

The Rats Do Sleep Nights

A Shortstory By Wolfgang Borchert (Translation: R. Warner)

(Setting: Germany, a bombed out city, 1944 or 1945)

The empty window in the lonely wall yawned blue-red full of early evening sun. Dust clouds flickered between the vertical remains of chimneys. The desert of rubble dozed.

He had his eyes closed. Suddenly it got even darker. He noticed that someone had come and was now standing in front of him, dark, quiet. Now they've got me, he thought. But when he squinted a little, he saw only two somewhat poorly clothed legs.

They stood rather bowed in front of him so that he was able to look between them. He risked a small squint up the legs of the trousers and recognized an older man. He had a knife and a basket in his hands. And some dirt on his finger tips.

You probably sleep here, don't you?, asked the man, and he looked down on the tangled mass of hair from above. Jürgen squinted between the legs of the man into the sun and said: no, I don't sleep. I have to be diligent here. The man nodded: so, that's probably why you have the big stick there?

Yes, answered Jürgen courageously and held on tightly to the stick.

What are you watching over?

I can't tell you that. He held his hands firmly around the stick.

It's probably money, correct? The man set the basket down and wiped the knife back and forth on the seat of his pants.

No, not money at all, Jürgen replied scornfully. It's something entirely different.

Well, what is it?

I can't say. Just something different.

Well, then don't. Then of course I won't tell you what I have here in my basket. The man pushed against the basket with his foot and closed his knife.

Pah, I can well imagine what's in your basket, Jürgen said condescendingly, food for rabbits.

That's right!, said the man amazed. You're a sharp guy. How old are you anyway?

Nine.

Well now, imagine that, nine. Then you also know how much three times nine is,

right?

Certainly, Jürgen said, and, in order to get some time, he went on to say: that's quite easy. And he looked between the legs of the man. Three times nine, right?, he asked again – twenty seven. I knew that right away.

That's correct, the man said, and that's exactly how many rabbits I have.

Jürgen made a round mouth: twenty seven?

You can look at them. Many are still quite young. Do you want to?

I really can't. I have to stand watch here, said Jürgen somewhat indecisively.

Always?, asked the man, even nights?

Nights too. Always and always. Jürgen looked up the bowed legs. I've already been here since Saturday, he whispered.

But don't you go home at all? You have to eat.

Jürgen picked up a stone. There lay half a loaf of bread. And a tin box.

You smoke?, asked the man – do you have a pipe?

Jürgen gripped his stick firmly and said hesitatingly: I roll my own. I don't like pipes.

That's a shame, said the man as he bent down to his basket. You could have looked at my rabbits. Especially the young ones. Perhaps you could have selected one for yourself. But you can't leave here, you say?

No, said Jürgen sadly, no, no.

The man picked up his basket and straightened up. Oh well, if you have to stay here – too bad. And he turned around.

If you don't tell on me, Jürgen said quickly – it's because of the rats.

The bowed legs came back a step: Because of the rats?

Yes, they eat from the dead. From dead people. They do live from them.

Who says that?

Our teacher.

And you're standing watch over the rats?, asked the man.

No, not over *them*! And then he added quite softly: My brother, he's lying down below. There. Jürgen pointed with his stick at the collapsed walls. Our house was struck by a bomb. All at once the light was gone in the cellar. And he was too. We still yelled for him. He was much smaller than I am. Just four. He still has to be here.

He is much smaller than I am.

The man looked down on the tangled mass of hair. But then he said suddenly: Well, didn't your teacher tell you that rats sleep nights?

No, whispered Jürgen and suddenly appeared quite tired - he didn't say that.

Well, said the man. That's some teacher - if he doesn't even know that. The rats do sleep nights. Nights you can go home without worry. As soon as it gets dark.

Jürgen made small grooves in the rubble with his stick. Nothing but little beds, he thought, all little beds. Thereupon the old man said (and his bowed legs became quite restless): Do you know what? I'll go now and quickly feed my rabbits, and when it gets dark, I'll be back to pick you up. Perhaps I can bring a rabbit along with me. A small one - or what do you think?

Jürgen made small grooves in the rubble. Just small rabbits, he thought - white ones, gray ones, white and gray ones. I don't know, he said softly and looked at the bowed legs - if they really do sleep nights.

The man climbed away over the remains of walls onto the street. Naturally, he said from there. Your teacher should pack his bags if he doesn't even know that.

With that, Jürgen stood up and asked: If I can have one? A white one perhaps?

I'll try, the man called out as he was walking away - but you must wait here. I'll go home with you then, you know. I do have to tell your father how to construct a rabbit hutch. You'll have to know that.

Yes, yelled Jürgen, I'll wait. I still have to stand watch here till it gets dark. I'll wait for sure. And he yelled: We've also got boards at home. Crate boards, he called out.

But the man no longer heard that. With his bowed legs he walked toward the sun that was already red from the evening, and Jürgen could see how the sun shined through the man's legs, they were so bowed. And the basket swung excitedly back and forth. Rabbit fodder was in it.

Green rabbit fodder that was somewhat gray from the rubble.
