

Translated extract from

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It Wasn't Me

Translated by Isabel Cole

Jasper

“Good morning, Sir. How are you today?”

“Fine,” I said. Which was actually true. I’d spent the whole night hitting the London bars with my colleagues and I felt just fine. Of course I didn’t tell that to the stewardess. She wasn’t keen to hear the details. Actually, though, I would have liked to tell someone what had happened over the past few days. That I’d successfully completed a software training session and now had our order management system *Equinox* down cold – a key qualification for moving up the ladder on our trading floor. That it was time I got cracking, career-wise.

The Equinox training session had gone until yesterday evening. My team leader had given me a day off to go for a drink with the London colleagues, or, as he put it, “knock back a few Guinness with the guys”. Probably because I hadn’t taken a single vacation in nearly two years in his unit. Don’t trust a trader who never leaves his books, they say. But I could hardly have gotten up to any trouble. As a junior trader I was much too far down the hierarchy. I didn’t take vacation because the time passed so quickly at work. Because I forgot to think about what I had to look forward to in the evening. Or what I didn’t.

So I “knocked back” a few Guinness with the guys. They talked about cell phones, home theaters and sports cars, all of which they granted the right to be complicated. Unlike women. I was interested in cell phones and women too, but I didn’t know what to say about them. Anyway, I was barely listening. All I could think about was *Equinox*, wishing I could be on the trading floor then and there, putting my knowledge to good use.

Instead I was sitting in this London bar drinking beer that was much too cold. And forced to listen all this bullshit about British soccer. I asked the others what they thought of Felix Magath becoming Schalke’s new coach. All they’d heard of was Bayern. Of course I knew it made sense to have a drink with your colleagues. Networking and all that. It was work too, but not productive enough to waste a whole night on. Why not have two beers, Tottenham, check, Arsenal, check, Audi TT, check, Range Rover, check, female colleagues, check, and off to bed?

Finally the bar closed. I went back to the hotel and had already pressed the elevator button when Vikram, the Bombay-born Arsenal fan, grabbed me by the sleeve and dragged me into the hotel bar where they were all sitting. “We’re drinking Jägermeister, man,” he said, as if, as a German, I couldn’t say no to that. So I drank. Caused an awkward silence by saying I didn’t have a car. Around three I pretended I had to use the bathroom, went to my room, threw up, took a shower, drank two quarts of water, swallowed two magnesium tablets, three

Tylenols and a Protonix, packed my bag, took a taxi to Heathrow and boarded the plane back to Chicago at 5:03.

The stewardess took my jacket and hung it up, attaching my boarding card to the coat hanger like a cloakroom ticket. Then she brought me a glass of champagne. I did my best not to show how excited I was to be sitting in business class. After all, this flight wasn't a present from Rutherford & Gold, it was a necessary expenditure. They saw me as a top performer now and had to treat me right. After all, I could go over to Dresdner Kleinwort or UBS any time I wanted. That was how I had to look at it. This roomy seat was the reward for my fifteen-hour day. This memory foam pillow that remembered the shape of my head – that, clearly, was my market value. I didn't feel like champagne. Just the smell made me feel sick. I put down the glass and looked out the window. It was still dark. Blinking lights, people with ear muffs walking in the sleet. My face was reflected on the windowpane. Me. In business class. I took a sip after all.

From now on they'd take me seriously at the Chicago bank. I was no longer the beginner the office-mates sent for coffee even when they didn't want coffee. This training session proved that Rutherford & Gold believed in me. Things were looking up. Professionally speaking. Sure, there'd be time for a private life someday. Wife. Kid. Later. I was only 31. Between 30 and 40 you have to be on fire.

I slept for quite a bit, and then I asked for a game console and hooked it up to the screen in front of me. The entertainment menu offered all kinds of new games, but I picked Tetris. Just like the old days, when I was fifteen, the Stone Age of computer technology. In our rec room in Bochum, where I played with my friends for so long that I saw rotating blocks as I fell asleep. I had friends back then. Now it's time for my career. You aren't young forever. And if I make the big time soon, sure, I'll go for an after-work beer now and then with the guys from the Chicago office. Then I'll belong.

