

Translated extract from

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**Tobias Elsässer**  
**Off into Paradise**

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My grandpa was dead, but life wasn't taking any break. It just kept rolling right along after the brief interruption. The bump in the road. Like a rickety dam holding back water until the current washes it away.

The funeral was five days ago. Grandma was going to be moving in next week. Which is why my mom was working her butt off. She wanted Grandma to feel at home, and she didn't want to talk to anybody. Not about her grief, not about her memories, and definitely not about her red, puffy eyes. So I just left her alone.

I'd already taken the urn out of the shed, wrapped it up in a towel and stashed it in my backpack. My plan seemed to be working. There was nothing in the papers about a desecrated grave or a tin of cookies filled with sand. I walked over to the bus stop across from our house and got on. My mom waved to me. I'm not sure, but I think she might've cried.

I got off at Stuttgart Central. From there I was planning to hitchhike. I'd even made a cardboard sign with HAMBURG on it. Chances were slim that I'd find someone heading all the way to Sylt.

But after three hours I came to the realization that my chances of getting to Hamburg directly weren't much better. Nobody stopped. Neither for me, nor for my grandpa. I even asked him for advice. Which I used to do when I was a kid. My grandpa gave good advice. He'd always listen first and mull things over before finding the best solution to my dilemma. Grown-ups aren't always very good at that. They don't take you seriously. Because you're young, and because supposedly school's the best time of your life. When you've got nothing to worry about. Like my mom always says. Not that I believe that.

My grandpa didn't talk to me. He just basked silently in the sun. On the side of the road. On Highway 27.

The air was shimmering above the black pavement. That's how hot it was. Maybe I was standing on the wrong spot, or maybe there just wasn't anybody in Stuttgart who wanted to head north in such weather. The forecast said it was raining up there. I thought about packing up my sign, taking out my map and looking for other cities along my route. It's not like I was in any big hurry or anything. I had seven days to get there and back.

Just as I was about to fold my sign up, a green Golf pulled over onto the shoulder. Though, came flying at me full throttle is more like it. Slamming on the brakes, tires screeching. Then it rolled a few more meters before coming to a full stop right next to me. The passenger door popped open, and a young girl was sitting there behind the wheel. "I'm probably only going to Kassel. That alright with you?" she asked, the motor running. "Yeah, sure," I said and got in, together with my grandpa.

"You don't do this very often, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Um, hitching?"

"Yeah, you know."

"Well, let me give you a tip. Next time don't stand in a curve. That way no one'll have to risk their ass stopping for you."

"Right."

The motor whined, and the girl shot across three lanes. Which about started a honking concert behind us. I buckled up.

"What's your name?" she yelled over the rattling stereo. Some guy, half man half beast, was howling incomprehensible sounds while an electric guitar wailed for mercy.

"Fabian!" I screamed.

"Pleasure. Alice."

Alice was wearing red cow boy boots, a faded denim miniskirt and this sleeveless top you could see her black bra through. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Air fresheners hanging from the rearview mirror had long since lost the battle against smoke and spilled beer. The small ashtray was overflowing. Alice's small, upturned nose was almost pasted on the windshield. She was blinking like she had sand in her eyes. She had a jerky way of driving and tried taking turns at 90° angles. The tires screeched We hit traffic just north of downtown. There was this line of cars as far as you could see.

"Fucking construction!" Alice yelled and gave the finger to some old guy who was smiling at her in his slick Mercedes. "Go fuck yourself!"

She turned down the music. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen." I lied. It was a reflex.

“You look younger.” With her lips she pulled a cigarette out of its pack “Want one?”

“Yeah,” I said, and a second later I was holding a smoke in my hand.

I’d never smoked before. Had my grandpa seen me, he would’ve slapped me one. “Don’t you dare ever start!” he always used to say. He himself was a smoker. Cigars. On New Year’s Eve he treated himself to a Havana. I couldn’t stand the smell. His doctor the effects. For his asthma smoking was pure poison.

The tobacco was glowing. I inhaled. It tasted bitter. I puffed the smoke out and did all I could to keep from coughing. We continued down the highway. I was on the road. We were on the road. Wilhelm and I. Our last trip together. I started getting a bit sentimental. He’d been dead for eight days now. At the age of 79. Humans have to die. Everybody. No exceptions. It’s just that we don’t know when. The expiration date’s a secret. But being logical doesn’t help much when you feel like shit. You can untangle a math problem with logic, but not the knots in your stomach. Women get older than men. One dog year equals seven of our years. I wonder if Micha knew that. Does a dog realize he has to bite the dust one day? Who knows. Micha was always happy even though, statistically speaking, she didn’t have much time left. But my grandpa was almost always in a good mood, too.

