

**Simone Buchholz**  
**Blue Night**

Novel

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Sample translation by Romy Fursland

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*Last night.*

*A kick in the right kidney, and you fall to your knees.*

*One in the stomach, and you go down.*

*And another in the kidney, the left one this time, to shut you up.*

*Then the bats, pulled out from under their jackets.*

*Four jackets, four bats.*

*One for each leg.*

*One for each arm.*

*And eight feet for twelve pairs of ribs.*

*A many-headed devil, summoned just for you.*

*Then the pliers.*

*Right index finger.*

*A clean cracking noise.*

*They don't seem to realise you're left-handed.*

*Somebody aims a final kick at something that was already broken.*

*And they leave you lying there.*

*It lasted five minutes, maybe six.*

*The pain is clear and dizzying and hot and cold at the same time, and everywhere. Blood is flowing from your right hand, almost comfortingly warm.*

*So this is what it's like.*

I.

A ROUND OF CANDLES, PLEASE

The engine coughs one last time, harrumphs like an old man under a dark sky, and floods. I get out of the car, sit down on the rust-gilded bonnet and feel the thick, cold air on my face.

Cigarette.

But first smoke the fog dry.

Whose ridiculous idea was it to drive out to the countryside for the weekend?

Jump in the car, they said, get out of the city for a bit, have a change of scenery. Genius. I mean: me of all people. It was doomed from the start. The car is a pile of crap, and I'm worse than a hog on ice behind the wheel. Nobody ever wants to come with me when I offer to drive so I always end up keeping myself company. And somehow I find that easier to cope with in the city than elsewhere.

And now there's somebody waiting for me back there, in the city – my services are required at long last, and here I am stranded in the wilderness. The person who's waiting for me doesn't know he's waiting for me, of course, because he's been beaten to a pulp and is lying unconscious in a hospital bed. They called me because I'm the one they always call at times like this. They couldn't call anyone else because they have no idea who the guy is.

I ring Faller; both of us, thank God, still know who the other is. So far nothing has put a stop to that.

He picks up after two rings.

"Good morning, young lady."

"Morning, Faller."

"Well?"

"The Ford's given up the ghost."

"Oh."

"I don't s'pose you could come and pick me up? I really need to get into town."

"Where are you?"

"The back of fucking beyond," I say.

"Whereabouts exactly?"

"Schaalsee. Between Zarrentin and the arse end of nowhere."

“Ah.”

He’s in West Hamburg, probably eating breakfast. He could be here in an hour if he puts his foot down.

“Stay there,” he says, “I’ll come and get you. Might be a little while, though.”

“I’ve got some fags. Ring me when you’re nearby, OK?”

I hang up and place both hands on the bonnet – it’s almost cold already. We just never really hit it off, this old car and I. Sure, it might have seemed promising at first; on the surface we probably looked like a good match. You might almost have thought: Those two are made for each other! How could we not have thought to introduce them before! But in the end it was just one of those barstool acquaintances that are so exciting in the heat of the moment but upon closer inspection – by the cold light of day, at the very latest – don’t make it past two minutes of small talk.

I turn up the collar of my coat, take my bag out of the boot and head west along the road. There’s a broad expanse ahead of me, a prairie of fields and meadows and a few solitary trees, a little ochre here, a little green there. I light my next cigarette and listen to the sound of my boots. We soon fall into a rhythm – we enjoy walking on tarmac, my boots and I.

It’s OK, Faller will find me.

Behind me in the east, way off in the distance behind the grim wet clouds, there’s a pathetic little sliver of morning sunshine.

I feel like a cowboy whose horse has been shot.

Faller is currently undergoing a sort of belated midlife crisis. I still can’t believe he went and bought himself a Pontiac. Sky blue. Convertible. His wife told him to get a car that needed doing up after he began, fairly brazenly, to eye up younger women.

Or rather, to claim that younger women were eyeing him up.

“You need a project,” she told him, and he’s certainly got one now: the Pontiac breaks down at the slightest opportunity. It’s lucky his old banger happens to be working the day mine isn’t, actually – because who the hell would I have called otherwise?

Calabretta currently has a ‘No Servicio’ sign pasted right over his heart. All that doom and gloom would have been too much for me this morning.

Klatsche is still asleep. And until a few hours ago he was behind the bar, so he might not have been in a fit state to drive even if he was awake.

Neither Carla nor Rocco have driving licences and besides, they're both on official Calabretta-watch.

All in all, I feel my group of friends is somewhat lacking in the driving department. He pulls up slowly beside me, the Pontiac chugging. He winds the passenger window down and stops the car.

"I thought I told you to stay put."

"I couldn't help it."

