Translated excerpt

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Being on Fire

Translated by Katy Derbyshire

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In the weeks after Fukushima, my mother had a distinct need to talk to me about Hartmut. I realize now that she was saying goodbye, in a different way than she made me believe. She wasn't saying goodbye, as I'd hoped, to Hartmut; she was taking her own leave from life. I didn't realize that until later, though. She knew the only way to win me over to Hartmut's side was to present me with a prospect of getting rid of him once and for all. Once he'd been mentioned in various newspapers, I thought my mother had achieved her goal or could at least tell herself she'd achieved it. I interpreted her wanting to tell me about him as her way of getting everything off her chest so she could free herself of him and devote herself to a life beyond Hartmut. That was the only reason I played along. Ultimately – and it's amazing that I didn't understand it straight away – all she wanted was to make sure I was well prepared for the inheritance she'd be leaving me. Now I'm sitting here with all the files and memories and I could try to free myself from them, but I haven't even managed to dispose of the documents. How I'm supposed to get rid of the memories, I don't know, especially not since my mother made me her sole heir in matters pertaining to Hartmut. This

attempt to write everything down is an attempt to leave it all behind me and at the same time to fulfil the obligation with which my mother burdened me, unasked for. Even though the story will be different to the one my mother envisaged, and she'd be disappointed because my story is no heroic tale. My mother no longer being alive means I can write more freely because I have no need to fear her perspective, her unconditional belief in the truth, as though there were only one truth with regard to Hartmut, whereas I prefer to trust my memory and my imagination. The possibility that something was said the way I remember it is enough truth for me.

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I have to say one thing about Hartmut; he was right. He'd predicted the disaster. Thirty-three years after he burned himself to death – to be precise, thirty-three and a third years, my mother had pointed it out – the earth moved in Japan and triggered a disaster.

33 1⁄3, that was more than a prediction; 3 was a divine number. Think of the Holy Trinity! It couldn't be a coincidence. Hartmut had a gift, if not divine then at least prophetic. That was how my mother saw it all her life. She was probably the only one, but as she saw it, the Fukushima disaster in March 2011 confirmed her opinion. If anyone's thinking my mother leaned back on her kitchen chair to enjoy the gratification and savoured her triumph in silence, perhaps garnished

with a modest smile – if anyone thinks that, I can say one thing for sure: they never met my mother.

When I visited her a few days after the meltdowns, she was waiting for me in her front door. She was 71 and no longer steady on her feet, so she was propping herself up with one hand against the door frame, and before I could hug her hello she said with a victorious look, as though she'd won a bet: 'He knew it! Hartmut knew it!' And of course – there was no need for her to mention it – she'd been the only one who'd believed in Hartmut and seen more in him than a crazy idiot. Perhaps she was even right about that, but I can't just forget what happened, all those years when we lived for Hartmut, when Hartmut was the measure of all things. Perhaps it's an irony of fate that I'm now the one who gets to interpret his life, or perhaps it's simply the right of those who come later.

That day, I said hello to my mother the way I always did: gripped her lightly by the shoulders, put my cheek to hers and said, 'I've brought cake, with no eggs, butter or milk, just how you like it.' The cake was called zebra cake and was a hundred per cent vegan, the young dreadlocked woman who sold it had assured me. I'd resisted the impulse to explain the cake wasn't for me but for my 71-year-old mother, who had something to celebrate given the global disaster and had asked me to bring cake.

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The story I'm going to tell about Hartmut is different to the one my mother would have told. Our stories are similar at the beginning – she'd have started with death too, as though it were his death that gave Hartmut's life its meaning. She'd have talked about Helmut Schmidt as well, who was chancellor of West Germany at the time and thought people like Hartmut were crazy greens and threatened to resist a majority vote against nuclear power even before the decisive party conference in November 1977. But we had different views on the role Helmut Schmidt plays in the story. My mother was convinced it was the chancellor's stubbornness that drove Hartmut to his death, which makes him partly responsible for it. I see him as a reactionary politician whose actions are far removed from the public perception of him, a politician who simply drove Hartmut to despair. A view that my mother always refused to accept. For her, it wasn't an act of desperation. Hartmut, she insisted, had been of one mind with the East German dissident Rudolf Bahro, and had relied on the long-term effect of every thought that really got to the core of a problem. She was convinced he had approached matters with absolute earnest, with utter sincerity and consistency. He had put not only his mind, but also his existence as a German citizen in the balance. Anyone accusing him of despair, she said, did not know what Hartmut had really been like, and they turned his act on its head, interpreting it as human weakness. The greatness of his act could barely be assessed, in her view. It had been an act of

