

Lukas Rietzschel

**Spacemen**

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Sample Translation by Emma Rault ([emmarault@gmail.com](mailto:emmarault@gmail.com))

I (p. 11 - 14)

Another night where nothing was going to happen. Not a single car on the streets. The apartment buildings all dark. Every now and then the wind, stirring the reeds that had been planted around the small pond by the hospital entrance. The fish in there had died of oxygen deprivation—how long ago had it been, two weeks? Expensive koi—one morning they were just floating on the surface. There had been a child, rooted to the spot, screaming and pointing at them, until the caretaker showed up. And in the apartment buildings across the street, windows had opened or faces had appeared behind the glass. In the hospital, too, those patients who were still able went up to the window and marveled. Wow, a child—look at that!

Jan stretched out his legs and screwed up his eyes. With some effort he could make out individual clouds in the night sky: dark shapes moving over the pale stars. It was cold beneath this sky.

‘The old man showed me a picture today,’ he said.

Karolina beside him. Her thigh touching his. ‘What kind of picture?’ she asked.

‘He immediately grabbed it out of my hand again. Said if I want to see it again, I’ll have to come see him.’

She laughed. ‘Well, put on your Sunday best and bring a bottle of wine, I say.’

Jan smiled and flicked his cigarette toward the ashtray. Karolina also threw hers and missed. A halo of cigarette butts was scattered on the asphalt. Still seated, Karolina raised her arm in the air and waved it slowly back and forth. The sliding doors to the ER opened. She had perfected this over time—she knew exactly what waving speed and height set off the motion sensor.

Jan turned around again. He looked across the parking lot, which was normally filled with the cars of patients and staff.

There had been a time when it seemed hard-wired into the animals’ DNA that an ambulance—or the Suzuki that belonged to the nurse who was working the late shift—could smash them to a pulp at any moment. Somehow they knew; they passed that knowing on to their children and grandchildren and gave the ambulance bay, and the hospital in general, a wide berth. But lately, Jan thought, it was as though word had gotten out even in the forests and fields and meadows that the hospital was closing down and there was hardly anyone left in the building. And now nature seemed to be finding its way in through every window, every door, every corner and crevice. All kinds of animals had passed through these sliding doors of late. Martens, especially around this time of night. Wild boars. Deer.

Karolina turned off the motion sensor, which locked the sliding doors to the ambulance bay shut. Her pager would tell them if anyone was on their way. If it went off, she’d get up and open the doors again. The sound of her Crocs squeaking on the linoleum. A quick glance into the examination cubicles and the waiting area. Then she turned to face him. ‘Break?’ she asked, unable to suppress a grin.

Unlike him, Karolina had her own room for the night, with a single bed and her own bathroom. As a doctor she was entitled to that. She’d brought in her own bedding, something from the clearance rack at Aldi or Tschibo. It was printed with the word ‘VINTAGE’ in different fonts, along with images of clocks with Roman numerals, set to 6:45. She put her socks down on top of the book she was reading, and then placed her pager on top of the socks. Pants and polo shirt in a second pile next to the first. Leaning against the wall, Jan watched her. He lowered the blinds and checked to make sure the door was locked, the alarm set.

Karolina fell asleep while he was still taking off her shoes. The covers pulled up to her chin, her body cocooned inside the duvet. He lay down next to her and closed his eyes. The humming of the appliances next

door, above them, below them. The fridge in the so-called nurses' lounge, the vending machine out in the waiting room. Only here, beside her, with his eyes closed, could he hear the strip lights in the hallway and the wind stirring the blinds. Another night where nothing was going to happen. No emergencies, no patients. Often, when Jan woke up the next morning, he would find Karolina had wrapped the duvet around him, the way his mother used to, all those years ago. All those make-believe polar expeditions. Burrowed into the duvet so nothing could touch his skin. No snow, no frost. He would lie in his bed as though he were ensconced in a sleeping bag. The alarm went off. Karolina was standing next to him, the first coffee of the day in her hand. Their shift was over.