It probably doesn’t matter if you know you’re going to die. There are all kinds of illnesses anyway. And accidents. Some people kill themselves. The notion that a heart can simply stop working is scary. “Hey everybody, it’s been real,” it says, taking leave of its fellow organs. And then it just stops. No more breathing. The EKG a flat line. Death. And then what? Heaven? Paradise? Hell? The Last Judgment? Reincarnation? As an ant or a dog. And where does your next life begin, if there really is one? In Europe, Africa, Asia? I don’t know. Mr. Meyer, my religion teacher, didn’t know either, but I still got in trouble for asking. It’s all speculation is all it is. And what if there’s just nothing afterwards? Darkness? Time will tell.

“What are you going to Hamburg for?” Alice asked. She had this habit of constantly sniffing.

“I actually want to go to Sylt.”

“To the island?”

“Yeah. To visit a friend,” I added.

“When you get to Hamburg, you’ve got to go out at night. It’s really wild.”

“I will.”

“You got a girlfriend?”

“Not at the moment.”

“I’m single right now, too. My boyfriend cheated on me. The prick. With some cheap slut, to top it off. You ever cheat on anyone?”

I shook my head. Up until then I’d never even had a real girlfriend before.

“Lucky for you. Otherwise I’d would’ve kicked you out of the car,” said Alice as she pulled into a rest area. She parked right in front of the bathrooms. “You have to go, too, or are you staying here?”

“I’m staying,” I said.

The minute Alice got out of the car, her cell phone began vibrating. I didn’t answer it. Five minutes later she came back, and I told her she got a call. She looked at the display and started swearing. Men are assholes, she screamed. Which in itself was a vicious generalization. And it didn’t exactly help any when she said she didn’t mean me since I wasn’t a real man yet. Hey, thanks! Next time around I’ll take my mom’s eyeliner and pencil in a mustache. Her phone vibrated again. Alice answered. Judging by the expression on her face, the caller didn’t stand much of a chance.

“You can shove your car somewhere else while you’re at it!” she screamed. “I don’t give a fuck... if you call the cops, I’ll tell them you beat me.”

She flung her phone against the backseat and clamped her eyes shut. Two slits were all you could see. Then they began to glisten. She was crying. The muscles in her face trembled. I felt a lump in my throat. A tear or two fell onto the steering wheel. Others followed. Faster and faster. It was contagious. I had to cry, too. Because of my grandpa. Because of the person I loved. He was no longer here. No longer here. No longer here.

No matter how often I’d told myself, my head refused to accept the immutable fact. You could prepare yourself for just about anything. Except for death. Grandpa was the first person who died in my life. The first person I’d loved. Up to now death had only been a word without meaning, some number on the news. Anonymous and without a

face. But now it had come and taken my grandpa away. The Grim Reaper or whatever. Just like that. Without even knocking. Heart attack. He didn't suffer.

How did my mom think she knew that, though? Did she speak to him right when he was taking the big leap over to the other side? Did she? Why didn't she say it was only what she thought? Maybe the hereafter was hell? Full of agony. What if eternity meant eternal pain? Or what if everything just stayed the same like on earth?

"Back of the line, please. All dead people with accounts of over ten thousand euros, please step to the right. Everyone else is dismissed."

My grandpa would've been doomed.

"What the fuck's up with you?" Alice asked, full of reproach. "You making fun of me or something? What are you bawling about?"

"Just because."

"Nobody just starts crying. Did you run away from home, or your old man beat you?" She looked at my swollen nose.

I shook my head.

"Well, I know you're not sobbing just to keep me company, so tell me what's up."

Lie Number Two crossed my lips pretty easily. My imagination can sometimes get out of control. There's nothing I can do about it. I wanted to leave my grandpa out of it, so I told her about Markwart and how we had a fight. Which is exactly how I put it: a fight. What I didn't say was that my nose got this way from one single punch and that I didn't even have a chance to pounce on the bastard. To round out the story I made up this thing about how he was trying to get money out of me. I was babbling so fast she didn't have a chance to call my bluff. As I went on embellishing my story, the tears dried. Both mine and Alice's. It was pretty weird to be sitting there next to each other. On the highway driving north. Our bags packed with anger and grief.

I put my grandpa on the backseat. We hadn't talked to each other since early that morning. I put on his seatbelt. Alice got this surprised look on her face, but didn't say anything. More traffic. Alice went ballistic. She swore like crazy and nailed the steering wheel. Swearing had to be one of her favorite hobbies. Four-letter words shot out of her mouth like a round of bullets.