courage and determination and love. And then she made a new Jesus out of Hartmut, claiming that Jesus had said no one had greater love than he who gave his life for friends. That was how she saw Hartmut: 'He gave his life for all of us.' That's another thing, now almost 34 years later, which I see somewhat differently. In my story, we gave our lives for Hartmut. He sacrificed less himself than us, we who were close to him, whether we wanted to be or not.

It's always been like this: whomever I tell my story, they can't help thinking my mother wasn't quite right in the head. A conclusion that practically imposes itself, but one that no one dares to express clearly, at least not in front of me. Instead, people look for words to circumscribe their conclusion as kindly as possible. 'It sounds tragic,' is a line I often hear. Or they ask what it was like for me, living with a mother like that. They ask about my father. One got carried away and asked whether my mother had ever been in treatment, and as though I might have misunderstood, he added, 'Not with a doctor, I mean… you know.' One woman I know was convinced my mother had done it all out of love, love for Hartmut that she hadn't lived out in public and perhaps hadn't dared to admit to herself. Essentially, the woman thought, one could interpret her behaviour as a kind of displacement activity. Then she looked at me and seemed only to realize at that moment what she'd just said to me, and she had the empathy not to expand on her theory. What was I to say to all that? None of the reactions surprised me because I'd already been through all those

thoughts. I'm 44 years old now; you could say I'm a grown man. I've been through therapy, as every grown man should, starting with weekly sessions. In our very first conversation, the psychologist identified my mother as the person I'd have to work on. To depict the state of my psyche, she compared me to Obelix and my mother to the menhir I had to carry around day after day; unlike Obelix, I hadn't had the good fortune of falling in a cauldron of magic potion as a child. I thus had two possibilities, in her view: either I got so strong that the menhir was not a burden on me, or I had to chip away at the menhir for so long that it shrank in size and weight. Both options, she quickly clarified, would require at least two appointments a week. I don't know how many hours I spent on her couch, it's years ago now, but I do know I think that form of processing is the wrong kind, from my current point of view. Because you regress. Talking about your mother as a grown man feels like sitting on the sofa in a pair of too tight Winnie-the-Pooh pyjamas wrapped up in the duvet, eating peeled apple slices. To take the place of therapy, I'd started boxing. That is, until the old East German coach called me into the ring for my first sparring session and explained how important defence was, grabbed my wrists and pushed my fists in front of my face, then threw me a trial left hook and I gave myself a nosebleed with my own glove, not prepared for the force of his blow. After that I joined a fitness club and drove my weight training to the point of excess – which would have delighted my therapist, speaking of menhirs.

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There isn't a day in my life I remember more clearly than that 16th of November. Looking back, that day was the starting point for the most fundamental change in my life. All my lifelines can be traced back to there, though I wasn't aware of that at the time, of course. How could I have been? For me, Hartmut was the first. I didn't know there'd been others before him; my mother only told me later on about Jan Palach in Prague and Oskar Brüsewitz in Zeitz. Had I known about those others at the time, I might have understood what an act of heroism Hartmut had performed, the moment my mother came into my room to tell me he'd burned himself to death. As it was, though, everything began with a misunderstanding.