## II (p. 15 - 21)

Twice a week the old man would be waiting in the lobby. He had to be around sixty—he was nowhere near as ancient and brittle as the nickname the hospital staff had given him made it seem. They used that moniker the same way children playing in the street try to avoid saying “father” or “dad” at all costs. “I can’t stay out any longer, my old man wants me to go home.”

The revolving door turned behind the old man like the workings of a giant clock. The blue carpet was faded and gray from all the shoes that had passed over it. Two parallel lines had been carved into the pile like ski tracks, from the entrance all the way over here. His hands were resting in his lap. As always, his shirt was too big and not tucked into his pants. That’s how he sat there, waiting. The old man knew the way; he could use the elevator, the automatic doors. He didn’t actually need Jan. He didn’t need anyone. After all, he’d made his way to the hospital alone, too.

Jan watched him through the windows in the doors of the ward. He looked out into the lobby. Saw the revolving doors, the reception desk, the entrance to the cafeteria. Saw the old man greeting Peggy at reception and then Karolina as she walked past him. The hope of a personal conversation, the eagerness to be recognized, like a regular in a bar or hotel. Perhaps he hoped that another patient would notice and be impressed. Wow, that guy knows the doctor! He must be a big shot around here.

Jan opened the door and strode toward the old man, who clocked him from a long way off. ‘Here we go again,’ he said, smiling at Jan. The elevator ride up to the second floor. Jan’s ‘We’re here!’ as he wheeled him into the changing room.

The old man regarded himself in the mirror next to the wardrobe as Jan unbuttoned his shirt. A ‘wrinkle-free’ label sewn into the inside. A few white chest hairs visible beneath his undershirt. The small circle of smooth, taut fabric where his bellybutton was.

‘Do you like your job?’ he asked.

‘It’s not bad,’ Jan said, folding the shirt with the worn elbow patches and laying it on a shelf next to the old man’s shoes.

Jan wheeled him from the changing room into the treatment room, up to the window. The blinds were half down.

‘Mr. Kretschmer will be with you shortly,’ he said.

‘No rush.’ Another line that the frequent fliers always trotted out.

Jan knocked on the door to the physicians’ lounge. Knocked again, until he heard stirring. ‘Yes?’

‘Mr. Kern is here.’

‘I’ll be right there.’

There was no water in the aquatic therapy pool. It was being used to store deflated exercise balls. They were

scattered in limp folds across the bright blue tiles. Withered yucca plants in each corner of the room. Stretching between them, the silhouette of a dolphin, as long as the wall on which it had been painted. Even before any of the other departments of the hospital, the basement, which housed the physiotherapy area, seemed to have been put into economy mode. Kretsch's domain.

The aroma of Axe Alaska body spray came wafting up from the wooden shelves where he had put the old man's clothes. The door between the changing room and the treatment room was ajar. Jan stood leaning against the doorframe, not moving, even trying to steady his breath so they wouldn't notice him.

Kretsch had put a chair next to the old man's wheelchair. With one foot steadied against it and the old man's arm resting on his thigh, he was moving his head—which he was holding in both hands—slowly back and forth. All you could hear was a faint crunching noise. The sunlight slanting across his gray socks. The faded linoleum under his wheelchair. The old man circled his arms and spread them out like wings. Kretsch grabbed them and pulled. Pushed. As hard as he could without the wheelchair falling over. They didn't exchange a word. No awkward small talk about the weather like so many others. Their movements seamless as a dance routine.

The old man changed positions. He sat up, his spine straight, and then hunched forward, releasing all tension. Kretsch stood behind him, circled his arms around his chest and lifted him up. The old man leaned up onto his elbows and stayed there, carrying his full body weight—what strength that must take. The way his arms started trembling before he fell back into his wheelchair, groaning. Then Kretsch dug his thumbs into the old man's upper arms, into his shoulders and neck, as if he were kneading a slab of raw meat. Jan could see the red indentations that remained, just briefly, before they seemed to fill themselves and disappear again. After some time, Kretsch clapped the old man on the shoulder as if to say, 'Good game.' Kretsch grabbed the wedge he'd put under the wheels, a fluid motion from the floor back up and into his pants pocket.

