

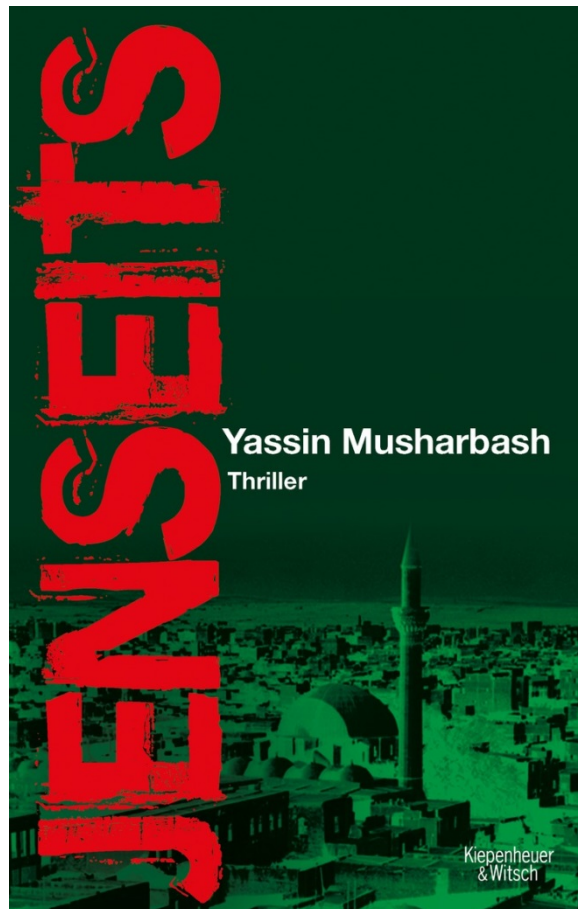
Sample Translation (pp. 9-35)

# **JENSEITS**

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## Prologue

There is no god but God – *ratatatatata!*

There is no god but God – *ratatatatata!*

Of course he was afraid. Even if no one was shooting at him and they were all just firing up in the air. But these bullets were going to come back down some time, without any *ratatatata*. Gent had already seen twice this afternoon how brothers had been hit by such bullets as they were returning. They fell off their vehicles, covered in blood. By the side of the road they received treatment, bandages, water and pills of some sort. But they didn't look good.

There is no god but God – *ratatatatata!*

La Ilaha illa Allah – *ratatatatata!*

La Ilaha illa Allah – *ratatatatata!*

Gent pulled the trigger, too, when the others fired their guns. His index finger was almost numb and his arm trembled with exhaustion. He tried to shoot at a bit of an angle in the hope that the bullets he fired would fall to earth in the field of watermelon that was for some reason right next to the road, even though they had almost reached the center of town. He remembered the first watermelon field he had ever seen. It was shortly after his arrival. Before that, it had never occurred to him to ask himself how and where watermelons grew.

The convoy crawled through the city. It had been for an hour even though this place was just a small city, more like an overgrown village. They passed a gas station, a dusty flower shop, stores where you could buy pistachios and pumpkin seeds, a small restaurant with red plastic chairs, a bakery and a school that had children in blue uniforms staring out the windows. Out of the corner of his eye, Gent saw a man balancing on a ladder that was leaned up against a house. There were beads of sweat on the man's brow, as he hastily let a bedspread fall across the window of his store. Alcohol, thought Gent. One of the brothers in the vehicle in front of his pointed to the man and laughed. He had a revolver. *Tack, tack*. The man upset the ladder as he fell.

It was hot. Several of the brothers were dancing on the vehicles: dark green mini-buses armored against explosive booby-traps, a track vehicle that shook and smoked as it went around corners, white Toyota pick-ups with camouflage nets over their beds and even two police motorcycles with blue and red lights. The brothers who had climbed aboard kept sounding the sirens.

“Takbir!” one of the brothers shouted next to or behind him on the bed of transport vehicles he’d ended up on. Maybe it was Kalashin or Shruki. Maybe it was someone else. Gent didn’t know, and he didn’t look to see who it was. He just followed the call to respond like everyone else. “Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar!”

God is greater.

*Ratatatatata!*

How could it not be so if there was no other god but God?

Gent closed his eyes, and all the noises around him melted into a stamping, a powerful grinding. Everything became part of it. The whip cracks of the gunshots, the heavy motors, the ululating singing, the cheering, yelling, even the chirping of the crickets and the stench of oil and fire, He felt nauseous. Of course, he was afraid.