"And apart from this little mishap, have you had a nice weekend?"

I open the door, chuck my bag on the back seat and collapse onto the black leather.

"Bloody fantastic. This is the first and last time I go in for this rural shit."

He looks at me and shakes his head.

"You do have some funny ideas sometimes, don't you, Chastity? Taking off out of the city like this. You need your concrete jungle."

I don't know. I'd decided to take my friends' advice for once. I had to *do* something. I'm not cut out for all this sitting around. Since what happened at the harbour I'm still officially a public prosecutor, but unofficially I've been put on gardening leave. They ummed and aahed for a long time about what to do with me. Blowing the whistle on a corrupt boss might look like grounds for promotion from the outside, but inside the force grassing up your own boss does not go down at all well.

And then there was that unauthorized use of a firearm.

The fact that I saved Calabretta's life in the process is one thing; the fact that I shot the bad guy in the crown jewels rather than the leg – three times – is another. I don't know what happened to the guy: I never heard anything more about it, and there wasn't so much as a ripple in the press. I have no idea how my colleagues wangled that one. I don't even want to know. They told me I had nothing to worry about, stashed my dad's army pistol away somewhere and took me out of circulation. And then, after I'd been in limbo for several months, they came up with a new assignment. A post created especially for me: victim protection. When somebody somewhere is beaten half to death or shot or run over, when somebody is pushed off a bridge or a roof and survives, it falls within my remit.

But not the investigation – only the victim.

What an insanely exciting job.

Make way, make way: Chastity Riley here, on important hand-holding business.

The first few months I dutifully kept my head down and did what was expected of me. But I interpret my role more broadly now. I pounce ruthlessly on every one of the few cases that land at my feet. That was never the plan, but nobody's said anything yet. What *can* they say? After all, we're all in the same boat, and its name is 'nobody mention the man with no nads'.

So there you go.

All in all, I'm not overly thrilled with my provisional arrangement.

All in all, I suddenly feel as though the walls are closing in.

Hence the misguided road trip idea.

"Where to?" asks Faller, sounding like a taxi driver. "Home?"

"I need to get to St. Georg. To the hospital."

"Ah," he says, "a new patient."

"A new client," I say.

"And what about your car?"

"I'm sure somebody will be glad of it."

He speeds up and the Pontiac roars beneath my arse. It's a bit like riding in a tank.

Always do what your heart tells you. Or bury it at the bend in the river.

That was what my dad often used to advise when I asked him what he thought I should do. An old Native American saying, by the sounds of it. Those guys had a snappy little motto for every occasion.

My heart is telling me to sit down and hold his hand. It doesn't look like anybody else is going to. I can spot a lonely face a mile off.

The hand is warm and dry and surprisingly soft for its size – a real paw of a hand. I try to hold it in both my hands. It looks faintly ridiculous. My hands are a pair of sparrow's wings trying to embrace a raven.

He was brought onto the ward early this morning, just after four. His arms, legs and ribs all have multiple fractures, and his right collarbone is shattered. There's a thick bandage on his right hand: the nurse says he's lost his index finger. Except that people don't just 'lose' an index finger. He's got no head injuries and his lungs are still in one piece. His kidneys are swollen but basically working. There's a central line hooked up to his neck where his medication's going in: a cocktail of drugs from the pouches on the infusion stands. He's being given soporifics and probably all kinds of painkillers against all kinds

of pain, and because the stuff is evidently working and his face (bar a few grazes from the tarmac) is more or less unscathed, he looks oddly peaceful.

Forensics have taken his clothes away – he wasn't carrying any ID.

He's tall, and what with all the splints on his arms and legs he barely fits on the hospital bed. His hair shines silvery grey, cut short at the sides and longer on top. He's got one of those angular faces that men don't start to grow into until they reach a certain age. I'd say he was in his early to mid-fifties. A man in the prime of life, if he hadn't been in such a terrible state.

In fact, if he hadn't been in such a terrible state he'd have looked a bit like a very tall George Clooney.

But before his facelifts.

The machines on the wall behind his bed start bleeping and the nurse comes in and presses a few buttons. She smiles sympathetically across the room as if I'm a relative, though she knows I'm not.

I'm not sure how to react.

"What was he wearing?" I ask her. "Before the hospital gown, I mean?"

She switches off the smile. Question marks flash faintly in her eyes.

Okay. Sorry.

"Where did they find him?"

"I don't know exactly," she says. "Somewhere nearby."

Her look is increasingly sharp.

She seems reproachful: I might not be a relative, but I could at least have the decency to behave like one. Brusquely she tidies a few things from one end of a shelf to the other, then leaves the room in a hurry before I can ask any more inappropriate questions.