Jan stepped back. He planted his hand on his hip and then dropped it down again, crossed his arms and then uncrossed them. Kretsch stopped when he entered the room and saw him standing there, door handle still in hand. White tennis socks in his plastic slippers. 'All done,' he said.

Jan nodded and kept waiting. The old man was still looking toward the window and the blinds, as if life were taking place in the thin slits of light between the strips of aluminum. The window went all the way down to the floor, but all he could see was the overgrown ventilation shaft. From time to time frogs would end up down there and jump up against the glass.

Not that long ago, right before the previous session or the one before that, the old man had asked if Jan and his father still lived in the house near the mattress store. After a moment's hesitation, Jan had said 'yes?' He'd made it sound like more of a question than a statement, hoping something else would follow. Hoping that the old man would ask another question or that he'd make fun of him like other people had done. But nothing had followed. Not then, and not since.

Jan cleared his throat, the way he would when he was making his way down the corridors of the hospital. Every now and then he'd whistle or snap his fingers. He liked to announce his presence so he wouldn't startle anyone when he came around the corner or stepped into a waiting room. The old man didn't move as Jan approached. He didn't even turn his head. Twice a week they would see each other—Jan couldn't even remember how long it had been. They didn't talk much; at the most they'd make small talk about the weather or about the hospital closing. But Jan hadn't seen the old man this quiet and withdrawn before.

'Mr. Kretschmer told me he was very happy with how your session went today.'

The old man smiled.

'Would you like to stay here a while longer, or can I accompany you back upstairs?' It was important to use

words like ‘accompany’ rather than ‘take.’

‘I can’t stand this view,’ the old man said. ‘I want to go home.’

Jan put his shoes on and draped his shirt over the old man’s shoulders. That’s what they’d agreed on. The sweat, the exertion. The old man didn’t want to take a shower, he just wanted to catch his breath for a moment. Back upstairs, in the lobby, just before he disappeared out through the exit next to the revolving doors, Jan was supposed to put his shirt back on and do up the buttons. Even though that was something the old man could do for himself. Just like he could lean on the armrests of his wheelchair and hold his own weight. The way his muscles would tremble, which made you aware that he had muscles—in his upper and lower arms, his chest and shoulders. Liver spots big as blood-gorged ticks.

Jan was about to accompany the old man to the elevator when he suddenly held up a passport photo in front of Jan’s face. The wallet he’d produced it from still open.

‘You know this man, don’t you?’

Jan reached out his hand. The laughter lines, the dark hair, eyebrows so thick they looked sharpied on. The old man snatched the photo back.

‘Don’t touch it!’

‘But I didn’t get a good look at it.’

The old man held the picture up again.

‘Well?’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t know who that is.’

The old man spun his wheelchair and looked Jan in the eyes. He seemed on the verge of saying something—he parted his lips. Exhaled audibly. Maybe he was one of those people who can spot a lie from a mile away.

‘Come visit me sometime,’ he said. It sounded nicer than Jan had expected. ‘You can look at it at your leisure at my house.’ He handed Jan a yellow post-it note with his address. Lessingplatz 7. Ring the doorbell for Kern. Lint and hairs on the sticky strip. The old man turned again, toward the door. Jan was about to follow him, post-it note still in hand. Just one step. But then the old man called out, ‘I’ll see myself out, thanks!’

XV (p. 88 - 96)

Three o’clock, that’s when Günter—or Little Kern, as the neighbors called him—was supposed to be back. He’d had to promise several times. A twenty-deutschmark security deposit—half from him, his mother had fronted the other half. The Steinborns knew where the Kerns lived, so nothing could go wrong. No shenanigans, no messing around. Günter had stuffed his father’s old knapsack, which no one was supposed to know he still had, full of newspaper and then wrapped it up in more newspaper. He took the camera from Mrs. Steinborn; for one brief moment they were both holding it. Then he laid it down into this bed of yellowed paper as if it were a living thing. He could feel the woman’s eyes on him as he put the camera into the knapsack and then tried, as if in slow-motion, to sit it upright.

‘That camera’s a boomerang,’ she said.

