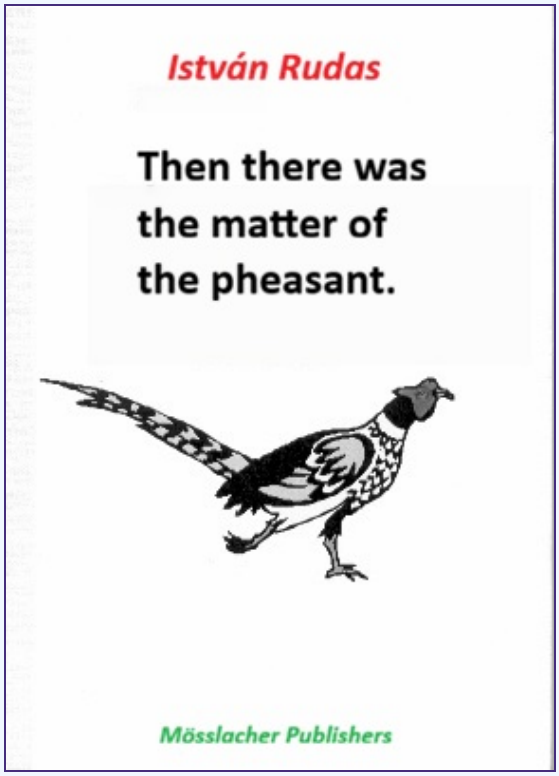
István Rudas

Then there was the matter of the pheasant.



Mösslacher Publishers

The Matter with the Pheasant



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Afterword

Off to America!

In the early 1950s—I was about four or five years old—the part of Budapest where my family lived was a small, innocent village; perhaps comparable to today's 19th district of Vienna, where detached houses with large gardens and plenty of greenery dominated the landscape. For us children, it was paradise, where we could play cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, or Russians and partisans to our heart's content. If only the Great Man of Steel (Visavoyonovich Dzhugashvili, alias Stalin) had known! But he sat in the Kremlin, smoking his awful makhorkas and gasping for breath as he approached his final year…

To my annoyance, all my peers back then were female and completely useless—thankfully, that would later change, but perhaps that's a story for another time… In any case, I had no choice but to join the gang of my older brother János (1945–1977), who were about two to four years older than me. Perhaps I should briefly introduce the group.

János, about eight years old, black-haired and incredibly strong. Later, he would be nicknamed, not without reason, "the Russian tank." Then there was Árpád, the same age, son of the judge who lived next door. He traveled abroad several times a year to attend conferences—which wasn't the norm in Hungary at the time—and brought us kids cowboy hats, Chicklets (chewing gum), and comic strips. He was by far the most beloved old man in our neighborhood. Árpád now lives in the USA as a lawyer. Zoltán was the serious, taciturn senior member of our gang and often peeked over at the neighbor girls, biting his fingernails. Today, he's also a lawyer and a grandfather several times over, which I—probably quite wrongly—attribute to his nail-biting. The brothers András and Gábor were cousins, sons of a daring war hero, and well on their way to becoming equally daring heroes themselves. They also live in the USA today, have children, wives and other merits; one as expected as a fire chief, the other as a sports teacher, among other things. Tracing all these life paths would provide material for another book.

Well, and then there was little István, me, the future master spy of our gang. Back then, a blond-haired angel, quite capable of asserting myself in realpolitik with a baby-like pout. Initially, of course, it was difficult to keep up with the grown-ups and make myself indispensable. But gradually, the gang realized that such a small, angelic face could sometimes be quite useful. They graciously let me participate everywhere—or almost everywhere—even though this school was very tough; the little angel sometimes had to work quite hard to keep up. Predictably, this only made the little angel even tougher and more resilient.

Well, that bit about Stalin wasn't just a random aside earlier. We weren't just preoccupied with our own affairs; no, we sometimes hung around the adults, trying to get to the bottom of the things that preoccupied them so much (or that they kept as secret as possible—but self-censorship works here too). And the growing pressure from the East, the stench of the Iron Curtain that threatened to engulf Hungary, perhaps all of Europe, body and soul, was at the heart of their debates—after all, they were bourgeois, Catholic, and Western-oriented.

Of course, I don't know who came up with the idea anymore; I can only say for sure that it wasn't me, honestly! Whatever the case may have been, we played "emigration" or "running away" more and more often, naturally to America. We had no idea about reality, but the fact that Árpád's father brought back the best chewing gum and comic books, and of course the coolest cowboy hats, was an unbeatable argument for America. After all, everyone there wore those hats and looked cool, chewed Chicklets, and read comics. So we walked around looking cool in our papier-mâché cowboy hats, chewed Chicklets until they turned into a crunchy, gray mass, and read comics where people also chewed Chicklets, wore cool cowboy hats, and so on. Wham, Bang and Zoing entered my vocabulary earlier as "ho mee dareis anthropos", "jus primae noctis" or "a digital error has occurred and your computer has to be shut down immediately; Cancel (C) or Continue (C)?"

Perhaps I could tell you about two more things that also entered my vocabulary back then: "Atlantic" and "Operencia," which require

a little explanation. It made a lasting impression on me, a little tyke, when my father once expressed the opinion that the Russian steamroller of steel, once set in motion, wouldn't stop in Hungary, but would roll straight on to the Atlantic. Since I knew that steamrollers rolled downhill but never uphill, it was clear to me that this ominous Atlantic must lie far below the horizon. — And the children's song "Túl az Operencián ..." (Beyond the Upper Enns, beyond the great sea...) was sometimes whistled by the adults as well, for example, when they wanted to discuss emigration and signaled to the others that they were meeting in the back room. Little István was certain that the Operencia must be a vast sea that an emigrant would have to laboriously cross. Of course, the etymologists among you immediately recognized that the Operencia is nothing other than the Upper Enns River, and "the sea" is Lake Neusiedl... I vaguely suspected something, though: the Atlantic Ocean, or Operencia, or America. Because of the cowboy hats and all.

Of course, I was the last to find out. To be more precise, I owe it entirely to my exceptionally suspicious attention that I wasn't simply abandoned, left stranded in backward, steel-clad Hungary. The grown-ups behaved almost naturally, but only almost. At some point, I noticed that cult objects like Árpád's ultimate American-made pocketknife were no longer where they were supposed to be. Then Andy's leather pilot's jacket, the one his father had worn in the war, disappeared. When János gave me his comics one afternoon, placed his hand on my shoulder with fatherly seriousness, and murmured in a husky voice that I had to be very brave now and look after our sisters, the penny finally dropped.

Of course, I didn't let on, but something was definitely up. The older kids were acting very mysterious, and I, on the other hand, didn't understand what they were up to—I was only five, or so—and I couldn't exactly ask. So I kept watching and stayed silent. My target was Gábor, my best friend and only a little older than me. I stuck to his heels and wouldn't let go. Wherever he went, I was his shadow. The older kids didn't notice anything, but he was starting to get a little uneasy about the fact that the little one—we're talking about me! —was clinging to him like a burr.

Then, one afternoon, he grew restless. He tried to shake me off; me, the budding future master spy! I gave him a few seconds' head start and stuck to his heels. Gábor scaled the low wall of the neighboring property, crept through a hedge to the next one, and secretly slipped through the cellar of the last neighbor. Over there, on the still-vacant building plot, he breathed a sigh of relief, but nearly died of fright when I sneezed in the dark, musty passageway just a few meters behind him. His desperate look, along with the curses he sent skyward, remains a lasting memory.

Then Andy, Árpád, and János appeared on the other side of the construction site. Zoli had apparently been sitting for a long time on a silently rusting piece of construction equipment, looking at us seriously. The older boys stopped and conferred. I stood next to Gábor and waited. If they were going to do something adventurous, they wouldn't do it without me: I wanted to go along! (Apparently, my family says today, all that remains of that time for me is the defiant attitude of a defiant little angel; — could that possibly be true?).

Catching the neighbor's cat and locking it in the cellar. Stealing the caretaker's moped and riding it around until he came running after us, yelling and cursing. Using the large full-length mirror from my parents' bedroom to shine sunlight on drivers and blind them until one of them stopped and angrily smashed the mirror, which led to considerable argumentative acrobatics. That was roughly what I expected. But nothing came close to what the grown-ups now revealed to me—rather hesitantly and reluctantly.

"We are emigrating," said Zoli, and Árpád added, as if I were slow on the uptake: "...we are running away!"

"We're going to America," Andy and János said in unison.

"But you're too small," said Gábor, my best friend. "We can't take children that small, unfortunately!" A friendship of many years could shatter in a fraction of a second, especially because I really, truly started to cry. No, not from sadness, but from anger. What does "small" even mean here?!

Gábor slowly straightened up, clutching his aching stomach and barely suppressing his tears, for my then-childish fist already possessed some of its later striking power. “So, if he absolutely insists…” he began panting, and János, my brother, was the first to fall. “Well, one could perhaps…” he started, but Andy kicked him in the shin. Zoli rose from his rusty old car and sauntered off. As always in such situations, as a great statesman and world leader, he had no time for crybabies or weaklings; he was destined for greater things.

János immediately took the initiative. “All right, you can come along, little brother!” he said, taking my hand. As we passed Gábor, my former best friend, I muttered, “Phew, you pig!” and shook my curls triumphantly. I really gave it to him, by Zeus!

We followed Zoli, the eldest, unobtrusively; he was the only one who knew how to get from a garden suburb in Budapest to America. Of course, we didn’t go down the street—where would you think we’d go! We crept, naturally, through the gardens and fields of the district, along time-honored pirate and robber trails. As we crept through Grandfather’s large garden, I tugged at János’s shirt, suggesting we might as well go up to Grandma’s; she usually had hot cocoa and cake or cookies on hand. America would probably be quite interesting, too, but Grandma’s cookies were certainly worth abandoning this adventure. Although I had whispered almost inaudibly, Zoli grumbled reluctantly that they—the grown-ups—had sworn a great, sacred oath to go together and win, or perish together. And should anyone—whoever, I didn’t know, of course—catch us, we would be as silent as the grave.

I nodded, intimidated, and János reaffirmed the Great Sacred Oath for me, until “silence as the grave.” Then we crept on. No one noticed that “pirates” or “robbers” or “cowboys” were sneaking through the gardens—we did it almost daily. Thus we overcame all obstacles, moving inconspicuously and quietly through the gardens and eventually reaching more populated areas.

Zoli strode purposefully ahead, and soon we crossed the high walls of the hospital complex, which until then had formed a natural barrier, marking the end of the world. More skillfully than the adults

had imagined, I used their human pyramid and arrived, awestruck, on the other side of the world's edge. Zoli walked briskly ahead, we crossed a few streets, and then we stood before Budapest's Southern Railway Station, which you might know as Déli Pu. (déli pályaudvar). We lingered for quite a while until Zoli and Andi, who had gone ahead as scouts, waved. Then we crossed the main street and, with pounding hearts, entered the beautiful, old station, whose metal design bears the signature of Gustave Eiffel.

For the younger generation, I should probably add a bit of historical context, as things are handled differently today. These days, we go to the station, get on the right train, and simply board. We either have our tickets saved on our phones via text message or—a bit more old-fashioned—as a computer printout. Those in a real hurry simply board and then pay the conductor, by credit card, of course. Back then, things were a bit slower. Tickets were produced by specially made printing machines, which were only found at larger train stations: the ticket clerk would take a small piece of light brown cardboard, about the size of a matchbox, from a drawer (and if you don't know what a matchbox is, then just go to the tobacco museum next Sunday instead of idling in front of your screen, okay!?). Then, the clerk would find the correct ticket on a large wall panel, where the metal printing plates were alphabetically arranged in small slots, and insert it, along with the cardboard, into a slot on the machine. A quick, nervous check, a press of a spring mechanism, and the metal plate along with the cardboard backing was shot through the machine, emerging again on a small dispensing tray at the bottom. The metal plate with the negative print was then returned to its original packaging, and the passenger received the printed ticket, provided they had the money ready.

I could have stood there for hours, gazing at this marvel of Western engineering, but the grown-ups moved on. Firstly, we had no money, and secondly, riding without a ticket, as they say, is part of the real deal. Of course. Anyway, I whispered to János as we walked on, one day I'd become a ticket clerk, and this amazing ticket machine would be mine, mine forever, I swear!

Of course, you, dear reader, have surely also arrived late to the train station at some point, raced panting through the hall, out onto the platform, and jumped onto the possibly already departing train with your last ounce of strength. Just as this is no longer possible today with the remote-controlled, automatically closing pneumatic doors, back then you wouldn't even have been able to get through the hall.

There are police officers there. In all likelihood, "real" police officers; in all likelihood, railway station police. A matter of luck, because in later years I often exploited their simple-minded self-importance to my advantage. But back then, when we little kids were sneaking through Budapest's Southern Railway Station, we were a matter of doubt.

They were correct.

Two.

Zoli, Árpád, and Andy got through without any trouble; they were obviously hurrying after "their parents." János, Gábor, and I were undoubtedly unlucky, just plain bad luck. The police officers' job was to make sure no riffraff snuck onto the train without a ticket or, even worse, brought sheep or goats along—which really makes you wonder who keeps sheep or goats in a metropolis like Budapest, but anyway, the Balkans weren't far away; as everyone knows, they begin just south of Budapest.

One policeman stared through the asphalt of the platform with X-ray vision, trying to counteract the Earth's rotation by gently swaying his body, still reeling from yesterday's drinking binge; the other glanced irritably to the left, then glumly to the right, and then irritably to the left again. Irritably, of course, because three little tykes, barely eight years old, were coming along, wanting to get to the trains. "That's not possible," he said; "not while I'm on guard duty here, damn it!"

As so often happens in life, several things were now happening simultaneously. First, the locomotive began to chug and rumble might-

ily, and the carriages started moving with agonizing slowness. Zoli, Árpád, and Andy were already standing on the running board, whispering excitedly to each other because the watchful policeman was holding us back and trying to question us. Then they jumped off again and came closer. János and Gábor took a desperate lunge forward and got past the policeman. My lunge came a split second too late and was also half a percent too short.

He had me in his clutches, that policeman!

The train slowly pulled out of the station. On the completely empty platform were two officers carrying out their duties and six caught kids. Surely the poisonous glares of my gang members would have dropped me dead on the spot, had I not been so aware of my childlike innocence. And I had taken such a huge lunge!

A little later we entered the guardroom. While the bad guys rightly sat contritely on the bench, I soon found myself perched on a secretary's lap, munching on sweets. — Did I mention the little blonde angel yet?

Scene change.

Mother ran from house to house in a panic, searching for us. Soon the other mothers joined in, sharing the panic, the search, and the running. Even today, I can glean complete medical diagnoses from Mother's account, with "impending circulatory collapse" being the mildest of the complaints. After an indeterminate amount of time, the distraught women exchanged glances and decided to alert the respective fathers by phone. What emerged was an improvised, but no less effective, logistical plan, one that I later managed to develop myself in similar panic situations—when my children went missing. I believe that even the news of the legendary Puskás's World Cup goal didn't spread faster through all the police stations in Budapest than the news of the disappearance of a whole handful of magnificent heirs. Wearing dirty-white cowboy hats.

Of course, the report reached "our" station as well. The police officers questioned each of us again, one by one, but we just shook our

heads silently. The great sacred oath, you know, the one about "keeping silent until death," and all that.

János, who in the eyes of the law enforcement officers most closely resembled the gang leader, had to sit down at the Grand Mufti's desk and answer his questions. He didn't answer for a long time; only when the all-powerful man turned bright red, as if having a heart attack, and began to roar uncontrollably, did he mutter that his name was Lacika (Lacika is the diminutive form of Laci, Ladislaus. A fairly common first name at the time and perhaps comparable to the American names John or Jim).

Naturally, the questioner shouted that his name must be János Rudas, but János stubbornly shook his head and insisted his name was Lacika. And he said nothing more.

After a while, even the toughest cop gives up, it seems to me, because, wearily, he wiped the sweat from his brow and called my mother to say that the children—or rather, madam, presumably only presumably—were at his station and that she should please come by for identification. She, of course, called my father, and he hurried halfway across the city to come here as well.

The secretary pushed another cookie into my mouth and casually asked what her sweet little angel's name was.

"Pityuka," I said, munching away, and gave her my most innocent look—because no one actually called me Pityuka, a ridiculous diminutive of a diminutive, only for true dwarfs. Not for aspiring master spies. Now my big buddies could see that I, too, could give a false name, keep silent until my grave. Even if they'd ripped my tongue out, I would have still claimed my name was Pipfuka.

"Yes, nice, and what are your parents' names?" she asked, because secretaries always approach things more cleverly than the boss.

"Mommy and Daddy," I said truthfully, having swallowed the cookie and glancing again at their stash. Of course, I'd had to memo-

rize my own name, address, and phone number in case I got lost. But I hadn't gotten lost, had I?

"But surely they must have other names too?" she cooed, baiting me with another cookie. It's incredibly embarrassing for me now, but I genuinely didn't know back then.

"Anyuka and Apuka," I said, hoping you recognize my mommy and daddy. The kind woman waved another cookie and asked where they lived. I remained silent, eyeing the treat. When I finally got it, I correctly stated that we lived "at home." "All children live at home," I added pedantically, "except for Ilona, who lives with her grandma because her parents have a falling out."

"And don't you have any other name besides Pityuka?" she asked, making one last, desperate attempt. Triumphantly, I took her last cookie, then, blushing, I said with my mouth full, "Yes, I do: my little angel!"

What can I say? Time was running out to devour the rest of their supplies, because now Mother and her neighbor stormed in, hugged me, sobbing uncontrollably, and turned to János. He looked grim and stared stubbornly straight ahead.

"But Jánoska, don't you know me?" she asked, pale, looking around desperately, the way any mother would look when her son had become either amnesiac or mentally disabled. The policeman glared again, then finally János admitted that his name was Lacika and that he didn't know this woman at all. Not even a little. Then János stared stubbornly at the window frame again, probably thinking of the 150 warriors of Chief Sitting Bull who had bravely accompanied our gang's self-chosen protector to his death.

Mother's weeping was of no use. The emigrants had sworn to silence and were keeping their oath. The youngest hadn't sworn an oath, but tried to stall for time with childish jokes. The neighbor tried to speak to Árpád—after all, he was her son—but he looked right through her and shook his head emphatically when she brazenly claimed to be his mother.

Even when my father arrived, the men couldn't open their jaws. Silent and stubborn, they sat there, remaining steadfastly silent. My father not only had a sharp mind, he also knew how to use it and quickly brought a folder full of family photos from home. It became almost truly embarrassing when one or another policeman reached into his jacket pocket and then produced pictures of his wife, children, and dog—a culturally ingrained reflex when someone shows their photos.

So everything dissolved into pure bliss and contentment. Or perhaps not quite, for faithful János received a terrible thunderous slap and had to go to bed without supper, and this is how it happened:

We were all standing in front of the guardhouse door when my father turned around again and sternly demanded that János give his name immediately. János turned around, looked seriously at the group of uniformed men, and said:

"Lacika!"

Then!

Occasionally I allow myself a little nostalgia, romance, and emotion. This text is one such example, even though at first glance it doesn't seem to have much in common with my other texts.

And yet. It was the first consciously staged text I wrote with the intention of publishing it someday. Since then, of course, I've published it everywhere I possibly could. Sometimes to the despair of my readership, who wondered, puzzled, what on earth was the point of all this?! — The worst affected, of course, were the readers of "Euro Agrar," who found my scribblings amidst a foot-and-mouth outbreak. The editors, however, had accepted my argument that the 30th anniversary of the great artist's death was approaching.

Looking back after some 15 years, I still recognize several elements that are so typical of my writing style: a touch of eroticism, but only in tiny hints. A crumpled yet endearing hero. An event that, of course, is only an event from a subjective point of view. Arbitrary names, little plays on words, and a true core story, wrapped in a sparse narrative. A hint of the bizarre. And here and there, a little humor flickers.

Not too noticeable, but still.

I did, however, run into difficulties when a somewhat humorous reader asked me who exactly "Hollinger" was, and who also harshly criticized the original subtitle, "Obituary for KF"—good advice was needed, but too expensive. I couldn't very well title the text "When I Met KF for the Only Time in My Life"—yes, I had only met him that one time and was deeply affected when he died a few months later. Perhaps that comes closest to the truth: my single dialogue with the master still seems worth recounting today.

Meeting with Karl Farkas (* 28. 10. 1893 Vienna, 16. 5. 1971)

"You're a fool, Hollinger," growls my graying German professor, and his mixture of standard German and dialect rises to a worrying 63:36, "Karl Farkas has been dead for quite some time now, and a possible round anniversary of his death is nowhere in sight!"

Where first-class Italian ice cream is served today, there used to be the LUGECK, a refined and affordable restaurant that had already seen better days. I dined there one evening with my bride and future in-laws, who had rushed to Vienna from the farthest provincial capital to check on things after the teacher with whom my bride Angelika, who was somewhat in love with her and had followed her to Vienna during her final year of high school (since the former had been transferred to Vienna as punishment for loving young girls—something completely unheard of for a Catholic nun in a provincial capital at the time), had initially stayed, had anxiously informed the parents that their daughter had been sent to Vienna because she had a husband! who had allowed her to stay overnight and who, in turn, now felt compelled to evict her, citing the pimping law, so that the poor child was now completely unprotected with this strange man!, who had followed said daughter like an amorous rooster and was also a casual laborer from the provinces without long-term prospects.

"Let's get down to business, Hollinger, let's get down to business!" grumbles my gray-haired German professor in impeccable High German, "and no such daring sentence structures, please!" He shakes his head wearily: "13 commas, 2 exclamation marks, seven periods!"

LUGECK was therefore the perfect end to this wet and cold November weekend, during which we checked on things, even though we were the only guests in the cellar and the sluggish service from the nasal-voiced waiter did little to convey the sophisticated capital city flair. But the young couple, blessed by their parents, needed neither cheerful service nor lively company; they were perfectly content on their own. The only other guest, who arrived later, sat down at the

furthest table and immediately began silently spooning up the liver dumpling soup, which had been served without a word or greeting.

We exchanged eyebrow-raising glances and whispered, “Isn’t that… what’s his name again, Karl Farkas?” “Oh no, yes, believe me, I recognize him!” Again and again, furtive glances flitted to the master as we ate our meal and chatted quietly, until, after dessert, my future father-in-law hemmed and hawed and finally blurted out, “It would be so great to have an autograph from HIM!” The effect of his wish on the day laborer with no long-term prospects was electric. “I’ll do it!” “No, I just said it offhand,” my future father-in-law half-heartedly tried to stop me, in vain. I was already half out of my chair when my mother-in-law hissed after me, “Däs chaascht doch näd dua!?”, which those familiar with Alemannic dialect can easily translate as “You can’t do that!” But I’m already on my way, crossing the hall with wobbly knees and a queasy stomach. Hundreds of tables and chairs, which I hadn’t even noticed before and which block my path, fill the vastness of the hall, and I’m right in the middle of it all, in a nimble slalom, heading towards the master.

He stares at me, stony-faced, when I finally stand before him. I hear someone who obviously has either throat cancer or is going through puberty ask, “Could I please have an autograph for my future father-in-law, Mr. Farkas?” He looks at me for a long time, silent and expressionless. The machinery in my head, paralyzed by fear, slowly begins to grind back into motion. I follow his gaze and, after what feels like an eternity, realize I haven’t brought anything to write with. “Just a moment, Mr. Farkas!” A frantic slalom back to our table, “Do you have anything to write with?” and a pleading look around the room. My future father-in-law rummages in his pockets; an unwritten postcard has to do. Slalom back, pushing the chairs aside, I turn around halfway, “And something to write with!” and then, armed with a pen, I head back to Mr. Farkas. I will remember the following dialogue for the rest of my life:

“For?”

His scrutinizing gaze is more reminiscent of a hawk than a wolf. Farkas actually means wolf in Hungarian.

“For Hans.”

The master turns the postcard over, staring blankly at the Lipizzaner horse, the Ferris wheel, and the opera house. The ballpoint pen scratches deeply as he scribbles the illegible, sweeping message. I surmise, “For Hans, KF.” I watch, fascinated, as he looks only at his enormous nose while writing, and not at what he’s writing.

“From where?”

“Bregenz, Mr. Farkas.”

“Have you been here long?”

“Three months.”

Pause. He turns the postcard over again, looking from the town hall towards the Upper Belvedere and Schönbrunn.

“Do you like it?”

Embarrassed, I shift my weight from one foot to the other. “It was the last one they had left, Mr. Farkas, and the one with Empress Elisabeth…”

“Do you like Vienna?” he interrupts me irritably.

“Yes, very good, Mr. Farkas.” I’m perplexed; that was the first complete German sentence. Long silence.

“Simple?”

I am hurt and look at him defiantly; I may be from the countryside, and I’m not a doctor yet, but I don’t have to put up with being insulted, not even by Mr. Farkas.

“Have you been to the Simpl yet?” he repeated his question somewhat impatiently.

I frantically search my brain, desperately looking for the keyword for “Simpl”. What on earth does he mean? Oh yes, there it is: “...a recording from the cabaret SIMPL. With Karl Farkas and Ernst Waldbrunn.”

“Unfortunately not, Mr. Farkas, my in-laws were only here for the weekend.” Icy silence. Long silence. Shifting from one foot to the other. “My fiancée and I can’t afford to go out,” the day laborer with no long-term prospects murmured awkwardly, staring blankly at the tablecloth. Pause, a very long pause, I waited.

“Then then.”

I feverishly rack my brains trying to figure out what this could mean. I continue to look at him questioningly for a long time, while the master, without any emotion, turns back to his liver dumpling soup and continues slurping it down—completely ignoring me.

Okay then. Oh, I see. He can go now.

“Goodbye, and thank you very much, Mr. Farkas.”

He doesn’t even look up when I turn around and hurry back to our table. “What did he say, what did he say?” my family asks all at once. I’m trembling with relief, my wet shirt clinging cold to my back. “Nothing,” I say, “he just asked how we were liking Vienna and if we’d ever been to Simpl.” My bride beams at me, her hero.

“You’re a fool, Hollinger,” my graying German teacher growls grimly, the ratio in his mixture of standard German and dialect shifting to a mild 61:38. “Since graduation thirty years ago, you don’t even need to know me or even greet me, and now you come to me with your scribblings so I can correct them!” He shakes his head and mutters something about the decline of Western civilization. “An obituary for Karl Farkas, well, I never! Hollinger! — Well, then hand over the piece of paper!”

The escape

My children kept urging me to tell them the wonderful story of our escape (from Hungary, 1956) one more time. Reading aloud had never been easy for me; they already knew "And Again, No One Looks" or "The Language Craft Book" by heart, not to mention "At Night All Ravens Are Colorful." So I increasingly succumbed to the temptation of telling stories (or rather, anecdotes) from my life. And the escape story simply had to be retold again and again—it was a matter of honor! Of course, it went exactly as expected. Instead of falling asleep, the child sat up indignantly in her crib and complained that last time the "..." had been completely, completely different! And why weren't there any evil policemen involved this time?! The part with the rocket was also missing...

Caught out, the father's ignorance turns red, he searches for words, for excuses, and flails his arms frantically. "Child, you don't understand yet, but we older folks are sometimes forgetful." "Okay, fine," he says, "I'll tell you about the "..." again, trying to remember the details [what on earth did I say at this point last time?!]." The child nods and obediently continues sucking his thumb, listening intently and shaking his head vigorously whenever the policewoman story comes up again at the wrong moment. His little lips move silently, reciting the text without sound, his little eyes are already longing to close, but his distrust of his father's storytelling keeps the poor thing awake...

The mother cautiously poked her head in the door and grumbled that the child certainly wouldn't fall asleep like that...

But you all know that.

A few years ago (1996, for the fortieth anniversary), I decided to write down the story of our escape once and for all and give it to my children for Christmas. Perhaps (and I say perhaps because – as mentioned above – I am rather forgetful), perhaps even back then I was already fed up with this stupid Christmas gift-buying frenzy,

perhaps I was already repelled by the junk and tinkling noise on the high street and was looking for something that came from me and that might bring joy to my children.

Perhaps it was also the case that my children were discussing their father's stories and noticed that one or two details didn't quite match up (I deliberately say: not quite). After all, no two children are alike, so you have to adapt your inventions, would be my excuse if I needed one. In any case, one day the children confronted me with the "not quite" matching details. (Now comes the bit about the red ears again...).

Be that as it may, I sat down at the computer and thought. Could I begin as trivially as, "One day I decided to escape..."? No, and no again. I don't write like that. Rather, I had to have the story (and its embarrassing little differences) told by several people, thus creating THE ESCAPE as a Rashomon hybrid. Yes, of course, the participants each told a piece of their subjective truth, deliberately only a piece, and the reader/the child has to piece the fragments together themselves.

I liked the idea, so I had Aunt Elli (whose real name is Elisabeth and who is called Elly by my father) tell the whole story – I deliberately didn't portray Elli as hysterical as my father might have experienced her, but that's how she was to me. Then I let one or two of the soldiers we came into contact with have their say – of course, this is all pure fiction, but based on what I could remember. What must have been going through the mind of such a guy when he was confronted with a group of refugees consisting of four adults and eight children?

Since I was already so engrossed in writing, I naturally also wrote a fictitious correspondence between the Hungarian and Russian commanders, and I ask you, why not?!

In retrospect, our behavior towards and assessment of the Russian soldier, who presumably came from Mongolia, seemed arrogant and presumptuous. So I quickly jotted down a few lines: the Mongolian writes about us and wonders why we consider him a

hillbilly: "...or do you monkeys really think I can't tell a violin case from a monstrance?!"

Uncle Ákos was also allowed to "take notes"; he is the same Feri whose son, Feri, was my father's best friend at the time and who fled with us. The reason I named him Ákos is probably because I consider Feri a horrible Teutonicization, and I liked the rather rare and old name Ákos (back then). After that, I had my sister Juli tell the last part (the mix-up of the bottles); I simply liked letting her rant a little against the adult world—that, too, was true back then, just a little bit.

One small difficulty couldn't always be overcome permanently: the linguistic peculiarity in Hungarian of using different "pet forms" for given names. So, when we talk about Bandi and Endre, it's the same person (as you now know), meaning they can't possibly play tennis together. Some of these names are very old, and often their origin and context can no longer be determined (for example, why István can become Pityu). Let me give you a few examples:

Andreas = Bandi = Endre
István = Pista = Pityu
Maria = Manci = Mányika

It is easier to understand forms that are known almost everywhere:

Elisabeth = Elli = Elly
July = Juliska, etc.

I had christened my work THE BLUE RIBBON, referring to the last chapter, printed four copies with different forewords and afterwords for my children, and bound them myself in cardboard. (Note well, printing the cardboard with the PC was an adventure in itself and led to a long-lasting friendship with an American named Bill Gates, I believe that's his name). The thin little book got lost among the other presents under the Christmas tree; several days passed before the children read it. I waited impatiently to see if they liked it (because every author is really eager to know if the reader liked it),

and whether they might notice that something was "not quite right" again. But they were probably too grown-up and perceptive; not a peep, not a single complaint. My siblings read it later, too, laughed heartily, and thought I had become a real storyteller. No, one couldn't claim that any of it was untrue, but the whole thing is certainly nicely presented, isn't it?

My father sat down and wrote his own version.

Was I mistaken, or did he mutter something about "tasteful - unserious" to himself before he began to write? - Be that as it may, ultimately, even in RUSHOMON, the wise man must have the last word, and the viewer may only understand the whole thing after everyone has told their truths (and nothing but the pure truth).

Besides the many true parts, there must also be something like the whole truth.

PS: An early and very tearful version of ESCAPE received the 1st prize of the Austrian student competition in 1967 and was submitted by the Salzburg Lions Club to the headquarters in New York for the 50th anniversary of the Lions Club.

Chapter 1

(The second night, as told by Aunt Elisabeth)

Not that I'm a particularly anxious person. But even now, when I think about it, my knees tremble, and I know it's not just amusing, but also frightening. Anyway, it's been forty years already, and I'll try to tell the story in order. So, we arrived in Austria on December 8, 1956, and the first place we entered was Deutschkreutz in Burgenland. On the morning of December 7, we were caught by the border guards, which means we left Budapest on the morning of December 6. "We" are my husband Feri, our three children aged 8 and 5, our baby, just a few months old, and me, Aunt Erzsi, or Elisabeth in German. Yes, and there was also Feri'Ää's work colleague Endre (also called Bandi), his wife Maria and their 5 children János, Juli, István, Johanna and the almost one-and-a-half-year-old Tomi.

After consulting with Endre on December 5th about the reason for his threat of arrest on December 4th, we came to the conclusion: now or never. Feri was also in danger, and we women were afraid not only for her, but above all for the future of our children. We prepared everything, practicing marching in columns with the older children, following the men's commands. "Jump—forward—take cover!" I will never forget that for the rest of my life.

Of course, we told the children a tall tale: that we were going to Aunt Anni's in Sopron, formerly the Austrian Ödenburg, because she was slaughtering a pig again and we would finally get some meat, real meat. We disguised the military preparations by telling them about the current situation and the dangers lurking along the way. The children were very quick learners; although the girls initially acted a bit silly, they were soon spurred on by the ambition to emulate the boys.

The men took on the task of packing the documents, money, and other important family possessions into manageable pieces of luggage. We women first had to take care of the older children and their equipment, and then ourselves and the babies. Oh, I won't even go

into detail about what that entailed—in any case, it was a piece of cake compared to equipping a Himalayan expedition! But the men hadn't drawn the better lot, because while they packed what little they had, they had far more time than we women to dread the undertaking and its consequences, and to reconsider the wisdom of their decision a thousand times over…

Even today I remember discussing with Feri and Endre how much bribe money we would bring in small, handy bundles (and each one was "truly, our very last money!"). Feri had the brilliant idea of also taking a small bottle of schnapps so we could immediately celebrate our successful escape. He would have preferred cognac or something else fine, but in those difficult times, nothing like that could be found; it was already a real struggle to get hold of this cheap rotgut. I also took another small bottle of schnapps, just in case, in case we ran out of bribes and needed to soften up a border guard with a good drink. To distinguish this one from the bottles of baby tea, I took a blue ribbon and tied it around the neck of the bottle: Juli, the overeager one, kept fiddling with it and complaining that the ribbon didn't look pretty enough, but I shooed her away because I wasn't in the mood for games at the moment…

The next morning, it all began; the train journey seemed to last forever. The train kept stopping, and Revolutionary Guards, regulars, and Red Army soldiers took turns checking passengers, luggage, and any presumed loot. I became slightly hysterical every time a soldier's hand stroked my baby; I breathed a sigh of relief when the fellow disappeared again, and I was almost indifferent when some brazen hand brushed against my body as if by chance—so what? As long as these degenerate men left my children alone.

We arrived in Sopron, prepared everything, and went to bed early. The guides, friends of Endre, woke us long before sunrise, and we drove to the border in a very old van. There, our guides waited with us until dawn, described the route once more, and then scurried back into the undergrowth. We, the "Twelve Apostles," marched along the railway tracks to the point where they split south and west; here, as planned, we were to "get lost" and follow the tracks westward. While the two men tried to agree on the cardinal directions (in the fog,

without sun or compass, that certainly wasn't easy), we saw a Hungarian border guard approaching us.

We were startled at first, but he looked peaceful, and when he arrived, he really just wanted to alleviate his loneliness and chat with us, smoke a cigarette, and find out the children's names, etc. All in all, it was a rather peaceful situation, and when he noticed the restlessness among us adults, he said, "Yes, yes, I know! Well, I didn't see you, I'm going on a bit further now, and now you see that you get on your way!" he grumbled kindly and turned to leave.

Had the higher being whom some of you worship intended to create the borders for escape purposes, he would probably have created warm waiting rooms, well-signposted paths such as "This way to Austria!" and "To freedom, please keep left", squeaky escalators, and bored officials.

But His Excellency was, as everyone knows, in the Holy Land at that time, witnessing the Suez Crisis live from a bank of clouds, so we had to cope with our fate alone. Yes, of course I still believed in guardian angels back then, but when we arrived at the railway junction, they merely flapped their wings briefly and whispered almost inaudibly, "We'll fly ahead"—and then we were truly alone.

Not quite alone after all. The friendly border guard's foot stopped. A small group of Red Army soldiers, looking cold and hungry, were coming towards us. Our border guard turned around, yanked his gun off his shoulder, and shouted at us: "Halt! Stojeto! Scum! Stop right now!" and whispered through clenched teeth: "I'm sorry, guys, but I know those guys, and you don't mess with them. Understand me, but I have to think of myself too. They won't hurt you, just come up with a good excuse, and they'll send you home…"

The Russians took us with them; we rode in an open truck to the commandant's office. There, we had to go from interrogation to interrogation all day, but we had practiced that beforehand, and they only heard the same story about our Sunday outing and getting lost, repeated stubbornly. Eventually, though, even a commandant like that has to call it a day, and grumpily, he threw us out, threatening

that if he caught us again, then…; and we scampered, as fast as our feet could carry us, relieved, back to Aunt Annie's house and licked our wounds.

Our guides, father and son, knew their area intimately. They pored over the general staff maps for hours with Feri and Endre, then found a route, which the men memorized. We set off late that night; the guides led us to the death strip, located the trail markers for us, and then whispered directions to our men. Then they embraced us once more, firmly refused any payment, and disappeared silently into the pitch-black night.

Bandi (that's what Endre was sometimes called) went ahead, his youngest son asleep on his shoulders, a metal strip in his hand, which he intended to use to locate mines, and we all followed in complete silence. The older children had by now realized what time it was, so they were very focused and quiet. Every few hundred meters we had to change direction whenever Bandi found another mine, or even just suspected one. He was very reliable and an expert in these technical matters. Several times we had to throw ourselves flat on the cold, wet ground because flares went off and wild gunfire erupted all around us. Once I was lying next to Bandi and saw his sweat-drenched bald head reflected in the flares' light. I whispered to him that he could surely be seen a hundred miles away, and he pulled his little son, who was sleeping peacefully, over his head. Another time I let out a soft cry because, while throwing myself down to "Defense!", I landed on a dead body. I sobbed and couldn't be calmed down for minutes.

Well, we were getting closer and closer to the barbed wire fence, and Bandi and Feri got to work on it. Feri had brought his thick chemical gloves for this purpose, and Bandi had some metal wires, which he deftly threw at the fence, causing it to spray vicious blue sparks and hiss nastyly. Then they snipped the wires and tore a small hole in the electrified fence. Bandi attached some insulators, took off his glove, and—after a moment of hesitation—touched the fence with his bare hand. He turned around grinning and said, "All right! Just stay inside the hole, nothing will happen to you!" And so, heads bowed, we crept into Austria.

That is to say, I thought we were already in Austria. But no sooner were we all across than a cigarette ember flared up not ten paces away, and a hoarse, muffled male voice said, “Well, you did a good job!” Feri, the well-mannered city boy, who hadn’t even attempted the escape without a tie and meticulously pressed trousers, thanked us warmly and said that we were finally across the border. The other man laughed softly, and as we drew closer, I saw with rising horror that his coat bore badges and gleaming buttons; indeed, when he stood very close to us, we all stared at him: it was an armed Hungarian border guard.

For what seemed like an eternity, he savored his entrance. Then his wrinkled face broke into a broad grin, and he said: “Well, I’m not a monster. I don’t hurt anyone and I help everyone with this wretched fence if they get stuck. Perhaps you could give me something if you can.”

Feri fumbled a small bundle of banknotes out of his jacket pocket and began to awkwardly divide them. Smiling, the border guard took all the bills from his hand and said, “Good bloke, you won’t be able to do anything with these in Austria anyway!” I was standing very close to this insolent fellow and could smell his sharp breath. I immediately remembered the schnapps bottle, and I reached into my pocket, found the bottle with the ribbon, and handed it to him: “To your health, sir, and God will thank you for letting us go!”

Perhaps this boorish fellow became somewhat embarrassed, because he didn’t want to upset God (the higher being whom some of you worship), or it was simply the thirst of the eternally thirsty: he thanked him with unintelligible muttering and slunk away.

Only then did I notice how much my knees were shaking; I quickly handed my baby to Feri and said, “I have to, I have to go right now, or it’ll happen!” and took a few steps away. The child woke up in Feri’s arms and immediately began to scream. I ran back to him as fast as I could, took a bottle of baby tea out of my bag, and gave it to him. The little one swallowed and swallowed, then indignantly spat out the tea and screamed bloody murder. We were at a loss; Feri

helplessly tried to cover the child's mouth, I hit him and shouted, "You'll suffocate it, you monster!"

Bandi thought the tea might be too cold and tasted it. He immediately spat it all out and gasped, "Good heavens, this is rotgut!" I froze. The child! I yanked another bottle out of my bag, tasted it first (yes, it was lukewarm children's tea), and gave it to the still-screaming child, who stopped screaming in surprise and then sucked greedily and blissfully.

We walked another half mile until we could clearly make out the houses and streetlights, then we sat down, had a bite to eat, and sang our old national anthem. We were deeply moved, not ashamed of our tears, and took turns looking from our abandoned homeland to our new one and back again.

We were already in the village; the Austrian border guards had kindly shown us to the school, where sleeping quarters, hot soup, and warm meals were waiting for the refugees. We had taken care of the babies and the older children and were just about to go to bed when Feri and Bandi, who had been whispering quietly to each other, suddenly burst into loud laughter. Like mad, they slapped each other on the back, clapped their thighs, and laughed like idiots until tears streamed down their cheeks. They could hardly calm down, and Feri stammered, the fit of laughter shaking him between each word: "Imagine the border guard's face when he takes a deep swig from your bottle and then realizes it's just baby tea…"

My children are grown now. Peter is an engineer and architect, Paul a successful dentist, and Feri and I have been retired for years. Feri has had a brilliant career as a chemist, making several inventions and filing patents worldwide. He fulfilled a childhood dream, as even as a schoolboy he always talked about wanting to be a famous inventor one day. He hasn't changed in one respect, though: even now, well into his eighties, he insists on wearing a crisp white shirt and a nice tie every single day. He'll probably keep it up for the rest of his life, even though my eyesight is failing and ironing is already quite difficult for me. I hope I don't leave this world before him, because who knows who will iron his shirts for him then?

Chapter 2

(The third night, narrated by Sergeant Béla)

Well, at least I'm still wearing my own boots. Those damn Russians took everything from me: belt, cap, and winter coat. This thin uniform jacket is the warmest thing I'm wearing. They tried to steal my wallet too, but since it contained nothing but a picture of my wife and kids, they let me have it.

The damp December fog creeps through the concrete walls, the small barred window, even penetrating the floor. A few cockroaches scurrying busily back and forth are my only cellmates. How good a drink would be right now, even if it were just water! My split lower lip burns, I think not just from the punches, no, it burns because my insides are burning from top to bottom. I want a drink, just a tiny little drink!

Four of them overpowered me, threw me to the ground, and took me to the commandant's office. Interrogated, beaten, interrogated again, and beaten some more. The commandant questioned me at length. He wanted to know exactly who had crossed the border, and of course, I didn't tell him everything right away. But then, at some point, when I was lying there half-dead from the pain, I told him how these city dwellers had suddenly appeared before me, with a good dozen women and children. And that I had then thought of my own family and let them go.

He wanted to know exactly how many there were, what they looked like, and where they came from. I tried my best, although in the dark I probably saw little more than that dandy or the quiet man carrying a child on his shoulders. But all of a sudden he seemed to know precisely what and whom he was looking for, and his deliberate kicks helped me remember. Yes, there was also a small, delicate woman who had nothing but her children on her mind.

I didn't remember much of the conversation, perhaps that they'd talked about the Raab-Eisenstadt railway tracks, about a Sunday out-

ing where they'd gotten lost and been caught, and then all I saw was his fist flying towards me, accompanied by a furious curse, "Job toi Matj!" The Russian had completely lost it, his face was dark red and the veins on his forehead were bulging alarmingly. I ducked as he continued to hit me, but the merciless first blow had badly torn my lower lip.

As if through a fog, I can remember that at some point he let go of me and had me dragged down to the cellar. His henchmen had attacked me roughly when they brought me out of the commandant's interrogation room, but in the corridor they loosened their grip and led me down in silence. Downstairs, one of them gave me a cigarette; we smoked in silence at first, then one of them said the old man had been completely out of his mind today. "It can't be, buddy, that you upset him so much that he got so angry, just because you were drunk and shooting. What did he want?"

Well, I started cautiously, but then quickly and fluently recounted the whole story about the city folk. They looked at each other and burst out laughing at the same time: "Those were the Budapesters!" Grinning for an awkward moment, I asked if I could join in the laughter, and they said these city folk had already been there yesterday. The Red Patrol had caught them as they marched merrily along the railway tracks toward Austria, humming a little tune. The Red Army soldiers certainly felt sorry for them, but they knew they wouldn't get their own food until they had captured refugees, so they took them to the barracks and then immediately ran to the cook. The old man had interrogated the people, but they were hardened and couldn't be cracked. They admitted nothing, couldn't be persuaded to abandon their simple stories and excuses, and didn't contradict themselves. They must have been either cunningly well-prepared or completely bonkers. In the evening, the old man was furious because he had to send them home, if only for the sake of the children.

The small black cockroach tries to climb up my boot. Fascinated, I watch its efforts. I see it get a little way up, then it starts to slip and lands back on the floor.

My situation is actually no different. They simply forced me into service; they didn't ask me if I wanted to be a border guard or not; they shoved a rifle into my hand and sent me out into the cold. I haven't seen my family or heard from them in weeks.

And then those city folk. I was friendly to them, almost brotherly! Well, I took their money, but what good is it to them in the West? It's worthless there, and I have to provide for my family somehow. But the fact that they pressed a bottle of lukewarm tea into my hand instead of schnapps—that I can never forgive—"Enjoy, sir!"—those two-faced snakes!

I hadn't had a proper drink for hours, and then this mockery, this disappointment! I greedily opened the bottle and immediately put it to my lips, taking a deep, greedy gulp, and only realized after the second or third sip that it was lightly sweetened tea.

Rage surged within me like boiling lava rising from a volcano. Suddenly, all I saw was red. I smashed the bottle against a tree and bellowed like a bull. I grabbed my rifle and emptied the entire magazine into the air, firing and bellowing until there was nothing left in the chamber, and then the four of them attacked me...

To the

Commanders of the glorious Red Army

Colonel Vladimir J. Kniezewski

Field Marshal Von-der-Trenck Barracks

SOPRON

Subject: Sergeant Béla HANCSÁR Sopron, 9.12.56

Dear Colonel!

I have learned that one of my subordinates, Sergeant Béla Hancsár, was taken into custody by your brave armed forces last night.

Since I do not believe this is anything serious, I request, esteemed Colonel, that you release the otherwise impeccable sergeant from the custody of the glorious Red Army and transfer him to my area of responsibility.

Down with the revolution!

Yours sincerely, your servant,

János BÁNFFY

Major in the National Defense Forces

Prince Eugene of Savoy Barracks Sopron

To

Regular National Defense Force

Border Security Department

Major J. Bánffy

Prince Eugene of Savoy Barracks

SOPRON

Subject: Zl. 8934/56.01 Sopron, 10.12.56

Major!

Did your so-called loyal subordinate lose valuable ammunition because he was completely drunk, firing worthless shots in the area and hitting nothing? Thank Lenin. He first smuggled a bunch of imperialist spies and traitors across the border and let himself be bribed with a small amount of money that's practically worthless now.

Our esteemed Commandant, Colonel Vladimir J. Kniezewski, personally interrogated spies and uncovered some unbelievable facts.

Among other things, he discovered that capitalist imperialist spies hide behind children, but also feign strolls along the border, singing and carrying walking sticks, playing the innocent fools with whistles to their lips. Our esteemed Commandant, Colonel Vladimir J. Kniezewski, immediately reported this to the Main Commissariat via telegram.

And the esteemed Chief Commissioner Colonel WJ Kniezewski has instructed me to tell you that the fool shouldn't think it's nothing serious, because he'll tell him himself soon enough. And that Private Béla will of course be interrogated further, because he has always been a collaborator with the imperialist border spies and probably knows even more, most likely.

At the end, the Commissar, Colonel Vladimir J. Kniezewski, says that after the execution they might eat a good goulash together and drink vodkas with the Major, and then everything will be over.

Long live the glorious Soviet Revolution!

Jan Tschech, translator for

Mr. Colonel Commissioner WJ Kniezewski,

Main Command of the Victorious Red Armed Forces SOPRON

URGENT!!!! OFFICE MAIL!!! PERSONAL!!!

To the

Commanders of the

glorious Red Army

Colonel Vladimir J. Kniezewski

Field Marshal Von-der-Trenck Barracks

SOPRON

Subject: Sergeant Béla HANCSÁR Sopron, 12/10/56

Ref. 8934/56.01

But my dear Colonel!

We don't want to talk about execution just because good old Béla has a drink or is shooting around! Nothing happened! I admit, the lad should hold back a bit if he can't hold his liquor, right, Colonel? We two have certainly downed a lot more and handled it with ease, hahaha!

I remember that delightful evening when we, dear Colonel, celebrated your esteemed wife's birthday together and...

I don't want to rehash old stories, but I need this Béla Hancsár, still alive and sober. Translate that literally, Jan Chekhov, or I'll open your lying mouth wide! — And, esteemed Commissar Colonel, I've made inquiries about the spies and assure you, they were really just a few crackpots who even knelt down and sang hymns after illegally crossing the border! No offense, my dear Colonel, but you should forget about those silly people once and for all.

Just send me that Béla, I'll take care of him, believe me, he's already caused me enough trouble and deserves a good dressing down, but execution, no, thank you! So, once that's done, come on over and we'll forget the whole thing over a drink!

Long live the glorious socialist revolution!

Down with the revolution!

Yours faithfully, always yours,

János BÁNFFY

Major in the National Defense Forces

Prince Eugene of Savoy Barracks Sopron

To

Regular National Defense Force

Border Security Department

Major J. Bánffy

Prince Eugene of Savoy Barracks

SOPRON

Subject: Zl. 8934/56.01 Soldier Béla H. Sopron, 12/11/56

Dear Major!

We interrogated Private Béla again vigorously. He confessed to everything, but also admitted that he was quite a fool. That at least saved him from the firing squad. But he had seen the spies crossing the border, and that's why he shot so much.

I think he missed because there weren't any spies there at all; it was just vodka-fueled nonsense in his head. So let's forget about the spies, and the child spies too. I've already sent a dispatch to the capital explaining: vodka and December fog, hahaha.

And you're doing some more vigorous drills with Private Béla to clear the December fog, because, as we have a Russian proverb: if you can't handle a bull's horns, don't go into the arena! If he has a small bump on his face, or a big one, then maybe he fell down the stairs. We certainly didn't hit him. Jan Czech didn't translate everything accurately, so I replaced him with a substitute interpreter, and now he's scrubbing potatoes for the whole big pot. He translated "December fog" as "imperialist spies," so he's scrubbing potatoes for the whole glorious soldiers' kitchen until the December fog is gone.

