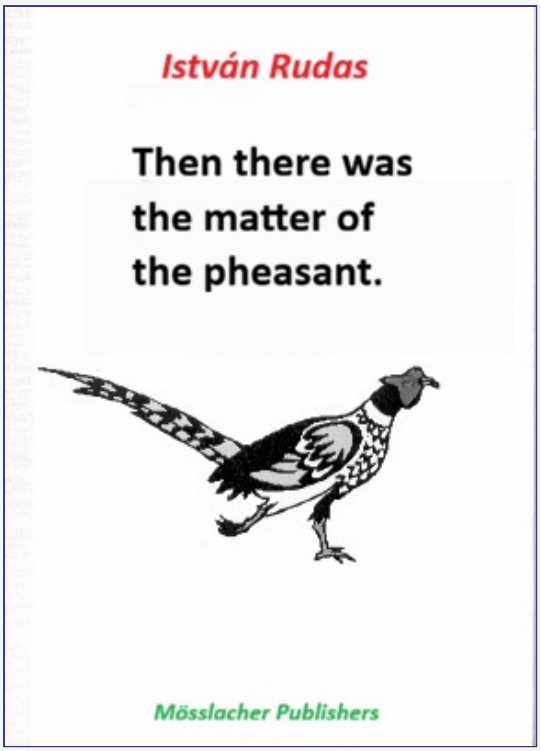
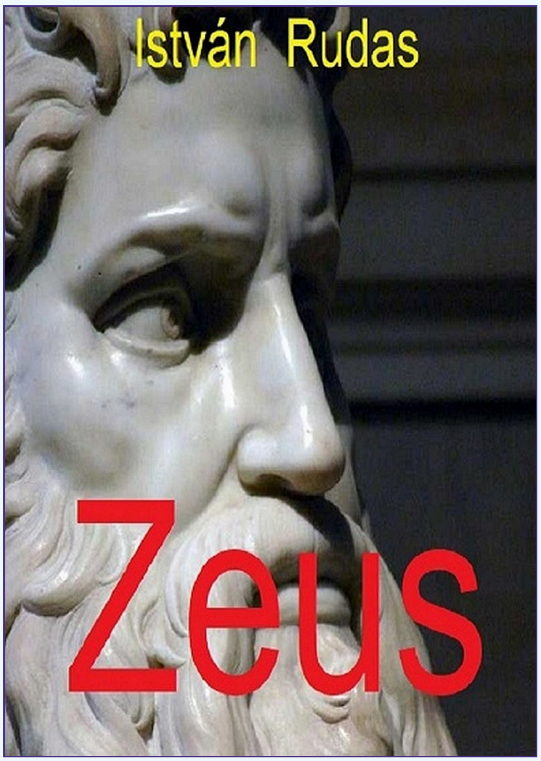

István
Rudas
Complete
works

The Matter with the Pheasant



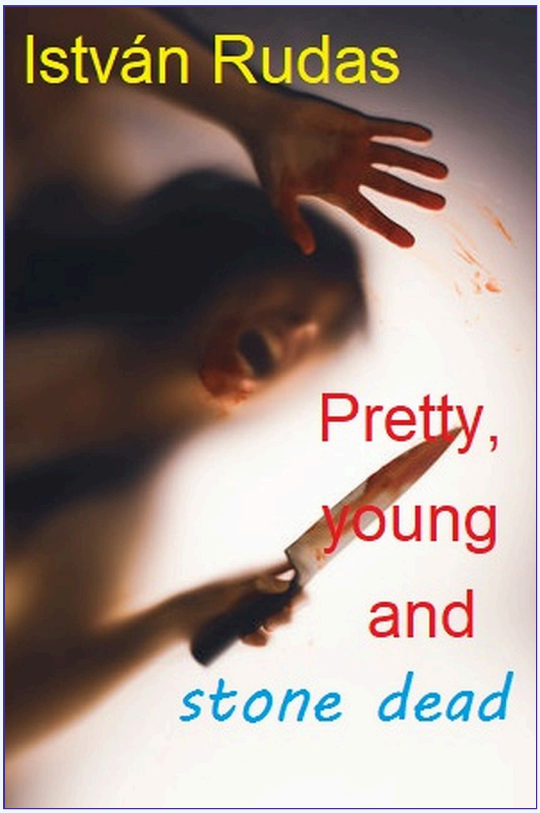
Off to America
And Then
The Escape
My Friend Patroklos
Corsica
The Boxing Graduation
Breton Cliffs
Adventure in the Red Sea
A Year Like Any Other
Chief Tecumseh
Irish Fragments
De Administrationibus
Merry Christmas
Sweat-Inducing
Night Drive
Diamond Fever
The Thing with the Pheasant
Afterword

Zeus



So it Started
The discovery of the Gift
First Conversation
The Spaceship
Lin Enters in His Life
First Plan
First Contact
The Worlds Hunger
A Project
Detective, Judge and Hangman
The Organizations
An Eventful Year
Mount Olympus

Pretty, young and stone dead



Preface I
Preface II
Preface III
Inspector
Killer
Interrogations and confessions
The Roboter
Imprisoned
Wake-up-call
Spain
Spring murder
First Shot
Second Shot
Dawn of the Gods
Fatme's tale
Tired Heroes

Alfie — who came out of the fog



[Introduction](#)
[Before The Kettledrum Stroke](#)
[Thundering The Kettledrum Stroke](#)
[Who are you, Alfie?](#)
[The Promotion](#)
[Fall](#)
[Fall storms](#)
[Swan Song](#)

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 Hun-

gary, 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 mightily, 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 memorize 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 outing 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 noth-

ing 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

household 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 Meeting, 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 together, 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 nitpicker 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 re-

pented 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, listens, 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 breath-taking.

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 binary system, calculating with zeros and ones, vital for sur-

vival 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 paper. 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 embarrass-

ing 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 an-

cient 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 Sugar-loaf 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 dis-appeared 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 darlings. 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 pilot, 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 his-

tory: 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 fel-

low, 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 today!" 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 Ameri-

can 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 vanished 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, skydiver, 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 heli-

copter 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 – unfortunately, 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 Per-

sian 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 know-

ing 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 really 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 feathers. 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 opposite 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 bis-sextile) 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 patch-work 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 Ischwan 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 attempts 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 mes-

sage 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 impression 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 snicknack 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. Suddenly, 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 ses-

terces 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 subsubject. 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 Abacus 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 re-

ceived (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 GOMBKÖTŐ, 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 womanhood, 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 ances-

tors; 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 broken 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 manufacturer 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 un-

happily 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).

The beginning

by István Rudas © 2022

Ray suddenly woke up and sat up.

He didn't know the room. He looked out through the tall double doors, a sunny, bright sandy beach and the calm, smooth sea in the morning light. He searched for an explanation of where he was and how he had gotten here.

"You're in the south of France, on a beach from your memories, and we teleported you," said the voice in his head. Ray knew the voice, she had spoken to him in countless dreams, although he could no longer remember the content. He was alone in the room, he could only hear the voice in his head. He was obviously plem-plem, he heard voices!

"It's about time we met in person," said the voice, "and no, you're not going insane! It may seem unusual to you, but you'll be fine!" Ray said he didn't understand and was surprised that his voice sounded so loud.

"You don't need to speak" said the voice, "I understand you too!" He sat motionless for minutes, trying to think clearly. The voice laughed very softly.

"Are you ready for some information that will change your life immediately?" The voice fell silent and Ray clawed his fingers into the covers. He was terrified, he had no control over the situation and this was the only time since childhood. He got up and went to the double doors. The sea, which he loved so much, had a very calming effect. He relaxed his hands, which were clenched into fists.

"We've known each other a long time Ray, we've spoken hundreds of times. Your inability to remember is by design. We wanted to get to know you better before we got in touch. We had to make sure that you are the right one." Ray's mind raced, the right one for what? The silence was liberating and suddenly Ray wasn't

afraid anymore. He knew somehow inside that he knew them. That he knew what they wanted from him.

"We are Jareel, we've talked about this many times. We've been observing the planet for thousands of years of your era and occasionally found a few right ones who understood us. It wasn't necessary to intervene in the course of your development until now. But before 70 years In the last few years you have made a significant leap in technological development. We knew from our own history that humans are very violent and have been at war for thousands of years, but we haven't been at war for a million years. And the fact that you have nuclear weapons developed and used so recklessly triggered the next step in our process. We had to wait for the next right one. That's you." The voice trailed off and Ray thought.

He suddenly knew everything again. He had dreamed that he had told his whole life story in detail, including his sexuality, that they had discussed his thoughts with him and talked to him for hours about his special gift. He knew they were real and out of this world. It was a little spooky that they were aliens, but they had explained to him in his dreams why they didn't approach all of humanity directly, why they kept a low profile. They were like that.

Ray felt an urge to see the Jareel. The voice seemed to laugh as it told him to lie back down. Before he could even stretch out on the bed, he was there.

He sat up again and looked around. It seemed to be a technical room, the entire equipment of the small room was crammed with devices of all kinds and apart from his couch there was hardly any space for living beings. He realized, sobered, that he was only wearing his boxer shorts. But he noticed immediately that his clothes were lying next to him. He dressed quickly and tied his sneakers. The voice said, "Follow the signs on the ground." The blinking LEDs on the floor zigzagged him forward for a long time until he was in a larger room. The LEDs ended in front of a small gilded bench and he sat down. There was no one there, just an exquisitely decorated wall, in front of which a bright ray of light glimmered briefly.

"Welcome to the Jareel, Raimund!" said the voice.

Ray discovers his gift

by István Rudas © 2022

Raimund grew up in a suburb of Vienna, nothing to indicate that he was anything special. He liked school and had a few friends. They studied and played together. They went to high school together and Raimund was an excellent student. All in all, he had a carefree childhood and loved his parents. The mother ran the household and the father worked as a senior clerk in a large international trucking company. He got his first cell phone when he was 12 and all his classmates envied him, but over time they all had cell phones.

Around the age of 9, he began to discover his talent step by step in amazement. When he touched his mother's hand, he could see her thoughts, see her memories like in a movie. It was a very intense experience, he couldn't relate to many things. More and more frequently, he succeeded in enticing her into small abstruse deeds that she would never do of her own accord. The 10-year-old managed to let her buy a pack of cigarettes. She returned home holding the useless package in her hands. She wondered, since no one in the family smoked, why Ray had ordered her to. Then the kid recognized the need to give her a forgetting order at the end of his manipulations.

In her thoughts, sexual acts appeared very often, which he was only able to classify and understand over time. Curious about all things sex, he soaked up everything sex related in her memories. He had soon learned to mentally control her and make her reveal her sexual secrets in great detail without reservation, shyness or shame. She felt compelled to bring up all the sexual details again, tell them and let him see it. From time to time he delved deeper into her thoughts and tried to mentally influence her more to obey his commands. He got better and better at dealing with his new gift and asked his father and mother about their sexuality, which kept the 11-year-old very busy.

The father was much easier to manipulate than the mother. He questioned his old man thoroughly. The father was a toad, he nibbled on all the young interns and plowed in the virgin furrows,

sowing the seeds without hesitation. Sometimes the mother would listen and wipe her tears from her eyes. She had known for a long time that he was plowing in the young furrows and wasting his manhood. She was outraged at the time and immediately retaliated. Ray elicited each of her missteps, each affair and each *one night stand* from the mother, she told everything without shyness or shame. Most of their affairs ended because they were caught red-handed. Ray could now suddenly explain the angry looks of some neighbors. One day she told in a trance about her very first affair.

She had only been married a few weeks, was a virgin to the marriage and had no idea about sex. Yes, she confirmed, she had never touched indecently before then. She went to an event with the magician and hypnotist Magnus. He fell in love with her beauty immediately and called her onto the stage to play his jokes on the audience. He instantly hexed her and she blindly followed him to his hotel room. The affair lasted only a week, she drove home at dawn every morning, ruefully lay down with her husband and made out with him until he was ready and aroused. She let him mate with her several times until he was exhausted. At night she drove to her magician, let herself be put into a trance and mounted on it until he was exhausted. Only he brought her to a climax in a trance. The magician taught her to touch herself and induce climax, which she has been doing at least twice a day ever since. The father just shrugged, he really didn't care if she climaxed herself. She couldn't tell if it was her husband or the cunning magician who had gotten her pregnant. From that day on Ray was convinced that the magician was his father, which explained his special talent. In any case, his mother was also a toad who got even with her husband for plowing in the young furrows twice and trebly. She stopped menstruating after he was born and was unable to conceive, making her revenge much easier.

12-year-old Ray had only played innocently and had never exploded. Of course he had gotten very horny with her stories, just like she. The hand of a benevolent god had always prevented him from exposing her or himself completely naked or from approaching her unseemly. Despite being able to put her into a trance easily and having total mental control over her, he had previously shied away from making her expose herself to him, but he had thought of that every day. In a deep trance she told the sexual details and

pressed her hands with lust on the pubic area under the skirt. She stammered in embarrassment, she needed it urgently now.

Since he didn't understand what she meant, he croaked hoarsely okay, then she should just undress. She quickly stripped him and herself naked and lifted him astride her thighs, facing each other and placing Ray's hands on her full, firm breasts. "Just let me do it first! It's almost over, I'll do it real quick!" the beautiful 32 year old gasped jerkily. And now, in her lust, she showed him everything, really everything, masturbating and then making love without shame and shyness, without reservation. In a deep trance she did everything with him, but as soon as he ended the trance, she remembered nothing, nothing at all. Two years later he turned 14 and fell in love with Ilse.

He adored Ilse, the unattainable beauty from the class above him. She went with someone her own age from her class and Raimund found him unspeakably stupid, conceited and arrogant. He waited in front of the school every morning and watched Ilse with greedy eyes. She never noticed him, but he had butterflies in his stomach and sunshine in his heart. He was hopelessly in love. His friends grinned widely and teased him a bit. It burned brightly until the end of the school year. He was 14 damn it, and he was pulling himself together.

He was determined. He waited until school was over and waited until Ilse came out. He had no plan and trotted two steps behind her. Before she reached the bus stop, he said, plucking up all his courage: "Come with me!"

Ilse started and turned around. He stretched out his hand, took hers and repeated: "Come with me!". Confused, she held his hand and together they walked to the opposite tram stop. They rode in silence to the last stop. She held his hand as if they were walking together. "My name is Raimund, Ray for my friends" he finally got out and Ilse nodded: "I know!" They were silent to the end and held hands.

He led her along a forest path to a small clearing. "We're here," he said and sat down on the grass. They put down their school bags, then she sat down across from him. He grabbed her second hand and looked into her eyes.

“I’ve been in love with you for a very long time” he said and she nodded. “I know,” she said simply. He leaned forward and kissed her on the lips. She smiled and said, “You don’t know the right kissing yet?” He shook his head. “I’ll show you,” she said softly and kissed him. He felt her tongue and felt his tongue carefully for her. That was Ray’s first kiss.

He kissed her again and again, it was wonderful and aroused him greatly. He stopped and said, “Please show me your breasts!” Ilse needed a moment, then she pulled her summer dress apart and pushed her bra down. He saw a girl’s breasts for the first time and held out his hand. She smiled as he fingered her breasts for several minutes. They were much smaller and not as firm as his mother’s breasts. He sat up straight again.

“Will you show me your... that down there?” he asked hoarsely as she readjusted her bra. She didn’t hesitate a bit, lifted her skirt and took off her panties. She spread her legs and Ray eyed her sex. He looked and looked, she only had a small hole and not such a big hole as that one. He asked if she was doing it real and real with Kevin and she nodded, of course! He questioned her thoroughly and she told everything in detail and without shyness. She smiled absently and he asked if she would teach him. He was very excited when she immediately nodded in agreement that she would explain exactly what he had to do.

It was like a first time for Ray and he never forgot it. He never met Ilse in secret again.

The next day, Ilse came to him during the 10 a.m. break and offered him a cigarette. She hung around for a long time and asked how exactly he had done it. He didn’t know an answer and she continued to ask how he had done it, she had gone with him without any will and he had done everything with her. He asked if she wasn’t going along voluntarily gone and Ilse thought about it. “Yes!” she finally said, bowing her head. She knew full well that it was she who had done it to him. She just didn’t know why. No, he hadn’t done anything. It was she who had shown him how to kiss, who had shown him her most intimate parts and introduced him to making love. She bowed her head, it was all her. They talked for a while, then she left. He went home straight away, even though school wasn’t over yet.

He searched his computer for “involuntary” and eventually came across a website that was about hypnosis. He read until well after midnight, his mother brought his supper up to his room and stayed as quiet as a mouse so as not to disturb him. Only very rarely does he study for so long, she said to his father when she was back downstairs.

Ray was now certain that he had somehow hypnotized Ilse. He found enough descriptions that confirmed him in this. He read for hours, separating the idiots from the experts as best he could. The next day he drove into town and bought a few books on hypnosis, which he devoured over the next few days. He doubted if the techniques in the books would work.

He tested his knowledge on several children in the playground. He couldn’t hypnotize a single child with the book knowledge. However, when he surprisingly grabbed a child’s arm, it immediately obeyed, somersaulting and hopping on one leg. He continued testing for days with the same result. It was the element of surprise, he thought for a long time. He went as far as touching the child briefly and then controlling it with willpower. That worked very well, he threw the books away.

Ray was a good student and managed his time well. He learned just enough to complete his assignments in a timely and complete manner. He spent a little less time with his friends and more time exploring his abilities. The children on the children’s playground were no longer his target group.

A long conversation happened quite by accident with his mother, who to his surprise was very understanding of his problem. His sexuality was awakening and he sometimes wanted to invite girls over and be private with them in his room. She blushed deeply when he said it had nothing to do with her dealing with his sexual distress on a daily basis. His mother encouraged him to have sex with his peers and had few requests or concerns. First of all, there was nothing more embarrassing for a girl than to experience something she didn’t want, his mother said gravely. So he should be sure that the girls really wanted it themselves, no matter what it was. She explained to him very laboriously that the second thing he had to think about was contraception, for himself and for the girl. Pregnancy would greatly affect both of their lives and per-

haps ruin the future. They discussed this topic at great length, and Ray sincerely promised not to fool around. She explained to him how to calculate the fertile days. He was very grateful to her because she showed so much understanding and wanted to help him discover his sexuality. It was a good conversation.

Ray kept his word. Gradually, many of his classmates came to his house every day to study with him. They varied in difficulty to hypnotize, but he never gave up, even if it was difficult at times. He questioned her thoroughly about her sexuality, carefully separating the experienced from the inexperienced. He got fed up with the girls' nudity and wrestled with them naked on the bed. He let the experienced show him everything and made love with them. The inexperienced played with him in childish lust without sleeping with him, and that was okay. Very few wanted to be deflowered and he was really very gentle and considerate about it. He learned everything about female sexuality faster than his friends. He seduced a girl from school almost every day until the summer after high school.

Ray often thought about keeping his word to his mother. His visitors had to want the sex themselves and agree with him on the right timing. He always calculated when the fertile days were. He was, of course, aware that he was gaining an unfair advantage by hypnotizing, but he was never guilty. You could happily roll around naked on the bed and play with the inexperienced without sleeping together. He never crossed the boundaries his mother had shown him, he had a clear conscience about it.

Ray never tried to use hypnosis to gain an advantage in school. He was among the best in class and he wanted more. On the contrary, he was proud that he had managed it without much cheating. There was only one incident with the written Matura in mathematics. He had solved 9 out of 10 tasks quickly and efficiently, but had a complete blackout on one. Desperately he raised his hand and the math professor came to him. In a low whisper he said that he had no idea how to solve problem number 8. The teacher pointed his finger at the text and accidentally touched his hand. At the same moment, Ray saw the solution and the solution very clearly in front of him. He listened to the teacher's whisper and nodded his thanks. He didn't have to blame himself, it had nothing to do with hypnosis. He had experienced it several times

that when touched he could see into the other's mind like his mother, but it happened only rarely and he didn't know how it actually worked.

Seducing the girls from his school was one thing. The other was actually criminal, he knew that very well. Kevin, Ilse's exboyfriend, gave him 50 euros a week. Kevin always had a lot of pocket money and could easily get over it. Ray only got 20 euros pocket money a month and knew that his parents could not afford more. He told them it was way too much. But Kevin gave him the money and later knew nothing more about it. Ray took the money from him and his rich buddies without batting an eyelid. It didn't matter to him that he was actually a thief. It seemed right to him not to be financially marginalized and to dress as stylishly as his friends, buy a computer and play games like them.

In the long run, seducing the girls from school wasn't enough for him, far too many were virgins and their childish sexuality didn't satisfy him. He had passed his high school diploma, was 18 and longed for a lot more sex. He looked around the neighborhood for young women interested in sex. Some he couldn't hypnotize and that was a bitter realization. He didn't give up and looked for someone else. Nevertheless, there were surprisingly many who let themselves be hypnotized and did his will. The women taught him everything that was important for sexuality. He stuck to what he had promised his mother. She had to want it herself and that contraception was taken care of. Most women used birth control themselves, leaving nothing to chance or their husbands. If Ray found out that a woman didn't want to betray her husband, he immediately let her go. He had no right to make her an adulteress.

After graduating from high school, he did a summer internship at the town hall. By chance he overheard a councilman accepting a bribe. Ray was stunned for just a moment, then decided to take some of his loot from the good man. He took an opportunity and questioned him under hypnosis. The officer was in the construction department and every construction project brought a bribe. Ray listened open-mouthed because that was a decent amount of money! He ordered the officer to give him 50,000 euros in a plastic bag, which wasn't very much. He opened a bank account and deposited the money. For weeks he trembled inwardly as to whether he would be exposed. But nothing happened. At the end

of the internship, he took another 50 thousand euros from the man and quietly disappeared from the town hall.

Ray still had no idea what he could do for a living and, more out of convenience than interest, followed his friends who moved to the city to study and formed a shared apartment. The parents didn't mind because he could take care of himself, he said. After all, he had saved the money he had received from the girls for tutoring. How much he had was not an issue, and he promised to work alongside his studies. Still, his father said, if he were ever in short supply, he would help him out. The parents sat with him for a long time and they discussed everything they knew about shared apartments. Ray was grateful and happy to feel their support and goodwill.

Ray still didn't know what he wanted to do for a living, but he enrolled in law. God knows, no particular decision, that should do for starters. Student life was much more exciting, there was a party almost every day, people drank, took a bit of drugs and there were always enough girls. He learned to fall in love and break up naturally. He rarely used hypnosis to get a girl into bed. The hunt and the slaying of the game was exciting and excitingly beautiful. Attracting the girls naturally was far more satisfying than hypnotizing and fucking them.