A sudden pressure in my ears. Were we descending already? I'd only just reached Level 15. Had to make it to Level 18. Blocks came tumbling down and I made them deflect and rotate. They all fell into place. Level 16. My thumbs darted back and forth across the Joypad, right, turn, turn, right, turn, left, I had to be faster, even faster, but suddenly the monitor went blue. Sky, a few clouds. The American Airlines logo appeared and a stewardess made the usual pre-landing announcements. I hammered away at all the Joypad's buttons to get the game started again, but all the monitor said was: *Announcement*.

The Chicago suburbs below me. Big houses, lots getting smaller and smaller the closer we came to the city. Outside a shopping center parking spaces chalked out in a fishbone pattern. All the consumers were still asleep. Europe was six time zones away again, in the past, where it belonged.

On the screen in front of me an airplane blinked across the map of North America, remaining flight time: 0:11. According to my watch it should have been 14. For the next three minutes the screen showed 11 minutes remaining. Whatever. I was a day early getting back to Chicago anyway. I wasn't actually supposed to go back to work until tomorrow, to the headquarters of Rutherford & Gold on LaSalle Street, Trading Floor, Desk 3, Futures and Options, to my work station in the 29th row with the four monitors, two on top, two below and above that a white sign saying Jasper Ludemann – they hadn't figured out the "ü" – on plain old paper. Slipped into a plastic mount, replaceable at any time.

In Chicago I turned my BlackBerry back on, and a reminder popped up: *Today: death anniv. Dad.* I clicked it away. I couldn't afford to get sentimental now. Sending my luggage home with a courier, I took the Blue Line to the Loop. I could just see the looks on their faces: a training session in London yesterday, networking beers all night, a snooze in business class and raring to go the next morning. That proved it once and for all: they hadn't made a mistake two years ago when they took me out of the back office and sent me to the trading floor. Up to the front. Onto the front.

I'd bought a plastic sleeve for my employee ID badge. It was 9:33 when I held it up to the sensor and the speed gates opened. I kept it out in the elevator. Held it up to the second sensor at the entry to the revolving door. The green signal blinked, and I placed my feet on the outlines on the floor and waited for the half-rotation of the revolving door to deposit me onto the trading floor. 40 rows, an organism made up of 600 people, 1200 telephones and thousands of screens. Soon Fixed Income came into view; behind that was our desk. I was focusing on it so hard that I almost ran into a woman – I wanted to shout after her and apologize, but she'd already vanished into the Japanese securities. I was too slow! I thought I'd finally gotten rid of it, that back-office amble.

Alex, my team leader, stood next to our shy trainee Jeff, adjusting his rimless glasses with one huge hand. He talked very quickly; as usual, only his mouth seemed to move while the rest of his face looked oddly paralyzed. I recognized my work station from the Schalke pennant I'd stuck between the two top monitors, the Reuters one and the Bloomberg one.

Then I realized that Alex wasn't standing at Jeff's place, he was right at my work station. Looking over someone's shoulder. Someone sitting at my computer. Maybe that wasn't actually my work station? Had I gotten the wrong row? No, there was the royal blue Schalke pennant. I headed toward it, deciding to say "Good morning" in a calm but surprised voice. Then the guy at my computer turned around. Very slowly, as if he'd noticed something on one of the monitors. First I'd just seen the back of his head; now I saw his nose, his glasses, his chin, raised to look at Alex, my team leader – who'd insisted that I take the day off. When I saw that the guy was wearing a tie, my stomach cramped, and just one word went through my mind: fired. No one on the trading floor wore a tie. That was someone from management. One of the people who kept tabs on us. I was fired. All right, I didn't know why, but it was obvious. Tie Man was setting up my computer for the new person. He pointed at one of the monitors. Shook his head.