And we'll meet again on Thursday evening for a game of chess, okay?

Down with the revolution!

Long live the glorious Soviet Revolution!

Wojtech Czymielinek, translator for

Mr. Colonel Commissioner WJ Kniezewski,

Main Command of the Victorious Red Armed Forces SOPRON

Chapter 3

(The first night — told by Uncle Ákos)

So, now everyone is settled in nicely; the children are upstairs in their grandparents' bedroom, and the adults are in the hayloft above the barn. Bandi, Feri, and I went over everything, and then they all went to bed.

I marked out the route for them through the last fields and then through the elderberry bushes to the railway tracks, drilled into them where they should "get lost," and marked some landmarks on the map, such as the dilapidated mill and the cutting in the railway embankment. If they're lucky, they'll cross the border unscathed and without major problems. I'll take them to the border early in the morning, along with my son Antal.

I made sure they had small bundles of banknotes with them in case of encounters with border guards. Feri, that dandy, initially acted a bit foolishly (no, of course you don't get a receipt!), but finally even he realized that only courage and improvisation would help here. I'm praying to God that they get across the border smoothly, because Feri's nervousness and clumsiness could still ruin everything.

During my walk-through, I checked to make sure everything was alright. Little Juliska was still rummaging through the luggage under the stairs; I think she was checking and putting away the baby bottles. She was a bit startled when I walked by, but I gave her a conspiratorial wink and then continued on my way. She's a dreamy, but also very headstrong child.

Behind the pigsty, I suddenly stop short; I hear someone whispering. I cautiously creep closer: it's Bandi and Ildikó, my only daughter, standing there talking quietly.

When Bandi was transferred to Sopron in the last weeks of the war and was quartered with us, little Ildikó fell madly in love with the tall

and handsome soldier.

At twelve years old, she had suddenly become very quiet and shy and just adored him; damn, we had a hard time making her understand that he was already taken and much too old for her anyway. Bandi and I had a drink together then, and when I explained the situation to him, he was very upset. Honest and kind as he was, he remained very friendly to Ildikó, but he followed all the rules and then very soon left for the capital again.

Now they stand there, and Ildikó, now well into her twenties, speaks to him with her head bowed. Tears stream down her face, and it almost breaks my heart. I don't need to understand what they're saying; I understand it anyway. She suddenly embraces Bandi with all her heart, her head resting for a moment on his chest, time seeming to stand still. He awkwardly takes hold of her hair and gives her a gentle kiss on the forehead. Then he pulls away decisively and goes through the door, upstairs.

Ildikó stood frozen for a few seconds, then her shoulders slumped, and she entered the house through the back door. I stood there for a while longer, sensing how much this final farewell must hurt her, and then I went to bed myself.

I wake Antal and the townspeople before sunrise.

Mother and Ildikó have already prepared a good breakfast; there's even real beef broth for the adults and older children. As we sit down, Ildikó has already gone back upstairs, and Mother returns my questioning look with a grim shake of her head. After breakfast, everyone gathers in the back courtyard and waits for old Karcsi, who will drive us to the border in his ancient truck. When he arrives, they quickly climb onto the back in the darkness, and we pull the tarpaulins closed.

Karcsi is the worst driver in town, but he's determined to keep driving that old clunker himself. Every time he shifts gears, he winces because the gearbox makes a truly awful grinding noise, then he grins stupidly and says, "Ah, the clutch!" Antal stands outside on

the running board, facing backward, and tells me when cars are coming. Then I knock three times on the rear window, and the townspeople know they have to be as quiet as mice.

After about half an hour, we arrive unmolested at the fields that stretch to the railway tracks. The truck comes to a halt with a jolt, the engine dies with a final, desperate diesel pop, and Karcsi curses loudly and blasphemously into the silence. Antal sprints to the back, lifts the tarpaulin, and says, “Quick, quick, we only have a few seconds to get out!” The Budapest men crawl wearily from the truck, and I immediately walk a little way ahead along the path and gather them around me. Antal gives Karcsi the money, and after a brief whisper, he hurries to me, muttering that the old man wants more. I tell Bandi that we need more money, and Antal gives Karcsi some more, but then remains firm and sends the grumbling old greedy man away.

I take the back path, and everyone follows behind me in single file. Antal brings up the rear and helps the children with any small obstacles that arise. The children walk in pairs: Peter with Paulchen, János with Hanni, István with Juliska. And Antal, my eldest, walks behind them, making sure they don’t lose track. It fills me with pride that I can rely on him completely.

At the end of the last field, I stop, say we’ll take a fifteen-minute break, and then go around to make sure we don’t encounter any unpleasant surprises. There are still a few mines scattered beside the railway tracks, so I show Bandi and Feri again in the beginning dawn where small craters from exploded mines can be seen next to the rails. I see them clench their teeth. “There are no mines on or between the tracks, just stay away from the embankment!” I say, and they nod.

The sun will rise soon, I think, and yet it won’t break through the fog today. I show Bandi and Feri once more the small rise behind which the path branches off, then we say our goodbyes. I hold Bandi’s hand for a long time and realize he wants to say something more, but then he presses his lips together. I say, “I know what you want to say, I’ll pass it on,” and he looks at me, concerned. I pat him

on the shoulder, swallow the lump in my throat, and hug the others; then Antal and I quickly head back along the path.

The surprise was great when the Budapest residents reappeared at the door that evening. They excitedly recounted their adventure, and I thought to myself how incredibly lucky they had been.

The Russian commander is a bitter, brutal man, torn between depravity and duty. He has often personally tortured prisoners, and rumor has it that he is responsible for several deaths.

Antal not only helps me around the farm, he studied engineering until the outbreak of the unrest and has a very sharp mind. He listened quietly until every last detail had been recounted and the townspeople began to repeat themselves. Then he looked at me intently and said: “We can’t wait until tomorrow! That’s exactly what the Russian will think, because of the children, who have to sleep sometime. We should put them to bed for a few hours right now, but then leave before midnight. They should take the death strip as their route; the Russian won’t expect that.”

I know immediately he’s right. So we sit down with the two men and examine the map very carefully. Bandi says he knows about electric fences, and we shouldn’t worry about the mines either; he dealt with them during the war. Antal brings some mines he’s dug up and defused, and he and Bandi study their construction together. Meanwhile, I make some detailed sketches of exactly how the electric fence and the death strip are laid out, and Bandi and Feri memorize everything. It’s approaching midnight when we wake the children and get ready to leave. Antal comes in with Karcsi and says Karcsi will drive us part of the way. Karcsi grumbles to himself that this is surely the very last time he’ll do it. Antal whispers to us that it won’t cost anything this time, and I secretly wonder how he managed that.

The journey proceeds like the first, and for days we hear nothing. After about ten days, a call comes to the mayor: “The city apartment is free,” the agreed-upon code word that they have arrived safely in Austria. I still chuckle to myself today that Bandi used that fat communist swine as the messenger of conspiratorial news. At least I was

able to explain briefly and succinctly to the questioning-looking fatso that it was a student apartment for Antal.

Ildikó didn't speak a word for months. She silently did her work and then retreated to her room. I only saw her cry briefly once, when I told her what Bandi couldn't say. Her cheerful and lighthearted nature had become dull and sad. For many days, our house was quiet and oppressive.

One day, on a whim, she went to the city, completed teacher training, and returned after several years. Since then, she has taught at our school, and children and parents love her for her gentle nature. She still lives with my mother and me and helps care for my mother, who is no longer the same after her stroke.

Antal now lives in Budapest, works for the radio, and has become a successful director. He's made something of himself, and yet he hasn't forgotten his elderly parents and visits us quite often. His children are grown now, and some of his grandchildren have gone to university and are our pride and joy.

No, we never heard from the people of Budapest again.

Bandi sometimes meets up with Antal when he's in Budapest, but he's never come to see us again. I understand him.

That was about forty years ago. Now I sometimes sit in front of the house, breathe in the scent of the acacias and birches, and think how wonderful it is to have grown old in my old homeland. And that I, too, was lucky they never caught me: after all, I smuggled hundreds across the border back then…

Chapter 4

(Afternoon of the first day — narrated by soldier Yuri)

When we arrested the two families, I felt quite miserable. I pictured the children from our village in my mind's eye and thought: what we're doing isn't right. I was brought to this country from my homeland of Tungusistan weeks ago. The officers had told us that we had to fight capitalist pigs and imperialist spies because they threatened the survival of the entire Soviet people. When we arrived here, we saw that we were actually embroiled in a civil war, that our enemies were women and children. The border troops were rotated every month because they lost their morale so quickly.

My comrades teased me because I looked Mongolian—well, I was of Mongolian descent, and the more they teased me, the prouder I became. As we loaded people onto our truck, I noticed the two men whispering to each other and clearly heard the word "Mongolian." One of the little girls had her violin case with her and was clutching it tightly to her body. She seemed afraid we might damage the violin. Yes, of course, after what this people had experienced with the glorious Red Army, this fear wasn't entirely unfounded.

I offered the little girl the seat; I wanted to allay her fears and convince her through my kindness that we were different from what people said about us. I repeatedly gestured for her to sit down and tried to translate my Russian and Tungusic words with the appropriate gestures.

The men whispered to the little girl, who now clutched her violin case even tighter and looked rather tearful. The finely dressed man, in particular, showered her with a torrent of words, and she looked at me silently and defiantly with her dark eyes, pressing her lips tightly together. It didn't exactly look like friendship.

I asked Gregorij, who understood some of the language, what the men were whispering. He said he hadn't quite understood, but perhaps it meant that you considered the violin case a deity or a house-

hold altar, and you were asking her to “lay out” the god or altar on the seat.... Gregorij shook with laughter.

“Yes, and then you feed us bananas,” I thought grimly, furious because international understanding was clearly not on the agenda today. This dandy seemed to divide the world into two categories: Hungarians and apes, and the little girl was intimidated and frightened, probably also because she had never seen such a stupid creature as me.

I was speechless for a few minutes. Gregorij was speaking broken German to the men, and I recognized his sly grin! He was probably spinning them the tale of the enchanted Mongol prince or something similar. That really made me angry.

Then it was Gregorij’s turn to stand there looking stupid with his mouth open, because I knelt down, gently but firmly took the violin case from the girl’s hand, and carefully placed it on the seat. Then I began to bow like a praying Muslim and rattle off stupid sayings like, “Your ticket, please? Anyone else getting on? Today is Wednesday, the fog is white, long live Mother Russia,” and so on, whatever came to mind.

Gregorij couldn’t stop laughing. The lieutenant glared from the driver’s cab and grumbled. None of us had eaten yet and we were all irritable. My clowning around was just a sign of utter exhaustion, fatigue, and hunger. We were all relieved when we finally arrived at the barracks.

Years later, Gregorij visited me. He had lost a leg during the fighting and was now traveling the country, going from one friend to another, begging his way through life. We told each other this story—among others—over and over again, laughing heartily. At the time, I had a good position as a senior engineer at the oil refinery and was able to employ Gregorij for a short time until he moved on again.

I wonder what became of the little girl with the big sad eyes and the deity – pardon, the violin case?

Chapter 5

(The evening of the second day — narrated by Juliska)

No. I'm always portrayed as stubborn, as someone who can't do anything on my own, and the adults never admit when they make a mistake. But if I try to say something, all they say is: be quiet, you're just a child.

No. I'm not a little child anymore. I know much more than the adults think. Only my dad is the only one who takes me seriously. My mother and that disgusting Aunt Erzsi, or her lecherous husband, they're all against me; they always find something to criticize and nag about me.

Then they tell us about the pig slaughter and the trip to Sopron to visit Aunt Anni. As if we were completely stupid! Of course, we already know everything. Pityu and I spent half the night lying on the floor, spying and listening through the crack under the door as they planned everything. Of course we know, they can't fool us. We are the Knights of St. Stephen (that's the name of our secret society). Pityu is my First Knight, and I am the Queen, naturally. We are currently recruiting more knights.

We also initiated János, even though he's not a Knight of St. Stephen; he probably thinks too highly of himself, even though almost everything about our secret society was originally conceived by him. But this matter is of the utmost importance, so we're initiating him anyway. He scratches his head for a long time and then says that if we cross the border, we'll probably never, ever get back.

Suddenly, I have a huge lump in my throat. The playground, my schoolmates, the secret society, my best and second-best friends, our dear nurse Mányika: are we never, ever, ever to see any of them again? I suddenly feel so small and shriveled. János then says we have to call a Grand Secret Meeting. I don't know what that is, but then he explains that all secret societies have a Grand Secret Meet-

ing, and that everyone has to come, even the rival gangs, and that they have to abide by a general truce.

The next morning saw a flurry of diplomatic activity. Knight Pityu, Queen Julia, and Special Envoy János hurried from house to house, greeting each guest with the respective ceremonial salute of the local secret society and whispering the message into ears spit on three times. Everyone was astonished; no one had ever heard of a Great Secret Meeting, but it was another new adventure, and everyone would be coming. We met in the Royal Courtroom (a basement of the waterworks) and took our seats solemnly. János, Árpád, and Zoli, the three eldest, had perched on a higher water pipe and, for the special occasion, wore their dirty-white American cowboy hats, which Árpád's father had once brought back from America.

After the renewed announcement that an absolute ceasefire was to be observed, Zoli gave the floor to Árpád, who administered a completely novel, yet seemingly foolproof, oath to everyone, pledging to remain silent about the matter and never to speak a word to a human or animal soul. Now everyone was on tenterhooks, waiting until Árpád then laboriously passed the floor to János.

János rose dramatically slowly, threw his cloak over himself once more, and pointed theatrically into the distance: that was where we were going, far away, to a strange, distant land, and we would never, ever, ever return. The elders had decided this, and afterward, there was a profound silence.

Some remarked dismissively, "Aha, so they cross the border too," but the others were genuinely moved and shushed. Ceremonial oaths of loyalty followed, vows of silence were sealed with all sorts of secret symbols, and eternal friendships were promised. I could only say goodbye to Zoli with tears in my eyes, as we were practically betrothed, a fact known only to me and Pityu, my First Knight. Zoli's sister, Babu, howled loudly as she bid farewell to János, and Pityu, with a magnificent gesture, bestowed his treasures—his beautiful longbow and his infallible slingshot—upon the comrades of the First Wars. His eyes, too, were glistening with tears.

Then, one last time, the sacred mist rose from a fire of newspaper leaves, the princes and shamans murmured their incantations once more, and we went our separate ways in all directions.

Ah, then came the admonitions from those pesky adults again. They wanted to be absolutely sure that not a single word was whispered, and if they had known that about thirty neighborhood children were in on it, they would have had a heart attack! But we trusted in our sacred oaths, and we were right: no one ever betrayed us. It took a while until I had distributed my treasures, which I couldn't possibly take with me, among my friends. There was jealousy, squabbles, and some sore throats. But for my ego, it was good to act and be treated like a queen. I didn't give away some of my dearest treasures, though, but wrapped them neatly in a cloth and hid them in my violin case. It was obvious that if the adults found out about these activities, they would know that we knew what they knew. So everything was kept under the strictest secrecy.

Helping Mother pack was all right. But Aunt Erzsi, a skinny, pale old goat who was always obsessed with the baby—oh, she really got on my nerves! While she packed and unpacked the baby things for the umpteenth time, I silently helped her sons, Peter and Paul, pack their things. Little Paul was quiet and still, but Peter, the older one, was quite cheeky. Once he tugged at my braid, then he pushed me here and there, tried to grab me—he was quite a nuisance. Of course, I knew what that cheeky toad wanted, but it would never, ever, ever happen that I would show him anything, even though that kind of curiosity was quite important in secret societies.

Aunt Erzsi was repacking the baby things again. Then she chirped to Feri, her slicked-back little darling, about how they absolutely had to take an extra bottle of schnapps for the border guards. Uncle Feri, as usual, wasn't listening and just mumbled "Yes, yes" over his shoulder. Erzsi-néni then took a bottle and very clumsily wrapped a blue ribbon around its neck to mark it as "the" bottle. I, of course, had much more delicate fingers than that whiny old goat and tried to make a proper, pretty bow out of her mess: but you should have seen it! Like a fury, she snarled at me to get lost, that she already had an insane amount on her plate and couldn't possibly have to deal with

me, a “brat,” too! And that her bow was perfect, I should just keep my hands off it!

The queen strode off, her head held high, but her heart was consumed by murder and mayhem. The First Knight was tending to Peter, who had cut his finger, and so I could take a little revenge on the wretched goat by helping with the bandaging and making Peter suffer more than necessary. The fool believed anything; blood poisoning and tetanus only had to be casually mentioned, and the coward would whimper with fear of hellish torments and gangrene, his eyes bulging. In despair, he ran to his mother, who saw yet another reason to curse the miserable brat—me.

I still remember the whole journey and the escape vividly (but you’ve already read all about that). Perhaps I should add that in the evening in Sopron, after everyone had gone to bed, I had to go out again “to the toilet.” There they were, our travel packages, under the stairs.

I crept quietly over there, waited a moment to make sure no one would disturb me, and then searched Aunt Erzsi’s bag. I simply wanted to do the trick properly, and if she wouldn’t let me, I’d take matters into my own hands.

I had unpacked the bottles and untied the ribbon. I smoothed it down with my hand and began to tie a pretty bow when I suddenly heard Uncle Ákos approaching. I quickly shoved all the bottles back into the bag, holding only the ribbon in my hand, but there wasn’t time to put it away, so I crumpled it up and hid it in my hand. Uncle Ákos came slowly towards me, a giant of a man, and I was a little frightened when I saw him. Mother had once told me that Uncle Ákos had bludgeoned his enemies to death with his bare fists in the war, strangled them with his bare hands before they captured him. If that was true, then he could easily crush me—or someone like me—between two fingers. I stared, mesmerized, at his hands, which were truly enormous, and felt my skin shiver, as if I were getting goosebumps.

But he just looked at me and winked in a friendly way. Had he noticed something? Why wasn't he saying anything? He must have noticed me crouching under the stairs, my hands in my travel bag, probably looking a bit defiant. I looked up at him, prepared to come up with some nasty excuse, but he just gave me a friendly pinch on my left cheek and said, "Good night!" Then he moved on and left the house through the courtyard door.

I waited a few heartbeats and then took the bottle out of my bag. It was this bottle, wasn't it? I looked at it, a little puzzled, because they all looked the same. Then I realized how time was slipping away. Yes, I could almost physically feel the seconds ticking by. On impulse, I tied the blue ribbon around the neck of the bottle, made a pretty bow, and put it back in my bag. I didn't think for a second about what might happen if I had mixed them up after all.

Then I went back to the toilet door, opened it quietly and closed it loudly again, went through the corridor and back into the bedroom.

Later, when the adults were wondering how the poor baby had managed to get schnapps at the border, and what the border guard might have said about his bottle of baby tea, I felt very uneasy, but nobody paid any attention to me.

And Pityu, to whom I confided, had to swear a hundred sacred oaths that he would never, ever, ever tell anyone.

…just a word, my child!

Of course, anyone who was there will immediately realize that these stories aren't entirely true. Well, Erzsi's story really did happen—apart from a few tiny details. The electric fence wasn't charged that day; there probably wasn't always power during those chaotic events. This is just a small example of when a story can be embellished without resorting to outright lies!

The other stories, as well as the names of all the people, are invented, although anyone who was there will sense that it all happened almost exactly like that. But how else can I portray a mood, a time, and the experiences of people at a particular time, except through fantasy stories that are, in some magical way, nevertheless true?

Juli got the worst of it. Of course, there was never a blue ribbon, so she never snuck out at night and never mixed up the bottles. It's no malice on my part to attribute this role to her; I simply wanted to come up with a somewhat plausible explanation for the bottle mix-up. And, it seems to me, it's readable and enjoyable. Juli will forgive me, I'm sure…

My father (Bandi) also undeservedly kissed Ildikó's hand (that wasn't her real name). On the other hand, how was I, as an eight-year-old, supposed to reconcile things I saw but didn't understand with my imagination? The pretty young girl, eager to please and attract attention, fawning around her father? Of course, she wasn't even born during the war, and my father had more pressing concerns than fawning young women. But, that's how unfair our world of poets is, and Ildikó will remain for me the lonely, aging spinster, even though the real Ildikó is probably a grandmother many times over, heartily laughing, and otherwise quite wrinkled.

Perhaps you did enjoy this story after all, even if it turns out that not everything is quite as you wished. All I can say is: I like it this way. And next year I would rewrite it, completely differently, yet somehow still the same.

It happened exactly like that, every jot, I swear!

My friend Patroclus

Ho me dareis anthropos u paideuetai
A person who is not abused will not be educated!

Only in later years did I understand the above saying, which the parish priest of Troy, Laocoön, so casually and lightly uttered to his king Priam. No, not just casually uttered: Laocoön was an advocate of a "healthy slap," and therefore I don't feel sorry for him at all that the sea serpents swallowed him up. A healthy slap has always been unhealthy, you sir, you!

Apart from that, Laocoön was quite right, for the criticized Prince Paris was a cheeky young man who defiantly railed against the gods and was terribly conceited about his future kingship. Although, on closer inspection, in Troy, with its barely two thousand inhabitants, he could at best play the role of mayor. Paris, who lustfully pursued the daughters of the Greeks and Trojans on the beaches of Greece and Troy...

But I wanted to tell you something completely different. My father held the laudable and honorable opinion that his children had to go to elite schools to have the best possible start in life. My older and younger brothers attended a well-known school in Ried, Upper Austria, my sisters went to a convent run by tall, imposing figures, and I was destined for Stella Matutina, the most prestigious Jesuit school in Vorarlberg.

Thankfully, the Jesuits were wiser than my father in this regard, recognizing my difficult temperament—without ever having seen me—from afar, and they didn't budge a single penny on the exorbitantly high school fees, refugee or not. The monastery school on the shores of Lake Constance was more understanding; the feud with the Jesuits of Stella had been simmering for centuries, and besides, they had a heart for refugees. I was looking forward to Lake Constance, the fantastic sports facilities, and the horses that were cared for by students in the adjacent enclosure.

Well, so much for the theory. In practice, it was relentless studying, high-performance sports, and nightly canings (strokes on the bare bottom with a cane) for the minor or major transgressions of daily life; only the best, most compliant, and most diligent were allowed on the horses. This was a matter of prestige for the monastery, as they were only a fraction of a second behind the Stella. Like the Stella, the Stella was a classical high school, meaning Latin, Ancient Greek, and a broad, classical general education. I confess that I sometimes cried into my pillow at night in anger and disappointment, and very, very quietly, because there were 40 of us boys in one dormitory. But looking back, I am grateful for the thorough and quite modern education.

I don't remember all the priests, but some names I'll never forget. Paulus, the old warhorse in charge of trouser stretchers; Ambrosius, who playfully taught us Latin and Greek; Kassian (the current abbot), who, as a young gymnastics teacher, once climbed the scaffolded church facade with his cassock hiked up to prevent a lovelorn, drunken high school senior from clumsily attempting suicide over a pub waitress's rejection, and got him down over the scaffolding; Anselm, who was responsible for the choirboys at early mass and the theatrical productions. It won't surprise you, dear reader, that I not only distinguished myself as a fearsome ankle-killer on the football field, but also, spurred on by Father Anselm's empty promises, imprudently pushed my way to the front of the singing auditions.

And won.

Six boys with bell-like soprano voices accompanied Theo, two or three years older than me, every morning as a choir. Theo was a child prodigy and would probably have become a new Beniamino Gigli if he hadn't been called home by the Lord years later, one morning in the middle of Gregorian chant. So, this whole choir thing needs some serious explanation. Naturally, my heart leaped when Father Anselm read out the six names after the audition, lastly "little István from Hungary." The next day, there was no more leaping, because it started at 5 (five!) a.m. without breakfast: putting on choir robes and singing bell-like voices at the early Mass, Gregorian chants in antiphonal chant with the basses of the priests, who had already begun

their silent prayers at 4. When Theo sang, I closed my eyes and was moved to tears: I want to sing like that someday, I thought again and again, without suspecting that my voice breaking would ruin my plans.

God's reward came at 6:30: while the others were still asleep or fighting over the best washing spots, we choirboys sat with the priests in the large refectory, received a hearty breakfast, and listened silently to the reader, just as they did. Just as things are done in a proper monastery.

Unfortunately, I wasn't just the bell-like soprano, but also the ankle-killer. Whenever we were allowed, we romped around the football pitch, scoring goals, and I destroyed ankles one after another. One day I went too far, was surrounded by angry teammates, and threatened with lynching. The guy from Ravensburg narrowed his eyes in pain and hissed that he would beat me to a pulp, and how, because I was a wild boar! The twins from the Bregenzerwald copied everything the guy from Ravensburg did and hissed too, even though, in my eyes, they were tiny little things and toads. But this time, the Swiss guy, Roger S., was also angry, and he was no pushover. The only one whose fist I had ever felt and who could beat me. He was not to be trifled with; he was stronger than all of them. I held my bleeding nose after his first blow and considered whether I should completely cut off the air supply to the twin I had in a headlock, while the Ravensburg native, a cowardly Lake Constance pirate with a hooked nose, threw himself on top of the ball of flesh and smashed everything below him.

With eyes wide in surprise, Roger staggered backward as an even more powerful fist grabbed him from behind and yanked him back. I caught my breath, kicked the cowardly Ravensburg native hard in the groin, and staggered away from the fighting. It was Klaus H., a Liechtenstein student from my final year, who couldn't bear to watch me go down and had saved me from being lynched. The disappointed mob dispersed, Klaus tended to my bleeding nose, and a brief friendship developed, beginning with him teaching me the basics of expertly killing treacherous Ravensburg residents, Bregenzerwalders, and Swiss. I often visited him in his single room; we studied to-

gether, and once, when I admired his atlas, he gave it to me without hesitation.

I wasn't ungrateful. But what could I, an 11-year-old, possibly offer an 18-year-old? I experienced firsthand the wisdom that even someone without means, but with a bright mind, can give a gift to someone. Klaus was a gifted person, well-mannered and from a good family. He excelled in mathematics and the natural sciences, but in languages he was a genius. He spoke his Liechtenstein dialect perfectly, in fact, but all other languages remained a mystery to his genius.

He suffered greatly because of it, and after a while he admitted that despite diligent studying, he was only just managing to pass in both Latin and Greek. I could already read Greek and often sat with him, studying with him and quizzing him on vocabulary. Of course, I had known since the beginning of the school year that there would be a theatrical performance at the end of the year; the graduating students would be reenacting scenes from Homer's Iliad, as they did every year. Klaus, like all the graduating students, was assigned a role and, much to his dismay, had to learn Achilles, one of the most talkative main characters in the Trojan War.

Great armor (borrowed from the Theater am Kornmarkt), great fight scenes (with real theatrical swords), and a whole lot of dialogue! Klaus always seemed very troubled by the latter. When he recited his lines, he didn't sound like Achilles, who frivolously blasphemes and challenges the gods at a drinking bout and then laughs uproariously, but rather like Klaus, who barks out the text in a clipped, serious, almost sour expression, boring the gods with repetitive hexameters, and of course, there's not a trace of uproarious laughter. Moreover, Achilles had a friend, a best friend, whose name, as we know, was Patroclus, a reckless youth who, on royal orders, was supposed to look after the impetuous young warrior; King Agamemnon himself insisted on it. This year's Patroclus, however, was in reality a disciple of Bacchus devoted to wine, women, and song, sleeping more often in the city taverns than at the boarding school, and cunningly promising to practice the dialogues of the friends with Klaus "tomorrow," and then for real. Of course, "tomorrow" turned out to be "today,"

and Patroclus, offended, insisted that this was the agreement: “tomorrow,” not today!

Do whatever you must, dear reader, but never do one thing: never challenge the ancient Greek gods! They actually exist—unlike UFOs—and they can punish terribly. About three or four days before the performance, for which Achilles was preparing very conscientiously and for which I was assisting, standing in for Patroclus, Zeus, the father of the gods, had had enough of Patroclus, the drunkard. He let the brave hero, who had to leave his beloved waitress and his beloved tavern at closing time, fall asleep in the beer garden, even though it was drizzling. Patroclus developed a severe case of nephritis and remained in the hospital until after the performance date. Zeus nodded grimly and turned, satisfied, back to his earthly consorts; his anger lasted for weeks, and so he left it to Apollo, in the guise of the gymnastics teacher Father K., to pluck the completely drunken man from the scaffolding of the church facade… — Father Anselm, his graduating class, and Klaus were deeply affected; no, not because of the kidney infection, but because of the problem that had to be solved within a few days. They deliberated back and forth, Father Anselm even considering aloud canceling the performance due to divine providence or speaking the text himself, when Klaus suggested, almost under his breath, that I (little István from Hungary) could play Patroclus.

Without having been there, I know that you could have heard a pin drop at that moment, it was so quiet. An 11-year-old?! Patroclus?! Impossible! After some back and forth, Klaus came running into the large study hall and whispered to the priest on duty, then weaved his way through the rows of pews and wordlessly tugged at my arm: “Come with me!” I waited for the priest’s nod of approval, then slipped out of the pew like a weasel and ran out after Klaus.

Father Anselm resisted for a long time, saying my voice was far too high for a Greek hero; the others complained that I was lost in the hero’s bronze-colored breastwork like a peasant child in his father’s winter coat; but one thing was undeniable: I knew the text almost flawlessly by heart, knew from Klaus’s stage directions when and where Patroclus should sit or stand, and when he should bravely

draw his sword to make it clear to Achilles that he, Patroclus, would, if necessary, use armed force to prevent him, Achilles, from his plan (namely, to massacre the hero Paris).

A twist of fate or the favor of the gods, for which I had prayed most earnestly? At the third rehearsal gallop, Father Anselm finally relented and gave his approval. The graduating students cheered and patted me on the shoulder. “Patroclus, let’s be friends!” I suddenly felt very small and vulnerable among all the great, strong heroes of Greece and Troy. Helena (whose real name was Peter) lisped with a grin, saying Patroclus would draw the laughter and distract from her/him. “Thank God,” added the beauty of the night with a pagan, mad-eyed wink. Father Anselm shook his head and went into the back theater room and selected the smallest possible breastplate, the smallest helmet, and a hemp beard for me. The helmet was later omitted; I was given a kind of crimson turban, and my milk-faced cheek was tanned with a dark paste.

I was incredibly nervous and had terrible stage fright, and I stumbled over my lines in the dress rehearsal, so much so that I burst into tears of anger. Father Anselm was a good man; he gave me a motherly hug and said everything would be alright, that I could take the text with me to the performance and read it aloud, and that everyone would understand.

Friend Patroclus, he then announced before the performance, had unfortunately had an accident and was in the hospital (well, now I was enlightened: even clergymen tell fibs). But, Father Anselm continued, I had discovered a young Greek talent in the lower grades (correction: shamelessly lying) who could speak Patroclus like the grown-ups; so he asked for your kind understanding regarding my high-pitched, childish voice and my short stature, which, however, certainly wouldn’t have prevented the real Patroclus from avenging the death of his protégé Achilles (finally settled: clergymen are clueless, as if an immortal could be dead!). An observant person would immediately notice that Father Anselm had no idea what this play was actually about. Oh well. Thus prepared, the audience waited with bated breath for the “Scenes from the Siege of Troy.”

Imagine it like this: the props—the scenery, weapons, and clothing of the legendary heroes—were borrowed from the Theater am Kornmarkt. The backdrop was a Renaissance painting, an English park landscape with an English castle: this was Troy. Rough potato sacks represented the sandy beach in front, and wooden chairs covered with rags served as seating. The bonfire, around which the heroes gathered and belted out their lines, was indeed there as a woodpile, but fire regulations forbade it from being lit, which made the whole thing look somewhat disconcertingly artificial. Only a pedantic nit-picker would be bothered by the fact that the heroes wore Roman legionary armor and carried Roman short swords. The art-loving spectator could close their eyes and feel transported directly to ancient Troy. —So be it!

I only had a very brief appearance, in the fourth scene. My nerves got the better of me, and I laid my manuscript down upside down. My turban slipped over my forehead and eyes as I took off my much-too-large helmet upon entering. I couldn't see the audience because of the bright spotlights, but I immediately sensed that a large, breathing, coughing monster was lurking behind the lamps. I hastily turned the manuscript right side up and memorized the first few verses until I realized I already knew them.

Achilles came in awkwardly, thus giving me—as agreed—a little time. Then we began. As in the dress rehearsal, I was irritated by the interruptions of Odysseus and Heracles, who were perfectly justified in doing so, but of course, we had omitted their parts during Klaus's rehearsal. Now I had to wait carefully until Klaus gave me the signal to begin. Naturally, I still understood very little Greek, but I read quickly and tried to find the rhythm of the poem. Klaus frowned darkly to draw my attention to my completely out-of-place, Italianate gestures and hand movements.

Father Anselm nodded approvingly to the abbot and the deputy mayor, nodding particularly gracefully and sincerely hypocritically to the group whenever a hero stumbled and stumbled ignominiously.

The finale was approaching. Patroclus managed to appease Achilles by taking his armor and beating Heracles himself. The burly

demigod wouldn't stand for it, and so I—continuing my theatrical declaiming—had to bite the dust. The dead Patroclus watched the rapid ring-pounding from the corner of his eye; Menelaus finally rescued my corpse and Achilles' golden armor: he grabbed me by the elbow, dragged me around the still-unlit bonfire, and dropped me with a crash onto the stage behind it. Klaus, sadly amused by his friend Patroclus's pain-distorted face, grimly belted out his lines at the deputy mayor, the festival director's assistant, and Father Anselm, until his divine mother Thetis (multiple times the transvestite Helena, shrouded in a black cloak) brought him a shield, helmet, and spear from the deep sea. Having thus become invincible, he slew Heracles, then torches were lit, and while the chorus of remaining heroes murmured a final dirge, the curtain fell and the bright light went out.

Caesar's triumphs could not have been greater than when the curtain fell after the final scene and the audience, led by Father Anselm, erupted in frenzied applause. Yes, it wasn't we who deserved the applause, but Father Anselm, who had backed the right horse and had the courage to include a fresh-faced youngster in the troupe; it was Father Anselm who had tamed a horde of unruly youths and presented them triumphantly on stage. While the heroes embraced each other pathetically in the dressing room and acted like mad (like everyone who has an enormous weight lifted from their shoulders), Klaus simply extended his hand to me and looked me in the eye. "Thank you, my friend Patroclus," he said, and that was that.

Ankle killer!? No, from then on they called me Patroclus. The guy from Ravensburg jovially patted me on the shoulder and said he'd told everyone I'd deliver, and I'd totally nail it! The twins looked at each other and whispered that they'd always said the same thing, and so on. Roger remained honest, couldn't get his hands out of his pockets, and muttered defiantly over his shoulder that I'd just been incredibly lucky, pure luck!

Then we cleaned up the theater, and the adults went to the celebratory meal, which took place in the abbot's private chambers, as was the tradition. Klaus tugged at Father Anselm's elbow, and then Father Anselm announced that I, of course, had to come along to see the abbot. I nearly sank into the ground when the high lord patted

my head and said that I had done Father Anselm and the monastery a good service by stepping in for the ailing abbot. He exchanged a few more trivial words about the existence and non-existence of refugee children and the Lord's magnanimity in having blessed me with a beautiful voice and a good feel for Greek tragedies (even though I was just a refugee child, mind you!), then his esteemed interest waned.

Actually, I shouldn't report on the feast of the legendary heroes. Suffice it to say, Brother Joseph was sweating bullets when the abbot ordered Patroclus to have milk, fresh milk! The heroes of Troy roared with laughter, Brother Joseph rolled his eyes and whispered that, for agricultural reasons, there wouldn't be any fresh milk again until morning, but no way, waved the abbot, the boy wasn't getting any wine! Then he turned to the deputy mayor and the assistant festival director and no longer cared what the boy was actually getting. And so it came to pass that Patroclus made the acquaintance of white wine spritzer for the first time in his life.

Brother Josef brought the glass with a slightly trembling hand, and Klaus muttered dryly that, in a pinch, it could just about pass for milk. "Ego te absolvo," he whispered conspiratorially to the bewildered brother, who hastily made the sign of the cross and made a hasty exit.

Of course, there was no happy ending. After the long meal and drink, the Abbot remembered the little Hungarian refugee and asked him to sing a Hungarian hymn. The boy turned bright red and whispered in a faltering voice that he couldn't, but Father Anselm's stern gaze allowed no excuses. Even the fact that the boy didn't know any Hungarian hymns would have been of no use, and his silent pleas echoed unheard in the state room. "István will now sing us a Hungarian hymn," Father Anselm announced in his soft, eunuch-like voice, folding his hands as if in prayer. Black mists obscured the boy's empty repertoire of hymns. Klaus, who instantly recognized the boy's predicament, kicked me in the shin, telling me to just start singing, anything at all. Thus it came to pass that the abbot, the dignitaries, and the heroes of Troy, with folded hands and gazing reverently at the tablecloth, listened to a supposed Hungarian hymn, which

squeaked and sounded rather mediocre from the boy's throat and could easily be recognized as a children's song in translation:

"Behind the Oberenns, behind the sea, once lived a little May beetle, ..."

Corsica

In late summer 1967, my brother János (1945–1977) and I took a moped trip to Corsica, which pushed me—then 18 years old—to my limits. Since almost all documents and photos were later destroyed in the fire that destroyed our parents' house, I have to reconstruct this adventure largely from memory. Nevertheless, everything happened as I describe it; however, it's possible that one or two of the sharks we encountered now appear somewhat larger and more menacing in my memory...

Preparations

The frequent correspondence with my brother, who was studying in Rome, often led to shared adventures. This was also the case in 1966: while I commuted between my hometown of Bregenz and school in Salzburg, my brother János, three years my senior, was studying canon law and dogmatics at the Institut Germanicum et Hungaricum, silently reading his breviary daily and sometimes surreptitiously glancing at the small map he had tacked into the inside cover of the breviary.

Corsica.

My visits to my parents' house, which took place every two to three weeks, often followed the same pattern: a warm hug from my father, mother, and siblings; then a few minutes of reporting on my successes (I usually only mentioned the "other stuff" shortly before leaving, of course!). Then I would rush into the garden and poke fun at my father's moped. He was approaching 50 by then and had finally bought his first car; his moped was used by everyone who knew how to ride it. Which included me, since my sisters were girls (!) and my younger brother was still too young.

Unbeknownst to my father, I transformed myself into a brilliant mechanic in the garden, dedicating myself to sprucing up and customizing the moped. Had Father ever suspected what we boys were really up to, he probably would have given us a good thrashing. But as it was, he was happy that I was enthusiastically pursuing a constructive activity—cleaning the moped, it seemed to him—and not roaming around with a horde of beer-drinking hooligans. In reality, I disassembled the thing in a flash and took the parts to the neighbor boy, who was a gifted apprentice mechanic and generously trained me to be a (moped) master mechanic. In short, a Puch 50 became a rocket, boasting a bored-out carburetor and widened, polished fuel channels, as well as a gutted second exhaust silencer that could be released with a small foot lever (which I wisely stored at my mentor's place). Unofficial measurements showed peak speeds of around 100 km/h with a tailwind.

In distant Rome, János pored over the map, tinkering with different route options, inquiring about ferry fares, and anxiously watching the fluctuating petrol prices. He chewed his calculator in despair and probably shook his head more than once: our shared finances would leave us stranded miserably in the middle of the Corsican mountains. Meanwhile, I tirelessly filed and drilled the exhaust valve, polishing it for hours. Then I wrote to János, telling him not to get gray hairs, because I had taken on a three-week job that would fatten our coffers.

This job was something else entirely and could fill a chapter of its own; perhaps suffice it to say that we loaded household appliances into railway cars and got paid for it. The extra night shift brought me a lot more cash, but on one of the last days, I got my leg caught between the platform and the train car. My knee swelled up badly, and that ended my stint there. I couldn't really go to the doctor, since the cigarettes I bummed were probably the only legal thing on this job (to be more precise, I doubt even that now, because they were likely contraband too…). The foreman, a former Foreign Legionnaire, paid me with a gruff look and told me to get lost, after emphasizing once again that there were no electrical appliances or train cars here and that he didn't even know me.

The plan for the Corsica trip was brilliantly simple: I would ride my moped from Bregenz to Rome, where János would join me, and we would take the ferry to Sardinia and from there continue on to Corsica. Finally, we would take a third ferry to La Spezia, where I would have to drop János off at the train station for Florence on a certain date. From Florence, I would ride my moped back to Bregenz alone. We would cover approximately 2,800 km by road, sleep outdoors or in haylofts, and generally be very, very frugal.

To give you an idea: a Puch 50 moped (not two), with two boys plus a large backpack on top, no tent, no sleeping bags, and not an ounce too much. And of course, with a No. 2 exhaust. Father lent me his leather helmet; I politely declined the enormous rubber coat because of its weight and because "the sun always shines in Corsica." Besides—as Father should have known—James Dean doesn't wear a rubber coat like the Gestapo.

Clothing was one thing that needs mentioning. I must have watched too much James Dean or Humphrey Bogart, because I'd bummed a white hat from the Red Cross—or rather, a once-white, wide-brimmed hat—and a shabby, worn-out leather jacket. I also bought myself (with a heavy heart and without informing János beforehand) a pair of white jeans. Yes, white jeans! —You're allowed to grin: there I was, sitting on the white moped, with a brown leather helmet, a shabby black leather jacket, a white scarf, and white jeans: the outfit of an adventurer! —James Humphrey Rudas.

All roads lead to Rome

Then my alarm clock rattled at three in the morning. I loaded my backpack onto the moped, hugged my mother, and set off with a pounding heart. Towards morning, I reached Chur and rode up to the small San Bernardino Pass (the tunnel either wasn't there yet or I didn't want to go underneath it). The higher I climbed on my moped, the colder it got; the sky slowly darkened, and I reached the border guard post in the snow. The border guards were quite astonished, and while one disappeared into the office with my papers, I got off and clambered around a bit to warm up. Grinning, the other let me step under the door and then said I could help myself to some tea from his thermos. I slowly warmed up again and shook the snow off my wet, white jeans.

Late in the afternoon, I climbed the Giove Pass north of Genoa (I didn't have to go through Genoa, of course, but because I'd heard the port there was particularly great, I had to). The moped was sputtering and backfiring, and I kept getting off to clean the spark plug and try to find the cause. As I entered Genoa, it got to the point where I only made it a few hundred meters before the engine died. I looked for a garage and, after a long search, found one that was just about to close. My overachieving at school (or should I say, my not-too-frequent truancy?) was starting to pay off: speaking broken Italian, I pointed to "il Vergasero" and exclaimed, "nix funziona maladetto Scheißdreck!" (nothing works, damn it!). The mechanic pushed me aside, shook his head at the sight of my makeshift exhaust, and then said the "carburatore" was shot. Shaking his head, he indicated that someone had filed it down too much. For all I care, let the carburetor be called carburatore from now on, what do we do?

I realized what I could do with my carburetor when he simply tossed it over his shoulder into the bucket. Then he went out the back, and I trotted along behind him, beaming: he had dozens of moped wrecks lying around. He made a welcoming gesture and handed me his wrench. I nodded, went from wreck to wreck, and after a while, I had two carburetors that should fit. The mechanic nodded, took one from my hand, and shook his head: into the bucket it

goes! He weighed the second one in his hand, then said a number that made my throat tighten. I rummaged in my pocket and started counting; he laughed and said: okay! He was satisfied with a banknote, then said that I could work in the front yard. I just had to put the tools back in the box afterward, then he locked the workshop and disappeared.

It took me about two hours to install the carburetor, which was a bit larger than the original and also more powerful; however, this also meant higher fuel consumption. In the dark, I took a test drive to the harbor, where, naturally, all the sailors were already in their bunks, and I couldn't see anything special except silence and darkness. Well, not exactly silence either, since suddenly several sailors were shouting wildly at me to get my carburatore moving! I continued a few kilometers south and slept in the grass on the outskirts of a village whose name contained "Mamma."

At dawn, I continued my journey, repeatedly glancing at my white-spotted jeans and feeling a pang of regret. They weren't white anymore, not entirely. But the carburetor was perfect, and the engine had its bite back, even more so than before, I thought. Somewhere on the country road to Grosseto, I tested the speed and reached about 90 km/h. Then I tried what I'd seen other Italian moped riders do: I held onto the tailgate of a truck with one hand, let it pull me along, and switched off the engine to save fuel. (Children: please don't try this at home!) The following evening, I pulled up in front of the Collegium Germanicum et Hungaricum in Rome. Sweaty, dirty, and wearing my black and white jeans.

The porter brother had actually wanted to send me away brusquely (begging and soliciting were forbidden!), but my brother met me at the gate. I had to wait a few more days in Rome until János had finished his exams and we could finally leave. During the day, I wandered aimlessly through the Eternal City, looking at everything and everyone, and returned to the seminary in the evening—usually hungry. I wasn't allowed to sleep there, but János had found me a cheap, simple room a few blocks away. He accompanied me there every evening, since the way led through the red-light district and he was worried about my spiritual well-being, as he admitted

with a grin. But the landlady (I've forgotten her name), a middle-aged woman who battled the trials of cosmetics every day, patiently escorted the Padre (that was János in his red cassock, the seminarian's priestly robe) and the Signore (that was me) to their room and had to promise the Padre every evening that she would watch over my virtue. And no sooner had he left than she returned with a large bottle of Birra Forst and said with a wink that it was on the house.

We had a big problem. On the last day, we were allowed to attend a "private" papal audience, the "private" meaning that only a few hundred (not thousands) of believers were present. The problem was, I had nothing to wear. My black and white spotted jeans were simply not papal-appropriate. János sometimes had brilliant ideas. And so it was this time: he brought me his "spare cassock," and I slipped into it; well, János was a few centimeters taller than me and also a few kilos heavier, but it would work. But my roommate Wolfgang (later my best man and then a bishop in Germany) shook his head and said we couldn't do that. Another friend, Gyuri (later archbishop of Alba Iulia, Romania), suggested we simply clean the jeans. So the two of us knelt high in front of the bathtub, scrubbing the garment with a hand brush and another brush of unknown origin, using soap after soap. The stains faded, fading until they turned light gray. The idea of taking it to a dry cleaner never occurred to us. When Gyuri, who is about my height, lent me a snow-white shirt, nothing stood in the way of my visit to the Vatican. To put it colloquially today, I might not have been in the fisherman's shoes, but I did wear the socks of a German bishop and the shirt of a Romanian archbishop.

The papal audience was uneventful. Certificates and medals were presented, and some prince or other lordship was the only one allowed to briefly kneel before the throne and kiss the ring of St. Peter. Finally, the faithful filed past the Holy Throne in a long line from the pews, were allowed a brief nod to the Pope from a few meters away, and then had to move on. The papal ear whisperer stood beside His Holiness and whispered the name, rank, and importance of each person passing by into his ear. It might seem unbelievable, but I understood perfectly what was whispered because I could (at least back then) lip-read.

“The Count and the Press…”

“God bless you, my son!”

“…and his daughter, the Contessa!”

“God bless you, my daughter!”

“Lord Greenbawm and his wife Sara!”

“God’s blessing!”

“Seminarists from the Germanicum & Hungaricum seminary!”

“God bless you, my sons!”

“The Pongratz family from .. “

“Benedetto, you left one out!” His Holiness said reproachfully. Benedetto glanced at me briefly again, then whispered: “Your Holiness, the red ones are from the seminary, then comes the Pongratz family from…”

“No, the one in between, the one in the white-spotted uniform!” and there is already a hint of displeasure in the holy voice.

The eyes of the papal whisperer etched a deep hole in my shirt: “A seminarian who apparently isn’t wearing a cassock, Your Holiness!”

“Benedetto, Benedetto!” The tone becomes somewhat sharper, the holy nostrils quiver: “…and, tell me, don’t you smell it, it suddenly smells so strongly of cheap soap here…?”

“A madman from Vorarlberg, who usually repairs his moped in white trousers and therefore looks accordingly, on his way to Corsica, and the Pon family……”

“God bless you, my son!” interrupts Petri’s great-great-grandson, then His Holiness lowers his voice and winks: “…and maybe try Rei!”

The Pongratz family was pushing and shoving, so I moved on, but I still heard His Holiness muttering to himself: “When I was young, I also…” Unfortunately, I couldn’t hear the rest.

Well, maybe it wasn’t quite like that, but that was the gist of it. Surrounded by all those snobs dressed up like jesters, I felt very small and worthless, hid behind the car in front of me, and repented profusely of all my sins, especially the unauthorized carburetor tampering—and even three times over! I vowed to do better and that I would never, ever, ever drink that lady’s beer again. Honestly.

The next morning—that is, the morning after I had finally broken my beer vow, and long before the Roman sparrows awoke—we both knelt before the Father Spiritus (who wasn’t so named because of his drinking habits, but because he was the house spirit) and received his fatherly blessing for our undertaking. Then we happily rode southwest on the gleaming moped to the ferry to Civitavecchia, which took us overnight to Sardinia.

As a bank robber in Sardinia

Olbia in Sardinia greeted us at the crack of dawn with brilliant sunshine and an unfriendly official who held up our papers for at least an hour, but we stood our ground and refused to hand over any bribes. Eventually, János had had enough and produced his seminary ID card, in Latin and bearing the papal coat of arms. At that very moment, the papers were sorted, and we exchanged glances: next time, the ID card will be shown immediately!

We spent the whole day driving slowly and leisurely north. It was only an hour's drive, so we swam in a bay and grilled a slice of rye bread to go with our canned tuna. The ferry to Corsica wasn't until evening, so we dawdled all day and finally set off in the late afternoon for Santa Teresa di Gallura, the northernmost point of Sardinia, just centimeters from Corsica (look it up in an atlas if you don't believe it!).

This Santa Teresa, in case you've never been there, was back then a tiny village with not even 10 houses, a warehouse with a police station (also harbor master's office and border station) and a concrete wall left behind by the Allies, which could pass as a harbor facility if necessary (but only then).

The ferry hadn't arrived yet, but I was already savvy from the previous day and knew I had to be in the front row to get on quickly. So there we were with the moped, sorting our luggage and rattling our tickets, unaware that the village policeman and two other civilians with shotguns had positioned themselves behind us.

Suddenly we get a call: "Hands up!" For the first time in my life, I'm staring down the barrels of pistols and rifles, and I feel quite uneasy. János looks up, more astonished than scared, and tries to approach the three of them to ask what's going on, but then the policeman shouts that he should stop, you scoundrel, or else! So there we stand, hands half-raised, looking ridiculous, knees shaking (completely), and probably looking rather foolish.