Günter turned around and gave her a questioning look.

‘It’ll find its way back to me,’ she said and laughed. Günter laughed too and remembered that people said that the darkroom chemicals had gone to her head. Suddenly she stopped laughing.

‘Three o’clock,’ she said, ‘you hear me?’

‘Three o’clock,’ Günter said, and he even went up to her again to shake her hand.

Back home, he put the knapsack down next to the bed and sat at the table by the window, between the two

beds. He tried to write something down, scribbling words onto a piece of paper as they came to him. Sometimes he would write multiple lines of the same word over and over again like back in elementary school. German Baselitz, as the town was now called, Greater Baselitz, as it had been called before the war, Wendish Baselitz, the next town over. As if there was one Baselitz for the Germans and one for the Wendish people, whatever this 'Baselitz' was supposed to mean. He crossed it out, circled it, underlined it. He looked at his watch, out the window, then back at the piece of paper in front of him. Random scribbles. Baselitz, Baselitz. Then he heard the sound of the door being opened.

Georg came into the room. 'Greetings,' he said. 'Greetings,' Günter replied. Two men, virtually adults, sharing the same room—the only way to manage that was to at least improvise some semblance of formality.

Georg lay down on his bed and crossed his arms behind his head.

'I've got something for you,' Günter said. 'But we have to hurry.' He went over to the bed, grabbed the knapsack and laid it on Georg's stomach.

'Why is Dad's old knapsack wrapped in newspaper?'

'Look inside.'

As if he was expecting something to come out and bite him, Georg slowly loosened the drawstring, waited, began gingerly to reach in with his hand and then snatched it back again when he saw the grin on Günter's face.

'It's nothing bad,' he said, 'don't be such a baby.'

They both knew about reams of newspaper from the paper cones filled with candy they'd gotten on their first day of school. Günter had been lucky—he'd started school later than Georg, during a better year, so the wads of newspaper had only started halfway down his candy cone.

Georg seemed to have found the camera. 'No,' he choked out. He froze, not even breathing.

'Take it out,' Günter said.

'I can't,' Georg said. 'We have to take it back. Where'd you steal it from?'

Günter lifted the camera out of the knapsack. This was all taking too long. 'I borrowed it from the Steinborns,' he said. 'They need it back by three.'

'Why do you need a camera for two hours?' Georg asked.

Günter could tell his brother was afraid to touch the camera, despite it being right there in front of him. He also knew how excited Georg was deep down, even if he wasn't going to show it, especially not to his little brother. 'Don't be an idiot,' 'you're such a baby,' 'grow up'—Günter had lost track of how often Georg had told him that, and not just since turning eighteen. This so-called adult world. He knew so many kids in the neighborhood who already acted and sounded just like their parents. New babies were being born all the time, but no one was really a child anymore.

'If you want to be an artist,' Günter said, 'you're going to need some pictures of yourself.'

Georg nodded.

'Otherwise how are you going to end up in the paper or on posters?'

Georg grinned. 'So we have two hours?' he asked.

'That's right.'

'Then let's go down to the lake,' he said.

Georg had been painting the lake again and again lately. Next to the portraits of classmates that he'd sell for ten deutschmarks, the lake and everything surrounding it was Georg's favorite motif. He painted the old oak trees along the side of the road that bent down toward the water. He painted the reeds and the sunlight glinting through them, onto the nest of a reed warbler. Birds, in general.

It must have been more than ten summers since that evening when that strange old man, creeping around

German Baselitz with all of his equipment, had approached the Kern brothers on their way home from one of their digs. He'd introduced himself as Helmut Drechsler, nature photographer. 'Do you know where the gray herons have their nests?' he'd asked. They shook their heads. 'Might one of your friends know?' Shrugs. They'd kept their distance. But he clearly wasn't Russian—you had to be careful around them, their father had said.