Now I was the one walking faster than all the others. Out the revolving door, out of there.

Meike

Now all I had to do was get used to it being lovely here. To this front door being my front door, with no vestibule outside it smelling of disinfectant, no baby carriages, no plastic bin overflowing with discarded junk mail – just my blue shoes on the brown flagstones in the entryway. This was me in my new life.

I hung my jacket on the doorknob to dry and entered my new living room, whose windows gave me a view of what the local tourist office extolled as a *bracing climate*: a fierce wind driving rain onto a green meadow. The day before yesterday there'd still been sheep on it.

I walked past the stereo without looking and pressed the button I knew said “power”; in the kitchen I turned on the electric kettle without lifting it first. I knew there was enough water left from this morning for a cup of coffee – that's how it was when you suddenly lived on your own. I opened the jar I'd already broken a few fingernails on and put two heaping spoonfuls of instant coffee into the cup. The stereo shuffled the CDs in its carousel, the electric kettle went *bing*, I poured the boiling water into the cup, stirred, took the milk carton from the refrigerator and shook it vigorously until what was left inside had turned to foam, milk froth I poured into the coffee cup. Almost like in a café. In Hamburg, in my previous life. But now I'd chosen this.

I put the cup and an ashtray on the book-filled moving box I used as a coffee table, went over to the stereo, pressed “Play” and sat down on the sofa just as Wagner's *Tannhäuser* started up with congested-sounding brass. Then I looked out the window and pondered how mechanical this whole procedure had become after just four days living here.

Gradually the hues of the sunset fought through the grey clouds. Orange, dark blue and red. Now that was lovely. Coffee on the sofa in the evening light – they should see me now, my Hamburg friends, as they rode the stifling, crowded subway on their way home to their little kitchens where the only evening glow came from the toaster. Arthur should see me now.

Just as I was about to light my cigarette, I remembered the tiled stove. I hadn't added more wood for hours, though I had to keep it from going out because I hadn't really been listening when the previous owner explained how to light it. I went over, opened the cast-iron door and screwed up my eyes shut as a cloud of smoke engulfed me. Reaching into the basket next to the stove, I discovered that the chopped wood I'd acquired along with the house was completely used up. There was plenty of wood left, but in big billets stacked up behind the house under a rain-splattered truck tarp.

Of course my house had a real heating system, actually quite a sophisticated one: the previous owner had installed floor heating powered by geothermal energy from a hole he'd drilled himself. Then he'd suddenly moved out, leaving behind the heating system, which for some reason had never worked, three freshly-installed insulating windows with holes in the seams and a living room sponge-painted three quarters ochre. He hadn't told me why he'd moved out, though he talked quite a lot otherwise. I assumed his wife had left him, fed up by all this amateurish home improvement.

So all I was left with was the tile stove, which had survived the last renovation only for styling reasons, but kept the house tolerably warm. "Of course, you get a much nicer warmth from a tile stove," the previous owner had said, one of his stupider remarks; warmth was radiation with a certain energy, and it made absolutely no difference whether the stove had a heating coil or wood burning in it, or, as the case might be, not burning.

I took the ax that leaned against the wall in the hallway, put my wet jacket back on, left the house, had a quick look in the mailbox, not for the first time today, and walked around to the back of the house. As I grabbed the truck tarp to pull out a big beech-wood billet, it occurred to me that nearly all my Hamburg friends had a satchel made out of this material. Arthur even had two. Carefully lifting the tarp to let the water drain off to the side, I made the belated New Year' resolution, beginning now, to chop wood ahead of time when the weather was dry. I remembered that much of the previous owner's advice: chopping wood in the rain was not good. What else had he said? I couldn't remember. I placed a billet on the chopping block and lifted the ax above my head.