On the day when Hartmut became a hero in Hamburg, I was sitting at my desk, annoyed about my triple Hitzfeld. As so often, I hadn't been paying attention when I'd swapped and I'd got another Hitzfeld in exchange for Hölzenbein and Höttges, when it was Hattenberger I'd needed. Number 80 in the album. It was the 1977/78 season, VfB Stuttgart had lost in Düsseldorf the previous weekend and was at number seven in the league on the fifteenth day of play. Cologne would be playing in Stuttgart that coming Saturday. My father had promised to take me to the stadium. I had no idea of course that the Hartmut thing would stop that from happening. The Bergmann sticker album

was open on my desk, next to it the pile of doubles and triples. I was just thinking about who I could fob off with my three extra Hitzfelds when my mother came into my room and stood next to me. Perhaps I could have told by her tone of voice how serious what she had to say to me was, but to be honest I hadn't been listening to her and hadn't really noticed her voice. In my memory, I hear her voice muffled, like when she'd sit by my bed in my childhood and I was snuggled underneath the thick duvet.

She reached out a hand for the back of my lemon-yellow rotating desk chair, turned me to face her and then squatted down. She held my chin with her other hand, to make sure I didn't miss a thing. I had no option but to look at her. Her large eyes, which had a watery colour to them. I couldn't help thinking of my paint box and what it was like when I mixed the dark blue paint with too much water and then painted a line across the paper until it paled, strong at the beginning and almost invisible by the end. If I had to describe my mother's eye colour, I'd say it was somewhere in the last third of that line.

'Did you hear what I said?' she asked. I nodded, although I should have known my mother wouldn't be satisfied with a nod. 'What did you hear?' she asked.

'Someone burned himself,' I said.

'Not someone,' she said. 'It was Hartmut.'

Almost every team had one or more Helmuts, but there was only one

Hartmut and he was at VfL Bochum, Hartmut Fromm, number 310 in the album. I never told my mother that the person I first thought of was Hartmut Fromm, who I'd never particularly noticed as a player, and whose name was only familiar from the album. My mother would never have forgiven me.

When tears welled in her eyes I realized it must not be Hartmut Fromm who'd burned himself but our Hartmut, whom my father at first called only 'Gründler' and then later 'that crazy Gründler'.

'That's not so bad,' I said, wanting to comfort my mother and thinking Hartmut had probably hurt his hand on the cooker. The room he lived in at that time was full of books. On the floor, along the walls, there were piles of books everywhere; he even had shelves above the cooker. I imagined him reaching for a book and leaning on the cooker, forgetting the hob was hot. I knew my mother kept burns cream in the bathroom cabinet for cases like that.

My mother wasn't particularly fond of my sticker album. She didn't like football at all, and it wasn't the first time she'd taken the album away from me. She got up and left the room. I stayed on my chair, stared at the little pile of doubles on the desk and didn't know what I'd done wrong.

It wasn't until later in the afternoon that I found out the tube of cream wouldn't have helped in Hartmut's case; not even a whole barrel of the stuff. Hartmut had poured petrol over himself and then set it alight. He

had sent out a fiery signal. As a protest, as my mother said, as a protest against West Germany's nuclear policy. And what Hartmut had done was the ultimate act of heroism. Because he'd done it for us, for all of us, so we could live in a better world where we need no longer fear nuclear death.

Later that day, my mother came into my room and told me she needed my help, there was something we had to do. I was glad she was clearly not angry any more, and I didn't want that to change. It wasn't the first time she'd needed my help, after all.

In the car, my mother put a box of flyers next to me on the back seat. She must have written them after she'd come dashing into my room. There was a typewriter in her room, at which she often sat, and a copy machine in my father's room that she often used when he wasn't there. I know precisely what the flyers said, because I found one among all the documents my mother collected:

'On the Self-Immolation of a Life Protector. Nuclear Power Claims its Victims.'

The heading is underlined. It goes on:

'Hartmut Gründler burned himself to death in Hamburg on the occasion of the SPD party conference on the Day of Repentance, for the sake of the truth, the truth about the government's nuclear policy, for the sake of truthfulness between the governors and the people. He sacrificed himself so that we do not fall victim. The Working Group for the Protection of Life respects this act of consistent testimony against the threat to life through unchained technology.'

Below that it says: Working Group Life Protection. And our address at the time on Keplerstrasse. And below that:

'As Hartmut Gründler would have wished, we ask for your donations to support for the anti-nuclear struggle.'