The three whispered about who was going to disarm us. Giovanni, you go first! No, I have two children, do it yourself! The short, stout policeman cautiously approached and told us to open our jackets, but slowly. We followed his instructions in slow motion. He walked around us, looking and looking, then carefully felt us and called out to the other two: “You have no weapons!” János wanted to ask what was going on, but the nervous policeman shouted at him to shut up. So we remained silent; the men and the policeman stood motionless, and everyone waited. Then the policeman told us to go ahead, into the station.

One of the men goes ahead and unlocks the door, János and I stumble in behind, and then we’re sitting in a small, dirty cell. Outside, a crowd has gathered, everyone cheering and shouting at once: “Now we’ve got them!” János and I look at each other helplessly, we hear a horn, and our ferry docks. After a few minutes, which feel like an eternity, the policeman comes into the station and starts talking frantically on the phone. János listens and translates for me that we are the dreaded bank robbers who robbed the bank in Palma this morning and shot a security guard. Then he says, quite matter-of-factly: I had no idea how dangerous we actually are.

Our ferry, which had filled up with people, cars, and goats over the past half hour, gave three pitiful toots and then cast off. In my mind, I tore up our tickets and wondered what we would do for the next two days until another ferry from this company ran. And how we would ever be able to fill this huge hole in our travel budget.

The sheriff calls one colleague after another, recounting in increasingly lengthy variations how he and Giovanni and Guido, well, actually just he and Giovanni, no, actually he alone, had apprehended the dangerous murderers.

The phone rings again, the lawman answers. Apparently, it’s a general on the line, because he jumps up and salutes the invisible man. Yes, there are two of them. A short one and a tall one, yes, both bald. I breathe a sigh of relief, because I have bushy, thick hair, a James Dean lookalike. No, the tall one is bald. I shrink back down. Yes, a leather jacket. White trousers, yes, but very dirty. No, they’ve

thrown away the rifles. I feel a choking sensation in my throat, I ask János if garroting is only fashionable in Spain or also in Sardinia. He says, shh, and garroting isn't practiced anywhere these days.

The sheriff nodded on the phone. They have everything with them, it's them, for sure! No, not the rifles, and not the money either, but a huge backpack, he'd already examined it. Just tourist stuff. And a white motorcycle, yes, he'd confiscated that. It's parked in front of the house, Brigadier.

No, white, not black. With foreign license plates, they must have stolen it. No, a black motorcycle, oh, I see.

I perk up my ears. The fenders are made of white plastic; that can't be black painted over, I can prove it.

The fat, sweating policeman rummages through our papers and reads out our details. Then he says it can't be right, the shorter one certainly isn't 17, definitely older. Suddenly he hesitates. Hesitates, then says: "Brigadier, the tall, bald one has a strange ID card with him, 'Colleggio' and so on, a papal coat of arms. A very nice forgery." His Italian-accented Latin almost makes me laugh.

János says through the bars, "Call them, Signore, I'll give you the number!" The policeman waves him to be quiet, then listens into the receiver and grumbles, "Very well, what's the number?" János closes his eyes and retrieves the stored data from the card: patiently he repeats number after number, which the fat man then repeats in turn, and the invisible man apparently writes down. János calls out to ask for Padre Spirito, but the call has already ended.

The policeman approaches and asks, somewhat uncertainly: "So, is all of this correct?" János explains everything to him, recounting in detail the preparations for our trip, and it seems to me that the portly man is now more inclined to believe us. Then János says he can check; our ticket for the ferry to Olbia is still there. The policeman takes the ticket, calls the port of Olbia, and becomes serious again when he looks over at us.

“You arrived early this morning,” he said, “that’s only half an hour from here. Where were you all day?” “No, don’t tell me, I know: from Olbia it’s only two hours to Palma. You robbed the bank there and shot the security guard, then spent two or three hours in the mountains burying the loot and the guns. From there you drove back here in two or three hours to escape to Corsica.”

He grabs the phone to give his brigadier another dressing-down. He pauses as János says, “My ID is real, you’ll see!” It sends our sheriff squirming, pacing back and forth, muttering to himself. Then he goes out and leaves us alone.

János and I try to calm down and discuss the situation, which isn’t actually all that rosy. He says that no one at the seminary answers the phone at this time; it’s already after closing time, and everyone is probably already in the dormitory.

The hours slip by, I’m desperate because I can hear the village children outside tinkering with my moped and I imagine that by morning only a bare skeleton will remain. Every few hours the sheriff comes again, brings water and some strips of pizza around midnight, then disappears again to continue the party at the village inn.

János and I sit on the cold floor, dozing in the semi-darkness, and sometimes I mutter something about Chateau d’If and Abbé Faria, until he tells me to stop spinning my mind, that everything will be sorted out sooner or later…

Eventually, the guardhouse will be locked from the outside, and we will be left to our fate.

In the morning, the phone rings incessantly, but no one is there to answer it. János grins at me and jokes, “Pronto! Pronto!”—which is Italian for saying hello. It takes at least fifteen minutes for the policeman to arrive. We excitedly explain that the phone has already rung several times.

He calls his station, but it wasn’t them. Finally, finally, the doorbell rings. It’s the Brigadier. The short, stout policeman salutes, lis-

tens, shrinking smaller and smaller. Yes, Brigadier, yes. - Yes, yes.

After being placed on the ground, he slowly comes to our grid.

He plants himself out in all his small breadth before us, looks as serious as the robber chieftain Hotzenplotz, and bounces on his toes. Then he takes the keys in his hand and unlocks the gate, opens the gate wide, and points outside: “You are free!”

We step uncertainly outside, I gaze at the bright morning sun and think how beautiful Sardinia is. He comes out behind us and launches into a tirade: that the men had been caught during the night, that the brigadier had called Rome and had Padre Spirito roused from his bed by a patrol car because no one had answered the phone, that they had also found the black motorcycle, the rifles, and all the loot, and that he now believes us that we are Austrian tourists.

Then he invites us to sit at the table outside the guardroom; there’s coffee and a roll. We chew and listen to his dramatic account of how the real robbers were captured—a wild shootout, by my soul!

János interrupts him at some point and says that we won’t have another ferry until tomorrow evening and that our tickets have expired. I interrupt János and say that our backpack is gone and apparently the side mirrors as well. After a quick check, I’m relieved to find that everything else is still attached. The policeman (I’ve forgotten his name, but he introduced himself over coffee) gets up and calls out a name across the street. Then he sits down with us again and says we’ll figure it out.

A small, scruffy boy slowly walks down the street, greets us, and looks serious. The policeman chatters away rapidly in a language I don’t recognize. The boy initially looks annoyed, then nods and runs off. We continue talking; the policeman says everything will be alright and asks if we know Rapid. János shakes his head, I guess it’s a football team, our policeman laughs and says, “Yes, but they got a real beating,” and I nod, without knowing what the idiot is talking about. Time passes, our ship is gone, the tickets too, the moped is wrecked, and he’s still talking about football.

There's a rustling behind him, and two little gnomes drag our backpack over. I want to jump up, but the law tells me to sit down again. The gnomes bolt as fast as they can run. Then there's another rustling, and a lad my age appears behind the lawman, places two mirrors on the ground, and disappears again without looking at us. I beam, because this is real magic. While I'm putting the mirrors back up, János and the lawman go into the inn, returning after a while, beaming with joy. The day is saved. A barge will cross to Corsica around noon and take us along for free. Since we hardly have any money, the policeman has offered to buy the "Capitano" a large drink, so that works out perfectly.

Hours later, we heave the moped onto a small, sturdy-looking cargo ship, the ever-increasing swell causing the vessel to pitch and roll, and I imagine the moped sinking into the waves a hundred times. After some effort, everything is stowed away. The captain gets his drink at the village inn, while János and I wait impatiently on the ship. The wind picks up, the waves grow larger, and János is already quite pale. I tie the moped to the wildly pitching vessel, which is now traveling at 27 knots, and frantically wonder whether I'm just feeling hungry or if I'm getting seasick. From the inn comes the captain's cheerful, booming laughter, then we hear him shout "Un altro!" (One more!).

The crossing to Corsica

The captain's shrill whistle hurt my ears almost more than the clatter of the rusty gears as he maneuvered the boat back and forth to bring us out of the port of Santa Teresa di Gallura. "The Pipers of Tralee," or perhaps just a Corsican freedom song—who could have said?

The brave little barge chugged along, its diesel engine chugging, through the strait between Sardinia and Corsica, which is about 14 km wide – or less if you're talking nautical miles. The captain was in good spirits; he'd bravely swallowed the fare and now seemed to be trying to compensate for the missing loudspeakers with some rather merrily whistled sea shanties from the Sardinian mountains – after all, we do care about our guests' well-being, don't we? We didn't understand his Sardinian, and he didn't understand our textbook Italian either, so he devoted himself to the engine and the music. János and I retreated to the bow, far away from our musical steam-powered chauffeur.

János looked terrible, pale and wan around the nose, clutching the wooden railing with one hand, staring intently into the distance, gagging. I listened to my body, astonished that this could be the fabled seasickness, and pondered the matter. What if it wasn't seasickness after all? What if I was simply hungry? After all, my breakfast had fallen victim to working on the moped. János, my good János, had even made me a double-decker of white bread and Sardinian cheese before we'd set off and tucked it into my jacket while I tinkered with the moped. I thought about it for a long time, then decided it could only be hunger—I don't get seasick, not me!

János's ears twitched nervously as I reached into my jacket pocket and heard a rustling sound, but he bravely suppressed his curiosity and didn't look over. Slowly and carefully, I unwrapped the bread; it was rocking so terribly, and sometimes a little seawater splashed up, so I had to be careful not to make it salty! The pungent smell of the Sardinian cheese (which, unlike Corsican cheese, was never used as an explosive) assaulted my nostrils at first, only to then unfold into a

cacao-olfactory cloud of all the scents and smells of the highlands. The cloud of aromas must have hit János like a blow from a club, because he flinched and hunched his shoulders. While I opened my mouth wide, very wide, to sink my teeth into the juicy biplane, poor János also opened his mouth wide to offer a sacrifice in a high arc to the sea god Neptune and the wind god Rasmus.

Of course, I remained hungry, because János' accusing, lamb-like glare abruptly halted my snack. The sandwich rustled back into my jacket pocket and stayed there until we reached Corsica, at its southernmost town, Bonifacio. Corsica, here we come!

Bonifacio

Bonifacio is a village perched atop several high chalk cliffs, its harbor nestled in the cleft between them. Nothing particularly remarkable so far—an eagle's nest on rocks, very close to the sky, simply beautiful. And mainland, above all. The miserable rocking ceases, a rope is thrown to the pier and secured; one is glad to have land under one's feet again, even if it is barren and rocky. But the joy is short-lived when the soldiers, appearing as if from nowhere, begin arguing with the captain. Shrugging, he repeatedly points at us, babbling away while chewing a cigarette, nodding his head, and spitting into the harbor.

Case closed. A barge with two stowaways; your papers, please! Now it's my turn to translate, with my three years of school French, and my first surprise is how sloppily these legionnaires speak their own language, and above all, how fast! It sounded quite different in school, Professor! - It certainly wasn't my translation, but suddenly we're sitting on the back of a larger jeep, helpful hands heave the moped up, then we head up the steep road to the barracks in the fortress. "We're going to see the centurion," says the decurio, "he has to decide, after all, he's the centurion and I'm just the decurio!" Unfortunately, I think of yesterday and try, groping and stammering, to find out if they're looking for bank robbers again (I say: robbers of a bank, for lack of the proper term). Well, perhaps I shouldn't have tried that. The decurio hisses into his radio again as we drive uphill past some Corsicans riding donkeys. "I already have a feeling where we'll be spending the night," János murmurs resignedly, burying his face resignedly on his crossed forearms. I whisper back, "...but there is one good thing about it; with this incline, one of us would definitely have had to get off and push!"

Presumably, the Bonifacio fortress is a beautiful tourist attraction. Presumably. We drive into the fortress's barracks courtyard, which looks like any barracks courtyard in the world. Otherwise, we see nothing of Bonifacio. Oh yes, perhaps we do: the large clock in the long, bare corridor where we sit on a wooden bench and wait, wait, wait. The decurio, probably promoted to centurion during the long

wait, often walks past us, nodding sternly each time; the legionaries, perhaps by now also promoted to decurio, march through the corridor once without even glancing at us; then finally, the centurion appears, who has probably only been waiting until he was promoted to general or at least rear admiral.

"Nonsense!", says János, "he just finished his siesta and then had dinner."

In short, a well-rested and well-fed general has its advantages: we can hear him laughing all the way down the hall as he talks on the phone with his counterpart in Santa Teresa di Gallura, whom we know very well. [Perhaps something like this: "Hello, my dear servant, you can call off the search, I've got your bank robbers!" - "No, we've got them!" - "Why? They're sitting with me, a fat bald guy and a tall skinny one, we fished them off a barge..." - "No, we've got the right ones, the ones with you are two harmless Austrian lunatics on a moped..." - "Oh, come on, tell us..."]. Then he comes out into the hall, grins, hands us back our passports, and says that our adventure with the Sardinians is very funny, he has to tell his wife right away, and waves us on that we can go now.

The decurio from earlier greets us in the courtyard and says it's probably too late to continue driving; if we like, we can spend the night in the former—now empty—stables. After briefly glancing into the yawning, dark emptiness with its inescapable bars, we exchange a quick look and politely decline. No, thank you, we'd rather sleep outside! The soldier is surprised, shrugs, and allows us to spend the night in the courtyard when János asks him.

One night in a cell in Sardinia, one night in the barracks courtyard in Corsica; that's quite a record. We sit bundled up against the snow, leaning against the moped, dozing towards morning. Several times during the night, shouts ring out, boots clatter: changing of the guard!

‘over the sea

In case I haven’t mentioned it yet: we naturally wanted to drive the route of the “Rallye des Mille Virages”—the Rally of a Thousand Curves—from Bonifacio to Bastia, counter-clockwise, just like Juan Fangio once did. So, the next day we set off. After a quick celebratory lap through the steep streets of the mountain town, we headed northwest towards Propriano, which lies halfway to the capital, Ajaccio. We wanted to see two things there: the nature reserve near the Bruzzi Islands and the Calanques of Roccapina. You probably know what islands are, but the Calanques need some explanation: they are bizarre rock formations, cliffs that rise vertically above the sea. (Well, okay: some people also use the term Calanque to refer to those fjords that have carved their way deep into the mainland between the actual Calanques…). The most famous calanque is the one on France’s southern coast, 13 km from Marseille, near the town of Cassis – there, Europe’s highest cliff edge, the Calanque du Cap Canaille, rises to over 500 meters above sea level (today it’s a paradise for free climbers). Second place goes to the Calanque of Piana in Corsica (we’ll be visiting there later); it’s not quite as imposing, but it still climbs and descends about 400 meters…

In the sixties, free climbing didn’t exist yet, or at least we weren’t familiar with the sport. However, János and I (usually together) had been exploring the mountains of Vorarlberg; many a real mountaineer could only shake their head silently and/or despairingly when they saw us city kids, armed with Mom’s hemp rope (yes, the one for hanging up laundry!), scrambling around in the mountains. Of course, we had no idea about real climbing; we were simply hikers who occasionally scrambled over an easy rock face, especially when our parents weren’t watching. Our last climbing adventure was ascending the Tschengla rock, located directly below the Pfänder cable car in Bregenz. That’s when Mom’s hemp rope, and her patience, finally ran out. [Whenever I later rode the cable car up there, I shuddered every time, because now I’m a father myself, and my stomach churns when I imagine my children up there…]

Okay, where were we? At the Calanques. Hardly anyone knows the third set, the ones by Roccapina. For self-respecting free climbers, they're far too unspectacular; they're not 500 meters high, not 400, no, maybe not even 40 meters, and not even vertically sloping. But for us amateurs, they're just right. And, as János naively pointed out, "...if you fall, just get away from the rock, push off! And make sure you fall into the water..."

[From a purely film-academic point of view, the following dialogue would have to be inserted here:]

"Have you ever tried that?" - "No."

"Did you believe back then that this could work?" - "Yes."

"Do you believe that this can work today?" - "No."

We spent the whole day in the Bruzzi area and were a little disappointed because the famous islands were just tiny islets – and there weren't any shipwrecks to be seen! But that's precisely what they were famous for: the clever Corsicans of centuries past used false lighthouses to lure ships to the Bruzzi. – I wonder if they were among Bill Gates' ancestors? – Well, we weren't discouraged, because the nature reserve is beautiful, and we also discovered that the best swimming and diving spots are right next to the "No Swimming" signs. Those clever Corsicans!

Dinner: cold – we didn't dare light a fire in the nature reserve. Sleeping in the pine thicket: a dream! We saw stars, thousands upon millions of megatons of stars! We competed to see if the moving object was a satellite or a comet, only to realize with some disappointment that there must have been an airport nearby. However, it was also the first truly uninterrupted night's sleep, completely without prison bars. My brother, I love you, sleep well, you too!

The Calanques

In the morning, we drive a few kilometers along a tiny, narrow coastal path, through increasingly dense undergrowth, to the Calanques. With a few quick adjustments, we disable the moped, hide it under the bushes, and cover it with pine branches. Clad only in swimming trunks and carrying my father's camera (a Makina bellows camera), we head out onto the Calanques. Up close, 40 meters is quite a throat-squeezing height. Before we climb, I pull a thorn out of János's foot; we had clearly underestimated the maquis (that's what the low scrub is called here).

After just half an hour of climbing, I'm completely fed up. But a glance at my brother, who's stubbornly continuing on, gives me renewed strength: no, if he can do it, then so can I! Every now and then I stop, guide him a little further forward or backward, and take a photo. What sounds so easy here was actually a hair-raisingly cumbersome affair. A bellows device like that isn't just heavy, it also needs two hands to unfold and operate (with the third hand, you'd be holding onto the rock, if you had one). And the film is expensive. So no half-hearted snapshots; you have to carefully consider every shot, the framing has to be just right, János has to be in good spirits, with the sea and the steep cliffs dropping away, so I have to lean further forward—no, backward—and—a cry from János, and I catch myself just in time. Phew, that was close!

János also takes a few pictures of me, and during the handover, the camera is repeatedly in mortal danger. Until the clever little younger brother (that's me) comes up with the idea of swapping the person instead of awkwardly handing over the camera.

So the device is wedged into a crevice in the rock, then A climbs on and B reaches the device. This works quite well, because climbing is easier without the device. We scrambled around there all day, found a deep spot in the small fjord that juts into the Calanques, and jumped into the water from a height of 3-4 meters – pure swimming fun!

For the next two days, we lazed around the Propriano area, swimming at the rocky beaches of the Gulf of Valinco or scrambling through waist-high undergrowth to reach some dilapidated windmill ruin or farm. The latter proved to be a reliable source of food; our money was worth more to the farmers than in the city.

We gradually made our way towards Cap de Moro, a barren and rocky area that offers, above all, a magnificent view of the Bay of Ajaccio. There we sat, watching the boats and admiring the sea: it was truly much larger than Lake Constance, and far more breathtaking.

János still had some ace up his sleeve; he'd vaguely hinted in Rome that there would be something special in Ajaccio, but he hadn't revealed anything to me. We looked out over the gulf, and far in the distance, west of the city, we could see the Îles Sanguinaires, the "Bloody Islands." János kept glancing there, asking if I couldn't see the lighthouse on the middle island; and with dreamy eyes, he murmured: "It must be wonderful there, I want to go there!"

Ajaccio

At first, I didn't take it literally. We rode into Ajaccio, and I was already looking around on the outskirts of town to see if there were any affordable places to stay. But János tapped me on the shoulder and shouted in my ear that I should continue along the coastal road by the sea, yes, into the center, along the promenade.

In the middle of the promenade, he commanded, "Halt!" János walked towards a palace, grinned at my bewildered face, and rang the bell. The doorman opened the door and let us in. While we took care of the moped and unloaded our luggage, János whispered that we could now stay in the archbishop's palace for a few days—so that was what he had kept from me in Rome! The archbishop wasn't there, but that was okay; at least we could sleep in proper beds and have a real breakfast. We planned to stay one or two nights, explore the city, and then continue our journey.

And so it was. Or almost. On the very first evening, János directed me about 10 km west from the city to a headland called Pointe de Parata. There, at the foot of an old Moorish (actually: Genoese) lighthouse, we sat, sipping water thoughtfully from a canteen (an earlier form of sundowner) and gazing across at the Îles Sanguinaires, their silhouettes against the sunset. I didn't need to be a clairvoyant to guess my brother's thoughts. From Pointe de Parata, it was a good 2 km to the largest island, with smaller rocks (islands would be an exaggeration) strung out in the water like pearls on a necklace. And I thought I saw a small white dog running around under the lighthouse on the main island, backlit by the sun. The light-colored building in front of it must be a restaurant, right? (By now, it should have been clear that we had to plan the entire trip without Dumont or Marco Polo, otherwise things would probably have turned out quite differently...)

We didn't say much; on our previous expeditions, we'd never had to debate the how and what for long. Yes, swim over to the small rock, rest on it. Pocket a few coins to maybe buy a drink at the

restaurant on the main island. Swim back after a stroll. We exchanged a thoughtful glance, then nodded in unison: so be it!

The next morning – at the crack of dawn – we drove back to Pointe de Parata. A beautiful, bright, and clear morning. When we arrived at the Moorish tower, we had a brief moment of shock: the place, deserted and empty the previous evening, was now teeming with people. A film crew was working on the tower itself, shooting a love scene (a pirate kisses a scantily clad woman before swinging up the tower with a knife between his teeth, and repeats this a dozen times in a row!). I pulled out my camera and photographed the historically significant tower (somehow the pirate's impossibly long legs also ended up in the picture, strange, very strange!). The cameraman took my camera and was quite astonished: built in 1939! We are undecided for a while (János is thinking about where to hide the moped, and I am wondering what the pirate might look like without makeup), then János spots a group of bushes where we can hide the moped and change our clothes.

The Îles Sanguinaires

With only a few coins (from the restaurant!) and a small pocketknife (from the white dog!) tucked into our swimming trunks, we set off. The sea is like glass, there's not a breath of wind, so we make good progress. It takes a while before we reach the first small rock and take a break. Then on to the next, and so on, until we (almost) reach the main island. By now, a strong wind has picked up, creating some waves. Swimming "against" the current is becoming arduous, so we have to take breaks in the water; while one of us rests, the other treads water and holds the first; then we switch. The closer we get to the main island, the more a suspicion grows in my mind: the lighthouse isn't one at all, but one of those Moorish round towers, and the restaurant is dilapidated, windowless, burned out, and beyond repair.

I'm not saying anything yet; we're still fully occupied with swimming and resting. The wind picks up even more around midday, and we barely manage to reach the eastern shore of the main island. János carefully climbs ashore in front of me, then we sit down and rest. I say, "Now I know why the island is called 'the Bloody One,'" and point to our feet: the dark red porphyry rock is as sharp-edged as coral, and our soles are bleeding from tiny cuts. We discuss the lack of a lighthouse, a restaurant, and drinks; we decide to swim along the leeward northern side of the coast to the lighthouse. No one can walk barefoot on the island; they would completely ruin their soles.

So we swim along the island, just a few meters away, the midday sun beating down mercilessly. As we approach the tower, it turns out to be a ruin (it's called Tour Genoise, by the way, the Genoese tower). No white dog, no restaurant, and climbing it on this steep coast is out of the question. We rest in the water and swim back a little way. We rest in the shade of a huge boulder and sit there for about an hour. Not a word of disappointment passes our lips. Not a word.

The return trip is easier, as the wind is blowing from the southwest and we're swimming with the waves. But my knee (the one that got pinched) is starting to hurt and swell. I'm taking more frequent

breaks now; János is worried about whether I can manage swimming with only one leg, but I prove him wrong that I can grit my teeth: we reach Pointe de Parata again at sunset. Exhausted and panting, we sit on the beach, take our first sip of water since morning, and watch the sunset. As we dig the moped out again and get dressed, he complains of pain in his shoulders. I look at him and discover finger-thick, watery, swollen blisters from the burns.

Half an hour later, we rang the doorbell at the brother's house and lay down. An hour later, I ran downstairs in despair and tried to explain to the priest on duty that János had blisters on his shoulders, a terrible headache, and a fever to boot. After ages, the doctor (that's really what he was called) was summoned. He treated János with burn ointment and a syringe, shaking his head at us fools who had spent a whole day unprotected in the water in the blazing sun. I had redness but no pain, and yet he still smeared the ointment on me. I cowardly avoided the syringe. [Years later, at a high school reunion, one of János's classmates—I think it was the well-known Vorarlberg ski racer Udo Albl—told me that he had been diving in the Ajaccio area around the same time and that you had to be very careful of the sharks there. I was at least as pale as János when he told me!]

Father Medicus comes several times to check on János. By morning we're feeling somewhat better; the priest gives us a long and only partially comprehensible lecture (or has the fool ever tried swimming in the sea wearing a wide-brimmed hat?!). The ugly, weepy blisters are carefully lanced and bandaged. János has to stay in bed for three days. We're crestfallen, as our travel plans are completely derailed. And, would we even be allowed to stay that long? János had only negotiated with His Excellency the Archbishop from Rome for one or two nights; there was no mention of four or five days! Father Medicus looks stern and remains firm; he'll take responsibility for it.

I'm now trying my hand at being a nurse, as best I can. Fetching water. Bringing food. Emptying the chamber pot. Fluffing the pillows. Feeding him semolina porridge by the spoonful. I bravely sit hour after hour beside János's bed, twiddling my thumbs. We discuss at length his future as a priest, and later my career aspiration of becoming an astronaut. I'd need a lot of math for that, yes. And the bi-

nary system, calculating with zeros and ones, vital for survival in space. So János teaches me how to add and subtract with my fingers (they're called digits). When it comes to multiplication, which he, as a genius, has mastered just as well as binary division, I completely give up. Outside, the birds are chirping, the children are laughing brightly, and down below, on the promenade, beauties in miniskirts are strolling. And there I am, hunched over in a spartan, dimly lit hospital room, listening to someone explain how to remember the carry by bending your little finger.

"Now go, go!" says János. I make him coax me for a while—no, I can't do that, you just can't do that—but then I give in and disappear, exploring the old town, the beach promenade, and the beauties strolling there in the sunshine. Oh, how long ago it was since the Signora brought me that dreadful beer to my room! Sighing, I return to my brother. Celibacy isn't for me, really!

On the third day, Father Medicus carefully bandaged the burns, remarked that it was far too early to leave, and added sadly that he knew we were unstoppable. We thanked him, said goodbye to each priest individually with long handshakes and solemn farewells, then saddled up the moped and set off. But we only made it to the end of the promenade, where children, tourists, and ethereal beauties were frolicking on the sandy beach. We decided to enjoy a long swim before continuing our journey.

Bathing fun (II)

The very idea of going into the water with my blisters was pure folly. But then again, I could have just stayed in Bregenz in front of the TV, couldn't I? So, off with the clothes, and into the water I went! I could feel the gazes of the fairy-like figures, my chest puffed out, and my trousers bulged (sorry, but that's how it was!). And, like the peacock I was, I strutted a few meters across the sand and expertly dove headfirst into the waves. Flat, as is proper for shallow water, half belly flop, half dive. And then, with my arms underwater, I immediately pushed myself back up. I surfaced and immediately checked to see if the beauties had been watching!

Yes, of course they did, and appreciative glances flickered out from under wide-brimmed sun hats; I looked over at them gratefully. I saw János stand on a small boulder, then climb onto a higher one and try to dive headfirst into the water. I shouted and yelled: "No! János! Don't jump! Not like that!" but it was too late. He flew in a wide arc like an eagle over the water, dug deep into the sand of the shallow water, and stood up, bewildered, in the knee-deep water: his forehead was scraped, and bright blood was running down his face. I ran to him and examined him in a flurry of activity: thankfully, nothing serious. But he was bleeding quite a bit! Again and again, dazed and completely bewildered, he asked why he could do it and not me?! I explained to him that I had practiced diving into shallow water before and that my dive had only been an act. Because of the girls, I add sheepishly.

My handkerchief is now soaked with blood; I frantically try to think of what I can do. My gaze falls on the archbishop's palace. János follows my gaze and shakes his head, no, we can't do that!

Absolutely! I'm now his mother and father; I energetically grab the resisting boy and lead him across the street, impatiently ringing the doorman's bell. The question chokes in his throat when he sees János covered in blood. He immediately calls Father Medicus.

Priests are only human, I'm learning that quickly. Even the dazed János pales at the Corsican curses the priest is now unleashing. Seriously, these brain-dead tourists! They can't even go an hour without bandages and painkillers! Well, at least János only suffered a superficial scalp cut and didn't fracture or even get a concussion. While the priest applies a proper bandage and then a turban to my brother, I swear to myself that we would immediately drive another 20 or 30 kilometers so that—even in the worst-case scenario—we wouldn't find ourselves in the humiliating situation of having to ring his doorbell a third time.

The kind-hearted Samaritan surveyed his work once more, nodded with satisfaction, and decreed that we must spend another night here; only after he had examined János again in the morning could he be certain that he didn't have a concussion. So we returned to our room, I fetched the moped and luggage from the beach, and had to tell the sympathetic ladies there how poor János was doing. They asked and asked, and I urgently needed to get back to the palace, so I promised to be right back. This, of course, meant that I hastily stowed away the luggage, moped, and the dazed János, and then rejoined the elves on the beach. - I owe it entirely to the long-practiced art of stealth among the Bregenz Indians that I was able to pass by the doorman unseen and catlike at night (theoretically, because all the sneaking and sweaty heart-pounding was for nothing: the gate was open, the doorman's lodge empty, and he was blissfully snoring in front of the crackling television...).

‘Above the Sea II

This happened on the very first day of the second half of our trip, and we were still in Ajaccio. At that point, we should already be in the highlands; the originally planned route led via Vizzavona to the old capital, Corte, and then westward past the foot of the 2708m high Monte Cinto to Porto and Piana, back to the sea, to the Calanques of Piana, and back onto the Mille Virages route. During our (definitely) last breakfast in the archbishop’s kitchen, we debated back and forth, finding it hard to accept a change of route, as it would mean admitting partial failure. On the other hand, we had unexpectedly spent four days in Ajaccio without seeing much of the city and should have already left the Calanques behind us by now. However, we would save a bit of money on petrol, which seemed advisable given this thirsty Genoa-built carburetor. So we decided to “only” drive along the coast and forgo the trip to Corte, but not the Calanques near Piana.

Without looking left or right, we hurriedly left Ajaccio heading north, stopping only at the Gulf of Sagone for a long swim. János still seemed quite frail, and besides, a few disagreements needed to be settled amicably. Couldn’t I have thought of bringing sunscreen? Spending a whole day in the water was bound to lead to sunburn, so why hadn’t anyone considered that? Did my jump really have to be so spectacular and showy? And—worst of all—what was going on between those old women and me? There was that young friend in Bregenz, wasn’t there?!

I countered that I didn’t get sunburned because I wasn’t weighed down by excess fat (an unfair reference to my then-athletic 60 and his already considerable 90 kg, approximately). And which of us is bald, who scalps themselves in the sand, who has to compulsively copy everything the little guy does? And you don’t understand about the ladies, my brother, there’s nothing to confess, and that’s that! - Only vague remnants of this conversation remain in my memory; forgetting will have its advantages.

All day we swam in the area north of Cargese, lazed in the sun, and polished off several cans of tuna that had traveled from the Atlantic to Bregenz and from there by moped to Corsica in the Mediterranean, finally reaching their destination here. Gradually, I brought up more serious matters; our calculations regarding petrol prices and finances were completely wrong, and our funds were dwindling alarmingly despite our most frugal spending. It must have looked rather odd, two lads camping out in the middle of nowhere, with nothing better to do than meticulously re-examine the travel accounts. Then János sighed and said, “That’s right, we’re running into trouble.” He’d call a fellow student who lives in Calvi first thing tomorrow morning to see if we could visit him; he might be able to help us out of our predicament.

The next morning we drive high up into the heart of the Calanques, spend the whole day climbing around and gazing down at the blue sea. We don’t dare to recklessly challenge these enormous cliffs and stick carefully to the narrow goat paths. Sometimes we crawl out onto one of the ledges and stick our heads over the abyss. Sometimes János throws a stone down; we count the seconds and try to calculate how far it must have fallen. In this beautiful, peaceful landscape, our disagreements suddenly seem very far away, as do our worries about the travel budget.

We spent the night in Porto Bay, sleeping wonderfully in a dilapidated little stone hut and gazing up at the stars through the missing roof. In the evening, János had called his friend Pierre in Calvi to let them know we were coming; we received a most warm welcome!

The next day we drive north again, chatting with a shepherd during siesta in three languages (French, Italian, and Corsican, which only he speaks) and learning a lot about his life as a shepherd. We share canned tuna, salami, and Corsican cheese so sharp it knocks your socks off. I’m fascinated by the enormous Corsican folding dagger the old man uses to cut white bread and cheese. From that moment on, I know I wouldn’t return home without one.

To be honest, the time and the route between Piana, Ile Rousse and St. Florent have largely been forgotten; although I’m itching to

throw in a proper tall tale here, or at least try to, I'll exceptionally stay on the straight and narrow and only report what is still there in memory - at least a little bit.

The snake

Somewhere along this stretch, as we skillfully navigate the wild curves of the poorly maintained, narrow coastal road, I jerk the handlebars: a long, thin snake crosses our path. I struggle to keep the overloaded moped on the road despite the high speed. János shouts in my ear: “Did you see it?!” and I growl back over my shoulder, asking if he really thinks I was zigzagging for no reason at all, huh?!

Later – I think a few days later – we had our (only) breakdown in Corsica: I felt the rear wheel start to wobble, slowed down, and stopped. The rear tire was flat. No problem, since I had brought plenty of tools as a precaution, so we got to work together, like a well-oiled machine. After unloading the luggage and putting the bike on its center stand, I started to unscrew the axle and immediately stopped: there was something wrapped around the wheel hub and the chain guard. It was probably just an old rag, I thought, and pulled it out.

János picks it up, and then we both get a shock: it’s the remains of the snake that didn’t make it and wrapped itself around the rear wheel and chain guard. I’m quite pale and skip my snack that day.

Calvi

We won't see much of Calvi, because right at the edge of town, János directs me left into the mountains, where, after some searching and wandering, we find the small village where Pierre lives. I only remember that Pierre, whom I assumed was a fellow student, turned out to be one of the university professors from Rome, was already a few years older than us, and was vacationing here at his parents' house. He wanted to go with János in the dusty Renault to the next largest village, or rather, suburb of Calvi, to visit someone; I have the honor of taking his niece (I think) along in the back seat and following the two grown men as best I can.

Before any false impressions arise, I'd better mention right away that I was already familiar with the stories of shotgun-wielding Corsican fathers back then, that my niece Renée didn't speak any of the languages I knew properly, and was also much younger than me, more like 12 than 13. She begged and insisted, chattered and babbled on Pierre until he gave in and, shaking his head, translated his irrevocable decision into a request. Secretly, I was proud to have something special with the moped and agreed immediately.

While Pierre, János, and Renée disappeared into the rectory, I politely declined their offer and said I would wander around and have a look at the place—parish talk wasn't for me today. I wandered around a bit, returned to the main square, and discovered a stone bench encircling the church, where several old men sat, calmly gazing at the heat of the square. (Later, when I was reading the Corsica Asterix volume with my son, I was surprised to see the same old men there again.)

I sat down at a respectful distance, but someone approached me and gestured for me to come closer. In a trilingual mix of the two languages I knew, we chatted about where I was from and where I was going. What kind of moped was that? "No, you don't say, all the way from Austria to here, and so fast—they saw me speeding up!" "Giuseppe, right? He's got one of those too, but it only goes in first

gear. You could overtake it on foot, at least you could, with your young feet!"

And what a pretty young wife I have! "She's very young," one of them grumbles. "No, she's not my wife, I'm still a student." "Oh, it must be difficult, sitting in school as a married man, surrounded by all those children. No, I'm not married, she's not my wife!" "Well, my boy, that's the same for all of us; first we can't do enough crazy things just to get them, and then once we've had them long enough, we can't get rid of them, can we, Giovanni? You don't want your old lady anymore either?" A roar of laughter ensues. I protest, but it's completely useless. My school French and equally good Italian apparently don't penetrate their presumably battery-free hearing aids. If they even know what those are. Batteries, I mean.

In the political part that followed, I kept my mouth shut as best I could. I nodded when they complained that the French had always oppressed the Corsicans. I nodded again when they said that "under the prefect" such things hadn't happened (whoever the prefect might be). That the French had been raging terribly ever since the prefect was gone (aha, dead, presumably). But the youngsters would bomb the French out of Corsica, yes indeed, and that was certainly in the prefect's interest, since he himself had been a savage back then, hadn't he? (I nodded vaguely, doubting the right to be wrong). And then they asked me, indignantly, whether I thought it was right that the French had exiled the prefect and let him die there—on the distant island of St. Helena?!

How many sheep does my father have? Does he make the cheese himself or does he go to the cooperative? Somewhat resignedly, I explain that we don't have a single sheep and that Father doesn't produce cheese, but tinkers with electronics in the basement workshop (as a hobby; or, how else am I supposed to translate "export merchant" for Corsican hearing aids?). The old folks nod thoughtfully and shake their heads. Yes, yes, so-and-so tried it too, but the machine-made cheese is no good; so-and-so would have to take it all the way to Marseille, nobody here would buy it. I nod and grin, saying that Corsican cheese really is something special. They thaw out; one of them fumbles in his pocket and pulls out a cheese wrapped in pa-

per. With red ears and beads of sweat on my forehead, I chew on my sample—this time irrevocably and mercilessly, the famous explosive! Someone hands me a bottle as I gasp for air. The sharp, bitter cider has never been more welcome than now. My father should reconsider the machinery in his cheese shop and maybe go back to making the cheese by hand; that's what we all do here. I nod silently, not daring to breathe. Because of the explosives.

The conversation then continued without my participation; the stranger was informed that the prefect had been the Great Corsican, born in Ajaccio (August 15, 1769), and that he had ruled half the world. But the French! No, they can't even make proper cheese, wouldn't you like another piece? And so on and so forth. I breathed a genuine sigh of relief when Pierre, János, and the niece finally came out again and I could say goodbye to the old folks.

Before we set off, Renée was quite cheeky, chattering and gesturing in sign language that she was expecting at least a rocket ride: vroom, give it some gas! OK, I nodded internationally. - After our arrival, she jumped out of the saddle and ran towards Pierre's car, which was just arriving, gesturing wildly and letting out a torrent of words: how great it had been and how we had ridden like maniacs; her arms and hands eloquently described the ride on the rocket, the scattering goats, and the goatherd who saved himself by bravely leaping into the ditch. I grinned at János, who understood a bit more of her rambling and didn't seem to approve of my ride. Father Pierre gave me a friendly pat and said: "Tu es con, tu sais?" which I would translate, with a touch of self-deprecation, as: "You rode like a maniac, you know?"

Pierre's sister generously packs us bread, cheese, and a hard salami—the provisions will last us for a few days. We continue our journey without asking Pierre for money, visiting Calvi's old town and the famous castle. We drive around the area near the village of Île Rousse for a bit, taking in the sights. I recalculate everything, making sure the return fare (in Italian lire) remains untouched, rummage around for the last few pennies, and together with János, I buy a beautiful Corsican folding knife for myself—the smallest and

cheapest they had, but a Corsican one nonetheless. Probably not the smartest decision, but very emotional. Very István.

Fair in St. Florent

We arrived in St. Florent on our penultimate evening, a small and very Corsican-looking town in the bay of the same name. There was a funfair on the beach. We ate our last of the provisions and wandered around the fair; a miniature Prater amusement park in the heart of Corsica. Our eyes sparkled; we felt like children again. The last attraction on the north beach was a tent with music and an open-air dance floor. Many young people our age were on the dance floor. We sat on the sidelines and watched them; my neighbor and I kept smiling at each other.

János glances at the dance floor, I scoote over a bit and make contact. Corsican? No, from France, Nicole. Ah, my brother and I are from Austria. By moped. The white one, over there. Nicole is impressed. She's friendly, speaks slowly and in simple words. My French doesn't sound so stilted anymore, I dare to speak more fluently. I tell her what, where, how, and why. She's on her graduation trip, from the Lyon area. She's going to study medicine, living in a student apartment with a friend. The whole class passed, and now they're staying for a few more days. Those people on the dance floor, those are her classmates. I'm completely clueless and just say: aha!

"They have lovely music," Nicole says, glancing back at the dance floor. "Yes," I say, nodding several times, "the music is good, but it's from a tape." "You can still dance to it," Nicole says, and I'm still stuck. Slowly, like a bead of sweat, a thought creeps into my mind, and I brush it aside. Then Nicole asks if I don't want to dance. I explain that I've always played in the band and therefore can't dance. She laughs at me, then leads me onto the dance floor. A benevolent god takes pity on me and puts on one slow, languid dance after another. János sits rather forlornly in the sand, gazing up at the stars when he's not watching us dance. Nicole doesn't seem to be having much luck, having to charm a real dancer like me. I give it my all, but all our attempts end the same way: in a tightly entwined, languid dance.

That has its advantages, too. We can whisper in each other's ear, I can hear my heart pounding in my chest, feel Nicole with all my senses, and realize it's been ages since I last drank Signora's beer. I perceive us as a single body, divided in two by bothersome fabric; sweaty bodies, tentatively and curiously exploring each other as they rock and sway. I hear Nicole giggling and whispering, wondering if all those awful Austrians are as daring as I am.

Apparently, one can also dance on a long wire, not just sit; at least, I reply that I consider myself rather shy. Nicole laughs and says she's a puce (a flea, damn it, why a flea?) and looks me in the face. I say a flea, I don't understand that; I know Libra or Gemini and also Scorpio, but a puce (a flea), no, I don't know that, and my dance partner looks at me grumpily, as if I'd said something terrible. Nicole is silent, then she whispers, asking if I don't understand, a puce, a pucelle (a little flea, then, a little flea).

Here and now, I demand a complete rethink of French lessons in our schools; we learn what a metro is, a bourdaloup, or a topgallant staysail, yes, but not what the French understand by "pucelle": Nicole discreetly dances me out of the throng to the less lit edge of the dance floor and hugs me tightly, then whispers in my ear that a "puce" is when you've never had sex with a man. Jeanne d'Arc, the Pucelle d'Orléans, the Maid of Orleans. Do you understand? I nod silently, and we sway, closely entwined, to the beat of "Yesterday, all my troubles seem so far away," my mind racing with thoughts: why is she telling me this, and what does it all mean...?

We dance in silence, I'm heartbroken because I've just fallen in love and tomorrow it will all be over. I tell Nicole that our trip is over and we'll be leaving tomorrow morning, for Bastia, to catch the ferry to Italy. Nicole asks if we're really leaving already, I nod, and then we both cry. John Lennon finishes at some point, Paul McCartney continues: "She was just seventeen, and you know what I mean," and we jump around like crazy, like everyone around us. Nicole stops and says she can't dance anymore. Not now, when everything is so incredibly sad.

Nicole from Lyon and István from Bregenz take a few steps to the sandy beach, to the edge of the sunbeams, sit beneath a billion stars, listen to the gentle lapping of the waves, and whisper softly, whisper, and cry. István from Bregenz kisses Nicole from Lyon, gently pulls her into the sand, and embraces her. János from Rome slowly approaches, coughs softly, and says to István from Bregenz: “Come on, we have to go!” and to Nicole from Lyon: “Il faut nous partir (we have to leave)!”

Blinded by tears, I exceptionally let János drive. We drive a few kilometers towards Punta Mignola, where we had already scouted out a good spot to camp near a castle ruin during the day. We don’t talk much. János starts by saying he’s sorry, but I growl at him to finally leave me alone. We both know he’s right, but my heart is almost bursting with grief and lovesickness.

The Col de Teghime

The next morning, the sun doesn't wake us until it's already quite high in the sky; we've both slept soundly and without dreams. Silently, János prepares some bread, silently I secure the steel spring that keeps slipping off the exhaust pipe and needs to be tightened several times a day. Then we sit facing each other, and I suffer under János's sad gaze. Oh well, I playfully punch him on the arm with a grin: "Must be tough for you, traveling with an asshole like me!" János smiles tentatively at first, then we both laugh. Years later, we still wink at each other whenever someone mentions a sand flea in Corsica.

We ate our last provisions for breakfast and drove past St. Florent to the mountain pass road that climbs over the Col de Teghime to almost 1300m and from there descends back to sea level in the port city of Bastia, where the ferry to Italy awaited us. We've already ruled out the round trip to Cap Corse with its extensive chestnut and walnut forests. No time and no money left.

After the last gas station, at the first hairpin bend with a rest area and panoramic view, I pull over. We check our luggage, travel funds, and gas tank again: everything seems pretty meager. Our provisions are gone, our travel funds are empty except for our "Italian reserve," and the tank, well, the tank! I shake my head and say that we might have enough fuel to get up the hill, but going downhill we'll have to drive electrically (that is, without the engine) to make it to the port. János says we can't linger too long today, because we can't buy provisions again until we get to Italy. That would mean 24 hours "without."

A tourist standing next to us approached us. He was also from Austria, he said, and that old black Mercedes with Vienna license plates was his. He asked where we were from, and so on. Good heavens, by moped, from Bregenz to here! That was a huge distance! He had come by ferry from Marseille; the crossing was incredibly expensive, but he had saved up for a long time for this trip and could finally afford it; but by moped, no way! It quickly became clear that he

was a friendly and easygoing man who meant no harm, quite the opposite: after questioning us at length, he said he had overheard us discussing things, and he wanted to give us (so many) francs to ensure we got home safely. He calculated aloud that this should roughly cover two tankfuls of fuel plus a decent snack.

At first we thought it was a joke when he casually blurted it out, but then he reached into his pocket and counted out some bills. Without hesitation, he pressed the money into my hand; when János asked him how we could pay it back, he said, “Oh, come on, you’ll surely meet someone who needs it someday, just like you do today, so just give them something!” Then he got into his car, said, “God bless you and drive carefully!” and sped off.

We remembered this man for years afterward; that was true neighborly love in action! But for the moment, we drove the short distance back to the gas station, filled up the tank, and bought groceries for two days. Then we drove up the mountain, at that time (after the Koppen Pass near Hallstatt) the second steepest mountain pass in Europe. At the top, on the pass where an old cannon commemorates one of the decisive battles for the liberation of Corsica, we rested and looked once more at Corsica, which can be seen almost in its entirety from up there.

János rummaged through his papers again, found the passage about the Col de Teghime, and read aloud who had fought whom there. It was a wonderful end to our trip; we had successfully completed something important to us, and the sun was shining, especially brightly today for a man in a Mercedes heading south towards Porto Vecchio. Yes, my friend, I’ve recognized you many times since then, paid off my debts, and am still working on it! I looked down at St. Florent, down there where the old church stands in the water, almost forgetting Nicole, my little flea from Lyon. János continued reading, bringing a part of Corsica’s history to life.

From Bastia, the ferry took us to La Spezia, and from there – due to a ferry delay – we made a real mad dash to Florence, where I literally got János to the train at the last minute. I remember it like it was yesterday: the last 70 km took me exactly 58 minutes; we were

checking our watches almost every minute, time was so tight before departure.

And just as precisely, I have forgotten, absolutely forgotten, how my journey from Florence to Bregenz went; I still discover fragmentary remnants of memories of an overnight stay in a farm near Merano and the next day the visit to my school friend Walter S., who lived in Nauders on the Reschen-Scheideck Pass.

But the rest is forgotten. Forever.

The boxing graduation

I don't really care that every Tom, Dick, and Harry uses the Western zodiac signs for astrology; how silly that is can be seen from the fact that I, for example, was born under the sign of Libra; an interesting animal, isn't Libra? — So, naturally, one would choose something more suitable, like the Chinese calendar, according to which I was born under the sign of the Rat. That's much more fitting. Or the Tasmanian Devil — definitely my zodiac sign! I would like it best if it were acknowledged that I was born under the sign of Auriga, whose main star is Canopus. And I could tell you quite a few things about Canopus, the brightest mind at the court of Pharaoh Ptolemy III.

Why am I thinking about this now? — Well, I was just wondering why I only got my high school diploma at 20, even though I didn't lose a single year by repeating a grade or anything like that. Since I was born in autumn and was therefore a teamster, I didn't start school until I was 7 and completed a 5-year upper secondary school program—including a polytechnic year—it's easy to calculate why I wasn't ready until I was 20. I spent those 5 years of upper secondary school in Salzburg.

Why Salzburg? — Well, the professor of Ancient Greek at our humanistic high school was a die-hard Nazi who, among other things, made my classmate Tomi, who was also of Hungarian descent, and me—sitting backwards on our wooden chairs—gallop across the wooden floor of our classroom while spouting his favorite saying (it doesn't get much dumber than that): "...there they are, the Avar horsemen from the East..." Well, it was difficult for me to learn Ancient Greek under such conditions. As an honorable representative of the Pure German Race, he offered me the choice of either failing every year—and he'd make sure of that, by Thor!—or leaving the school honorably. I was the wiser of the two and emigrated to Salzburg, where my parents were able to secure me a place at an elite school. — When I heard years later that this teacher had been dishonorably fired from the school because of his honorable but reactionary behavior, I was rather pleased. I was even more pleased when he lost

his positions as a member of parliament because the Right Party fired him due to some embarrassing gaffes on the radio and a completely unhinged campaign speech on local television. He was then committed to a psychiatric hospital, where he lived to a very old age.

The fact that I only took my final exams in the fall requires some explanation. Subjectively speaking, I was always a good student; objectively speaking, other things interested me more and more than studying at that time; strictly objectively speaking, my grades were rather mediocre to just about passable, even if they put me in the top third of my class. No sooner had I painstakingly acquired a basic understanding of the topic of women (which hasn't changed significantly to this day) than I was presented with the consequences in mathematics.

No, I don't think it had anything to do with the fact that the math teacher was the second (and last) Nazi among my teachers; I was simply too ambitious when it came to basic knowledge and too lazy and complacent when it came to studying, and that's just not ideal for math. When I blurted out during a smoke break in the schoolyard and called the math teacher a "fucking Nazi" who "has to be careful not to paint swastikas on the blackboard instead of plus signs," I noticed far too late that my classmates were staring past me in horror; the teacher was standing behind me, his eyes flashing and his chin trembling with rage. Since my grades in the first three quarters of the school year were fairly satisfactory to just about acceptable, and I had already passed the written final exams, I wasn't particularly worried. But I should have been, because in the following last few weeks of school, I racked up failing grades in math. So far, so good.