Its weight surprised me, pulling my arms further back than planned, so that my hood fell down and rain hit the back of my neck. Goaded on by the cold shower, I let the ax fall forward, and remembered, too late, what else the previous owner had said: I had to stand with my legs apart so I wouldn't split them in half if the ax missed the chopping block. I slid my legs apart on the muddy ground, trying at the same time to slow the ax's fall. Too late. The ax hurtled down, I tried ineffectually to turn to the side, the ax missed the billet, my legs slid, slid, I fell, closing my eyes and waiting for pain of some kind. When I opened my eyes again, I was lying in the mud, and the ax was stuck in the chopping block. Instinctively I looked around – had anyone been watching my embarrassing antics? But no one was there, of course. Not even a neighboring house. Just meadows and the bracing climate.

You could get the bathroom nice and cozy at least, you just had to take a fifteen-minute hot shower, longer if possible. That was especially important the morning after my failed wood-chopping attempt, when the stove had gone out for good overnight.

The mailbox was empty. Of course, who could have dropped something off between now and my last look before going to bed last night? I checked whether my business card was still where I'd stuck it over the mailbox for want of a nameplate: *Meike Urbanski lit. translator*, underneath it my old Hamburg address, crossed out.

The mailbox was one of those American models that look like oversized loaves of white bread. That fit the house's previous owner, his dream of an independent pioneer life in the North Frisian prairie with his own geothermal heating. His wife must have rolled her eyes, what woman wouldn't roll her eyes at this mailbox from the next best hardware store claiming something like: Here is America, the land of self-fulfillment, land of the free, embodied by a dirty-white tube with a red metal flag for the mailman to raise after dropping something off. It had been down ever since I'd moved in.

I had to chop wood. Wood meant warmth, and without warmth I could give up on my new life right now. I looked around the living room. The previous owner's ochre sponge paint gave the room a cozy, womb-like feel, which hardly jibed with the fact that it was now so cold that I could see my own breath.

Rather than listen to *Tannhäuser* again, I looked around for the moving box with the CDs, and when I couldn't find it off the bat, I realized where it was: in the hallway of our Hamburg apartment, under the gas heater, to the right of Arthur's shoes, where my shoes had been. What a classic moving glitch! Everything had gone perfectly, I'd just forgotten the main thing, meaning that my music selection was restricted to the three CDs in the stereo's carousel: two CDs of *Tannhäuser* and one of Rufus Wainwright. The way he sang the words *alcoholic homosexual*, I wanted to be both.

Arthur and I had always worked well as a couple. We lived the life that's the stuff of TV series, we had enough money, interesting friends, interesting work. We'd met ten years ago in the housewares and appliances section at Karstadt. Arthur had asked me if I'd lean toward a washing machine you load from the top, or a normal one with the door in the front, a "classic frontloader", in the words of the salesman, who chimed in on our conversation and naturally thought we were a couple. All right, I'd said to myself, if that's what the Karstadt salesman thinks... Step One was taken care of. Followed by Step Two: hanging out with other

couples, Step Three: moving together, and Step Four: thinking about having kids. Then I did Step Five and moved out.

I didn't want to ask the other couples for help, so I took care of the move by myself, clandestinely, at four in the morning. At that hour I could be sure not to meet anyone on the street; the pub-crawling years were over for Gösta and Regine, Sabine and Lars. It was as if, even back when picking out my furniture, I'd made sure to get nothing heavy or bulky: the bed belonged to Arthur, but I had a sofa-bed, a designer piece made of pressed Styrofoam that weighed less than 50 pounds and was a cinch to carry down the stairs. I'd screwed off the legs of my desk the night before, and the rest went into the moving boxes. Just an hour later everything was stowed away in the Renault Rapid minivan I'd bought a few weeks before. I even took the time to shift Arthur's furniture around and rearrange the books in the bookcase so that maybe he wouldn't notice my absence right away when he came back from his exhibition opening in Munich.

It wasn't even six by the time I closed the doors to the minivan's cargo area once and for all. Turning off Bellealliancestrasse onto deserted Fruchttallee, I didn't signal and barely hit the brakes. Soon after that I was accelerating down the A 23 toward Husum/Heide, convinced that I'd never see this city again.