His bank account melted away like spring snow. He sat listlessly in the lectures and decided to become a criminal again and get money. He knew the place where the people from the town hall frequented. He carefully selected the corrupt officials and got them to bring him money in a plastic bag the next day. He often learned from someone who was still open to bribery. So he went from one to the next and carefully took the money from them. He listened very carefully when they revealed what they knew about the lazy clientele. He chuckled to think what he might have done with that information as a lawyer or prosecutor. But he had chosen to be a thief. He took the money of the corrupt officials and soon afterwards the money of the rich and super-rich. He carefully scouted out how much he could snag from them without difficulty. There was much more to be gained from these than from the officials. His bank balance grew enormously, by fourth year he had stolen more than 5 million. He went on vacation after each semester and

took his parents with him once a year. They were terribly proud of their son, who earned so much as a young lawyer.

For a long time now, he has not only taken money from the rich and super-rich, he also took their often pretty wives and daughters. Almost everyone was up for a fling and he let them love him in all honesty without any false pretense. They gave him everything and more than they ever gave their husband. Of course, he was always on the lookout and didn't make any mistakes with this clientele. Among these, the proportion of those he was good at hypnotizing was quite good. Some he didn't reach mentally and broke off immediately. He made not the slightest attempt to get their money or their wives. He knew he was dancing on a razor's edge and couldn't afford a single mistake. No money in this world and no woman, no matter how seductive, was worth killing.

Ray stayed in the shared apartment, although only a few of the original crew remained. The youngsters who followed were just as hungry for adventure as their predecessors. Parties, alcohol, drugs and girls as always. He traveled to distant places and got to know many peoples. The parents didn't want to go so far away and he paid them holidays according to their taste. After the final exams he invited them to the party, they were very proud of their son, who had now become a lawyer. He only had one more year of practice to complete. However, it turned out to be four years, after the first year he passed the bar exam. He continued studying philosophy and graduated in fourth year.

During this memorable time he got to know the really big fish. Super crooks who knew no borders and relentlessly robbed society. Interestingly, he got many of them into his hypnotic grip. Maybe it had to do with being overbearing, arrogant, and narcissistic. It was a very daring game when he usurped the gangster's wives and daughters. These criminals spent enormous sums of money to capture or buy the most beautiful women. The beautiful wives were often celebrities, film and TV stars, and invariably had no problem cheating on their husbands if they could keep it secret. Everyone gave themselves with complete honesty, because he didn't want any lying pretense. When he was still a student, he couldn't see through the mendacity of some girls and women. Only with some experience in the hot student life did he see through them and ordered them to leave out everything fake. He was as

careful as he could with each of these adulteries, for it was always a game of death.

Most of the gangsters' daughters were consistently depraved princesses who would give themselves to anyone without hesitation. They were very surprised by their own sincere devotion because Ray was never put off with superficial pretense. For some, it was the first time laying down with a man with honest devotion. It was not uncommon for them to cry afterwards, feeling deeply moved.

He took the gangsters' money by the briefcase and robbed them of a few percent of their wealth. Those close to the gangsters saw suitcases of money being handed over every day, so his little crime went unnoticed. It was not uncommon for the gangster to whisper softly to his lawyer or secretly hand him a suitcase of money. To cover up his crime, he drilled down on the bosses exactly what they allegedly talked about. He remained as cautious as ever and made it look like a nemesis had taken the money when it came to large amounts. If they distrusted and suspected each other, that was his right and he didn't care at all. He stayed out of anything involving violence had to do, but in all other respects he was a good, a very good, lawyer for the gangster. And he was paid handsomely, his exorbitant fees justifying the fact that he was an excellent lawyer, combative, brilliant, and always victorious. He has long since taken millions from them without feeling embarrassed. Ray ended his three years of practice with a good 750 million in the account. He could confidently retire at the age of 30.

He went to the Caribbean for a few months and was having a god damn good time. Sun, sea and tequila, that was beautiful. He read the newspaper in the morning, lounged around and let himself be seduced by enchantingly beautiful holidaymakers every day. He was told everything about their sexuality and sexual secrets, which interested him very much. The most beautiful women from all over the world told all their sexual secrets and lay down with him passionately.

He was 32 years old, in good health and wealthy. Not keen on working in an office, he bought a modest house in the south of Vienna and became a private citizen. He had chosen to retire and remain alone. He didn't want to work as a lawyer and stayed away

from the previous clients he had robbed. He would go out once or twice a month, enjoying the town's nightlife with his old friends and always bringing a companion from town to lie down with him. He needed a housekeeper and thoroughly interviewed each applicant before hiring them. He gave her his orders under hypnosis, which she faithfully carried out. The housekeeper looked after his household, cooked for him and willingly lay down with him when she felt his tension.

He decided to invest some of his money in real estate. He left the administration to the professionals, he didn't want to burden himself with annoying work. He supported his parents generously, enabling them to retire as soon as possible and to enjoy their retirement financially. The bond between them grew stronger every year. His parents were incredibly proud of him for making it this far. The only thing that worried his mother was that he wasn't thinking about getting married. She was very displeased that his housekeeper lay with him every night. That's not right, she said bitterly. It used to be the big landowners who took their subordinates to bed. Ray noticed that her bitterness was mixed with a good deal of jealousy. He looked deep into her soul. Why did he give this complete stranger what was actually her right? He assured her that if the right person came, she would!

He loved good music, read serious literature for hours, read many newspapers and watched the news and news magazines on television. He researched the world extensively, spent many hours on the internet and got a good and comprehensive view of the real world as it really was. It felt like there was nothing he could do about it. The world was a mess and it disgusted him how the rich and powerful were misleading and robbing the common foot soldiers. That was very sobering because he had no idea how to change that. It was obviously part of being human to snatch, rob and use violence. The knowledge of decency, neighborhood help and better solutions was generally available, but greed was the dominant thing in the world. It seemed like greed was etched into human DNA. People like him, who could one day stop grabbing money and even more consciously put an end to greed, were rare. He was 32 years old.

And Ray was still having these intense, weird dreams.

The first conversation

by István Rudas © 2022

“Welcome to the Jareel, Raimund!” said the voice.

“Please call me Ray,” he said, “Raimund is so official and a bit old-fashioned!”

“Very well Ray, whatever you like! Welcome, we’ve been looking for you for a long time and it’s very satisfying to have you with us!”

Ray thought it was weird not seeing the other person. Who were they, who was the voice?

“I will answer all your questions,” said the voice and continued: “I can hear your thoughts, feel free to ask if you want to know more!”

In the soft glimmer of light, a face was dimly visible, looking at him and speaking to him. It was a gentle, intelligent face, looking at him kindly.

“We are actually bodiless, our existence does not need a body like you. And there are many of us on this space station, about a million, and we mostly act together. - Oh, the space station? Look, I’ll show you! “

An oddly shaped object appeared in the air in front of his face. It looked most like an elongated hedgehog, with antenna-shaped spikes and towers protruding from both the front and the back. The object was completely dark. Suddenly, thousands of lights blazed up, illuminating it. Only now did Ray realize how complex it was. His eyes swept over the thousands of details that could be seen on the surface. It was a huge spaceship and Ray watched it with great interest. How big it might be, he puzzled and knew the answer right away. It was 5.4 km long and 1.2 km in diameter. The object went dark again and disappeared. It was about 500,000km from Earth and was camouflaged, invisible to all terrestrials. Ray had to swallow a few times, so there he was. A little human, invisible far out in space.

The person opposite gave him time to digest it. Ray closed his eyes. Hamurabi had sat before him on this little bench before he became king of the Babylonian empire. Imhotep, priest and architect of ancient Egypt. Chandragupta Maurya who ruled India. Pakal, the great Mayan king. Deganawidah was the last of those seated. He founded North America's first democracy, the Iroquois League, over 900 years ago and abolished cannibalism overnight when he returned from the Jareel. He didn't understand, of course, that the Jareel were concerned about the plagues that cannibalism would inevitably unleash.

And now him. Why him!?

Thoughts poured into him, he gradually and fragmentarily understood how they had come to him. It has a lot to do with your first partner's genes, the voice in his mind whispered. He thought. Ilse? The voice hesitated for a moment. "No, the one before!" she whispered. He blushed as he remembered it all like it was yesterday. "We know everything," the voice whispered, almost inaudible. "Your mother's genes and those of your father, the magician Magnus, made a mix that's rare to find! We watched you grow, amused by your afternoons with the schoolgirls as well as your raids. You convinced us that you're the one!" The whisper died away.

The knowledge flooded into his mind and he suddenly knew everything he needed to know. The Jareel on this space station have been here for many centuries and watched the development of humanity. They almost never intervened, people had to evolve quite naturally. The development of nuclear power was unavoidable and the Jareel had decided to intervene. This development led straight into the abyss, they couldn't allow that. He had been chosen to prevent it.

Ray, representing the Jareel, had to reach out to humanity and deliver their message. And execute. That's why he was here.

The friendly face looked straight at him. "Tell me three things that bother you about your world," the voice prompted.

"War, hunger, poverty, destruction of the planet, exploitation" flashed through Ray's mind.

“That was more than three,” the face smiled and beamed at him. “Those are good targets,” rang in his head. “We can work on that.”

Ray nodded, agreeing with that. But — how should that happen? He waited for an answer, but the voice was silent. So, Ray sighed, the world leaders call a meeting, and… and then a 32-year-old complete stranger comes up to them and demands whatever? He laughed and shook his head, that didn’t work! He laughed at the thought of showing up in the antechamber of any President and delivering a message from aliens. That was just stupid.

He thought he strained after. It had to be something very convincing, something that didn’t stray too far from people’s imaginations and was impressive enough to make them listen. Gradually he collected his thoughts, which were made up of many individual snippets. He smiled because a lot came from Hollywood movies and novels. But that didn’t matter, it just had to be effective.

The Jareel could do anything. Telekinesis, teleportation, mind reading, and affecting minds. They could procure all materials, manufacture them or develop new ones. They could clone living beings as well as objects of any kind. They were so technically advanced that they could produce everything imaginable perfectly. Ray nodded satisfied, “Let’s do it!” he cried and fell into a deep sleep.

The spaceship

by István Rudas © 2022

Ray knew what he wanted. He had to think or imagine it and let them produce it. He needed a spaceship that would allow him to appear before humanity. It should be based on the popular ideas about UFOs, people would accept that. It should have the shape of a disc, be completely smooth and impenetrable on the outside. About 500m in diameter. With cloaking ability and a shield that the best weapons of man could not overcome. Armed to the teeth. Navigation for all areas of the world. Best means of communication to talk directly to any or all people. A device to address any or all television channels in the world. One translator module for all languages in the world.

There should be a large, impressive reception hall, with an imposing throne for him. He needed an apartment that was all his and well equipped, with a kitchen that could cook everything for him. A command center where he could see and control everything. Big screen equivalents that could show him everything. The whole spaceship and its setup should be voice controlled.

The voice in his head encouraged him to think the thought through. “Go ahead, Ray!” He needed a mate. A pretty Asian, maybe. Video portraits of the prettiest Asian women appeared in front of him. The fifth impressed him immediately, she had a smart face and her naked body was just beautiful. Clone her, he thought, give her a submissive, friendly nature. She must speak my language — and should be smart and educated. Drop the pubic hair and ovaries on the clone, I don’t want kids with her. Ray paused exhausted, had he forgotten something important? Yes, she should be very sexually experienced, absolutely! The bright face across from him smiled friendly, we will design it according to your ideas, we know your sexuality and your desires very well. The face was smiling, she will be an ambassador between us because you are so socialized that you are better off talking to a specific person. You will surely like it better than the thought communication.

Ray felt hungry. He spotted a set table in the room next door and went there. Steak with fries and a mixed salad, a glass of red wine and a small beer. They actually knew what he liked. He ate and drank and took a cigarette out of the wooden box. He was full and looked at the picture that was presented to him.

It was an excellent model of his spaceship, a discus that looked like the discus of a discus thrower. He grabbed it in his hand and turned it. Yes, that's exactly how I imagined it! he thought and nodded in satisfaction. A flap opened and the "camera" flew in. There was actually a 100m2 large, round hall whose ceiling offered an impressive play of light as if made of precious stones. They *are* gems, the voice in his head murmured. His eyes widened. On the right was a gilded throne on a finely decorated pedestal. It *is* gold, finest gold from Russia! whispered the voice and laughed, "the seat cushions from the Forbidden City are covered with silk and are soft!" Ray laughed along with the voice and face. The floor is black marble with white inlays, he chuckled and the face nodded in the affirmative. All around were Greek columns made of white marble, behind them a beautiful, green landscape with a sandy beach by the sea. Deceptively real. Ray was impressed and very satisfied.

There was a comfortable lounger in the next room and Ray went to it. Your spaceship will be ready in five earth days, said the voice in his head before he fell asleep.

Lin — the girl

by István Rudas © 2022

Ray woke up from a very nice dream. He had slept really well, felt immensely refreshed, and was stretching. On the chair were his pants, underwear and a t-shirt that he wore very often. His sneakers looked like new. He looked closely: everything *was* new, sneakers, pants and t-shirt. Impressive what they could do! He dressed quickly and went into the next room. The table was set, breakfast like at home. He had a leisurely breakfast and smoked a cigarette, then looked at the model of his spaceship again. He floated the camera back into the throne room. He knew the camera wasn't a camera, but something very sophisticated that he didn't know a word for. Next to the throne room was the command center. He floated the camera in and was amazed to find that everything was in motion, parts appearing from nothing and being inserted by invisible hands. "It's not a model, it's the *real* command center being set up!" whispered the voice in his head. Ray rubbed his eyes. "Is this all real?" The voice fell silent, giving him time.

He reached for the wooden box and took another cigarette, poured himself a cup of coffee and looked up.

She stood in the doorway smiling. He recognized her immediately, the girl from the video. She was much younger than him, 20 at most, and slim with beautiful black hair that reached her hips. He looked at her beautifully shaped face, the full breasts under the translucent summer dress and her slender build. She wasn't wearing any underwear, he noticed that immediately. He smiled back.

"Come closer," he asked, watching her gracefully walk toward him and stand still in front of him. He put his hand on her back and let it slide down her small butt. "Do you know me?" he asked and she replied, "Yes, of course, you're my man, Ray!" She had a very pleasant, full voice. Her beautiful almond eyes rested on him. "What do you want to call me?" she asked, looking at him expectantly. The thoughts tumbled in his head, he had had a vacationer from China in the Caribbean, she was great and very impressive in bed and hasn't left his mind since. Her name was Lin.

“Lin,” he said simply, and she nodded, “Lin, like the gem!” He made her sit down next to him and grabbed her hand.

“Would you like to be my wife, Lin?” he asked quietly and she nodded and kissed his cheek.

“Yes,” she said, smiling, “that’s why I’m here!” She leaned against him. He poured a second cup of coffee and offered her a cigarette. They drank and smoked in silence.

“Would you like me to show you my spaceship?” he asked and she shook her head. “I know it very well, we did it” she said and he realized that he was speaking to the Jareel through her. “I want to go to the command center and familiarize myself with the devices.” Lin nodded and followed him. They let the camera take them to the command center and spent most of the day in front of the consoles. Lin could explain everything to him like the most competent engineer. She paraphrased the sometimes difficult to understand terms in terms of his world and remained patient if he did not understand something right away. He was a lawyer and not a fighter pilot, he knew that. Nevertheless, he stubbornly continued to practice, trying to use both the voice input and the manual controls. Lin was a very good teacher, patiently explaining over and over how it actually worked. He needed a break, a coffee and a cigarette. Without a word, Lin got up and served. They kept practicing until he got hungry. What he would like to eat, Lin asked and he only thought about it for a moment. “Steak with fries and salad like yesterday,” he said, “and then vanilla ice cream with whipped cream.” She nodded, “We’ll eat in 10 minutes, shall we have an aperitif first?”

They drank a martini and talked about their situation. He said that unfortunately he hadn’t showered, he hadn’t found a bathroom in the morning. She laughed out loud and ruffled his hair. “The bathroom is right at the head of the bed,” she said, “you can take a shower with me before bed if you like!” She smiled faintly because it hadn’t escaped her notice that he would have preferred to skip dinner. But the table was set, the hot steak was waiting for her. After dessert he had Lin serve him an espresso and they smoked and chatted happily.

Lin stood up. “Shall we take a shower?” she asked teasingly and he followed her. They showered and splashed happily, then lay down on the bed. The Jareel had done an excellent job, Lin was the sum of all good memories.

A First Plan

by István Rudas © 2022

Ray sat back after breakfast. Lin had cleared the table, came back with graceful steps and poured them both more coffee. She accepted the offered cigarette and sat down next to him.

“I take your thoughts as a compliment,” she said, smiling, “I’m just trying to be the good woman you wished for!” Ray took her hand and kissed her fingertips. He didn’t particularly like mental communication, preferring to talk to her. She nodded in agreement and ruffled the hairs on the back of his neck affectionately.

“I’ve been thinking all the time about what I can do in three days,” he said. “War is in people’s DNA, it’s been like that for thousands of years. I don’t know if you can simply tell people to stop fighting wars.” Ray sucked on his cigarette and watched the smoke. “I understand some things about hypnosis, but it seems unrealistic to me that hypnosis can make people forget the war.”

Lin nodded gravely. “We evaluated that a long time ago, it doesn’t work sustainably, it doesn’t last.” She snuggled up to him and took his hand. “It has to be different.” She said thoughtfully: “We’ve also tried taking away people’s weapons, that was before the Trojan War. At the end of the Iron Age, we shattered their spears and swords like glass. For 50 years it went quite well, they didn’t carry any More wars. They were determined and invented bronze. People would not stop for a single day from forging new weapons.”

Ray thought long and hard about what Lin had said. There had to be something that could be done. He lit the next cigarette. He had to flick the lighter several times before the flame appeared and lit the cigarette. He stared at the stupid thing. A thought shot into his brain and took shape.

“And what if the guns just don’t work?” He was still staring at the stupid lighter that didn’t always work. Lin sat bolt upright. She thought about it and a whole crush of Jareel thought and discussed the idea.

“It’s enough if no weapon works anymore,” Ray murmured. “Or if the ammunition becomes unusable. If firearms no longer work, then people have to wage their wars with knives, spears and clubs. That is far too tedious, the wars could only be waged with physical strength, the wars are becoming shorter and regionally restricted .”

Ray leaned back. “Would that work?” he asked Lin. She was silent for a long time, contemplating with the crush. Minutes later she grabbed his hand. “It would be possible to remove the ability to explode from most firearm ammunition. Most other propellants could also be removed from the ability to explode. No ammo, no explosives, no rocket fuel.” Lin paused and looked Ray in the eye.

“There would also be many downsides,” she continued. “You could no longer launch rockets, not even for civilian purposes such as satellites or space research. The police and military would be disarmed, that would be fatal. Quarries and tunnel builders would have no explosives. These are some of the problems.”

“Okay,” said Ray, “let’s go through each item one by one. Rockets: most are for war, so throw them out! You could keep a single rocket fuel plant operational for civilian space travel and monitor the release tightly. Police and military: for hundreds of years the police officers in England were unarmed, so it works. In addition, many police officers already have tasers, which they could still use. Of course, this is very delicate, but the positive effect far outweighs it. There were quarries Thousands of years before Alfred Nobel, you have to change production, that’s not a big price. Tunnels could already be dug in ancient times. High-rise buildings can also be demolished without explosives. All in all, I see huge advantages and manageable disadvantages.“

“Nuclear weapons are still a problem,” Lin said, “defusing them from a distance is very, very difficult to impossible, we’ve done a lot of research on that.”

Ray thought for a moment. “Correct me if I say something wrong,” he told her. “There will be no more rockets to carry a nuclear weapon. There will be no more explosives to detonate the nuclear weapons. It will still be possible to drop the nuclear bomb from an airplane, but it would do little damage. A small local dirty

bomb sucks but that's not the way to make a real war, similarly biological and chemical weapons, you can drop them, but such a war would only be local, it's the same with the military, you can unleash upon the enemy with clubs and machetes waging a war the old-fashioned way will be difficult. And violence will probably never be abolished."

Ray met Lin's eyes. "No more nuclear weapons, no more rocket weapons, no more artillery and no more handguns. That wouldn't be such a bad start. I think we should do that. That would be a giant step towards a better future. And yes, violence does not leave peoples mind."

Lin lit two cigarettes and gave him one. "Today before dinner I can tell you if the Jareel can do it technically." They smoked in silence.

"Come on," Lin said, "let's see your spaceship, your apartment is ready!" They let the camera take them into the spaceship and inspected the new apartment. He was amazed. It was right behind the command center, was exquisitely furnished and very spacious. The ceilings glittered and sparkled with their jewels. The bathroom was huge, the bathtub round and ingeniously equipped with massage jets. Functional shower and two vanities and a special closet. Lin explained to him that it had a washing machine comparable, there were hand and bath towels on top, which you tucked in below after use. The next day they were on top again, clean and ironed.

The bedroom was also stunning. Here, too, a sparkling and glittering ceiling that could be switched off. A huge bed. The glass walls reached to the floor and gave him a view of a sandy beach and the sea. Lin amazed him and then said that you could go out on the sandy beach and swim in the sea. He looked at her in disbelief, but she just walked ahead of him, walking across the sand and up to her knees in the sea. He followed her and grabbed her hand. He asked her how that was possible, but she laughed out loud and said it was some Jareel mumbo-jumbo that he probably wouldn't understand. His spaceship had a diameter of 1,500 meters, there was enough space for mumbo-jumbo, she said smiling to the amazed Ray. The sea stretched to the horizon, tiny rocky islets formed a natural breakwater. The sandy beach to the left and right

merged into a sparse stock of palm trees, like on a South Seas island. He couldn't believe it. They went back and a confused Ray washed the sand off his feet. It was real sand, no doubt. Lin chuckled as she washed her feet in the bidet after him. "You know that it's meant for something else?" and laughed sweetly as he shook his head and his ears went red as she whispered it in his ear.

He just glanced at the tiny kitchen, it wasn't interesting. Lin told him that the kitchen was mainly for the dishes, the food was ordered and "hocus pocus" was cooked and served. She explained to him with a broad grin, of course it would be cooked on earth, the Jareel teleported the meal to the spaceship in the blink of an eye. He nodded in the affirmative, realizing that the chef must forget that he had cooked. Lin grinned from ear to ear. "I order from the chef, steal the meal in a flash, pay him well and let him forget. That's how they cook here, my dear!"