And, since I've already started, I must also mention that Michael K., a lovable, affectionate, but eventually rather tiresome school friend, took me along to boxing training a few times, hoping we'd achieve something together at the Salzburger Stier* boxing club. However, I didn't have the right attitude towards training, and so Michael had to become a boxing legend on his own. The Salzburger Stier needs a bit more explanation here; perhaps you'll be in Salzburg sometime and wonder what all goes by the name "Salzburger Stier." First, since 1981, the Salzburger Stier has been a cabaret prize, and

knowing this will make you the hero of the evening—hardly anyone knows about this coveted cabaret award. Then, the tour guides at Hohensalzburg Fortress show off an ancient organ* that, in earlier times, sounded a far-reaching alarm signal whenever the marauding Bavarians invaded. More famous, however, is the legend of the Salzburg Bull, a real beast that the besieged Salzburgers painted a different color every night and walked along the fortress walls in the morning so that the besiegers (sorry, but it was the Bavarians again) could see that the Salzburgers still had plenty of steaks in stock and would then actually withdraw. Last but not least, the renowned Salzburg boxing club, which has produced numerous champions, is also named after the Salzburg Bull.

But after this little digression into Salzburg's animal life, back to boxing: Michael soon gave up trying to drag me along; I was simply incapable of consistent training and wasn't really focused anyway; there was still so much basic knowledge to acquire! Moreover, Michael complained whining behind my back about my "lazy left," meaning a feint I had invented myself that repeatedly surprised him with painful punches.

Our headmaster, who held me in high esteem, appointed me as head of the boarding school, hoping to relieve his highly paid teaching staff through the "voluntary" Saturday and Sunday shifts he mandated—he wasn't about to miss the opportunity to exploit a naive young man like me. Unfortunately, his appreciation came to an abrupt end one fine Saturday afternoon when I beat a boy across the long corridor of the boarding school and then through the closed door at the end. I only stopped beating him when the lad was lying on the floor on the remains of the door—in the room of a housemaster who was standing at the sink shaving, wearing only brightly colored boxer shorts. The boy screamed, the housemaster screamed—he had slashed his cheek in shock—and I screamed too, because I was still furious. "Murderer!" screamed the bleeding housemaster, and the whole house came running, "Murderer!"

I was immediately put on house arrest. Before the police were called, my victim's mother rushed over and interviewed her son, inspecting his knocked-out tooth and bruises. Apparently dissatisfied

with his explanations, she demanded to see me. I was stubborn and insisted I had been in the right (as if there were a right to beat someone!). Under her cross-examination, I had to repeat word for word what the fellow had said, which is why I had beaten him up. The mother asked me to repeat it again, more or less making me swear that it had happened exactly like that and not otherwise. Then she called her husband, the ambassador, and consulted with him. The director had meanwhile been alerted and now joined our small group. The teacher breathlessly described everything to him from the perspective of the shattered door, bloody shaving foam, and adhesive bandages—the headmaster must have initially assumed I had attacked the teacher with the razor. He only realized much later that I hadn't beaten the teacher, but the fellow, trying to defend my honor—in any case, the headmaster loudly interrupted any further discussion and decreed that the offender (meaning me) would be expelled from the school immediately!

God must be a woman, for now she intervened in the guise of a mother. She believed me more than her own son, she said coolly and resolutely. She had spoken with me at length, and everything I had said seemed credible and honest. We all knew that violence was fundamentally wrong, and he (meaning me) had surely understood that by now. Her son had made a grave mistake and should actually be apologizing to me, not the other way around! The ambassador and she insisted that the whole matter be dropped and vehemently demanded that I remain at the school. The ambassador (or was he the consul?) would be returning to Austria in a few days and would personally speak with the headmaster once more; he insisted explicitly that I not be punished. Explicitly—I will never forget that.

Although the situation escalated for days, and I, along with my buddy, had to serve several hours of potato peeling and kitchen cleaning to improve communication and instill humility, the ambassador's decision stood. Only Michael K. was very disappointed, because the director had immediately called the boxing club and given them a piece of his mind: surely such a brutal thug as myself didn't align with their understanding of boxing, did it?!

Ah yes, once the whole thing had died down and things had seemingly quieted down after that stupid fight, the headmaster called me into his office a few days later and accused me of cowardly betraying the trust he had placed in me and calling me a real nasty little bully, yes indeed! And he was doubly upset that I had taken boxing lessons, because now he wasn't surprised that I had beaten up the guy who was easily 20 cm taller than me. He solemnly promised me he'd get me yet, just you wait!

The opportunity arose when I called the math teacher, who was a Nazi, a Nazi in the schoolyard. Only now, in the course of his rather sordid, albeit legally compliant, examination orgy, did a classmate discover that the math teacher was supposed to have served under the headmaster during the war, who, of course, had not been a Nazi since 1945, but rather a thoroughly Christian, honorable member of the church community.

It was no use that the entire class, despite my protests, went en masse to the headmaster's office and demanded, in essence, that one should be allowed to call a Nazi a Nazi. Even today, I can still imagine those scoundrels patting each other on the back and laughing until they cried, after we naive fools had been ushered out empty-handed!

While 75% of my classmates were pondering what to do with their lives after graduation, Evelyne and Eva, Christian, Billy, and I were considering what essential things we could learn over the summer to excel in the resit exams in the fall. Christian—who would later become a prominent businessman in the civil service—had his connections and discovered that there was a regulation dating back to the Kaiser's time stipulating that those who volunteered for military service and arrived at the exams in uniform were to be judged leniently by the examination board—which essentially meant that everyone in uniform was expected to pass, period.

Christian, Billy, and I naturally showed up in uniform for the final exams, which started late because the bewildered headmaster first had to consult with the teachers about what this meant and whether

everything was above board. It was all right, all right! — But I don't want to get ahead of myself.

Billy and I decided to work and study together at his father's hotel over the summer. Billy, not yet a Commercial Councilor at the time, decided at the last minute that the little bit of work wasn't enough for two and that he'd rather spend the summer on the Italian Riviera; as the son of a capitalist, he couldn't possibly take that little bit of work away from me, the working-class boy! His father grinned and agreed; I agreed too, though I couldn't quite manage the grinning part.

The small, once elegant hotel on a Carinthian lake was suffering from poor marketing and the less-than-rosy times in the tourism industry. There were days when three or four people could barely manage the workload, but often the hotel stood empty for days on end. Since I earned no money on these empty days, I increasingly focused on finding ways to attract guests. I called everyone I knew, asking if they could send us guests.

So, foolishly, I ended up calling Michael in Salzburg; Michael, the one who had dragged me into boxing and hoped we'd achieve something together at the Salzburg Bull tournament. Well, Michael was working at a travel agency over the summer and got back in touch shortly after: yes, he'd been in talks with the Austrian Amateur Boxing Club, and they were keen to hold a training camp in Carinthia with some of their athletes; after a few phone calls, everything was satisfactorily arranged. They were preparing for the Olympics, and Austria had high hopes, especially in boxing, so it came to pass that Olympians Rainer Salzburger, Franz and Hermann Frauenlob, and the national team coach, Jo Kaspar, ended up at our hotel.

At the same time—if it wasn't a coincidence, it must have been Michael—a group of freestyle wrestlers checked into the hotel, preparing for the Catch-as-Catch-Can tour that was starting in a few weeks (back then, this form of exhibition wrestling wasn't yet called wrestling). Among this handful of incredibly strong wrestlers, I still remember (hopefully correctly) the names of the Austrians Otto Wanz and Ferdl Weiß; the other wrestlers were athletes from Eastern

Europe, like Mr. Dimitroff (or was his name Domitscheff?), the mysterious “Black Mask.”

At check-in, one thing led to another; Michael must have told them some tall tales about me, anyway, Jo Kaspar casually mentioned that I should join them for a run in the morning.

It starts at 5 a.m. Monika, the attractive waitress I’m working with today, gives me a sideways glance. Before I can even utter a peep or consider an honorable exit that wouldn’t damage my standing with Monika, Jo Kaspar goes to his room, and that’s that.

My God! Five o’clock in the morning! No amount of crying or gnashing of teeth will help; my honor is at stake, and—much more importantly, because it’s more tangible—my chances with Monika, so I get up! While I wait in the parking lot in borrowed gym shorts and a vest, I catch a glimpse of her face behind the curtains. Okay, one point for me, even if it is at 5 a.m. The fun that followed is called a cross-country run.

Minutes later, I regret every single Marlboro I’ve ever smoked; a few minutes after that, the beers and then the roast pork become the next things to be regretted. Less than twenty minutes later, I regret my entire cosmic existence. The athletes, in a spirit of camaraderie, help the waiter who’s in trouble. At six o’clock, we’re back at the hotel. I’ve sweated out at least a dozen liters, and now everyone is sitting expectantly in the breakfast room. Not me, though, because I run up to my room, take a shower, and minutes later I’m downstairs in black trousers and a white shirt with a bow tie, ready to serve breakfast. Limping, panting, and with excruciating muscle soreness.

Gentlemen, what a stressful experience! However, on the following days, I only managed half the distance, if that, and then trotted back to the hotel on a shortcut to greet the athletes with a ready-made breakfast. But don’t think that was all. Things got even more intense after all the other hotel guests had left and our hotel transformed into a dedicated sports hotel.

Jo Kaspar smiled kindly when, after breakfast, he suggested I join him at the wrestling tent, where the boxers were also training. I was very curious, especially wanting to see the famous wrestlers, and immediately said yes, gladly. So, I quickly cleared the tables and put away the dishes, then headed to the bus.

The first half hour was just as I'd expected. The wrestlers were practicing catch wrestling, and I watched in amazement as the men trained hold after hold, throw after throw. It was all carefully choreographed. Of course, they had to learn how to fall and throw themselves properly so it looked bad; it probably hurt a bit, too, but the main goal was to avoid seriously injuring themselves or each other. Even so, it had to look martial. I was fascinated when a combination was practiced slowly at first, then faster and faster, until at the end you got the impression that the guys were really going at it. Of course, they weren't. Or maybe a little, if it was Dimitrov.

Then Jo Kaspar strolled over, stood silently beside me, and watched the wrestling. He was already around sixty at the time, about my size, but very athletic and tough, and had an iron grip that brought tears to my eyes every time he shook my hand. Rainer Salzburger, on the other hand, was tall and so slender that hardly anyone would have guessed he was the best boxer in Austria. The two Frauenlob brothers were broad and muscular, both blacksmiths by trade, who ran an artistic forge in Salzburg. Franz's forearm was as wide as my thigh; Hermann was somewhat slimmer than his brother.

So Jo Kaspar leaned against me and said with a serious face (only a faint grin flickered beneath his wrinkles), he needed me, his lads needed a sparring partner. Of course, I didn't notice the glint of a grin (or that it was a bit of a joke) and was perplexed, because I knew exactly what sparring was: one punch to the nose, and I was flat on the mat. And that's exactly what happened, or almost exactly.

Here I must add that I must have misunderstood something during a conversation and from then on believed Jo Kaspar was a former European boxing champion, which filled me with great respect and awe. — Only thirty years later was the error cleared up; but I certainly don't want to suggest that the good man deceived me!

“Michael K. said,” said Jo Kaspar, “that you’re quite quick on your feet and throw a cheeky left. I want to see that for myself!” (Michael probably actually said: lazy left, but that’s not a boxing term; he probably meant to imply that I sometimes fouled him.) Jo handed me a pair of gloves and put some on himself. I was still paralyzed with fear and vaguely registered Hermann putting the gloves on me and then tightening them quite firmly. Before I could even say a word, I was standing in the ring facing Jo Kaspar. I, who had never fought a real boxer before, was now facing a former European champion and was about to get a terrible beating. All because Michael had to ramble on about my legendary speed! Where was it now, huh?! My knees were weak, and my pulse was racing at 180, I swear!

“Come on!” said Jo Kaspar, waving his arms a few times in front of my face. I recoiled in shock, because no one had ever waved their arms around so quickly in training; things were done slowly and deliberately there. Jo grinned (because someone who’s already sent several other champions to the mat is prone to grinning) and landed hit after hit on my face and body. No matter how much I ducked and jumped, he had me right in his sights and hit me every time. Not hard, always just lightly. In the midst of this flurry of blows, I heard his instructions: that I should dive left or right, raise my guard to the right or left, and, damn it, who taught you to hunch over like Quasimodo? I followed as best I could, but he kept hitting, and I knew my performance wasn’t up to par; at best, I could only make a career as a punching bag.

Disappointment. He hit every time. I never did. I stood there like a statue, rooted to the spot. It slowly dawned on me that I had to move, and fast. So I moved as fast as I could, and now only 99 out of 100 punches were landing. Jo took a short breather and commented that he (I) knew a thing or two about footwork, then all I saw was a big, round, brown leather thing hurtling towards me. I almost sat down, because I wasn’t expecting it; we were taking a break, weren’t we? Rainer was standing behind me, cheering me on. Franz and Hermann interrupted their training and came closer. Rainer urged me to duck faster, strike, and then immediately raise my guard again. At one point I jumped back, let my arms hang down, and said through

tears of anger that I simply couldn't beat someone so much older than me!

I shouldn't have said that; I know that now. Back then, I knew it right away, too, because Jo Kaspar immediately punched me right in the nose, sending sparks flying, and said he didn't feel that old at all, that I should go ahead and hit him if I could, and the others laughed uproariously. I got angry, which didn't help much, because it only made my intentions more predictable. Since I'm a southpaw, I always start my attack from the right, and of course, you can see that coming ages in advance, because the right shoulder moves forward long before the fist. You can see an angry shoulder even two ages in advance.

Franz commented on this and said to his brother Hermann that all beginners were like that, and it was pointless. Hermann said that only deception could help him (me), deception in such-and-such a way, and he did it, slashing—wham!—into the air. I somehow caught on and copied him. I turned half-heartedly and struck with the "wrong" fist, hitting Jo hard for the first time, and said, astonished, "Sorry!"

Of course, my hard punch hit Jo as if he'd been brushed by a butterfly's wings; he laughed and told me to try again. Most of the time I didn't manage it anymore; the trick had become transparent and predictable. Once or twice, though, I did pull off the quick double spin and landed, or at least grazed the master's chest or shoulder. Unlike Michael, he didn't complain about my "lazy left," didn't even flinch, and soon let my attack miss. Again, I feinted a double to the right, let my left flash forward, and slashed hard into the air, because he was already way off his game. What I, in my overconfident arrogance, thought was a brilliant feint turned out to be an easily seen-through routine for the pro. The realization that I looked like a lame duck compared to the old man almost brought tears to my eyes. I lashed out like a berserker, hitting the ropes of the ring, the corner post and probably also uninvolved spectators, but I never hit Jo Kaspar again.

Heaven eventually took pity on me and allowed Jo to realize that I was probably never going to be cut out for boxing, at least not yet. He

stepped back and told me to stop this nonsense, and I did, grateful and completely out of breath. Michael was right, Jo said mockingly, I really could pull off a feint. Had I been a little less naive, I probably would have noticed that not all the athletes were happy with their coach's antics. Later, Hermann took me aside a few times and showed me some basics of proper boxing; first of all, how a boxer should stand and not look like a waiter who'd accidentally wandered into the ring. But my promising boxing career came to an abrupt end that week when the athletes left.

We must have gotten along quite well, because when I had to go back to Salzburg in the fall to prepare for my final exams, I was allowed to stay with the Frauenlobs. I survived the exams, as well as the obligatory post-exam drinking session, quite well. A little later, I was glued to the TV to watch Rainer, Franz, and Hermann fight at the Olympics. But by then I was already serving in the Austrian Armed Forces, and I had to learn to fight more and in a different way.

*I have marked some things with * to add some facts that could not be included in the flow of the text:*

The "boxing professor" Mag. Dr. Rainer Salzburger was five times Austrian champion in amateur boxing and an Olympian in Mexico 1968; in his civilian profession he taught physical education (sports) and geography at secondary schools and is president of the Austrian Amateur Boxing Association ÖABV.

The brothers Franz and Hermann Frauenlob from Salzburg were also multiple Austrian champions in amateur boxing and Olympic participants in Mexico 1968.

Josef "Jo" Kaspar from Linz was the national coach of the boxing association for about 20 years.

Besides the aforementioned cabaret prize, the "Salzburg Bull" is also the namesake for a weightlifting competition, a darts festival, and a diving competition; to my knowledge, there has never been a boxing club called 'Salzburg Bull'.

Disharmonies with Michael K. (who is not his real name) prompted me to change both his name and the club's name.

For those interested in history, it should be noted that the "Salzburg Bull" is indeed a unique musical instrument: commissioned in 1502 by the then Archbishop Leonhard von Kettschach (1495-1519), this late Gothic barrel organ with hornwork (200 tin pipes) served as the acoustic timekeeper for the city of Salzburg. For 500 years, it was housed in a small wooden structure next to the material ropeway (the "Reißzug" of 1504). The 1.7-meter-long maple barrels were initially driven manually by a wooden gear system, later by an iron one. Several works by Leopold Mozart, still preserved today, are particularly noteworthy. The Salzburg Bull was decommissioned in 1994 and underwent restoration between 1999 and 2002. — I was unable to ascertain whether it was ever used as an alarm signal.

Breton cliffs

My collection of autobiographical adventures has shrunk considerably; I've already told you most of them. The rest, which has moved me over the past 50 years, isn't suitable for writing down... ;-) But undaunted, I've once again rummaged deep into the old chest, cleared away the tall tales, and also the many amusing anecdotes that an amateur world traveler can tell when he's returned home safely (if he's returned safely, of course).

The story of a boxing career cut short was sidelined, just like the tale of the Holy Grail, of the first ascent of Montsalvatsch in the Pyrenees. I dust off the books of Merlin and Arthur, who have been waiting for publication for ages, and feel a silly wistfulness as I pick up the hand-drawn nautical charts of Oahu and Viti Levu: no, all that will come later, perhaps. King Richard the Lionheart and his wooing of the beautiful Berengara of Navarre: a quick puff of air, a wink in the small fountain of dust—and the dust blows to the ground like his adversary Isaac of Byzantium. Those three, too, will have to wait. I'll write all of that, but not until later—

Hey, what's this?! At first I thought it was an old bicycle inner tube, but when I blew off the dust and looked more closely, I discovered a dirty gray-orange children's kayak. You know, one of those inflatable ones that used to reappear every year, relentlessly, in the camping sections of Gerngross (God rest his soul) and Herzmansky (also) department stores.

What was it like again? A rocky cliff topped by a medieval fortress; a wide, bright sandy beach and a swarm of laughing children; mothers engrossed in the triple novel edition of "Summer Love" from Bastei-Lübbe, and screeching seagulls defecating on Bastei-Lübbe from a safe distance. Amidst all this summer bustle, an agitated father, frantically and sweating, scurrying across the beach....

The family vacation of 1984 was drawing to a close. In the last few days, my almost 12-year-old son, Tibi, had managed to soften his father's heart and now strutted down to the shallow sandy beach to launch the newly acquired rubber kayak, an inflatable orange monstrosity, for the first time. For the sake of good order (and in defense of my father's indulgence), it must also be said that despite being only twelve years old, he pitched in diligently and bravely, which proved to be a real relief, especially when it came to the large eight-person tent with its heavy poles. The kayak was therefore well and truly earned. Although Tibi was very disappointed with the orange color and would have preferred something completely different, something absolutely amazing; But it was the only thing in the tiny sports shop he could "choose" between... His mother Margret and my daughter Julia—not even two years old at the time—were already sitting on the beach with my daughter Anuschka—almost four—and Anuschka's mother Geraldine, enjoying the sun-drenched beach life: building sandcastles, destroying rival sandcastles, and running wailing to their respective mothers ("Mommy, Mommy, she's smashed everything again!"). Tibi's and my architectural consultation, including construction support and temporary staff, came to an abrupt end when Tibi encountered something slimy and slippery from the Earth's past at a depth of about 50 cm....

The first signs of mathematical genius appeared when one of them took a stick and drew a line in the sand: "My half, your half!" - which inevitably had to lead to a set theory drama ("Mommy! She has more sea than me again!").

Sun-drenched beach life, as I said. Tibi and I, meanwhile, were struggling further out, trying to inflate the orange monstrosity. My cheeks puffed out mightily, the vein on my forehead swelled alarmingly, and my silent curse on the stupid smoking habit and its noticeable consequences was loudly expelled into the rubber sausage with my breath. Then a light cough and another attempt at inflating!

The beach at the foot of the town of Douarnenez in Brittany, in the middle of which we camped, was one of the few family-friendly ones: it was a good 200 meters wide, the water was surprisingly warm, and you could walk out quite far before it got really deep. To the south, a

mighty cliff face supported the town of Douarnenez, once a medieval fortress. The only downside was the cliffs that bordered the beach to the north; according to the nautical guide and the guide to France, there were relatively dangerous whirlpools there that could be hazardous to an unwary swimmer. Naturally, I explained the lurking danger to my children in detail, and that if you went out too far, you could be swept all the way to Brazil.

"Dad, what is Brazil?" - Well, I'm certainly no epically long-winded storyteller, not at all, but to let a child grow up so stupid and uneducated, no, I simply couldn't let that stand. "Brazil, dear child, is a far, very far away country..." - Margret and Geraldine took the children into the tent at midday to prepare their snack, even though I'd only been to Francisco Pizarro's house and of course Brazil was nowhere near, not to mention Pelé and Sugarloaf Mountain.

But please, I don't want to be responsible if one of my children forgets to eat because they're listening so intently and starves! So, give the Infante what is the Infante's, and then come back here so I can continue with Brazil - hey, where are you running to?!

"Papa," says the bright 12-year-old, and it seems to me that there is a little defiance in his tone, "I want to go paddling now!" But yes, I think, he hasn't even tried out the new boat yet!

"Okay, go ahead then, and be careful, there are dangerous whirlpools back there by the cliffs..." but the son has already disappeared in a cloud of dust, pulling the orange monstrosity behind him.

I look around to see if there are any other listeners – no, the mothers are reading and the young sparrows are doggedly starting new sandcastles, while Tibi, like his father before him, bravely and doggedly fights his way north against wind and waves – well, then I'll lie down for a few moments and think about how I can still get that stupid Pizarro, who was hopelessly lost in the Chilean Andes, to Brazil...

Margret nudges me lightly on the elbow. The sweet Indian girls with whom I had been playfully braiding daisy chains vanish in a

flash, and I sleepily wink up at my wife. “Haven’t seen the Tibi in quite a while!” she says seriously, and I’m instantly wide awake.

“He was just down there on the beach,” I say, looking astonished. Where just moments ago there was a deserted beach, now hundreds are milling about! I jump up as if stung by a tarantula and start running. Naturally, towards the cliffs, to the north.

Do you know that feeling? Running through the hard sand, skidding over deck chairs and beach towels, chasing after every orange thing, no matter how inconspicuous? Soon enough, the orange objects turn out to be towels, swim rings, and swimsuits. But not a single orange inflatable boat in sight!

“Did you perhaps see an orange rubber boat? Avez-vous vu un bateau en gomme, un Kajak orange?”

I slow down and now walk step by step towards the cliffs - nothing! Carefully and as fast as I can go barefoot, I climb over the small rocks, round the cape after a few minutes and jerk back, stammering an apology, when a couple in love hisses venomously at me.

Not a single Tibi, not a single Orange anywhere to be seen!

Go ahead and laugh – but I’m staring like a hawk at the horizon, scanning the vast blue sea for something orange and rubber-boat-like. Nothing! My eyes are already watering from staring so hard, but I don’t care, I have to save the poor worm!

Where could he possibly be? After some deliberation, I decide to go back to the beach and the women. I run along the water again, inquisitively observing each group of children jumping in the waves, and keep running. I ignore the anxious mothers clutching their little ones because a man is running along like a steam engine, nor the braver ones asking the sweating runner in all sorts of languages what’s going on. It’s unbelievable! Where on earth is the boy?

Now I’m back with Margret, Geraldine, and the girls. “Have you seen him?” We look around helplessly, our gaze growing increasingly

desperate as we stare toward the cliffs. Our helplessness soon turns to certainty: my little son is adrift in the Atlantic, heading for Brazil!

Or maybe not? We ponder this, then my wife – the wisest wife of all, as a certain EK would write – says whether we shouldn't perhaps look in the other direction? – A weight lifts from my shoulders, but yes, of course! He certainly won't have swum to the right as usual, but will have exceptionally paddled to the left, towards the inner bay.

Relieved, I set off at a trot, the orange search filter fully activated. The closer I get to the inner bay, the fewer people there are. No one is swimming there; it's a collection point for dirt and driftwood washed ashore by the sea. I run until, blinded by tears, I stand before the high cliff face above which the town of Douarnenez towers.

No Tibi, no rubber boat, nothing at all.

It's not just the unfamiliar walking that makes my knees weak. No, I've now searched the entire beach, my little one is gone, gone, forever! Slowly, my big, soft heart turns into a small, hard lump of ice. I wander back, thinking of a thousand possibilities, from human traffickers and UFOs to slave hunters.

From afar I can already see Margret and Geraldine running excitedly in my direction, and there, yes, next to them, a tired and very battered little warrior carrying a stubborn, orange rubber boat on his shoulders, which makes me think more of a turtle…

Tibi.

We have him back.

Nimble as a deer, I ran to my family, hugged everyone, and was overjoyed that we were reunited. We tried not to alarm the poor lad and then learned that he had indeed been blown towards the cliffs by the wind and surf, always in knee-deep water and never in any danger, until he decided to return home on foot, defeated, since he could no longer row against the forces of nature. I must have overlooked him—staring into the distance—and walked right past him. He didn't want to drag his new prized possession through the sand (I wonder

what his father would have said!), so he turned the monstrosity upside down, hoisted it onto his head and shoulders, and then walked back along the coastal road to his mothers.

My adrenaline levels returned to normal, the afternoon grew hot, and I recovered with a pleasant nap. Phew, that was the last day of vacation—quite exciting, but tomorrow we head back home. And tonight we're going out for one last big meal, a "big wild boar feast à la Asterix." Then this adventure will be over, too. I drifted off peacefully. We had our son back, so nothing could go wrong now.

Absolutely nothing.

When we went to the tent and changed into our evening clothes, we were surprised to find a fair set up along the approximately 1km long coastal road leading to the village, with one stall after another. Cotton candy, sweets, teddy bears, and artfully decorated seashells. In front of the large, expensive restaurant, there was a carousel.

Up to this point, we'd managed to maintain general discipline; after all, we'd deliberately rationed our French cash so that there would be enough for the last evening. But we still didn't have enough cash for the fair. Discipline or not, even the most hardened shopkeeper couldn't resist that wonderful carousel. The children were allowed to ride. Once. Twice, three times. But that's enough now, children, we're going to eat. Four times. Okay. But that's enough for now; maybe again later.

As planned, we dined exceptionally well, ordering the best dishes on the menu and eating with cloth napkins and seven sets of cutlery. A real treat after several weeks in a tent.

Then Anuschka said – we hadn't even really gotten to the main course – that she was already full and now wanted to go on the carousel.

Now.

They patiently explained to her that another course was coming, followed by dessert, and perhaps a coffee after the cheese, and only

then would the meal be finished. After the meal, there would be another carousel ride.

No! Little Anuschka wanted to ride the carousel, right now. In a matter of seconds, our sweet little daughter transformed into a roaring beast, to which I was certainly not related, and bellowed in a torrent of angry tears: “Carousel, carousel!” Not only did the waiters look offended, but even the portly head chef peered through the door and shook his head. Our attempts at mediation failed; the roaring became embarrassing, and the few other guests glared at us disapprovingly. Geraldine—usually a patient and composed mother—increasingly lost control of this roaring beast (which could not possibly be my daughter) and, in turn, screamed that if she didn’t stop immediately, she would take her straight to the tent, and there would be no carousel ride. And so on.

We tried to look down our noses at the other, impatient guests. No, we weren’t bad parents, we were alternative; we worked out these little differences with the children, they shouldn’t be thwarted by maternal (less often paternal) dominance. And we don’t do spanking, not even healthy spanking. But actually, child, that’s enough now! You can stop, we know how strong you are. Stop, I said! “Carousel, carousel!” screamed the red-faced alien, stamping its little feet with every “ca” and “ru” and “sel,” spitting tears and screaming in an increasingly shaky voice, “Car-ru-ssell, car-ru-ssell!” and howling and sniffling and stamping its little shoes.

Geraldine, who had bravely persevered until this point, had finally had enough. She grabbed Anuschka and whispered to us that she would take her a few more steps to the beach and let her cry herself to sleep there, then they would come back. And then she disappeared. We, the waiters, and even the chef breathed a sigh of relief as a refined calm returned to the five-star restaurant.

Julia and Tibi had been good about keeping to themselves. Julia, because she had been secretly gobbling up Margret’s dessert (I think it was iced chocolate-covered chestnut slices) during this whole thing, and Tibi, who at 12 had no patience for screaming little dar-

lings. But now Margret's dessert plate was empty, and the children were getting bored.

Julia fidgeted in her chair and refused to sit still any longer. "A French restaurant like this isn't really suitable for little girls," she told herself, and became quite a nuisance. Then she became even more so. I felt sorry for Margret, because she was worried about Geraldine and Anuschka, who had been gone for a very long time; I felt sorry for myself because I knew—one way or another—that the final cognac and the fine cigar would be gone.

You wouldn't believe how creative and clever some children are at just 12! Of course, Tibi couldn't care less about my cognac, and certainly not about the stinking cigar, nor about Mother's concern for the screaming Anuschka. He was very embarrassed by our little play; he would have much preferred to be far away—in the safety of the tent, for example—and because his little sister was already fidgeting in her chair, he offered to go with Julia "to Geraldine and Anuschka's." Margret and I, who were (presumably) deeply embroiled in a parenting debate about fancy restaurants, carousels, and toddlers, nodded absently, and dear Tibi took his little sister by the hand and left.

Minutes later, Geraldine returned from the beach with Anuschka. Anuschka had run around and played to her heart's content. We looked curiously towards the door, wondering where Tibi and little Julia were.

Wars have probably been lost, or princesses not rescued from the evil dragon, because "listening carefully" is quite a difficult thing... Geraldine hadn't seen them, no, they weren't in front of the restaurant either. Margret and I exchanged pale glances. We paid as quickly as we could, then raced off, combing the area. No Tibi, no Julia. It quickly became dark.

What had he said? "I'm going to Geraldine and Anuschka's!"

So, Geraldine had gone to the beach with Anuschka, to the deserted beach, so that Anuschka could scream her head off without

bothering anyone else. But where, “to the beach?” No, not again: the cliffs!

We searched everywhere; by now it was pitch black. The tide was rising relentlessly, and the small footpath along the cliffs was already completely submerged. I took off my shoes and balanced across the slippery stones, searching every nook and cranny. Margret, Geraldine, and Anuschka, who had become very quiet, searched behind the shooting galleries and in the small dunes, but there was no sign of our children. They had vanished, swallowed up by the night.

I resolutely approached the only policeman I could see. I put on my best French and tried to explain to the fat, phlegmatic man in blue that my children had disappeared—a 12-year-old boy and a girl just under two years old; they had gone to the beach, but there was no sign of them. After several attempts, he understood and leaned into his Peugeot to radio it. Ah, the tourists! Another couple of children have gone over the cliffs, fallen into a crevice at night, and drowned miserably!

At that moment I glance over the crowd – I don’t really like such sudden deaths, and I prefer to look into the distance so that no one can see my twitching eyelid – so at that historic moment I see Tibi. Tibi, carrying Julia on his shoulders and looking very exhausted.

I see Margret run off, right into the middle of the crowd. I talk frantically to the policeman, telling him the little ones are back, that he should just forget about it, and then he’s amazed, because I also run off like Nurmi.

After the reunification, the children are allowed to ride the carousel again (of course under the strictest supervision), get an ice cream and walk back with us through the noisy shopping street (also under the strictest supervision).

Gradually, everything became clear. Tibi had only heard that Geraldine had threatened the raging Anuschka, telling her to go to the tent; but he hadn’t heard Geraldine whisper anything about the beach. So he and Julia had gone to the tent, but there was no sign of

Geraldine or Anuschka anywhere. Getting into the well-locked tent was, of course, little more than a chore, and before Julia could really start to get scared in the dark, the resourceful Tibi had lit a mosquito lamp. Still no Geraldine, no Anuschka. So he sat down with the little girl in front of the mosquito lamp, read her a story, and waited anxiously for Geraldine and Anuschka to appear. After a while—a small bar of chocolate had also been sacrificed in the meantime—he went back to the coastal road with Julia to see if anyone was coming. But no one came, except for a friendly neighbor from the next tent, who cycled towards him just before they reached the village and said that his parents were desperately searching for him! Without hesitation, he grabbed the now sleepy Julia and hurried on to the village where he found us.

Wars have probably already been lost, or princesses have been killed by the evil prince - - - uhhh, we've already been through that... Well, what I actually wanted to say was: I was goddamn glad to have my children back.

Adventures in the Red Sea

Cairo, November 1991. Per, Helga, and I—the advance party, so to speak, tasked with procuring the ship's papers, transit rights, diving permits, and so on; we would meet the ship and the rest of the crew in Port Said—had spent a few days in Cairo and were now dog-tired from this overwhelming abundance of cultural treasures. We would soon realize that we were (of course) considered spies, given that the Gulf War was raging right next door! Anyone who wasn't a journalist or television personality was inevitably a spy. Naturally.

The receptionist at the Cairo Sheraton gave us a friendly wink when we asked about the best routes through the city and to the pyramids. We immediately and flatly rejected his first offer of a run-of-the-mill tourist sightseeing tour; but I suppose that's what all spies do, they rent a car, of course. So he recommended his cousin, a very reliable driver who often drove for government officials – you know, wink, wink.

He responded to our sincere and honest assurances that we were just simple sailors with a connoisseur's look: good disguise, hey!

We had diligently visited all the sights listed in the relevant cultural guides, and despite dozens of taxi rides, we had walked mile after mile to see absolutely everything. Here are a few fragmented snippets from my memory; the rest is in the guidebook: Day trip to the Fayum Oasis: when the driver wanted to know which road he should take—there were three, apparently—I pointed with my fingers, suggesting that with three roads, one would surely take the middle one, wouldn't one? (Surely one is allowed to try?!). He grinned broadly and said, "You already knew that, it's a restricted zone, a military zone, yes!" For anyone wanting to follow in his footsteps: under no circumstances should you take the middle road! There's a military checkpoint halfway between Cairo and Fayum, right in the middle of the desert. We were lucky, because Per had one of those blue civil service passports, which looks quite baroque and impressed the militia who had rudely blocked our way and initially

wanted to send us back the 80 miles. With this wonder passport, however, they frowned and let us continue – you never know what's written in those ornate French and German hieroglyphs – and our driver grinned, because "he'd known that beforehand." Wink.

The return journey took a very wide detour through the western provinces. At one point, the driver pointed to the left: "There, that's Libya, the great Libyan Desert. The White Desert. Stop, hold on, we have to see this!" So, out of the Peugeot (almost all Cairo taxis are Peugeots) and up onto the crest of the dunes. I think I'm going to suffocate. The steam is rising from behind the crest at 50 degrees Celsius or more; I can't breathe, it's like an oven! Three steps back, take a breath, three steps forward and look over, don't breathe. Three steps back, exhale. Breathtaking, the White Desert. "Over there," I said to Helga, "about 120 km to the west lies the place Sakra-Blabla, where Alexander the Great died and is presumably buried." "You probably mean the Siwa Oasis," whispered the culturally challenged Helga dully, turning away from me, the philistine, in horror.

The journey on the Nile was unusual for us "real sailors".

We had only wanted to quench our thirst and saw one of the decommissioned steamers moored on the banks of the Nile; I joked that it reminded me of the "Johann Strauss," which has been "nailed down" in the Danube Canal for years. So we went into the ship's bar and had a cold drink, when suddenly the wreck cast off with a loud toot! Our shock only subsided when the barman announced that the bar and the ship belonged, with a wink, to a few cameramen, television journalists, and us for the next three hours. Per dozed under the parasol while we passed the only papyrus plantation in the world and watched the film crew at work. I told Helga that the plantation was (co-)founded by the old Prince Pückler, the one after whom the ice cream dessert is named, old Pückler with his Egyptian princess, the beautiful Machbuba. Helga wanted to know everything, and only my Catholic upbringing prevented the worst, so I didn't tell her everything.

The bazaar

Behind the magnificent Sultan Hassan Mosque lies Napoleon's residence, situated in the heart of the souk. The souk is the bazaar district. Foreigners should not enter it without a local guide, and certainly not alone.

They shouldn't have. But, wink, you know. Per, Helga, and I exchanged a quick, unsure look—none of us wanted to admit we were actually scared—and then off we went. The locals initially gave us a wide berth; you never know what kind of people are venturing into our increasingly narrow, dark, and menacing souk without a local guide, do you? Later, a couple of shadows followed us. Per and Helga huddled together, I brought up the rear, clutching my camera, which would be a pathetic substitute for a phaser or at least a laser pistol, but of course, nobody carries such things.

A figure, fat with oily hair, emerges purposefully from the shadows; we're surely headed to the souk, he'll accompany us. We decline and thank the man, who looks about sixteen, but he simply says yes! and goes ahead. Soon we're winding our way through the narrow alleys: Per, Helga, and I, the oily-haired man, his little brother, and his uncle, with his twin nephews and the neighbor boy behind us. I keep turning around, counting the heads. Per, the two-meter-tall man, also turns surreptitiously and looks at me. I nod and gesture with my index finger, indicating a stomachache. Per grows taller and strides, every inch the civil servant he is, stiff and dignified as if marching through the souk on May Day. Ah, the Ring Road and May Day, how far away that seems; I feel truly homesick in these dark, narrow alleys, where eerie shadows follow us.

Whenever we want to turn left or right, the oily guy shakes his head and keeps walking, unperturbed. I move closer and whisper to Per, "Something's brewing, man!" He makes the "beer" sign with his fingers, and when I move closer, bewildered, he whispers, "Something's brewing!" Helga grins and whispers that we're just imagining things, that they're all really nice, and besides, we're democrats, so—you don't have anything against foreigners, do you?!—Well, then.

Per refuses, but the oily-skinned man suddenly stops and points to the entrance of an unassuming house. “Come on, I’ll buy you a drink, come in!” I mutter quietly that we have to accept this invitation; just look around, there are too many of us, and we can’t just leave! The two of them are still undecided, so I gather all my courage and go inside.

“No, not into the house, Effendi, please turn left here, into the shop.” We’re standing in a tiny store selling top-notch tourist junk. Carpets, pyramids, camels, and Queen Hatshepsut, in real marble, honestly. We’re a bit hesitant, so the oily guy goes to the refrigerated display case and offers each of us a Coke, “only $2, free!” We nod and drink the cold beverage. $2? Okay.

How about a rug? A pyramid? Or a little camel, absolutely adorable? A camel, made of camel? No? How about a…

Helga stabbed Per and me in the back. She walked around, picking up this and that. She asked prices, put the items back, and protested that she didn’t want to buy the whole shop. “Bargain, Helga, bargain!” I whispered urgently, because I had realized with a touch of rue that she had realistically taken the right approach. When we arrived back at the hotel an hour later, we were richer by three small wooden boxes, handcrafted with inlaid marquetry. And by one lesson, too: when a guidebook describes something emphatically, just believe it and don’t try to be a know-it-all. “Bazaar only in guided groups.” That’s experience.

The last day was also packed with activities; my nightmare came during the drive through the city: a massive traffic jam in a city of ten million. The taxi driver, however, knew his way around, weaving through backyards, across sidewalks, and through construction sites, I’d say. We wanted to go up to the citadel, and he waved his arms, apparently explaining that because of the many one-way streets, we had to drive in circles like this and that, and do a lot of circling – I shook my head and pointed to the castle hill, right up there, where the mosque and the citadel stand, that’s where we wanted to go! He nodded grimly, then unexpectedly – having just reached the roundabout – he jerked the steering wheel to the LEFT and cut our route

by kilometers by driving AGAINST the flow of traffic in the roundabout! My eyes nearly popped out of my head as cars came towards us, honking furiously in at least four lanes, and he skillfully slalomed between them. When he then starts arguing with the tropical-helmeted general, who, with a shrill whistle, seems to think he has to direct the already perfectly functioning traffic, and we come to a stop for the first time, my usually robust nerves fail me, and I slam my hand on the dashboard, shouting angrily in German: “Well, now we’re going to get a ticket too!”, whereupon the two quarreling men fall abruptly silent. The taxi driver drives off without a word, the astonished general salutes, and then we tear up the castle hill so fast that even Niki Lauda would have been left in the dust!

Stamp and signature

The moment was drawing ever closer when we would have to take care of the ship's papers. I'll spare you the long backstory, but suffice it to say that we had been instructed by the agent in Port Said (to whom our friend Harald Klärner* had referred us) to obtain this and that document ourselves in Cairo (which, in plain English, means that he, Prince Achmed, who usually handles all the paperwork, was certain that we would fail and realize that one can't simply sail around during wartime! And he told us so straight away, as sure as his name was Achmed Ben Dings and Bums, for crying out loud!).

*- *)Harald Klärner, Carinthian circumnavigator: "Hot Winter in the Red Sea", Carinthian University Printing Office 1990.*

Per and I threw on our best clothes, ties and all, Helga put on her long black dress with puffed sleeves plus plenty of glittery things, including crown jewels; clothes make the man! It would be a joke if we didn't get the papers, Achmed Ben Dings and Bums! We made our first mistake – simply idiotic, I must say in retrospect – as soon as we left the hotel: instead of ordering a long, black Mercedes to pull up in front of the hotel like Pierce Brosnan, we (simply) walked across the street, because that's where the maritime office was, along with the maritime police and the maritime police porter.

We hadn't even reached the middle of the street when the maritime police porter had already picked up the phone and reported our approach; perhaps the hotel reception had called ahead, who knows. In any case, the maritime police colonel asked the porter again if we were really coming on foot (please repeat: on foot?). Then he leaned back and said to his adjutant that they certainly couldn't be hardened spies if they were coming on foot. On foot!

So we waited an hour (or was it two?) in the anteroom. The flies buzzed, Helga shifted around as if something was bothering her, and the guards looked past us with bored expressions.

Then the door opened, and the officer acted as if he were sorry for making us wait so long. I felt sorry too, because I could see him the whole time; he just read in his thick book and sighed occasionally, for an hour or two. He read contentedly to himself and kept us waiting, and he supposedly regretted it too. Oh well, never mind, now we're finally on our way.

We sat down in front of his enormous desk. He politely introduced himself and asked if we would like a cup of tea, which we gladly accepted. He sent his aide and immersed himself once more in his thick book—the Quran, I realized, because he was praying in a low voice, his lips moving. Per began to explain our request in clear English. The superior looked at him frowning and asked if the master couldn't see that he was praying and that the tea hadn't even arrived yet! Then, without looking at us, he turned back to the Quran and silently continued reciting its surahs.

Several of these surahs passed before the adjutant trotted back, balancing several small cups of tea on his serving tray. We nodded silently and were about to drink, but saw the superior's disapproving look and stopped. He spoke a few words in Arabic [Per whispers: "What did he say?" and I: "Must have misheard, because he said, 'It's already a quarter to seven, I hope it doesn't take too long, he wants to be home for the evening news'" and Per kicks me disapprovingly in the shin], then he drank first and smiled at us invitingly. Ah. Now we could have some too. "In Vienna they'd send you out twice for stamp duty," I whisper to Per and Helga, and we grin despite the awkward situation. The superior looks questioningly. I say in English that I had said we couldn't get peppermint tea as good in Austria as we had here in Egypt.

"Ah, Austria," sighed the superior, his gaze dreamy. "There's Hans Krankl and Rapid, do I know them?" "Yes," I lied, "and I know Schneckerl too—Herbert Prohaska." "Who's that?" asked the superior. "He's the greatest for me," I said, "because Krankl is world-class and loved by the media, but Prohaska is also world-class, but he's not loved as much by television, so at least I'm rooting for him."

The officer nods and jots down “Schnkkl Prchtzk” on his desk pad. Per and Helga bite their lips in despair, knowing how much I care about football. Per says, his face expressionless, that the best strikers at Rapid right now are Josef Hader and Alfred Dorfer. The colonel and I nod in agreement, “Yes, yes.” Helga can’t contain herself any longer and gets up, goes to the open window, and bursts out, her face averted. The officer suddenly becomes furious and shouts at Per and me, telling the woman to get away from the window immediately, because it’s unacceptable for a woman to be standing in his office—dressed so indecently—at the brightly lit window, publicly disgracing him…

Helga immediately sat down again, clenched her hand around the teacup, and hunched over so that her breasts were no longer visible. I thought something very unkind about the culture of our host country and that Helga would only end up with a hunchback and back pain if she had to hide her breasts.

Per starts talking about the ship’s papers again, lays out all the documents, and on top of that, his blue service passport. The officer takes it in his hand, puzzled, and asks what it is. “A service passport,” Per says patiently, “it’s issued to senior officials by the Presidential Chancellery”—he can’t quite grasp “government office” or “presidential chancellery” and gets stuck on “president”—which the officer, of course, misunderstands. He gets really grumpy and asks if Per is the president, ha!? We’re confused because it’s just too ridiculous. The officer, for his part, is equally confused because it’s all in French, in ornate script, and actually signed by the UHBP (our Federal President). Le président de la République, personally. Maybe the passport is real after all, he thinks, and maybe there are more of us than the maritime police porter had said, the idiot.

He defuses the situation and tells us how he has to do his boring job day in and day out, filling out forms and so on, even though he’s actually trained for higher duties and studied the Quran at university—he adjusts the large, green-bound book and points randomly to this and that passage—but then he takes a pile of forms out of a drawer and begins transferring the data from our Austrian documents to

Egyptian forms. A great many forms. Meticulously, with a beautiful, deliberate approach.

"Like at the passport office in Silk Street," Per whispers, and I nod, because if he keeps going like this, circle after circle, it'll be midnight, gentlemen! The officer seems to have understood us, because he suddenly looks up and says, "That's impossible, it's the Gulf War, you can't go there!" He can't give us permission, not for us, not for the ship, no diving permit. "Why don't you go diving in Cyprus?"

A long, awkward silence. We confer, and I mention—whispering in German—Ahmed, the prince, who is supposedly, or perhaps is, the most famous shipping agent on the Suez Canal, and that I will go to Achmed's immediately by taxi and, if necessary, coax him over by ear. The Egyptian then interjects, asking if he had heard the name Achmed Ben Dingsda correctly. He asks for forgiveness for overhearing our conversation, but he knows Achmed very well, a distant relative, so to speak... the rest remains as unanswered as his raised eyebrows. I launch into a heated genealogical debate with myself, pointing out that he, too, is a prince...

Well, if that's the case, why didn't Prince Achmed come along? He picks up the phone and, to our astonishment, spends the next thirty minutes on the line with Achmed – I only catch Rapid, Hans Krankl, and (glancing at the desk pad) a certain Schanegglah Prohassgar. Interspersed are long stretches of smiling silence with "Lä" and "Lä-Lä," which can easily be translated as "Yes" and "Yes, Yes." (Years later, one could read in Achmed's brochures that Rapid, Hans Krankl, and Herbert Prohaska were also among his satisfied shipping customers.)

I don't know how well you speak Arabic. I, for one, tuned out after "Good Morning!" and "Good Evening!" (and even that's already English), so I have no idea what was being discussed—whether camels or cars were being auctioned, the Gulf War was being debated, or Fatima's ample calves were making the phone line burn up. Per, Helga, and I hung on his every word, listening intently to the unfamiliar sound. Then he hung up and smiled at us.

“Everything’s fine!” he said, adding with a friendly, reproachful look, “We could have told him about Achmed right away, and who we were.” The three of us remained stubbornly silent and avoided even a wink. (I’d like to preemptively apologize to the Austrian Football Association (ÖFB) should the three of us possibly—I say possibly—appear in Egyptian maritime history as Mrs. Rapid, Mr. Hans Krankl, and Mr. Herbert Prohaska…)

He finished his hieroglyphs in an astonishingly short time, then looked out at the now-dark city and shook his head worriedly. All the offices have already closed; there’s no chance of finishing today, he mused. Per stiffened his back and straightened to his full height. I know him well enough to know what would happen next.

“We need the papers now, tonight,” Per said loudly and firmly. “Tomorrow—no, tonight at three or four—we’re going to the ship and we have to have the papers, no matter what.” The officer was genuinely depressed, his eyebrows raised in concern. “We’re in Egypt, Effendi,” he said, “the offices close at 9 p.m., remember that, sir!”

But we had the upper hand. Achmed, a real prince after all, the UHBP, and the blue service passport. Everything was brought up again; like a coiled worm, the conversation spiraled and wound its way into the balmy night sky.

The officer was on the phone here and there, now truly desperate, because all the offices were indeed closed, and Per added fuel to the fire, saying that he, the officer, had made us wait and wait unnecessarily, we could have been in a taxi to Port Said long ago, and now he didn’t care how they managed it, but the paperwork had to be finished today. Period.

Helga and I studied the commentary on the back of the forms, and we whispered to each other that everything except for two places was already described in a scribbled, roundabout way. The officer watched our whispering suspiciously and then explained, yes, exactly, the so-and-so office still had to stamp it there, and over there too. Per, who had fought his way up through the Viennese bureaucratic jungle his whole life, was clearly riding the right wave and kept

up the pressure (even though I would have given up long ago and gone to the hotel bar).

Then, finally, someone answered the phone.

The officer shrank a foot and groveled before the great chief, the Müdür or Grand Mufti, whom he had just caught. Yes, he was terribly embarrassed, three foreigners… no, important ones, they needed… yes, Prince Achmed… no, Your Excellency, today, I spell it out: tonight, because they were leaving immediately by taxi for Port Said… yes, unfortunately, I know, but it had to be today…

Okay, the content of this dialogue is pure speculation, but he hung up, drenched in sweat, and took a few sips of tea before looking at us in utter astonishment and saying that we must be special favorites of Allah—praised be His name—because the bigwig So-and-so was coming back to the office to sign our papers. We had to go there immediately, right now, by taxi to get the papers stamped.

We paid for the forms (without a receipt, of course, and generously) and took a taxi there. I'm not exaggerating when I use the term Alcatraz; we went to Alcatraz—or rather, the Egyptian version of it. As we were led by the guards into the waiting room, whose furnishings—a narrow wooden bench and a flickering fluorescent tube—have been adequately and meticulously described, I nudged Per in the side and muttered that it had looked exactly the same in the East Berlin docks, hadn't it?

As soon as the gate guard had ushered us in and left us alone, a nicotine-addicted, skinny question mark appeared, took the forms, said in French that it would only take a few minutes, and disappeared again immediately. The minutes really did turn into a few, and then a few more, damned! I lost the bet, because the question mark reappeared before the hour was up and, nervously puffing away, handed us the stamped forms. Per immediately checked to see if there was anything written on them; there were just a few dashes and a bombastic stamp impression, nothing more. The question mark lit the next cigarette from the last one and led us out through the maze of corridors—yes, there are some taxis over there, and good

night, gentlemen! He hadn't even noticed Helga, the well-mannered man. Instead, he silently pocketed the dollar bills, that's how well-mannered he was.