I'd lived here for ten years, in the Schanzenviertel, a classic case of moving there as a student and then watching everything gradually get cleaner, sleepier, in short, more *middle-class*, even if no one dared to call it that the first few years, until suddenly everyone was constantly using the word, as if to prove to themselves that there was nothing wrong with it.

The rehabilitation of the word *middle-class* was followed by offspring. One of the couples we knew, Gösta and Regine, had started several years ago with a dog they named Leander, whereupon Lars and Sabine retaliated with a child they named Friedrich. When Lars and Sabine had a second child – I could never remember whether she was called Sophia-Marie or Maria-Sophie – Gösta and Regine's only alternative was to have little Maximilian to catch up, if not to even the score.

With the kids, the dog and the trips they all took to the countryside, an enthusiasm for *regionally-grown products* ran rife. From the Altes Land, for instance, where you came back with apples or cherries that tasted better simply because you could almost see the Altes Land if you looked down the Elbe and told yourself that somewhere beyond the Airbus factory things were growing on trees. But despite all that we never wanted a dog. I was afraid of dogs, and Arthur was afraid for his paintings, which he referred to as "works". For the past several years Arthur had been painting entirely in monochrome.

Why I'd lived here for ten years and then secretly made a run for it might be hard to explain – but it's not unusual. People do that kind of thing. Lots of people. Every day. What I pondered instead was why it had happened now. One reason was definitely the Christmas Eve we'd spent at Regine's and Gösta's last year with Sabine and Lars. Regine and Gösta had become very tradition-conscious since having little Maximilian. They barred us from the living room and wouldn't let us in until Gösta had lit the real candles on the tree and jingled a bell. Their apartment was really too small to restrict mobility like that; we jostled in the kitchen with the increasingly restive Friedrich, Maximilian and Maria-Sophie, eating cookies that were baked according to some special grandmotherly recipes but tasted like any old cookies. Under the table Leander the dog lay there so apathetically that I pictured them putting sedatives in his food – and wished they'd do the same for me. Space was especially tight because Gösta had bought himself a wine refrigerator with shock-absorbent shelves and five individually adjustable temperature zones. Just as I was about to ask whether I at least could go into or actually just through the room with the Christmas tree to smoke a cigarette, the bell jingled. Gösta read the Nativity Story; evidently unsure where to stop, he read much too long and finally broke off, befuddled, at the point when old Simeon takes Jesus into his arms at the Temple of Jerusalem. Meanwhile I stared at the balcony door. Then the presents were distributed, and Gösta got something from Regine.

“Oh, a salt grinder, is that one of the ones with...”

“... a Peugeot mechanism, stainless steel. Nothing else will do,” said Regine. The word Peugeot mechanism prompted emphatic nods on the part of Sabine and Lars, but I was surprised at how small the salt grinder was; in recent years, whenever Gösta had cooked for us, he'd creaked pepper onto each serving with a pepper grinder the size and shape of an outdoor chess piece. I wondered whether he'd go around the dinner table twice now, once with pepper, once with salt, and I must have acquired such an absent-minded look that Regine made an effort to involve me in the conversation by saying:

“Gösta can use it for his Himalayan salt.”

“Himalayan salt?”

“All salts aren't created equal. There are huge differences. Your typical salt is just full of industrial pollutants.”

“And Himalayan salt?”

“That's pristine salt. It comes straight from nature.”

“And in nature everything's always so clean?”

“There are no environmental toxins in the Himalayas. That’s why it doesn’t cause allergic reactions. In children. And besides it tastes better, so you need less of it.”

“Salt is 98% sodium chloride, whether it comes from the Himalayas or Bad Reichenhall. And that always tastes the same,” I said. I knew that because I’d researched it for a recent translation.

“Then I guess it’s just my subjective taste,” said Regine, smiling as if she knew I couldn’t reply to that. Taste, in this case subjective taste, perceived taste, so to speak, was above discussion.

