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Tupolew 134

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On August 30, 1978, the Polish airplane Tupolew 134, carrying sixty two passengers on board, was hijacked on its way from Danzig to Schönefeld. The hijacking to Tempelhof airport in West Berlin took place amidst measures outlined in the „European agreement to fight terrorism«.

According to the news magazine Der Spiegel in the May 21, 1979

issue:

„Just as the airplane from the Polish carrier LOT is about to land, the hijacker pulls a stewardess from her seat at the front of the machine and holds a bebe gun to her head. He then demands in Polish that they change their course to land at Tempelhof Airport.“

Tupolew 134

The American officer's smile as he stood there on that huge field, after all the excitement about the landing. You can't describe that.

You don't forget that.

It makes you think it's the second coming, he said. And you weren't taught to think that way. But it was so quiet. A silence that even made motors stop running. The smile took you right in, it penetrated everything in a single moment, but the officer out there couldn't possibly have seen us in the cockpit. It was way above him. He just assumed we could see his smile from inside.

Even the stewardess saw it, though she couldn't move her head. He smiled as if he wanted to wish me, us, good luck. Not even the gusts of wind bothered him, or the roar of the motor.

It could have been your smile, said Lutz Schaper on the witness bench to Katja Siems.

Please answer the question, said the district attorney.

The way you smile when you're absolutely certain about something, said Lutz Schaper, without turning his gaze from Katja.

The way you smile when you're being held responsible by the FDJ for something you didn't do.

Had done, he said in 1979, after having lived almost exclusively on oranges for half a year in his cell in Moabit prison.

He said: Out there, that was just a landing strip, concrete slabs and lights to the right and left. But it wasn't just the runway. The officer in his American uniform had to have known that.

A top notcher! A real hit that uniform. I told the stewardess he should get a pat on the back for it.

Nice costume.

Fancy pants enemy.

There might have been a lot more people standing around the airplane. I didn't see them, not even later when we got out.

I was exhausted. All of us were exhausted.

And yet, the whole thing didn't last more than half an hour.

Exhausted, but never happier. Can't really remember.

A half-hour. A few kilometers. A stone's throw to Tempelhof. And each time you thought, if you end up in Schönefeld again, you were right back in the armpit of the world.

Last time I said to myself: fuck it. The armpit's okay. But I'd rather find it myself. Budj wsegda budget solnze. Born to be wild–You've got to know that one, said Lutz Schaper. This time to the District Attorney who waited for somebody to translate the sentence into English.



Just one thing you ought to know: The runway out there doesn't look any different than in Schönefeld. A few thousand concrete blocks. The American officer made the difference.

A fancy pants enemy.

I told Katja back in Gdansk: Don't be afraid, they'll treat us like we're famous politicians. They've got a nose for things like that. They teach them stuff like that early on over there.

Answer the question, said the district attorney.

No idea. If it hadn't been a toy gun...maybe I would have done it anyway. Ask Katja.

For years we didn't do anything but make tools out of raw metal. She knows what I'm talking about! And suddenly the thought shoots through your mind. The thought starts to take shape, like the piece of metal there in the machine in front of you. Then you cool off again. But now you've taken on this shape for good. You can't escape. You pace up and down your thirty square meter pre-fab apartment, the bit of private property you're entitled to.

You drink beer and wait for the delivery that never comes. You play skat or go dancing.

If you know what it's like to wait, you can understand why there's so much dancing in this country.

The movies showed over and over, the pubs closed at twelve nightclubs were only open on weekends. But you could still fool around.

Over time you started to get a kind of night face. You couldn't help it if you wanted to catch someone by midnight.

The women weren't exactly prudes. They were hot at night. A plus for our country.

You'd both get on your Moped and make sure that you didn't drive into the arms of the cops.

You couldn't talk. Not with such a thought in your head.

Can you possibly imagine something like that?

Not so easy in a country with uniforms that look like costumes right? Lutz Schaper asked the jurors from six neighborhoods of Berlin's US sector.