As we sat in the hotel bar that night, we treated ourselves to a rather large glass of cognac. We had done it after all. After the third cognac, I sided with Helga, who suspected that the question mark had been scribbled underneath herself, since there was no sign of the Grand Mufti anywhere.

The next morning we overslept and missed the bus. The next one wasn't until noon. So we found time for one last mosque and one last museum visit. Then a two-hour bus ride north to Port Said. Halfway there, we passed the newly built city of "23 October" (or is it 27 September?!?), in any case, an attempt to settle people in the desert. The bus driver gestured, "Here's your pee break." Per and I looked around questioningly, the bus driver laughed and pointed to the large construction sign showing the bus station yet to be built. "There!" he pointed, and we joined the other men, all standing obediently lined up at the roadside, relieving themselves. Helga glared hatefully from behind the window curtains; she still had to hold it in for another hour until we reached Port Said.

Later, Per and I drink loudly from our plastic bottles and laugh cruelly as Helga, almost blind with tears, beats us down.

Port Said

Achmed gets nervous when he asks about the ship, and I wordlessly point out to sea, where a small white dot is visible on the horizon. “You have to leave in twenty minutes, then they’ll close the canal again, and you won’t be able to get through until tomorrow!” Per wins our bet, because our PAPAGENO takes three hours to get back to port. Prince Achmed gives me a carton of Marlboros, and I give him 20 dollars for another night in port. For those with little sailing experience, let it be stated once and for all that sailing is no longer free anywhere. (Our canal toll was negotiated at 150 dollars; all in all, we shelled out around 200. These days, it’s not possible to get through for less than 350!)

We spend the rest of the day on the beach and in the cafes. I’ve stopped caring about local customs and go into a cafe with Helga. I ignore the protesting looks from the Egyptians, period. My respect for this millennia-old culture has been so badly damaged in recent days that I place particular emphasis on my own culture today and demand respect: Women DO have souls, and they are allowed to drink coffee in public. Period.

Per and Achmed have taken care of all the formalities and arrive later. Achmed nervously ushers him and Helga out of the coffeehouse, while I brazenly remain seated. My anger at this male clique only dissipates when an elderly local invites me to his table and we converse in fluent English. He’s a professor of astronomy, and I hastily dust off the very last memory cards in my brain, filled with Arabic star names, so as not to appear completely ignorant: Mirphak, Denebole, Al Debaran, Al Qaid, Al Suhal, Al Genib, and so on. His delight is evident when he orders a hookah, and we smoke it together; my first hookah! Although I’d read about it before, I’m astonished that in a coffeehouse, you order a hookah like you would a coffee back home, specifying the type and amount of tobacco, which then marks you as a connoisseur. I am grateful for the instruction on water pipes and must listen crestfallenly to learn that my relevant Arabic vocabulary (chibuk and tutu) actually originates from Turkish

and identifies me as a naive Karl May reader. The old astronomer smiles gently as I take a deep drag and almost choke.

In the early evening, we bring provisions and water aboard the PAPAGENO. The sailing yacht is a 15-meter trimaran (Cross 50 Sherman), built entirely of mahogany and teak, and its unique feature is that everything (and I mean absolutely everything) that's electronic is broken. The radio, the direction finder, the autopilot, the satellite navigator—everything. However, it's exceptionally well-equipped with everything a diver could wish for. The crew is a motley crew: the two Santas from Austria are two of the three owners, Kerstin and Alexandra from Switzerland specialize in skydiving and flying, Alex is a university assistant in Innsbruck, and Matz, who is almost blind, used to work for air traffic control.

Achmed, who as always appears in golfing attire even though the nearest golf course is a two-hour flight away, drinks a few more drinks on board and explains the peculiarities of the canal to us, gives valuable tips on dealing with the pilots, describes particularly beautiful bays, and marks on the nautical chart the places where we can find provisions or water. There won't be any diesel for the next two weeks, and then we'll need form 17b (the yellow one) so that we're officially registered as eligible for diesel. Per, the little Santa Claus, and I take notes; who knows, we might need Achmed's knowledge again. The evening ends cheerfully as Achmed listens to the story of our Cairo Maritime Police adventure for what must be the tenth time.

The next morning, we waited, ready to sail and nervous, for the pilot who would guide us through the Suez Canal. The clock ticked relentlessly, Helga brewed tea for the third time, and I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. Per energetically asked me to drum somewhere else. Big Santa Claus showed the first signs of his true mental state when, with Matzen's help, he prepared to go waterskiing in the Port Said harbor basin. On the other hand, this seemed to have been the right tactic, because a small pilot boat pulled up alongside the harbormaster's office. Were we completely crazy, wanting to go waterskiing in the harbor basin?! Little Santa Claus (our skipper, i.e., captain) grumbled back that if we had to wait much longer for the pi-

lot, then we'd just go waterskiing! Ten minutes later, a sweaty, fat pilot climbed aboard and took over the helm. I sulk and leave, because I'm actually the helmsman, damn it!

The Suez Canal

Among my friends, he's known as "the baksheesh channel," and rightly so. Forget our primitive, Western world order, where you drive into an underground parking garage, press a button, get your ticket, and then pay for it at a machine before driving off. In that area, things would be different. At the entrance, there's someone who pulls up the barrier with a rope after you hand him a bill. On the lower levels, there's another one who directs you to the left-hand lane, which is already almost full—he directs you quite forcefully, even though the right-hand lane is still completely empty. Right-hand lane? No, Effendi, that costs a dollar more! Before you can even get out of the car, his hand is already clenching around the bill you're supposed to have ready. You head for the elevator, but it only starts moving when the elevator operator notices you rummaging in your pockets for a bill. When you want to pick up the car, repeat the same process, but in reverse order. Added up and converted, the total comes to only slightly more than what you'd pay in a Viennese underground parking garage, but you can drive off with the gratifying feeling that you've helped support at least three or four families. Inshallah.

A brief digression from our lexicon: The Suez Canal (Quanat as Suways), commissioned in 1854 by the then Khedive (Viceroy) Mohammed Said Pasha to the former French consul in Cairo, Ferdinand M. Vicomte de Lesseps, and built in less than eight years (1859-1867, with a one-year construction halt) according to the plans of the Frenchman Linant de Bellefonds and the Austrian A. Negrelli by 2.5 million Egyptian construction workers (125,000 died), is approximately 163km long and was opened on November 17, 1869, in the newly built opera house in the presence of the new Khedive Ismail, Empress Eugenie of France (wife of Napoleon III and cousin of de Lesseps), Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria and the Prussian Crown Prince; Verdi's opera Aida, commissioned specifically for this purpose, was completed too late and only premiered in Cairo in 1871. Its southern section, from Port Tawfiq near Suez up to Lake Timsah, had already been built around 1900 BC by the pharaohs (perhaps as early as Thutmose III, but certainly Necho) and repeatedly improved

by various kings (Xerxes, Darius I, Ptolemy, Trajan, and Amr ibn al-Aas). In the 8th century AD, it was closed and forgotten. From the canal's checkered history: in 1875, the British bought all of Khedive's shares when they could not prevent its construction, but in 1888, under the Treaty of Constantinople, they had to guarantee international shipping through the canal. De Lesseps died on December 7, 1894, at his Château La Chesnaye, mentally deranged and completely ruined, after being (unjustly) accused of corruption and embezzlement in 1893, along with Gustave Eiffel, during the construction of the Panama Canal, and receiving a five-year suspended sentence. In 1956, President Abdel Nasser wrested the canal from the clutches of the British lion. The Israelis overran it in 1973, and since 1975 it has been quiet. From 1980 onward, the canal lost its former importance for shipping due to insufficient depth and high tolls (and, as the Xinhua News reported on December 19, 2000, the tolls remained unchanged in 2001...).

At the time, it shortened the sea route around Africa by almost 9,000 km, which translates to 50 days or more. It's actually two canals: the northern part, from Port Said (Bur Sa'id) via Lake Manzalah (Buhayrat al-Manzilah) to Lake Timsah (Buhayrat at-Timsah), is artificially hewn into the sandy rock; then, from Ismailia, a channel leads to the Great Bitter Lake (Al-Buhayrah al-Murrah al-Kubra) and the Little Bitter Lake (Al-Buhayrah al-Murrah as-Sughra); after that, the southern part of the canal runs in a partially natural or historical channel to Suez (As-Suways) and Port Tawfiq (Bur Tawfiq). Even at its narrowest point, the canal is still wide enough (approx. 70 m) to accommodate a large tanker and our small barge; nevertheless, the large ships are guided through in southbound and northbound convoys. The Gulf War, with its numerous warships and supply vessels, is a welcome additional source of income.

So we're back to the pilot. Unlike other pilots, this one wanted to steer himself; my heart clenched every time the gearbox crunched in response to his fiddling and the engine wailed in agony as he wrestled with the levers. We stopped several times so he could pray in the bow, facing Mecca. Alexandra cursed like a sailor when she went to the toilet after him and found it covered in scat; what a pig!

Every few kilometers there's a tower where the pilots and canal safety officers sit, monitoring and regulating the traffic. They maintain radio contact with the pilots on the ships and direct them. Not us, of course, because we don't use a radio. Our pilot is desperate and sweating even more, roaring his engine ever closer to Captain Rahn's MUGGELE from Germany, which is ahead of us, shouting as he communicates with the captain's pilot, before dropping back again.

We see many soldiers in the dunes to the left and right of the canal. We wave, and they wave back. Some make internationally known hand signals, whooping with laughter, when they see Helga, Alexandra, and Kerstin in their skimpy bikinis. The pilot tries to explain to us that honest Muslims despise such loose women and that we (men) should send them below deck. Skipper Nikolaus kindly hands him a can of Coke and tells him, in good Salzburg dialect, where he can shove his wisdom. Captain Rahn's MUGGELE suddenly slows down, and the pilot shouts something to us; ours replies with long "Lä-Lä's" (Yes, yes). We pull into a small parking bay.

It's still early afternoon, what's going on? The pilot explains that we'll be spending the night here. At first we laugh at him, but then he sends us over to the Muggele, and we hear the man from the tower say that the first part of our passage ends here; we'll continue tomorrow morning. The end.

Per, Little Santa, and I are hunched over the maps, calculating. "Looks like four days," sighs our skipper. Per is annoyed, but he doesn't want to interfere. I do a rough calculation and say we'll have to pay about $200 more, and that's not going to sit right with me. Santa asks what I intend to do—I don't know. But I speak to the pilot after he's finished his prayer. Our rambling discussion ends when he immediately explains that he's just waiting for his money, then he'll leave; another pilot will come tomorrow. Little Santa gives him the money, but he wants more. We shake our heads—no way, not with us, a deal's a deal! He's eyeing my cigarettes. I lapse into childish helpfulness and give him half a carton. When he brazenly demands the other half as well, I refuse and hint that otherwise I won't have anything left to smoke myself. Reluctantly, he disembarks and wishes us a good trip (or maybe not, who knows).

Captain Rahn's Turkish wife is very kind and has prepared a small snack; afterwards, we ravenously devour a huge portion of spaghetti that we had cooked ourselves. We drink another bottle of wine with this quiet man from the Allgäu region, who is on a long voyage and intends to sail around the world. On his advice, we give the guards watching over the dilapidated hut in this parking bay a few packs of cigarettes. They indicate that they understand and that we can sleep soundly.

The new pilot arrives the next morning by bicycle (where on earth did he come from, I wonder, in the middle of the desert that stretches out on either side of the canal?). He speaks passable English, is chatty and lively, and handles the boat more carefully than his predecessor. After only a few minutes, Per and I exchange astonished glances: he clearly has no idea about boating, steering as casually as a car driver. Per strikes up a conversation, and promptly the distracted boy steers toward the rocky bank. I stroll over and correct with my hand; he readily hands over the wheel. Little Santa Claus has silently watched everything and asks me what's going on. I hiss to him that the pilot isn't a professional, can't steer, and that I have no desire to end up in the Kronen Zeitung as "the one who got stranded in the canal."

Later, Per whispers that he doesn't think the pilot is a pilot at all; he smells more like a policeman. We're slightly nervous that our pilot, hired through Achmed, has been diverted and replaced with the wrong one. I try to soothe my nervousness by starting a conversation about the rest of our journey. We'll be through the canal this evening, won't we?

The pilot squirms, then says we have to spend the night at such and such a place. Little Santa Claus and I insist that we must be through by evening. The pilot insists we spend the night at the next checkpoint.

Blind Matz actually gave me the idea when he said they couldn't have done that to him before; he would have really given them a hard time, those wogs! I briefly consulted with Per and, armed with his wonder service passport, strolled over to the pilot station.

“A problem,” I said, my face contorted in pain, “a big problem!” “What is it?” the pilot asked anxiously, because I was looking genuinely distressed. I wailed and wailed that this was going to be a big problem. I was traveling with the big boss, the tall, lanky fellow, he was my boss, and he’d hold me responsible if this took much longer! The boss had been here before, he’d even driven through in a single day back then. And now it was going to take two or even three days—the boss would surely call Cairo afterward and cause us all a lot of trouble. A lot of trouble! Then I showed him my blue service pass and explained everything to him, how it was with the UHBP and so on. I must have talked at length, because he slowly softened and became restless. “You security, bodyguard?” he asked, and I cautiously dodged the question with “No, assistant!” Who knew what the fellow’s real profession was, but assistant always works. I left him to his thoughts and withdrew, Per reported, saying that I may have given our boy something to think about, nothing more.

The intense sun seemed to have taken its toll on Helga after all, because now she intervened (women do have souls, definitely!) and quoted from world literature: “If they want a spectacle, then give them a spectacle!” She arranged a shady nest for Per on deck from the cushions of the bench, told him to sit down, and offered him food and drink. The farce almost descended into the bizarre when she—now dressed childishly in baggy trousers and a veil like a harem woman—began to dab the beads of sweat from his forehead with a small cloth. The pilot was now obviously steering towards one of the control towers. I whispered to him whether he thought it was a good idea to stay overnight already; it was only just after noon, and we were going to be in serious trouble with my boss, oh dear! He replied nervously that he was going ashore to make a phone call. Per turned around and said in English, “Good, because then I’ll be able to call Cairo too.” He would not accept such treatment without comment! The pilot ducked and tried to calm things down; he would ask the canal authorities to let us through to Suez-Port Tawfiq (the end of the canal).

Hey, that sounded much better! We docked at the foot of one of those towers, little Santa Claus ran ahead to the MUGGELE and called to Master Rahn, “We’ll call and see if they’ll let us through to-

day!" Rahn also docked, and we waited together. Our pilot spent a long fifteen minutes in the control tower; at times, loud shouting could be heard. Per chuckled softly: "That's a story!"

The pilot came down and steered toward Per and me. "We're in luck," he said, "the channel's staying open, there's only an American warship coming the other way, and they've agreed to let us pass." He looked at us with satisfaction, waiting for applause. Per nodded and said, "Tonight, Suez!" The pilot started to reply (presumably that it was too far), but Per had already settled back onto his cushioned throne, pointed south in a Lord Nelson pose, and said, "Let's go!" Even the pilot understood that.

We were now traveling at twice the speed, Nikolaus took the wheel, and we sped along. The pilot took me aside and asked if this was okay, how he'd managed it. I remained calm and said that if we reached Suez today, I would ask my boss to give him a good word in Cairo. The pilot said okay, but he still wouldn't tell me his name.

The American warship approached us; the GIs waved and laughed, and there was enough room for another ship. At the checkpoints, they waved to us cheerfully as we passed. Helga continued playing the part of a harem servant, and little Nikolaus taught the pilot the basics of steering multihulled boats. Alex and I went to the chart table and did the math: we would be in Ismailia before sunset and, realistically, in Suez by tomorrow afternoon! The MUGGELE stayed behind; the good Rahn had to conserve its engine and couldn't keep up with our pace. We suspected it was in for a lonely night.

Indeed, after the last bend in the canal, we sailed into the bay in front of the city of Ismailia. It seemed arrangements had been made for us to be expected; the supermarket owner arrived at the anchorage in his water taxi to bring us and the pilot ashore. I put in a good word with the boss, who graciously pressed a few dollar bills into the pilot's hand. No sooner had this shady rower disappeared into the launch than everyone burst into hearty laughter and asked the friendly supermarket owner where one could shop and eat.

He looked at us blankly at first, then grinned and said, “At my place!” We agreed that he would pick us up at nightfall.

The sandstorm

The weather was beautiful, calm, and perfect. Little Santa Claus started cleaning the ship, and one after another joined in without a word. Before long, the whitewashed wooden deck of the PAPAGENO was gleaming white again. I passed the barometer and couldn't believe my eyes: the thing must be broken! I'd never seen such a steep drop. The captain insisted the barometer was fine. We went up on deck. A dark, grayish-brown haze hung over the city. Alex muttered that it must be a sandstorm, and I replied, "What nonsense, Alex, we don't have sandstorms here."

Then, within minutes, the sandstorm hit. It grew dark, the wind howled in the rigging, and sand flew horizontally around our ears. Nikolaus and I secured the dinghy, and I shouted to Alexandra to seal up our cabin, otherwise we'd be sleeping in the sand that night. Soon we had everything below deck and all the hatches closed. For the first time, the entire crew sat around the large saloon table, and only then did we realize that nine men barely had enough room.

Alexandra, who was clinging to me tightly because she was terrified of the storm's roar and howling, and also because there was so little space, suddenly whispered in my ear, "There—out there is a rower!" I was beginning to think it was some kind of Alemannic misunderstanding, or that she'd gone mad, when I saw him gliding past us, a shadowy figure. A young man in white gym shorts and a tank top, in a rowing skiff, one-two, one-two, elegantly gliding by. I said, "That's a real storm, what's he doing out there?"

Curiosity has gotten me into some sticky situations before, but this time I controlled myself. At least for a minute and a half. Then I freed myself and crawled on deck. The storm wasn't so bad up top, it was only below deck that it sounded terrible; the howling and roaring of the wind and the poisonous whirring of the sand sweeping along the superstructure.

The sand crunched between my teeth, and I watched intently as the rower appeared out of nowhere, sped past us in a flash, and van-

ished again just as quickly. About three minutes later, the same thing happened, but in reverse. One by one, everyone came up on deck and watched this prodigy, for whom training was more important than the sandstorm, which subsided in an instant. Nikolaus surveyed the deck, now covered in centimeters of fine brown sand. “And this just an hour after we washed the ship!” he said ruefully, shaking his head as he went below deck to do something about the bad taste in his mouth. I also drank a beer, enjoying it despite the crunching sand that was being washed down my throat and would probably act like sandpaper afterward…

The water taxi docked. We asked the supermarket owner what he thought of the storm, and he asked back, “What storm?” Apparently, this once-in-a-century storm hit here daily. We explored the (small) town, bought provisions for the next week, and had everything brought out to the ship—the water taxi belonged to him, after all. The man was alright, his prices were reasonable, and as darkness fell, we enjoyed a delicious supper in his garden gazebo. Then he took us back to the ship.

Once back on land, he converted his launch (with a sign reading: PORT AUTHORITIES) into an official vessel, bringing the harbor master and his watch aboard the PAPAGENO. We (as VIPs!) were given permission to sail out into the Red Sea with the next convoy. So, off we went – a night passage through the Bitter Lakes…

The Suez Canal exit is also guarded by a tower. They were already aware that we had no radio; so they raised a flag when the exit was clear. We—a proud 15-meter boat—led the convoy: behind us, a dozen enormous tankers, none under 100 meters long. Immediately after the exit, we veered sharply and moved closer to the shore, letting the behemoths pass. At first, we dipped our flag as required (boats are supposed to greet each other by lowering their flags), but after the fifth or sixth elephant rumbled past us without a salute, our enthusiasm waned. Good seamanship or not, the merchant fleet didn’t seem to care much for our flag salute, so we stopped. This would prove to be the least of our mistakes that day.

The collision

We formed three crews: little Nikolaus, Alexandra, and I would have the first watch; big Nikolaus, Kerstin, and Matz the second; and Per, Helga, and Alex would do the early watch. The wind was blowing briskly from the northwest, propelling the boat forward on a broad reach at a good 10 knots—a respectable performance for a heavy cruising boat! Before night truly fell, we had left the last of the small islands and shallows behind us and were now charting a perfect course across open water: we would make a long tack far south and cover half the distance to the Gubal Islands (located on the western shore of the Red Sea and our first destination) by morning; with a bit of luck, we could be there by evening.

As we sped along, small, bright lights kept appearing on the water. Fishermen fishing with gas lamps. Because of the high waves, these small boats, often only 4 or 5 meters long, were only visible at the last moment, as they danced on a crest. Sometimes we sped past just a few meters away, greeting the fishermen with a loud “Hello!” and waving. They were friendly and waved back; apparently, no one but me gave a thought to the fact that the pointed hulls of our trimaran were plowing through the water at breakneck speed and could easily impale such a small boat. Shut up, Cassandra, and go to sleep!

Changing of the guard. Nikolaus instructs Nikolaus, pointing out the convoy behind us. Kerstin, experienced boutique owner, sky-diver, and pilot, has me explain the compass and steering wheel to her one more time, and also that the bearing (the direction pointing from our current position) must not remain constant. Then we have a goodnight cigarette, and the rest of us go to sleep.

A loud crash jolts me awake. My first thought is of the fishing boats and our razor-sharp hulls. As I run past, little Santa Claus looks at me sleepily: “What is it?” “I don’t know!” I yell, and keep running, up on deck. When I climb out of the hatch and see a huge black wall and lit windows high above me, and hear a roaring rumble, no one needs to tell me what happened. We didn’t impale a poor fisherman; we’ve been rammed by a tanker! A quick glance around:

big Santa Claus and Kerstin are kneeling in the cockpit, the bent railing behind them, and on the half-torn davits (two small cranes on which the dinghy hangs) the battered dinghy, dragging half in the water: crumpled as if someone had run over it with a steamroller!

The tanker has now completely passed, and I can see the enormous propellers at a safe distance—we would have been ground to pulp in seconds in that gigantic churning machine! The black, mighty wall—as high as St. Stephen's Cathedral—and the roaring noise of the propellers momentarily take your senses away. I stand next to little Nikolaus and look up. It immediately dawns on me that we've had an incredibly lucky escape; it could easily have ended fatally. A glance at my watch—it's just after 1 a.m.

I tell Nikolaus we need to count the crew. But he stands there frozen, not moving. I count them all aloud, calling out their names – one is missing!

"Santa, Per!" I shout, "One's missing!" "No way," comes the laconic reply, "Count again!" I count and call out each name. I hold onto the last one—Alex—even after saying seven, then beat my chest and shout "Eight!"

"Someone's missing!" I scream desperately, and suddenly think it's Matz. I shout, "Where's Matz, where's Matz?!" A squeaky voice right in front of me says, "I'm here, I'm here!" and I say to him, without realizing I'm still clutching him tightly and hitting his chest, "No, not you, Matz!" Almost tearfully, the supposed Alex says, "But—I'm Matz!"

It takes me a second, then another, to grasp the meaning of his words. One is missing, clearly, but it's not Matz, it's the other one.

"Alex!" I shout, "where is Alex?!"

Dead silence. Per says dryly, "His bunk is right under the crushed dinghy." Nikolaus: "Good heavens!" Kerstin: "Well, doesn't anyone want to go and take a look?" An awkward silence falls all around. Nobody wants to go down there now.

Per and I went down to the companionway at the same time, crawling along the narrow bachelor bunks all the way to the back. There lay a figure wrapped in a sheet, silent and motionless. I had only one thought: he must be dead. Per stood motionless behind me; I heard him—rarely enough—take a deep breath. Then I carefully felt my way forward and touched the figure.

"Yes, what is it?" Alex mumbles sleepily and rolls over, "what's all the shouting about up there?" Per and I sigh with relief - the good boy is alive, sleeping peacefully, while perhaps 15cm away from him thirty thousand tons of steel roared past at 20 or 25 knots and had half torn our ship to pieces.

Alex quickly gets dressed and comes up on deck. Helga has lost her composure and found her voice again; like a fury, she screams at the big Santa Claus, Kerstin, and poor Matz, asking what they thought they were doing; they could see the ships and get out of the way in time, damn it!

We talked for hours, until dawn. It went something like this: Kerstin and Nikolaus had retreated to a corner of the deck to flirt. They put the three-quarter-blind Matz at the helm and told him to just watch the compass and drive at 160. Matz said he could easily read the brightly lit compass, so that was fine.

Nobody paid attention to the convoy behind them.

After some time, Kerstin and Nikolaus, startled by the noise of the tanker, returned to the helm and saw the giant ship, already within arm's reach. Nikolaus shouted that it was too late to swerve, that all they could do was pray! So the two lovers knelt down, while Matz stared into the darkness in mortal fear—he couldn't see the tanker, he said, only heard the roaring thunder of the gigantic bow wave. The tanker hit our ship on the starboard aft side and swept it aside as if it were flotsam. Somehow, the dinghy had cushioned the impact a little and thus helped to cause our boat to veer off course and be pushed aside. The davit scraped along the hull and screamed like a wounded animal before it broke. The crumpled rubber tube that had once been a dinghy wrapped itself halfway around the bent stern railing, thus

preventing it from breaking. The whole thing was over in a few seconds.

Per and I sat in the bow and discussed the situation. We'd been lucky this time, but there wouldn't be a second chance. We decided that from now on, one of us would always be awake, because we knew we could rely on each other; it was a proven fact. We wouldn't entrust our lives to such amateurs again—after all, the big Santa Claus (whom we unanimously blamed) wasn't just some random beachgoer, but one of the ship's owners and co-skipper, with a license and certification. We stuck to this decision until we disembarked.

The very next morning, the two Santas proved just how different they were. The larger Santa, who silently avoided us and refused to have breakfast with us ("because we're so mean to him"), was at the helm when, chewing, I glanced out of the porthole and saw a workboat with a crane crossing our path. I immediately jumped up and went to the wheelhouse. Per followed me; he too had noticed that something was wrong.

I stood silently next to Nikolaus. "He has to give way, we have the right of way," said Nikolaus, and calmly drove on.

"The bearing is set!" I said (meaning we were on a direct collision course). Nikolaus said nothing. I repeated, more emphatically: "Come on, we're on a collision course! Just bear away, turn the boat away from the wind so we slow down and let him pass in front!" "No," Nikolaus insisted, "we have the right of way now!"

Meanwhile, little Santa Claus, still chewing his sausage sandwich with his mouth full, had come up and positioned himself at the second helm. Wordlessly, he pressed down the shift lever and took over the wheel. He skillfully maneuvered around the obstacle and let the Egyptian pass, who waved cheerfully and seemed completely unaware of his wrongdoing.

In the heated discussion that followed, we told the little Santa Claus quite frankly that we still trusted him, but had absolutely no

trust in his companion, and that he could consider this a mutiny if he wanted: we certainly wouldn't stand idly by while the other Santa Claus killed us! The atmosphere was pretty tense, but after a few hours everyone calmed down. Apart from that, the big Santa Claus didn't get behind the wheel again for the next week.

The wind died down, so we spent the afternoon swimming and tried to repair the worst damage ourselves. But the dinghy was completely wrecked. "That's alright," said little Santa Claus, "we have a second one, still in its packaging below deck, we can put that one into service now." It took several hours to unpack and assemble the new boat. All in all, we were a pretty good crew, because everything that could go wrong during assembly did go wrong.

Towards evening, we headed for a small bay where there was obviously an abandoned depot or business. The quay wall was intact, so we tied up, but put out a small anchor with the dinghy, just to be safe. We spent a very peaceful evening – to my own surprise, I caught the first fish of my life on a line, using Alma cheese from back home as bait. I'd originally just been thinking about "fishing nonsense" because everyone said I'd never (ever) catch anything here with that line. Nikolaus fried the fish 'la Papageno' and prepared a great snack, but we were still hungry. In the distance, a fishing boat chugged along, then turned and came alongside. The fishermen waved a large fish; did we want to buy it? It must have weighed 30 kg. But the $100 they wanted was too much for us, so they chugged off again. During their maneuver, they got caught in some kind of rope, but they accelerated hard and disappeared into the darkness.

Anchoring maneuvers and reefs

The next morning brought great surprise. Our extra anchor was gone. Nikolaus examined the severed line. Aha, the fishermen from last night. They'd gotten snagged somewhere. Now we knew where. We dove around for another hour and had to continue on empty-handed; the anchor was gone for good; I suspected it was still attached to the fishing boat. Around midday, we reached the northern tip of Gubal Island and rounded it. Here, the reefs were only very vaguely marked on the chart; the Red Sea Pilot even mentioned "underwater shifting sand dunes." It soon became clear that this was no laughing matter when we counted the wrecks clinging to the reefs. One was even a brand-new motorboat, which probably must have cost tens of millions – but now it sat motionless on a reef, and with binoculars, we could see that it had been completely plundered in the meantime. Little Santa Claus sent Big Santa Claus up halfway up the mast in the bosun's chair, to the lookout. The lookout, perhaps for younger readers, is the person high up in the air who has to keep watch for Gauls, pirates, or reefs and shout loudly if he sees anything dangerous. ("The Ga-, the Ga-, the Gaga…!", as it says in Asterix).

Santa Claus even brought his polarized sunglasses because "you can see below the surface of the water with them." Snails! He looked here and there and made faces, but he didn't see any reefs.

A helicopter took off from the shore about 2-3 km away and flew overhead. The pilot turned around and looked at us very closely. Everyone waved, but he descended even lower; he obviously wanted something. Then we could see him pointing to his headphones. Radio? No, we don't have one. Since no one else made any move, I went to the foredeck and first pointed to my ear, then made the telephone sign with my thumb and little finger, then crossed my forearms into an X (=broken). He nodded and descended a few more meters. Then he pointed forward and drew hills and mountains in the air, then his hand slid through the air again and crashed into an imaginary obstacle.

Per had positioned himself next to me and translated aloud: “There are reefs up ahead, and you’ll smash into the concrete!” We nodded to indicate we understood; but he positioned the helicopter in front of the boat and set a course of about thirty degrees to port, then repeated it once more. We nodded, and little Santa Claus dramatically turned the wheel so he could see our course change, so he would know we had understood him. He rocked the helicopter a few times and disappeared behind the dunes again.

Per and I stood at the front railing, watching the water, while the girls, Alex, and Matz furled the foresail. The big Santa Claus felt old and superfluous, because we gestured to the other Santa Claus at the helm when we saw bright green water and the first reefs—dangerous things, so-called “Negro heads,” lurking just a few centimeters below the surface and only clearly visible at low tide. We slowed down and glided at a walking pace through the entrance between the two large Gubal islands, always keeping close to the reef edge.

Then we reached the spot Achmed had marked on the map a week earlier: a truly beautiful, small bay sheltered to the north. The wind was now blowing at force 8 across the flat sandbar, and the anemometer at the masthead was showing a steady 8 Beaufort. Down on deck, we were protected by the island, and there was only a light breeze.

Little Nikolaus cautiously edged forward, while Alex and Per fiddled with the large main anchor and lowered the chain. Then the anchor caught, and Nikolaus let the boat drift back to dig in the anchor. A jolt, and we drifted rapidly away – the chain had snapped! After a moment of shock, we did what we had been taught: Nikolaus restarted the engine and headed forward again to where the anchor should be; Matz and I prepared the small hand anchor and lowered it into the water. The anchor caught, the line tightened; but this could only be a temporary fix. We wouldn’t be able to stay here overnight with this small anchor.

Per, who took the breaking of “his” anchor almost as a personal insult, stripped down to his swimming trunks and jumped into the water to dive for it. He surfaced and held up the anchor chain – un-

fortunately, he'd misjudged the pressure equalization during this maneuver, and his ear hurt terribly for several days afterward. Nikolaus rushed into the cabin and searched for the anchor repair kit (I have to admit I'd never seen one of those before). Triumphantly, he held up a repair link; now it was only a matter of minutes until the two halves of the anchor chain were firmly reconnected. The ship slowly reversed, the anchor and the repaired chain holding. Losing two anchors in one day was certainly strange.

We stayed one day and two nights on the northern Gubal island, took shore excursions, and explored the completely uninhabited sand island a bit. We went diving at the reef, which made me quite uneasy, as we had to rely completely on the large dinghy, even though we didn't really trust it anymore.

All the equipment belonged to him; he was the only certified diving instructor (certified here means: with a certificate) on board, and we wanted to learn some diving techniques from him, after all, we had paid him for it. I'm an excellent freediver, but I wanted to refresh my scuba diving skills. I devised a (technically questionable) compromise: I would only dive long and deep enough that, in the event of an "unexplained malfunction," I could always remove my equipment and surface. Let me be clear: don't try this at home; you can get seriously hurt! Later, I was able to fully enjoy the thrill when dusk fell and we dived without lights in the increasingly dark water.

Then we drove east again and crossed the Red Sea, driving south along the west coast of the Sinai Peninsula to its southern tip, Ras Muhammed.

Diving at Ras Muhammed

You probably know the area from television, as former President Mubarak had a conference center built there next to his presidential retreat, where Israeli-Palestinian peace talks have frequently taken place. So, with a favorable wind, we rounded the corner – before us lay the wide, beautiful Gulf of Aqaba. Up at the cape (Ras is the Arabic word for it), next to the lighthouse, stands a long, low building.

Kerstin, a pilot and skydiver, looked up and remarked that it was perfect for a free jump. Alex cast a connoisseur's eye upward and said it was a tidal observatory. Alexandra, lying on the bench with her head resting in my lap, read the cultural guide about the area's attractions. I played with her blonde hair and kept quiet as she read aloud the title of the next page: Ras Muhammed – the newly built international shark observation observatory opens!

Little Santa Claus soon spotted a channel between the reefs and steered carefully inside, then we anchored. We dove and frolicked in the water, fascinated by the abundant underwater flora and fauna. There, in the water, you're just one of many, many delicious fish. A hundred meters above us was the concrete platform of the observatory; little people stood there waving and waving their hands and calling out to us. We waved and waved our hands back and called out "Hello!" and "Hello!" and "Hello!" Alexandra tugged uncertainly at my sleeve, wondering if they could see more from up there than we could from down here.

No, of course there are no sharks here, as Santa Claus, who has dived here "quite often," knows. Admittedly, he's quite skilled at handling the diving equipment; we refresh all the emergency procedures, such as how two people can manage with one regulator, etc. Unfortunately, our underwater lights fail, so his video footage and the photos I take are of very poor quality. We enjoy the magnificent underwater world at Sharks Reef and only get out of the water hours later when we start to feel cold.

The next day, we chug along in calm conditions, sailing up the Gulf until we reach the city of Sharm El Sheikh (Ofira), the fabled land of Ophir, if you recall the Book of Kings by the ancient Persian Al-Firdausi. Sharm El Sheikh is our destination; from there we will fly back to Cairo, the PAPAGENO will head back to the west coast and ferry tourists to Hurghada for diving. The town deserves a full description: a harbor with a barracks, eighteen houses, two shops, and fifteen five-star hotels. On the beach, there are two dive schools, three boat rental companies, and an excursion boat advertising “Visit the Shark’s Observatory at Ras Muhammad!”

At the harbor master's office

For all its architectural modesty, Sharm el Sheikh is an important location for Egyptian seafaring and El Gism, the army. The almost square-shaped harbor basin (new harbor) is a concrete bathtub, a 17-meter-deep swimming pool, probably 250 by 250 meters. On the sunny side, at the pier, lie an Italian and a Spanish warship. We are met by a small launch and guided to the shady, rugged eastern side of the harbor basin. Our anchor is simply dropped onto the smooth concrete bottom, not to mention digging in. The distance is too great for a shore line, but the pilot, who speaks passable English, explicitly forbids us from anchoring any closer to the shore. Warships and cannons do impress us civilians, so we swallow our protests and remain anchored in the middle of the swimming pool – nautical nonsense, but we don't dare argue.

The day before, we had filed an accident report about our collision. Naturally, not a word about our incompetent watch leader, just a simple, accurate description of what had happened. The only thing missing was the tanker's name—we hadn't been able to read it in the dark. Our skipper, Per, and I boarded the dinghy and followed the local to the harbor master's office. There, they sent us back; the harbor master wouldn't be there until a certain time. We stayed on board and got the boat ready, meaning we tidied up and washed it. When the time came, we chugged back to the harbor master's office.

The walls of his small office were plastered with photographs and photo trophies. His name was Colonel (pronounced "Körnel"), everyone called him that. In some photos, you could see him in a fantastic carnival uniform; perhaps he was a real Körnel after all; he did, after all, speak fluent English. They had already seen us coming, and as soon as we sat down, we were served hot peppermint tea in thin clay cups – I must tell Michael Häupl about that sometime! On the table was his name card: Capt. Abdel Wahab M. Saleh. "Father of the Whales," I whispered to Nikolaus, and he whispered back: "I can read too!" (On the wall hung a brightly painted sign: Abd el Wahab – Father of the Whales. I wonder if this is where Melville got his Captain Ahab for Moby Dick?).

Per placed our report, written in English, on the desk. Körnel immediately took it away again, pointed apologetically at the thick, green-bound book on which Per had placed it, and said with a smile: “This is the Holy Quran!” Then he took our paper and began to read. He stopped again immediately (I can’t read Arabic, after all) and said: “Well, tell me about it!” Nikolaus introduced himself, the ship, its name, etc., and reported that we had wanted to go from Port Said to Sharm el Sheikh (here are our papers), and that we had had a collision with a tanker on such-and-such a night. (The conversation is so vivid in my mind that I want to reproduce it here verbatim:)

The gnome smiles. “Collision?” - Apparently, he’s imagining with a smirk how we’ll ride into a mountain of steel with our lances lowered.

“Well,” corrects Nikolaus, his face red, “the tanker rammed us!”

“Aha,” said the grain, satisfied, “that sounds better. And – did anything happen to the tanker?”

Nicholas silently denies it.

“But your ship—is it badly damaged?” Nikolaus shrugged. “We repaired the railing ourselves in a few hours, we can throw away the old dinghy, there are only a few inconspicuous scratches on the hull —no, the ship isn’t really badly damaged, good American craftsmanship!”

“And – was anyone hurt?” Nikolaus again denies it.

“Inshallah!” exclaims Körnel, pushing our folded and unread report back across the table, “thank God that nothing worse happened!”

So much for the maritime court hearing. Nikolaus and Per are making a half-hearted attempt to find out the tanker’s name and pursue the matter through insurance channels, but the father of the whales has long since retreated dreamily into his peppermint tea and isn’t responding. Meanwhile, I was desperately trying to identify the

people in the photographic trophies, but alas, all the Egyptian nobility were completely unknown to me.

Körnel noticed my inquisitive glances, and now he's taking the pictures off the wall one by one, explaining that here he's pictured with Minister So-and-so, there with General Whatsit, and here's his penultimate ship, a 1,500 hp one, by the way, which he sold to the merchant Icksipsilon. Speaking of which—if we needed provisions, water, or diesel, he could get us everything, because the merchants in Sharm, he said, were cutthroats, real swindlers who even charged extra for delivery; but with him, you could simply hand over a list of goods, and he'd deliver them to the ship free of charge. Welcome to the baksheesh canal!

I spent a long time digging through the Red Sea Pilot and had a problem, so I brought it up: "Mr. Körnel, Sir, Your Excellency! We would like to go diving there and there today and tomorrow - is that okay?".

The man suddenly sat bolt upright – he'd obviously never seen an idiot ask to pay voluntarily. "Of course not," he said predictably, "you need a special permit!" Now I smiled broadly, because that's what I'd been aiming for. "Here it is!" and Nikolaus placed the form with the printed red diver on it on the desk.

The guide paused, studied the paper ("ah, you were at good old Achmed's!") and in the next second dismantled us: "This is a 14-day general diving permit for the entire Egyptian coast, except for Ras Muhammed and the bay from Sharm to the island of Tiran, which have been nature reserves for two years now!"

That was exactly what the Red Sea Pilot had said, and now I had confirmation. Yesterday, we had unknowingly dived illegally in the nature reserve at Ras Muhammed, but we couldn't do it anymore once I knew and Körnel had seen us; he was as sharp as a razor, and I wasn't about to mess with someone like that. Friendly and wordless, he reached into a drawer and took out a form. "I need an ID or passport from you," he said, as he began to write.

Nikolaus and I rummaged in our pockets—no, we didn't have anything with us. Per casually reached under his shirt and produced the blue diplomatic passport from his pouch. "Well, what's this?" Körnel paused, and began to leaf through it. He discreetly slipped the form under a stack of newspapers while he studied Per's passport. "A diplomatic passport!" he declared with a knowing air, "I used to travel with one when I was a military attaché!" He suddenly became so jovial and chummy that I felt a little uneasy—this could all go very wrong.

Without further ado, he grabbed the "invalid" diving permit, grinned broadly, stamped it with several different stamps, and scribbled his name underneath with a flourish. "There you go, now you can dive anywhere," he said. "I'm also the highest conservation authority here, I give you permission!" He barked at his doorman, and a few moments later we were served fresh peppermint tea. The guy grinned broadly as he reached into the bottom drawer of his desk. "Allah will forgive us," he murmured, placing the cognac on the table. We declined, but he poured us a generous amount of cognac into our hot tea.

Like cat and mouse, he and Per circled each other in the ensuing small talk, neither revealing anything at all about their jobs, only that they both worked for the state (each for their own). Per didn't correct the "diplomat" comment, let the father of all whales think what he wanted. During a pause, the elusive captain gestured to Nikolaus: "You skipper?" and we nodded. The captain nodded at me without looking directly at me: "You security?" I shook my head: "No, assistant," and the captain nodded understandingly, winking at Per. Yeah, assistant.

The conversation then turned to the Gulf War and the considerable workload the two warships in port were causing (and, almost as an aside, Per was gently quizzed to see if he was a diplomat with three percent status and therefore entitled to supplies). Poor Körnel had to deliver truckloads of provisions and forbidden drinks to them, "You can't imagine how difficult it is to procure all this stuff around here!" I thought to myself, I'd love to have his whining and his percentages…

We were back on topic; a brief glance, then Nikolaus said we'd like to come aboard to put together our shopping list. The captain said goodbye and gave us a man to take the list and arrange the delivery.

The mood on board was cheerful. We sat around our coffee, chatting, and Nikolaus had to tell the harbor master's story for the third time. Then Alex said that the boat wasn't lying steady; the anchor was dragging along the bottom. The boat had already circled several times, so the chain was twisted and might break again. Nikolaus decided that we should carefully move towards the shore and put out a stern line. When the anchor winch lifted the chain, we saw underwater that it had wrapped itself ridiculously around the anchor itself. Someone had to go down to sort it out before we caused any damage.

The tall Santa Claus was just in the middle of putting on his diving gear when Per dryly remarked that the soldiers on the warship were watching us with binoculars—and if you go into the harbor basin with diving gear on, they'll get you! Santa Claus, the quick thinker, stopped dead, his mouth wide open. Helga had to disappear into the galley immediately, where I heard her laughing loudly.

"I'll do it," I said, and dropped my clothes. Per grabbed his underwater camera and joined Alex in the water. I jumped into the warm water, dove down the 17 meters to the anchor, worked on it, and tugged on the chain a few times, which was almost immediately free again, then I pulled back up. Per immortalized this successful dive in a wonderful 8mm sequence—in which I saw myself diving for the first time. The big Santa Claus grumbled as he disposed of his bottles and was furious "because we're always so mean to him."

Alexandra asked how one manages to get down so deep. She could barely get a meter down; the air in her stomach and chest just kept floating back up! I first grinned at the chest part and then said that I simply let all the air out beforehand. But Alex (our medic, in addition to being an electronics technician) commented that I was a fool, letting the air out and all that, you can easily drown that way—that's why a weight belt is safer. Everyone agreed with him, except Alexandra. We practiced for quite a while, and suddenly she got it. "Phew," she said panting when we got back to the surface, "I have to swim re-

ally hard back up, and when my strength gives out, I'm pulled back down!" Yes, that's just how it is with freediving.

Diving in paradise

After breakfast, we hurried to get the ship ready and followed the caravan of excursion boats, reaching the bay described in every dive guide as a diver's paradise (Ras Umm Sid) after half an hour. We arrived last, excitedly standing on the foredeck, watching the excursion boats slowly circle the bay, dropping off divers. The tall Santa Claus, now at the helm (!), because, after all, he "had dived nearby a few times," boldly steered into the center of the circle, where a rock was visible in the water.

"Hang the anchor on!" he commanded, and Alex and I hurried along, oblivious.

Suddenly, someone from one of the dive boats shouts over, asking if we'd lost our minds, anchoring right on top of the "Dome"?! Get lost, you damn tourists! (or something like that). The "Dome," it should be noted, is an underwater stalactite about 15 meters high, unique in the world and sacred to all divers. Some call it a "temple" and claim it's a coral, but I know Aunt Amalie's coral necklace, and that looks completely different!

Per takes the helm and steers the boat outside the circle. Alex snorkels ahead and waves, indicating good anchorage over there. We anchor the boat and go diving. Since there isn't enough equipment on board, we split into two groups: the Santas and Kerstin with tanks, and the rest of us free dive.

For me, it's all new: the dome, rising like a giant candle from the black void; the many colorful schools of fish coming within centimeters; the cheeky little zebra-striped fish nibbling at our skin and wetsuits. I'm seeing barracudas for the first time, and I'm photographing lionfish for the first time. Unfortunately, the pictures are only so-so, as the flash doesn't reach far enough at a depth of 10 meters. When I show the slides to friends and family, I have to explain why everything is such a dirty green and why the lionfish (which is actually fiery red and poisonous) appears a rich dark brown with white feath-

ers. Only to very, very close friends do I sheepishly admit that I simply didn't dare get any closer.

Matz, our blind air traffic controller, doesn't have a wetsuit and is freezing miserably. We leave him on board as watchmen and follow the Santas to the steep drop-off, where the reef edge plunges vertically into the black void. They dive down and, in their uncomradeship, don't notice Kerstin's hand signals; the depth is clearly frightening for her, and she stays behind with us above. Alex is chasing a school of barracuda; we swim quickly over to him and ask if he's lost his marbles. He grins and says they don't hurt you anyway, but then decides against it. Alexandra and I look at each other: we're really in a sorry state, gentlemen!

Per, Helga, Alexandra, and I stayed together, swimming around in this beautiful underwater world and admiring this fantastic garden for hours. I snapped photos and photos until the film ran out, asking Helga to photograph this and that, because it was like the Garden of Eden. The sun slowly set, the light became dim, and the predatory fish awakened. Now it was Alex who was being chased by a school of barracuda and reached the boat in a record-breaking crawl. Slowly, everyone gathered on board, and we chugged back to the harbor. The most beautiful dive of my life (so far).

Captain's Dinner

I still admire little Nikolaus to this day. With little money and a lot of hard work, he manages the PAPAGENO single-handedly, because his partner is completely out of his mind and more of a nuisance than a help. He keeps the ship in excellent condition and does everything himself that he possibly can. I'm no surveyor, but as far as I can tell, the ship is in tip-top shape. The faulty electronics only affect unnecessary luxuries and don't impair its seaworthiness.

The bribe-and-bake channel has drained his finances, gentlemen! Nevertheless, Little Santa Claus announces that he wants to treat us to the Captain's Dinner in Sharm el Sheikh tonight, our last evening together. We dress up and chug across the harbor basin, surrounded by the barracks wall, go through "passport control" once again, and trot over a small hill into town. There—we wouldn't have believed it—we can't find a single restaurant. Except perhaps for the dreadful hotels, where even the appetizers cost more than a meal in Cairo. This price maximization rubs us all the wrong way, so we ignore the greedily rubbing dining room managers and head back into town. After a long walk, we sit down at a street café and have a drink before continuing our stroll.

"Why wander any further?" the coffeehouse owner asks us. "I'm having chicken and rice tonight in the garden." Then he lowers his voice so Allah won't hear, and whispers, "I have beer and wine, too." We look at each other, then follow him into the garden, which is just like a Viennese wine tavern, except that the drinkers here are darker-skinned. It's cramped, but we enjoy the meal, which, although terribly greasy and spicy, is far tastier than the spaghetti Bolognese and spaghetti Papageno (and vice versa) we were used to on the ship. Here in the garden, where Allah can't see, wine (in copious amounts) and beer (in cans) are served openly. After the meal, I try to strike up a conversation with our table neighbors, two dark-skinned Arabs, but it's very difficult, very difficult. They beckon me to join them.

The crew roars with laughter when Per casually remarks, "Now he doesn't dare, Mr. Security." That's all I need to know. I give a quick

nod to the group and sit down with the two sinister-looking fellows. Our conversation slowly gets going, me slowly in English, them slowly in Arabic-English. I have three children, and no, no wife. They're surprised; everyone has a wife or more. "Yes, yes, but not me. I have a girlfriend, but no ring." "Aha," they nod, uncomprehending. "What, no ring? That's a ring, isn't it?" "Yes," I say, "a signet ring, a decorative ring. Not a ring for a wife." "Aha."

The two work in road construction in Cairo, I quickly realize; they come from the island of Tiran. It actually belongs to the Saudis, and they are Saudis too, but that's not so important here. At midnight they'll take a bus across the Sinai to Cairo, and they'll be there by noon tomorrow. I ask if I can buy them a beer – head shaking, beer, for God's sake, no! I soften the blow and offer them peppermint tea: yes, gladly, that's very kind. When I order, one of them points at my cigarette – no, when I offer him one, he gestures that he means a water pipe. So, another chibuk for the dark-skinned guest, waiter, and plenty of tobacco for three. Thank goodness for Karl May.

This invitation to tea changes the whole conversation. Suddenly, the Arab construction workers aren't so gloomy anymore; they're laughing and sipping their hot tea. They ask about my work and customs in Austria, and I slowly realize that their attempts to pronounce "Austria" correctly are gradually turning into "Asturia," and suddenly we find ourselves talking about bullfighting in Barcelona. No, gentlemen, Austria, not Spain! No bullfighting—except perhaps at the Opera Ball—and no fandango, but Schnadahüpfler!—Schna-Schanada—what!?

The water pipe is passed around (not the pipe itself, just the hose), and I cautiously wipe the metal mouthpiece with my flat hand—hygiene and all that—but they acknowledge my apprehension with broad smiles. Apparently, the greedy waiter didn't provide enough tobacco (tobacco is rolled into small, cone-shaped paper pouches and placed in the clay bowl containing the glowing charcoal). Someone takes out their own tobacco pouch and adds a little more. Immediately, a pleasant, sweet aroma fills the air; we draw and puff on the delicious tobacco, laugh and joke, and try to bring Vienna back from Spain to Austria. I could tell them that things were exactly the oppo-

site in the time of Charles V, but my Arabic gestures probably wouldn't be sufficient...