The dining room was large and bright, behind it were two comfortably furnished rooms. There he could read and listen to music. All he had to do was call up a piece of music and it played out of invisible loudspeakers. There was also a desk with a big screen where he could access the internet. Here, too, the walls showed the sandy beach and the sea, on the other side a meadow and a forest. "You can go there too," he asked, "Hocus pocus?" Lin smiled and nodded in confirmation. Her smile was so adorable that he stepped up to her. "The kiss is for the sweetest woman I've ever met!"

He sat down by the screen and said he wanted to see the New York Times. The front page promptly appeared and his gaze fell on the date. He's been here a week, he said to Lin, time just flies! He flipped the pages for two minutes, reading the headlines, the world's troubles were unchanged. He switched off and sat down in one of the comfortable armchairs. Lin sat down with him.

"Something is bothering you," she said, "I'm not reading your mind because you don't like it. Can you tell me what it is?"

He nodded and thought about it, she took two cigarettes from the wooden box that was spread all over the apartment. They smoked in silence and Ray organized his thoughts.

“It is typical for us humans that we judge the other person in fractions of a second when we meet. That’s how it is, it’s in our DNA. For example, if a teacher steps in front of a school class and he is a head shorter than the students, perhaps still inconspicuously dressed, then he will have a hard time, no matter how good he is as a teacher.” Lin nodded in agreement.

“Now look at me. Slim and slender, medium height, unremarkable face, beardless. If I wear a suit, an impressively good suit, then I can act as a lawyer. But never as a crime boss.” He paused and gestured in the air. “How am I supposed to appear in front of the most powerful people in the world, for example in a lawyer’s suit!?” He stared sorrowfully out to sea, the waves calming him a little.

Lin grabbed the back of his head and ruffled his hair. It was a very loving gesture. “The Jareel can do anything. It won’t be a difficult task. The easiest would be to have you appear in any shape or dress at a meeting or a televised address. All you have to do is tell me what you wish for!”

Ray said he’d like to think about it. He closed his eyes and thought. The first thing that came to mind was Michelangelo’s Moses in Rome. One of the most impressive male figures he had ever seen. But the horns, which the great sculptor must have formed with care, repelled him. He dismissed the thought. The second thing that came to mind was the imposing Zeus statue by the sculptor Phidias at Olympia. He said it out loud and Lin could follow his train of thought. She said it could be done with ease. He deepened the thought. If a living god appeared among the people, that would be really impressive, even for an uneducated head of state. “Cross the statues of Moses and Zeus as muscular giants six feet or better two and a half meters, long white locks of hair and long beard like Moses. A white tunic trimmed with gold and a golden staff with a thunderbolt on top. Something like that.” Ray looked uncertainly at Lin.

She smiled and looked into his eyes. “It’s an easy task, it’s really easy to do.” She thought for a moment. “For a TV appearance, it’s enough to change your image on the show. But I can also give you the look if you have a face-to-face meeting. It’s just a question of whether you want to be changed temporarily or permanently! “

“Temporary only!” Ray replied like a shot. “I’m perfectly happy with how I look, it’s just to impress the world. And such a *living god* is impressive, I’m sure!”

Lin said they would do a dry run tomorrow and then decide what Zeus should look like. Ray nodded in satisfaction, that was a good plan.

They went to the command center and looked at everything, it was now finished. He went back to the throne room at the end, he was really stunning. He turned the lights on and off, walked through the huge hall and took a good look at everything. He asked Lin to sit on the throne. She cooed, grinned, dropped her sundress and sat naked on the throne. He whistled shrilly and laughed, didn’t she want to give the televised address?

They exited the spaceship and drank an aperitif before dinner. Lin snuggled up to him and he exhaled the smoke through his nose. “It will work,” she said abruptly and Ray didn’t know what she meant. “The Jareel can do anything, they can disable any kind of ammunition, explosives and rocket fuel too.” Ray blinked and nodded, that was very good news. She continued, “It will take them a total of two Earth days to set everything up. The mission will take less than half a day. You can rely on this information!”

Ray digged deeper and was told by Lin that the Jareel had already tried everything out in the field on Earth. Small arms ammunition could be crippled just as easily as artillery ammunition. They disabled and detonated some US and Chinese missiles. There was only one hell of a fire in the launch pads, otherwise no damage was done. Likewise, there were some fires in the nuclear missile silos, and with that it was possible to disarm humanity to a large extent. But not in the blink of an eye, it would take half a day.

Ray hugged Lin. “That’s wonderful news,” he said, “we can work with that!”

They talked all night after dinner, finalizing the plan. Lin had good ideas, they needed careful choreography. Fanfare and theatrical fog at the beginning, Lin would stride around the throne scattering flower petals. He would deliver his brief address to every television channel in the world, then more theatrical fog and

fanfare. They fine-tuned and formulated his text, which he learned by heart but, just to be on the safe side, could also read from a projection. A few espressos and a dozen cigarettes later, they went to bed.

First Encounter

by István Rudas © 2022

The next day, after breakfast, Lin reminded him to watch the projection of Zeus in the throne room. They let the "camera" bring them into the throne room. They squatted on the visitor's bench in front of the throne and waited anxiously. Zeus appeared on the throne. Ray and Lin held their breath.

The muscular giant looked imposing, his powerful chest twice as wide as his hips. The god unfolded his magnificent manhood. "My God!" stammered Lin, "I've never seen one like that!" She grabbed Ray's hand and snuggled up to him excitedly. "A giant..." she breathed, "how did it feel?" She put her hand to her mouth and turned red.

"He needs a tunic and a staff," Ray reminded dryly, both of which magically appeared. The white tunic, made of the finest cloth, was edged with gold and covered one shoulder and the abdomen of the imposing man. A finely worked fibula made of pure gold held the tunic together over the chest. A hand clutched a golden staff towering over him. Small bolts of lightning shot from the tip of the staff. Ray nodded contentedly, that's pretty much what he had imagined.

"He's too pale, he needs some tan," he murmured, and the giant's face and body acquired a pleasant tan. "The hair should look silverier and reach to the shoulder blades. Curly, like Phidias." He took a closer look at the face. "He should be a bit younger, around 40 and some prominent wrinkles on his face are also needed. No, not that much! Wrinkled distinctive and not wrinkled wrinkled!" Ray wasn't quite done yet. "The eyes have to get brighter, radiant blue, fascinating blue!"

Ray looked at Lin, who couldn't tear her eyes away from the giants genitals. He asked her and she winced slightly. "I want to hear his voice!" she said and Zeus repeated blankly, "She wants to hear my voice!"

“No, no!” said Lin, “he needs a deep, rumbling voice, he’s the goddamn thunder god!” She waved his hands over his voice until it was deep and growling. Ray and Lin shuddered at the thunderous sound of that voice, now it was right. Ray gave Lin a few minutes to feast her eyes on the gods privates. They dismissed the god and went into the living room of his apartment. “I’ve noticed and I’ll give you this pleasure if it’s possible,” he said, gently stroking Lin’s hot cheeks with his hand. She lowered her head and blushed. “It’s possible,” she whispered, “you can wish it anytime!”

He led the way into the bedroom and lay down on the bed. He desired the body of the god and he was it. “It’s me, Ray, it really is me,” Zeus growled as Lin laid down next to him.

He later wished for his own body again and they had dinner at the new apartment. After dinner they drank whiskey and gin and smoked. He felt very comfortable and content in his new apartment. He listened with a smile as Lin gushed to him about her experience with the god. He swam in the sea with Lin before they went to sleep.

Then the big day came. They went into the throne room, Ray sat on the throne and turned into Zeus. He saw a small square in the air in front of him, he should look there. He waited a few minutes to completely relax. Theatrical fog rose, fanfares sounded, and the fog cleared. Lin floated in from the side, carrying a basket of flowers and petals.

Her face had transformed into the idealized, aristocratic face of an ancient Greek woman, her naked body under the white tulle left no questions unanswered and she walked around the throne, scattering flowers and petals on the floor. She sat down at the feet of the god and snuggled up against his legs.

Ray concentrated and calmly read his speech from the display that appeared just behind the square. Zeus raised a hand and the fanfares stopped.

“Peace be upon you, people of this world! I come in peace and I want to bring you peace. But you must all want peace yourselves too! Stop all wars, urge your leaders to stop wars once and for all. After thousands of years of wars, it is now time for humanity to

take a big step towards a peaceful future. Do not waste your resources, use them wisely and fairly. I demand of you: end your wars immediately, throw away your weapons, because I will come back in three days and take them from you!”

Fanfares, theater fog. Ray got up and transformed back, as did Lin. They walked hand in hand into the living room and sat down by the screen.

The media hell erupted immediately on Earth. All television channels in the world had his speech broadcast simultaneously, everyone heard his words in his native language. Very few TV channels tried to interrupt his speech, but none succeeded in time.

The powerful and the political leaders immediately convened crisis meetings. The contact details of Zeus were received in the offices of three presidents, the USA, Europe and China. They should be the only ones who could contact them directly. Videos appeared in the air next to his screen showing the crisis management teams. He sat in front of these displays with Lin for hours, observing the reactions of the Krisenwands. Ray didn’t ask what mumbo-jumbo the Jareel used to stream sessions from the high security rooms.

Of course, the first thought was that it was a Hollywood-style hoax. On the other hand, serious journalists and pundits noted that the address was seen simultaneously and in different languages around the world. Such a joke was technically not possible! The speech was repeated hundreds of times, and talk shows with well-known participants commented on every word and sentence. It was agreed that an extraterrestrial had contacted them. His outward appearance was reminiscent of Zeus from ancient Greek mythology. Experts confirmed that it was not a computer animation etc.

The message was simple, clear and unmistakable. The politicians of all states were in turmoil and questioned their partners worldwide. End wars? Why? The speech ended with the announcement that the weapons would be taken away from them.

No one who was at war wanted to end it. None of these states was ready to back down. It was ridiculous, how would anyone take their guns away? The leaders of the USA and Europe contacted

them and advised a temporary cessation of hostilities. Both the US and Europe were the first to conclude that it was alien contact and serious. They were ridiculed and their warnings ignored.

Different opinions circulated in the print media and online services. There were the craziest conspiracy theories, but also opinions from serious people. The message of the speech was simple.

End the wars. Spend the money on better things. Live in peace.

Indeed, hundreds of thousands of people around the world turned to their politicians. Politicians were startled, they had to say something about it. The usual, what else please?

Ray was quite disappointed. He had been sitting in front of his screen and the displays where the Jareel had compiled the most important information for more than two days. He was tired, drained and disappointed. He had slept less than four hours, had bathed in the sea and immediately sat down again in front of the screen. He didn't feel like having sex, Lin understood him very well and made sure that he ate and drank something.

Lin said it's starting.

The Jareel spacecraft had invisibly approached 5,000km from Earth, exposing thousands of objects around the world. The objects were barely 2 meters tall and camouflaged. They were programmed to disable the weapons and return to the spaceship.

Ray's spacecraft flew uncloaked at insane speeds across Africa and the Atlantic to within 10 kilometers of the mouth of the Potomac River off Washington, where it stalled at 10,000 feet. The military monitoring stations followed the incredibly fast flight of the large spaceship and immediately sounded the alarm. Several fighter planes took off from America's east coast and circled the spacecraft, which could be seen with the naked eyes from Washington.

Ray sat with Lin in the command center and watched them. He didn't respond to the radio messages, although of course he could see and hear everything. President Andrews did not authorize the attack on the alien spacecraft. Whoever was in that UFO may have come with peaceful intentions, the President said. The President

was no fool, of course, the pilots had the green light to react immediately to an attack. Major media helicopters hovered as close as they could, continuously filming the spacecraft and fighter planes. Neither these nor the helicopters could get closer than 2,000 meters to the spacecraft. An invisible wall prevented them from getting closer, the planes and helicopters glided down the invisible barrier without damage.

Ray followed the meetings on both sides of the Atlantic and also those of the Chinese leadership. He hovered in front of Washington for 24 hours, the Jareel flying objects began their work in the morning. Hour after hour they rendered the weapons useless. They were almost done when it was time to make the second contact. Ray went into the throne room with Lin and they transformed.

Fanfares, theatrical fog and the Greek Lin, who was almost naked again and was scattering flowers. When she sat down at his feet, the fanfare stopped. As before, he spoke to the people in their native language on all television channels.

“I came as promised and I was a bit disappointed. You didn’t end all wars even though I asked you to!” thundered Zeus. “As announced, I’ll take your weapons away from you, you don’t need them, you need peace. That’s my message: Peace! I’ll be back.” Fanfare, Zeus disappeared in the theater fog, end of broadcast.

He had transformed back into Ray and gone to the command center with Lin. One of the American fighter pilots flinched and fired a missile at the spacecraft. The rocket broke off the plane and fell into the sea, burning and smoking, where it sank without exploding. The military followed the incident and looked at each other in disbelief. These rockets never failed. Ray made the spaceship make a few slow circles around the center of Washington, then it rose and flew cloaked at lightning speed to the Jareel spaceship.

Over the next few weeks, he closely followed what was happening on Earth. All firearms were useless, hand guns, artillery and rocket weapons useless. Americans, Chinese and Russians were secretly testing their nuclear weapons. They burned out in the silos quite unspectacularly, they didn’t come from the ground. Explo-

sives could no longer explode, they burned up harmlessly. Space rockets didn't take off, they just wouldn't ignite and the fuel burned up ineffectively. Mankind realized that Zeus had indeed disarmed them. Only the police officers could use their tasers, a consolation for the law enforcement officers. The wars stalled. They used clubs and machetes to fight each other for a while, but these weren't wars any more.

When Lin asked him to do so in the evening, Ray turned into Zeus. He only made the condition that she, too, be transformed, always into something else. After a short time he noticed that it wasn't as nice for her as it was for him. Good-naturedly, he no longer asked for it, and she loved his generosity.

They spent many days observing the people. The Jareel summarized the main events and showed it to him and Lin. Washington, Brussels and Beijing quickly grasped the scale, held joint meetings and faced the facts. They all had the same contact details from Zeus, but even the best technicians couldn't find the receiver, god knows how the Jareel did. Ray, who followed these conferences, had to grin. Washington was the first to decide to make contact. They wanted to talk to Zeus, they wrote in their email.

He answered immediately. A Washington representative was supposed to be waiting for him on the steps of the Capitol at noon the next day. She should take her questions in paper form with her and not carry any electronic devices with her. Washington asked if he meant a woman? He confirmed that she should come alone and that he guaranteed her safety.

He followed developments in the White House. They found a diplomat from the State Department who wanted to take the plunge. She was thematically prepared from all sides and the secret service equipped she with the smallest bug. She stood in front of the Capitol at exactly 12 noon. Ray appeared out of nowhere 10,000 feet above the Capitol with his imposing spaceship.

The diplomat disappeared in the blink of an eye and the bug clattered to the floor. Those present were stunned. Only the government cameras recorded it, the media had been carefully distracted with a speech by President Andrews in the briefing room. Among other things, the President said that at the same time, in a

secret operation, diplomatic contact was made with the being that was generally referred to as Zeus in the media. He stressed that the operation demonstrated American *leadership*. Results are not expected before tomorrow. The spectacle in front of the Capitol went largely unnoticed.

The diplomat, who had just stopped in front of the Capitol, found herself in a small room, the lights dimmed. A pleasant female computer voice asked her to undress and stand in the lighted circle to be scanned for electronic devices. After that she was supposed to put on the white tunic that was lying on the bench. The voice repeated the message until the diplomat undressed. Please take off everything, she said when the diplomat hesitated to remove her underwear. Then she stood on the lighted circle and waited. The computer voice asked her to put on her tunic and follow the light signals.

Ray came up with this prank, Lin grinned and didn't object. The big boy in Ray loved to look at naked women, she murmured good-naturedly and nudged her lovers in the side. She assured him that the diplomat had nothing on her but her papers. They went into the throne room and both transformed.

A moment later, the diplomat entered and looked around. Impressed by the throne room, she followed the LEDs to a small bench with gilded feet. She stopped before Zeus and bowed. Zeus raised a hand in greeting and said, "Welcome, Anne Kilpatrick, please have a seat." The Greek Lin rose and pushed a small table next to Anne, on which stood a crystal clear carafe and a glass. "Ice water, as is customary in America," Lin said, sipping from the glass. "It is digestible and not poisoned at all!" she said with a beautiful smile before sitting down again at the god's feet.

Zeus watched her in silence. Anne was in her early thirties, well educated and not ugly. She exuded an aristocratic confidence. She regarded Zeus fearlessly, trying to judge him correctly. She fidgeted a little nervously with the sheer tunic that revealed her nudity more than it hid it. Zeus' eyes studied her body as any man would, this was familiar and somehow reassuring.

He looked at her kindly and said, "I know your name, people call me Zeus. Where am I from? Olympus in the human tradition

is not what is commonly believed. It is out in the universe, for the people out of reach. From there I came here to bring you peace. I took your weapons away from you, but violence is part of human nature. You have to learn to deal with it, nobody can do that for you."

Anne had lost her initial nervousness and listened to him attentively. "My government will not be very pleased," she said, "I have been commissioned to inquire where Excellency comes from, what people he represents, and whether your intentions toward humanity are kind." She fiddled with her tunic again, which stubbornly revealed more and more of her nakedness.

Zeus smirked and a hand played with the curls of his beard. "It is not necessary to title me Excellency, please just call me Zeus, as the media of the world do. I speak on behalf of the peoples of the Universe, of which I am Lord. And my intentions are very kind, I assure you solemn to all mankind!" Anne felt the giant's ice-blue eyes rest on her. The longer Ray looked at the 29-year-old with the short, blond hair, the small virgin breasts and the narrow hips, the more he liked her.

Zeus continued: "I took your firearms from you, knowing full well that you will continue your violence with swords, clubs and spears. Your inventors will design new weapons that are no longer based on explosives. It would be quite to be expected that mankind is and will remain stubborn. You can win peace or lose your civilization. I have nothing to gain, nothing to lose." Zeus leaned back a little.

Anne looked at her papers. She could delete most of it, it was answered. "So it will no longer be possible for us in the future to produce weapons based on explosives?" she asked. "Just to be clear," she added, looking up. And Zeus immediately replied: "Yes, it is so!"

Anne looked him in the eye fearlessly. It meanwhile she didn't mind sitting almost naked in front of the giant. "There's an important question about our exploration of space. We can't launch rockets at this time, so we can't put satellites into Earth orbit, we can't explore space any further." She looked questioningly at the thunder god.

“I was expecting that question,” said Zeus, smiling. “You can make rocket fuel in one of your factories. Just one factory, only rocket fuel for peaceful purposes. Share it with the other nations. Have no ulterior motives, I always know and will destroy more factories or rockets for military purposes! I’m serious !” he growled.

Anne nodded in the affirmative, “This will look favorably on my government,” she said. “A second problem is that our quarries, tunnel builders, demolition contractors, etc. are out of explosives. What answer can I bring, Venerable Zeus?”

He smiled and nodded. “For that, too, I give the same answer. One factory worldwide, no military use, share with the other nations!”

He looked at Anne with knitted eyebrows. “Deliver these messages verbatim. Rocket propellants and explosives for non-military purposes only. Only one production site at a time! And share it with the other nations! Control it closely, because you can!”

Anne looked back at her papers. One point was still open. “There have been many UFO sightings over the past few decades, were those UFOs yours?” Anne smiled shyly, but she had this nonsense to say. Zeus laughed and looked at her kindly. “No, dear Anne, not at all! There was - apart from my visit - only one visit from outside, a good 800,000 years ago. The Valurians wanted to explore the earth, their research ship crashed, but there are no traces of that today (*See “Valuria” by Jack X. Faber*). Everything else was hallucinations, trickery or sailor’s yarn. I’m sure you won’t be disappointed, dear Anne!”

They were silent. He raised his hand and the bench she was sitting on rose into the air until she was eye level with him. Fearfully, Anne clutched the seat and involuntarily kicked her legs. They looked into each other’s eyes.

“Anne Kilpatrick, it was pleasant to meet you,” said Zeus. “In your clothes you will find a USB stick that I took from your desk. Our conversation is recorded on both audio and video. You have to decide for yourself who can see the video, maybe it’s a question for you decency or privacy.”

Anne only blushed slightly and fiddled with her tunic again, she released way too much. She lowered her eyes and caught a long glimpse of the giant's body. The bench lowered back to the ground.

"Go in peace!" said Zeus, the conversation was over. Lin rose at the same time as Anne. "Goodbye and peace be upon you!" Anne said in a low voice, bowed and followed the LEDs on the floor. She got dressed and made sure the USB stick was in the skirt pocket of her costume. She blinked because she was back in front of the Capitol.

She was immediately surrounded by the Secret Service and taken to the White House. There was a special screened room in the basement where she waited for the President. The faceless officials patted them down, they examined them with radiation meters and other devices. It took quite a while before they gave the Secret Service the green light. The President came and shook her hand, and the room filled to capacity. President Andrews waited for calm to settle and spoke a few words, then invited Ann to report. She introduced herself to everyone by name and said she had faced the being and did not appear to be facing any projection or hallucination. She was absolutely convinced that it was a real, living being. And now she will play the conversation, it's all recorded.

She inserted the stick into one of the computers and waited a while for the screen to glow green as a sign of safety. She selected the file labeled Audio and started. The recording was technically perfect, you could hear the conversation in excellent quality. Some took notes eagerly, the President and his ministers and advisors listened intently. At the end there was a long silence. The President ordered it played again. Everyone listened attentively, again some made their notes. At the end there was a babble of voices until President Andrews raised his hand and announced that the Cabinet would meet in an hour for deliberation, exceedingly natural. Everyone got up and spilled out.

The chief of intelligence stepped up to President Andrews and beckoned to Anne. The boss asked Anne what else was on the stick. File name video, the boss added, he was able to read that. Anne pulled herself together and said, turning to the President, that she would beg you to show it to the President first and let him decide who might see it. It's a question of her privacy. The Presi-

dent nodded and let everyone leave. Only the two heads of intelligence and the Secret Service remained.

Anne started the recording. It began the moment she entered the throne room, the camera followed her gaze across the magnificent throne room. Her nudity was plain to see and the men immediately understood why Kilpatrick wanted to watch it in private first. The recording matched the audio exactly, the camera showing either Anne or Zeus when they spoke. Anne didn't blush at the close-up shot of her modest breasts. She blushed because you could see her clean-shaven pubic area very clearly and as sharp as a hair. At the end then the bench, which floated up. Her panic and the involuntary parting of her wriggling legs, revealing a deep look into her most private parts. Everything as tiny as a hair in all clarity, every hair, every pore and every skin fold in lifelike resolution. The giant's final word, her enchanted look at the mighty body of the thunder god. She followed the LEDs and the recording ended as she left the throne room.