As Titus Brandt left the small office on Bergmannstrasse and locked the door, he didn't notice that two people were watching him. Otherwise he wouldn't have been humming a song. And he certainly wouldn't have tried, in a moment of silliness, to throw the key he had just withdrawn with his right hand over his left shoulder into the partially open backpack that hung from the handles of his wheelchair. With a clink, the key hit the pavement. Titus sighed, turned his wheelchair around and bent down to pick it up. His sense of hearing had not let him down. It was lying to his left. But before he could pick up the key, a hand grabbed him. It was a big hand, as Titus immediately recognized. Then he saw a trouser leg, grey checked and part of a suit with wide lapels and then the plaited black leather gloves. Titus looked up and saw a tall man around the age of fifty with thinning grey hair. The man was powerfully built, but not fat. His face was round, and his small eyes were hidden behind thick horn-rimmed glasses. His expression was...expressionless, Titus thought. Not friendly, not unfriendly, not open and not closed, as though he had been painted by a child, and his face merely consisted of a couple of lines and the rest, untouched paper. The man held out the key. Next to him was a woman of roughly the same age.

"Here," said the man.

"Thanks," answered Titus.

When he looked at the woman, she gave a shy smile.

"Actually we were hoping to come in," said the man. "We thought you were still open."

Northern Germany, Titus guessed.

"No problem," he said.

"We've heard of you," said the woman, smiling again. But her smile faded quickly.

"There was a traffic jam," interjected the man.

"Where did you come from?" asked Titus.

"From near Rostock," said the man. "You're Titus Brandt, are you not?"

Titus had somewhere else to be. He was training for a wheelchair marathon in September, and in a half-hour, he was supposed to meet Ernst at the airport-turned-park Tempelhofer Feld to do a few laps on the former runways. Afterward, they'd have a beer.

"We could go around the corner," he suggested. "There's a tapas bar."

“We don’t want to put you out,” said the woman. “We could find a room somewhere around here and come back early tomorrow.”

She looked tired. Titus asked himself whether she was disappointed. Had she been expecting something other than a thirtysomething guy in a wheelchair who had a hard time getting a key into his backpack.

“Son or daughter?” he asked.

“Son,” said the man.

“Gent,” said the woman at the same time. “His name is Gent.”

“Let me make a phone call,” said Titus.

The bar was very full, but they were in luck and found a table. They had said nothing on the way there, and now, sitting down, no one said a word either. The waitress brought menus. The man and the woman opened them but immediately put them back on the table.

“Where is your son now, do you know?” Titus asked-

“Not exactly,” said the man.

“In Syria, we think,” said the woman. “He disappeared around a year ago.”

“There’s no one who knows about this sort of thing where we live,” said the man.

The waitress came back, and Titus ordered a glass of Rioja and some ham and cheese. The man asked if they had any beer. They did. The woman ordered a mineral water. And then, as though on the spur of the moment, a Rioja as well.

“You’ll have to forgive us, Mr. Brandt, for surprising you in this way,” she said after the waitress had gone. “We weren’t sure whether you had to make an appointment. We just drove down here.”

Titus nodded. He was glad that the music wasn’t all that loud.

“We haven’t introduced ourselves,” said the man. “My name is Sassenthin. Karl Sassenthin. This is my wife.”

“Elisabeth Sassenthin,” said the woman. “Pleased to meet you.”

“You know who I am,” said Titus.

“Yes, of course,” said Karl Sassenthin.

Titus was sitting on one side of a small square table with the man and his wife squeezed together on the other. I’ve seen worse, Titus thought. He had met more than one set of parents who could no longer stand one another.

Elisabeth Sassenthin must have once been a very beautiful woman. In fact she still was. Straight brown hair, high cheekbones, big green eyes, thin. Karl Sassenthin had apparently cut himself shaving that morning. There was a thin vertical line of coagulated blood on his face. He was wearing a brown corduroy jacket and held his beer in both hands, his powerful fingers interlocking on the back side of the glass.

“He’s been gone for around a year?” Titus asked.

“Yes,” said Elisabeth Sassenthin. “Two years after he accepted Islam. He wasn’t living with us anymore. But we talked every week on the telephone and saw each other a lot. Suddenly he was gone. From one day to the next.

*Accepted Islam*, Titus repeated to himself. That would have been the son’s choice of words that she was now using.

“There were no signs that he intended to leave the country?”

“None,” said the man. “None at all. I mean we knew that he had – how should I put it? – drifted away. It was all he could talk about. But there was no announcement, no farewell letter, nothing.”

“Except,” said his wife. “One week before he was back home. He went up to the attic and came back down with a sleeping bag. ‘What do you need that old thing for?’ I asked him. ‘Oh, just a little trip,’ he said.”

“Elli, we couldn’t have known.”

“I know. I just thought: maybe it’s important.”

Titus saw they she was close to tears. He was glad the waitress brought his food.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but I haven’t had lunch today.”

“Mr. Brandt,” said Karl Sassenthin, who seemed not to have heard him, “can you explain how it works? What you do, I mean? How does it work?”

“Can you help?” added Elisabeth Sassenthin.

Titus, whose mouth was full, raised an index finger to indicate that he needed a couple of seconds.