Drechsler had moved into a room at the local inn. Every day he walked around the village, his eyes on the sky instead of straight ahead or down on the ground like the other men. When they saw that he was building a kind of blind out on the shore of the lake, they went up to him. He showed them and the other children that soon thronged around them how you could find birds' nests. He photographed birds swimming, flying, brooding, mating. Sometimes he would jump up cheering and pumping his fist in the air, though always in complete silence. He'd flail around like a crazy person. Günter and Georg built blinds with and for him; in return he showed them how to sneak up on animals without startling them. Bitterns, penduline tits, coots, great crested grebes, ospreys—they had been surrounded with these birds all their lives. Now suddenly they knew their names.

Years later, when Georg was already living in Berlin, Günter had come across Helmut Drechsler's books at the local bookstore. They had titles like *The Crane of Weißes Lug Lake*, *Through the Fields and Meadows*, *In the Red Kite's Realm* or *A Summer at the Pond*. Many of the pictures had been taken in German Baselitz, some from the blinds that Günter and Georg had built for him. Günter recognized the island with its monument in the background. He recognized a few of the old oaks and saw how black the water was—only the pond in German Baselitz could be that color on some days; only a body of water that had been shaped by the devil could look like that. After he'd been standing there in front of the books for some time, the store clerk came over to him. She straightened the row of books and then mentioned off-handedly that Drechsler had died. On an expedition in Africa. He'd gone down to a lake to take pictures and never made it back. Günter bought two copies of *A Summer at the Pond* and sent one to Georg in West Berlin.

Georg and Günter walked down the tree-lined lane. Dappled shadows of leaves on the ground. Wind stirring the branches. Like dancing camo print on the sand. There were wooden boards strewn along the lakeshore in the reeds to their right. They could hear the swimmers down at the campsite in the distance. Günter had hung the camera around his neck in addition to grasping it with both hands. Georg was carrying the easel under his arm. The shoebox full of paint brushes was in the knapsack.

There was a point where the road got wider. This was where the cars would turn; the side of the road was paved here. At one point the lakeshore had even been separated by a guardrail until someone had pulled it down and made off with it. The lake swallowed up any noise something like that would have made, regardless of the time of day.

'Do you know how to work the camera?' Georg asked.

'Mrs. Steinborn gave me a quick demonstration.'

'And it's already got film in it?'

'Yeah, she put a roll in.'

Georg set up the easel. The canvas he put on it was still blank. A short shirt, long pants, the knapsack at his feet. He stuck Dad's old pipe in his mouth—this alone made him look the part. The placid lake in the background, his figure framed by two oak trees.

Günter went up close to him and then backed further away. He crouched down; got up on tiptoe. At an angle, from the front, in profile, always making sure you couldn't tell that the canvas was empty. He held the camera calmly, looking at Georg's face through the viewfinder. His brother looked straight back at him as though there were no lens between them. No film, no camera casing.

'How much did you pay for this?' Georg asked.

'It's a present,' Günter said, keeping the camera trained on him. And when he saw his brother's reaction—a smile that appeared not just on his lips but also in his eyes—he pressed the shutter.

Once they got close to the water they took off their pants and at least waded in up to their knees. They knew this lake had ruined them. Like children who grew up by the sea, they would never again be able to do without, regardless of where their lives might take them.

'When you're famous, can I come visit?'

Georg looked at him. Drops of water clung to his lips from when he'd rinsed out his mouth moments earlier. The taste of the pipe stem. 'Why don't you just come with me now?' he said.

'What about Mom and Dad?'

'They'll get by.'

'You think you'll come visit us sometime?' Günter asked, expecting the usual response: 'don't be such a baby,' 'don't make such a big deal out of it.' Instead Georg nodded, his eyes on the water.

'We should probably head back,' he said.

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Günter arrived back at the store at seven minutes past three. Mrs. Steinborn was waiting in the doorway with her arms crossed.

'I'm sorry,' Günter said. His clothes were sticking to his skin; they felt heavy.

'Where's all your paper gone?' Mrs. Steinborn asked.

'I was in a hurry.'

'And you still didn't make it.'

'It was just a few minutes...' Günter said quietly.

'Oh, and now he's talking back, too!'

'I'm so sorry... I...'

Mrs. Steinborn chuckled and held out her hand. 'Alright, let's see what masterpieces you've created.'