I had already treated everyone to three or four rounds of tea and tobacco, and the Dark Knight had dutifully added his own tobacco, when Alexandra strolled over and sat on my lap (naturally, only because there wasn't a chair free). She sniffed and then whispered in my ear, "Honey, that's hashish!" and looked at me wide-eyed, knowing full well that I utterly detest such things. I can still hear the words, but at the time they didn't register in my consciousness, because I was in such a wonderful mood and everything was shrouded in a sweet haze; everyone was so lovely and I felt glorious. I politely explained to her that I was simply having tea and smoking a hookah with the two gentlemen. Alexandra slunk off again, inexplicably pouting.

Every Captain's Dinner has to end, and so did this one. We walked out into the balmy full-moon night, and I marveled at how soft and springy the soles of my ancient sailing boots were. I danced and skipped ahead of the others, uphill toward the barracks, still hearing the comments behind me that he must be completely done for, and looked around to see who "he" could possibly mean. But there was no one else there. So we strolled homeward—I was dancing in my new shoes—and reached the barracks gate, in front of which stood three guards: two with Kalashnikovs, one without, because that was the commanding officer. We had probably shown our passports and the port papers for the PAPAGENO ten times in these two days, but each time they insisted on seeing them again—rules are rules!

As I pranced around in front of the group like a madman, it apparently looked alarming, because the militiamen huddled together, clutching their rifles tightly: Watch out, a fool! Even now, I'm baffled as to which corner of my repressed subconscious this homosexual impulse sprang from; in any case, I suddenly embraced the commander and planted a loud kiss on his unshaven cheek. "It's me, dear István!" I added unnecessarily. Startled, he opened his eyes like a calf in a slaughterhouse, then gestured gruffly that we should get through the gate quickly, and hurry up! Delighted that there was no tedious passport control, we ran laughing down to the harbor.

The others are still roaring with laughter, but Alexandra swears she'll never, ever, ever kiss me again, that I'm such a horrible thing to do! The others are now teasing me, saying I'm so high I could fly over to the Italians (addendum: warship) and ask if they have anything to quench our thirst. I couldn't be held back any longer when the others realized my drunken resolve and tried to downplay it with "it was just a joke!" How often have we been told we'd never be allowed near the warships!

The others followed slowly as I pranced towards the Italians. A corporal sat at a table in front of the passarella, the gangplank leading onto the ship, calmly watching me. It's clear to me now, because I probably wasn't the first stoned soul he'd seen in his long service, but back then I noticed how completely cool he remained, even though everyone else neighed or freaked out at the sight of me. From a distance, I greeted him in my rusty school Italian and asked not to shoot—we were the tired and thirsty sailors from the trimaran out there and just wanted to ask if we could have a sip of Chianti or something else decent. Cheekiness pays off, I thought.

In snarling English, he informed me that "the Italians" were those back there, and he was "the Spaniards." But if I wanted, we could have a beer; there were no other drinks because the harbor master wanted exorbitant prices. I frantically searched through the hashish-addled seaweed filling my brain and tried to make myself understood in broken Spanish. When I tossed him one such phrase—that the harbor master was probably a ladron (thief)—he became approachable and grinned broadly; well, come along then!

Helga whispers, "István, you're the best," while we wait at the gangplank until the officer returns with two cases of cold, nice and cold beer. While we drink our cans, the others give him a rough outline of how our trip went. When Nikolaus reminds us that we have to get back to the ship, the Spaniard gives us a full case of beer "for later."

Needless to say, I was soaking wet after rowing back to our ship; it's also unnecessary to mention that the beer didn't last until morning; but it's also unnecessary to mention that at some point the wet

clothes had to be taken off and that Alexandra and I danced the Sirtaki on the cabin roof – under a full moon, naked and beautiful! (Sirtaki, because it was the only playable cassette on board).

The two Santas soon went their separate ways – the older Santa and Kerstin pooled their savings and bought the SYMPAT, a trimaran they still charter today. Alex walked from Sharm (over several days) to the Sinai Peninsula to St. Catherine's Monastery and subsequently had to have his bleeding soles treated in a Cairo hospital. Matz continued to take tourists on the PAPAGENO in Hurghada for a while with the younger Santa, Alexandra went to Brazil, and Helga, Per, and I went to Vienna.

We still sometimes go to sea together today.

A year like any other

I probably haven't even mentioned that I've spent most of my professional life in data processing. Computers and all that, you know. Of course, you can do that for a while without becoming completely out of touch or eccentric. However, you shouldn't forget to do something else, at least as a hobby. For me, the best thing to do was to work my way up in the computer club I'd joined and one day become editor-in-chief of the club's newsletter.

Well, it wasn't really that bad.

There wasn't a club newsletter yet; a double-sided, hectographed sheet was sent out two or three times a year, listing the most important events of the past year and upcoming dates, etc. Then the current president had the idea of asking me for a short contribution for the next issue, which I did. Unfortunately, I couldn't manage to write one that was less than 12 pages long. Now we were in a real bind, but we were able to help the good man: that's how the newsletter came about.

Perhaps the president at the time thought I would publish great programming tricks or masterful coding examples; presumably he hoped I would put together 8 to 10 pages of them.

He soon knew better.

Month after month, I filled the pages from then on, sometimes only 48, but usually a full 64. Among other things, I had stipulated that I could give free rein to my pen. Whether it was an announcement of a conference or lectures by IBM luminaries, I neatly wrapped it all in short, readable stories, believing that this was a better and more humorous way to present the dry facts to the readers. I always wrap my dog's pills in a special sausage wrapper, too, of course, right? So you don't need to worry that you'll get bogged down in incomprehensible technical jargon in the following stories; it's perfectly sufficient to know that computers exist, that there's a

computer manufacturer called IBM, and that this very IBM produced one of the world's best computers, the legendary AS/400.

The rest follows logically: a club of computer geeks who meet in various major cities for conferences or other lectures; an editor-in-chief who has to entice them to attend the conferences and meetings; and a president who spends nights brooding over unpaid printing bills for the newspaper produced by the prolific editor-in-chief…

The hot topic of 1996 was, of course, the year 2000, which was supposed to bring about the biggest computer system change worldwide. Thousands of newsrooms around the globe wrote themselves into a frenzy, as a disaster, perhaps even chaos, was widely feared.

Not so in our small, one-man editorial office. We (or rather, I) had taken precautions well in advance and didn't have any Y2K problems at all. Nevertheless, the editorial team had to address the general concerns and nervousness and published a simple, lighthearted article on the topic of the year 2000 and the upcoming congress; but unfortunately, the editor made a typo on page 3, which did not go unnoticed. The former (the lighthearted article, of course, not the congress) earned me a multi-page, complimentary letter to the editor, the praise of which culminated in a flattering comparison to the works of the famous Israeli humorist Ephraim Kishon.

The joy over this and the annoyance over the many complaints concerning the stupid typo that had so shamelessly exposed my overly lax research were initially swirled around with plenty of cognac, then my name swirled around to become a pseudonym; and all these swirls then led to the following melancholy reflection (and more cognacs, of course).

May EK forgive me!

Ornella Muti, who longingly stretches her arms towards me, bursts into a thousand pieces when the wretched cucumber starts chirping. I grope hastily in the dark for the device (the cucumber, as

you've surely noticed, is my mobile phone) and simultaneously try to decipher the luminous numbers on my wristwatch: '3! What an idiot...

"Yes, please?" I whisper, glancing anxiously towards the other side of the bed, where Ornella's predecessor stirs briefly, then falls back asleep. "This is Ephraim K., the famous humorist," croaks the voice on the other end of the line, "I'd like to speak to the editor-in-chief!"

A cold sweat breaks out instantly. Taxi to Vienna Airport, plane to Tel Aviv, hotel room, three suitcases. How on earth...?

"The editor-in-chief and my wife have already retired for private business, so I can't possibly disturb them, Your Excellency," I say hoarsely, and add just to be safe: "I'm only the First Secretary. But how did you come to the conclusion that we're in Israel today?"

In my mind's eye, I see Ephraim K., the famous humorist, smiling slyly: "I have some connections there. No, seriously: my friend Jossele saw him, along with his wife and luggage cart, at Tel Aviv airport this evening."

"That was the AUA cabin steward," replied the baggage handler, "who accompanied my best friend and us to the hotel; we are here for the Annual Meeting, which will take place in Jerusalem in June."

"I know, I know! So what is it, can I speak to the so-called editor-in-chief now?"

"Unfortunately not, Your Grace, I really can't disturb you right now." A pleasantly warm wave of power washes over me, the subjugated creature. "But I could certainly do something," I add vaguely, in a fit of magnanimity and peasant cunning. The bait always works —at least with Viennese local politicians.

General knowledge, yes, but at 3 a.m.?

"All right, take a note," growls Ephraim K., the famous humorist, and I fumble around on the floor for the cigarette pack, among socks, beer cans, and remnants of the Jerusalem Post. "In the last issue, the great master made a huge blunder; he apparently not only didn't understand the whole leap year thing, but also published misleading information on page 3. If that isn't an embarrassment! So, I want to lend him a hand—colleague to colleague, so to speak—even though he apparently has never heard of me, the greatest humorist," he adds, somewhat piqued.

"Are you even listening to me?" he asks, and I hurry to hum "Hmm-Hmm" into the phone while my eyes greedily wander around searching for the damned lighter.

"Go ahead, Your Eminence, I just quickly grabbed my notepad," I lie cheerfully and blissfully take a deep, first drag.

"So, you don't need to say goodbye to February 29th for the next eight years, as mentioned in your rag. The year 2000 is a leap year!" I'm about to blurt out that he's the eleventh caller about this embarrassing matter, but then I manage to keep my mouth shut. "Perhaps you should do some explaining about leap years," says Ephraim K., the most famous humorist between the Elbe and Euphrates rivers, condescendingly.

Leap year, nighttime reconnaissance

“The first thing you need to do is get rid of ‘Pope Julian’; that gaffe is simply too embarrassing. There was a Pope Julian around 300 AD, and then another one around 1700, so forget it. Tell your people that the term ‘Julian calendar’ is named after Julius Caesar, and that it was the great Gaius Julius Caesar (100-44 BC) who, returning victorious from campaign in 46 BC, found a miserably inaccurate military calendar in Rome, stolen from the Persians, and was annoyed that his victory, which he had won six weeks earlier, would actually only take place in three days. Furious, he decreed that this year (46 BC, mind you) should have 455 days, and thus 15 months. Then he smashed the curtain against the door and had himself rowed to Egypt in a galley. - Do you have that?” “Of course, that’s truly interesting news,” I pretend, yawning and watching with interest the tiny beetle that is kicking across the bedsheet on six legs.

“So, Julius not only courted Cleopatra in Egypt, but also rummaged around in the pharaonic archives (one needs breaks now and then, haha). There he actually found the decree of Pharaoh Ptolemy III from the year 238 BC, in which the gifted astronomer Canopus calculated the tropical solar year as 365.2422 days and the synodic lunar month as 29.5306 days, and from this deduced with razor-sharp logic that every three years with 365 days must be followed by one with 366 days. Julius was delighted with this discovery and immediately ran to Cleopatra, the beautiful one, and together they devised his new Roman calendar: 11 months with 30 or 31 days, a 12th month, February, with 28 days, and every fourth year with 29 days, as well as a bright boy named Caesarion, were the result of this.” “Fruitful cooperation, hahaha.” I don’t know why he laughs like that every now and then, but older citizens find some things so funny.

“But was this calendar accurate enough?” I interject, feigning interest, while I leaf through the Hebrew Gideon Bible I found in the hotel room’s bedside table in frustration, trying to at least figure out which end was which. Besides, I’m sick of all this calendar nonsense: as if the Roman Christian calendar were the only one! There’s the

Jewish, the Islamic, and who-knows-what calendar, why doesn't he bother with them too?

"Young man," the humorous figure continued, "you have no idea what Julius left behind in Rome. No, it wasn't just the ill-fated year 46 with its 455 days. Many years earlier, the Romans had already completely overhauled the Persian war calendar; the year ended on February 24th with the festival of the god Terminus (not related to 'train station,' but the originator of our New Year's Eve fireworks) and began, still sensibly Persian, on March 1st, but continued with solar and lunar months of varying lengths, ending in a February with 22 or 23 days. The months themselves had three fixed points: the 1st day (the calendar), the Nones (the 5th or 7th day), and the Ides (on the 13th or 15th day). The other days were specified in relation to the next fixed point (the 11th was 'two days before the Ides'). In doing so, the Romans also invented something like an intercalary month (the Mercedonius)." (began after February 23rd) to compensate for inaccuracies. These leap days between February 24th and March 1st (Latin "bis sextum ante calendas martias") are still found today in French (année bissextile) and Italian (anno bisestile) for the leap year. Furthermore, after Caesar's assassination, the Romans moved the beginning of the year in 43 BC to January 1st, the day the consuls took office (as the Viennese local politicians were called in ancient Rome), where it remains to this day. Nevertheless, even this ingenious Julian calendar had a flaw that would not be corrected until a millennium and a half later: the annual average was 12 minutes, or more precisely 11 minutes and 12 seconds, too long. Ephraim K., the famous humorist, takes a short, weary break, which allows me to gently place the miniature Hebrew, who had fallen off the bed, back onto the bedsheet so that he can continue to wander around on the yellowed lettering of HOLIDAY INN JERUSALEM.

Leap year, a papal stroke of genius

"Now it's coming!" "Write that down verbatim!" exclaims the master of humor. "In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII (the Thirteenth, EK adds didactically) had finally had enough of having lunch served at 9:30 in the morning, hearing the Angelus bell ring at 2:45 instead of 5:00, and, even worse, having to pay extra interest annually at the Banco di Roma for 11 minutes and 12 seconds. So, one day, while he was just casually watching the chubby-cheeked, blond-haired Roman altar boys sack-racing in the Sistine Chapel and Maestro Michelangelo painting frescoes, he had a sudden epiphany: a division hastily scribbled in the centuries-old dust showed the correctness of the papal flash of inspiration: one only needed to make every fourth of the centennial years (the turn of the century) leap years, and there one had approximately..." Twelve minutes (including interest) were saved or gained. Thus, the rules were immediately refined in 1582: Every fourth year of a century is a leap year, but not the centennial years (those ending in 00, you cultural pigs), unless they are evenly divisible by 400. Thus, 1600 became a leap year (Gregory XIII financed a small weekend campaign with the interest to give the Pisans a good thrashing), and 2000 will also be one.

Leap year OK, everything OK

"Then everything's fine," I say, turning the squirming little baby onto his back and trying to numb him with cigarette smoke, "so we've had a flawless calendar for a good 400 years now..." But the eloquent champion of humor immediately interrupts me: "What are you thinking! Nothing's fine! Of course, this is just a patchwork solution; this four-hundred-year rule doesn't really solve the problem, because as early as the year 4300, an extra leap day will be needed to correct this papal amendment again! Besides, what do you mean, 'for 400 years'? Oh, you and your AS/400 number game! No, in reality, this calendar regulation only applied to the papal sphere of influence from 1582 onwards; the Swiss canton of Valais, for example, only followed suit in 1583, the Japanese in 1873, and the Greeks not until 1923. And your editor-in-chief probably only in 2012." The humor grandee quips, laughing briefly and grumblingly, as if it were a joke.

So we gossiped for a while longer about whether Canopus was just an advisor and astronomer, or perhaps even a brother of the Pharaoh, etc. yawn-yawn-yawn, then I let the cucumber slowly slide to the floor with sleepy eyes and think of Ornella, her slanted green-gray eyes, her full lips, how she lisps through her sweet little gap in her teeth: "...let the old year be the old year, sweet little Russty..." and the voice of the greatest humorist of all time continues to squawk from the cell phone, quieter and quieter and quieter....

Rust van Idas,

First Editorial Secretary

Leap Year, an Afterword:

Instead of this epically broad feature article, a four-line sentence would have sufficed:

"Correction: In our last issue, page 3, a small error crept in regarding the year 2000: the Julian calendar was developed by Julius Caesar in 46 BC. The correction of the annual difference of 12 minutes was made in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII: every year divisible by 400 is also a leap year, period."

MMG, editor's wife

Chief Tecumseh

Another newspaper appointment was coming up, and once again I had only been thinking about earning money, car repairs, and accompanying my child on their week at the country school, and I hadn't written a single article.

Atlanta is home not only to Coca-Cola, but also to IBM research facilities and our next computer congress. The best computer club magazine I'd ever had as editor-in-chief lay languidly stretched out on the hard drive, eagerly awaiting my messages. Time was of the essence, and I really had to act quickly—in a one-man operation, what I'd learned in the course on proper delegation is difficult to put into practice—I don't know why. Nevertheless, a true, full-blooded editor doesn't give up and uses the internet to fill the pages.

Not everything in this article is true—with one possible exception: my computer magazine was probably the best you've ever read. Some things are completely made up, brand names are mixed up, manufacturers too—I don't want any lawsuits, after all. Nevertheless, you'll recognize some of it from your own experience, or will soon. You'll go online at some point, won't you? You have email, don't you? Are you "in" yet?

It must be said at some point that many a veteran programmer has been shipwrecked on these newfangled data highways. And that this was less often due to the veteran programmer's own fault than you think or than we are led to believe.

For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that all of this happened "back then, in the day." These days, internet connections are completely trouble-free and incredibly fast, modems and lines work perfectly, and of course, the stork still brings babies…

Perhaps you too have a mailbox like mine: in the hallway by the front door, all the residents' mailboxes are lined up in a long row. When you get home, you grab your briefcase in one hand, your cell

phone in your mouth, and your keys in the other. Then you unlock the mailbox, flip open the narrow door—yes, there's a lot of mail again—and then you drag the scoundrels out of the mailbox in bundles. If they'll let themselves be dragged, that is.

Sometimes someone sends a thick manual or Microsoft its latest price list; then it can be quite a hefty package, and you have to tug and pull at this monstrosity until it comes out—more or less undamaged. Phew, done, but it almost got stuck in the narrow doorway.

Last week it happened again. Of course, I'm no longer a punch-card dinosaur, and naturally, I don't receive my mail via a post office box anymore; I'm in the e-business world now! Naturally, I've been posting more or less successfully via internet email for the past few years. There have been a few hiccups here and there, but all in all, it works (when it works, which is often not the case). Objectively speaking, my communication frenzy has only increased, because it's now incredibly easy to send a few lines across the Atlantic. Previously, such a call would end with a glance at my Swatch (it's 3:15 a.m. in Toronto now) or with the first few pages of the phone book (a minute costs €27.50).

But e-business is the way to go! As the editor of a market-leading trade magazine (you're holding it in your hands), I have email contact with most of the authors/editors – that's my e-business. Yes, readers can also reach me directly and without bureaucratic nonsense (come on, they'd need a stamp on that, wouldn't you?) via our website or my personal email address. Maybe I should publish my first time in the "My First Time" section (BRAVO has a "My First Time" section too!).

My first time

I, a wired PC user, can join in for around $25. A fairly straightforward identification process at IBMNET, insert the floppy disk, type INSTALL. Snore snore, and completely unexpectedly: it installs without any ominous MRI-xxxx or other error messages! Joy! Emotion! Fatherly pride! What's your name, which is your nearest IBM dial-up node (select your phone number from the drop-down list), your credit card number, or do you want to cancel (back in the day, it was: money or life)? And that's essentially it. 30-day trial, after which it becomes a monthly subscription of, as already mentioned, about 0.25 kiloshillings, or $25 per month. And it would be worth it, if...

Or rather, if not.

Joy in the newsroom. Baby sparkling wine and a bag of peanuts are offered to the gods. Almost everyone and everyone connected to the editorial team now has an internet address. IBM employees, of course, all do, and anyone without internet access is simply out of touch.

Pure bliss and semolina pudding. Atlanta, here I come! Well. No matter how much the Atlanteans might advertise, I just don't like the CoCoLaLaLight. The best are still, in my opinion, the old 0.2-liter bottles, which, half-empty, can be topped up with White Coruba Rum. Just a side note, though; in truth, Courvoisier Dreistern surpasses both.

Of course, I'm still struggling with the quirks of this tiny computer. I wonder how unfair the world is that products like Windows for Workgroups or Windows of this quality make a man like, say, Bill G., the richest private individual in the world; others, like me, type their fingers to the bone and then buy a well-maintained new car (four years old) with only 120,000 km on the clock. Sigh! Goodbye, world!

But—where was I? Oh yes, I wanted to say something about the internet. It certainly takes a while to get used to the tools, especially

for a seasoned screen voodoo practitioner like myself. Of course, I haven't really been able to surf properly yet, because my Netscape is incompatible with my co-user's Netscape, who has a university-level version at a discounted student rate and me as his father. It will surely be just as obvious to you as it is to me that Netscape can't possibly be compatible with Netscape, obviously! (Any questions?)

I don't have time to surf the web, I have to work and earn money. So, I'll just use the email part of the internet for myself, and we'll look at Hugh Hefner's colorful pictures with "his" Netscape. Okay. If you haven't yet wondered what word roots Netscape might be composed of (net = network, scape = abbreviated Escape), then that's probably a good thing, because you're a computer specialist, not an etymologist.

The email program (it's called EULALIA) is right up my alley. It's great how clicking on the "Help" button reveals a single, green line. I vaguely remember that in OS/2, green in the Help screens meant "more behind it" (i.e., hypertext). So, I cheerfully clicked on the green text with my nimble hand (the arrow is long gone), and a paid registration form from Qualcomm for EULALIA appeared (let's spare you the details). This registration form beamingly announced that I would then receive more emails from this company from time to time; all I needed to do was fill out this form and submit it with the button. Thank you for using EULALIA. But that doesn't really help me; I need Help right now to actually look at my emails.

Well, that's what friends are for. One of them just came by my fridge and said, "Griaßdioidawigetzda." Beaming, I told him about my EULALIA, which I still don't really know much about. He quickly grabbed a small snack from my fridge, then sat down with his legs wide apart in front of the PC and started clicking this and that. Suddenly, a name directory (NICKNAMES) appeared. He said, "Go on, give me your addresses," and typed in some of the names along with their web addresses. Then he clicked here and there and in the top right corner, and then it said, "New Mail, No Subject, No Recipient." My English is just good enough to guess "New letter, no subject, no recipient," then he launches into it and writes to the randomly selected address at the top: "Tscharli. servas ooida hab grad beim Is-

chwan eulalia zum laufn brecht der hirsch weiß ned amoi wo er was ei-tippn soi. Pfiatdi, xandl" and before I can even say "giggles," he does a monkey grip SEND click and off it goes. (Haven't heard from Tscharli since).

See, it's that easy. I ask him how things work with manuals and such at EULALIA. With a broad grin (which I only allow my friends to do without reservation), he blurts out, "No manual, intuitive user interface." "Aha!" I say, completely bewildered. It's somehow related to his endless car analogies; oh yes, "If you can drive one, you can drive them all," or something like that. It'll take at least three months, though, if they catch you... Intuitive user interface, and I, the idiot, write a 30-page manual for my customers' intuitive interfaces. Oh well, I can always improve on that.

When he returns from the refrigerator, I ask what this is all about now; I'm completely bewildered. The "demon" sends me a "Non-Delivery Report," or rather, a "non-delivery report from the evil spirit." I'm informed that the address I entered, "I4atdi-aus.abaI@traumi.net. komm," is incorrect. A tedious search ensues, oh yes, a minor typo. A thunderous laugh and a resounding slap on my left shoulder; he seems to know Monika's email address as well. "Bring me a little more, then I'll explain everything to you," and so it happens. Soon enough (dawn is already breaking, it seems to me), I'm able to send a message to my friend Alex, attach a Word document to my message, and it arrives.

At least that's what I believe.

Far from it. After an hour and a half, another daemon informed me that the message could not be processed. After deciphering the jumble of English abbreviations that appears at the beginning of every email (if you want to call it that, I know), it turns out that the recipient (an AS/400) couldn't process the Word document. Ah yes, compatibility. I'd forgotten again that you shouldn't put gasoline in a diesel engine (thanks for that helpful example, Alex!).

Email, the wonderful message in a bottle. If I write a message on my completely outdated, yesterday's terminal, I immediately get an

error message without delay if the user ID is incorrect or the user is not online, etc. We'll have to get used to it.

My friend Alex pops in briefly from the kitchen ("Hey, I'm leaving now. Because this isn't working. Every time I come, your fridge is empty. I really don't know what you understand by friendship. Bye."). I'm also surprised that the fridge is empty again.

Internet light

Two months have passed. Around 300 emails are stored on my PC, roughly 700MB. I'll probably have to buy a new hard drive, or get rid of some documents. Printing would also be an alternative to a paperless office. It's great that everything has already been so well thought out.

A week ago I discovered: now I can only write. Yes, I can no longer read, or in other words: I can't collect my mail. Then a POP3.CA.US....andsofort. contacted me and said I no longer exist! User RUDAS does not exist, please enter your password: ******.

Seventeen times I tried to pick up mail (CHECK MAIL). Seventeen times nothing. So no connection, the post office won't release anything without—well, without what exactly? I entered my password KAKERLAK a dozen times, always getting OK, then some certain MIME SERVER said, "You do not exist," the sad genie in a bottle! Or how else would you describe the DAEMON of a message in a bottle?!

Well, with the terminal, I know how to help myself, I call the operator and say: this and that isn't working, do something, please!

It probably works the same way with the internet; if my password expires or something, then he should just give me a new one. Wait—who the hell is the internet operator, anyway? And, just out of curiosity, where is he? All I know is that the internet is a system of many, many thousands of interconnected computers. But which one is "the system"?

Now I need to go to the fridge (it's restocked) and get some good advice. After the second or third piece of advice, I remember that there's a funny little reception bell icon in the top left corner of the internet dialer (you remember: Franco Nero rings the bell at the bar in "A Fistful of Dollars" before he starts shooting). By now I'm desperate enough to negotiate with any receptionist—er, operator—even if he's Django or Quasimodo himself. I click on it (now his bell

should ring) and—a form appears. Open a new account, change an existing account… no, that wasn't it. Yeah, where is he then?

Then, way down at the bottom, I discover HELP. I click, and a lot of text comes rushing out. I work my way through it, learn a lot about the people at IBM who write these texts—they also prefer manuals—and after some enjoyable reading (manuals are sometimes better than intuition), I find the US phone numbers where you can call toll-free. Of course, that doesn't apply to me (I already had this experience with satellite TV: you can't call the attractive women toll-free from Austria, no matter how good that sounds). Oh, there's something else… local support. Ha! After the inevitable click, a dropdown list appears (well, a list expands in a little window) with the numbers of the worldwide country helpdesks. Yeah! Austria 0660 and something. I call: there's no one there except for the beeping. Helpdesk lite! Does anyone at IBM actually believe that these new helpdesks are worth even a single penny? Truly "valuable"?

Now good advice is hard to come by; a bit of business consulting is needed, so to speak. The fridge is on fire, and Jennifer graciously lends me my key to the bar cabinet. Speaking of business consulting! The saving idea: I'll write to a well-known figure at IBM. No sooner said than done. I know my contacts; he'll get it tomorrow, then I'll call, and so on. And to think some people say a visit to István's Bar isn't worthwhile!

The next day everything will be wonderfully clear (that will surely be tomorrow, I assume, because I can't wait any longer for the help desk to finally get around to writing this article), and my IBM colleague will certainly owe me a piece of good advice or two. Gladly! But what does someone who doesn't know anyone at IBM drink?

Ah, I see. My proofreader asks what "Internet light" is supposed to mean in the headline. Well, I've become quite light on these time-consuming squabbles. It's a light experience until you get this email business somewhat under control. And I feel light on all those who still have it ahead of them.

Chief Tecumseh

Two hunters meet in the woods (admittedly, a very short joke); Friedl and I meet online, “Hey, hi, how’s it going? Can you send me something for the newspaper again? — Yes, I’ll email it to you, I’m currently in Budapest. — Okay, see you later then!” — Actually, this e-business is quite simple, isn’t it?

The very next day, during my sacred morning routine of a cigarette, coffee, shower, yogurt muesli, and the hallowed mail-collection ceremony (in which the “abholze” is only coincidentally included: but the automatic spell checker always suggests “Abholzen” here…) are all supposed to be handled one after the other, I stop short, so abruptly that my cigarette falls right past my coffee cup and into my muesli: mail from Hungary! Aha, Friedl is sending his tips and tricks for the newspaper!

A brief but important architectural digression to illustrate my privacy: my apartment is divided into two parts by a long, narrow corridor: the office/editorial room and the engine room on one side, the private quarters (large audience hall, princess’s bedroom, kitchen and pantry as well as the bathrooms) on the other.

So, I’m pacing impatiently in my underwear between the office and the Blue Lounge (TV room), waiting for the “Ping! You have new Mail!” from the email program, glancing back and forth between the internet and Eurosport. The thing just keeps transmitting and transmitting and transmitting, and then finally pings! but only to laconically inform me: Error 10060 timed out by SMTP server.

Ah, I know that one. So, I quickly remixed the muesli in the kitchen, then went back to the PC and cheerfully clicked “Check Mail.” My email program then hooked itself powerfully into the IBM network, winding its way past Paris and Ostend directly to Rosslare in Ireland, and from there under the Atlantic to New York, to connect to the smtp-pop3 server of ca.us.ibmnet—that nimble little devil!

I get up to get my yogurt, nut, and nectarine muesli, but freeze mid-movement, which turns into a frozen pirouette: Ping! Error 10060 Timed Out by SMTP Server.

"Honey," chirps a voice from the bedroom, "can't you even fix the socket? The hairdryer's not working!" Beware when a sentence contains "not," so first, a bit of time-saving (double-click on "Hang up," then "Do you really want to hang up at this time?", "Yes + Click") and then straight to the bedroom. A light tap of the elbow on the socket, the ends of the hairdryer's plug are briefly bent apart (why can't the engineers at the manufacturer just produce such bent plugs for broken sockets as standard?!), and then it's whirring again, my sweetie, but I scamper back to the office.

Two timeouts during two bowls of cereal—I haven't had this much bad luck in ages! I log back into the global conflagration (IGNIS, short for IBM Global Network and Information Services, means "conflagration" or "global conflagration" in Latin). Attempts two and three unexpectedly fail after 20 minutes each, and my better half bids me farewell with, "It's not working, honey? Oh, don't take too long, you have an appointment at 9!", then vanishes in a massive cloud of perfume. Tirelessly, I start attempts four and five, then my patience and the next 45 minutes are up, and I inwardly curse the sender of such a timeout-prone mess. For God's sake, what is he writing in such grandiose terms that the server keeps pinging?

To add a special touch: I have a major customer problem to solve—now, and fast, please!—and I seem to have exhausted the possibilities of the local IBM support team. I've been waiting for days for a helpful response from the IBM lab overseas. And with each attempt, I stare at the screen, where I can see that behind this large egg, there are five more packages waiting to be picked up. Inwardly, I'm chomping at the bit with impatience.

Late in the afternoon, I nervously left the client's office and logged back into the email system. Ahh, now it's working! I stared intently at the screen, watching the blue bar slowly count down the hours. "DECODING TIPSUND6.DOC" was now displayed, as the first five at-

tempts had failed miserably. Then, as the timer reached about 75%, the screen flashed briefly, and Error 10060 reappeared—damn it!

Hang up to optimize my phone bill, and I pace back and forth a bit. A new form of reminder? No, I have direct debit. Is my email software...? Sorry. No, it's not even two years old yet and is just entering puberty, right? What else could be causing the problem? My gaze falls on the backup device (Zip drive). The joystick. The mouse. The microphone. The dual speakers. The color flatbed scanner, the laser printer. Of course, the poor PC has to monitor all of this while I try to empty the mailbox! So I quickly grab my tools from the server room, a few turns of the power drill here, a few there, and the joystick, the scanner, the Zip drive, the speakers, the microphone (yes, that too, I can type the DOS commands instead of barking them) etc. are disconnected until the machine can finally breathe a sigh of relief. Sweating profusely, I take off my sweater and other clothes; I want to breathe freely, after all. Then I turn the PC back on and let the email program run wild, unleashed like a wild horse on the POP server, only to immediately (and that wasn't a pun) get the same ping error message again (10060).

My cry must have sounded like the death cry of the Comanches, because the office door was flung open: "Honey, what are you doing there, naked in front of the screen?!" I hastily covered myself with an 8" floppy disk (a 3" disk would have done too, editor's note) and replied: "The mail's stopped working!" She, now curious, crept closer with suspiciously bright eyes and asked: "Oh, and where are the colorful pictures, honey?" I'll just forget about the next hour.

(Later:) I'm sitting in front of the stripped-down PC, listening to Ravel's Bolero and brooding. Timeout error—somewhere, someone's time (what time?) is running out. I picture the mailbox in front of me. Messages arrive at the server via SMTP (Simple Mail Transaction Protocol), neatly queued one after the other, to be retrieved later using POP3 (Post Office Protocol 3). And there, first of all, is a thick package. The POP3 operator arrives, grabs his briefcase in one hand, puts his mobile phone in his mouth, and unlocks the mailbox with the key in the other, but then can't get the thick package through the door. Perhaps a neighbor (let's say old POP2, for example) comes

along and wants to get to his mailbox, but there's POP3 standing with his legs wide open in front of my mailbox, trying to pull out Friedl's big package, but he can't move forward or backward — so old POP2 punches POP3 and yells: "I want it too! I want it too! I want it too!" and throws him out with an Error 10060 Timed out.

Yes, that's how it should be. I quickly poured myself another Jaki (Russian nickname for cognac), then stared intently at the screen, took a deep breath, and the next attempt ended again—predictably—with a ping! What would Mr. Spock advise me to do now?

"Captain, people tend to get drunk on Jaki instead of solving their problems. A very strange behavior, sir!"

Oh, shut up, I need to concentrate. "No, seriously, sir, your excessive concentration is transmitting the vibrations of your overloaded—and I must add, alcohol-impaired—brain to the communicator, causing intermittent interference…" Shut up, you pointy-eared fool! All that talk about Allolo…Alloho…Alkolo…

Okay, fine. I settle into the swivel chair, let my feet dangle casually, tap the communicator very lightly with the mouse, refrain from any interruptions… interruptions… uhh, and grin just as coolly at Mr. Spock, who is silently concentrating on his consoles. There! After twenty minutes, it's happening again! 10060 — Ping! Well, Master Spock? Any suggestions?

I won't say a word about the nightmares (nightmares, according to Duden possible) of that night, except that neither Friedl nor IBM nor the SMTP server escaped unscathed, especially the snarky—pushy POP2 neighbor got a real beating… Why IBM, I don't know either, but if they were innocent this time, then it was for something else.

In the morning, I snap at my best friend when she brings me coffee to the computer, which I've been tinkering with for the past hour. She slips off silently to work, not without first hanging a ring of garlic over the door. I hear her spit over her left shoulder three times as she crosses the threshold, and I know she's trying to ward off evil spirits and the Intermi… Interfe… Interthingy. True love.

On a whim, I emailed Friedl, explaining my predicament and asking him to perhaps re-send the email, maybe in a smaller size or even in the correct format for Word 6.0. The brevity of my message must have alarmed him, because shortly afterward I saw in my inbox that there were now six items waiting to be collected. Seething inside, I thought to myself, "Surely the email programmers could have included a button (F2 or a click/there) so you can move a specific item to the back of the queue." But that would be asking too much. I wistfully recalled the (far more convenient) webmail program my son uses, which first displays a list of all items and lets you decide whether or not to forward them. That would certainly save me from my current worries…

The reply from the US must have arrived long ago. Perhaps they're still waiting for supplementary answers from me; these kinds of communications often turn into real "talks." Damn it, I have to keep trying! Attempts 10 and 11 are over so quickly that I barely register the concurrent news report about the life's work of Aldo Castignani, the creator of the Superleggera sports cars. In fact, I even get the impression that the ping! comes just as I'm settling comfortably into my armchair. Who knows, maybe?

Attempt 12: A cautiously cool start to the conversation, a casually whistling stroll out, then standing next to the armchair in the Red Salon. It works! Just don't sit down! Hooray! The blue bar gets longer and longer, Aldo is handing over the reins of the Superleggera to his son Sergio, and ping!, it's happened again. So television has nothing to do with the email problem after all, thank Gates!

During attempt number 13, I patiently stand next to the PC, mute the interview with Sergio using the remote control, and don't make a sound. The progress bar grows longer and longer, and I can't stand the hunger any longer. I tiptoe into the hallway, turn right towards the kitchen, and ping! It's over. Tears of rage mix with the mustard spread, soaking the pickle, and I'm furious, absolutely furious, and I almost bite my own tongue in anger as I chew the jam-mustard-pickle sandwich.

What was always the same? Let's analyze this. Time out. What if the programmer entered a cryptic error code? 10060—it could just as easily mean he doesn't want an improperly dressed person sitting in front of the computer. I was mostly only lightly dressed, and I know from experience how, for example, soldiers react to that (even if only a single uniform button is undone): Fall over! (=ten push-ups, in case you weren't in the army). I shower and comb myself and my beard thoroughly, get dressed, and then spray a generous amount of Eau des Marineurs Bleus Supérieur under my arms.

Attempt number 14, fragrant, perfectly dressed, and impeccably groomed, is a complete flop. Defiantly, I switch off the PC, hop into my "Not-quite-Superleggera" car, and purr over to the client. A rather sensible person who won't make us miserable with e-business.

In the evenings, I really don't feel like dealing with the mail anymore. I listlessly start attempt number 15, go to the laundry room (excuse me, but that's the kitchen, where there's also a washing machine), and empty this oh-so-perfectly-functioning machine (an intelligent, not-yet-internet-connected product) and wait and wait for the ping!, but it doesn't come! Seriously? Can I believe it? After finishing my domestic chores, I tiptoe across the corridor, around the corner, and stare at the beam that's slowly growing and growing. Like an Indian (let's say Winnetou, or better yet, Tecumseh, not everyone knows him), I slowly lower myself and creep on all fours across the office parquet floor to the mail machine, slowly wriggle my way up the swivel chair, and

Ping! Well, I need to catch my breath first. A hundred kilos of Indian weight on all fours takes energy, doesn't it? As I close my eyes, I watch as a thousand tiny explosions behind my eyelids signal the racing pulse of the alerted Gesamtkunstwerk "István." Retinal reflections of the back of the eye, yes indeed, Professor. Reflections of the background? Wide awake, I open my eyes, shake my fist at the communicator, Mr. Spock, and Chief Tecumseh, and start the 16th attempt. I know this one will do it. When I'm finally in the mail server, that window is there again: PROGRESS "Decoding Tipsun16.doc". If I now move the mouse (arrow) beyond PROGRESS (at which point it flashes through my mind that one of the parts of the malfunctioning

Russian space station MIR is also called PROGRESS), this arrow transforms into an hourglass (Bill must be the name, and have plenty of time!). Meanwhile, the blue bar, which indicates the progress of the process, jerks imperceptibly by a tenth of a point to the right — that's it, reflections against the background.

I sit there, jerking the mouse up and down, the arrow becomes an hourglass, the hourglass an arrow… the bar grows and grows. Slowly, with my other hand, I fully dress myself while the arrow and the hourglass alternate, send up silent prayers to Mr. Spock, and kneel Tecumseh-style next to the swivel chair, and the bar slowly gets longer and longer, and I couldn't care less that my dearest love is now standing frozen in the office doorway, watching this unusual charade with her mouth agape. The main thing is that the bar keeps growing and growing…

This ritual takes 45 minutes and 23 seconds until the bar reaches the far right and the second, and I can't believe it, the third, and hurray! the fourth, the fifth, and the last email are processed in rapid succession, and a new image appears: "You have new mail! Ping!"

Irish splinters

Ninety-six percent of the members of our computer club didn't attend the annual congress in Dublin; presumably, fear of flying, the long distance, or lamenting the wasted kerosene would be cited as the main reasons for their absence if we were to ask (but we won't, because we're not stupid and know perfectly well that the reasons are entirely different). Four percent, however—fearless flyers who couldn't care less about fuel consumption—were there, so it would undoubtedly be despicable of me to bore them again here with my subjective impressions of the congress. Which, it should be mentioned, satisfied neither my sailing interests nor my natural curiosity about the mating behavior of the seven-spotted cockchafer, but rather offered very little in the way of nautical or zoological information, with its dry topics such as Java, the internet, SMTP servers, and programming languages.

Into this dilemma, the fact that I embarked on a week-long (and wonderful) tour of Ireland immediately after the congress in Dublin struck like a deep impact: I didn't waste a single second of my precious free time on AS/400, OS/400, or anything else/400. Instead, I immersed myself in the country and its people, opened myself (and my wallet) to the lovely Irish folk, and completely forgot that a system change, the next newspaper, and the unresolved problem of a cubic, eight-dimensionally nested sales statistic awaited me in Vienna. So sit back and let's read together what my ThinkPad has to offer.

I must first explain two women's names: Deirdre is that know-it-all, elderly secretary and gray eminence of our association, with whom I had a bitter, public debate since the congress in Jerusalem, as I couldn't understand why congresses were held in places where the bombs speak for themselves. — Fiona, on the other hand, is her friendly, capable (designated) successor, with whom I got along famously—almost out of spite.

This headline came about when I tried to translate one of the charming Irish sayings I encountered along the way: “If you slip down the Bannisters of Life, may the Splinters not point the wrong way” or something similar, meaning “If you slip down the banister of life, may the splinters not point in the wrong direction!”

Deirdre’s astonishing question, “…and where are your bombs now, huh?!” I couldn’t answer the day before yesterday in Dublin. However, today, Sunday, June 21, 1998, the radio (Belfast Channel, FM 100.6) broadcast hourly: “A bomb exploded in Belfast last night, shattering hundreds of windows. Thank God no one else was hurt, as a warning from the IRA was received in time. — A 27-year-old man was seriously injured by four gunshot wounds to the backs of his knees and ankles. These appear to be traditional punishment shots. — A car bomb in Armagh today, June 25, 1998, killed two people and injured a dozen others. The National Liberation Front (INLA) claims responsibility for this attack on the eve of the Northern Ireland elections…” There they are, Deirdre, there they are, even if you don’t notice much of it on your golf course. I approach Ireland respectfully, but with a keen ear; not on the golf course, but in the pedestrian zone, among the drinkers, minstrels, and street prostitutes: that’s where you’ll find me.

The stupid sheep

With Deirdre's second astonishing question (and Deirdre, as you surely know, can indeed ask the most astonishing questions), I'd like to begin my report: "...well, where are all your women now, the ones you always surround yourself with, huh?!" Arnold, Beatrix, and Wolfgang stare at me silently, and I sit there with an embarrassed expression. What a question! First of all: they're still to come! Secondly: my readers have long since realized that my women (doesn't sound as sleazy as "women") are exactly here, in the newspaper: wonderful, exotically erotic, yet banal creatures of my imagination, whom I naturally couldn't take with me on such an arduous journey. So much, dear Deirdre, for your "topless" question. Well, to round off the transition to the rest of my report: when I arrived at the car rental agency to pick up the car, I suddenly burst out laughing so loudly that the poor Irishman serving me looked at me, slightly bewildered and concerned: "Deirdre, just imagine, I didn't take this trip with Michiko, the exotic Japanese photo model, but with a Japanese starlet, a real starlet (from Toyota)!" Even though I immediately realized I was risking an angry email from you, I laughed very, very heartily at your expense.

Admittedly, my Starlet was very tightly built; after all, thirty liters of excess weight had to be stowed behind the steering wheel. But I'm used to that from the Prater amusement park: go-karting in Ireland! Second observation: it's much, much more persistent than that one. It happened in the parking lot of a roadside restaurant: I got out and strolled off, and there it was, rolling right after me, the sheep! I just managed a skillful maneuver as a Starlet-catcher and pushed the stupid thing back into place. From then on, the Starlet was called Dolly, the silly sheep, which always had to be carefully moored in the parking lot. But from then on, I also knew what that annoying lever between the front seats was actually good for: the only problem was that in some parking lots, the tow rope turned out to be much too short for mooring!

Merlin I

I was sitting there all alone on a tree trunk in the Irish countryside, pondering what to write in my Thinkpad, when I suddenly heard a discreet cough beside me. Even though there hadn't been a soul around just a moment ago, there was now a rather costumed old man sitting next to me.

"I am Muirlinnhe," he says, and I spontaneously add: "Oh yes, you are Merlin, who stole these old stones in Ireland and brought them to Stonehenge! King Arthur and all that…"

"Shhh, not so loud!" growled Merlin, glancing nervously all around, "that won't happen until next week, and if the warlike Picts (for non-Latin speakers: the ancient Irish) hear us, we'll be out of luck with the stones again! Besides, we still call Arthur Saint Camber, the Latins used to call him Rhiathamus, and it wasn't until the 11th century that the French would call him King Arthur."

"Merlin, old chap, you really do know everything in advance! How are you doing, and how did you even get here, when the wicked Morgane La Fay imprisoned you in the enchanted forest near Douarnenez and…"

"Don't remind me of that unfortunate story! Yes, I wandered blindly and aimlessly through the enchanted forest, but after a thousand years the spell was suddenly lifted as if by itself and…"

"Oh, I know that one!" I interrupt Merlin, perhaps a little rudely, "the counter goes to 998, 999, and then it hits 000! Then it's: Bingo, make your bet, rien ne va plus! We call it the Y2K paradox. Y2K stands for Year 2000, the Year 2000 problem," I add, trying to sound smart.

Then there was a "pop!", and Merlin was gone.

Port - Starboard

After what must have been an hour of zigzagging through Dublin's busy streets (nothing but wrong-way drivers, I tell you!), it occurred to me that the local president (Mrs. Mary Robbins) wanted to do something for women in this "Year of the Woman": so she decreed that from now on, women would be allowed to sit in the driver's seat, while men were (almost simultaneously) relegated to the passenger seat. But since the car industry knew from statistics that in many families only the men had a driver's license, they discreetly moved the steering wheel to the passenger seat as well. Thus, overnight, the left-hand driving rule came into being here, which we also know from the English and which seems rather strange to us, but on the other hand gives the otherwise severely oppressed Irish mums the feeling that they're in the right place. No, dads sit on the right! Mums sit on the left, as does the ashtray. So, now the confusion is complete, but I can't help that. Just ask Mary Robbins.

Instead of traffic lights, there are roundabouts. Imagine having to drive around a whole circle instead of going through every traffic light, trying to find the right exit: so, for example, if you have to go from the Südbahnhof (South Station) to Floridsdorfer Spitz, then good night, you'll arrive completely dazed, I promise! However, my cook told me after my return that I don't have to drive a whole circle every time, but only the section up to my turn. But then I ask you: why on earth is it called a roundabout? — Well, exactly! To you, dear readers, I'll reveal my recipe for driving on the left: I simply did everything wrong, and that made everything perfectly right again. Got it?

On the motorway from Dublin to Galway, I slowly got used to this strange wrong-way driving regulation and settled in. For example, the center of the road is marked not only with the usual center lines, but also with small, round metal inserts that reflect at night and are called bumpers. The only problem: when you change lanes, the tires bump every time they rumble over one of these metal things (that's why they're called bumpers), which made me a bit nervous. My Starlet is still quite new, not even 600 miles (or kilometers?) old. So I

started to fervently practice skillful slalom driving to avoid these bumpers, even developing a certain mastery at changing lanes quickly without bumping. Until the Garda, the local police, let me continue on my way after two hours, a stricter breathalyzer test, and 50 Irish pounds lighter. Party poopers!

You can recognize the continental driver, the driver from the mainland, where the mothers sit on the right (etc., oh well, just read above), by their strained, hunched-over posture, their pursed lips, and their oh-so-typical slow driving. Knowing these facts, I sped through the countryside, usually belting out Hamburg pub songs or sea shanties from Lake Neusiedl, my shoulders dutifully hunched. I greeted every tractor driver and trekking biker with a beaming, jovial wave before my slipstream blew them into the ditch. How I rejoiced when—sweeping down from the Twelve Pins mountains—I spotted the line of cars crawling slowly uphill, driven by tourists from the continent! You should have seen me then, hurtling down the mountain in a massive cloud of dust like a thunderstorm, belting out the Andreas Hofer song and sending the bewildered continental crawlers sprawling into the ditch! The World Cup? Me? — Nah, I don’t need that!

Dr. Rudas

The language situation is also a bit tricky. Actually, it's not a problem at all, since the country is bilingual: Irish (that is, Celtic/Gaelic) and English; so you can take your pick. But what kind of English is that! Irish people don't usually like talking to English people, but once they've figured out that there are no kangaroos in Austria, they thaw out and start talking. Quickly, incorrectly, and incessantly. That's what happened to me at the Kilkee diving center, about 30 km south of the Cliffs of Moher (note: mohair refers to the curly-haired sheep and their wool; the word itself is Persian and has nothing to do with the Cliffs of Moher, as I was surprised to learn).

So, there I am, sitting on the pier in Kilkee, feeding the seagulls (whose names you'll soon learn) and watching the divers bustling about. The people from the Marine Rescue Centre are excited, squawking along with the seagulls and running back and forth. I mean, something must have happened, because a dinghy comes racing around the jetty with a whoop of hooray, the dinghy crew jumps out, gesticulating wildly, a stretcher is brought in, and the neoprene-wrapped body of a casualty is hoisted onto it! One rescuer runs frantically to the Rescue Centre, talking on his walkie-talkie, others carry the stretcher, and a young female rescuer loudly counts "1, 2, 3, go!" pumping the victim's heart.

I leap from my deckchair (you know your István, he has to be right there at the front!) and, phone in hand, run the few steps up to the rescue hut. I ask one of the important-looking guys: "Do you need a doctor?" and think, "Now I can finally try out the 112 number and find out if an Irishman or an Austrian answers." The important guy looks at me, then says: "Come on, Doctor," and leads me into the hut. "Are you a doctor?" the busybody asks me again, and I truthfully reply that I'm just a hobby gynecologist. At that, the "dead woman" (because it was quite obvious she was a woman) completely loses it and roars, laughing and snorting, to everyone: "Hey, he's a spare-time gynecologist!" As it turns out, she, Jutta, is from Germany and very much alive. The whole thing is just a drill, and I, the idiot, stand there with my phone, staring. Jutta links arms with me, grills me in a

matter of minutes about where I come from, why I'm from, what I do, etc., then I'm allowed to buy the still grinning team a beer and meekly slip away.

Jutta caught up with me again in the parking lot, reassured me that it was good that outsiders were also spontaneously willing to help, and showed me around the rescue center; she seemed pleased to meet someone who spoke her language. At dinner, she showed me how to open Cornish crab crawls with a nutcracker and then pick the crabmeat out of the claws with a flattened knitting needle. Afterwards, I had to go to McDonald's because, although the crab was a lot of work, it wasn't filling.