“Whether I can help depends not just on me, but on you as well. And your son. And third parties over whom we have no influence. It may depend on security authorities. I can only give advice. I can’t promise anything.”

Titus knew that it was no good raising false hopes.

“Are you in contact with your son?”

“That’s the thing,” Elisabeth Sassenthin answered. “Yesterday Gent got in touch. It was the first time in eleven months, since he sent a text message from Turkey saying that we shouldn’t worry. But we don’t know what he’s trying to tell us.”

\*

Three hours later, Titus Brandt was sitting in front his laptop in the small yard in front of his apartment smoking the one cigarette he allowed himself every evening. A privet hedge separated the yard from Bänischstrasse and from the entrance of the apartment building to his right. The left side of the yard ended in an exterior yellow wall. Almost all of the buildings on this street were painted yellow or orange. Actually, come to think of it, all of them were, except for the red-brick church. That didn't use to be the case. Every time you had a beer with one of the long-time residents of this part of the Friedrichshain district they would go on and on about how things used to be, before Germany was reunified, the buildings got renovated or the area was gentrified. He, on the other hand, only knew the street in yellow and orange. Seven years ago, he had been lucky enough to find this apartment. It was somewhat more expensive than what he could actually afford since it was meant for two people. But it was handicapped accessible.

He particularly liked the yard, even though the grass was brown and patchy and he didn't take care of the garden because he didn't know anything about plants. In the yard, he was protected from prying eyes yet could still follow what was going on around him. Like now. He heard the children playing on the other side of the street and listened to snatches of conversation from the Portuguese café a couple of steps down the street to the right.

It was still warm, even though the sun had set an hour ago. The computer screen bathed his hands in blue light. He had started writing a report about Elisabeth and Karl Sassenthin. At the moment, he had 23 cases on the go. 23 families, 23 misbegotten biographies, 23 young men and

women who had left for Syria and Iraq, were about to do so or had just come back. 23 cases that occupied his mind around the clock. His mobile phone had rung and received text messages twelve times while he had been in the tapas bar with the Sassenthins. And before he went to bed tonight, he would not only finish this report and answer mails from some of the other parents. He would also force himself for an hour or two to watch the videos that had been posted from Syria and Iraq today.

That was what his life had been like for the past five years, after he had started working at the counseling center.

In the beginning, it had only been he and Lotte. They hadn't had the office in Kreuzberg. Instead they had shared an improvised desk in Lotte's spare room. He had applied to work for her shortly before he had finished his university degree. He had studied for a long time, much too long, because already in his second semester he could no longer say why he wanted to become a social worker in the first place. Even if everyone else seemed to think it was only logical that he became a social worker. Maybe it was precisely because everyone else thought it was logical. His mother, for example. She had suggested that he go into social work. A couple of his fellow students had even told him, in all seriousness and a thousand, increasingly unctuous forms, how jealous they were because he knew from his own experience what it was like when someone needed help.

But he never quit studying. Instead, he registered that a certain thought was repeatedly entering his mind and always staying there longer and longer. It was a strange thought, one he himself didn't truly understand. It went: If I have to help people, then I want to help assholes!

Nazis, for instance. The most repulsive sort of Nazis. The people who had tipped over his wheelchair in the tram and bellowed "Off to the gas chamber with you, you deformed cripple."

He never told anyone about this thought. But one day, just before final exams, he picked up a brochure in the cafeteria. "Social work in the city," it said – or something like that – and it spoke of "New beginnings," a counseling center that helped Nazis get out of the scene. At the bottom was Lotte's email address.

"I can't help you there, Mr. Brandt - unfortunately there's no opening with the Nazis," she had said a couple of weeks later when they met face to face. "But I may have something for you. If you're willing to try something completely different."

She told him about her new project. More and more young people, she said, were heading off from Germany for Syria and Iraq to join terrorist groups, and she believed that the same techniques she had used to help right-wing extremists could also work with jihadists.

"Of course it only has a chance, if they truly want help and, in the best-case scenario, if their families are involved," Lotte had said. "That's the plan anyway."



She had spent months contacting experts, visiting imams in so-called problem mosques and locating parents whose children had been part of the first wave of "foreign fighters" who had gone to Waziristan to do battle with al Qaeda or Somalia to join Shabaab. Then she had written up a grant application and gotten money to expand "New Beginnings" to include a counseling center for Islamists.

"We're ready to go, Mr. Brandt," she had said. "And I can just about afford to pay you, if you're the sort whose demands are easily satisfied."

For a moment they had sat there in silence, staring at one another across a slab of artificial pressed wood propped up on two wooden supports. He didn't know what to say. He didn't even know what to think.

"A woman and a guy in a wheelchair," Lotte added, drily. "What could possibly go wrong?"

That was the moment he knew that he was going to say "yes."