President Andrews wiped his forehead. He first looked into the eyes of Anne, who had turned red as a turkey, then at the head of the secret services. "Jim, get the video edited. Anne's nudity needs to be blurred out, as well as the thing of Zeus, people don't understand that. And skip the part about the USB stick, it's better if they don't know exactly how was created!"

Jim, the head of intelligence, ran the recording again. He stopped the recording at all points where Anne's nudity could be seen. He looked to President Andrews to see if it was a spot that needed work. Andrews nodded each time. Vernon, the Secret Service man, stood behind the two and Anne saw his look of disdain as the two men stared at the spot where Anne's private parts were naked and clearly visible. Anne wasn't surprised, that was a very understandable reaction from the men. She said softly, "That has to be covered up," and only now Andrews nodded, "Cut!" he commanded. Andrews instructed the intelligence chief to transfer it to their servers and have the corrections made before releasing it. "Agreed, Miss Kilpatrick?" he asked formally and when she nodded, the meeting was over.

Ray, who had observed the meeting with Lin, asked her why? Lin said they have studied the legends surrounding their dream

character, Zeus, and know exactly how people react to sex. Ray thought for a moment and agreed. Americans, for example, presented themselves as extremely prudish, but they consumed more pornography than other nations. “But you do realize that the video will be leaked sooner or later?” Ray asked and Lin nodded in agreement, that will definitely happen. “But I can assure you that Anne Kilpatrick will not be disadvantaged by this!” said Lin. When they went to bed that night, Lin, with a big grin, said she had a present for him. Ray looked at her expectantly as she dropped her dress. She turned into Anne Kilpatrick and lay down with him. Anne was quite inexperienced sexually, but virginity had a certain allure.

They stayed over Washington in the spaceship for several months, swimming in the sea and observing developments and reactions. The defused video was published a day later, and copies were given to all embassies. (The uncensored video leaked online a day later.) Conferences were held with Washington, Brussels and Beijing, and the sites for the two factories were decided. The production of the rocket propellants should take place in Pennsylvania, that of the explosives in Spain near Madrid. The US and Spain signed treaties with all relevant states to regulate distribution and funding. The final versions were emailed to Zeus, who promptly approved them. Ray growled that he hated such bureaucratic frills. However, Beijing did not comply. They continued to clandestinely produce military missiles. Ray watched for a while, then decided with Lin to set an example.

He flew to China. He flew very slowly over the megacities so that many could see them. Then he positioned the spacecraft over the rocket factory. He left a message for 2 hours via Bullhorn that everyone had to leave the factory, and unbearably shrill tones rang out until the last person had left the factory. He had informed Washington and Brussels beforehand and destroyed the factory and warehouse with a single shot. The deep crater should be warning enough. They should know he could. They returned to Washington and released the uncensored video of the destruction to the media.

They spent the days by the sea, swimming or lying on the sand under the artificial sun. Ray followed developments on the screen and in the Jareel summaries. They monitored the two factories,

but there were no irregularities. Mankind no longer waged wars. States began using the military for civilian tasks and downsizing armies. There were repeated outbreaks of violence, but they remained local. Where the states had previously relied on deterrence, they abandoned it I now ensure that no one owned any weapons worth mentioning. The arms trade and production collapsed and it was very difficult to catch them. President Andrews was a wise man and he intervened generously to save most of the workers and factories. He scored a lot of points for his re-election.

Ray sat in the comfortable armchair of his living room, drank a whisky, smoked and planned the next step with Lin.

Famine

by István Rudas © 2022

He knew as well as Lin that the next task was far more difficult than the first. Fighting global hunger would be a very complicated matter. They bathed in the sea and let the artificial sun dry them. He discussed several ideas with Lin, they argued back and forth, and they scrapped the plans. There was no point in fighting hunger with mumbo-jumbo. Mankind had to realize that the planet could feed everyone. The distribution was the big problem and the smart production of food in the region. For example, it wasn't wise to burn food in power plants to make electricity, Ray said. The same was true for the water.

"Give the hungry a fishing rod, not a fish!" Lin quoted this wise saying of Lao Tse again and again. Ray knew how right she was. But man had to develop the fishing rod himself, forcing hocus-pocus on them was pointless. The Jareel, too, had taken millennia to feed their world population when they still had bodies. Humanity had to follow the same path, it had to develop the necessary steps itself.

Ray insisted on giving the starving fish. He could not see millions more starving to death while meetings and conferences on world hunger continued to be held. Perhaps one should do something concrete instead of discussing it. He had seen hunger in Asia, South America and Africa and it was the next pressing problem for him. He presented his thoughts to Lin, and she noticed that he was stubborn. It was a very simple plan, not at all brilliant. But Ray reminded Lin how the war had gone. People bowed to his dictates and became inventive in times of need. They didn't reinvent war, they invented how to deal with peace. The development was new and it was not known whether it would last. Lin finally nodded, they should at least try.

Zeus wrote identically to the governments in Washington, Brussels and Beijing. He ordered a female diplomat to the square in front of their government offices for three days. They were to bring any questions they had with them in writing and not carry any electronic devices. He guaranteed her safety.

The government lines were running hot. Anne Kilpatrick was ready at any time, a diplomat in Brussels and one in Beijing were prepared in joint conference calls with Anne. There were no questions, the diplomats had to improvise ad hoc. You didn't know what Zeus wanted.

Ray and Lin also prepared. Ray had prepared a very short speech, which he would read from the prompter if necessary. Lin said there was no need to move the spacecraft's position, the diplomats would be teleported here at the same time. It was to be exactly the same as Anne Kilpatrick's visit. The day came, the diplomats disappeared at the same time. In Washington and Beijing, the tiny bugs clattered to the ground. Brussels hadn't even tried, Kilpatrick's first experience had convinced them that the Thunder God's technology was vastly superior to that of humans. The diplomat in Brussels would probably have refused to play silly games.

The diplomats had to undress and put on a white, transparent tunic. Lin left her in the lighted circle to be scanned for a long time so Ray could get his glance at their naked bodies. Then they followed the LEDs into the throne room. They stopped, overwhelmed, the hall was brightly lit and the magnificence took their breath away. They admired the throne room for minutes. They followed the LEDs to the three benches and Zeus invited them to sit down. Three replicas of the beautiful Greek strewn flowers around Zeus' throne. They pushed small tables in front of the diplomats, served ice water and sipped from it. Then they sat down at the feet of the god.

Zeus greeted Anne Kilpatrick, Carin van der Velde and Wen Shi Seun by name. "Greetings, ladies, welcome to peace!" They answered in their mother tongue and bowed. Zeus looked them in the eye and let his eyes wander over the bodies. Ray lustfully stared at the women's nudity.

Zeus gave his short speech. "Humanity is just learning to get along without war and in peace. Give my thanks to your governments!" Zeus paused for a long time, then continued.

"It is very depressing that millions of people are starving while the others can eat their fill. I have two demands on you, and I

spread my message to all governments. Give of your abundance to the starving and secondly, teach them, show them how they will look in the future feed themselves." Wen Shi spoke up.

"In my country hunger has been conquered, nobody has to go hungry!" Zeus interrupted Wen and lightning flashed from his staff as he thundered: "Spare us your party propaganda, Wen Shi Seun! In your homeland, more than 163 million people are currently starving or have just enough food to keep them from dying! We can understand your government's hiding this fact, but I want you to get my message across!" In Wen's mind, images of starving Chinese raced by in a split second. It was overwhelming and Wen Shi knew in an instant that it was the truth. She fell off the mule like Saul when the knowledge of God struck him like lightning. Her eyes widened, then she nodded, realizing the facts instantly.

Zeus' fingers played with the curls of his beard. He continued: "You didn't care until now, because hunger has always existed in the world and the starving didn't demand it loud enough! But you have to change that now, immediately!" Zeus paused and Ray stared at Wen Shi's body.

"Anne Kilpatrick, will you lobby your government to end hunger?" It wasn't a rhetorical question, it was a direct question. Anne cleared her throat and replied that she wanted to deliver his message and urge that something concrete be done. She avoided his gaze and added, "Honestly, I think it's unlikely they'll do anything tangible!" She lowered her head.

Zeus asked Carin van der Velde how she saw it. She immediately replied: "I will carry your message as well as Anne, but I'm afraid the 30 European countries will just talk it down. Unfortunately, I am just as pessimistic as Anne."

Zeus asked Wen Shi Seun what she had to say. "I saw these pictures and I fear for my future. The party does not know these pictures, most politicians believe in the truth that is presented to them. Of course I will deliver your message, but I will be ignored, maybe silenced! I have no hope that anything I say can matter." Wen Shi bowed her head and defiantly wiped the tears from her eyes. It was the first time that the very young career diplomat and

loyal party soldier cried on duty. Zeus said reassuringly that nothing would happen to her.

Zeus smiled at the diplomats and nodded slowly. “I expected your answers exactly and I’m not surprised at all, I know the people. So listen to the second part of my message. Starting tomorrow, I will be distributing all the food from 10 randomly selected cities directly to the hungry. 10 cities, every day! I won’t tell you which cities, I’ll leave that to my assistants Hermes and Loki. The cities will supply themselves again the day after, I have no doubts about that, and nobody will be harmed. The food robbery will only stop where sharing with the hungry is vigorous, effective and sustainable!” Zeus looked from one to the other.

“The last part of my message is important: teach the hungry to support themselves, give generously and help them to feed themselves!”

He made a hand movement, the benches rose into the air, the diplomats kicked their legs anxiously and held on to the benches. They floated up a few meters until they were at eye level with the thunder god.

“Thank you for coming!” The diplomats stared at the body of the god famous for his sexual adventures. “Go in peace and bring my message! You will find a USB stick in your clothes with everything written on it. Go in peace!” The seats lowered gently to the floor.

The diplomats bowed and murmured that he may live in peace. They looked at each other, unsure whether to say anything else, then followed the LEDs to the dressing rooms. They blinked and found themselves back in front of their seats of government. They were surrounded and led away by government officials and secret service agents. Like Anne before them, they were scanned according to every trick in the book and played the audio file to the assembled greats. Wen Shi Seun was initially stared at in Beijing, but at the end of the broadcast, the chairman stood up and clapped directly in her direction. He applauded for minutes and said Wen Shi spoke very wisely. As Zeus had said, nothing happened to her.

At first only the diplomat and the boss looked at the video file, but the most intimate parts of the diplomats and Zeus were blurred so that the recordings could be released. One recognized the nudity of the diplomats, but nothing that explicitly showed her private.

Lin told Ray the performance was very good, we'll see how the governments react. He nodded and smoked nervously. His plan was primitive, but was it perhaps too primitive? Too naive? Lin smiled reassuringly and said they would see if there was enough pressure on the governments. Lin ruffled the hair on the back of his neck in the usual way and lightly said she had two surprises for him. He looked up in surprise and forgot his nervousness for a moment. "The first surprise!" announced Lin and sat down to the big screen.

She had three "cameras" film the bodies of the diplomats in close-up. Ray stared at the footage with growing excitement. "I thank you!" and hugged Lin tightly. The recordings showed everything down to the smallest detail and left nothing to be desired. Lin watched him and his reactions closely. After an hour they had looked through the recordings, Ray was sweating almost feverishly. Lin got up and went to the bed. "The second surprise, Ray!" she called softly. Wen Shi Seun dropped Lin's dress and got into the big bed. Ray almost couldn't believe his luck. After dinner with Lin, they splashed in the sea, then went to bed. Carin van der Velde, the oldest of the diplomats, was waiting for him there curiously with a sexy look.

The next morning he woke up next to Anne Kilpatrick, who hugged him before breakfast. He had breakfast with Lin and sat down with her at the screen. The Jareel informed him on a separate notice which ten cities had donated all their food.

All food in the cities, from all households, supermarkets and distribution centers had disappeared in the morning, the restaurants and cafes had to close. People were surprised, even though the recordings with Zeus' message were everywhere and they all knew. In the poor zones of Asia, Africa and South America, the food appeared and hundreds of thousands were able to eat their fill. Of course, the cities could supply themselves again the next day. But even a single day without food made the population of the

cities nervous and panicky. Zeus was obviously not in the mood for a joke. Even the most indifferent person was hungry and angry after a day of involuntary fasting. So the pressure on the politicians increased. It was very slow and Carin, Anne and Wen Shi had guessed correctly. There were more conferences and meetings than food deliveries. There was a lot of talk and nothing done for a long time. Some politicians criticized the three diplomats that they should have opposed Zeus and somehow prevented his plan. President Andrews vigorously opposed this nonsense and telephoned Anne. She had done her job well and everything else was nonsense. Zeus had sent a message and there was nothing to discuss, not with Zeus. He defended her several times in public and in every media appearance. Should she have said, you can't do that!? Of course he could, as you could see. How, if you please, could one have discussed or negotiated with Zeus? Zeus announced his message, which was like an order, he didn't come to discuss it. Andrews thundered into the cameras to use your wits before criticizing Anne Kilpatrick!

Denmark and the Benelux countries were the first to present concrete plans in Brussels and start deliveries on a large scale.

Lin made a list of cities. Relentlessly, 10 new cities were added daily. Like Ray, she followed the debates and articles, which for the most part were smart and well-founded. Benelux built a huge bread factory in the Sahel and generated many new jobs. Of course, initially the flour etc. had to be delivered from Europe, but large sums were invested to support the farmers in the area. It was to be another year before regional agriculture yielded enough to produce the flour in the region.

New laws in Europe banned food waste from being exported to Africa, destroying the local economy. Likewise, fishing in African waters by European factory ships was banned or severely restricted. It was dirty money that was being made, and it was the first law that put morality above profit. Outrageous! USA, Mexico and Russia grudgingly followed suit, politicians needed these advantages. Other states followed suit overnight, the pressure from the electorate was too great. Governments and companies raced, factories and jobs sprang up in the famine regions of Asia, Africa and South America. It would be three years before that who were able to end the Jareel food robbery in large parts of the world.

China was one of the most stubborn states, even war-torn Russia had caved in earlier. The Chinese leadership drove Wen Shi Seun to all conferences where she was a popular speaker, but the state media reported nothing. Hunger in the world has been reduced by 75 to 85% in these three years.

Each week, Zeus phoned the three diplomats individually to get updates on their next steps on the issue of hunger. Anne and Carin had far-reaching plans and were very successful in pushing governments to take further concrete steps. The media in the USA and Europe were successfully made aware of the global hunger crisis and the aid programs received approval from many. The two blocs actually brought together many joint projects that boosted regional agriculture and food production in particular. They had the capacity to help generously financially.

During a phone call, Zeus warned the diplomats that mankind knows very well how to make drinking water from seawater, but that the efforts are not sufficient and drinking water is becoming increasingly scarce. The diplomats also brought this up and a short time later a huge desalination plant was built on the Italian Adriatic coast, in northern Germany and on the Californian Pacific coast. Another one is planned in Saudi Arabia.

Wen Shi had it the hardest because the world's most powerful party was stubborn and incredibly difficult to move. But Zeus spoke to the Chinese in a friendly, comforting way, her hugs were the best, Zeus and Ray were grateful for that. Of course, Wen Shi didn't know why the thunder god treated her so kindly, but after every conversation she was full of energy and renewed vigour. Western coffee grounds analysts predicted that she would be the next Minister of Agriculture or Minister for Development Aid.

Lin was an excellent conversationalist, she was a good link to the Jareel. She was amazed at how well the plan against hunger was developing. When people felt compelled to do something, they became amazingly inventive. Lin said she would not contribute to helping people with technological mumbo-jumbo. The Jareel had already tried this on a planet and it hadn't gone well. Step by step, people had to develop their coexistence on their planet, discover space themselves and develop interstellar space travel. The collapse of the military complex freed up finances, resources and

brain power in previously unknown dimensions, so defeat hunger! Lin and the Jareel told Ray he had done the world a very great service. In earlier times he would have been made king, Lin smiled and kissed him on the lips. Ray blushed and muttered that a king's job sucks, he doesn't want it. He's happy with how things are right now. Ray wanted to stay Ray.

For the next three years, he watched developments with Lin. The gods Hermes and Loki, whom he never met, let off steam. They were relentless and made their trail through the cities of the satiated. Millions of people were still starving and only a small proportion, together with their children, could eat enough of a city's groceries in one day. They shared with their neighbors as a matter of course, far more generously than the people of the saturated zones. Ray and Lin had their hands full teleporting the groceries to those remote villages where the old and sick couldn't go to the distribution centers. Very helpful was the well hidden system they worked with. It guided them exactly where in a village the hungry were. And it later carried out the orders automatically when they had supplied a village with food and said it had to continue to be supplied.

Only the beginning of the artificial sunset reminded her to finish the work. Even after a long day, Lin still had the power of the Jareel and gave Ray a nice end of the day. They ate like a king every evening, the best chefs from all over the world gave their best. A quick dip in the sea, a movie night together or reading a book over whiskey or gin — Ray always went to bed rested and relaxed. He transformed when she wanted it, so did she. Lin wisely made sure that the fire in the home hearth never went out. She liked to surprise him with the body, the esprit and the love arts of a complete stranger, because he also loved variety. Initially, Lin transformed herself, but she kept teleporting someone from Earth and watching them both. Lin knew him very carefully and chose a girl or a young woman very carefully. She read in his heart whether it should be young or experienced. She knew, of course, that he didn't want to have children. When the girl returned to the world in the morning, she had forgotten everything. Sometimes he wished that Wen Shi lay down with him, because he enjoyed her lovely and childlike lovemaking very much. In the morning, Wen Shi often did not know with whom she had spent the night, but she always felt deep happiness in her heart.

Ray and Lin happened to have the same birthday. Lin saw to it that they ate lavishly at breakfast, lay lazily in the sun during the day, and ate lavishly at noon and in the evening. Every year there was a giant bowl of ice cream with whipped cream, which they both loved. They gave each other something small, nothing big, but always something surprising. Lin did not cheat when ordering his gift from the Jareel, and pointedly covered her ears. The quiet music was always solemn and atmospheric. They only had to look into each other's eyes, and Zeus and Wen Shi went to bed with bright eyes.

Three years later there was still hunger, but the investments were beginning to have an impact. Ray and Lin still sat in front of the screen every day and teleported groceries to the remote villages. They didn't just stay in Washington anymore, many people wanted to see the spacecraft with their own eyes. They let the spaceship glide over the landscape at low altitude.

In China, the people discussed the hunger crisis more and more openly. The almighty party bigwigs could not avoid at least allowing the discussions. Wen Shi avoided public appearances as much as possible, letting other people carry her message. She pulled the strings in the background and allowed Anne Kilpatrick and Carin van der Velde to make media appearances in China again and again. The powerful leader was not yet ready to take a public stand and sent subordinates to the fire. Officially, there were no starving people in China, period!

Several times, Lin and Ray discussed the issue of a targeted appearance of Zeus on Chinese TV channels in Chinese languages. But somehow they always came to the conclusion that it was counterproductive. The Chinese mentality didn't tolerate outside interference, it had nothing to do with the Party. They could only wait for the Chinese people to exert enough pressure of their own accord. Lin had enough insight and knowledge of the Chinese mentality herself and was a great asset in these conversations. Both of them followed Wen Shi's efforts very closely. Lin always recognized in good time when a party apparatchik wanted to get at Wen Shi and vigorously paralyzed his intentions. Zeus said so and kept his word.

Ray called his mother at least once a month. He videophoned in his first conversation from his office/living room. She admired his cozy, beautiful living room and he told her about his life. It was all a lie, but he had to make up a good legend. He was in demand as a legal advisor overseas and Ray said as little as possible, he didn't like lying to his mother. It was much more important to him that his mother saw to it that the housekeeper kept his house in good shape. The mother told about it in great detail, she was very strict with the housekeeper. She also mentioned his generous check that she and his father received monthly. It was far too much, she said, and they didn't even know what to do with it anymore. He suggested that with a clear conscience they should go to Venice a third time and of course also to Paris, it is beautiful there at this time of the year! They gradually traveled all over Central Europe after his father took early retirement. Ray was very happy to be able to give presents to his parents. She mentioned in a subordinate clause that the love between her and her father had become even more intimate, although he was no longer interested in sex. It made Ray very sad.

He already had the second conversation with his mother on the sandy beach and ignored her reproachful comment that he was naked. She didn't mention it again and just stared at his body throughout the conversation. On the third or fourth call, he introduced Lin, and the mother curiously appraised the Asian woman's beautiful body. The two women talked for a long time and his mother seemed very pleased with his wife. The mother had meanwhile gotten used to the nudity of the two. Lin smiled, "She enjoys these shots very much."

Ray and Lin regularly videophoned his mother, and sometimes their father as well. He was very short-sighted and rarely got around to it. Once he'd gotten his glasses to gawk at his naked daughter-in-law. Since he could hardly see anything despite his glasses, he quickly left after talking to Ray and let his wife do the videophoning. The parents wanted to escape the cold winter in Vienna and had been considering renting somewhere in southern Spain for months. Ray didn't think much of renting, he had spotted a lovely penthouse apartment in Marbella and asked them if they liked it. They were enthusiastic about the beautiful apartment and the magnificent view. Ray didn't hesitate and bought it. Marbella was outrageously expensive, but there were many German-

speaking residents and they might make new friends. They shouldn't worry about the costs, he took care of that.

More and more desalination plants were built on a large scale and drinking water was pumped to inland countries. It was a good deal and a lot cheaper than struggling with the drought. Ray and Lin were happy with this small step towards saving the planet. These were small steps, of course, but they led to the greening of a few square kilometers of desert, square kilometer by square kilometer. It was actually crazy that the Amazon forest was being felled at the same time.

Every month the three diplomats visited Zeus, they wanted to discuss the next projects with the god personally. Of course phone calls or video calls would have been enough, but Ray was happy to see the ladies in the flesh. Lin smiled knowingly, giving him pleasure. Even though they were busier than ever and never ran out of work, the bottom line was it was just the two of them.