Bed and breakfast is the perfect way to experience Ireland, although I would have preferred not to have to share breakfast with Jutta. (Deirdre, please: it's all a story! Made up! No Jutta involved! Just breakfast!).

The Irish breakfast deserves a description. So, first, coffee with milk and sugar, but without the harmful coffee beans. Milk soup with kernels or cornflakes with orange juice. A few slices of bread and toast and lightly salted butter; honey and jam with the salted butter for the truly clueless. Then, fresh and hot: a fried egg (for me), a slice of black pudding (yuck, Jutta gets that), two sausages (one for me), and two slices of bacon (both for me). To finish, a deep and satisfying Marlboro (Jutta rolls a joint, but only to annoy Deirdre).

An Irish couple in love

“My name is Henry,” says the big-eyed sheep to the squealing starlet, which is slowing down, “and Thusnelda is sitting over there.”

“Beep,” says the starlet, “beep, beep-beep!” The person presses the airbag again energetically. “Beep!”

“Yes, Cousin Angus had that too, you should maybe try three drops of honey in your tea!” says Henry, and Thusnelda turns her head to the starlet and says: “That affected city slicker! Pfft! She’s got a red-lacquered, sleek coat, probably belongs to old O’Brien. Ugh, and look at those big TVs!”

Henry trotted slowly over to Thusnelda and whispered to her: “A little more poise in front of strangers, my dear, if I may, and don’t bleat like a goat!”, and turning to the starlet he said: “Ah, you know, she’s having trouble with her digestion, that’s why she’s lying on the warm road now, it makes it easier for her to pass gas.”

“Toot-toot,” says the starlet impatiently, “toot-toot, toot-toot-toot!” With the Toyota, you honk with the airbag, funny, isn’t it?

Henry shakes his shaggy, yellowish-white fur, marked with a blue spray, and slowly retreats to Thusnelda. “You’re not very talkative today, Ma’m’selle,” he says to the starlet before slowly settling down on the road beside her. The starlet gives one last short growl before falling silent, and inside, a person can be seen frantically pounding on the airbag.

“She looks good, the lady,” Henry remarks to Thusnelda with a connoisseur’s eye, “her smooth, red fur seems to be all the rage in the city these days, doesn’t it?” “Oh, you men! You’re only looking at her tires anyway, you lecherous old goat!” Thusnelda sighs sadly, tears rising to her eyes in a sudden wave of self-pity, so she turns away and stares up at the mountains so that Henry, that dear old monster, won’t see her.

Meanwhile, the man had carefully heaved himself out of the Starlet when Henry said somewhat contemptuously: “Just look at him, my dear, he’s not good at wool! Just look at his bald head.....”, but he didn’t get any further, because I had had enough of it, and I pushed and shoved the two stupid creatures off the road, in order to continue on my way.

Map Reading I

It's really not difficult to find your way around Ireland. You just need to follow the signs; they're in English, Celtic, or both, and sometimes even in Italian (for example: Pizzeria Da Giovanni, 2km; pronounced: due chilometri). So, multilingual people have a certain advantage here, although languages aren't everything: distances given in kilometers and/or miles shouldn't pose any problem. And they wouldn't, if it weren't for the lingering realism in the tourist's brain that constantly wants to convert, because, as everyone knows, a mile is roughly 1,600 meters and some change. Or is it?! Today I came across a sign: an Ceirinn 7', below it: 21km. I'm baffled; these aren't nautical miles, and they're not statutory miles either, so where on earth do the 21km come from? I then picked up a hitchhiker; he chuckled briefly when I asked him about it, then he said (if I understood correctly): "Don't look at the signs, just drive along the road, and you'll get somewhere!" So that's what I did.

He was a bulldozer operator from Dingle, already smelled strongly of Guinness, and initially crossed himself at every little church we passed. As our journey progressed, he also crossed himself before, and later after, every bend, or while drifting through the peat bogs, and seemed generally prone to seasickness, this pale child of the Emerald Isle.

Even better, I could rely on the map (kindly provided by Fiona). I did have to spread it out on the back seat, though, to get the reading distance right. Glasses? Oh yes, where were they again—just a moment, let me rummage in my tourist bag—oh dear, my glasses are in my suitcase in the luggage storage in Dublin, along with my suit, tie, and conference materials. Bravo, maestro! But at least my spare pair is in the glove compartment (unfortunately, my car with said glove compartment is in Vienna...).

Never mind, I'm far-sighted (sometimes even precocious), so I first look ahead, read the signpost, then look back to locate the place on the map, then engage the clutch and shift into the next gear, signal left, and make a bold right turn! It makes an even better impres-

sion if you also hold your phone to your ear (though it doesn't necessarily have to be switched on). You can practically see the whites of the oncoming driver's eyes, honestly!

It's astonishing what kind of automatic habits a person can develop over a lifetime. Initially, I thought driving on the left (you know, when the mothers are behind the wheel) would be the biggest challenge: far from it! As a pedestrian in Ireland, I'm sure I looked the wrong way twice as often. The hardest part was getting used to the ashtray being on the left. No, don't laugh, I'm serious! Driving and smoking are clearly two completely different things in my mind, or rather, like slippers (left) and flippers (right). Turning the steering wheel with my right hand instead of my left: no problem. Shifting gears with my left hand, or using the handbrake when skidding in a peat bog, is also doable (the crucial drift zone after tight corners for us holiday racers is mostly a peat bog in Ireland, although the barriers are made of barbed wire!). But when I then reach over the steering wheel with my left hand and press the cigarette into the right door panel, and the plastic hisses and stinks with an ugly noise, then I know: oops, that wasn't the ashtray! That ashtray (namely the one to my right) is in Vienna! — You see: nobody's perfect.

Map Reading II

Back to glasses. No, not back to Dublin to the luggage storage, but back to the topic of glasses and map reading. I was joking with friends in a Dublin pub late one evening about the fact that the French wine cooperative Le Ventoux has recently started using Braille on its wine bottle labels: one could also use Braille on road maps and traffic signs… But one should really reconsider the whole wine bottle labels and Braille thing, this time very carefully. After all, one could also see it as a warning: anyone drinking this swill might then…

So now I was without glasses and reliant on my ability to confabulate (no, you don't even need to look it up in the dictionary: to confabulate means to make something up; indispensable for us club officials, by the way).

So, what do we have here? A big blue one, aha, the Atlantic. Then a small yellow-green sausage-shaped thing sticking out into the sea: the Connemara Peninsula. A dark brown one inside it—that's probably the Twelve Pins Mountains. Oh, look, a little line! That's surely the road through the mountains! Where's the sun? To the left. So (I turn the map upside down) the sea must now be to my left (yes, that's right, there's an oil tanker back there), the mountains to my right, and surely there must be a road somewhere?! That's how the memorable encounter with Henry and Thusnelda came about.

What was pleasant up there was that I was the only road user for miles around; the others were all pushing and snaking their way down through the valley, while up here I found green pastures and sometimes a peat field (after tight bends).

The only annoying thing was that the road just sort of ended; yes, you read that right, the road came to a miserable end in the moor. The dark blue storm clouds gathering that night (it doesn't get pitch black here until around midnight) couldn't frighten me, since I had comprehensive insurance. It was a shame about the bed, but I was sure I'd be back in time for breakfast.

Groaning, the Starlet struggled through the hilly landscape, its eyes burning, digging its tires deep into the soft green grass; at least those who came after later found a properly groomed track (to use a skier's term). In short, I did eventually get to bed, but I overslept breakfast (since I only went to bed then, of course?).

So, despite feeling guilty towards Fiona, I decided to buy a map. The woman in the shop was friendly; yes, exactly, that's the larger scale he wants, the gentleman from Austria. She rummaged and rummaged and then brought out the one with the smallest scale (= the highest resolution, as we screen-damaged folks would say). The sea was enormous, and instead of a sausage, there was a proper peninsula. Highly satisfied, I paid for the map and went to the café to take a closer look.

Please, every village is on there, every tiny road winds its way through the tree bark like a fat bark beetle canal. Every little stream is a thick blue line, every tiny hut at least a small black dot. The mountains are brownish-red patches, crisscrossed by green forest and light green moorland. The map is so fantastic, I can't get enough of it! It's just that the place names are in such tiny, inconspicuous print that I'm now sheepishly going back to using Fiona's oversized map…

Map Reading III

Fiona and her map, that was quite something! Almost reluctantly, she gave me her street map in Dublin, explaining apologetically that she'd once eaten a roast chicken and there had been some stains on it. I solemnly assured her that it didn't bother me at all; I would carefully drive around the stains.

Perhaps that was a bit premature, because when I returned to my room on the first evening after a long walk through Galway, determined to finally tackle my weight problem seriously and not eat anything else that day—absolutely nothing, except maybe a few Snickers, a bar of chocolate or two, and a can of Coke—the whole room smelled like roast chicken. I was nearly driven mad with desire, my mind filled with images of tender, crispy drumsticks, rust-red, crunchy wings, and hormone-filled breasts! Fiona! Not two seconds later, I was off again, leaving Snickers and all my good intentions behind.

Satisfied, I sat down with my beer and lit a "Thank You for Not Smoking" cigarette. I inhaled the smoke deeply, closed my eyes, and pictured Fiona holding a tenderly roasted ham hock with her fingertips, biting into the crust with a satisfying crunch… no, something about this image wasn't right! I looked at the map again, the stains, the dozen or so fingerprints near the Galway-Dublin junction: yes, that must have been it! Now I saw Fiona turning the sacrificial animal this way and that on the map, murmuring magic spells, counting eeny, meeny, miny, moe, and snick-nack to decide whether to turn left or right. That, and only that, I'm willing to believe: she—like the augurs in ancient Rome—was consulting the gods about the right path by reading the entrails of the grilled offering! Map reading in Ireland.

Birds in Ireland

I'd finally seen all the sights, and the weather had turned decidedly Irish; rain, fog, and strong gusts of wind didn't make things any easier. But at last, I'd reached my destination. I moored the Starlet in the parking lot, grabbed my umbrella, stale bread, phone, and laptop, and set off through the dunes.

Well, some of you know I'm a bit of a bird lover. This was probably the most remarkable spot in Ireland, a true bird paradise. I climbed out onto the sandbank along a stream bed, then over some stones to the small, offshore bird islands, and there I was, right in the middle of them, my birds. I pulled out my laptop, put the umbrella between my teeth, and inserted the CD "The Birds of Ireland." And there they all were.

On the left, a shag (Latin: phalacrocorax aristotelis, Celtic: seaga) was fighting with a cormorant (Latin: phalacrocorax carbo, Celtic: broigheall) over a piece of seaweed; on the right, a snipe (Gallinago gallinago, Naoscach) seemed to be waiting for food from me, its head tilted to one side. The lapwing pair (Vanellus vanellus, Pilibin) were courting intensely despite the biting wind and apparently didn't mind that an oystercatcher (Heamatopus astralegus, Roilleach) was watching them unabashedly. The Arctic Tern (sterna paradisaea, Geabhrog artach) tried to scare away the lecherous perv with wild chirping, but his cousin, the Sandwich Tern (sterna sandvicensis, Geabhrog dhuscotlach), simply said: "Leave them be, the youngsters these days want to try everything, you uptight bastard!" The Common Gull (larus larus, Faoilean ban) circled majestically above the colony of Blackheaded Gulls (larus ridibundus, Faoilean ceanndhubh), while the Great Black-Backed Gulls (larus marinus, Droimneach mor) loudly and furiously cursed the Herring Gulls (larus argentatus, Faoilean scadan), whose last raid had severely damaged the breeding colonies.

So there I stood for almost an hour among my feathered darlings, typing busily on my laptop and occasionally scattering stale toast (left over by Jutta, dear Deirdre) to keep them from flying away. Sud-

denly, I had the feeling of being pushed from behind. Now, I know, just like you, bird-loving reader, that I was all alone with them on the bird islands, so no one could push me from behind. But still, the feeling persisted. Persistently. You know how it is: no error in the program code, and yet the result is wrong.

I looked around. The stiff breeze blew hard in my face, the waves raged as they always do, and the birds screeched as usual; they've learned nothing else. And the stream, over there by the dunes, flowed peacefully uphill in its streambed.

Wait! What? The stream flows uphill?! I looked down my trouser legs, pale with worry, and sure enough: I was already almost ankle-deep in water. The tide was rising rapidly, and I, the self-proclaimed expert, hadn't been paying attention. The ford back home was now at least knee-deep, or even deeper, so I had no choice but to climb higher on the bird island. The shag and the cormorant took off with indignant squawks (you'll have to read about the other birds above yourself; they also took flight when I gasped my way up), and I finally stood on the uppermost granite boulder, estimating roughly 20 minutes until I was submerged.

A good bike is expensive, as my friend Miro once said. I looked at my now completely soaked Bally pedals and wondered how they had survived everything so flawlessly. Further up, in the dunes, was the parking lot with a bus from Peter's Reisen in Kassel (what were they doing here, anyway?), but of course, nobody was paying any attention.

Perhaps they're just taking my picture (titled: Irishman on offshore island). Further down, in the dunes, a few colorful anoraks, intrepid Ireland travelers who don't let wind and weather deter them from their evening stroll on the sandy beach and who, at most, shake their heads in wonder at the living advertisement for IBM Thinkpads on the bird island.

In between, in the middle, the tide, and in the middle of it, me and my little island, rapidly losing square footage. In the bay, a fishing

boat swung (turned) slowly, and a man waved to me kindly; of course, I waved back. Vigorously.

I couldn't understand a word he shouted at me. I simply shouted back in German: "Yes, you too!" and thought about how often I'd let down inflatable mattress paddlers floating away in Lake Neusiedl (actually, never).

Mike—back then, of course, I didn't know his name was Mike—so Mike climbed into his dinghy and rowed slowly toward my bird island. About half a cable length from the island—or was it only 20 meters?—he slowed down and started chatting. All I gathered was that he was speaking Celtic, not English. I knew immediately that this was a language test, because if I answered in English (British), it would be a long and wet night. I mustered all my strength and shouted, "I am from Austria!" Mike thought for a moment, then called out, "Rainhard Fendrich!" And I exclaimed, completely taken aback, "Yea, that's correct!" So Mike rowed over, let me in, and brought me safely ashore. Grinning broadly, he told me that he rescued at least five or ten tourists each season. He was also a fan of a certain Wulfgeng Embrous, and much to the astonishment of the Kassel pensioners, the "two Irishmen in a rubber dinghy" bellowed loudly and somewhat silly "forever young, forever ju-hu-hung!" On the shore, I asked how I could return the favor: at "half past nine" at the "Wagoneer" in Kilmare, said Mike (a Brit would have said half past eight), and set off. (Curtain).

It turned out to be my most expensive night in Ireland, folks: when Mike showed up, washed, combed, and apparently very thirsty, the bartender turned pale and sent for backup. Mike, who knew all the waitresses in the place and properly introduced me to each of them (that bloody guy from Austria got wet at Kings Head, you see). Mike, who could down four pints without a break. Mike, who pitied me because I couldn't manage more than two small beers. Mike, whose 150 liters of sheer physical weight had to be hauled home around midnight by his blasphemously cursing wife, Mary, and me. Mike, who assured me at least a dozen times along the way that our Federal President, a certain Mr. Hölmut Cole, was a truly wonderful Mr. President. And that he loved him very much, Cole, Hölmut.

Two bad fouls

I was so relieved when I could finally wash my socks and jeans at my lodgings and hang them up to dry. The widow Plunkett, with whom I was staying, offered me a video recording of Scotland versus Morocco in her living room, and also a plaid (a Scottish-patterned wool blanket) for my loins, "otherwise you'll catch a cold, my dear!" It really was just an accident, honestly, that I reflexively jumped up when a Moroccan player committed a nasty foul, but then I prudently refrained from doing so, even though she rewound that part three more times. One has one's principles, after all.

I was watching the fishermen in the harbor, tidying up their boats, cleaning their nets, or simply standing around taking a smoke break. I was just about to move on when a guy approached me: "Hello, how are you?" and launched into a rambling monologue about where I was from, how I was liking Ireland, and so on. During the conversation, I politely asked him what he did for a living (suspecting he wouldn't give me an honest answer, as I'd already noticed his vacant, slightly tipsy eyes and suspected the whole thing would end in the obligatory tip for the next pint). He then dramatically grabbed my hand and said, "I'm a visionary." Then, after another dramatic pause: "The Visionary of Clifden." I struggled to suppress a smile and replied, "My children are visionaries too—televisionaries." He smiles strainedly, assures me I'll have a pleasant journey, and subtly steers us towards the pub. When I let him in first, his clairvoyant abilities seem to have deserted him, because far too late he notices that I've turned around behind him and am making my way forward.

Merlin II

Up on the pass, the heavy rain, the winding roads in the thick fog, and the sheep wandering aimlessly on the road were all too much for me. I found a spot in the meadow and dozed off a bit on the reclining seat. But no sooner had I closed my eyes than an old man tapped on my window with his walking stick.

"Failte, welcome!" he said, "I am Muirlinnhe, the king's advisor."

"Failed you too, Merlin, old friend," I said wearily, but still surprised, "You again? What brings you here at this hour? You should actually be stewing in the enchanted forest near Douarnenez in Brittany?!"

"The evil Morgane La Fay imprisoned me there for a thousand years," said the wise old Merlin, "but I don't know how it happened, suddenly the spell was broken…"

Laughing, I interrupted him: "Hey, we've already been through this, after 998 comes 999 and then 000, Bingo! Year 2000! Don't you remember?" Ploff, it went again, and Merlin was gone.

I dozed a little longer, thinking about Morgane and the obvious programming glitch in the Dark Ages, when there was another knock at my window. "Okay, Merlin, what's going on?" I asked, waking up. But the old man outside in the rain didn't look like Merlin at all, more like an old shepherd with the inevitable Irish paddy cap on his head.

"His name is O'Brien," he said somewhat disapprovingly, and asked if I could take him down to Molly's pub in this (beep!) weather; his (beep!) old legs weren't what they used to be, and it was a good three miles, (beep!) and (beep!) again! When we arrived there after a wordless drive, he got out, thanked me, and asked, "Why did you call me Merlin earlier?" I couldn't answer him, and shaking my head, he disappeared into Molly's den of iniquity, (beep!) muttering "foreigner."

The biggest steak in Ireland

In Wexford, I was quite surprised when, returning to my car from a midday stroll at the harbor, I found a voucher from the local police (worth £50) behind the windshield wiper. For £50 (equivalent to a mere thousand), I walked miles – about two kilometers uphill, to be precise – to the police station. Once there, I instantly transformed into a dim-witted, anxious Alpine native, speaking with a distinctly English accent. I couldn't read traffic signs. I couldn't understand a thing, Inspector, what kind of voucher is this?

Excited buzzing in the beehive. Phone calls, a radio conversation: "Jamie, you've got a stupid tourist! What can we do?" I cross my fingers and silently pray to St. Brendan, the patron saint of Irish sailors.

The constable behind the glass window glances at me two or three times, nods vigorously, and describes me in detail (I can't repeat it here, but I might just buy that guy...). There's barking on the other end, then the man nods and hangs up. Turning to me, he says: "Okay, you don't pay anything, not even fifty pounds, we'll do blah blah blah with the car rental company." Well, he's going to be thrilled, I think, but what's the point of having comprehensive insurance?!

Then he adds: "You go to the car, Jamie will be waiting there."

I'm puzzled by the slightly amused glint in his eyes (there's something there, isn't there, but what?!), so I summon all my linguistic skills and bid him my "most humble" farewell. And out of the temple, I trudge to the car, which is now almost three kilometers away because I took a shortcut.

On the way, I imagine that Jamie, that rascal, will probably want a drink or something. Fine, it's still worth the two or three pounds. But I shouldn't count my chickens before they hatch.

Jamie was standing by the car; that was visible from afar.

More precisely, Jamie was standing there, and right next to him, my little red Starletter from Japan was crouching in a no-stopping zone. My feet hesitated at first when I saw Jamie, but then I reluctantly kept going.

When I arrived, my eyes roughly level with Jamie's belt buckle, I couldn't manage much more than "Hi, Ma'am!"

Jamie stretched her shoulders back so that the two enormous domes of the Duomo di Milano arched above me, and boomed down: "So, you're the one who thinks he can't read the Irish signs! Hey, folks, look here, this is the dromedary from faraway Austria who can't read this sign, please, this sign right here!" and pointed accusingly at the round blue sign with a red border and a red X inside (you can look at any no-stopping sign on Mariahilferstrasse if you don't know what an absolute no-stopping sign looks like, you dromedary...).

What followed was a ten-minute lecture on traffic signs and road markings. How to walk, how to stand. Where to look left, where to look right. When to use your turn signal and when not to—unless, as Jamie sneered, you're from the continent. On which Sundays, public holidays, and banking days you're not allowed to stop where and why, unless it's a Tuesday. Double yellow line: "Even someone from Austria isn't allowed to stop here!" Single yellow line: "You may stop briefly here to load or unload!" — "Ma'am," I said, "Ma'am, there's only one yellow line!" Jamie paused, looked down unkindly at me, the little earthworm, who dared to interrupt: "Now don't you chatter, there are two yellow lines!" I didn't give up. "Ma'am," I said, "there are two yellow lines up ahead and two more back there, but here, where I and at least ten other cars are parked, there's only one yellow line!" Jamie grunts something non-English (presumably (beep!)), walks briefly up and down the street, bends down beside the cars and finally states: "This must have happened when they were laying the new asphalt surface, there, you see, it was supposed to continue in a double line, but they just slapped the surface over it (spoiled over, if you don't believe I know what 'slapping' means in English)!"

Jamie shrinks a little, I grow a little, and now I can already see the sweaty imprints of her Wonderbra under her uniform shirt. If she weren't so stiffly trying to appear official, she'd be quite a nice lady. A bit stern, admittedly, and somewhat sharp-edged, but when I imagine her in leather, with a mask and a whip... "You're enjoying yourself," Jamie states sternly, yet unsure how to interpret my cheeky grin. I say, "You know, Ma'am, I've been in Ireland for a few days now: a wonderful country! But even more so, I've become an admirer of Irish women. They have their hearts in the right place, they bravely sink their teeth into a problem and stick with it like bull terriers. That's something I find very appealing!"

Bingo! She runs a hand through her hair once to tidy it up: "No Irishman sees the woman when you're in uniform; they're not supposed to see me as a woman while I'm on duty. And as for the bull terriers"—my cheeky heart stops for a second—"you're exaggerating. I'm not insisting on a double line if it's not clearly visible, but that would still be twenty pounds!" Half of fifty pounds is twenty pounds, of course.

Before I go down another wrong path with uniforms and "my God, you look great in that," let me add a little more flattery: "Of course, you are first and foremost a police officer, and that's how you should be seen while on duty (sorry, I got that line from one of those unbearably boring Saturday afternoon soaps, Cagney and Lacey or something. But now comes the original István transition, which you, dear readers, already know very well:). But when I imagine you without your uniform (oops, too soon), in civilian clothes or casual dress (correction successful), then I see a dashing Irishwoman with heart and character."

Jamie has now moved a good step away from me; several people are standing around us, staring. "Don't imagine me without the uniform!" he threatens me with a smile and a pointed finger, then turns with a coquettish, sharp turn, strolls towards the harbor, and glances back twice discreetly to see if this sleazy Austrian guy is finally going to disappear. Which he promptly does.

That evening, dear Arnold, I rewarded myself with a steak three times the size of the one you used to get at Planet Hollywood, and only managed the last quarter after a long smoke break (The Coach House, Roundwood near Newtown Kennedy, 9.95 pounds including vegetables, salad, new potatoes AND chips), and for the rest I raised a beer or two to Jamie's health (that awful non-alcoholic one from Schmeck's, because of the starlet, you know?).

Irish humor

Later, I tell Mike how, in the raised bog near the Neolithic stone circle, I dodged a normally peaceful grazing buck, which, startled by the flash of my camera, feigned a harmless horn blast in my direction. Startled, I jumped sharply to the side, not realizing I was standing on stones placed in the bog. And in doing so, I promptly dropped my mobile phone into the bog water (dear Fiona, that's nine commas, and they must stay!). Reflexively, I grabbed this little gem of Swedish craftsmanship and saved it from certain doom. After a split second of shock, I knew what to do: sit down, immediately call Vienna to explain that the phone was probably lost or had drowned, so they wouldn't think I was missing. — If, however, someone from Ireland called to say their phone had just "drowned," well...

Mike slaps his thighs and almost chokes with laughter when I describe what the scene must have been like: in the middle of the old pagan Druid monument sits a madman, talking on his cell phone in German, and peat water is dripping from it. The four or five Italians who are just turning the corner stare in disbelief when, to top it all off, the guy on the phone says: "Questoqui ' un Druidofono — funziona solo con acqua, veramente!" and lets the water drip from the device. I translate for Mike: "That's a Druido-Phon, it only works with water, really!"

That evening, Mike probably makes me tell the story ten times, every time new friends show up in the deafeningly loud pub. He drinks copious amounts of beer, and I shout in the ear of his maid Mary, who's wedged between Mike's and my barstools, sitting on our thighs: "Mike must have a damn big bladder!" meaning, of course, that he hasn't gone to the bathroom even once.

Mary, unexpectedly, turns bright red from head to toe and glances at the stuffed capercaillie above the bar; obviously, I've said something very wrong. Mike asks, so I explain that I'm surprised he doesn't go pi after four or however many liters of Guinness. He grins, pulls a one-penny coin from his pocket, and says, "That's a pi." Sensing a joke, I pull out a two-penny coin: "That's a pi-pi." Mike then

produces a five-penny piece and holds it under Mary's nose: "Well?" But Mary just gives us both venomous looks and sits down. Irish humor, which I didn't quite get, but Mike laughed loudly and for a long time.

Mike keeps having to sing songs by W. Ambros, Franz A. Heller, or R. Fendrich, and I bellow along, more off-key and loud than beautiful: "Niente Sandale, lauter Skandale," and so on—you probably know the lyrics (I, of course, don't). Then Mike tells me about his trip to Austria: he was in Wiesen, at a jazz festival. And he had a great meal at his friends' place in Lower Austria: he especially liked the "Saumaise." I almost choke on my weak beer and look at him, taking a deep breath: "Say it again, please!" Then I ask him to remember "Saumaise, Maise Maise Maise" and not to use the other no-no-word again. When I say "no-no-word," Mary's interest is piqued, and now she absolutely has to know what it means. Jon Bon Jovi's portrait is emblazoned on her T-shirt, so I boldly reach out and touch roughly where—in my mind's eye—Bon Jovi's belly button should be, and declare: "That's it!" I'm then a bit taken aback myself, because she looks at me calmly without even flinching, not the least bit embarrassed. Irish girls, I didn't quite understand them, but then we both laughed loudly and for a long time.

Interlude (dedicated to all those who think they know me): Well, I don't know about you, but whenever I fall in love, it's utterly heartbreaking! That's why I'm tearing through this rain-soaked landscape, tenderly embracing trees: either an unhappy love affair that pains me especially. Or an unhappy pain that I love especially. Or a particularly unhappy woman that I love painfully. — I hug another mossy tree (tradition says this increases fertility) and speed on through southern Ireland. Of course, some of the drivers behind me might have had something to say, but I don't care: if I see a mossy tree, I slam on the brakes, leave the engine running, jump out into the rain, hug and kiss the tree, and then I'm off again. Surely there's time for fertility, don't you think? — What a hassle, I think to myself at the last tree before the pass, my God, if only it weren't raining so hard! Oh well, I have to get through it, suffer and cry and keep hugging trees. The bitter pain of being in love diminishes in proportion to the moss-green discoloration of my light-colored sweater — oh, it's all so

complicated! István's private life, which probably no one understands, but please everyone laugh loudly and for a long time anyway.

Bonnie and Clyde

This morning I'm being mugged for the third time. Clyde holds his gun to my head, Bonnie nervously holds her orange laser rifle to my chest, water dripping from its barrel onto my trousers. Clyde, through pursed lips, mutters in an Eastwood-esque voice: "Stranger, 20 pi for Snoopies (candy), or your time is up!" I rummage in my pocket and place the coin in his small, cheeky, demanding hand. "And another 20 pi for Eli…uh, Bonnie, she'll get some candy too!" I pull out another coin. Bonnie bites her lip uncertainly, then looks up at her big brother, and when he nods, she snatches up the loot as nimbly as a seagull (Larus larus, oh well, see for yourself!). The bandit looks at me with a merciless gaze and says: "It's over anyway, Stranger, pray your last Ave Maria" and "bang bang bang!" he squirts the full load from his water pistol into my face.

Bonnie frantically fiddles with her laser rifle, but it's not working properly. I help the seven-year-old and pump the mechanism a few times, which is indeed sticking, and then I get my full blast. Aaargh! Like a wounded Godzilla, I gasp for air with flailing arms, sink to my knees, and wheeze miserably in the soft grass. Bonnie and Clyde run around me, yelling wildly, their Colts dripping (smoking wouldn't be quite right) and whooping with delight.

"Kevin, Eliza, come inside, leave the gentleman from Austria alone!" calls Widow Plunkett, hurrying anxiously towards the mortally wounded Alpine man. "Wait, I'll quickly bring you a plaid (wool blanket, see above), give me the wet clothes to hang up!" I try to appease Widow Plunkett, categorically refusing the plaid and the trouser drying for certain reasons (see above). Widow Plunkett is, as you will surely know, a direct descendant of William Robert (actually Joseph) Plunkett, one of the ringleaders of the Sinn Féin Rebellion of 1916, where he and many others, under the leadership of the Polish Countess Mankiewicz (!), fought for their (whose? which?) freedom in St. Stephen's Green Park in Dublin. WR Plunkett (here the widow was tearfully weeping and sniffling so pitifully that I placed a comforting hand around her trembling shoulders), so WR Plunkett was subsequently executed by the English, but the death sentence of the

aristocratic Mankiewicz was commuted to 6 years' imprisonment (released early after two) (here the widow Plunkett trembled with anger at the social injustice and vigorously shook off my therapeutically placed hand, sat me sniffling and blowing my nose in front of the video recording of England against Morocco, carefully placed the plaid on my knees and disappeared with my wet trousers into her realm).

No, Deirdre, no! Just for your peace of mind, I won't soften it now, like: "Widow Plunkett, with whom I stayed, was very amiable, talkative (see William Robert, etc.), and busy; her children were at least my age, red-faced, unemployed drunks with mediocre IQs, living off their mother's bed and breakfast, and slyly watching me at breakfast as if I were stealing their food." Furthermore, dear Deirdre, my stories would be absurd if I were playing Wild West with water pistols with two fifty-year-olds (I can already hear Mrs. Plunkett's comment: "Now they've gone completely nuts! Playing Bonnie and Clyde in the garden! — I'd rather have Alzheimer's!"). So there you have it, and now I'm off again (now the tree-kissing can begin again).

Savings champion

Furthermore, a few Irish people love to fleece us tourists like stupid birds. 25 pounds (approx. 450 Austrian schillings) for a smelly, moderately clean bed, a broken shower, and a poor imitation of the Irish breakfast described above, makes one want to take revenge. So one morning, I passed the bread basket around the breakfast room, pointing out that the bread was already green with mold, hoping for applause. The lady of the house hastily replaced it with freshly toasted bread. When I paid, she gave me a 5-pound discount and apologized profusely, shaking her head, saying she really didn't know how the bread could have gotten moldy... I left her overpriced establishment thinking to myself that I'd been quite right not to have given everything away to the birds that day...

Merlin III

In retrospect, I must silently apologize to that poor Irishman who very kindly and politely addressed me in the coffee shop opposite the palace of Richard II, built in 1741 in Waterford (now a bishop's seat): "And how is the Pope doing in Vienna?"

I am experienced and confident in such situations and patiently explained that the Pope was in Rome.

"No, in Vienna," he stubbornly insisted, so I ordered him to give a somewhat more extensive lecture on the Habsburgs, the Hofburg Palace, the Spanish Riding School, and the Lipizzaner horses, culminating in the—not in itself incorrect—instruction that the Pope lives in Rome, or more precisely, in Vatican City, and has done so since the treaty concluded with Italy's King Emmanuel II in the year…

No, the Pope was in Vienna, not in Rome, the scoundrel insisted, interrupting me(!), and Emmanuelle was banned in Ireland, sexist trash, yes indeed, he had only seen the video once, and even then only reluctantly, at his nephew Brian's house….

My temper flared and I hissed at him quite venomously, saying that Emmanuelle could only be described as trash starting with the episodes featuring Laura Gemser, and that the Pope most certainly lived in Rome, I had seen him there myself around 1967, and that he shouldn't tell me who was in Vienna and who wasn't….

Regarding my Lipizzaner horses, which come from Yugoslavia and not Italy, the know-it-all remarked that they were, as everyone knows, from Spain and had arrived there with the Moors from North Africa; the Habsburgs, by the way, were Swiss from Aargau; only the Hofburg Palace did he mercifully allow me to know. When he then also claimed to have some knowledge of football, and I triumphantly retorted that we Austrians don't need the first 89 minutes at all, that one minute, and thus the 90th minute, is enough for us to win, he shook his head and fell silent, finally letting me have my Pope in Rome.

I was almost struck dumb on the plane when, as I was boarding, the Kronen Zeitung newspaper grinned at me: Pope has left for Rome again — Schönborn next Pope?

That, I suspect now, was my last encounter with Muirlinnhe, the strange wizard of King Arthur.

De Administrationibus

Finally, my business was doing so well that I could lease my own new computer—but the joy didn't last long, because the manufacturer, in its overzealous cost-cutting efforts, had apparently driven out the wrong people, and the low-paid staff who were allowed to stay couldn't cope with either the customers or the software. Between you and me, the administration was in a real mess.

My dilemma was multifaceted. On the one hand, I was a paying customer and refused to accept such appalling treatment. Furthermore, I had projects using computers from the same manufacturer and couldn't very well criticize my own company. Thirdly, I was the editor-in-chief of the one and only truly excellent newspaper maintained by the fan club of this computer series. Of course, the term "editor-in-chief" might be a bit of an exaggeration for a one-man operation, but what's true must remain true.

That was the fourth problem. It was true that this manufacturer produced the best computer of its time. But it was also true that some of its administrative staff were clearly completely overwhelmed and deeply angered customers. The newspaper had to report on it, but how?

Necessity is the mother of invention; so I asked my friend Quintilius Tertius Faber from the Latin provincial town of Vindobona for a guest commentary. Little did I know that this humorous piece would be my undoing as editor-in-chief…

by Quintilius Tertius Faber, Unio COMPUTANDI Latina

Quintilius Tertius Faber amici sui ad Unionem COMPUTANDEM salutat —

Apollonia, the first-rate of all wives, actually had the idea: "The association is your lobby, your powerful…" she quotes from some scrap of paper she probably got handed at the market or somewhere else—

in reality, it has nothing to do with us, you can bet on it. “Besides,” she sniffs, “the previous editors have all disappeared, so now we can finally fulfill the request to write about our experiences!” Yes, we. We, that’s me.

A word about myself: I head the complaints department of our small company (ours here means Apollonia), she manages everything else. From design to production to delivery. She only consults me occasionally on legal and business matters (excluding marital issues). As her husband, I have a somewhat vague, but not quite defined, role in her company.

My favorite thing to do is sit in my office, in the complaints department, and watch the cemetery sparrows. Apollonia urgently instructed me to definitely mention our company in this article; you never know. I might.

I would have loved to become a master parachute tailor back then, yes indeed, but then I met Apollonia, the daughter of a wealthy stonemason, and I put down my thread and awl. I’m so bad at saying no, goodness knows! So, here we are, Apollonia and I, with our FABER GRABSTEIN CONSULTING GmbH. We deliver promptly and free of charge (well, practically right to the cemetery), at the best prices, gravestones in all sizes and styles, in real marble, real marble imitation, or real marble-look plastic.

Perhaps that’s enough; Apollonia would certainly want to see more here, but I’m thinking of your newspaper, where one isn’t supposed to do too much self-promotion. Nevertheless, one last thing: should you—as we did with our Unio Computeris Latina—ever wish to lay this to rest, then you’ll get the best possible conditions for a gravestone from us. “Us” actually refers only to Apollonia, as I’m merely in charge of the complaints department (surviving relatives excluded!).

So one day we decided to replace our old PRAETOR computer from Rufus with a modern one from Businoxx Machinibus Internationalis (BMI). The consultation went smoothly, everything was in order, the Businoxx salesman was beaming, and we even wondered if

he'd sold us something like Julian's Tomb. But those gloomy thoughts were quickly dispelled, because the exorbitant upfront price was mitigated by an attractive installment plan from Businoxx: we would only have to pay a couple of handfuls of sesterces now and then small handfuls of sesterces monthly. We even asked Apollonia's uncle, a Gallic menhir supplier, what he thought of this advantageous contract, but then we placed the order—anyway.

Faster than a Phrygian runner could run, order forms and contracts from Businoxx fluttered in, and Apollonia quipped: "No job is done until the paperwork is done," a saying she'd probably picked up from one of the Scythian or Pictish slaves. We opened the carefully sealed papyri. And froze.

I will spare you the following, utterly blasphemous curses; suffice it to say that everyone from Jupiter the Father to the Germanic Loki got their comeuppance. What was the point of all this?! The contracts—there were five of them—were issued to five different companies, from JF Faber, selling automotive bicyclists, to Gutemine Faber, a senator at the Businoxx itself, to the vegetable trading company Faber & Faber, and yes, Faber Castellum, the pen manufacturer, was also included.

An angry phone call made the typist at Businoxx turn pale, but I advised Apollonia to calm down, since the poor fellow was the least to blame. However, I gathered from his stammering that this was an occasional malfunction of the word processor; no, they weren't using Businoxx's own, but rather the one from Microproxx, which was so popular everywhere, even among the pirates in Taiwan. Apollonia and I looked at each other: yes, had we perhaps ordered the wrong thing after all? I won't soon forget the sleepless night I spent—to escape the furious woman—amidst, or rather on top of, our cold homemade products.

Anyway, after a few days, a friendly Businoxx employee informed us that the contracts had been corrected and everything sorted out; this was indeed the case. So we were relieved, signed and sealed everything (Consul T. Ing. Faber sounded very pompous to Consulting

Faber; presumably, the Businoxx word processor or Microproxx's was malfunctioning and malfunctioning again).

The mild March days passed uneventfully; I sat in my office watching sparrows and was glad that no complaint came back from the cemetery — then something happened again.

Oh joy, oh jubilation, oh merriment! The oops! (object-oriented parcel service) delivered the Abacus Electronicus AE/CCCC, wrapped in cardboard papyrus, along with all accessories, including many papyri, cartons, and manuals, but also the ELP/CCCC (first live program/400) on many small compact discs, with which one first had to breathe artificial life into the AE/CCCC, installare necesse. Apollonia and I, however, first had to endure the gravestone stress following the many Bacchanalia, Saturnalia, and other festivals before we—sobered up—could turn our attention to the new Abacus.

What a joy to see this truly virile black fellow standing amidst our equally attractive black marble, marble substitute and plastic gravestones!

But before I could even finish thinking about my vague idea for a new gravestone model in the shape of an abacus, Apollonia suggested we take a look at all the papyri; perhaps there's something important among them, a Ridmi-först, or whatever the people at Businoxx call it. So we went through everything for the new AE/CCCC, and so far everything seemed to be in order, but oh dear, the license seal for all the program discs was (this time uniformly) in the name of Gutemine Faber, the well-known senator at Businoxx herself, a truly kind person with a broad general knowledge and equally extensive specialized education, with whom we are in no way related, and whose business dealings have absolutely nothing to do with our business, FABER GRABSTEIN CONSULTING GmbH (I'm supposed to mention that again here).

So, another call to Businoxx, knuckle-tapping, panting, chest-heavy. No, we're not who we're thought to be. We have plastic stones with a marble look and ones made of real marble substitute, and real marble upon request, but we're not the honorable Senator Gutemine

F., but A. & QTF. Couldn't this be clarified somehow? It's unacceptable that we have to puzzle over whether we're who we are or not with every new episode of "oops!" or "Littercom." The friendly typist whispered "of course, gladly" into the receiver and promised to clear things up once and for all. Yes, even more than that, she sent an email via the UUU (Urbi Urbani Ubique, the worldwide Roman network) to us, to Hibernia and everywhere else, to inform everyone about the Fabers and their trademark rights. Last but not least, she sent us a tongue-in-cheek, digitally certified email assuring us that we, the real Fabers, were perfectly justified in using Businoxx Machinibus Internationalis products on our Abacus Electronicus /CCCC. Indeed.

After this last email exchange, Apollonia and I threw a small party. We had aurochs tripe in honey and—oh, but that really doesn't belong here. Anyway, we were delighted to be the Fabers, FABERS GRABSTEIN CONSULTING GmbH, to be precise (forgive me, but it has to be said). Fredericus from Carinthia and Antonius from Pannonia, and many other friends, chatted with Cervisia from Noricum until the early hours of the morning. Then the Littercom arrived with an express registered letter. From Businoxx.

After reading the letter (surprisingly correctly addressed to us), Apollonia ripped her toga open from her navel to her knees, screamed bloody murder, and threatened to smash the brand-new Abacus Electronicus with a twelve-pointed chisel. Only with difficulty did the Nubian servants (copyright by Wolf, Gang) manage to calm her down and escort her to the Budovarium. The guests and I were quite astonished to read that Businoxx had sent us a first reminder regarding the installment payment of a handful of sesterces due for the previous month. But—we had contractually agreed that after the down payment, the first installment was due at the next Saturnalia, so in about two weeks?!

That same day, I resolutely sat down and wrote a not entirely humorless, but serious letter to the Businoxx, directly to Quirinus Schlapfus, the guardian of the sestertii and other pecuniary. I informed him of the facts, copied the originals, and sent everything via a reliable express messenger.

For days I sat outside my office, listlessly watching my sparrows and impatiently waiting for a reply. Instead of the expected messenger, another uniformed Littercom officer arrived, delivering a registered letter to the Fabers. That's us, as everyone knows by now. Again, the letter was from Businoxx, and suspecting the worst, I opened it without waiting for Apollonia's return.

Those at Businoxx must have gone completely mad: a third reminder (where was the second one?) for the same handful of sesterces, a warning typed in horribly tortured Latin that Businoxx would now unfortunately have to hand all this over to a lawyer and would collect so much in late payment interest, since we delinquent Fabers hadn't paid the sesterces that were due two months ago!

As sure as my name is Quintilius Tertius Faber: my jaw dropped at such audacity, which I have never before encountered among either Hibernian boxers or Frankish oyster-suckers (please don't consider these comparisons racist). On the other hand, I feared that Apollonia might even shed her entire toga in her distress, so, with fierce determination, I grabbed the speakingphone and angrily called Quirinus Schlapfus, the guardian of the sestertii and other pecuniary treasures, omitting all embellishments and humor, and asked him point-blank if he had some kind of Archaeopteryx or even Helicopteryx in his head: a third reminder with legal representation, even though the first installment wasn't due for another 10 days according to the contract?! He remained cool and said he would look into the matter first, but behind his coolness, I sensed his bored disinterest in me, the imperial sub-subject. When I casually mentioned that I had recently torn a Libyan lion in half with my bare hands, he hastily assured me that he would look into the matter immediately and call me back—he didn't need to know that it was an illustration on a newspaper papyrus…

A few minutes later, my phone buzzed; it was Quirinus. Well, he'd looked at everything, the reminder text was completely wrong, because it was actually about the down payment that was missing from this Abacus, but (here he quickly cut short my impassioned interruption) he knew we'd made the down payment months ago because he could see it in another Abacus Electronicus. Only, this was one Aba-

cus and that was another, and—he put on the joke record—you know those ancient punch-card programs, don't you? And nope, I didn't need to do anything else, he'd corrected the situation in all the Abaci Electronici; I could safely recycle the reminders without further thought. When I finally got a word in edgewise, he didn't understand at all what I meant by saying that Businoxx should just buy themselves a decent Abacus and some good software to boot. A shoemaker can't work in worn-out sandals, a butcher can't work with food poisoning, and a gravestone dealer—ahem, that's where my argument ended.

So, I only told Apollonia all this after everything was definitely over. On the one hand, she was grateful that I had spared her this nervous breakdown. On the other hand, I recently overheard her talking on her cell phone with her friend Elena while she was painting her toenails with red Phoenician purple in the budarium, and casually musing about how much it had cost us to switch from Businoxx to Microproxx—it wasn't any better, but cheaper?

Dear friends of Unio Computandi, you may not have these problems with your abacus supplier, but we here in Urbs Latina need to build a strong lobby to make it clear to Businoxx that only they themselves, with exemplary management, can contribute to gaining trust in their management products.

"But do you think it's conceivable that this could happen to you too?" Take part in our unique COMPETITION by answering this one question and sending me an email: one of you can win a beautiful artificial marble stone with an individual gold inscription, guaranteed hand-soldered; at the same time, you could also let me know if you liked my first work.

May Hermes guide your affairs, Apollo smooth your countenance, and Hebe bless your wives.

Your Quintilius Tertius Faber.

Merry Christmas!

The matter of Quintilius, Apollonia, and the abacus led quite directly to my resignation from the newspaper's editorial staff, after the censorship department of our association forcefully forbade the editor-in-chief from publishing it. I never would have dreamed that we had anything like censorship.

In any case, I shook the dust off my sandals and turned my back on this unworthy bunch. Because, of course, it was the same old story, as so often happens with the powerful of this world: when a red warning light comes on, they unscrew the bulb, but they don't fix the actual problem…

For a year and a half, I received monthly payment reminders from Businoxx. One sunny December morning, I was on a plane to Cyprus and inevitably overheard a conversation between two businessmen, one of whom was an employee of that very manufacturer and was praising his company to the skies. I couldn't very well intervene, although I almost choked with anger at involuntarily listening to these tall tales, but I immediately decided to write a Christmas story.

Here she is.

As I promised, here you'll find the ultimate, most heart-wrenchingly emotional Christmas story ever! The only truly complete compendium of pre-Christmas poetry—it would make even Selma Lagerlöf or Karli Waggerl drool!

Santa Claus in his sleigh, with reindeer, snow flurries and traffic jams on the A2 motorway, little cherub angels fluttering excitedly around the manger, their little frozen bottoms hidden beneath their smocks…

???

One moment please, the doorbell is ringing, I think it's the postman!

Originally, it was supposed to be a really lovely, sentimental Christmas story with Santa Claus, reindeer, snow flurries, and Jingle Bells. But then the postman rang twice…

The European Christmas sensation!

e-XMas at its finest!

Download now!!!

Quintilius called me about a week ago, distraught and quite frantic.

"I'm at the airport, but I have to tell you this first!" He's apparently huffing and puffing Apollonia's suitcase through the departure hall. I wait patiently until the crackling of his guaranteed crystal-clear cell phone subsides, then I urge him: "Well, go ahead then!"

Quintilius seems very exasperated and confused, because he asks back: "What then?"

As you know me, dear readers, my proverbial patience is not easily tested, so I demonstratively remain silent and continue typing ".....schte, and then the rag mother placed the tiny, most adorable rag baby in the …"

"Oh, yes!" said Quintilius, "so, what I wanted to say is that we're flying off on holiday this morning, as you know, and then suddenly the doorbell rings and the postman delivers a registered reminder from Businoxx and I think I'm going to have a heart attack, which you can surely understand!"

"Please, dear Quincy, not so many 'and's, and besides, how do I know you're going on holiday? And – who approved that?"

Quintilius was of course no match for this masterful rhetorical hook, and in the ensuing pause I corrected the passage "...but no matter how hard Santa tried, the reindeer veered sideways into the bushes..." and listened to Quintilius again.

"I'm not in the mood for jokes," Quintilius grumbled defiantly into his cell phone. "They've sent me another reminder, again threatening legal action, but this time by registered mail!"

I remain silent and think, "That's what he gets for not being a club member," but hey, he's got to be stubborn! If I remember correctly, this lackluster club already denied its history once before...

"What should I do?" he interrupts my club-philosophical musings, and I hear in the background the announcer asking the driver of the car with the license plate W 236 KL to please go to the information desk.

Time is clearly of the essence, because if he's parked his car illegally, he'll probably have to walk. So I help him and answer:

"I don't know what can be done either!" This whole Businoxx saga has been dragging on for quite a while now; perhaps something should be done...

"I have an idea, Quincy, why don't you write the whole story down and send it to me via the internet? Then we'll see what's next!" I hear him breathe a sigh of relief, and he says:

"Thank you, I'll do that! But I have to go now, my car is parked right in front of the fire station entrance and Apollonia's hatbox is..."

I quickly interrupt him and wish him a good flight. — Annoying fellow!

A few days later, as I was writing "...a small piece of road dung flew from the hoof of the last reindeer Santa directly into his eye, so that his tears mixed with the snowflakes...", my PC sang: "You have got an e-mail!", so I checked, and lo and behold, it was the story that Quintilius sent me from his holiday.

The shrill ringing of the house bell jolts me awake.

7:01 AM! Well hello, that can't be! But the short-short-short-long signal tells me that it's Mr. Wawranek, our postman — a die-hard old radio operator who simply ignores the official worldwide discontinuation of Morse code (July 1, 2000) and is waking me up with the (now former) **call** signal.

He surely wouldn't do it without a good reason, I think alarmedly, and rise with a groan, trying not to wake Apollonia. I shuffle down the corridor and open the door: it's the postman.

"Well, boss, how are you?" he asks as always, holding out an envelope. I grumble something to him in a friendly-grim tone and look at the sender: Businoxx Internationalis Machinibus, BIM!

Are they completely out of their minds? Are they now sending their annoying monthly reminders by registered mail?!

I sign nervously and nod to Mr. Wawranek, then shuffle back to the bedroom, roll into the warm blanket, and try to fall asleep again. My heartbeat subsides, and Hypnos, the god of sleep, graciously takes me under his wing once more. As I drift off, I think about how we're flying off on vacation today, and that's precisely why this idiotic reminder doesn't interest me in the slightest. I'd much rather imagine the blue sea and the palm trees, the ice-cold tequilas, and romping around with Ornella in the hot sand…

And then the bell rings shrilly again. **Di** -Di-Di-Daaa! Wawranek! What has he forgotten now, the idiot? Why does he have to ring me out of bed again?! I jump up angrily with the grace of a bulldozer, waking Apollonia, who sleepily murmurs, "Well, what is it, darling?" and rolls back onto her side.

"I'm leaving already!" I whisper, stomping out with a grim look. Of all things—now she'll probably be in a bad mood all day! As I open the door, I joke grimly, "…and if the postman rings twice!"

Mr. Wawranek looks at me with his dachshund eyes, trustingly but uncomprehendingly, holds out a package and says: “Excuse me, this seems to be for you too!”.