Nowadays there were five people working for Amal. The word meant "hope" in Arabic. It, too, was Lotte's idea. Money was no longer a problem. The project was funded by the government, and there were also donations. The challenge was the sheer number of cases. They could hardly keep up with the paperwork and the messages to the parents. They were also present when parents talked on the Internet with their son or daughter in Raqqa or Mosul. The idea was to give them real-time advice about how to react, what to write to make sure that in their anger, worry and fear they didn't destroy the last fragile connection between them and the children who had - what was the word Karl Sassenthin had used? - *drifted* away.

This connection was the most important thing.

Because every once in a while, if not all that often, this connection would lead Murad or Amira or Thomas back home. Without any blood on their hands, the rest of their bodies or their souls.

He no longer asked himself whether he was helping assholes. That question had lost all meaning. He was good at his job. And he liked doing something he was good at.

"Gent Sassenthin, 26, converted to Islam at the age of 23," he had noted. "Relatively stable family. Father: shipbuilder, mother: piano teacher. Twin sister who died at the age of 23 (cause?). Since then Gent Sassenthin was restless and apparently also (somewhat?) depressed. Studied medicine but dropped out. Occasional jobs as a paramedic. Conversion partially accepted by parents and social circles. Conflicts only began with increasing radicalization (birthday parties suddenly *haram*,

disagreement about dietary restrictions etc.). Last summer unannounced trip to Syria (or Iraq?). Probably with the Islamic State. Further details unknown."

Titus stared at the computer screen. He had no time for another case.

"It can happen to any family," he had told the Sassenthins. "Really."

"But we must have done something wrong!"

"Not even Gent would say that, Mrs. Sassenthin."

He never lied to the families. The truth couldn't be any worse than what they were going through anyway. All of them were desperately looking for something to cling to. They needed to feel that there were patterns, rules, grounded hypotheses. Something that would help them survive the sleepless nights. So he tried to help them with that at least. He took them through the typical phases of radicalization. Told them how people got recruited. Gave them a picture of the life their son or daughter was probably leading "down there."

Yes, there were hospitals in the caliphate, with trained doctors. But of course, conditions weren't ideal.

No, not everyone had to fight on the front.

No, he didn't think recruits were forced to launch suicide attacks.

Or to behead anyone.

He didn't tell them how unreal he himself found this exodus of children, this evil Pied Piper farce. Only in the evenings, when he was sitting in his yard as he was now, did he allow himself to think such thoughts. He had gotten to know more than one of these young men before they took off. He'd seen how the baseball caps disappeared, how the hoodies were replaced by robes and how the constant grinning gave way to impenetrable seriousness. And how, if you listened carefully, even their ghetto mutter faded and their pronunciation grew clearer. It was a particularly grotesque side-effect of their newly attained self-discipline and determination. When he saw those same guys later on, as had happened a few times, in videos from war zones, their beards long as fists, their eyes flickering and their fingers on the triggers, he asked himself how he could have imagined he would be able to help. Observing something isn't the same as understanding it. There was no recipe. Everyone was improvising.

Trial and error.

Not just all of you. Us as well.

"Antonia, you have to go to bed now," came a voice from across the street. "Now, honey. Right away."

"Recommendation: Counseling for the Sassenthin family by Amal," Titus typed, "Recommended counselor: T. Brandt."

He knew what they would say in Monday's team meeting, "Man," Gabriel would sigh. "If I said yes every time..." But Gabriel hadn't sat with the Sassenthins in the tapas bar.

"Yesterday, Gent got in touch. For the first time in eleven months, since he sent a text message from Turkey saying that we shouldn't worry. But we don't know what the message means."

"How did he get in touch?"

"He sent me an email. A very confused one."

"Do you have the message?"

"It was just gibberish."

"Please show it to me."

Elisabeth Sassenthin had taken a sheet of paper from her purse and handed it to him. The email was very short and consisted of nothing but letters and numbers arranged into ten groups of four. Titus had no idea what they could mean. But he was convinced that Gent Sassenthin hadn't sent them for no reason.

\*\*\*

"Sammy?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something personal?"

"What then?"

"Where can I find the...you know."

"There have to be Kleenexes around somewhere. Will they do?"

"Sure. Thanks, sweetheart!"

Her voice sounded just as cheerful as before but somewhat muffled by the door between them. Still he was sure that this moment would signal the end of the evening. In one or two minutes, she would come out of the bathroom. Maybe they'd make out for a bit, but she wasn't going to stay.

That was okay as far as he was concerned.

He didn't care about the toilet paper. *Sweetheart* was far worse. *Sammy* was too much.

Maybe he should cut the whole thing short. By leaving now, for instance.

Maybe I could even like her, he thought. I've only known her for three hours. But he wanted to be alone, preferably right away, without any strained goodbyes. It wasn't likely that she would say something like: "Sammy, my man, I think I should go. Another time."

That would be something.

