Wolfang Borchert: Rats sleep at night (1947)

The blown-out window on the ruined wall yawned soft pink, suffused in the early evening sun. Wisps of dust played in the light between the smokestacks. The rubble heap slept. His eyes were closed. Then, twilight deepened. He sensed that someone had come and was now standing in front of him, dark and quiet.

They've got me! he thought. But as he blinked a little, he saw only two legs, clad in slightly tattered pants. The legs were so bowed with age that he was able to look straight through them. He risked a quick glimpse above the pants and took in the silhouette of an old man. The old man carried a knife and a basket in his hands. His fingertips were dirty.

"You sleeping here, huh?" asked the man, looking down at the mop of hair.  Jürgen blinked at the sun coming through the man's legs into the sun and said, "No, I'm not sleeping. I'm on guard." The man nodded. "So that's why you've got that big stick there, huh?" "Yeah," answered Jürgen bravely and gripped the stick tightly. "What are you guarding?“ "I can't tell you."He held the stick firmly with both hands. "Hmm... money, huh?" The man set the basket down and wiped the knife on the back of his trousers a few times. "No! Not money!"said Jürgen contemptuously. "Something else."  "What then?" "I can't tell. Just... something else"."Ah... then don't tell me. Of course, in that case, I won't tell you what I have here in this basket." The man nudged the basket with his foot and folded his knife away. "Pah, I can guess what's in the basket," Jürgen said dismissively. "Rabbit food". "By Jove!"said the old man, amazed. "You really are a sharp fellow! How old are you, then?" "Nine." "Wow, just think of that! All of nine years! Then you must know how much three times nine is, right?" "Sure!"said Jürgen and (to stall for time) added, "that's really easy." He stared a moment out through the old man's legs. "Three times nine, you said? Twenty-seven! I knew that right away." "Correct!" said the man, "and that's exactly how many rabbits I have." Jürgen made a round face. "Twenty-seven?!" "You can come see them. Some are still very young. Would you like to?" "But I can't...," said Jürgen hesitantly. "I have to be on guard." "All the time?" asked the man. "Even at night?" "Even at night... all the time.Always."Jürgen squinted up at the crooked legs.  "Ever since Saturday," he whispered. "But don't you ever go home? I mean, you've got to eat!"  Jürgen shifted a rock. Behind the rock was a half-loaf of bread. And a tin box. "You smoke?" asked the man. "You got a pipe?" Jürgen clutched his stick tightly and said timidly, "I roll cigarettes. I don't like pipes."

"Too bad," said the man stooping down for his basket. "You would've liked to see the rabbits. Especially the little ones. Maybe you could have picked one out for yourself.  But if you really can't leave...". "No,"said Jürgen sadly. "No... no." The man took the basket and stood up again. "Well, it's a pity that you have to stay." And he turned to go.

 "If you don't tell anyone," said Jürgen quickly, "it's because of the rats." The crooked legs took a step back. "Because of the rats?" "Yeah, they feed on the bodies, you know... of people. That's how they survive." "Who says that?" "Our teacher." "So you're on guard for the rats?" asked the man. "Not for the rats!"

 And then he said it very softly. "My brother. He's lying under there. There." Jürgen pointed at the collapsed wall with the stick. "A bomb hit our house. All of a sudden the lights went out in the basement. And him, too. We called and called for him. He was a lot smaller than me. He just turned four. He has to be there somewhere. He really is much smaller than me."

The man looked down at the mop of hair. Then, suddenly, he said, "Yes, well... didn't your teacher ever tell you that rats sleep at night? "No,"whispered Jürgen who looked very tired all of a sudden. "He never told us that." "Humph," said the man, "that's some lousy teacher if he doesn't even know that. Rats sleep at night! At night you can just go home! Rats always sleep at night. Even when it's just getting dark, they're already asleep."

Jürgen dug little holes in the rubble with his stick. "Nothing but little beds," he mumbled, "just little beds."

Then the old man said (and his weak legs shifted uneasily as he said it), "You know what? I'm just off to feed my rabbits now, and when it gets dark, I'll come back and pick you up. Maybe I could bring a rabbit with me. A little one. What do you think?“ Jürgen kept digging little holes in the gravel. "Nothing but little rabbits. White ones, grey ones, white and grey ones. I don't know...," he said softly and stared at the crooked legs. "If they really do sleep at night...."

The man hobbled over the remains of the wall on his way down the street. "Of course!" he said from the far side. "Your teacher should pack it in if he doesn't even know that!"Then Jürgen stood up and asked, "If I could have one... well, a white one, maybe?" "I'll see what I can do," the man called over his shoulder, walking down the street.  "But you have to wait here a while yet. Then I'll go home with you, okay? I'll have to teach your father how to make a rabbit hutch. You'll need to learn, too." "Okay!"called Jürgen. "I'll wait. I have to stay on guard until it gets dark. I'll wait, yeah."  And he called out again, "We even have boards at home! Box boards!"

But the man couldn't hear him anymore. He ran with his crooked legs into the sun.  The sun was already redon the horizon, and Jürgen could see it shining through his legs, as bowed as they were. And his basket swung excitedly back and forth. Inside the basket was rabbit food. Green rabbit food, flecked grey with dust.