I look at the thing; it’s incredibly heavy. Addressed to Quintilius T. Faber, Big Boss. I tell Wawranek I’m not a Big Boss, but he says I’m the only QTFaber in the house, except maybe my nephew, but his name is QQFaber, Quintilius Quartus.

I shrug and sign, then head back to the bedroom. On the way, I put the package on the couch, checking the sender’s name first. But it’s illegible, some random person from San Tacla, USA. Aha, from the USA—well, it’ll probably be some kind of plug-in or something. I sneak into the bedroom and am just swinging my front leg over the edge of the bed when the doorbell rings again. Clink.

Okay, now I’m going to punch Wawranek, damn it! Can’t he just deliver everything at once?! First that stupid reminder from Businoxx, then the ominous package—what could it be this time? I stride boldly to the door and yank it open, freezing mid-movement. Outside stand Joshua, aka Samuel Jackson, and Vince, aka John Travolta.

No, I’m not completely crazy, as you might assume—I’m just standing here with my mouth open in amazement. Out there are the two super-assassins from Quentin Tarantino’s film PULP FICTION, Joshua and Vince. In their black suits, Joshua with oiled, curly hair and Travolta with a shoulder-length wig. Casually clutching their silenced guns, they’re at it. [If you haven’t seen the film yet: a hilarious heist comedy that will have you laughing so hard your French fries will stick in your throat!]

“The Lord gives, the Lord takes away,” says Joshua, the former preacher, pushing past me into the apartment.

“We’re just picking up the package that was dropped off here!” explains Vince, uh, Travolta, and pushes me back into the apartment with the silencer on his chest, closing the door behind him.

We walk — me backwards — to the living room, Joshua picks up the package from the couch and grins: “Seek and ye shall find!”.

It’s totally paradoxical, it can’t be true! How did these characters get to me, why do they want this package, what do I have to do with any of this? Joshua—Mr. Jackson—sees the question marks on my forehead and explains: “We’re tasked with delivering greetings from the Little Boss to the Big Boss—he wants to become the Big Boss himself now. Sending the package by mail seemed the easiest way; it’s still the most reliable method!” Although I’m still glued to Vince’s overly long gunshot, I can’t help whispering, “You’re probably the only ones who still believe that.” Vince nudges me in the chest with the barrel of his gun and asks Joshua, “Kill me?”

I’m horrified at how quickly something like this can happen. Travolta is aiming at me, just waiting for Joshua’s OK. Despair and a healthy dose of anger make me blurt it out: “It’s simply unfair! First that stupid reminder from Businoxx! Then the package—and now the two of you, trying to crush me just like that!”

Mr. Jackson—Joshua—thinks for a long time, then nods. Travolta aims the bullet directly at me; I squint and hear a double “ploff!”, hear the bullets click into the plaster behind me. When I open my eyes again, I see Vince fiddling angrily with the device, presumably due to a jam.

Not so Joshua. He grabs Travolta’s silencer, the barrel dips to the ground. “A miracle! The Lord has performed a miracle! Listen, my brother, this miracle is a sign!”

Perplexed, I listen as Joshua delivers a sermon, speaking of the Lord and his miracle, of how Vince has never, he repeats, never failed! While the mad Joshua becomes increasingly entangled in his sermon and Vince stares down, more and more embarrassed, I glance towards the bedroom door where Apollonia, still looking completely sleep-deprived, stands in her short, good-morning-darling toga. Suddenly it dawns on me why Vince had missed the mark: no man can overlook that tiny toga!

My knees were shaking as I sank onto the couch. Joshua's phone rang, interrupting him mid-speech. He politely said, "Excuse me!" and held the phone to his ear, listening to the other person. Finally, he said, "Okay, Boss!" and put the device away. Turning to Vince, he said laconically, "Our mission is accomplished; the Big Boss got sick while jogging this morning!" Vince shrugged, then asked, "So what now?" Joshua sat down, Vince did too, and gestured for Apollonia to join us. After a long pause, Joshua asked me, "What was that about trouble this morning?"

I cautiously ask him if he hasn't read my story online; but Joshua denies it. So I explain in broad strokes that we leased a computer from Businoxx. And since the first payment, we've received (until today!) a reminder every month, sometimes even a forceful one threatening legal action. Today, for the first time, one arrived by registered mail, which suggests that Businoxx has finally lost all control.

Vince asks if I haven't complained? "Oh yes," I reply, "and I do!" I've called them at least a dozen times. They told me there were two computer systems involved: one that receives the payments and another that gently enters them into the accounting ledgers. Apparently, the two just don't get along. And they advised me to simply throw away the payment reminders; they become obsolete after a few days once computer number one has notified computer number two. Month after month, a curt reminder arrives, then my automatic payment comes through, and then there's peace and quiet for another three weeks.

Furthermore, I said, I suspect that Businoxx has a problem with my standing order, since they apparently only programmed the direct debit correctly; but, and now I look innocently at the two crooks, would you grant such a company automatic direct debit, seeing how incompetent they actually are at Businoxx?! When they both shake their heads, I grin and explain that—in order to add a humorous touch to the whole thing in case of a legal dispute—I also made a manual overpayment.

When Joshua looks at him blankly, Vince explains that Businoxx apparently has absolutely no control over its system; in the case of an

overpayment, the reminders should stop immediately—the customer has a credit balance, after all. It's a disgrace, says Vince, he used to work in accounting himself, back in the day, before computers. But Businoxx? Such a huge computer manufacturer, boasting about e-business and solutions for a small planet, yet using such a disastrous system that God have mercy! Well, people have saved money, I soften, otherwise I wouldn't be getting reminders for "(-,—) ATS" every now and then—zero schillings, so to speak. Vince laughs so hard that tears run down his makeup.

"I see," Joshua says, "so you rented the machine and set up a standing order; but because they can't manage their own computers and programs, you're being bombarded with payment reminders, month after month!" He pauses for a long time, letting the thought sink in, before slowly continuing: "Well, then we'll just bombard them back!" I stare at him wide-eyed, and he grins, patting the package with his hand. "Well, what did you think was inside?" he smirks, "A little greeting from Santa Claus!" — I suddenly understand what San Tacla, US, means.

"But you can't do that!" I protest, "You can't just…" Joshua grins and snarls: "Oh yes we can! So, let's go!" He and Vince get up, and since neither Apollonia nor I make any move to follow them, Vince pulls out his buffer and forces us to come along.

A rapid drive in the white Mercury ensues, along the Ring Road to the Danube Canal, where the Businoxx headquarters is located. I close my eyes, praying that Joshua doesn't drive over a bump, because what could happen! I remember all too clearly that in the film, the car bounces over a bump, and a shot goes off from Vince's cannon…

The car stops right in front of the main entrance. Vince takes the package, they both get out and go to reception. While Joshua engages the receptionist in a complex conversation, Vince gets into the elevator and comes out again a second later. I hug Apollonia, shivering in her "Good Morning, Darling" toga, warmly to my chest and silently pray that today might be a holiday. That the early birds might not be

inside yet and the latecomers might not be. But it's still 7:01 a.m., so there's no real danger.

Joshua and Vince return to the car. Joshua says, "Merry Christmas, Businoxx!" Vince lights a cigar and counts, "Four, three, two, one, boom!" At the same instant, a dull explosion rips the Businoxx building apart, and Joshua adds, "...and a Happy New Year!" The building is ripped apart from the inside out, desks, filing cabinets full of punch cards, and insanely long rolls of computer printouts are catapulted out into the morning stillness. One such filing cabinet full of punch cards flies directly toward our car, spins on its axis, and is about to crush us! While the others stare transfixed at this projectile, I throw open the door and hurl myself sideways out...

...and I crash onto the bedroom carpet with a whimper. Where am I? What happened to the explosion? Slowly, I recognize the familiar outline of the bedroom, sit up dazed, and rub my eyes. Apollonia wakes with a sigh, leans over me smiling, and kisses me: "Merry Christmas, my love, we're flying off on holiday today!"

Quintilius swallows gratefully and says: "Merry Christmas, my love!" (Also a kiss).

His gaze falls upon the registered letter of reminder, which lies crumpled on the floor.

And — okay then: "Merry Christmas, Businoxx!" (but no kiss), "... and a Happy New Year!"

Sweat-inducing

István paces excitedly back and forth in the living room. "I knew it!" he keeps saying, waving the invitation card around wildly. "Andy Ritter, he's a pianist, I told you so," is the second sentence he repeats again and again. It seems the renowned psychologist is having a hard time coming to terms with the fact that he completely misjudged a colleague from his computer club. "But," he continued lecturing, talking to his spirits in the air, "I had a feeling something was up. He's got something to do with music, I sensed it right away, and what does 'sweating profusely' even mean? Andy'll be pounding away at the keys, making the sweat pour off him! - Ah, at the Plutzerbräu! They have a stage there, sometimes tiny little artists perform, or even a pianist. Andy's definitely a pianist, delicate hands, smokes like a chimney — a pianist, that's all."

Satisfied with himself and his perfect analysis, István looks around, rubs his hands triumphantly and says: "Well, if I'm wrong, then he's just a minor artist, like Josef Hader or I-Stangl, you know?"

He turns to me to explain everything in minute detail for the umpteenth time, puts on his fatherly expression, and begins: "So, we're going to this Andy Ritter concert on Sunday evening, listen to a bit, nod to him and all that, and then we're going to your place. Just for twenty minutes, but we have to, he's at the computer club!" I know that as soon as these words are spoken, he'll become all soft and docile, that's how much he loves his computer club.

Sunday evening - he had spread at least six or seven ties on our bed and moved them around, but then decided to go "without" them in a truly revolutionary fashion - so Sunday evening we walked up to the Gasslwerk around the Spittelberg (I will spare you the fact that at almost every corner he told me that the Plutzerbräu was coming up, but then it was another corner further and another...).

István went straight up to the manager of the Plutzerbräu, jovially placed his hand on the manager's forearm, and whispered conspiratorially, "Where's the stage?" The manager took a step back, looked us up and down twice, and then said to me, "Ono koga ono wanna aisuru." I replied, "Please speak German, he doesn't understand Japanese," thinking to myself that if he did, he'd give him a good thrashing. The manager calmly replied, "We don't have a stage, but if you want to go to the SWEAT-WORKING event, please go down those stairs!"

István added, quite unnecessarily, "I have a visitor from Japan and I'm going to show her a little bit of Vienna." Then we slowly descended into the cellar while I whispered a heavily toned-down translation, "Every man loves this woman," into István's ear. We seemed to be the first guests, but then, sure enough, a slim young man approached István and said how pleased he was that he had accepted his invitation.

István briefly introduced me as a friend from Japan and a music student, embarrassingly fibbing deliberately, "and she plays piano, just like you; you're practically colleagues!" Andy Ritter merely nodded fleetingly at the "colleague" and then made the international gesture with his hand, "It's all around here," and István looked around the almost empty room in astonishment. "Where's the piano?" he asked Mr. Ritter, who in turn looked somewhat irritated at István from behind his eyeglasses and shrugged: "Which piano?"

I'll admit it: I get incredibly excited every time István runs aground. Like a heavy oil tanker, it heads straight for the reef with sleepwalker-like certainty, crashes down, breaks apart – and then the oil leaks out very, very slowly. That alone makes the trek up to Spittelberg worthwhile.

István looked around again, peering inquisitively behind this corner and that, and then said vaguely, but already somewhat uncertainly: "But the invitation, Mr. Ritter - there's supposed to be something going on this evening? I assumed..., I meant..., you look like a pianist, so where is the piano, the grand piano, the tinkling instrument?"

Andreas Ritter laughed, led us to the buffet, offered us a drink, and explained that in his free time he created sculptures from scrap metal (welding and embossing, aha!) and gave them away to family and friends until one day he mustered the courage to hold an exhibition (in Munich). Since it was quite well received, he decided to try it in Vienna as well: and voilà, here it is! He showed us around, presented the exhibits, some of which were still for sale, and told us the personal story behind each piece.

Since I had nothing to write with, I have to dredge it all up from memory, and there's no point in asking István for help—he's already got Alzheimer's! On the far right, next to the GUARDIAN, a menacing-looking monster, stood UAKA TANKA, and Andy explained that this was the Great Spirit of the Native Americans. A proud, man-high figure, which, especially because of the lighting Andy had made himself, created a powerful feeling. Next to it was a RUNNING MAN, seemingly running down the cellar stairs. Along the wide side of the room were two similar wall sconces, the ONE-ARMED BANDIT and GOMBKÖTÖ, which Andy said belonged to Toni (G.) and was only on loan. These wall sconces were welded together from pans, pitchforks, and scythes and fitted with lamps. They would certainly look great in a modern apartment!

FELI and MAUSI appeared to be two female figures, but Andy fetched us another glass of wine and conveniently ignored the backstory of these characters. My gut told me there was more to them, but we had already moved on to DON QUICHOTTE, and he had captivated István: there stood the old Hispanic, shield and spear in hand, ready to tilt at all the windmills in the world. "I want him," István whispered in my ear, so I asked Mr. Ritter if he was for sale. Andy—who was now on familiar terms with István—said, "Well, I'm very sorry, but the Don belongs to my seven-year-old; he was his birthday present. You can't have him anymore." István continued on his way, seemingly unmoved; only I noticed his disappointment. We came to KAWASABE, whose title, as Andy explained, was taken from a Laurie Anderson song. István glanced at it only briefly, his gaze drifting longingly back to Don Quixote. "Quichotte would look quite good in my office, and my clients would know right away what kind

of person I am," he said to Andy, still somehow hoping that Andy would react.

But Andy Ritter continued showing his exhibits: HÄLTA SCHIFFTA, he explained, was modeled after the Beatles' song Helter Skelter. I saw a funny guy who was clearly holding his oversized, semi-erect penis in his hand, presumably to urinate. István moved on, as nothing on that topic interested him, and silently examined the last two exhibits, one of which seemed to be modeled after Mickey Mouse, the other after a giraffe, and presumably intended for Andy's offspring.

Andy went off to talk to other guests, and István and I also spotted an old acquaintance, Birgit, a model. We chatted and made small talk, and it soon became clear to me that István was frantically forechecking his chances for a photoshoot. I quietly slipped away to Andy's group, as a crowd had gathered around him and a female visitor, haggling over the price of a sculpture. After some back and forth, Andy finally managed to sell the sculpture without any discount! Everyone laughed at once and was very loud (which, as always, struck me as highly inappropriate), while the woman wrote out the check and ceremoniously presented it to Andy. The first to congratulate him was Andy's mother, who could be very proud of her capable son.

At the buffet, I helped myself to a few rolls, admired Andy, who managed to balance a glass of wine, a bowl of goulash soup, a loaf of bread, and a spoon with both hands, yet still couldn't eat or drink anything, and let myself drift slowly back towards István through the densely populated room. He was surrounded by a group of young girls, to whom he was exuberantly gesturing as he explained HÄLTA SCHIFFTA in all its details, reveling in their wide, lustful eyes; moreover, he was currently arguing with a know-it-all who had joined the conversation, mistaking him for the artist, and who persistently wanted to know how much the wrought-iron stair railing leading to the cellar would cost, refusing to be dismissed.

My intervention with a kiss on the cheek saved István from a fit of rage or a stroke, which he was clearly on the verge of. We looked again at the truly wonderful and successful exhibits, lingered long,

almost too long, in front of the Don Quixote, and then said a very warm goodbye to Andreas Ritter. As we walked home in silence, István broke his annoyed, brooding silence only once: "...and he plays the piano! ...But, whatever you do, don't tell anyone about the piano!" he demanded, and I promised him I would.

Most holy.

Michiko,
Photo model

Night journey

At one of the lowest points in my life, I traveled almost weekly by night train the 700km to visit my ailing parents. Night journeys seem to last forever; the hammering of the wheels penetrates the mattress and pillow directly into my brain, making me invent the most absurd stories. A chance glance down the sleeper car corridor, the encounter of two lives in a tenth of a second, would plunge me into agonizing fantasies for hours.

I always thought I had no problem with getting older. But when the little innuendos, hidden barbs, and tiny digs at me, a near-fifty-year-old, started piling up, I began to seriously reconsider things. I started hearing things no one had said; I began to observe myself more closely and soon discovered this and that, things you only notice when you start observing yourself critically and suspiciously.

What struck me most painfully was that the young and pretty girls I, as always, admired on the tram, reacted to my flirtatious glances with surprise or bewilderment, and returned them less and less frequently. Tick. The realization that I was no longer the irresistible conqueror (of tram-riding beauties), even if only for the duration of the journey from stop A to stop B, brought self-doubt to the surface. Tick. The cogwheel of self-alienation turned another tick, the self-doubt sank deeper and lay leaden on my increasingly lame loins. Tick. I'm getting old, my loins suggested, it'll all be over soon! Tick. Damn it, what did you expect?! Tick.

A chance glance in the sleeping car corridor, the encounter of two lives in a tenth of a second, makes me sink into agonizing fantasies for hours.

"Your brain's shot," Jack quoted, "when the sky's full of violins!" I cautiously peeked out of the corner of my eye at the pretty blonde woman who—like me—was standing in the aisle of the sleeper car, smoking. I quickly finished my beer and, trembling inwardly for no good reason, went up to the conductor to get another bottle. "Don't

be silly," I heard Jack's voice say, "you just want to walk past her and talk to her!" Jack knew as well as I did that this was impossible.

No, I'm not schizophrenic at all, but Jack is something like the personification of my parental ego, as Freudians would probably call it. He's been with me since my youth, correcting, criticizing, and annoying me with his cold and clear logic. That he's the one who stares at the speedometer needle and growls "130!" or who spoon-feeds me the sensible and logical sentences that I then only have to parrot to appear logical and reasonable is perhaps acceptable. That he's a logician and mathematician through and through and loves computers above all else, indeed can practically see into them with X-ray vision, is the basis of my professional success. But I was fiercely determined to completely ignore Jack today, here and now. As if my life depended on it.

With the new bottle in my hand, I slowly made my way back to my compartment in the swaying train. As I passed her, she looked at me, and that look completely threw me off balance.

In truth, I stopped because I was out of breath and couldn't take another step. I broke out in a sweat, and she probably saw my face change color despite the dim light.

I spoke to her.

She smiled at me, her eyes radiant, her whole being inviting. Suddenly my daze lifted, and we chatted about the things travelers usually talk about in such situations—where they were going, what they were doing, whom they were visiting. Evi, that was her name, worked as a therapist and had just returned from visiting my parents. I mentioned that I was about to visit my parents myself, and I steered the conversation toward my elderly mother's illness, since it coincided perfectly with Evi's work. I don't know, maybe I was getting on her nerves with it, but it had been on my mind ever since I'd bought the ticket.

Jack retreated, grumbling. From a distance, I sometimes heard him mutter, "He wouldn't dare!" and defiantly, I thought, "Yes, he

would!" While Evi and I were engaged in lively conversation, a compartment door opened behind us, and a sleepy passenger came into the corridor. Correctly interpreting his expression, I asked anxiously if we were disturbing his sleep, and he nodded grimly. I looked at Evi, gave myself a jolt (and, folks, bungee jumping is nothing compared to this!), and offered my compartment so we could continue our chat. My knees were trembling, and I was waiting for the end, hoping it would be quick and painless.

She asked again if I was alone in the compartment, and when I said I'd reserved it so I could travel alone, she said, "Yes." I could practically see Jack's face turn green, and he said, "You wouldn't dare!" "Yes," I whispered back, and walked surprisingly calmly with Evi into my compartment.

I looked at her as we talked, and I felt myself becoming more and more attracted to her. At first, I started by talking about my professional successes, but then I thought that was actually a lame excuse and somehow ended up talking about sex, love, and relationships. Maybe she was taken aback by the change of subject, or maybe she was perfectly fine with talking about it, and we became more serious and grew closer.

Closeness. She offered me the informal "you," I began to open up to her more and more, a blissful intoxication of opening up began to take hold of me.

Seize. I noticed that in the last few minutes I had been taking her hand more and more often when I spoke about things that had been kept secret for years.

It doesn't really matter what we talked about, dear Jack; what was important was that she had a kind, open nature and was neither a bitchy city slicker nor a dim-witted, naive country bumpkin. She was simply Evi, who talked about her ideas on relationships, her work, her parents in Vienna, and her apartment. Jack adds that it was Evi who let me talk for a long time, almost too long.

To speak out. As if I had been condemned to silence for life (which wasn't true at all!), I clung to her and told her about my loneliness, my grief over the things I had lost in my life, but also about things that didn't exactly paint me in a flattering light. It suddenly seemed important to me to stand there completely open, honest, and naked, leaving all the social posturing aside. At times, I was genuinely afraid of my own courage; I was worried that Evi would be repelled by my directness and my refusal to portray myself as some grandiose showman, and that she would leave.

She left. She stood up suddenly, said she needed to use the restroom, and that when she came back, she didn't yet know if she would want to sleep with me; she might not be as in love as I was, but she liked me very much. I hugged her while she stood in front of me, and I said nothing, thinking only to myself, that's not important, I want to be close to you, to hug you—come back! After she left, I saw that she had left her handbag behind—was that trust? No one else I knew would ever leave her handbag in a stranger's compartment.

When she returned, we turned off the compartment light and sat very close together. We kissed and hugged, whispered, and were happy. The kissing and hugging turned into caressing, my hand searching under her sweater. "It's a bodysuit," she whispered, but I didn't know what that was back then. I confessed my problem, but she just laughed softly and quickly and easily undressed. I quickly got rid of my clothes, and we lay down next to each other.

I can remember every single little detail, that's how important that night was to me. Jack and the terrible air conditioning ensured that my already retired masculinity stayed in the background; I was far too afraid to sleep with her, since neither of us had any contraception with us – it was a surprising, completely unplanned event. (I'd have to laugh at myself if I carried a condom around all the time…).

I gave her my full attention, my tenderness, and let all the gentleness I felt towards her glide through my hands onto her beautiful body. She loved being stroked and caressed, surrendering completely to her feelings, and I tried to give her all the love and tenderness I felt for her—I often caught myself being too fleeting and insensitive,

but I was terribly nervous, irritated by my surroundings, and thinking far too often about tomorrow. Only once did we both almost get too carried away, but Jack, the dependable one, was already there and pulled us apart just in time.

The hours passed in pleasure and tenderness, in gentleness and excitement, in closeness and concern. Eventually, though, we grew tired, whispered to each other and smoked, listened to the clatter of the wheels, and fell silent. Evi said she might want to sleep for another hour or two before getting off. I said goodbye to her body with many, many little kisses, kissing every reachable spot, and wept silently in my sorrow.

Then she got dressed, and as she put on the bodysuit, Jack looked closely at how it was constructed…

I gave Evi my card, scribbled my personal phone number on the back, and asked her to get in touch and give me some time to sort things out. We had reached a very difficult point. I suspected that now, tired, worn out, and sleepy, she might not be thinking about continuing. I told her to get in touch, please, but I also said (or was it Jack?) that it was her choice. She shouldn't feel pressured by me; I was burning with passion right now, but I knew I never wanted to be pushy or demanding with her. I can still hear her saying the same thing. That she could sense how in love I was, but she wasn't as in love as I was. She put my card in her purse and said she might get in touch, but she wasn't sure. "Bye," said Jack.

I don't remember the moment she left; only that I watched her for a long time after she had walked to the front. My eyes filled with tears that choked me, and I remained in the dark compartment. I set my alarm so I would be awake when Evi got off, lay down, and tried to fall asleep.

I didn't sleep. Jack had decided to keep me awake with his comments. All he had to offer was mockery and bitterness. And crystal-clear logic about the significance of each piece's position on the board—Jack and his board!

Jack explained: after her initial sleep-in, Evi would wake up, and there were several possibilities for what would happen next. Firstly, if this wasn't her first sleeper car adventure, she might think it was quite nice and then go about her daily business without making a big deal about the night. "Bye," said Jack.

Secondly, if it was her first such adventure, she might be ashamed, blame herself, or be shocked afterward by our directness, or even think I might label her a "loose woman"; then she would hardly seek contact with me. Instinctively, I wanted to punch Jack, but he was only concerned about me—and therefore I couldn't really be angry with him.

Evi could also be wise and know that Cupid's arrows can strike anyone at any time. That in the given situation, neither she nor I had any other choice. The usual beginning of a relationship, getting to know each other slowly and gradually becoming familiar with one another: that wasn't possible in this situation! But was everything lost because of that? On the other hand—what did I expect? Could I, approaching 50, ever hope again to meet such a beautiful and so much younger woman and be loved by her in return? Would I be able to manage to get my currently restless and stressful life under control in order to start completely anew, completely fresh, with a dear person like Evi? Completely anew? So that I could say: "without ifs, ands, or buts"?

What, a thought flashed through my mind, if Evi thought I was a cunning, dirty old man? What if she was convinced that I traveled on sleeper trains week after week just to lure young girls into my compartment? I asked Jack to leave me in peace—I didn't even want to think about it, because in that case I'd be completely out, totally out of the picture; she'd be glad to have escaped the old swine. "Bye," said Jack.

In the twilight, Jack muttered something about another man, suggesting that Evi surely had a lover, a relationship against which our encounter paled in comparison, and that Evi would quickly forget this night and return to her relationship. Desperately, I fought against this thought, clinging to her warmth, her scent, her woman-

hood, her closeness with all my senses, and I didn't speak another word to Jack.

I turned off the alarm before it could wake everyone and quickly got dressed. I saw that we were almost there and went ahead; Evi stood all alone, serious, and silent by the door. I was very inhibited and couldn't get a complete sentence out; perhaps she noticed, perhaps she was annoyed at how clumsy I was—I was going crazy at the thought of making a serious mistake now, at the last second. We were mostly silent as we stood there quietly next to each other, gazing out into the last misty November morning. Perhaps we even spoke to each other; I don't remember.

I glimpsed the first houses and the railway tracks only through a slowly blurring wall of tears, against which I fought, just as I did against the lump in my throat. The train slowed down and then stopped. As she got off, Jack automatically bent over her luggage, picked it up, and handed it to her.

Jack saw that on top lay a wilting, long-stemmed red rose.

Diamonds Are Forever

Quintilius Tertius Faber sends his warmest greetings to his readers.

For a long, long time I pondered whether and how one could write something that some readers (whom I know well) might find blasphemous, disrespectful, or simply tasteless, while others—the majority, I believe, of readers who don't know me—would certainly consider enjoyable reading material. The more I thought about this publication issue, the clearer it became to me why such a discrepancy existed, albeit only an apparent one.

Firstly, after a death, it's simply not considered proper for the bereaved to be funny; a poet in mourning should put down his quill pen. Paradoxical, because what is a grieving poet supposed to do when confronted with Dionysian humor? Anything other than hearty laughter would be sour.

Secondly, a story always says something about the author. Suppose the author meant that the logical conclusion A + B = C was a given. But perhaps you see it differently; A isn't A to you, but an F or something similar. Then you would surely think, "Aha! So that's how the ancient Romans thought that A and B were connected!" I usually prefer to conceal my thought processes, but in this case, I'll make an exception and give in to the urge to write. Let it be.

Thirdly, a story says something about the characters. Thankfully, they're all fictional here. Because I wouldn't know how to defend myself against their indignant phone calls from Vindobona, Ostia, or Lutetia if these people were all real and alive.

Quintilius Secundus, my father, has passed away. When he was still alive, he fearlessly wrote against Caesars, consuls, and augurs, diligently sharpening his quill pen and often pondering at length before plunging it deep and fiercely into poisonous sores and papal entrenchment. But he also loved to laugh; then his serious face

would crinkle into a thousand laugh lines, and he could sometimes laugh until he cried out, gasping, "Stop, stop, I can't anymore!"

I am writing this story for him, thinking of him and hoping that he reads it and laughs until tears run down his cheeks.

The blasphemy can begin. (Sit venia verbo.)

"Telephone for you," István's voice rasps angrily from the intercom. For days he's been working on the illustration of his family tree, which he promised his father he would create, since he has a graphics program on his Abacus Electronicus. During such creative phases, it's best not to disturb him at all, because he takes any interruption personally. Especially since this program comes from Giulielmus Gattus's company, Microproxx, whom István now considers a complete cretin, as his programs resist any continuous productivity and exist automatically with delightful irregularity. During these phases, the telephone is no longer a necessary evil for maintaining communication with the outside world, but a treacherous adversary whose ringing is a hostile intrusion into the genius's productivity.

"Thank you, and please excuse me!" I reply quickly and pick up the phone. "Quintilius, yes, hallus?" I answer, keeping one eye on my two grandsons, the twins Tiberius Primus and Tiberius Secundus, with whom I had just been playing.

On the other end of the line is my half-aunt Agrippina from Nova Scotia. I'm happy for her call, because she too is still very much affected by our father's death, and we talk about all the things relatives talk about in such times. After a while, Agrippina gets to the point.

"Tell me, do you know anything about a diamond? Did Father perhaps give you one?" I can hear in her voice that she's a little embarrassed by the materialistic nature of her question. Truthfully, I answer: "No, I don't know anything about it, and he didn't give me anything like that." I can see her face, a half-expected disappointment spreading across it.

“Well, it was just a question. It could have been,” she says, steering the conversation in another direction. Apollonia, my wife and owner of A. Faber Grabstein Consulting GmbH (this must be mentioned again), has overheard snippets of conversation and is now waving her arms as if she urgently wants to tell me something, but I continue to concentrate on the phone call. Agrippina and I say goodbye, then I hang up.

“What was so urgent?” I growl somewhat irritably towards Apollonia, taking the Schuko plug out of Tiberius Secundus’ mouth: “That’s bad, little Secundus, very, very bad! That’s electric, Stromus electricus, he can pinch little Secundus very, very badly!”

Apollonia’s urgent need to communicate triumphs over her standard criticism that my parenting methods, and especially my chauvinistic, childish language, are simply idiotic. “The diamond, Grandma’s diamond!”

I’m drawing a blank (no, not Stromus electricus). Which diamond? Which grandma? Apollonia beams at me like a quizmaster at his opponent during the five-thousand-sesterce question; it’s that typical “Come on, tell me!” face. If there’s nothing I hate, it’s Apollonia’s simplistic quiz shows on TV. Exempla trahunt.

István, who has retreated to our house because he finally wants to finish this project, gets up and paces restlessly. I ask him what’s bothering him. He mutters something about Microproxx and how the Javascriptum doesn’t always do what it’s supposed to. Then he continues pacing in circles and absentmindedly tries to light his tobacco, but I grunt and point at Primus and Secundus; there’s no need for Benzedrine from the tobacco!

Apollonia couldn’t wait any longer and blurted out: “Remember when Grandma Constantia died? Everyone was looking for her diamond!” That hit me like a ton of bricks. This story was so infuriating that I could still explode with anger today. And this is how it happened:

Good old Constantia lived in that part of the empire occupied by evil eastern tribes, whose peaceful inhabitants suffered greatly under their rule—especially when it came to their pecuniary possessions. Those who had once been wealthy patricians were now poor paupers; inflation and expropriations had done their work. Constantia had inherited a small pouch of sesterces from her husband (Quintilius Primus), and when she felt her end approaching, she called me, her grandson most interested in money, and asked if it was true that the best way to invest one's money was in diamonds and then hide them. I agreed, because that's what we've all been doing since time immemorial. However, when I asked Constantia how many sesterces she was talking about, I had to tell her, much to my regret, that with that amount, it unfortunately wasn't worth taking the rather arduous detour via diamonds. Politely and considerately, I concealed from her the fact that with her sesterces she could hardly have paid for more than a single orgy for two at the "Drago Imperialis Pekinensis".

Some time later, when I learned that Mother Constantia's last hour had come, I immediately rode out with Apollonia and visited her in the hospice. When we arrived, she was already half-with the gods, talking to her ancestors, and probably didn't even notice our earthly presence. Sometimes she saw her Quintilius Primus through me and spoke to him, stammering blissful words of love until tears streamed down my cheeks. Apollonia and I remained silent and rode home again in silence.

No sooner had she lain in her humble mausoleum and the grave flowers begun to wilt, than my aunt Olivia called me from Baleum Mallorquiniae and asked if dear Grandma Constantia had passed away peacefully and happily. I was glad for her call, as she too was deeply affected by our grandmother's death; we talked about all the things one talks about in such times. After a while, Olivia got to the point.

"Tell me, do you know anything about a diamond? Did Grandma perhaps give you one?" I can hear in her voice that she's a little embarrassed by the materialistic nature of her question. Truthfully, I answer: "No, I don't know anything about it, and she didn't give me

anything like that." I can picture her, a half-expected disappointment spreading across her face.

"Olivia," I say, "Grandmother Constantia was as poor as a church mouse. She just didn't know it, because sesterces don't weigh as much today as they did back then, in her time. She asked me about investing in diamonds, but I advised her against it."

"But I thought—we all thought, in fact, that she had a diamond, and so we thought she might have entrusted it to you." Olivia was a proud patrician before she became an impoverished proud patrician, and it was difficult for her to admit that she had followed a rumor. I solemnly declared once again that I had not received a diamond from Granny Constantia, for where would impoverished Granny Constantia have gotten one, and that was the end of the matter for me.

She wasn't. Years later, my mother also passed away. I often visited her on her sickbed and talked with her until she was already halfway to the gods and began to speak with her ancestors. Then I stayed away and mourned until she too lay in her humble little mausoleum and the grave flowers slowly began to wither.

A few days later, Aunt Cassiope called from Lugdunum. I was happy for her call, as she too was still deeply affected by the death of our mother—her sister—and we talked about all the things relatives talk about in such times. After a while, Cassiope got to the point.

"Tell me, do you know anything about a diamond? Did Mother perhaps give you one?" I can hear in her voice that she's a little embarrassed by the materialistic nature of her question. "You surely mean Grandma Constantia's diamond, don't you?" I ask cautiously, and she nods.

Truthfully, I reply: "No, I know nothing about it, she didn't give me anything like that, and as far as I know, it doesn't even exist." I can see her face, a half-expected disappointment spreading across it.

"Well, it was just a question. It could have been," she says resignedly, steering the conversation in another direction. I return to

the diamond and explain to Aunt Cassiope that this has been happening sporadically with every death since Grandma Constantia's passing, and it's really starting to get on my nerves. There is no Constantia diamond, and that's that!

István, who was still pacing restlessly, suddenly stopped and interrupted my train of thought. "I'll put the program aside for now," he said to the wall, "and perhaps continue with the earliest ancestors; that's more fruitful. I've discovered an interesting branch of the family, the Weiss family from Budapest." And after a while, he added didactically, as if we Romans were uneducated barbarians: "Budapest, the capital of Pannonia." He looked at me questioningly. "Are you in?"

I had actually already played enough with the grandchildren and now left them to Apollonia, who retreated with them to the marble bench and tried to teach them Mices, even though I had repeatedly explained to her that they were still much too young for this dice game.

Then I sat next to István, and together we raced through the old databases, trying to place his ancestors in chronological order. But we got stuck on the oldest known white ancestor. "They might have emigrated to America!" I muttered to myself after a while, without giving it much thought. István, however, eagerly picked up the thread.

"America! Ah! We should definitely look into that!" and his fingers flew across the keyboard. Yes, someone had emigrated from Budapest, a Dr. Samuel Weiss and his family, in 1878. We silently read the lists of names, meticulously compiled by the Imperial and Royal State Archives.

István cleared his throat and said, "No, not what you're thinking, dear Quincy! There's definitely a catch, just like with that grandmother who, although she bore the same name as the Hungarian kings, turned out not to be my grandmother at all!" I remembered that grandfather had been a shrewd bigamist and, besides many bro-

ken hearts, had also left behind a few grandmothers... I couldn't help but mutter, "It seems to run in your blood."

We printed out what we had found and arranged the pages. It was an amazing and exciting story that unfolded before us. In the middle of it, he asked me what I knew about Houdini, so I rummaged through my memory: American escape artist, daring stunts, and famous performances where he freed himself from his chains underwater, until one day his jealous wife switched the key and he drowned miserably in the icy water...

"Easy, Romans, easy!" István interrupts my flow of words, "not a word of any of that is true!" Then he leans back, takes another deep puff on his tobacco and begins to tell his story.

Ehrich Weisz was born in Budapest on March 24, 1874, the third of five children of Rabbi Dr. Samuel Mayer Weisz and his wife Cäcilia Steiner Weisz. Four years later, the Weisz family emigrated to America, where immigration authorities changed their name to Weiss. Weiss settled in Appleton, Wisconsin, and became the spiritual leader of a new, German-speaking Zionist movement, as he spoke fluent German in addition to Hungarian and Yiddish.

Young Ehrich quickly Americanized his name to Erik, was already delivering newspapers at the age of seven, and took on a variety of odd jobs until he was thirteen to help his family, who were still very poor. His true passion, however, lay in magic and illusions; he first admired the traveling magician Dr. Lynn, and later the Frenchman Jean Robert Houdin. The turning point came with an apprenticeship —which he later abandoned—with a locksmith. Little Erik quickly learned how to pick locks. His first performance was on October 28, 1883, at the age of nine, as the rope and trapeze artist "Ehrich, Prince of the Air." Not yet thirteen, Erik was performing as "Erik the Great" on small stages and ran away from home, following the traveling circus and only returning a year later to his family, who by then were living in New York.

After his father's death (October 5, 1892), Erik worked as a messenger, electrician, cutter, and general handyman at the tie manufac-

turer Richter & Sons. He also became a photographer and once again an apprentice to a locksmith. At the same time, he kept himself physically fit for his acrobatic performances and won several sports medals in running and swimming. At 15, he read Jean Robert Houdin's autobiography: his life changed dramatically. Filled with enthusiasm for the then-world escape champion, he henceforth called himself Houdini, Harry Houdini.

At the end of 1892, he performed with his brother Theo "Dash" (who later achieved fame under the stage name Hardeen) in a show called "Metamorphosis Illusion – The Houdini Brothers." They gradually gained popularity and performed at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, as well as with P.T. Barnum's Museum Circus and the Welch Brothers Circus. Over the course of his life, Houdini would perform "Metamorphosis" 11,000 times.

In June 1894, he performed in Coney Island, where he fell in love with Bess, one of the Floral Sisters. Two weeks later, he married 18-year-old Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner (June 22, 1894). Bess soon replaced Theo in performances, who embarked on a solo career as Hardeen, the Iron Man.

From 1898 onward, Houdini developed incredible acts involving straitjackets and handcuffs, soon earning the nickname "The Handcuff King." He never once failed. His acquaintance with vaudeville agent Martin Beck quickly lifted him out of suburban isolation. Beck promoted him with extensive newspaper coverage, even staging daring prison breaks in front of state police and paying audiences, of course. His fee skyrocketed to $125 a week, and his fame soon spread beyond the USA, leading to his first European tour (in London) in 1900. His weekly fee settled at $1,200 after he escaped from Scotland Yard custody—in handcuffs. In Paris, he jumped from a bridge over the Seine while bound and then fooled the horrified spectators by hiding behind a bridge pier for several minutes. After that, he not only allows himself to be handcuffed, but is chained to a chair in a straitjacket and pushed off the bridge—his fee increases to $2,000. Houdini and Bess buy a beautiful house in New York.

In 1906, he had himself elaborately bound and chained in the death cell of Charles Guiteau, the assassin of US President Garfield, and escaped: all of America went wild with excitement. He jumped from the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, chained, handcuffed, and weighed down with a 75-pound iron ball. On January 27, 1908, in St. Louis, when he performed the feat of escaping while hanging upside down in a giant water-filled jug, despite chains, a straitjacket, and handcuffs, an imitator drowned. Deeply affected, Houdini wrote article after article for specialist journals and began writing his autobiography, in which he also described some of his tricks in detail. At the same time, he publicly spoke out against all forms of occultism and the charlatanism associated with it; this interest stayed with him until his death. Houdini exposed several fraudsters, which also brought him worldwide attention.

He bought an airplane in Hamburg for $5,000 and in 1910, during a several-month tour of Australia, set the first Australian air record (in Diggers Rest) – the 17th air record in history. For whatever reason, Houdini never flew again after that.

He invented ever more dizzying stunts, escaping from water tanks at night or from the barrel of a massive cannon just fractions of a second before it was fired. His daring flirtation with death, a rather realistic death, contributed significantly to his fame. His most spectacular invention was the Chinese Water Torture Cell, which he knew how to prolong to such a nerve-shredding degree that the rumor that he had died during it soon arose and persisted in some places even today. Increasingly daring combinations of ropes stretched between skyscrapers or dangling from the world's tallest buildings, from which Master Houdini hung and freed himself from chains, handcuffs, and straitjackets, constantly brought him new headlines in the newspapers and a considerable income. In 1918, he made the elephant Jenny disappear at the Hippodrome in New York City in front of thousands of spectators.

Hollywood discovered him in 1919; he played several small roles and then starred in two films himself, both of which were a financial success. Houdini was at the height of his career and undoubtedly the most famous magician of his time.

On October 22, 1926, Houdini performed in Montreal. While preparing for the show in the dressing room, he chatted with some students from McGill University, where he had given a lecture that afternoon. One of the students, J. Gordon Whitehead, asked him if it was true that he could take any punch to the stomach (like his brother Hardeen, the Iron Man). Before he could answer, he was completely unprepared and received three punches to the stomach. Nine days later, on October 31, 1926, Houdini died in Detroit from internal injuries (peritonitis, to be precise).

I remained silent, deeply moved, because what István had unearthed in terms of history, starting with a previously undiscovered ancestor named Weiss in Budapest, was truly something! Admittedly, no jealous, murderous wife or a man writhing in his death throes in the icy Niagara Falls, but…

"Stay cool, Roman!" István admonished me, guessing my thoughts. "Our Weisses certainly have nothing to do with American Weisses, believe me! There must have been several more Weisses in Budapest!" A long pause followed, during which I remained thoughtfully silent while he blew his tobacco smoke to himself.

Suddenly he slaps his thigh, grins at me, and bursts into loud, pealing laughter. "That's it!" he gasps, "that's it!" And as I look at him, worried and questioning, it slowly comes out of his mouth, punctuated by booming laughter: "That's it: the Houdini diamond! It's there, it's not there! Vanished—reappeared—vanished!" I'm usually quick-witted, but now it takes me a while to follow his train of thought, from Harry Houdini to Aunt Agrippina's phone call from earlier.

Then I laugh too.

So much for the contribution from good old Quintilius, dear readers. How could he possibly know that sometimes at night, when everyone else is asleep, I sneak to my safe and take the beautiful, large diamond out of its leather pouch to admire its sparkle in the moonlight…?

The thing about the pheasant

The manuscript was practically finished. Practically, that is, because unfortunately, the most important thing was missing: the title. I briefly considered keeping the existing title, “My Colorful Fur,” which I’d found online, and consulted with family and friends, but even the brilliant working title, “I Wish I Could Write Like Kishon,” was rejected after the initial discussion with the in-house lawyer. I racked my brains, and the vacation date was drawing ever closer…

Months in advance, I had decided to take my youngest daughter, Julia, to Venice for a few days. Ah, how quickly these children grow up in our fast-paced world, and as a father, you have to make up for all the missed holidays in good time, because one day she too will leave the nest and prefer to spend her holidays with her peers rather than her parents. Julia’s adulthood is deceptive, because I’m still successfully clinging to the last vestiges of my own youth…

Venice. I breathe in the scent of this wonderful lagoon city deeply, revel in the autumn mist, and spend hours with Julia on the vaporetto—the public transport boats—traveling through the canals. With a bit of luck, we snag the best seats at the bow, let the wind whip around our faces, and gaze, gaze, gaze. Sometimes something catches our eye that rings a bell, and then we break the silence and chat in hushed tones. “Yes, look, over there: that little palazzo with the verdant roof garden—Mother would surely love that!”

We were just imagining how we would use the remaining lottery millions to buy palazzi, verdant roof gardens and fast, agile boats, when a passenger leaned forward in his seat and said in a low voice: “Judging by his voice, that could be István!”

I look at him in astonishment—the short, graying hair, the angular features, the sharply flashing eyes behind the glasses—good heavens, that’s…! “And you’re Christian NN!” I say, even though at the beginning of the sentence I didn’t know the name yet and had to first retrieve it from the dusty file in my brain.

The joy of reuniting with a former boarding school roommate after 33 years. The all-too-rapidly approaching final destination forced a quick decision: we would meet for dinner on such and such a date, then he and his family disappeared into the crowds of St. Mark's Square, and Julia and I continued our journey to the lagoon islands. My heart warmed at seeing this friend again; my mouth overflowed as I recounted our time together at boarding school to Julia. Soon, I was only referring to him as Winnetou, since that was Christian's nickname among his friends. I immediately had to rein myself in, because Christian's wife and daughter had given me some very strange looks when I first (again) called him Winnetou. No, we weren't children anymore: I would have to switch to Christian!

In total, it turned into two evenings, as the first wasn't enough to make up for 33 years. You can imagine that the seating arrangements fell into place unspoken and entirely automatically: the two of us grayheads sat together, while Julia, Winnetou's wife, and their daughter tried to find common ground when they simply couldn't keep up with our reminiscing any longer. Only towards the end of the second evening was our initial curiosity satisfied enough for us both to break out of our isolation and finally all talk together.

Julia, in all innocence and honesty, had mentioned sailing and writing books when the ladies asked her what else her father did. I'd only been half-listening, but the conversation was threatening to turn to "books," and I object to that: it's bad luck to talk about a book that isn't even printed yet! So, like a mouse, I looked for a hole to slip through.

It's not the first time in my life that starting over from the past has proven to be a mistake, usually with "oh yes, what I wanted to ask you…". But since I haven't yet reached the age where avoiding mistakes is considered wisdom, I began: "Oh yes, what I wanted to ask you, Winnie, what do you do in your free time, what's your hobby?"

Winnetou's initial answer was innocuous, for the fact that he had taken over his father's hunting duties and become a hunter seemed perfectly legitimate to me, especially since my inquiries revealed that he dealt with the game and its population in a highly professional

and conscientious manner. “Not like before,” Winnetou grinned, and his wife looked up attentively, “when we used to catch pheasants, right?” His daughter and Julia fell silent immediately and also looked at us expectantly.

“Oh?”, his wife said slowly.

“Yes, and what about the pheasant?” asked her daughter.

Julia looked at me in surprise: “Pheasant?” and her eyebrows twitched upwards questioningly.

“Well, I know nothing about it, I wasn’t there, and I have an irrefutable alibi,” I choked out, trying to avert the inevitable, even though I knew painfully well that I couldn’t stop the avalanche. Winnetou completely misinterpreted my light kick to his shin and said casually, “Oh, that’s ancient history!”

You know my avalanche theory: sweaty, you finally smoke your summit cigarette, flick the ash down, which falls into the snow and forms a small, dirty-grey clump; the small clump rolls downhill and grows rapidly larger and larger, soon tearing huge slabs of snow from the slope, and then the Arlberg Express derails at the bottom, dozens dead—something like that, anyway.

Now there’s no stopping them; the ladies first ask, then vehemently demand the story about the pheasant. Winnetou tells it (a little too matter-of-factly, in my opinion, and definitely too dryly) and then nudges me in the ribs: “Well, that’s how it was, wasn’t it?”

I nod silently and think of the Arlberg Express.

For years I wrote my stories and let my children read them all—after all, it was all true, perhaps embellished here and there, but that’s just how it is with poetic license—but of course I didn’t write about everything that happened over time; one still has one’s little secrets! And now Julia looks at me silently, with wide, innocent eyes in which I can read the title: “MY FATHER, THE POACHER!”

Winnetou looks from Julia to me, then clears his throat and says: “What, you haven’t told her that yet?” I shake my head unhappily and think that I hate nothing more than a book that ends like this: To be continued!

Author's notes

The author should probably begin by stating that all persons, actions, and events, wherever they did not actually happen or befall the author, are entirely invented and therefore fictional. Any resemblance to living, dead, or undead persons is therefore purely coincidental, and in the latter case, highly surprising.

It should come as no surprise that the people in all the autobiographical texts actually live or have lived—even if, for good or bad reasons, some of their names have been changed. It should probably be noted in the same breath that some of these real or imagined events, viewed in retrospect—and not infrequently under the influence of alcohol, which the author ruefully admits, admonishing his possibly young readership not to follow suit—have been slightly to seriously distorted, which can be attributed to forgetfulness, a penchant for rambling, or simply the poetic license of writing.

However, it was by no means intended to mislead the esteemed reader in any way, or even to portray the author as a special hero or bon vivant, although he would like to see himself as such. Were it not for the disconcerting fact that the former usually lie in beautiful marble tombs and the latter quite frequently find themselves in prison.

Thirdly, the author should mention that this book is a collection of texts, some of which have already been published on his website and in computer journals, which will cause some frustration for loyal readers. Paradoxical as it may sound, this pressure provides more enjoyment for the disloyal, i.e., new, reader than for the loyal reader who already knows the texts from the newspaper or the internet.

It is to be hoped that one day a psychology student will scientifically treat this phenomenon of the reader-psychological paradox and its impact on authorship at the beginning of the twenty-first century (including propaedeutics and proof of economic viability for the publishing industry) and thereby win his master's or even doctorate.

And since the publisher has already been mentioned, the author should also mention, fourthly, that the constant knocking on doors of good or less good publishers got on his nerves from the start, and that he therefore took the — presumably not so — unconventional route of self-publishing; despite sluggish PC software and a stubborn laser printer, he repeatedly tackled the text until he was mentally and electronically exhausted, until it was typeset and, thanks to the help of a publisher friend, could be printed and sent to the bookbinder.

Thanks must also be given, without a doubt. To the author himself another time, but first to his children and the women who shared his life with him (and he theirs with them, too).

His life also meant reading his texts.

Heartily praised.

Be careful with your criticism.

Very carefully.

The children were hit particularly hard, without a doubt. Usually, when an exciting television series was on or their friends were chatting online, the author would appear at the door, his glasses fogged with sweat and his hair (thin, admittedly) blowing in the wind, to urgently request his dear children to perform the inexhaustible task of proofreading. He was being very insistent. Naturally, thanks must also be given to the VCR, which simultaneously recorded the exciting television series while the children performed their duty to their father.

Thanks also to all those who were friends of the author (at least up to that point) and who read his texts, helping to shape them with their opinions. It would be right to thank each and every one of them individually, but the author acknowledges his mistakes and simply refrains from doing so. Those who are still his friends already know this anyway, and as for the others, well, to hell with them.

Unconventionally, the author will now also thank the characters in the story (even if they are purely fictional), simply because he has

never heard of an author thanking their protagonists (which, admittedly, might also be due to our author's deafness). Did William Shakespeare ever write a single word of thanks to his Mercutio, or Agatha Christie to her old Hercule Poirot, huh!?

So what!

Finally, the author has the honor of thanking all those who have met him on his life's journey and who have remained in his memory with this or that small or large event (or who have given him one or another quirky thought or even the idea for a funny, bizarre or serious story).