He tried to imagine her saying that but failed. So he got up and left the apartment. In a sense, he was an expert in everything improbable, but precisely for that reason he knew how rare the improbable truly is.

Half an hour later, Sami Mukhtar was back sitting in the scuffed leather armchair he had paid too much for at a flea market because it allegedly was part of the original furnishings of Tempelhof Airport. He watched himself mixing a gin and tonic. It had only taken three minutes for Nina to stomp by him on the corner of Manteuffelstrasse and Reichenbergerstrasse. A pretty woman on a warm summer night. Only a bit too fast. Clackclack...clackclack...clackclack. When he saw her coming, he leaned against a building wall, feeling somewhat ashamed.

The moon was full, and there were bits of cloud in the sky, a wild mix of little circular next to bizarre elongated ones. It had reminded him of a gigantically enlarged map of Greece with myriads of islands. No, not a map. The way it actually looked when you flew over Greece, with the sea as the sky and the islands as the clouds. And then: the spectacular landing in Beirut, where you couldn't see the ground when the plane touched down as if it were making an emergency landing in water. And after the plane door opened, amidst all the sweat of businessmen, the babies' puke and the perfume from the women in their veils, the first scent of pine. From that moment on you never knew what was going to happen. You never did in Beirut. You only knew that you were in the right place.

Sammy. How clearly did he have to pronounce his own name so that people wouldn't call him that. But maybe he didn't pronounce it as clearly as he thought. Maybe he intentionally said: My name in Sammy.

On Mariannenstrasse, there was an open-all-night store, one of those strange Berlin places selling not just cigarettes and alcohol but jars of pickles, sliced bread, fatty spreads and anything else locals might feel they needed at midnight. On his way home, he had picked up some cigarettes and, while he was there, some toilet paper. When he went to the counter to pay, his nose picked up the scent of something metallic. For a split-second, he thought it was blood and he swirled around, but behind him was just one of those guys who went round hawking tomorrow's newspapers. The man was well over sixty and had a full, unkempt beard whose upper half had turned yellow from nicotine. Sami recognized him. His shtick was to sell paper by reciting homemade verse. The man looked at Sami with friendly eyes, gestured at the piles of papers he was cradling in his arm and recited: "We're all going to die, so don't die stupid. Read the *Tagesspiegel* and learn how to do it."

Sami had glanced at the headline, handed the guy two euros and gone home. Now the *Tagesspiegel* was spread out in front of him on the glass table.

### *Terrorism Alarm in Berlin - Jihadists Take Aim at the Capital*

He knew what was in the article without reading it. Even without this headline he would have gone to the office extra early the next morning. That was obvious after the bust-up with Eulenhauer this noon. But now it was even more important. Sami angrily tossed the paper in the corner.

"Can I ask you something, Mr. Mukhtar? When *do* you think it's time to sound the alarm? After an attack?"

You can do that, Eulenhauer. Sure you can. But then I would have to type "unspecified threat" thirteen times in the subject heading before you, at twelve noon on the dot, disappeared into the cafeteria to eat your pork schnitzel with Balkan-Style bell pepper vegetables. And then what? Some desk jockey with even less of a clue than me would have to deal with it. And then what, Eulenhauer? You know what would happen next? Passing the buck. Don't think you're the only person to hit upon that idea. Just keep passing the buck – until some deputy minister or attorney in the regional office for the protection of the constitution or chief of police who spent two weeks vacation in Tunisia in 1983 and got lost in the souk thinks: Wow, that sounds pretty serious. And then, before you know it, Eulenhauer, a Lufthansa flight or a demonstration or a football match gets cancelled.

And who's laughing, Eulenhauer? Abu Asshole, Son of Asshole, that's who. And tomorrow, or at the latest the day after tomorrow, Abu Asshole will tweet his next "warning to the *kuffar*," just because all of a sudden he's really powerful, a real *mujahid*, who makes everyone tremble every time he gets out his keyboard. And then what, Eulenhauer?

That's what he had thought. But in fact he had just rolled his eyes and turned his back. Because he knew Eulenhauer hated that.

Sami looked at the clock. It was 2AM. He could lie down and go to sleep for four hours. But he knew he was too angry for that.

"What do you do for a living?" Nina had asked him.

He'd been sitting at the bar. In a tiny place at the end of Falckensteinstrasse, with olive trees in tin canisters next to the tables and light bulbs in green wine bottles dangling from the ceiling and spreading a calming light. She had also been sitting at the bar and had repeatedly looked down at her watch, making him think that someone had stood her up. For the hell of it, he's told the bartender to bring her an Aperol, which he had done with no great fuss, just the way you have to, with the hint of a nod in Sami's direction as he put the drink down in front of her. And she'd joined him, sliding over the three meters between them.

She was short, dark-haired and thin, and he liked the fact that her thick hair looked as though it couldn't decide whether it should be orderly or wild. Half of it was parted – the other half was a complete mess. When she came over to him, he could see that she wasn't wearing make-up and had brown eyes.