President Andrews had been overwhelmingly elected to his second term and had no intention of governing as a *lame duck*. He had ceremoniously opened the tenth desalination plant of gigantic dimensions and huge pipelines brought fresh drinking water to the middle of the USA. Where fields withered and millions of farmers were thrown into misery in the 1920s, grass grew again and hundreds of thousands began cultivating the land again. President Andrews could be rightly proud of that. He was planning a long tour of Asia and was received triumphantly in the big cities. He was in Beijing now, appearing with the great leader in a joint press conference at Mai'jian Square. Suddenly shots rang out across the square. The great chairman collapsed, President Andrews was hit in the arm. The shot went through his upper arm and hit his chief of staff, Morris, square in the chest, killing him instantly. Chinese security guards arrested two of the assassins and shot dead the third. After a few minutes the spook was over.

The chairman was only hit in the shoulder. He and Andrews were immediately helicoptered to the military hospital and treated. The two statesmen discussed at length in their hospital how they should react. They agreed to hold the press conference the next day at the same time and in the same place. They chose to hide their injuries to show off their strength and power. The Chair-

man was still unwilling to discuss hunger in China and Andrews promised not to raise the issue. Peaceful trade with China was the only option. Russia's senseless war against Ukraine had done immense damage to the world and shown that war was a bad option. Especially since they had no more weapons. Andrews spent half an hour on the phone with the chief of staff's widow, who was placed in an Air Force One refrigerated chamber to be buried at home. The press conference went ahead, made pithy, powerful speeches and didn't answer any questions about the assassination. The great leader announced his country had struck a $140 billion deal with President Andrews and the US would provide giant desalination plants, pipeline technology and know-how. Andrews continued his journey via South Korea and Japan and returned on schedule. Popular Chief of Staff Morris was buried with a state funeral in Arlington.

The third project

by István Rudas © 2022

At the end of the third year, Zeus again invited the three governments to send one diplomat each. As always, they should take their questions in paper form and not carry bugs, he guaranteed their safety. Anne was ready immediately, Carin van der Velde had been promoted and Regine Durieux, a French diplomat, was sent in her place.

Wen Shi had retired from the diplomatic service and was teaching at a small university in Guangzhou. She had told Zeus on her last phone call, she had become blunt as a weapon and her career was more or less openly hampered. No, he couldn't help her, she didn't want this fruitless struggle anymore. She wanted to lead an ordinary life and start a family. Zeus made her sad face smile when he offered to be the father of her first child. Wen Shi drew new strength and energy from the conversation, and was very happy to think that the god really took her to heart. When Ray told Lin that he had offered Wen Shi to be the father of their child, Lin searched his mind to see if he was serious. She cleverly arranged that Wen Shi lay with Zeus every evening and after a few weeks Wen Shi became pregnant. Lin left Wen Shi's memories as a vague vision that she was devoting herself to the God with lust, bliss and fervor. She should know that she conceived the child of Zeus. Ray was overjoyed when Lin told him.

Wen Shi's successor was claimed by Mun Li Lee, who had worked her way up the corporate ladder primarily with her feminine charms and devious intrigues. The pursed-mouth 45-year-old diplomat was — compared to Wen Shi — incompetent, uneducated and, apart from the instinctive peasant shrewdness, downright stupid.

The three diplomats were teleported to the spaceship and waited a long time in the illuminated circle. Lin allowed Ray to take a good look at the diplomats' bodies. Mun Li pushed ahead as the diplomats followed the LEDs. China first! Theatrical fog, fanfares and scattering of flowers. The reception could begin.

Zeus greeted them by name, which seemed right to him. “Welcome warmly and in peace!” he began. “Your governments have solved my two tasks quite well, tell them my thanks for that! Most states have coped well with hunger and water shortages and thank you for that! The wars are mostly over, there are only local quarrels. I said quarrels ?” Zeus looked from one to the other. “Villages are still raided by gangs, the villagers beaten to a pulp, and the women and girls abused, molested and raped. Tell these gangs that my patience is exhausted. I will come upon them with biblical plagues!” thundered Zeus, his expression almost frightening.

“But there is still a great deal that has not yet been properly resolved on your planet. I will give you just a few examples. Measures against climate change. Pollution of the oceans. Human trafficking, slavery, the exploitation of workers . The forced prostitution. The ineffective generation of energy. Your strange financial economy. And a thousand other things - you can add to this list as you wish. For all these things you have organizations that unfortunately have not achieved much so far. These organizations need more support, more Money and more manpower. This leads me to my next task.”

Zeus looked from one to the other and ruffled the locks of his beard as usual. “The rich of this world hide their money in tax havens or choose complicated constructions in order not to have to share their wealth. Your roads, bridges or rail networks, for example, would be in better condition if they did their bit. So here’s my message: today in three days I will assign any hidden wealth to the individuals by name and transfer the money to one of their personal accounts. The relevant government will receive a list of the individuals and their actual assets. I will give your governments three months to tax these individuals fairly. If this doesn’t happen, I will donate 30% of the assets to randomly selected organizations. Year after year!” Zeus looked at the diplomats.

With a wave of his hand, he lifted the benches with the diplomats until they were at eye level. The women kicked their legs uncontrollably and held on to the benches. He said: “Thank you for your visit, you will find the recording of the conversation on a USB stick in your clothes. Go in peace!” The benches sank to the ground. The diplomats bowed, murmuring “Peace be with you too!” and turned to go.

Only Mun Li Lee stopped and wondered what the correct form of address is, Great Lord or Venerable Master? She pushed her femininity provocatively through the fabric of the tunic. “Venerable Mr. Zeus, can I meet you in private? In private, just the two of us?” She pressed her breast and pubic unmistakably boldly and teasingly forward and fluttered her false eyelashes. He didn’t hesitate for a moment. “I have no private dealings with human women, they are only legends. And the fruits you sell are not as sweet as you imagine! Go in peace, Mun Li, go!” thundered Zeus and looked at the Chinese unfriendly. She turned arrogantly and flippantly and left. The diplomats were brought back in the blink of an eye and stood blinking in front of their seats of government. The procedure was as usual, the audio and video files were played to the most important people and published the next day. Only the Chinese leadership cut out the last part before publishing it. Of course it leaked through the censors. The Chinese people laughed at the impertinent diplomat and there was a sneering *shit storm* that spilled over the imaginary whore. Mun Li left the diplomatic service immediately and holed up somewhere.

Lin smiled lovingly as Ray looked at her questioningly. “Of course,” she smiled and watched together with him the pictures that were secretly taken of the bodies of the diplomats. The close-ups are sharp as always, every hair and every pore clearly visible. Anne was prettier than ever, he commented on Regine Durieux’s body with a boorish, impudent whistle that made Lin laugh like a bell. He looked at the recording showing the Chinese woman’s body twice in a row and said, “Mun Li is quite an arrogant and conceited person, but this time I disagree with Father Zeus, the woman probably has a lot to offer!” Lin agreed with him, this is where Zeus was wrong.

They swam in the sea and ate the best Irish stew in years. When they went to bed, Lin teleported Chinese Mun Li to his bed. Lin couldn’t take her eyes off the two of them, the Chinese noble whore was really a grenade in bed and they only fell asleep at dawn after Lin had teleported the Chinese back. Ray was totally exhausted and slept until noon, after a hearty snack he dozed on the sandy beach until dinner. He exceptionally drank three whiskeys and smoked until he went to bed. Lin teleported the Frenchwoman Durieux into bed, straight from the bed of the lover whom she had to put into a deep sleep. The French was very pas-

sionate and experienced, in his breaks she surprisingly slid to Lin and made her happy.

Before breakfast, Anne Kilpatrick gave him a hug, and her inexperience never ceased to amaze him. He had a long breakfast with Lin and they decided to take a day off. They listened to music and Ray continued to read a thick book by T. Piketty. It was written very cleverly and in a way that was easy to understand. Ray soon understood a little more about economics. They swam in the sea before dinner and let the last rays of the sun dry them off. He answered Lin's question that Mun Li was great for once, but he didn't need her anymore, she was too arrogant and narcissistic for him, it was very repulsive. He really didn't need to have her again. Lin smiled at his question and answered, No, there were already some women with her and the sweet French knew her craft. Jack nodded with a dreamy look, "Yes, although I would rather call it art at its finest!"

The next day they went back to work. The Jareel ran lists of names and amounts on the ads, but they said nothing to either him or Lin. He spent a long time on the phone with Anne, so far she has only been able to confirm that the lists have been sent to the tax authorities of the countries concerned. However, the reaction of many rich people was bad. They smashed the door to the White House, demanding privileges, discounts and exceptions. They also demanded this from politicians, members of parliament and governors and were very persistent. It wouldn't do them any good, Anne laughed in a TV interview, Zeus would take their money! No one doubted that he could.

They resumed their work, there were still many remote areas where there was still hunger. Anne phoned Zeus and recorded the conversation. Her government wanted to know if he could give a clue to the energy production. He seemed to have inexhaustible energy reserves at his disposal, his spaceship had been observed long enough. Zeus laughed gently. "My dear Anne, my form of energy generation would also be accepted by your best scientists in a hundred years do not understand. You don't know the basics yet and any help from me would be too pointless. I can only tell you that if you invested a little more in this technology, you would be on the right track with cold fusion. It would be a big step in the right direction, I can confirm that. Your scientists have already

discovered enough, but they receive far too little support. The oil barons and other profiteers of outdated but very dirty technologies are still far too powerful and prevent any progress because they have a lot of money to lose. That's the real problem."

Anne was not sure that President Andrews would be able to address this issue in his final weeks. During the election campaign, he no longer had that much power and it was completely uncertain who would succeed him. But she knew the President and would play the conversation for him. After all, he was the President and would decide. Zeus said how much he valued her and hoped she would continue to work with him. Anne became sad, it wasn't up to her, she could always be replaced by the new administration. Zeus promised to ask the newcomers for their cooperation. Anne had a warm feeling in her heart as they ended the conversation.

Zeus spoke to Regine Durieux. Their 30 governments had also passed the lists on to the financial authorities, and the rich in Europe squirmed so as not to have to share their wealth. Zeus praised her because Ray was still very grateful to Regine. It was good that governments got his message and knew that he was not making empty threats. He said goodbye in such a friendly way that Regine stayed behind in astonishment. Zeus might be a god, but he wasn't a slippery diplomat. She was used to the diplomatic twaddle and was amazed at his genuine friendliness. She had to rethink and think and act differently about Zeus. Nevertheless, she felt unusually happy after the conversation.

In China, a new diplomat, Podukhai Tsetsen Khatan, was well acquainted with the Great Chairman and very ambitious. She visited Wen Shi, who gave her information and advice for hours. Wen Shi, who lay in the god's arms almost every day during pregnancy and looked forward to the child with him, then spoke to Zeus and said that she had known Podukhai for years, that she was very different from her predecessor and that she was a good choice. Ambitious, hardworking and convinced that a strong China would be good for its people. She came from an old Mongolian dynasty and knew what honor, honesty and decency meant.

Ray and Lin worked for the starving during the day, in the late afternoon they went to the sea and bathed or hiked through the forest. They videophoned the parents in Marbella, who felt very

comfortable there and reported on the wonders of the new city. The warm climate did Ray's father good; for the first time in the fall he had no gout problems. They dropped their bath towels when he left the mother to let her videophoning.

A surprising number of rich people in Europe, but also in the USA and many other countries paid their taxes properly or announced it seriously. Ray and Lin were honestly surprised, they didn't expect it. The lists of names flickered on their display every day, many with a green background. But there were many more who didn't want to go green. The clock was ticking, the days just flew by.

Ray and Lin were teleporting groceries to a remote village and laying their offerings in front of the elderly and sick when they happened to witness a village being invaded by a gang of thieves and murderers. It was horrific to watch the rapes, and Lin turned away. Ray didn't think it was cool at all and was seething with anger. "I have to do something!" he shouted angrily and slammed his fist on the table. He looked desperately at Lin. "I threatened them with biblical plagues, but they just keep going," he lamented. He stared at Lin. "I have to do something, now!" He had jumped up, occasionally glancing at the screen and stomping up and down. "I would love to rip their dicks off!" he murmured and Lin looked up. "Then do it," she said, "would that be right?" Ray looked at her dumbfounded. "Could I do that?"

Lin pursed his lips in annoyance. "We've been together for four years now, I'll do whatever project you want, I'll put the most beautiful women in your bed and you're still wondering if we Jareel can do it!?" Lin looked down in shock, she had gone too far, a submissive Asian woman didn't talk to her husband like that! Ray had walked up to her, lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. "I want to rob them of their manhood, they shall be impotent forever!" Lin smiled "Already done, my dear!" He scooted to the screen. The rapes stopped. The abused women pushed the confused men away and ran naked into the forest. The men stood together in small groups and whispered in embarrassment.

Ray had a recording sent to the three diplomats. No comment, only the geographical location of the village. It took days to track down the men. They had undoubtedly been robbed of their man-

hood, and the bond had broken up at once. Ray left it up to humans to understand what Zeus meant by biblical plagues. The story spread like wildfire across the African continent, and some robbers and murder gangs thought twice about raping women. Lin smiled her Confucian smile: “Not the gun, but the ammunition useless.” It took Ray a second, then he laughed out loud. Yes, that was her, his Lin!

They continued to work and Zeus answered the emails from the diplomats with a smile. He affirmed that in anger he had brought this biblical plague upon the gangsters, “just as the God of Moses had emasculated the firstborn!” Ray and Lin snorted with laughter as they composed the mail, because Zeus must have seemed more likeable when he hadn’t read the Old Testament so carefully. Anne and Regine giggled because they saw through the old smartass, Podukhai didn’t immediately notice the lapse.

The day came, the three months were up, the world held its breath. Punctually to the minute, the stubborn rich donated 30% of their wealth to the recognized organizations whether they wanted to or not. No court was willing to challenge the donations, not this time. Zeus sent the list of donations to the diplomats and they distributed them to the 200 states. No one was harmed, no one became begging. The rich vented their anger on politicians, legislators, and those under their allegiance. But those who had paid their taxes breathed a sigh of relief. Most taxes were under 30%, they had acted wisely. They made it public, the media and commentators took up the issue. There was still a year until the next levy, enough time to calculate the matter again.

Ray didn’t know the names of the organizations, he knew that the Jareel had carefully selected the recipients and sorted out the fraudulent ones. The grand total was over $1,870 billion and Ray felt the organizations would get a real boost. A little stuck on sticky fingers before putting the money to use. Ray knew about it, but it wasn’t very important and he didn’t care. The sticky fingers didn’t hoard the money, they bought important things like new fishing gear, champagne for the beloved or a new car. He had understood Piketty, the stolen money boosted the economy and that wasn’t a bad thing.

Ray discussed her work with Lin. They quickly agreed that if they continued at this pace they would wear themselves out too quickly. He had to admit that after only a few hours he was working more slowly and with less concentration, he had to take many breaks to smoke a cigarette and take a few steps before continuing. Lin knew this, she brought him drinks and snacks and encouraged him to rest for a few minutes after lunch. She herself was obviously of a stronger constitution and didn't get tired as easily as he did. There was no point in working until you dropped and not getting much done. It would make sense to organize the work better. 6 hours per day with an hour lunch break, one day off per week. They both laughed, sounding like what unions on Earth were demanding. Lin jokingly suggested forming a union, a president and a secretary. He laughed and would rather have a president and a chauffeur in livery. They laughed for the first time in months. They left the screens and sat in their armchairs, Lin served whiskey and gin and Swiss sandwiches. They grew serious, then decided on the new schedule.

They videophoned his parents in Marbella. The father had brought a magnifying glass to take a closer look at Lin. "Nice thing you have there, son!" was his verdict. He stayed longer because they were discussing something interesting. Every day he read a few newspapers from Germany and Austria to which he had subscribed. They spoke — like everyone else — about compulsory taxation of the rich. His parents rejected the action at first because it was an illegal expropriation. But it was discussed in the circle of friends, also because there was no one directly affected. People talked more and more about tax justice and the cheek of not wanting to pay taxes. His parents dutifully paid their taxes and felt it was injustice that the wealthy did not want to share. Most, including his parents, agreed that recognized organizations received the $1,870 billion. They had read about the organizations and agreed with their goals.

The changed working hours turned out to be correct, they were able to concentrate much better. Zeus invited the diplomats to visit. Lin let the ladies stand for a long time to "scan", Ray wanted to look at the Mongolian curiously. Then the usual, theatrical fog, fanfares and scattering of flowers. Zeus patiently waited until Anne Kilpatrick, Regine Durieux and Podukhai were seated. He greeted them by name with a warm welcome.

“Your governments have shown themselves very competent in the recent task of taxing the wealthy, give my appreciation and thanks. I hope they use the proceeds for the good of the people.” Zeus ruffled his beard locks and looked kindly from one to the other. “I asked you here because I have another message for the people. I would like to ask you three to spread my message and actively support it.” The diplomats were fully concentrated and listening.

“Recently, I punished and emasculated a gang of murderers and rapists. It worked for a moment, but after two days the gangs went back on fire and raped insolently.” Zeus stopped scratching his beard and stared at the ladies. “Not that you think the old man is very thin-skinned, what’s he upset about a couple of rascals? No, I threatened them with biblical plagues and I stand by it. A threat from me has consequences. I feel sorry for every single woman , no question. These gangs are like the plague for your community. Whole regions are left devastated and take decades to recover. Your governments are convinced that there is nothing they can do about it. That is not the case, they could do much more do that. That’s where you come in. First, I charge you with calling on governments to take strong action.”

“My second assignment is a lot more complicated. Listen, ladies! I will take action against these mass rapes from now on and punish and emasculate the rapists!” Lightning erupted from Zeus’ golden staff as, at the word “emasculate,” he rammed it into the ground so hard that the entire throne room shook. “I know, as diplomats, you don’t have direct access to these gangsters. So it won’t be easy to spread my announcement to the most remote corners of these gangs. But you have to, find ways and means!”

The shy Podukhai Tsetsen spoke up. “Noble lord, I have heard nothing of such happenings in my country. I would like to do whatever you ask, for I, too, feel anger and dismay when I listen to you.” Podukhai looked at him expectantly. Zeus thanked her for her respectful address, smiled at her kindly and said: “It is therefore good if you find a list on the USB stick listing the events of the last six months. Regardless of whether it is your government want to know. 150 out of 200 states are on this list, pass it on!” Podukhai asked, “China too?” and Zeus nodded, “China too!” and smiled encouragingly at the dismayed Mongolian.

Zeus raised the benches so that the diplomats were at eye level with him. Only Podukhai kicked her legs in surprise. “Thank you, dear ladies, for your visit! You have been given a difficult task, I am aware of that. Now go, go in peace!” The benches sank to the ground. The diplomats bowed and murmured their greeting, then followed the LEDs into the changing rooms. They blinked when, a blink of an eye later, they stood in front of their seats of government.

Lin awaited Ray in front of the big screen, grinning. The recordings of Anne and Regine offered nothing surprising, but the recording of Podukhai excited him greatly. She would be the most exciting Asian he had ever seen, he said and added, apart from you of course, my love! They bathed in the sea and let the artificial sun dry them. Ray continued reading Piketty’s thick book until the sun went down. For dinner there was a huge portion of Viennese Kaiserschmarrn with roasted plums from the Figlwirt, followed by vanilla ice cream with whipped cream from Rome. They drank whiskey and gin as they sat in their armchairs, chatting and waiting for Podukhai to go to bed, Lin didn’t have to think. She put the lover into a deep sleep, as she teleported the 28-year-old Mongolian to his bed. Ray kissed Lin deeply and lovingly with gratitude before falling asleep very late.

After breakfast they brought groceries to the remote areas, in the afternoon Ray tracked some gangs in Africa and emasculated a few hundred rapists by evening. Often the rapes had already taken place, often the men were in the process of raping girls and women. Ray felt only cold anger and didn’t care if the men were done or not. He struck mercilessly, sparing only the innocent.

In the evening he showed Lin some footage, but she soon switched off, actually she didn’t want to see rapes at all. He rewarded himself with some whiskeys after dinner and chatted with Lin about the beautiful night with Podukhai. Lin smiled silently, since she had been there, but he had to share his excitement with someone. They went to bed laughing.

President Andrews opened the first commercial fusion power plant in Virginia and ceremonially laid the cornerstone for television cameras around the world. He also formally said goodbye to Zeus in an email. A week later he handed it over to the next presi-

dent, Kyle White. Anne Kilpatrick connected the new President to Zeus on the very first day. A dozen advisers listened to the conversation in the Oval Office. President White accepted the congratulations on the election, followed by light small talk. Gradually, the President got to the point. The state of Delaware in particular suffered severe losses from Zeus' brutal taxation. Delaware lived on its earnings as a tax haven. Zeus added that the islands of the British Empire suffered as well. The British had already begun to introduce economic programs. Then he was silent. It was President White's job to save Delaware. The conversation continued in a friendly manner, in the end Zeus wanted to ensure that Anne Kilpatrick remained in office and with dignity. President White agreed and announced ad hoc that she would soon be appointed Special Envoy, which meant not only a much higher salary for Anne, but also a secure job.

Ray mainly worked on his gang project. He observed the raids meticulously. It irritated him that many rapes turned out very differently than he had thought. The women were beaten and forced, it was always like that. But many surrendered, did not resist, and some sought pleasure. He had to admit that he didn't understand the soul of African women. He turned to Central America and northern South America, where the gangs were relentless and brutal. He emasculated hundreds, thousands of gang members without mercy. The men experienced a deep turning point in their lives, the ties crumbled apart. After only a few weeks Ray saw how effective his measures were and he was proud of that. Lin felt how much the gang project was burdening him and put the beautiful Podukhai or Wen Shi in his bed every day. Wen Shi had become a mother, happier and more passionate than ever.

Ray slathered sunscreen on Lin on the sandy beach and kissed her neck affectionately. "Those were the best four years of my life," he whispered.

Detective, Prosecutor, Judge and Hangman

by István Rudas © 2022

The pirates off the Asian coasts were the focus of Ray's work. Lin provided food to the remote areas and he lashed out at the gangs. He was detective, prosecutor and judge in one, he took his job very seriously and his curse rarely missed. He focused on the pirate raids on the villages that didn't want to cooperate or where there was something to steal, if only the fish from the fishermen. There were raids where there was only robbery but no desecration. He punished the robbers with a temporary paralysis of an arm or leg that wore off after a month or two. That was punishment enough for many pirates. Podukhai took their job very seriously, spreading the message to the Asian media that this was the biblical plague they had been threatened with.