It was like we were in a parking lot. Just outside of Heilbronn. We'd only gone about thirty kilometers. After sitting there for ten minutes, people started getting out of their cars. So did Alice. She stood up on the median and had a smoke. I stayed in my seat. The traffic in the other direction began slowing down. Then I heard the whopping sound of a helicopter. The cars in the oncoming lanes were backed up as well. Now I got out. The helicopter landed on the road about two hundred meters in front of us. The blades kept spinning. It was probably going to take right off again.

Alice flicked her cigarette butt onto the ground and put it out with the heel of her cowboy boot. It looked like she was doing the twist. As far as I could tell, almost everybody had gotten out of their cars in the meantime. Businessmen were standing impatiently next to their fancy cars. They all had their cell phones out and were busy holding conferences or rescheduling meetings. Dads were telling their kids about the latest car models, and moms were making sure they had enough provisions in case the road was going to be closed for a long time. Truck drivers turned on their TVs and put their feet up on the dash.

Alice came over to where I was standing. She was just about to say something when an ambulance with its siren on flew by on the shoulder.

"Looks like somebody got wasted," she said after it passed.

"They probably have to scrape his brain off the pavement." Alice giggled. I didn't react. "Hey, dude. Loosen up." She gave me a friendly jab in the ribs.

"It's not funny," I said. And meant it, too.

What if someone up there was fighting for his life? What if a small child was bleeding to death?

The businessman next to us turned on his radio. Then he angrily kicked one of his shiny aluminum hubcaps and yelled "Fuck!"

The announcer said there had been a serious accident on A 81 between Mundelsheim and Heilbronn and that the autobahn was going to be closed for several hours. Alice shook her head, but refrained from saying anything. The guy in the suit threw this major fit and whizzed his cell phone onto the road. What a complete idiot, I thought. Then he gave up and slumped back in his car.

A big motor-coach about twenty meters in front of us opened its doors, and out spilled a bunch of teenagers. They went over into the field next to the road to hang out. One guy in baggy pants and a basketball shirt was carrying a ghetto blaster around on his shoulder. He turned the thing on, and the heavy hip-hop bass drowned out the noise from the helicopter which was still waiting for its precious cargo. The mega-cool dude started pissing me off. Like really pissing me off. I pictured the paramedic fighting for a young boy's life. Cardiac massage, artificial respiration, defibrillators. Whatever would help. And then suddenly this hip-hop. That wasn't working for me. Here they were having a party, while two hundred meters away somebody was dying.

I couldn't take it anymore, so I went up to the guy. He had a shaved head. I told him to turn the thing off.

"What do you want, dork?" He had to be about my age.

"Turn off the fucking box!" I yelled at him.

For a second I really thought he was going to, but then I realized he was kind of the leader. And if he'd turned off his ghetto blaster, his followers would have started looking for someone else to look up to.

In any case, it took less than five seconds for my retainer to get tangled up in my mouth like a fishing hook. The blood tasted like metal with a pinch of sugar. The crowd that had gathered howled and jeered I was flat on my back. The guy with the ghetto blaster happened to be standing so that his square skull was blocking out the sun. Total darkness.

Then all of a sudden it became light again. I squinted. Alice was standing right over me. She put out her hand and pulled me up. I could hardly believe my eyes: the guy was doubled up. And the music wasn't on. His fans all drifted off. Leaning against Alice, I limped back to the car. Somehow I'd also twisted my ankle.

"Did you know that guy?" Alice asked.

I shook my head.

"So why did he flatten you out?"

My mouth felt like it was on fire. "That's just how assholes like that are."

Alice sucked in air through her front teeth as she surveyed the carnage in my mouth. "You just made your orthodontist real happy."

She gave me a Kleenex, and I wiped off the blood. My mouth was one big open wound. But the music was off. Thanks to Alice.

The rotor blades sped up, and the helicopter climbed into the air. Dust whirled. Twenty minutes later traffic was moving again. We passed the scene of the accident, which was now all cleared. Small shards of glass were scattered across the road. The guard rail was smashed in. I closed my eyes. Alice didn't say a word. She just kept on driving. The radio remained off.

“Hey, wake up!” Alice shook my shoulder. I opened my eyes. We were at a big rest area. “You hungry, too?” she asked.

I glanced over at the backseat. My grandpa was still there.

“Earth to Fabian. Food. Chomp, chomp.” She smiled.