"Thanks for the drink. That's never happened to me."

"Then it was high time."

But then, after about three minutes or so, she asked: "So what do you do for a living?"

How come, he asked himself, almost everyone has boring, completely interchangeable jobs but at the same time they think that they're so crucial to people's identity that it's the first thing they absolutely have to know. Are you an accountant? A systems administrator? A retail salesman? He would have asked her if she liked staying awake at night. Or enjoyed poetry.

"I work with files," he'd answered. "Tell me if you need a hole puncher."

That wasn't even a lie, aside from the fact that he had no idea whether there were any hole punchers at his office and, if so, where they were. But it would have been somewhat more precise if he had said he was a threat analyst for the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. Currently assigned to the Joint Terrorism Defense Center in Berlin's Treptow district. But that would have given

the evening a turn that was as predictable as if he had said his name was "Sami" and not "Sammy," as he had done two minutes previously. Why had he done that?

Too many questions. And always the same ones.

Ultimately, the true question was: why does everything make me so angry? It was, thought Sami as he drained his gin and tonic, one of those 3AM questions, the ones that are either completely meaningless or the most important in the world.

He'd been asking himself this question for quite some time now. Why am I so angry? Why does everything upset me? Why do I drink myself stiff every night? Why do I disappear from my own apartment to get rid of Nina in the most callous sort of way, even though she's completely hot? So hot that I'm already regretting it. Something is eating at you, Sami. Not giving you any peace. Okay, so you're not a perfect cop, but that's not it. You're lonely, but that's not it either. You wish you were in Beirut more often. But that's not it, too. So what the hell is it?

It was nice to watch the sun coming up, he thought two hours later. How the sky, which had only been truly dark for a short time, emerged through all imaginable shades of blue until you could call it light. He noticed a bird chirping before he heard the screeching of the U1 subway line. He had decided on this apartment because it was all the way up on the sixth story of the building, under a slanted roof and with a wall of windows he had put his armchair in front of. He stood up, opened one and lit a cigarette he only smoked half of. Then he went into the kitchen and turned the coffee machine on, before going to the bathroom, taking a shower with his eyes closed and getting dressed.

He had never liked sleeping. He liked staying awake at night. Even as a high school student, after the end of parties, he had enjoyed sitting around with his back against the wall thinking his thoughts after the last beer had been drunk and everyone else was lying on the floor sleeping. He observed them. The prettiest girl, who was no longer the prettiest because a silver string of spittle was leaking from her mouth. The fourth prettiest, who suddenly looked like a princess with her hair spread out enveloping her head in the style of mermaid in the deep seas. The pimply guy who played guitar in a lousy metal band and who had fallen asleep while trying to cop a feel from the formerly prettiest girl, his right hand lying near her breast, in that no man's land between triumph and defeat.

*Yallah, nishar!*

Let's stay awake until sunrise.

It was something different than "making the night into day" or "burning the candle at both ends." For him at least. And for Maha in Beirut, whom he would have called his best friend from his sandbox days, if there had been sandboxes in Beirut and kids hadn't played in alleys of the

neighborhood or in old cemeteries, the way he and Maha had done. They had spent more than one night together since then, sitting on the floor, saying nothing.

He had to smile as he thought about Maha and drank his espresso. He was ready.

At six o'clock in the morning there was almost no traffic in Berlin, only taxis, some sleepy-eyed commuters and the inevitable city busses. So it was barely a quarter of an hour before he was at the barrier in his old VW Passat, showing the guard his ID and driving onto the parking lot at a snail's pace.

He couldn't help remembering how a thin young man from personnel had shown him the giant ground on his first day on the job and explained that the red-brick buildings scattered around the site had formerly housed the telegraph battalion of the Prussian Army. He had never gotten used to how people from Berlin would just mention things like that in passing. That used to be a Jewish school for girls. A paint factory. The headquarters of the Independent Socialist Party of Germany. The main Hitler Youth clubhouse.

Now it was over, a mere backdrop, somehow no longer real. Between the Prussian-era military buildings was a modern one, built for pure functionality, like the parliament buildings and everything else that had been put up when the German capital moved to Berlin, all glass, light-colored wood and thin steel supports. It was like a set of IKEA shelves amidst turn-of-the-century commodes. Practical, sober and innocent. It wasn't as if he spent a lot of time thinking about what might have taken place in the Prussian military buildings. But he had to shudder and felt a certain heavy-heartedness every time he thought about it in passing.

It wasn't even 6:30 when he got to his office in the IKEA cube. Automatically, he started his computer, although he wasn't going to need it. At least not right away. Holger wasn't there, but then again there was no reason to expect him to be. He put his feet up on the table, leaned back and scanned through the article in the *Tagesspiegel*.