It was cool and dark in the store. The tiles under his feet seemed to be radiating cold up through the soles of his shoes. 'How long do you think it'll take to develop the pictures?'

'It takes as long as it takes.'

They still hadn't been developed by the time Georg left for Berlin. But Günter would send them on, he said, he definitely would. And secretly keep a few of them, and prop one up on the windowsill, until it warped and he had to go to the Steinborns' store to get a frame. Which he would put away out of sight, because it would be embarrassing, when Georg came to visit or to pick something up. Furniture, painting supplies, the portraits of his classmates, him.

The painting that Georg gave him when he left, on the other hand, he would never take down or hide away. He hung it on the bare wall above Georg's empty bed. The Hunter, it was called. He liked it.

XXIII (p. 141 – 143)

Kamenz, October 3rd 1965

Dear Georg,

I keep telling myself that your letters just aren't reaching me, although I'm still living with Mom and Dad. I

tell myself that you read what I'm writing to you, that at least my letters are reaching you. That's especially important today, with regard to this letter.

Some time ago I met someone who told me that it's possible to leave the country by enrolling in a university program. The specific destination is tied to the qualification in question—after all, not every country needs the same people—but still. It's an option, I thought. It would take a great deal of time and effort, but it would be more likely to succeed than the last thing I tried, at least.

So I embarked on a part-time preparatory correspondence course. I kept having to travel to Dresden for it, and believe me, having to study after a full day's work was really tough. I fell asleep at my desk numerous times. Mom would find me there, try to wake me and then get me off to bed somehow. I'd have no memory of it afterwards, but often I would wake up in your bed. After all, your bed is closer to the desk. I was so exhausted that, in my half-sleep, I didn't even realize what was happening.

I knew that to be accepted into the degree program I'd have to join the Party at some point. I kept putting it off, saying I wanted to get an education first and then decide whether I wanted to join, so that no one could accuse me of being an opportunist and only having joined for my own personal benefit. I hoped it would buy me some time. Georg, that was naïve of me.

I was told in no uncertain terms that I would need to join the Party before commencing my studies, or I wouldn't be admitted into the program. I thought about it long and hard and discussed it with Mom and Dad and came to the conclusion that I can't do it. I just can't. I know that's weak of me and that I could turn a blind eye. But this looking away, this falling in line, turning a blind eye, even if just for a little while—I can't do it. Wasn't it the same for you when you decided to go to university in West Berlin? You told me yourself that there comes a point when you have to make a clean break from ideologies and the people who support them, for whatever reason.

I hope you understand. If anyone can, it's you.

I will have to do my military service now—I was able to postpone that for a while too because of the course I was doing, but they won't let me put it off any longer. And you know the reason the works Party official gave for refusing me permission to go to university? I had them put it in writing because it sounds so absurd: 'Due to your insufficient political and ideological maturity...' Unbelievable!

Dear Georg, what I want to tell you is this: I won't be joining you for now. For the moment I'm staying here and perhaps at some point, further down the road, I'll find another way. But I want to be honest with you and tell you that I can't see a solution right now. I've spent the past two years chasing after these two different strategies and right now I have neither the imagination nor—above all—the strength to go through all that again. Another factor is that Mom and Dad are getting older and I think I'll have to look after them in the period to come.

Perhaps I will find a new way—please give me time. Please don't be angry with me. Please don't forget me.

Love,  
Your brother

LVI (p. 283)

The letters Kern wrote to his brother were intercepted, read, and not delivered. A few were allowed through, for example after Günter's failed attempt to escape, right after the Wall had been built, or when he'd tried to leave the country by enrolling in a university program.

All the other letters—the ones in which he asked how Georg was doing, wished him a happy birthday, asked



him for help, for money—were not delivered. Georg Baselitz only seemed to get those letters which the authorities believed might drive a wedge between the two brothers.

Georg replied to the letters he received. He too sent letters wishing Günter, his mother, his father, a happy birthday, asking how they were all doing. As a rule, these letters were not delivered. Discouraged by the lack of reply from his brother and his family, his letters became increasingly sparse.