I stay with the tall, sleeping man and look at him. I stay with him until the clouds have taken over the sky and it's beginning to go dark, and then I head for home.

As the taxi pulls up in my street and I climb out, I feel cold raindrops on my head.

Yellow light wells from Klatsche's windows.

He's standing in the kitchen making us some cheese sandwiches. I'm sitting on the window sill keeping an eye on two bottles of beer to make sure they don't get warm. We've turned off the lights and lit the candles. Klatsche started this tradition sometime last year: a candle for each of us who happens to need it at any given time. At the

moment there are three candles burning – one for Calabretta, one for me and one for Klatsche’s grandma. She’s in a care home in North Hamburg and no longer has the foggiest idea what’s going on. They keep her strapped down at night because she’s always trying to run off to the Moorweide bunker to shelter from the bombs.

I’ve never had a grandmother.

“We could think about getting rid of my candle now,” I say. He’s standing beside me at the window holding the plate of sandwiches. He’s put gherkins in them as well as cheese.

“Open those beers for us,” he says. He doesn’t say anything about my candle.

“I don’t need it anymore.”

“What, the beer?”

“The candle. I’m fine.”

“Fair enough,” he says.

We clink bottles and drink, then take a bite out of our sandwiches.

“How’s our Italian friend?” he asks, chewing twice and swallowing. Another mouthful – a big one. Big man, big hunger.

“When I spoke to Carla on the phone yesterday,” I said, “Calabretta was watching the sport. He spent the day before that on the sofa, but without the duvet. He even answered her a few times when she asked him a question. And he ate a plate of pasta. Carla thinks he’s starting to turn a corner.”

“Rocco says he looks awful.”

“Is it any wonder?” I say, taking another mouthful of cheese sandwich. It’s rich and tangy. The gherkin crunches between my teeth. I’m a firm believer that a good cheese sandwich can save your life.

It all started when Calabretta tried it on again with Betty, our sophisticated forensic scientist. She’d turned him down several times over the years, probably for being an idiot. Calabretta is as useless as I am when it comes to affairs of the heart. But this time, for some reason, she relented. And they turned out to be great together: perhaps it was the stars or the moon or the harbour air, or perhaps Betty was just feeling charitable all of a sudden. Anyway, for a whole year they were joined at the hip. They were in and out of each other’s houses all the time, and there was joy and happiness all round. It was almost uncanny: as if they had their own personal sun. But then, from one day to the next, a new and presumably superior sun rose over Betty – a Swiss professor at a

forensics conference in Munich – and she gave up her old life in Hamburg, Calabretta included. That was in the winter, and he’s been in a slough of despond ever since.

We drink the beers.

I tell Klatsche about my trip to the hospital and what I found there.

“You don’t know who the guy is?” he asks.

“No. And nobody seems to have missed him yet.”

“What will you do now?”

*My job*, I think, and say: “Go and see Forensics. Take a look at his clothes. And sit by his bed until he wakes up.”

“Is there anyone protecting him?” asks Klatsche. Klatsche is a real product of his milieu. He’s never lost the ability to sense when someone’s in danger. His shaggy hair suddenly pricks up like antennae, and his green eyes are alert.

“Until I know why he got beaten up, there’ll be a police officer stationed outside his door day and night,” I say.

Klatsche nods. His antennae quiver again, and he takes a sip of his beer and asks:

“Shall we light a candle for him?”

*Summer.*

*1982.*

*FALLER, GEORG*

*Twice a week, in the evening, just before the cemetery gates are closed, I go and visit  
Minou.*

*By then there's hardly anyone left moving among the graves.*

*The old trees are my only audience.*

*Now and again they nod a branch in my direction – that's all the company I need.*

*Nobody knows about me and Minou.*

*My colleagues in the squad don't know, and neither do my two-and-a-half friends.*

*Nobody knows she had to die because I fell in love with her.*

*If you want to be with a girl from the red-light district – unless you happen to be her pimp  
– you have to pay for the privilege.*

*I knew that, of course.*

*But I didn't think anyone would realise.*

*There wasn't much to realise.*

*To all intents and purposes I was still just a customer.*

*Nobody can see inside people's hearts, I thought.*

*And then suddenly she was dead.*

*That was the payoff. The price Minou had to pay for me wanting to be with her.*

*They shot her.*

*Girls are a business model in St. Pauli, fella.*

*You knew that already.*

*So don't make such a big deal out of it.*

*But I do.*

*I miss her.*

*Her death was my fault.*

*No matter which way you look at it.*

*And for that I could beat the shit out of myself.*

*Whenever I'm by her grave I drop to my knees.*

*I can't help it*

*Someone lays flowers on her grave sometimes.*

*Not me.*

*I can't.*

*I write her little notes and bury them in the ground.*

*And I wait by her grave, half kneeling, half curled up into a ball, until night falls from the sky.*