It was followed by the details of a savings account.

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It was a cold day; we'd zipped our jackets up to our chins. I felt the wind on the bridge, quickly making my fingers grow stiff. My mother had jammed the box underneath her left arm and handed me a pile of flyers. I knew from experience it was better if we split up. My mother crossed the road and positioned herself on the opposite side. Stupidly enough, we soon realized we were obviously the only people on the bridge, presumably because it was a bank holiday. I held the papers first in one hand and then in the other, so I could put the free one in my pocket. I looked over at my mother. They way she stood there, alone with her flyers, I felt rather sorry for her. It was important to her that Hartmut's sacrifice wasn't in vain. He had set himself alight, and now no one was coming. I also felt rather sorry for Hartmut. Why had he chosen this Day of Repentance of all days?

Still no one in sight, I turned around and leaned over the edge of the

bridge. I peered down at the River Neckar, which looked dark and cold. I imagined what I always imagined when I stood on a bridge over a river: what it would be like to jump into the water. Not that I'd have dared; I didn't even dare to dive from the three-metre board at the swimming pool, but I liked to imagine it, I couldn't help it. It was as though there were a huge magnet at the bottom of the water and I felt its power of attraction. The trick was to resist that pull. Even at the swimming pool. But the others didn't seem to get it. 'Have you turned to stone?' 'Get a move on,' 'Are you going to jump any time this year?' they'd called as they waited behind me. When I turned around at some point I saw that half the pool was queuing up. I pushed my way past all the waiting children, clambered down the ladder and was rather proud that I'd resisted the lure of the depths. As I leaned on the edge of the bridge and felt the force of the magnet, I imagined jumping. I'd simply let myself fall from the balustrade. I imagined what falling would feel like; I wouldn't fly like a bird, I would drop like a stone. And then the moment when I'd hit the water, feet first. I'd go under. Get dragged along by the current. My mother wouldn't notice. I'd have to scream. Then she'd see me drifting away. And she'd cry. I realized I couldn't simply swim to the riverbank and climb out of the water, the current was far too strong and the river too cold. But I'd heard you get warm, just before you freeze to death. And that you usually fell asleep. Just as I was imagining drifting down the Neckar in my sleep, I heard my mother shouting, 'Hanno! Over there!'

I turned around. An old woman with a zimmer frame was walking towards me. I nodded. It took her a while to get to me, and even longer to notice me. She was shuffling along in a crooked posture and didn't stop until she'd almost rammed her walking frame into my feet. She raised her head and nodded at me as though she'd recognized me, but she couldn't have done; I didn't know her. Still, I thought for a moment whether I might have seen her with my grandmother. Once a week, a couple of other old women visited my grandmother for a game of Canasta. I often sat at the table with them and peeked at their cards and shook my head or nodded when I saw my grandmother wanted to play a particular card, which the other women at the tables weren't to notice, of course. My mother didn't like it one bit; the old women would drink Jägermeister and smoke. My father thought that was funny though, because he drank and smoked himself. The woman with the zimmer frame wasn't part of the Canasta party, though. I handed her a flyer. She made an effort to straighten up, resting one hand on the frame and holding the sheet of paper up to her face with the other.

'I'm sorry, son,' she said, 'the writing's too small, I can't read it. Can you read it aloud for me?' Of course I could read aloud for her. Unlike in maths, I was one of the best in my class at reading. I took the flyer out of her hand. And knowing old people didn't hear well, I read slowly and loudly: 'On the Self-Imm-olation of a Life Pro-tec-tor. Nu-cle-ar En-er-gy Claims its Vic-tims…' The woman nodded. I didn't know whether she was nodding because I was reading loudly enough or

because she agreed with what she was hearing. ‘Hart-mut Gründ-ler burned him-self to death in Ham-burg on the occ-a-sion of the S-P-D par-ty con-fer-ence on the Day of Rep-en-tance, for the sake of the truth, the truth about the gov-ern-ment’s nuc-le-ar po-li-cy...’