It wouldn't be long before the telephone next to his computer would ring. Gernot Eulenhauer, who not only looked like a filing cabinet but thought like one too, would no doubt assume that he wouldn't be there. That's precisely why he was there. So that he could answer the phone and Eulenhauer couldn't say he hadn't been around. So that he, as Eulenhauer would surely suggest, could watch the Eulenhauer show.

He wasn't mistaken, even if it took slightly longer than anticipated. The phone rang at 8:45.

"Sure, I'll be right there!"



Eulenhauer was good at not letting on when he was surprised. They probably learn that at some workshop or other at the Federal Criminal Office, Sami thought.

He himself would have rather joined the German foreign intelligence service, the BND. After finishing his degree in political science, he hadn't known much more about the BND other than that it was responsible for espionage abroad, which sounded promising. He'd pictured himself traveling to God-forsaken corners of the globe, to Timbuktu or Tashkent or Tripoli, and exchanging envelopes of money for USB sticks only to jet off to a cosmopolitan hotel at the other end of the world to loosen the lips of a military attaché, legation councilor or war reporter with drink. But he hadn't even gotten an interview with the BND when he applied, even though he spoke fluent Arabic, something in high demand after 9/11. Disappointed, he decided to go for the next best alternative, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. He knew even less about that institution. It was only over a beer between ping-pong tables in the courtyard after the two-week observation course in "Secretville," as veterans called the Office's training center in small Rhineland village, that an instructor had told him that he had no chance of a career with the BND.

"Why not?"

"Because you have family in Lebanon."

"So?"

"So you can be blackmailed, Sammy. What would you do if Hezbollah found out about you and started leaning on your cousins?"

Up until that point, he had hoped that he would someday be able to attract the notice of the BND.

"You should be glad you didn't end up there," the instructor, Markus Helten, had tried to console him. "There are too many soldiers at the BND. You wouldn't fit in. Believe me, it's much more exciting here."

More exciting. That was easy to say. But Sami knew Helten well enough to know that he believed it with all his heart. Helten was one of the people at the Office who lived for his work. Who was glad that he wasn't called to put anyone on ice. And who could talk about defending "liberty and democracy" without blushing.

He wasn't like them, he knew that. But he had also never forgotten how bowled over he'd been the first time he comprehended, *truly* comprehended, what it meant to poke around in other people's most carefully kept secrets. There had been a terrorism suspect, a man in his mid-forties from Gaza.

As part of his training, Sami had sat alongside a colleague who spied on him. For days. He had learned what it meant to be there when parents learned about their daughter's illness. To know how many debts the family had – and how little the husband told his wife about them. To read which search terms he entered while surfing the Internet at night, long after his wife and daughter had gone to bed, when religion, politics or relatives at home were not the main focus anymore. The report, written in official jargon, read: "The subject called up a variety of URL addresses, which, according to subsequently performed Internet research at this location, predominantly provide pornographic content."

*It's more exciting here...* It was a welcome exception to the rule whenever he as an analyst was allowed to talk with sources. That wasn't standard procedure, but for a few years now, when the operators didn't have the background knowledge needed to ask the right questions or interpret an informant's signals, analysts often accompanied them. But mostly he spent his days evaluating terrorist videos, interpreting speeches by screeching emirs, identifying networks in all the confusion, keeping a close eye on "his" guys and recording for all eternity what they did in boring reports.

At least he worked for the Center. There was less theory and more real terrorists, sometimes with actual plans for attacks. It all happened in real time. And as something extra, there were the federal and regional criminal police and the guys from the BND, who – as Helten had correctly noted – were even more robotic than the others. What's more there were Jack and John and Samantha from the FBI, the NSA and the CIA who occasionally turned up in Treptow, as though it were a kind of AirBnB for spies. They managed to seem a bit more important and full of secrets than the rest. Exciting? The Center was about as exciting as anything like it in Germany could be. And it was a great platform.

The table in conference room A242 was long and narrow. Eulenhauer stood at one end, looking impatiently at the clock. Sami nodded to the group when he entered the room, glanced briefly around and took a seat in the middle of one of the sides. Holger had saved him a spot. They must have called him on his mobile on his way into work. Around a dozen people were there. Eulenhauer had invited the danger evaluation and daily conference task forces to the meeting. It was a quarter of an hour ahead of its usually scheduled time.

"Okay, let's get started," said Eulenhauer.

"He's going to start preaching," Holger whispered to Sami, who was mechanically unpacking his notebook and pen. "I can tell from the way he looks."

"I know."

Eulenhauer stood up, took a step back, a step forward again and then began.

"Charlie Hebdo in Paris, dear colleagues, then Brussels, Garland, Texas, and Isère. Then Paris again, as you'll remember. Then Brussels again. Hanover, Nice, Ansbach, Würzburg, Orlando. And goddamn Breitscheidplatz here in Berlin. And those are only the attacks that couldn't be prevented."