*They will never do anything like that to me again.*

*Or to anyone I care about.*

*The girl from Herbertstraße and the lovestruck cop.*

*Sounds like a shit story.*

*RILEY, CHASTITY*

*It's the last long holiday before we start secondary school and our gang is torn apart.*

*We're all going off to different schools.*

*It's the last summer before things get serious, says my dad.*

*As if everything up to now had been a barrel of laughs.*

*I wear cut-off jeans and Dad's old army shirts and sometimes clogs.*

*Most of the time I go barefoot.*

*I like the feel of the hot tarmac under my feet.*

*I like having to watch my step.*

*We play James Bond on the bank of the River Main.*

*The boys want to be James Bond.*

*Or we play World War Two.*

*We ride our folding bikes through Sachsenhausen.*

*Germans versus Allies.*

*I'm always the Americans.*

*Obviously.*

*The boys go nuts over Dad's army shirts.*

*We play War or James Bond until the sun tips behind the houses.*

*Then the whole of Frankfurt glows gold and pink and orange.*

*It's because of the red sandstone they used to build the city.*

*In bed at night I sometimes think I'd like to be friends with a girl, but I don't know how.*

*And I think I'd like to have a mum. A mum who lives with me, I mean. My mum.*

*Every night I think about her and ask myself again and again how she could have done it, how she could just have run off like that, and my dad stands outside my door and sheds secret tears for me and my childhood and our broken family and I pretend not to notice and try to pull myself together, for God's sake.*

*There was nothing he could have done.*

*She wanted to get away.*

*She wanted to get away from this country that was bombed to devastation in the war when she was just a kid. And that man, that other officer – he took her away with him.*

*That's what I tell myself.*

*In bed at night.*

*There was really nothing my dad could have done.*

*But still he always thinks everything is his fault.*

*KLASSMAN, HENRI*

*I wasn't even born yet.*

*So unfortunately I don't have anything to contribute.*

*My mum might have just met my dad.*

*Whoever he was.*

*I do know that my mum always wanted a son called Henri.*

*Because of all the sailors she used to know.*

*But nowadays everyone calls me Klatsche.*

*CALBRETTE, VITO*

*Through the streets of Altona.*

*Alone.*

*I like walking alone.*

*I walk up and down and up and down.*

*And every time I pass my parents' supermercato, I go inside.*

*The shop has a pull on me, somehow.*

*It's because an Italian can't just pass his family by, says my father.*

*But I don't like to stay long – I usually head straight back out again.*

*It's cold in the shop.  
The frozen aisle is too big.  
And if my mother gets hold of me I get roped into sorting out the stock.  
Into the boxes, out of the boxes, in and out.  
I hate sorting the boxes.  
It's not difficult or anything, but it irritates me.  
Because it seems so stupid.  
As if they're only making me do it to keep me there.  
To stop me roaming the streets.  
But roaming the streets is the only way I can clear my head.  
It's my way of coping.  
It's my way of sorting things, I tell my mother.  
But she doesn't understand.  
She wants me to sort the boxes.*

*VELOSA, CARLA*

*Early morning at my grandma's house in Lisbon.  
Down in the Alfama.  
She's beating squid against the wall.  
She beats as many as she can against the wall.  
It makes the flesh tender, she says.  
Caught in my granddad's net.  
The squid, that is.  
But my grandma too, she says.  
Later on my granddad will take them all to the fish market to sell.  
Apart from my grandma, he says.  
The wall by the door of my grandparents' ground floor apartment is black.  
From all the ink.  
Soon, when I go to school and finally learn to read and write, I want to scrape off some of  
the ink and write things on the pavement.  
The sky over the Tejo is purple and red.  
That's from the souls of the squid, says my grandma.*

*Is the sky a different colour everywhere in the world, then?*

*Yes, says my grandma. The colour of any sky depends on who has died under it.*

*MALUTKI, ROCCO*

*My mum is the prettiest out of all the prostitutes.*

*Not just in St. Pauli.*

*In the whole world.*

*Her boobs are the biggest and the prettiest in the whole world.*

*My dad used to play violin in an orchestra.*

*Nobody knows where he is now, but it doesn't matter, says my mum.*

*She says: some people just aren't made to stick around.*

*We get along fine without him, anyway.*

*We've got money coming in every night.*

*In the morning when she comes home from work she stands at the ironing board and irons the money.*

*There, she says when she's done, folding up the ironing board, now it's clean.*

*JOE*

*Hey.*

*Hamburg.*