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Katja Siems was 24 when Lutz Schaper pulled a pistol out of his Anorak and got up from his seat as if he were going to the John. Twenty four when she left, escaped, flew the coop. Her story is true. But how can you prove the truth?

You can try to bracket what isn't true. First the rumors. There were lots of rumors. For example, that the hijacking was a well-organized terror attack. German Intelligence was behind it. They wanted to embarrass East Germany. Or it was the KGB hoping to throw off the Americans. Even the CIA was implicated for a moment.

And then, of course, there was the RAF. The rumor about the RAF really stuck for a long time.

There were interesting philosophical speculations. They searched for a DADA message in it because the weapon was a toy gun. They found similarities between Schaper, the prime suspect, and Rasputin and you could draw a direct line from Rasputin to the Decembrists.

Sometimes he was just a petty criminal; he didn't like that one much. But, still, Lutz Schaper and Kaja Siems were a couple. You obviously can't imagine anything else. It's a mental block. Then they turned them into a Bonnie and Clyde. Their deed was turned into a sacrifice for love. Some thought they did it out of greed, jealousy, pity, anger, or revenge—for injured vanity, pride or hope, which of course is only a part of it, a part of that infernal waiting.

In the end there's nothing. Nothing and the question. Where should we go now? Something Schaper must have asked in 1978, on a windy August day on Track #3. The day that Hans Meerkopf didn't show up. When the waiting wouldn't stop. When something obviously had happened to prevent him. There were rumors

about that too.

At some point, you'll probably ask, who's speaking there? Have you ever asked a lawyer that question?

You probably think I'm Katja.

But in the end, even Schaper's the one calling for an angel. Angel why don't you show yourself to me?

Imagine I was Scheherezade and you had time enough for a thousand nights.

Go ahead and laugh. But there's always this creepy feeling somewhere and that's when it gets complicated.

That's when it goes straight down the drain, just like what Lutz Schaper said when it was all over. Or could that have been me who said it?

Nonetheless, the feeling is the same. This dry tone. Time going by so slowly. An altitude where the air is thin.

Darkness, if you wish. Or bright, a sparkling brightness, and yet you are standing at the edge. You're just a spectator.

You want to know what happened back then and you come to me of all people. Did Schaper get you to do it?

He always lets journalists get the better of him. But he always felt like he was the Hijacker.

You shouldn't trust me.

You'll probably feel as if your truth has been betrayed.

Truth.

If you really search for a way out, you'll find one for sure, said Lutz Schaper in 1977 when the Special Forces stormed the hijacked plane Landshut on the other side of the world. The hostages were wobbly from four days of heat and fear, as they slid one by one down the gangway on air cushions.

The Polish stewardess had never seen Tempelhof. She didn't make any trouble, he said to Katja. He didn't say anything about it in court.

You can't treat people that way, he said before he got up from his seat 12 B. Think about that always.

Otherwise they'll stop smiling.

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There's Katja.

She's standing in a picture from the blue worker uniform days. It was taken in Ludwigsfelde. The corners of her mouth curve slightly upward which made people who didn't know her think she was always smiling sarcastically. During the summer the sun bleached tips of her hair. She wears a checkered blouse under a jeans jacket.

She probably would have preferred a „Shell“ Parka from the US-Army. But that cost over a thousand marks on the black market, and she didn't even earn six hundred a month.

The IFA car factory is a complex made from lines, driveways, guard houses and a giant assembly hall.

Katja would often think about the new trucks that were parked in a special fenced in yard, according to the fire protection laws. Every morning at seven she filled-up the oil in the machine, turned on the main switch, at which point her brown hairnet would slide into her eyes. Those things that looked like circumcised baseball caps.

You put them on so that your hair didn't get caught in the drill. At least that's what it says in the security rules.