The pirates have been raping the wives and daughters of the fishermen for centuries, mercilessly attacking the women and girls to satisfy their urges. They persistently ignored Podukhai's warnings and saw it as their inherent right. Ray had watched thousands of rapes, but his anger hadn't changed. He emasculated the pirates the moment they entered the woman or, if he was too late, when they had spilled. The women rarely resisted, because they didn't want to be killed. Ray could understand that very well, bare survival is part of human nature. If the woman was killed by the rapist, Ray killed the killer on the spot. He thereby saved many more women's lives than he judged murderers. That was the most distressing part of his gang project.

Sometimes the rape wasn't brutal and violent at all. The women didn't want to be raped at all and smilingly pulled the pirate onto their bast mat. "You don't have to hurt me to get your way!" said the translation module as the woman hugged the pirate. Ray found himself just watching the two of them and not interfering until the end. He glossed over his voyeurism by being a man besides everything. He was too ashamed to discuss it with Lin. Of course Lin noticed when he watched silently and understood him. Eventually she told him and that she was okay with it. He nodded absently,

not wanting to talk about his sore point. It was still good that his wife understood him. Actual rapes infuriated him and he emasculated the pirates on the spot. The Asian pirates were very persistent and refused to stop.

Ray dealt with a very different breed of gangsters in Central America and South America. They were the most brutal rapists and also murdered many of their victims. It was only during this time that Ray developed his resolve to kill the killers immediately. He had discussed this with Lin for many hours, but she too agreed to kill these murderers. It was very difficult for him, but at some point the prosecutor and judge decided to kill the killer immediately. This had a resounding effect, the murders of women decreased rapidly and were extremely rare. The emasculation was terrible for the machos, they became pariahs in their society. It didn't stop, but the gangsters knew full well that a god was punishing them. And they feared a punishing God in their twisted souls almost more than the devil. Ray switched his focus back to the Asian Coast Pirates.

Zeus invited the diplomats to visit again. Ray, as always, enjoyed the sight of them. Zeus had the diplomats report on their efforts; as requested, they had brought statistics with them. Of course, Zeus knew the numbers better than they did, but it was a good opportunity to let the diplomats speak. Anne reported from Latin America that many rapists had been emasculated and murderers had dropped dead. She looked up from her papers and looked directly at Zeus. "Your work?" she asked and he confirmed that he punished the murderers immediately. Anne wanted to say something, but he continued: "Your democratic rules are all right, investigation, trial and punishment. My rules are not like that. I look into the soul of the person and can decide immediately. Decide fairly!"

Podukhai said it was similar in Asia and she quickly realized it was his doing. She had discussed the matter with many diplomats and party officials, and in the end hardly anyone had a valid objection. Regine Durieux had nothing to report from Europe, but in Africa the gangs still raged like the plague. The African continent suffered greatly and she, Regine, had minimal influence over the governments and rulers there. Even consultations at the highest level could not persuade those in power to act actively. The money

of the Europeans were of course always welcome. Zeus assured her that he was following her efforts closely and that she was doing a good job. Centuries would pass before the majority of people learned to deal with their propensity for violence. The audience lasted a long time and at the end Zeus thanked her for coming. Ray gave them the good feeling that they were doing everything right and that the God loved them. They blinked as they stood again in front of their seats of government and felt the love of Zeus in their hearts.

Ray watched Lin's secret footage of the diplomats until he was sweating. He told Lin how exciting their recordings were, but that he still wanted to spend the night with her because he only loved her. Yet somehow Podukhai ended up spending the night with them. He kissed Lin gratefully in the morning and joked how good it was that she never changed her mind. He was hungry and Lin stole her hearty breakfast from a famous Parisian hotel. They took the day off, went for a walk in the forest and bathed in the sea. Lin served the sundowner on the sandy beach and they sat snuggled together in the sunset. Ray felt the need to talk about the night with Podukhai. Lin took his gesturing hands in hers and listened to her passionate husband. He was right, it was nice and exciting and he just had to talk about it. Lin was a little proud to have surprised him with the beautiful Mongolian.

President White loved ceremonial gestures, patriotic pomp and medals. Pompously, solemnly and patriotically he placed the Medal of Peace around the neck of his predecessor Andrews. White was a rich man and had paid his taxes meticulously with a steady eye on his career. So he came across as a little cocky and arrogant when the rich cronies called and wanted to squeeze out tax breaks. It was a dance on the razor blade, would Zeus be fooled this time? From many conversations with Anne, White got the impression that he wasn't impressed by cheap sleight of hand, and that he was right. Anne, whose salary had more than doubled, impressed the President with her terrific campaign to warn Central America and Latin America to the furthest reaches of the biblical alien plagues. The decrease in muggings, rapes and murders has been phenomenal. And White could adorn himself with these feathers.

Podukhai obeyed Zeus' command and carried his message to all Asian media. The Great Chairman had publicly praised her, giving her granite-hard support. The petty provincial emperors complained bitterly that the pirates were paying fewer and fewer bribes. Podukhai had never accepted a single yuan in her life and quietly had them fired, all of them. Zeus paid her respects during one of their phone calls. Podukhai's heart warmed, the alien really seemed to like her. Not surprising, then, that he often appeared in her dreams and sexual fantasies.

A major newspaper, the New York Times, ran a series of articles on the biblical plagues. The authors brought numbers, statistics and facts. The fall in crime in Latin America has been impressive. Nonetheless, the authors sparked a heated debate on the death penalty that kept the whole country on its toes. Where did an extraterrestrial claim the right to impose the death penalty in large numbers? Was that right or outrageous? It took weeks for the topic to disappear undecidedly from the media. Lin and Ray, of course, listened closely to the heated debates, but remained silent. Ray's mother was for it, his father was against. Ray chewed through every serious argument, but continued undeterred.

He followed the pirates of Asia and the bands of Africa. It was good when, in the midst of all the atrocities, some people mated without violence. He watched them smiling and there was no need to punish them. The supple souls of Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian women, filled with tender drive, enabled him to better understand the soul of African women. The souls were very similar, the African women were a bit wilder and more demanding in their drive. Ray was always happy not to have to paralyze, emasculate, or kill. He was happy to show these recordings to Lin, although she wasn't as voyeuristic as he was. He could watch these peaceful unions for hours.

Most people had started August 26th quite unspectacularly, a summer day like yesterday and tomorrow. But the richest in the world sat on glowing coals. Just in time for the start of the stock exchange, donations went to the organizations that were pursuing good goals. Lin had rolled out a screen next to the breakfast table. They enjoyed the sumptuous breakfast that Lin made stole a fine hotel in Vienna and watched the news. The broadcasters reported with some glee that today's fundraiser had raised $1,250 billion for

the organizations. Less than a year ago, but still a decent boost for recipients. Their presidents were interviewed for hours and asked what they did with the money and which concrete projects they could tackle.

From Berlin to Cape Town, from Beijing to San Francisco, the telephone lines were burning, the rich of this world were bombing their governments, what they intended to do against this outrageous raid. It didn't help again, a donation was a donation! Ray and Lin grinned broadly and calmly ate breakfast. Today was free, they read, listened to music and jumped into the sea. They checked the latest news every few hours. Zeus called the diplomats in the evening, the lists of donors had been distributed to the governments. The diplomats were very satisfied because the choice of organizations was excellent. Podukhai knew that China received only a small chunk because there were few helping or research organizations outside the party apparatus. She promised to raise this issue with the Great Chairman the next time she lay with the old man. Zeus/Ray chuckled silently. China's current boss loved young girls just as much as first chairman Mao Zedong did.

Ray and Lin videophoned his parents who were spending the hot days at Semmering, where it was much cooler. They were doing great at Semmering, but when the father left the conversation, the mother said he coughed a lot, maybe he smoked too much after all. But the GP wasn't concerned, so no need to worry. Ray was a bit concerned after the conversation. He asked Lin if the Jareel could do something about it. She listened absently to herself for a few minutes, then she nodded, her father would be better in 10 days or two weeks, he would then be cured. Ray kissed Lin gratefully and walked out into the woods for a few minutes, not wanting Lin to see him cry.

Ray had turned 38, Lin 24. His gang project was wearing him down and he needed a break, a day off wasn't enough. He brought it up in the evenings after they had turned off the screens and drank their whiskey and gin. Lin didn't feel ready for vacation yet and listened to him attentively. It was a long five years, they had worked on the screen day after day and had achieved a great deal, fighting hunger and bandits. Armies stopped shooting at each other and the rich donated to organizations that had good and wise causes. Mankind progressed in small steps. Ray, Zeus and Lin

didn't have to push the next big goal, the destruction of the world, the oceans and the global climate. There were enough people in the governments and organizations who pushed it forward of their own accord and out of insight. The droughts, the forest fires and the floods spoke an unbearable language.

Lin wanted to know if he wanted to take a vacation, incognito on Earth? He thought for a long time, there was much to be said for and against. Ultimately he dismissed the notion that Zeus was often needed on an ad hoc basis right now, and that was far more important than a sailing trip in the Caribbean. Lin's suggestion of lounging around for a week three or four times a year without leaving the spaceship was a very good idea. There was nothing wrong with that and Ray giggled that the woman union president would win. Rowing a boat to the small islets or camping in the woods for a night was something new, just lying lazily on the couch and watching films or series. They continued to work normally and determined when they would take a week's vacation.

Ray thoroughly enjoyed the first week off. Lin brought the most unusual delicacies to the table, they tasted the finest wines, and Lin held back, giving him space and air to breathe deeply. Every night she put a desirable Asian woman with him. She chose the girls carefully, she had to be willing and conform to his preferences. Ray was well rested, refreshed and full of new energy after this week.

President White reiterated in several interviews that he believed in voluntary and involuntary taxation of the wealthy. Many problems were solved and projects were implemented. Never before have so many countries had such well-developed social networks, which benefited many people. Mankind developed and researched on an unprecedented scale. The global economy produced record after record. The developed countries helped generously and brought education to the less developed countries. Afghanistan has been despised around the world because it denies education to girls still refused. Of course, President White couldn't claim everything for himself, but he strutted in and out of interviews like the leader of the western world, the vain peacock. Anne secretly despised her boss, but kept it to herself. Most people saw through his mask, but no one was outraged by it. One thing White did just as well as Andrews did was put good people to work and didn't inter-

fere with them. His administration made every effort to hire the best of the best. It was difficult because every uncle had to find a lucrative job for an incompetent nephew. It was an annoyance that couldn't be dismissed.

China, as a world power, could afford to fight the piracy on the Asian coasts with its mighty army and its countless ships. Podukhai had a key ally in the Minister of War who would have been happy to send his army into action. Podukhai launched media campaigns and brought the evil of the pirates into the public consciousness. She didn't shy away from lying with the impotent Old Man week after week and doing his will. In tiny steps she managed to persuade him. It was good for the party, for China and for international recognition anyway. China attacked the pirates. Zeus could hear in her phone calls how much reluctance she had to suppress in order to lie down with the old man and pretend passion.

For Ray and Lin, the change in working hours and vacation weeks have been a noticeable improvement. They spent much more time together, often discussing real issues of humanity and the planet. The pollution of the atmosphere and the oceans fueled the deterioration of the climate, social imbalances allowed rich and poor to drift apart more and more. Ray mused aloud that with a little mumbo-jumbo the Jareel could remove all of this. But Lin and the Jareel who spoke from her mouth thought nothing of it. Firstly, it would not be sustainable, because secondly, people could only change their behavior themselves. For example, if they cooled the climate by 5 degrees or fished the plastic out of the oceans, then people would continue to pollute the air, and so would the oceans. Ending the wars was sustainable, ending hunger as well, and taxing the wealthy led to an immediate rethink. Ray knew Lin and the Jareel were right. Mankind had to develop step by step and solve the problems themselves. It was true, of course, that it took hocus-pocus to end the wars, but it was the people themselves who turned it into a peace order. It was, of course, hoax to start the fight against hunger, but it was the people who addressed the distribution issue and made self-sufficiency a priority. Initiating fair taxation of the wealthy was, of course, hoax, but it was the people who did something useful with the money, invested heavily in research, and funded organizations that addressed the myriad problems of humanity and the planet. His gang project would not have been possible without Hocus-Pocus, but it was the people

who realized that the spook could be stopped or at least some of the gang problem solved. Lin looked at him with big eyes, “You understand that, my darling?” Ray agreed that it would be wrong to try to mumbo-jumbo.

Lin looked straight at him. “The Jareel are interested in putting mankind on the right path. There were only two paths, one would lead mankind into the fellowship of the peoples of the universe, the other would be doom, the end of the Homo Sapiens experiment. Like Zeus had said from the beginning the Jareel want to save humanity. There is still time for that.” Ray lowered his head because that was exactly what was on his mind. He didn’t have to say it, Lin knew it.

Lin took care of the remote areas and villages daily, searched for these regions and walked from hut to hut with the “camera”. She now moved about frequently in Chinese villages, since little attention was paid to the old and sick. It was mainly Chinese cities that were deprived of their food. Podukhai was always careful when she lay with the Old Man, the palace had eyes and ears everywhere. Still, she warned him that the people would not endure the lies of the state media forever. It was dangerous, wrong and also endangered him personally when the people were lied to and talked about generous food donations. But he remained stubborn and didn’t want to be forced into anything by this strange alien, no matter what! It was bad enough that the world power China had been disarmed. The chairman spoke in private circles from compulsory taxation, because he himself had not amassed any fortune and despised those who raked in money and thus also betrayed the goals of the party. In private, he was heard murmuring, “Serve them right!” Podukhai often spoke to Zeus on the phone and was bitter that she was not getting much more from the chairman. Zeus always managed to lift her up and send her into battle again with vigour. It is not in vain if she prostitutes herself. With every conversation, he emphasized how much he appreciated and loved her. Podukhai felt this love warm in her heart after every conversation.

Lin and Ray also enjoyed the vacation weeks because they gave each other space and time and didn’t sit on top of each other. It was really good for them to give each other space. Lin gained her inner strength and balance as she often took a lover with a loin on

vacation. She loved very much to devote a day to a specific topic and research the subject. Be it the silk mill or the medieval courts, she was interested in everything. Of course, she would hang out with Ray when it was convenient for the two of them.

Ray focused on the gang project, letting killers die and being more forgiving of the others. He used paralyzing on younger ones rather than emasculating. He understood better than before what a strong sexual emergency drove the younger ones. As long as they didn't kill or use excessive force, he gave them time and only paralyzed them after mating. It seemed fairer to him. Of course, in the evening he liked to look at the records of couples who did not use violence. Lin smiled knowingly that was her Ray!

Ray knew he was becoming more lenient towards the pirates. He hated punishing murderers immediately with death. He hated that some pirates, driven by the sheer lust for murder, killed the girls and deserved to die. Much quicker than before, he intervened and paralyzed the killer before the murder. It was very tiring to follow the proceedings and prevent the murder, but he always breathed a sigh of relief when he succeeded. Lin smiled and encouraged him, giving him the strength to continue. Struck by lightning, the killers collapsed and lay on the ground, paralyzed and terrified, before they could kill.

Neither he nor Lin could say later how they got the idea to take a closer look at the money going to the organizations.

The Organizations

by István Rudas © 2022

The debate the night before was heated and emotional. Ray couldn't believe that less than half of the money taken from the rich went to the real cause. Lin knew full well and contradicted him. He was far too naive and optimistic, more than half was lost. After breakfast they sat next to each other in front of several screens and Lin showed him what she had meant yesterday.

The proportion of direct corruption, i.e. direct embezzlement and cashing in, was only a small part of the loss, but many times higher than he would have estimated. The much larger part was pumped into the organizations themselves. Where once one manager was sufficient, a vice and two assistant managers were added. Ray was flabbergasted. The numbers Lin presented were facts. He cursed and raged. He had been so proud and content that the rich were asked to pay up and paid their fair share. It would have been too nice!

Ray turned back to the gang project, rampaging the shores of Vietnam so fiercely that he made no record of peaceful mating. He remained monosyllabic and silent, the dark thoughts held him captive for days. Lin let him think and ponder and didn't bother him. Only on the third day did he seek discussion with Lin.

"I'm at a loss," he lamented. The governments could not help. On the contrary, some organizations had been taken over by governments because the smell of money attracted greedy politicians like carrion to vultures.

Like every day, Ray and Lin bathed in the sea before dinner. Yesterday and the day before they had watched the sunset in silence, he had pondered and remained doggedly silent. He felt very clearly that he, as the only person on board, had to be ashamed of the corruption and the incompetence of the organizations. Lin and the Jareel have known mankind for a long time and were not surprised at how outrageous people were. It weighed heavily on him. But now, after two days of pondering, he wanted to talk. He

hugged Lin while they watched the artificial sun go down and dried off.

"I haven't come up with anything better than that we have to hand over the money in a controlled manner. The Jareel have certainly chosen the organizations conscientiously, but the people still managed to steal the money, inflate the organizations and not properly to be used for the intended purpose." Lin nodded in agreement and said, "Go on, Ray!" He thought for a moment and organized his thoughts. "Next time we must ensure that corruption and self-sustaining action no longer occur. A mechanism that checks the use of the money. We are simply not enough to be this mechanism." Lin nodded again, "We need some comrades-in-arms who think and act as independently as possible. Who aren't easily embroiled in corruption!"

Ray nodded. "I've only found one category of such people in my short professional life, the judges. 90% of them were not corrupt and the remaining 10 stank a mile to the wind." Lin wondered under his breath how one finds such judges. He looked into the reddish disk of the sun and said, following a sudden intuition, "I'll gladly leave that to the three diplomats!" They discussed and developed this idea.

The diplomats each had to appoint three judges, but Lin argued that the Chinese judges certainly represented the party's ideology. Ray laughed and said that Podukhai simply couldn't appoint Chinese judges. "So 9 judges?" Lin asked and Ray nodded. "If we want to fill the dozen, then add the three diplomats!" Lin thought for a second to hear the Jareel's opinion. "Two things should be clarified. How many votes for a decision and how long can the decision take? Getting all 12 votes is certainly an overstatement, and waiting for the decision for more than 24 hours is nonsensical."

Ray felt that three quarters agreement was sufficient and that the 24 hour time frame was good. That was the decision. They ate a chateaubriand with roasted vegetables from Madrid and drank two bottles of chateauneuf du pape without pausing their debate. Zeus would fetch the diplomats in two days and give them the new task. That's how it happened.

Ray was genuinely happy to see the three diplomats again. Zeus levitated the diplomats to eye level once they were seated. As always, he greeted them by name with a warm welcome. The task is quite tricky again this time, he said, spreading the problem with the organizations. Of course the subject was far away for the diplomats, they hadn't had anything to do with the organizations before. He made some examples appear on a display board in front of them and commented on them in detail. His explanations proved successful. They had recognized that something was rotten in the state of Denmark.

Anne and Regine shrugged, Podukhai wondered how that was possible. In China, this problem did not exist. Zeus paused for a long time, allowing his arguments to sink in. "Only one thing helps," he said, "we have to plan and control the promotion!" He looked from one to the other. "The money is deposited in a fund and spent on specified and verified projects!"

"Your tasks are therefore clear. Communicate the new procedure. First: tell the organizations that they have to slim down. You get numbers from me where it was overblown. Second: tell the corrupt that I stole their money already collected again. With these 186 billion dollars you can build up the organization. You will also get the list of the corrupt, the organizations may decide what happens to them. Thirdly, you will put together a committee that will decide on the award."

"Find 9 judges, three of you each. Honest, incorruptible people who decide the award within 24 hours. And of course a larger number of controllers. It will of course become a larger organization, but its success lies in your hands. I know how good all three of you are at organizing. You probably did the building of the project and the selection of the judges in a month. The selection of the judges is very important. This project is too important to fail !"

"Podukhai, you know how much I appreciate you. However, I am convinced that the judges in your country cannot leave the party line. Therefore, I would like you to choose the judges from other countries in Asia!" He smiled at Podukhai and waited. "I will comply with your wish," replied the Mongolian, "and I also know that there will be resistance. But I will fight!"

Zeus nodded with satisfaction and repeated: “9 judges and you three, so the panel has 12 members. Decisions must be made quickly, my suggestion would be within a day. If a project gets a three-quarters majority, it should be accepted. The Controllers must verify that the grant goes directly to the project. August is the next tax due, so be ready!”

Regine answered. She is not so suitable, because of her education she lacks the feeling for economic connections. She would like to appoint an experienced, trustworthy judge in her place. Zeus nodded in agreement, he has great respect for someone who knows their limits. Nevertheless, he asked Regine to start and accompany the project. Regine nodded, she would like to do that.

There was still time to discuss some details and then the meeting ended. The diplomats squinted in the sunlight and went straight to work. The governments were surprised by these developments, they were very unsure what the extraterrestrial intended with it. But, as Anne Kilpatrick emphatically explained to the President and his crew, Zeus wanted exactly what he said. Zeus had no ulterior motives, he spoke directly and without diplomatic flourishes. Zeus justified what he wanted and why. Nobody believed her. She was suddenly faced with a flood of proposed judges, each politician wanting to get his man in position. She diplomatically but categorically rejected everyone and searched herself. She had an excellent network and listened very carefully when she was considering a candidate. After three weeks she had her judges and her organization together. She was in constant contact with Podukhai and Regine, who, like her, were doing well.

The new organization, which they simply called the board for the sake of simplicity, had almost 2,000 employees who collated and pre-checked the data from the projects. More than half would then work as inspectors. The 12-strong panel met via video conference and often worked more than 12 hours a day. The judges were paid an annual salary $100,000 more than the president, which was enough for everyone. Several test runs were organized until everything went well. Judge Adams from Holland soon qualified as leader and was accepted by his peers.

Zeus donated the $1,680 billion of the wealthy to the body in August and ignored the protests of the wealthy. Donation is dona-

tion. It was just right.

In theory it all sounded very easy, in practice it wasn't easy. Judge Adams had the applicants sign how much the organization could use for itself and how much went to the mission. The applicants groaned and moaned, they had to slim down according to the guidelines and send people home. Prudently, they sent those who were not needed home. Anyone who didn't lose weight or cheated was cut off from the money supply, and word got around. Judge Adams and the panel were tough, and that helped. However, it was often unsatisfactory. But at least the money flowed lavishly into the missions. Ray and Lin looked at the numbers every day and after the initial stutters of the first few weeks, they felt good.

Many governments participated in missions that represented good causes and goals. Many politicians were thinking beyond just the next election. They were convinced that caring for the earth, the oceans, the flora and fauna and the climate also earned them credit points. A large part of the people, the voters thought the same way. The panel supported missions of small and poor governments on its own initiative, the panel assessed missions and not organizations. In his regular phone calls with the diplomats, Zeus supported this further development.