Once I finished, she said, ‘You read that very well.’ Then she gripped her walking frame to go on her way. I hadn’t anticipated that. She clearly hadn’t understood it was about Hartmut, about how he’d set himself alight for all of us. For her, as well. I looked around. My mother was still on the other side of the road, the box under her arm and a flyer in one hand, looking over. I had to do something. I said, ‘Helmut Schmidt is a liar.’

The old woman shook her head. ‘Helmut Schmidt is a good man,’ she said.

‘He’s a liar,’ I said.

‘He’s not Willy Brandt,’ she said. ‘Willy Brandt was the best one.’

I’d heard the name but I couldn’t remember the context. In fact I didn’t care who Willy Brandt was, all I cared about was Hartmut. I said, ‘He burned himself to death.’

That had an effect. She stopped and looked at me. ‘Who?’ she asked, ‘Willy? Brandt?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘not Willy Brandt, Hartmut.’

‘I don’t know a Hartmut,’ she said.

‘He lived downstairs from us,’ I said, ‘Gründler, down in the cellar, he was a life protector and sometimes he went hungry so Helmut would tell the truth at last. He told me all about the fuel rods. And he told me we’re all in danger.’

‘Are you here on your own?’ she asked.

‘No,’ I said and pointed at my mother. ‘We’re collecting donations for Hartmut.’

The old woman looked across the road. I didn’t know whether she could see my mother if she couldn’t even read the letters when she held the paper up close to her face. She seemed to be thinking. Then she said, ‘Have a look in my bag, my purse is in there, and you take out a one mark coin.’ The bag was hanging on a hook on her zimmer frame. I hesitated, wondering whether I was allowed to go delving in a strange old woman’s bag. But she’d told me to, after all. I opened the bag and found her purse right away. It was one of those with a stupid fastening made of two little balls, which are so hard to open. I wondered how the old woman managed it. Or did she always get other people to open her purse? I thought of Hartmut and his sacrifice. I pressed long and hard on the balls until they sprang apart. They left dents in my fingertips but I was instantly distracted by what I saw: a whole lot of bank notes, tens, fifties, even two hundreds, and a few coins. I couldn’t help thinking of Robin Hood and how there were various different ways of being a hero.

My mother had explained time and time again that the world was an unjust place because some had a lot of money and that meant the others had very little. There wasn't a never-ending supply of money in the world, so when some had a lot there wasn't much left for the others. That had made sense to me. This old woman was clearly one of those who had a lot of money. If I was donating my pocket money, it would be only fair if she gave a hundred-mark note for the fight against the nuclear threat. She was in just as much danger as everyone else. It was her life at stake too.

I had to distract the old woman somehow. Once, I'd stolen a ten-mark note from my grandmother's purse; it had been on the sideboard in the hall and there was no one nearby. This was a different situation. The old woman stared at my fingers as I sifted through the coins for a one-mark piece. I dropped the purse. 'Sorry,' I said as I picked up the coins that had fallen out. I pretended there was a coin further away and slid out of her view on my knees, still holding the purse. I shoved the hundred-mark note in my jacket pocket. Then I stood up, closed the purse and handed it back to the old woman. 'Thanks,' I said and showed her the one-mark coin.

'I'd better be going,' the old woman said, 'all the best for you and your Hartmut Brandt.'

'Gründler,' I said, 'Hartmut Gründler.' But I don't know whether she heard that.

Once she'd gone, my mother crossed the road and I held the hundred out to her, keeping the mark to myself. 'For Hartmut,' I said.

My mother took the note out of my hand and held it up, as though she couldn't believe it was real. 'You see,' she said, 'there are people who care about Hartmut.'

I nodded. My mother put the money in her jacket pocket. 'Come on,' she said, 'that's enough for today.' I followed her back to the car.

Even though it was for a good cause, unlike Robin Hood I struggled with my guilty conscience. Robbing a half-blind old lady is hard to make into an act of heroism. And so I never told anyone. But when I think about it, it shows me that even as a child I was convinced I had to earn my mother's approval, her attention and ultimately her love. That too, like so many other things, was to do with Hartmut.