“What are Himalayas?” asked Friedrich, little guessing how grateful I was to him for bringing the conversation back to the intellectual horizon of a three-year-old. Regine explained, nodding enthusiastically, that those were mountains, Hi-ma-lay-as, right, far, far away and reealy really high, hmhmm! Meanwhile I went out onto the balcony and smoked two cigarettes in a row.

Coming out to get another bottle of champagne, Lars surprised me by asking for a pull on my cigarette.

“Why didn’t Gösta chill the champagne in his wine refrigerator?” I asked.

“I think it’s full,” said Lars.

“All five temperature zones?”

“All five individually-adjustable temperature zones,” he said and took another pull. “Climate-controlled wine cabinet, by the way, not wine refrigerator, not every wine has to be refrigerated, after all.” Then he took a third pull and went back inside before I could tell, in the semidarkness, whether he’d said the last words with a grin or not.

When I went back inside, Regine was just starting off on her “I like the winter because in the summer there’s no getting through what with all the sidewalk cafés” harangue. I remembered how last summer at Café unter den Linden I’d watched Regina plow through the rows of café tables and chairs with her three-wheeled sports stroller like the Pharaoh’s chariot scattering enemy ranks. I said I liked the winter because I could sleep until nine without being woken by the light, and Regine said, “I’d love to be able to do that again, but the little cutie-pie just won’t let me.”

“So I can set my own hours, what’s wrong with that?” I said. Her pitying tone annoyed me.

“I didn’t mean it like that. Not at all, sometimes I wish I were as crazy about literature as you are.”

“I’m not *that* crazy.”

“I didn’t mean it like that, that’s what I just said,” Regine said. “I admire you for it.”

For the first time that Christmas Eve I realized it wasn’t just that these people got on my nerves. I felt homesick, though for ten years my home had been here – homesick for a place I didn’t know.

Of course the couples we knew had long since toyed with the idea of moving to the countryside. Especially since Sophia-Marie was born, Sabine was constantly talking about buying an old farmhouse, and today was no exception. As the third bottle of red wine sloshed to room temperature in the decanter, everyone offered their garrulous agreement, even Arthur: “Ah, yes, a house in the countryside.”

And there I was now: in the countryside, in the region where the *regionally-grown products* came from. As far as I was concerned, it didn’t have to be quite this rural. It would have been nice to have a supermarket and a train station within walking distance – a somewhat more exclusive solitude, quiet, but not out in the boondocks. But I couldn’t afford that; after all, I don’t write the bestsellers, I just translate them. And right now I wasn’t even doing that. I was waiting for the new manuscript from my author: Henry LaMarck. It should have arrived weeks ago, but it would be there any day now, as his German editor Thorsten Fricke had assured me.

I went back to the mailbox. The flag was down, but I looked inside anyway, wondering what Arthur and the others would think if they could see all this: the road, going God knows where, on the other side of the road the old levee, on this side my house, built in the forties as an annex to an old farm that had burned down. The mailbox, the door, the bedroom window and the trellis the previous owner had mounted to the wall for ivy to grow on, probably in the hopes of transforming the house’s image from dilapidated to romantic.

I walked around the house, past the unchopped wood and the bus with the slogan *modern travel... bus travel*. The previous owner had planned to convert it for guests, but had ended up just cluttering it up with almost-empty paint buckets, empty flower pots, leftover wall board and roof tiles.

Maybe my friends shouldn’t see this until I’d gotten used to everything here, after I’d gotten settled in and started translating Henry LaMarck’s new novel. Arthur. Gösta and Regine, Sabine and Lars. But then they’d realize to their astonishment that I, of all people, was living their dream, the dream of life in the countryside, beyond the levee. Of course, due to land reclamation the levee hadn’t seen the sea for centuries, the coast was two kilometers away, behind a real levee, but still: it was good that I was here. And it was lovely. In a way.