"I told you," Holger groaned softly.

Sami nodded without looking up from the cup of coffee Holger had poured for him from a thermos.

"That's why we have to take any tip that even *mentions* Berlin so seriously. You would think everyone would agree on that, but apparently that's not the case. That's why I called this unofficial little advance meeting. As you know, the purpose of this center is to coordinate all authorities responsible for fighting terrorism. Co-operation should be our motto, especially across institutional lines. Yesterday there was a very specific tip on the Internet about a planned attack here in Berlin. Nonetheless, it mysteriously made it no further than the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. There wasn't even proper record made of it. The analyst responsible didn't think it was serious enough so he put the tip off to one side. And he arrived at this judgement without consulting with anyone, not with the police, as I can confirm, nor with any of his own colleagues in the domestic intelligence service, as I've learned in the meantime. You could almost believe that he was trying to get rid of this tip. It goes without saying that in view of our workload all the colleagues here, even the younger ones, have to be trusted to make initial evaluations. But the press has gotten wind of this tip about a planned attack on Berlin - and they're taking it seriously."

Eulenhauer reached into his jacket pocket and slapped the *Tagesspiegel* on the table. A colleague from the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern or Brandenburg criminal police – Sami always confused the two, and his name tag was on crooked – immediately sat up straight. He wasn't the only one, only the first. They smelled trouble. Something to be discussed later.

"Whoah," whispered Holger. "He's serious this time."

"Let me briefly recapitulate so that something like this never happens again," said Eulenspiegel, who had begun to pace slowly to the left and right. "I've taken the liberty of printing out the threat in question for everyone here in case some of you aren't familiar with it."

Eulenhauer made his way around the table putting a sheet of paper in front of everyone in attendance."

Sami didn't need his copy. He knew the tweet by heart. Including spelling mistakes.

*Allahu Akbar. The brothers are on there way. Berlin the kuffar capitol has exactly 24hs.#Berlinwillburn*

"Because of this oversight, we had no chance to consult with our partners abroad about the announcement of this threat," Eulenhauer continued. "We've left ourselves dumb and blind."

Eulenhauer raised his voice.

"What if our partners *knew* who was behind this? What if they had a piece of the puzzle we needed? What then?"

Ok, thought Sami. Now or never. He cleared his throat. Eulenhauer shot him an angry look.

"Mr. Eulenhauer, as the analyst in question, can I say something?"

"That wasn't what I had in mind. I wanted to lay out the situation first. Maybe afterward. As far as I'm concerned."

"Okay, all right. We'll do that way."

"Fine. Now let me finish handing these things out."

"One moment, Mr. Eulenhauer. Just briefly, while you're handing them out. Can we also, when the time is right, talk about the fact that you were the one who passed on this tweet to the *Tagesspiegel*? I think it would be good if you explained that. I'm sure not everyone understands immediately why that was necessary."

Holger knocked his coffee cup over without even flinching. The sound of coffee dripping onto the floor was all that could be heard,

"Merle, come on, I have to know!"

"Sami, have you lost your mind? It's 3:30 in the morning. I'm asleep!"

"Did Eulenhauer pass this on? You journalists all talk."

"I can't reveal that to you. You know that. Where are you anyway?"

"At home. Come on, Merle. You know the guys at the *Tagesspiegel*. I know you do."

"Sami, seriously, have you gone crazy?"

"What if I give you something?"

"What?"

"Something big."

"Sure. Right."

"Merle, I've never let you down."

"That's true."

"So?"

"I still can't tell you."

"Of course you can. I have to know."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you that until later."

"Sami, you're insane. And drunk, I assume."

"No, I'm not, Merle, Have I ever called you at 3:30 in the morning before? I haven't. Have you called me? That's a different story."

"Is it a good story?"

"It's a good story."

"Okay. So..."

"No, wait. Before you say a word, Merle, I don't know whether it's a good story."

"But?"

"I think it could be a good story."

"Well which one is it?"

"It's definitely something important enough that I haven't told anyone here about it."

"More important than Eulenhauer's story?"

"Thanks, Merle."

"Sami, don't you ever dare do that again!"

After his call with Merle, he had calmed down a bit. Enough at least to pour away his second gin-and-tonic and watch the sunrise and listen to the birds instead, before he showered, made himself an espresso and thought about Maha.

Now he was enjoying Eulenhauer go red in the face and start searching for words that didn't come.

"Man!" Holder whispered. "Is that your version of a suicide attack?"

It's amazing how calm I am, thought Sami. Maybe they'll throw me out. Am I so calm because I don't care?

Correct. Because I don't care.

And because I know I'm right. Because I know the ones who just shoot off their mouths and the other ones who really are dangerous. And you don't know them, Eulenhauer. You couldn't spot a terrorist if you tripped over one.

[END OF SAMPLE]