The three of them are always in the same shift in hangar 11. According to the rules, they are allowed to take ten minutes for breakfast in the yard and a half hour for lunch in the canteen. They always start and finish the breaks together. Lutz, Verona, and Katja. When they span a piece of metal in the clamp and bend over the machine their covered heads look exactly the same, the way one stack of hay resembles another.

A while ago somebody had mentioned they thought Verona and Katja were more than just friends. Lutz just grinned as he bent over the work table.



Just then Katja pushed between them and rammed a screwdriver into the dirty, scratched wood, right between his thumb and index finger. They never brought the topic up again from that point onward. Verona merely shrugged her shoulders back then. But whenever Katja came close to her, she avoided her involuntarily, saying she was interested in one of the welders over at the other end.

Don't think I'm making this up.

Believe even less that it happened this way.

Judge for yourself, said Lutz Schaper's lawyer and told his client to stand up. Is this a man with criminal intentions?

Small incidents play a role, every gesture, every laugh on the machine and later in the giant airport. That's the information from which Katja is created.

She wore jeans and the cashmere sweater that her special investigations officer of the Air Force in Templehof gave her a few months prior to the pre-trial hearing. Snow was falling in front of the window.

But, here inside, the seasons aren't important.

Something that happened a long time ago seems the most believable in fairy tales.

A long lost land, like the one Katja was born in, goes back a long time ago.

Katja should have been a Pisces.

Even though her parents calculated the exact hour of her inception, and used candles and a shamelessly scented cream from a store in the Western sector they frequented, Katja was born an Aries on March 21st. A day too late. Doreen and Bernd Siems wanted the gentlest of all star signs and instead, they got the wildest.

I don't want a kid who'll end up in reform school by the age of sixteen, said Bernd Siems, as he saw the striking workers first on TV and then in front of the town hall barracks in Ludwigsfelde. They came out one by one from the factory behind the pine forest and clumsily unrolled a banner.

Siems went home. He put his feet up on the sofa that he bought with his first paycheck as a Neulehrer and for an entire day he just stared at the wall.

I don't want a kid who'll end up in reform school by the age of sixteen, he said that night to his wife. She gave him a surprised look and he kissed her in that special way on the neck. While he was observing the wall he was calculating the months and star signs and came to the conclusion that the time was right. His wife smiled and leaned her head back so that he could kiss her on the neck in that special way again. She then lit a frilly candle in the bedroom. And it wasn't even dark yet.

That was in 1953.

When the workers took to the streets in their blue uniforms. When they first marched down the Stalinallee with their paper flags, banners made from bed sheets, and painted cardboard cartons and then later through the rest of the city until the country that wasn't a real country yet, was on strike almost everywhere. When the strikes paralyzed all the coal centers and the metal industry, and after that they collected tons of freshly printed party books from the debris.

In the sunniest days of June 1953 it seemed as though it was the end of a world that had just begun. But Siems looked at the wall over his living room couch.

Not with the Russians, he thought and he took a bottle of pre-war wine off the shelf. Not with the Russians. There was a brief notice in the newspaper. Existing labor conditions haven't produced the stimulus for a long-term rise in work productivity. Despite destructive powers that continuously try to prevent the victory of socialism, the comrades will succeed in driving the country's progress forward. The friendly armed forces of the Soviet people will courageously stand by their side.

Three quarters of a year later, on March 21st 1954, Siems held his daughter in his arms. He carefully placed his hand under her little head and was surprised that the beginning of such a long and complicated life

weighed almost nothing. He rocked her in his arms and forgot about the undesirable star sign.

(...)

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The beginning situation.

Everything's at stake. You've got all sorts of possibilities. That's what makes these situations so difficult. You can still go anywhere. You've got the choice. Only the lighting distinguishes one floor from another.

Above the light goes yellow. Below white steel pours out of long lightless tubes, further down there is a gloomy semblance of daylight. Otherwise you can hardly see anything. A few rubber trees are scattered along the corridors. Instead of walls there are gratings and handrails smooth as polished stone.

But you don't know anything. You can't even be sure if the floors will support you.

(...)