I yawned. “Yeah, alright. I’m coming.” I leaned back over to Grandpa and unbuckled him. Very carefully, too. Then I heaved the backpack up over the seat.

“You got porcelain in there or something?” asked Alice, shaking her head.

“It’s just a little present.”

Once I got out, Alice reached for my backpack.

“Come on, let me see what’s in there.” She tore it out of my hands. Then the unfathomable happened: my backpack dropped like a rock onto the pavement. It clattered when it hit. Alice flinched. I felt like smacking her.

“You jerk,” I shouted.

Alice still didn’t quite get it. “It should be alright.”

I kneeled down and carefully unzipped the bag. Immediately I detected a strange smell and knew exactly what it meant. The ashes. The lid to the urn had come off, dumping my grandpa’s remains in my backpack. Alice bent down. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw the engraved urn. She reached for my shoulder, but I knocked her hand away and lifted the urn out of my backpack. Gently. I placed it on the ground and tried shaking some of the ashes that were caught in my clothes back in, but a light gust of wind came and carried them off.

“I’m sorry.” I apologized to Grandpa and quickly put the lid back on. I’d already lost enough ashes. Then I put the urn back in my backpack and apologized once more. Alice was standing right next to me without saying a word. She looked pasty.

“Who is it?” she finally asked, her voice quivering.

I didn’t respond. I just got my sweater out of the car and walked over to where all the semis were parked. Alice followed me.

“I’m sorry... How was I supposed to know you had an urn in there?”

I didn’t say anything. Alice cut me off.

“Hey, listen to me! I said I’m sorry. There’s no way I could’ve known. It’s not like I meet somebody every day who’s carrying an urn around.”

I brushed her aside and kept walking without saying a word.

“Hey, quit acting all hurt. You think you’re the only sad person on the planet? In case you’ve forgotten, my boyfriend just left me.”

“That’s not the same!” I yelled at her. “My grandpa is dead. You understand? Dead.”

“Your grandpa is in there?”

“Yeah”

“So why isn’t the urn at the cemetery?”

“Because I dug it up. Go ahead and call the cops if you feel like it.”

Then all of a sudden Alice got that sly look on her face again.

“What’s so funny?” I stopped walking.

“I’ve never heard anything like that before. Somebody digging up his grandpa’s urn. Talk about whacky.”

“You think that’s whacky? I’ll tell you what whacky is. Whacky is that nobody gives a shit what the dead want. All they care about is that they’re close by. And that they’re buried in some shitty place, in some shitass cemetery where they’re forced to listen to everybody griping all day long. They’re just a bunch of egotists. My grandpa didn’t want to be buried. You understand? He didn’t want to be stuffed down some hole next to a bunch of lame old farts. That’s not whacky, that’s just plain bullshit that nobody even cares.”

“Wow. You’re really riled up.” Alice reached for my shoulder again. This time I let her. “So what are you planning to do?”

“I want to honor his last wish and spread his ashes in the North Sea.”

“No way,” Alice said. Then after thinking about it a second, she said, “I’m going with you.”

“What? You want to come with?”

“Yeah. Like, I’ll accompany you... the both of you.”

“You think this is a joke or something?”

“No, I’m serious. Let me come. I want to do something meaningful for once in my life.” She had a hopeful look in her eye. “Please.”

“I thought you were only going to Kassel.”

“I didn’t tell you the whole truth,” she sighed. “That wasn’t my boyfriend on the phone...”

“Then who was it?”

“My dad.”

“You run away from home?”

Alice nodded

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t want to go to some fucking boarding school.”

“What grade are you really in?” I asked, though basically I could’ve guessed.

“I’ll be in eleventh.”

“How old are you?”

“I turn seventeen next week.”

“And you can drive already?”

“I got a license. From when I went to high school in America for a year.” She pulled a small plastic card out of her skirt pocket.

“You can’t use that here.”

“Why not?” Alice protested.

“Whatever. I’ll just go by myself then.”

Alice wouldn’t give up. She got that stubborn look on her face again. “In case you forgot, I’m the one who just saved your ass. If I wouldn’t’ve kicked that dude in the balls, he would’ve been all over you.”

“But you’re only going to Kassel”

“I don’t care where I go. As long as I’m far away from that godawful boarding school.”

I emitted a burst of air through my nose. Who would’ve thought? Alice’d run away from home because she didn’t want to go to some boarding school, and she didn’t even have a license. And I’d stolen my grandpa’s urn and was trying somehow to get north. It was a pretty explosive mix. But at least it wasn’t boring. Alice, my grandpa and I – bound for the sea.