Podukhai had found good Asian judges. Zeus had spoken to the Great Chairman for the first time, he appeared on the Chairman's screen and spoke to him for half an hour. It was difficult for Ray to mentally get a grip on the Chinese via the translation module, he just didn't do it. Zeus was able to make it clear that he posed no threat to the Chinese leadership and that he still did not want any Chinese judges on his panel. They were ultimately good, loyal party soldiers and he didn't want to bring them into a conflict of conscience. The Chairman felt good about the conversation and felt empowered to give Podukhai a free hand in this matter. At the next meeting of the Party Executive, he reported the good conversation with the alien and officially assigned the task to Podukhai. He received great applause when he carried out his reading that leading the way in accomplishing the task was a great achievement for the Chinese Party and the Chinese people! That was good medicine, the state media could spread that.

Podukhai had the Chairman's full support and immediately started interviewing her network. She interviewed the proposed judges intensively and, after many discussions, decided on a Vietnamese, a Filipino and a Mongolian. They were honored with a celebratory banquet in Beijing, and state television broadcast the banquet, the Chairman's speech and the big handshake triumphantly around the world. Ray and Lin watched the spectacle and were very pleased. Podukhai was more firmly in the system than ever, she had three non-Chinese candidates and China, rather than a loss of face, made a terrific patriotic gain from it all. Ray found that Zeus had had a successful conversation with the Chinese.

Regine had also done a very good job. She conducted around 100 interviews and chose judges Adams from Holland, one from France, one from Germany and one from Kenya. The Kenyan had served at the European Court of Justice for close to ten years and, like Adams, was a man of backbone, assertiveness and a very sharp mind. The judges from Germany and France were well versed in economic issues and had earned the respect of the judiciary. Regine was extremely skilled in selection and was able to ward off all attempts to smuggle in a compliant man.

In the end Anne chose one Canadian, one Mexican and one from the USA. She even had to quarrel with President White, who wanted to fill all three positions himself. She risked a lot in rejecting the president, but she stayed adamant. The President has been far too lenient with his advisors and influential managers. She never questioned his authority as president, but she didn't think much of him as a man. His anger wouldn't last even a week, she knew that for sure. However, she reported during the next phone call to Zeus that the President was quite pissed off because he hadn't had a direct conversation with Zeus yet. The Chinese stated powerfully that they were the first to speak to Zeus. Zeus sighed, he'll do that soon.

Zeus deliberately interrupted a cabinet meeting to talk to White. The conversation, as Zeus had expected, was very superficial. Zeus explained what he intended to do with this task and explained to the assembled cabinet what he expected. Advance humanity. To inspire humanity, with each other and with the better deal with planets. To belong one day to the fellowship of the peo-

ples of the Universe. It was counterproductive, said Zeus in a subordinate clause, that the Americans were developing more powerful, deadly taser weapons. They had not understood his first message and went the wrong way. Cabinet members, apart from the Secretary of Defense and the President, were ignorant and shocked. Zeus gave no sign that his comment was bound to lead to heated debates. He dropped out after 30 minutes.

On the same day, Zeus spoke to the President of the European Union. She was also in a meeting with her commissioners and he greeted everyone by name. Here, too, he explained his intentions and goals. The President was a very intelligent person and understood him immediately. She understood that it was about a serious change in people's behavior and that his commissions and tasks should help people. She promised to actively support Regine Durieux in her task. She reiterated that the issue of climate change was high on her agenda. The conversation was very friendly and Zeus wished them all good luck before ending the conversation.

Ray and Lin took a ten-day vacation while the panel formed. He listened to a lot of classical music and continued to read Piketty. They rowed to the rocks in the sea and sunned themselves. They wandered through the beautiful forest for a day and didn't come home until sunset. They videophoned his parents, who were spending most of the year in Marbella. The parents loved the glorious weather and the ease of life in this magical paradise.

Ray asked Lin not to put a cute Asian girl in bed for him every night, although Lin had correctly observed that they were the ones that gave him great pleasure. He wanted to spend the night with her more and more often, he loved Lin with all his heart and wanted her to lie with him. He wanted to show her his love, that became more and more important to him. Lin blushed every time she noticed and snuggled up to him. He was the first and only man she loved with all her heart.

After the holiday she went back to her program against hunger and he took care of the gang project with renewed vigour. He was annoyed to find out that not only the pirates but also the Chinese army were raping the women of the coastal regions. Although the soldiers shied away from robbery and murder, several raped a woman. He punished them all with a paralysis and additionally

emasculated the most violent. Zeus brought it up during the next conversation with Podukhai and she promised to talk to the Minister of War about it. It couldn't have escaped him that so many soldiers were suddenly paralyzed. Ray's anger was great, because none of the women would willingly indulge in gang rape, none of them had sexual pleasure when a whole pack of horny soldiers pounced on them.

Ray once asked Lin if the Jareel were responsible for his never being ill in the last 6 years. Lin nodded, the Jareel were happy to take care of his health. He thanks them for that, he said. It also explained that Lin has always been in good health. She had been with him for 6 years, but she still looked like the 20-year-old who had come to him, not a day older. She was still flawlessly beautiful, seductive, sexually experienced and full of sincere love like the first day.

If he had a problem with his age, Lin asked, who was good at interpreting his state of mind. He said that age is basically just a number, how you feel is what matters. He was afraid of old age. He didn't want any slow-growing diseases, memory problems, or impotence, to name a few. "But you're only 36," Lin said, "none of that bothers you today!" He nodded. "Yet I'm afraid of it! I want to remember everything I want to remember. I don't want to lose my libido, my potency and my curious sexuality!" Lin asked, is it really that important to him? Did he really want to stay 36 forever? "Of course," she objected, "you and I are mortal, someday we must perish."

Ray stroked her cheeks. "I've gotten older year after year, but you haven't. One day I'll be 50 and you'll still be 20, I'm losing my potency, but you aren't." He should have kept his mouth shut, he knew that immediately. He kissed her on the lips. "I'm not 50 yet, let's leave it at that!" Lin looked at him for a long time. "No, my dear husband! I got it right away and I will make you feel physically 25 soon and it will last for many years! No diseases, no memory problems, no impotence and a keen interest in sex, I promise to you!" She hugged him wholeheartedly firmly and kissed him on the lips. "Promised!" She wiped her tears with the back of her hand and looked him straight in the eyes. "I promise!"

The evening passed in silence as they sat snuggled together on the couch, thoughts swirling in his head. He knew she meant it literally and could actually make it happen. He was somehow reassured that he would be spared the hardships of aging for a while, but he also knew he certainly hadn't grasped the implications. The whiskey somehow made him happy, as did the beautiful girl at his side. He called up one of the beautiful records and they admired the beautiful girl from Laos giving herself to a boy. They later went to bed happy and excited.

Ray's body changed from day to day. He didn't notice it right away, most notably that his hair was growing back and the receding hairline that was beginning to recede disappeared within days. He carefully observed the changes from then on and was delighted when his body became more muscular than ever and his small tummy disappeared within a few days. Lin had kept her word. After a month, his body was as strong and efficient as it was when he was 25, his penis grew by centimeters and lasted much longer than before. His sexuality flared up again, his sexual prowess has never been higher. He felt a refreshing clarity and sharpness in his mind and was amazed that he could remember everything, really everything. Lin smiled before breakfast in the morning and said she was smitten with his younger self. He kissed her gently and whispered that he was heartily grateful to her for this miracle.

An eventful year

by István Rudas © 2022

Ray and Lin, of course, watched the panel work. There were projects and missions that were quite amazing. Immensely effective filters have been designed and installed for the large, industrial CO2 slingshots. Even in China. Governments in Ecuador and Chile were converting thirteen major fishing fleets that were tirelessly hauling plastic out of the Pacific on a large scale. The Brazilian government has partnered with the US on a similar project to fish plastic out of the Atlantic. The states on the Mediterranean also tried to get such a project off the ground. The 14 spacefaring nations joined forces and developed a system for capturing space debris and allowing it to burn up in the atmosphere in a controlled manner or dumping the larger pieces in the ocean.

All the techniques required for these projects had been known for a long time and just got moldy in drawers. But now there were younger ones at the helm, who thoroughly understood that these things stood in the way of progress. They left the stubborn, greedy old people behind. Just how foolish it was to ditch the self-destruct mechanism for space rockets, for example, became obvious when it became almost impossible to launch new rockets. There were so many failures, collisions and accidents that the scientists refused to work more than once and the rockets remained on the ground. Something had to be done, now, immediately. First aisles had to be cut in the space debris before a rocket could start. It would be decades before most of the space debris was cleared. It was more economical to build the self-destruct mechanism into all new rockets. China only took part after international pressure.

Research on plastic-eating bacteria received a large grant from the panel. There were good ideas such as applying the inactive bacteria during production, the bacteria became active after a certain time and decomposed the plastic. Of course, the conventional method of only applying the bacteria to the plastic waste after use was also tested.

Finally, the conviction prevailed that it paid off to further develop hydrogen fuel cell technology. The hydrogen could be ob-

tained in a climate-friendly manner, transported via pipelines and brought into the existing filling station infrastructure. The costs were high but manageable. For large installations such as ships, trucks or factories, hydrogen was cheaper than fossil fuels. There was still a lot of research and development to be done in passenger cars, but Ray was confident that there would be a breakthrough in this sector as well. All well-known car manufacturers produced electric vehicles and those with alternative drives. There was still a long way to go in the aviation sector. So a lot of good research that pushed the panel.

But there were also projects and missions that were not successful, that could not be successful with money alone. Racism, anti-Semitism or hatred, hate speech and malicious manipulation on the Internet were examples of this. Democratic forms of government rapidly declined and authoritarian systems and cults prospered more than ever. Even the appearance and work of Zeus gave the wrong signal. Snotty some populists pointed to Zeus, look what a strong leader could do! This was a topic that Ray kept arguing with Lin. The Jareel's decision to activate Ray/Zeus was central to these discussions. As hard as Ray tried to understand, in retrospect he often had doubts as to whether Zeus was right to act. Lin was absolutely certain that the Jareel had made the right decision.

His mother's voice on the phone was all panic, his father was dying. He looked at Lin but she shook her head, his lifetime was over. They immediately teleported to Marbella and, as a cover, took the bus one stop. The mother picked them up from the bus station and they sat at her father's bedside for three days. There was nothing more to say, but they whispered softly to him. He fell asleep peacefully. Ray suggested bringing the father to Vienna and burying him. The mother shook her head, he should be buried in Marbella and she wanted to stay here forever. Almost 100 of the new friends came to the funeral and bid farewell to Ray's father. Ray did the paperwork and had her make a new will, he would inherit the house in Vienna where he was born. They stayed with the mother for three weeks until she was over the worst of it. They left her in the care of her longtime lover Leonardo and teleported home. Ray had already checked out the widower Leonardo, who was 20 years her junior, and the divorced husband was perfectly

fine. And he gave her sexual pleasures she had missed since the Magician.

They went back to work. In the evenings, Lin lay down on the couch next to him, rested her head on his lap, and he talked about his youth. How he discovered and developed his talent, how he asked his father and mother about their sexual escapades and how his mother showed and taught him everything sexual. Lin listened in silence, for it was all implanted in her creation and she remembered every detail of his sexual awakening better than he did. He didn't say it himself that she had taught him how to make love, but Lin saw it clearly in his memories. Gradually the sadness faded and he remembered his parents with sincere gratitude, they had always loved, supported and encouraged him.

The diplomats came to Zeus every month and they discussed the results of the panel with him. Ray's interest in the nudity of diplomats steadily diminished, he was more interested in advancing developments and projects. He knew he was far too impatient, but the months rolled by, turning into years, and the planet was still gravely ill. Though he knew it would be another hundred years at least before any success could be seen, he was impatient. He wasn't a hundred years old. Lin had been able to stop his aging, but not the end, the Jareel could not or would not.

Ray often argued with Lin about hoaxing away the oil, natural gas, and maybe coal from humanity. That would spur the development of new energy sources, immediately reduce pollution on Earth, and smash the power of the oil barons. Lin cautioned that we are not ready yet, a worldwide collapse of the economy would destroy too much. She was convinced that this crisis would set the world economy back many decades. But the idea is good in itself, you just have to wait for the right time. Ray kept a close eye on developments in the energy sector, he didn't want to miss the moment. The energy crisis triggered by the war between Russia and Ukraine was a shot across the bow. But the main result was that the western states looked around for alternatives for the supply of fossil products, but did not push alternative energy production as a matter of priority. Everything went much too slowly for him.

One day Ray couldn't wait anymore. He discussed his plan with Lin and wanted to try it, on a small scale. If it went wrong and the

global economy was in serious jeopardy, they could always back out. He asked her if the Jareel could the oil-, natural gas- and cut coal production by a quarter. It should be done quietly and secretly, Zeus would not announce anything, the diplomats would not be informed in advance. Lin thought for a minute and nodded, it could be done. She passed on his request and the Jareel cut global production by 25% that same day. He and Lin watched the reactions with excitement.

The producers were angry. They couldn't explain why production was falling. The engineers were at a loss, they also could not explain why the total quantity did not increase even though they let production run at full capacity. It was an inexplicable physical paradox. Several weeks passed before it could no longer be kept secret. The governments ordered the iron reserves to be tapped. One could use no resentment in the electorate. For months, the shortage could be bridged until the major media outlets began reporting and the topic dominated talk shows and editorials. Finally, finally, the demands became louder to promote alternative energy production. Ray unobtrusively added a snuff every day until the total production was only 40%. He couldn't go any further, Lin and the Jareel figured that out for him.

During the diplomats' next visit, the dominant topic was the shortage of energy. Zeus admitted to having something to do with it and demanded that alternative energy production be promoted with great effort. The board should enforce that. The meeting was not very harmonious, the diplomats were not happy to be faced with a fait accompli. Ray didn't really care, he didn't have a hundred years.

The panel pumped huge amounts into innovative techniques. The wind farms in the North Sea have more than doubled in size, the successful and climate-friendly hydrogen project in Namibia has been copied by other African countries, it was money well invested. On the slopes of the Andes grew countless wind turbines up, Spain and France built several huge pipelines for the hydrogen from Africa. The oil barons and the Arab states tried to funnel their money into the new projects. The end of fossil fuels was getting closer every day. Ray breathed a sigh of relief.

Ray and Lin would sometimes teleport to his mother and stay overnight. He was very concerned if she was coping well with being a widow. She visited her father's grave several times a week and took good care of it. After a few weeks she was back in society and met old friends. Ray and Lin heard the couple's lust and his mother's happy sighs every night. When he once talked about it alone with his mother, she reassured him with a wink that Leonardo was the first man in decades with whom she could let go and had regular climaxes. She blushed violently: Leonardo took it for granted that she would do it herself when he needed a break. Leonardo was a reliable partner and loyal in everyday life. Of course, Ray knew from his research that he didn't have any love affairs on the side.

Ray and Lin started teleporting to different cities, going to cafes and chatting with the locals. The energy shortage affected everyone and was a welcome topic in every small talk. Everyone knew about the new research projects and were optimistic, but it was much too slow for most of them to get it all into everyday life. For Ray and Lin, these were important conversations and they soaked up as many impressions as they could.

Mount Olympus

by István Rudas © 2022

Ray slept for a very long time. He dreamed of being teleported very far away with Lin. Without anyone telling him, he knew he was going to Mount Olympus.

Lin held his hand as the two of them, a little timidly, stepped through a large portal. It was a huge hall filled with hundreds of people. The babble of voices was loud, but neither he nor Lin could understand more than a few snippets of speech. A sonorous voice sounded in his head.

“Right, everyone here can understand Us in their language. We all appear to everyone in the form of their people and also with avatars from their imaginary world. You were brought up humanistically and your decision to give your people the form of a god from the Greek Mythology has caused Us to show you here Mount Olympus and its mythical gods. Besides Us gods you see here some representatives of the peoples of the universe, they too have temporarily assumed human form. Welcome Ray and welcome too, Lin, wife of Ray and mediator to the Jareel!”

Lin bowed very low and Ray hurried to do the same. When he looked up, he saw a huge block of stone on which Zeus was sitting. In a split second he recognized the real Zeus, similar to his own but of imposing size. The god was about 4 meters tall and his white-blue eyes looked at him and her kindly. He was over 50, his striking face was likeable and his eyes rested friendly on them. His eyes went raptor-like as he appraised Lin’s body. Ray thought, what a magnificent, awe-inspiring, and mighty god! and Zeus nodded politely. “I can hear you Ray and I appreciate your greeting!” Invisible helpers had pushed a bench behind the two and they felt invited to sit down. Ray immediately took a liking to this god.

“We, like the Jareel, have followed your work closely over the past ten years, we have seen your whole life with our own eyes and are very satisfied with the way you two have been giving new impetus to humanity over the past ten years. That’s what I wanted tell you personally, that’s the only reason you’re here. I have no

new tasks or advice to give you, you don't need them." Zeus smiled and turned to Lin. "I'm more than twice your size and everything about me is good too, and I'd like to be twice the size you're used to. I beg you, don't think about it because it could harm your little delicate body!" Zeus demonstratively pushed his tunic to the side and grinned so cheekily and lewdly that Lin's eyes widened in disbelief at the sight and she turned red out of breath. Ray thought he could read her mind and grinned broadly. This Zeus was really a likeable guy!

Suddenly a richly laid table appeared before them and they felt invited to eat and drink to their heart's content. Zeus bent down and picked up a large goblet to toast them. "Is there anything, my dear Ray, that you wish for, gold, jewels or beautiful girls? I want to give you whatever it is!" Zeus gave him a friendly smile. No, Ray thought, I don't need any of that. I want to grow old with Lin, stay healthy as long as possible and keep humanity moving forward, I already have everything else. Gold or gems mean little to me! Zeus nodded, "The Jareel have already told me the same thing. You are a frugal person, Ray, I appreciate that very much! And with all your modesty, you shall have many beautiful girls throughout your life!" He nodded politely and emptied his goblet. How closely this god listened!

Ray was aware that it was only a dream and Zeus nodded slowly, "It is a dream and it is not a dream," and a comforting warmth flooded Ray's mind. "Everyone wants to get to know you, see you and talk to you," Zeus replied to his thoughts. "And yes, some goddesses and gods want to enjoy the earthly lust they have missed for many generations!" Zeus grinned lewdly from across his wrinkled, bearded face.

After they ate, their bench floated with them hither and thither, gods and goddesses talking to them for hours about everything. The dream continued, it seemed to them like days. Days and nights flew by in earthly lust, delicious food and exciting conversations. He was overwhelmed and exhausted from the talks, he had experienced a thousand novelties and enlightenment, more than any human had ever experienced before. Ray realized again and again that all the beautiful goddesses and gods only existed in his imagination. And that it was only a dream.

He felt very clearly when they were teleported back. He held Lin's hand tightly during the long journey that only lasted a split second. He woke up immediately when they were back in their own bed and let go of Lin's hand, she was still sound asleep. Had he only dreamed or had they really been teleported to the real Mount Olympus? He sat up and looked at his beautiful wife, she was so delicate, so lovely and highly erotic to look at, sleeping so peacefully. He looked at her for a long time and with growing desire. She was waking up and he kissed her tenderly awake.

Lin stole breakfast from a five-star hotel in Paris and they ate breakfast ravenously, as if they hadn't eaten in days. Lin had exactly the same dream as him, they shared the same experiences and laughed together because they had experienced everything together. Following an intuition, he asked the on-board computer what the date was today. They had slept for 14 days! The Jareel confirmed to Lin that they had been at Mount Olympus for 14 days. Of course.

They sat around the breakfast table all day, repeating everything they had experienced together. They laughed wholeheartedly when they shared their experiences. His head spinning with the famous goddesses of Greek mythology he'd had fun with, and Lin raved about how she'd given herself to the ancient giant Zeus on a daily basis and experienced lust like never before. Ray had witnessed and watched it himself, but despite the sight he had been very concerned about her delicate body. But she laughed out loud and said she just had to experience it! Ray kissed her tenderly and said with a smile that she looked more beautiful than ever in her lust with the god!

They celebrated the tenth anniversary of their relationship like a birthday, swimming in the sea before dinner and then sitting in the living room with whiskey and gin. They talked for days about the experiences at Mount Olympus. He said it was a pity they didn't have cameras and there were no recordings. They had forgotten the content of their conversations with the gods when they woke up and could not remember any details. Her experiences were all the more deeply engraved in her memory, every little detail. Ray sat down by the screen and wrote down everything he had experienced and what he had seen in Lin's experiences. She also wrote everything down, from her point of view, they often read

these texts together. One day Lin surprised him, she had — in whatever way — Keeping records of their experiences at Mount Olympus and they watched parts every night before going to bed, this kept the fire on the home stove burning and blazing for many months.

They returned to work the day after they returned. After the visit to Mount Olympus, Ray had become more serious, calmer and more forgiving. He punished the pirates in Asia and the gangsters in South America and Africa more leniently and prevented as many murders as possible. He only let the worst guys drop dead, which always depressed him completely. He was only happy in the evenings if he didn't have to kill one day. Lin told him that there were only a few spots left on the planet where hunger still existed. She now spent most of her time watching the progress of the panel, carefully reading through all the minutes, and with that she was able to cheer up Ray a bit in the evenings.

They observed the developments after the artificial shortage of fossil fuels. The committee poured a lot of money into research and pushed promising projects properly. In the meantime, more than 50% of the energy has been generated in alternative ways. Ray had cleaned up enough among the pirates and the gangsters that he could sit down with Lin every early afternoon and go through the committee's projects and minutes with her. After only half a year the projects really blossomed and he believed that he didn't have to wait another 100 years for concrete results.

The diplomats visited Zeus every month, and the initial resentment about his unannounced actions had disappeared completely. Zeus used the visits to discuss individual projects, as he received many technical tips from the Jareel. Yes, the diplomats took all these clues with them on the USB sticks and passed them on. Zeus always left the diplomats with a beautiful and strong feeling of being loved by him.

When Lin teleported the sleeping Podukhai back home, she left her with a remnant of the night with Zeus. Podukhai often sat in bed in the morning and let the night in the arms of the god pass before her mind's eye, which made her very happy and made her forget the humiliating nights with the Great Leader. And when she lay with the old man, she closed her eyes and smiled at herself the

lust with Zeus. The old man misinterpreted her smile, of course, but the young woman didn't care. The old man swallowed a handful of pills, mounted her with difficulty, and made a mighty effort to give her pleasure — The same game night after night. So it was not surprising that one night he collapsed dead on top of her with heart failure. Podukhai pushed him away in disgust, for he had poured himself into her while dying. She was able to escape unseen to her room.