Still, nothing's pushing you. Only later you'll have to choose. And from then on you'll be busy explaining that choice, defending it, justifying it.

(...)

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„I don't want a kid who'll end up in reform school by the age of sixteen,“ said Bernd Siems.

And he stuck to it.

He didn't go after Katja as she ran by him in tears. He heard her throwing a tantrum in her room, but he didn't go after her. Later, he explained the problem with the wall and the Russians in Indian terms.

You gotta look your enemy in the eye.

„So?“ he said.

„Where are our soldiers on the wall looking? Think about it, they've turned their backs to the wall!“

He didn't let go until she answered him.

The core of a story is always contained in its opening paragraph. Even the smallest movements, every hand gesture, like the way Verona tugs at her hairnet. Katja's high voice.

You won't be able to retrieve it later. And there you are at 24 with a bit of knowledge about yourself on a windy railroad track in Gdansk trying to fathom what went wrong.

Something always goes wrong.

As long as this breathtaking feeling of being alive hasn't been spoiled, the danger heightens with every second, and suddenly, even though the train arrives on time, something goes wrong.

It's like the sound of Katja's fake leather purse snapping shut.

Nearly like it.

Sharp and with a tiny echo.

Hans Meerkopf, who was supposed to arrive on track 3 at 10:23 on August 29th, didn't disembark from the train. The platform is full of people holding bags, suitcases, flower bouquets, and the lost smiles of travelers.

Katja holds her purse with both hands in front of her stomach and searches through the crowd, stares at the faces, pushes her way past the stairs. As the train lurches forward she hurries to the end of the platform.

Then the train pulls away. A flickering silence spreads across the tracks where the grass grows between steel girders holding up the platform roof, on the platform where Katja stands alone. In the distance there's only

Schaper, who comes towards her carrying two bockwurst on paper plates. A silence that can only be compared to a southern city at noon during mid-summer. White and with closed shutters.

Hans Meerkopf didn't get off the train. Hans Meerkopf, the man to whom she'd said: I would dare to do anything with you. Katja waited for three more trains from Frankfurt/Oder. But Hans didn't come.

(...)

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On August 27, 1978, Verona stamps out a cigarette in front of the telephone booth near Hall 11. The air is thick with an approaching storm. She speaks breathlessly into the receiver:

Hans Meerkopf on the Paris-Leningrad-Express via Gdansk.

(...)

Verona waits. She holds the receiver in her hand and listens. There are scratches on the glass in front of her and a dried wad of chewing gum next to the phone. She takes the receiver in both hands. From a distance it looks as though she wants to bang it against the wall. She hangs up.

„Bullshit. If you think you guys can fool me.“ She picks up the receiver again and dials the same number. But this time she barely lifts the receiver; she sinks her head and stays that way, slightly bent, standing. She slowly replaces the receiver. „Shit“ She hangs up and presses her palm against the phone booth door. „We didn't bargain for that.“ She doesn't go back to Hall 11; instead she leaves the factory before her shift is over wearing her blue work uniform.

As she passes the guardhouse she pulls her hairnet over her head and shakes her hair free.

The guard doesn't stop her. Katja took sick leave.

(...)

All I'm saying is: don't fall for positive figures.

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Take a close look.

Look at Lutz Schaper, for example, on a windy August day, shortly before Katja got to know Colonel Clerk. Look at him at noon on the railroad platform in Gdansk, standing there constantly pushing the hair out of his face. Look him in the face. Look at Lutz Schaper as though you were seeing the platform through his eyes.

The Paris-Leningrad-Express curving towards the railroad station.

Surrounded by people, the least of whom are passengers.

The express train approaches track 3. It arrives and its screeching wheels brake to a halt. Announcements roar through the loudspeakers. Below the roar there's a voice, but only a murmur can be heard.

Lutz Schaper doesn't hear the screeching wheels. He stands close to the stairs at the entrance, a hand in his pants pocket. It's not his first trip to Poland. He knows the Polish rail employees in every station with their round caps and that special way they toss their empty beer bottles into the garbage. He also knows their habit of keeping rules that only they understand. He knows the smell of garlic in the train compartments and the unpredictable behavior of the women at the ticket counters. When they're not in the mood, routes and connections that were just there a minute before suddenly vanish. Suddenly they say: We don't have it. It isn't there. And if you insist a little, because you've traveled that route on real tracks and past genuine signal boxes, they callously conjure up a sign from the depths of their ticket booth existence. They take out the sign and slip away, and the sign says OUT TO LUNCH, regardless what time it is.

But Schaper knows Meerkopf had bought the tickets in the West. The tickets aren't the problem.

He looks over to Katja, standing a few meters away from him on her toes. She wears a sleeveless blouse. The tiny hairs on her arm glisten in the narrow strip of sun falling between the station roof and train. They make her look as though she were blond. And for a single moment Lutz Schaper forgets about the wait: he doesn't hear the train coming; he doesn't notice how they open the door in the middle first; how the conductor jumps down without using the running board, which normally catches everyone's attention. Lutz forgets the people as they rush past him, embracing and hanging onto each other for only a short time.

He pulls his pants over his stomach and looks over to Katja. The only tell-tale sign of her nerves is the purse. She plays with the clasp with both her hands. It creates a rhythm that makes him see her dancing. He is

standing on the platform in Gdansk, and for a moment he forgets everything and sees this woman dancing. She is young. It never occurred to him before how young she is. He also forgets that she believed in the next three hours they'd be boarding a ship with fake passports. She believed that the ship docked in the Gdansk wharf would be her ship, the one that would take her to the west. The ship would be waiting just for her. In fact, she believed you could just take off that way. With a passport in which Katja is called Ines.

This morning he held her forehead as she stooped over the toilet vomiting, and he wishes he could forget how deathly pale she was and the handkerchief that left a moist warm spot on the palm of his hand.

(...)

He pulls up his pants and thinks he can't wear bell bottoms anymore. He is nearly forty, his pants are too narrow, too tight for his thighs and hips. He has a closet full of bell bottoms. Had, he thinks, and it occurs to him that he'll have to dress completely differently. He'll be wearing just his underwear as he stands in a dressing room in the first best department store he can find on the Northern seacoast. (...) He would have a saleswoman bring him a mountain of clothes and take them away again until Katja looked at him in the expensive mirrors and say with a wide grin: „Bingo.“

He'd feel like a machine that had been disassembled before Katja's eyes. After he'd put it back together again, the machine would be the same as before, the only difference being that Katja understood it after it had been disassembled. He wouldn't let anyone talk him into buying any tight fitting shirts and he'd never go out without a tie.

He sees Katja with her purse in front of her stomach, head tossed back, dancing on her tiptoes.

He begins to forget the danger.

The platform smells of bockwurst. The smell hovers thick and penetrating in the heat and reminds Lutz Schaper that it doesn't matter how many platforms he's waited on in his life, how many he's boarded or transferred from, how many he's left his cigarette ashes on. All of them had the same sweetish scent of bockwurst.

The same jarring announcement over the loudspeakers. It doesn't matter in the end which train he boards. It doesn't matter where the train is headed. Wherever you get out you always end up on the same platform. The smell reminds Lutz Schaper why he is here.

He remembers that this morning Katja couldn't stop retching even though nothing more came out.

He wipes his forehead with the moist handkerchief and concentrates on the people, some of whom have already heaved their suitcases down the steps.

He sees Hans Meerkopf twice. Once under a blue cloth hat and once with a forelock, typical of that time. Both times he hopes it is somebody else and knows it can't be. Meerkopf carries passports with their faces on them in a hidden coat pocket. Katja is called Ines on one of those passports. Everyone in this country knows what happens to people who carry around forged passports. What happens to people who are carried around in hidden coat pockets in fake passports where they are called Ines.

Possibly Lutz stopped paying attention a while ago.

English translation by Zaia Alexander