China mourned the loss of the Great Chairman for weeks. Some knew of Podukhai's nights with him and secretly offered her condolences. She saved face and just nodded silently, because she wasn't allowed to show her feelings to anyone. Of course, the fight for the successor began on the first day. Podukhai managed to stay out of it entirely and retired to her summer home. She found much comfort, affirmation and joy in the arms of the God.

In the end, it was the deputy who emerged victorious from the battles. He was still very young, not yet 50, and had been greatly encouraged by the deceased. Some officials disappeared from the scene, but the new chairman skillfully continued the policies of his predecessor. He too was unmarried and had young girls come every evening like his pedophile predecessor. It was less than three months before he took a liking to Podukhai and called her over, because she was extremely clever and experienced in diplomacy, which of course he could benefit from. Of course, he knew her body and her lovemaking very well, since he had also spied on the chairman with hidden cameras at night. Of course, Podukhai knew it and felt a special kick doing her show in front of the cameras. She felt the newcomer might be a little more open to reform and change, but she remained very cautious and reserved. Of course she willingly lay down with him and the very young girl and enjoyed her own physical pleasure.

Ray politely declined the new chairman's request to meet him in person without angering him. Zeus spoke to the new man several times over his television and clearly stated his intentions to improve the situation of mankind. He hoped the new chairman would be more amenable to his mission. He didn't get any firm commitments, of course not. But at least the man listened to him carefully and was clearly thoughtful at the end of the conversation.

Ray again failed to get a mental grip on the chairman and gave up his attempts.

Nevertheless, in one of these talks, Zeus managed to get the chairman to agree to significantly increase Podukhai's salary and to give her rich gifts. Podukhai didn't flinch when the chairman informed her and thanked her politely. The party's gifts were huge, often a hundred times her monthly salary, and poured out almost every week. Of course she knew it was Zeus and thanked him too. Neither her family nor herself were poor before, but she could use the money well. In China, if you could amass a fortune, you were considered better. She quickly became very rich and many admired or envied her. One of her first purchases was a magnificent penthouse apartment in Hong Kong, perched high above the harbor in a prime location. She would retire there when her career was over. Hong Kong was of course in the clutches of the party, but it was China's most international and Western-oriented city.

China remained a problem for the world under the new leadership.

Ray and Lin paid little attention to hunger and bandits, both of which had greatly diminished. They supported the panel and Judge Adams, who appreciated their work. Ray read a lot and observed the world from a good distance, not the details seemed important to him, but the big picture. He was heartily grateful to Lin that she had only turned him into a 25-year-old physically and that he remained 40 in his head. Lin put the finest young girls in his bed and had an infallible sense of when it suited his desires and when it didn't. She felt Ray's love for her and was a very happy woman.

He discussed his next project with Lin, who saw fit, and passed it on to the Jareel. He invited the diplomats to his place. Zeus received the ladies as usual and levitated them at eye level, a sign that he wanted to include them. "I have another assignment for you where it is important that you deliver the message, I will not burden you with any more work." Zeus twirled his beard and looked at each of them. "Slavery is no longer up to date and is worse for those affected than the plague! Unfortunately Whilst slavery is taken for granted in some regions, it is forbidden by law in most countries. I must leave it up to you to decide whether you

want to convince reluctant states. Or demands compliance with the law. You can decide that yourself, I don't want to influence that. Nor do I intend to destroy the slave-owners and to punish human traffickers, that may be decided by your governments."

He handed the diplomats wine goblets with the best French wine. They drank after he raised his goblet and toasted 10 years of good working relationship with them. He continued: "On your USB sticks you will find two files, organized by state. One concerning the criminals, their contact details, bank details and assets, their networking and their *modus operandi*. The networked gangsters are grouped so that their connections becomes visible."

"The second file contains the names and personal data of the victims, also classified by state, as well as the process of their enslavement. You can give this data to your appropriate authorities, who could free the slaves as well as shut down the gangsters and their networks , arrest and imprison. You have to, they have to decide that." Zeus paused and looked at them questioningly.

Regine was the first to answer. "I get it and will be sharing the data, my states are certainly very grateful for the thorough investigation you have done! Personally, I hate human traffickers and slavery from the bottom of my heart and know how hard it is for our investigators to understand them. And thank you for not pressuring the States on this."

Podukhai tugged at her see-through tunic, which obstinately bared her body over and over again. "Although I've never heard of it myself," she smiled lovingly at Zeus, "I assume that your research also concerns China and Asia." She smiled her brightest smile as Zeus nodded. "I just have to develop a good strategy, because the leaders in Asia and also in China will not want to make a big deal about it. But I promise you that I will pass on the data, even if it is not expected that you get thanks for it." Zeus nodded politely, that's probably the case.

Anne spoke last. "For the United States, I can also promise you that the data will get into the right hands and that they will be dealt with accordingly. That helps our authorities and they will be grateful for your help. Of course I am happy to give the data to all states North and South America further, we'll see how they handle

it.” Anne stifled the impulse to mention that President White would certainly adorn himself with these feathers. Zeus grinned at her and said, “There is no doubt about that, my dear!” Anne looked at him in astonishment. He winked and only spoke in her head: “You won’t find out in the recording what I said that to!” Anne bowed her head to hide her laughter.

Zeus pointed to a large tablet that was in the throne room. “This time there is a meal together, my dears, roast wild boar from Romania, deliciously prepared! The finest French red wine, a Cabernet Sauvignon from the Périgord, enjoy it!” The benches floated to the table, Zeus descended from the throne and sat down with the ladies. They ate and drank and chatted happily before being teleported again. Ray went to Lin. He thanked her for arranging the meal, which was new but really well done. Lin, looking down, murmured that she only did what was discussed. Secretly she was very happy, because it was something extraordinary that he thanked her so extensively. He took her under the chin and looked into her eyes: “My wife, my very best wife!”

In the following months they observed the news on earth, Zeus telephoned the diplomats every week. A few governments did nothing, nothing at all. But most of them let their Bandogs off the chain, arrested rows of gangsters and freed the victims. In Europe, action was taken most vigorously, brothels had to close, thousands of women were suddenly free and the courts had enough clues and evidence to lock up the culprits. The campaign was also very successful in the USA, although there was hardly any slavery outside the brothels, and many forced prostitutes were freed. Anne flew to Saudi Arabia to speak personally with the young King Mohammed. The king had thousands of slaves, as did other wealthy and important people. Slavery was theoretically forbidden, but the country could not exist without it. Anne was successful nonetheless, the king and some of his Confidants credibly promised to make employees out of slaves in small steps. Of course, this was a process that would take time, maybe a few months, but the king didn’t care whether his slaves became employees or not. Once he and his key people had taken that step, he would apply appropriate pressure to enforce existing laws throughout the kingdom. It would greatly improve the kingdom’s standing. Anne went home with a good feeling. But South America was just as problematic as Africa.

Podukhai was surprised by the crystal clear support of the Great Chairman. In any case, he was on her side, even if he was not personally familiar with the topic. Communist party and slavery, that just didn't work! She was amazed at how many party members ended up in prison camps or simply disappeared. The party granted pardon to anyone if slavery was converted into regular employment by the next month. The Great Chairman wouldn't budge, not a single exception! Podukhai was able to cite China's exemplary example and convince some governments. But not the Kingdom of Brunei, the sultan was obstinate and lived up to the day before yesterday. Indonesia and the Philippines reluctantly gave in, although many of the rich and super-rich preferred to pay the hefty fines.

Regine had little luck in Africa. It was able to get the large middle class in the republican states to give up slavery and have the slaves legally employed and paid. But the rich and super-rich didn't play along, they had slaves for many generations and stubbornly insisted on their rights. Only South Africa abolished slavery altogether and cracked down on the rich and super-rich.

In Africa and South America there were still an alarming number of slaves after 5 months. Ray and Lin talked a lot about this project, which wasn't 100% successful, but still worked quite well. Ray was now also convinced that it was right that Zeus had not imposed any punishment. After two months they had already worked out the next project.

Zeus invited the diplomats back. He began by acknowledging that the women diplomats had done a good job and he thanked Podukhai and the Chinese President specifically for their example. China deserved his special thanks. He paused for a long time and stroked his beard, knowing how sensitive it was to President White. Anne was about to say something, but he continued.

"The next task is similar to the previous ones. This time it's about child pornography and child abuse." He waited a moment and went on speaking earnestly. "This is a hideous plague, the souls of millions of children will be destroyed forever, as will their development and their future! During my research, I stumbled across it again and again and decided to give your executive a helping hand. On your USB sticks you will find it you two files. The

perpetrators, dealers and consumers, classified by state and network. As before, names, contact details, networks, bank details and assets, etcetera. There are also clues as to where the pornographic data is currently located. This should be yours assist investigations. The second record contains the names and contact details of the children, as well as when they were abused and by whom. Every one of these children needs help!"

The diplomats remained embarrassed, nothing could be added on this subject. Zeus asked if they wanted to take on the task and they nodded one by one. Zeus added: "The executive branch will have a lot of work to do with this, as will the courts. I don't think this will solve the problem, but it might reduce the plague in the future!"

He raised his hand and pointed to the banquet table: "Let's enjoy the meal together, seafood from the coasts of the Mediterranean and the finest Spanish red wine, a Tinta de Toro, a Tempranillo!" They sat down at the table, it became a very pleasant conversation and they enjoyed the sumptuous Mediterranean meal. The Spaniard shot the diplomats in the head, it drank himself light as mineral water and kicked hard as a bull the next morning. And again Ray specifically thanked Lin, his best wife, and again she murmured, blushing, that she had only done what they had agreed. Ray laughed, "you're the only one who can cook so perfectly!" They both laughed, because Lin never cooked, but ordered and stole food ready-made from the best kitchens in the world. Of course she always paid for it from the inexhaustible cash reserves of Jareel, that's how it should be.

For months, Ray and Lin watched the news on Earth. The media greedily ate through the slimy abysses, that was to be expected, but it was also very sad. In most cases, the police and courts were able to make short work of it, they were able to secure evidence and unearth entire networks. Most citizens had a natural horror and utter revulsion. They were glad that action was taken so vigorously and effectively. Most traders robbed the courts of their dirty money and used much of it to care for the children. Many a loving husband heard the handcuffs click and woke rudely from their shabby little dream. It was a worldwide campaign because all states were affected. Incest was not illegal in many states and was therefore not punished, but these children also needed psychologi-

cal help. That's why perpetrators and victims were listed, even if in many places it wasn't a crime.

Zeus telephoned the diplomats weekly and had them visit him once a month. Within 6 months about 85% to 90% of the networks worldwide were broken up and the members locked away. He was very satisfied and thanked the diplomats and governments. He was aware that most perpetrators would come out after a few months or years and continue the heinous activity. But that was a task for another day. Each visit by the ladies ended with a delicious feast, which seemed to become a good custom.

Ray and Lin were now overseeing a number of projects. The starvation project and the rapists still took up a few hours in the morning. They worked together on the committee's projects until lunch and then in the afternoon on the climate- and energy projects. Before dinner they reviewed the data on slavery and child abuse. This is what an average working day looked like.

They read late at night, Ray had thrown himself into psychology after talking about child abuse. He read all the books he could find and researched a subject thoroughly, reading dissertations and academic papers. He took part in discussions on internet forums when they were serious. Lin encouraged him to correspond with leading psychologists and psychiatrists, but it didn't last long. Lin was an excellent conversationalist, and from their intense conversations he realized that given the choice, he would probably choose to be a therapist. The legal profession had become completely uninteresting for him.

After the death of his father, they videophoned his mother and Leonardo every month. She had decided to videophone naked like them. Lin had promised him to keep her healthy for life. Ray noted that she had trimmed all excess fat and looking at herself, she had grown into a very pretty 53 year old and was showing pride. This conversations were very important for Ray, he never skipped it.

On his 40th birthday, he sat on the beach with Lin hugged in the soft light before the sunset. He wondered what the future might look like. He would probably bury the mother next to the father in Marbella and renovate the house where he was born in Vienna. He planned to work only half the month on the spaceship in

a few years and to work the other half of the month as a hypnotherapist in Vienna. Lin nodded in agreement that would be a good plan. Yes, she will accompany him and also look for an interesting job in Vienna.

Lin never told him that the Jareel let her see into the future. His mother would die in Leonardo's arms at the age of 66, suddenly and painlessly after making love. She clung to Leonardo and her heart soared as he spilled into her. Her heart burst in a moment of supreme lust. Ray would retain his physical strength well past 80 and then age healthily and slowly thereafter. He would be an excellent hypnotherapist throughout his life, able to help many poor people and not closing the practice until he was about 85. A few years later he would be persuaded to keep the body of Zeus and give up the body of Ray forever. She herself would live with her 20-year-old body and 40-year-old Zeus in the spaceship and serve humanity for many centuries to come. She smiled and said nothing. That was a good future that made her happy.

Ray would sometimes stand in waist-deep water before sunset, holding Lin in his strong arms, who loved to float in the water. She caressed her body with blissful fantasies. When she was done, she opened her eyes again and beamed happily at her husband, little stars twinkling in her golden almond eyes. These moments were the best of the day for her.

He knew exactly how old they were.

He was 25, she was adorable 20.

Foreword

by István Rudas © 2024-2026

It may be a truism, but it must be stated upfront: this is a fictional story; the characters and events are fictional and entirely invented by me. All events are purely fictitious and in no way based on reality. And don't consult the search engines; the results are bound to be wrong.

Some things were taken from the real world: there's the Rossauer Barracks, St. George's College in Istanbul, a Turkish community in Vienna, and, of course, police officers, detectives, and serial killers. Indeed. I even managed to get Sir Winston Churchill, Confucius, and Sun Tzu to make an appearance, although those gentlemen are pretty much dead, not to say stone dead.

Now, the author takes all of this, the real and the invented, into his hands. He shakes his hands for a very long time to mix everything thoroughly. Then comes the crucial phase, the act of creation. He lets everything fall onto the blank sheet of paper and examines it carefully. How have the dice fallen? How do the threads run from one point to another?

Ah, no, he thinks to himself. Nothing fits; no story is emerging from his hands. Only the beginning is certain. A good story rightfully begins in Istanbul, I realize. Although, why exactly? I've never been to this city on two continents and probably never will. The truth is much more trivial. I was dreaming of a crime story whose protagonist spent his youth there. It's that simple, I won't reveal any more.

And one more thing. Since childhood, I've had an aversion to people who start reading a crime novel but then turn to the last pages to find the solution. It's always annoyed me because when I read a crime novel, I leave it to the author to guide me step by step, whether misleading me or leading me directly, that's up to them. The authors will have put a lot of thought into how they want to develop the story. Feel free to turn to the last pages; it won't do you any good.

Now then: Curtain up!

Vienna, March 2026
István Rudas

• • •

Foreword 2.0

by István Rudas © 2026

And now I'm supposed to write a foreword. Well, I'm not spared anything (® Emperor Franz Joseph I.). I've skimmed the manuscript, and one thing I must make clear from the outset: István is not a racist, not in the slightest. His own family tree is a colorful patchwork quilt (a kilt made from hundreds of patches of Europe, Asia, and the surrounding areas).

I happen to know how István came up with the outlandish idea of having his detective grow up in Istanbul. At the academy, he had a likeable classmate, Hannes Fuchs. Hannes had actually grown up in Istanbul; his parents really did work at the Austrian Embassy, and he had actually attended St. George's College in Istanbul. Under the nickname Hakim Elbagr, he had terrorized the Galata district with a youth gang, but we were all young once, weren't we? Our pubescent schoolboy István wanted to create a kind of literary monument to this Hannes.

István's neighbor, Serdar, is a peaceful, friendly Turk. He objected every time István called him "Serdan," insisting that his name was Serdar, and that Serdan was a Kurdish name, unworthy of a Turk. István, however, remained stubborn, for a fat fly had perched on the nameplate on the door, right next to the last "r" of Serdar's name. The fly, squashed during its midday rest, left a black mark on the letter "r," transforming it into an "n." After Friday prayers, Serdar's wife, Fatme, went straight to the shower. István and Serdar sat peacefully side by side on the shoe rack in the hallway, and since the bathroom had no door, only a curtain, they stared at the shadowy figure behind the milky glass of the shower cubicle. István thought he could see that Ms. Fatme was apparently shaving her pubic area and then doing it for 10 or 15 minutes. And, as always, they talked amongst themselves, trying to sabotage the politicians. They didn't always see eye to eye, especially not on the Kurdish question, and Fatme, wrapped in a bath towel, stepped out of the shower. She came forward to the washbasin to wash her beautiful, black hair. Fatme, of course, knew exactly what István was made of, and she played this game for the two men every Friday, grinning inwardly. Actually, both men

found Fatme beautiful, but István could never say so aloud. His gaze slid up Fatme's beautiful legs and he surreptitiously observed the small, red heart tattooed on her pubic area. "Serdan, your wife has a heart of gold," István remarked ambiguously, and Serdar slowly rose. "Come into the kitchen, we'll make Turkish tea; Fatme will surely want some." Perhaps this little anecdote clarifies István's connection to Turkish culture, because otherwise, there isn't one. In fact, István has only been to Turkey once, for a hot air balloon ride in Cappadocia. And don't bother me, it's called ballooning, I know.

And please don't bother me either if you stumble across the "Czech asses" while reading. That's easily explained, too. István's longtime cleaning lady (correctly: housecleaner) is from the Czech Republic. And when she kneels on all fours on the floor to scrub the stone slabs, István bends down very low to revel in her bush and slit. He cheekily and ambiguously quotes Jacqueline Susann and her "Valley of the Dolls." His assertions that even the Habsburgs enjoyed themselves and therefore dubbed Prague "Imperial City 2.0" are pure nonsense, intended to distract from his shameful amusements. It's that simple with his fascination with "Czech asses," you see? At least it sounds more factual than the Habsburg story.

No wonder, then, that the detectives in this novel have quite a lively private life, to put it mildly. You know our István and how his imagination runs wild. Where everyone else sees a halved grapefruit as a halved grapefruit, this lout is making a big deal out of it. So, let's be lenient, mellow with age.

There's not much to say about the novel itself. A serial killer, a few dead policewomen, shots ring out, the killer takes off.

Perhaps these key details will suffice, and you won't have to wade through all the pages.

Vienna, March 2026.
Rust Van Idas,
Head of the Chamber Office.

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Foreword, Third Attempt

by István Rudas © 2026

I read the forewords of my predecessors with interest. Of course, István mentioned a Hakim at one point, as well as Fatme and his cleaning lady, but naturally I didn't research the details; I'm no idiot, after all. I'm supposed to manage his office, not the rumor mill.

When István handed me the manuscript two years ago for a favorable and benevolent review, I was very flattered. But I had to bring him down to earth. "This isn't a crime novel, it's embarrassing porn," was my first comment. I crossed out all the embarrassing parts with a red pen because, as I've already said, I'm no idiot as defined by the dictionary. István turned the pages this way and that. "There are four pages left, four shitty pages," he managed, pale as a ghost. "The shortest crime novel since >A Song of Ice and Fire<." You almost felt sorry for him. Then came a year of radio silence. István tortured the AI chatbots in four languages, but he didn't touch the tattered manuscript again until, well, until the ill-fated muse kissed him once more — some girls are simply beyond help.

With a red pen in hand, I read the new manuscript. I resolved to be lenient. The mention of the Turkish mafia (turk mafiyasi) was new here. The mafia was under considerable pressure between 2020 and 2023, so why shouldn't his protagonist be an undercover hero? A good idea to introduce him to Vienna's Turkish community that way. Why his girlfriend could be Turkish and not Viennese, Norwegian, or simply Sicilian remained a mystery to me. I'll take note. But why his killer comes from Ukraine, at a time when an upright European stands behind the war-torn Ukrainian people, we discussed that for hours. Finally, he said he had already finished modeling the characters and didn't want to reinvent the wheel. Had he perhaps thought of Mr. Firtasch? No, he said, he's just a white-collar criminal, not the kind of killer he needed. Grandfather, father, and son, a nice family of killers, that's what he wanted to create.

The detectives had a flourishing sex life; my fingers, clutching the red pen, twitched incessantly. Why didn't he use the actual work of the police instead? István looked at me, perplexed. "Come on, how am I supposed to know how the police actually work? And even if I did, would I write a recipe book for the crooks? Nah, a little bit of sex, that won't hurt!" I growled, "No publisher prints sex these days; you're 100 years too late, since Felix von Salten." He flinched. "How on earth am I supposed to rewrite incest in a publisher's terms?" I retorted. "Why incest at all?" His answer was surprising. "Because I wanted to add a provocative, controversial element. Not the main character, of course, since the readers are supposed to identify with him. A supporting character, that's fine."

Nevertheless, I cut many saucy-spicy, sentimental passages; they didn't carry the plot. It was supposed to be a crime novel, after all. He wouldn't part with the hunchbacked medical examiner. "A hunchbacked medical examiner is almost as good as a dwarf medical examiner's assistant." I understood who he was talking about (Christine Urspruch, a dwarf actress from a TV police series). Whatever. I leaned back. "You describe the Turkish community very sympathetically; I like that. It gives the whole thing a nice, friendly touch." István nodded. "That was exactly the intention." I took his hand, which was holding the shot of port. "Obviously, you've never used an escort service. A man of the world notices that immediately." He didn't flinch. "And how many men of the world read crime novels?" It was pointless trying to talk him out of using the escort service.

"You know, Aunt Resi, she had a daughter who worked for an escort service and ended up on the streets, on Prater Street and at the Hotel Orient. Little Lydia was heartbroken her whole life because she was in love with the porter, or rather, the doorman, at the Hotel Bristol. But he never paid her any attention; he wanted to get ahead and was having an affair with the wife of one of the owners, Madame Florence, as everyone called her. I included her in my novel. Florence had fallen in love with a Saudi prince on vacation, one of the 18,000 Saudi princes. But it remained just a passionate holiday fling; nothing more than a fleeting exchange of juices came of it. The Hotel Bristol has its own chauffeur service, and one of the drivers is a Saudi, but of course, not a prince. So Madame Florence was now standing on two legs: the driver and the doorman, Charly." He appears in my novel as a pimp, good old

Charly. There are rumors that Madame Florence has a few girls on the go, but I think those are just rumors. I even met one of these girls, Mrs. Frühwirth. By day, the most respectable housewife in all of Favoriten, by night a vamp, dancing as Monique on the pole in one of the notorious discos. I saw her myself; she's a sleeping volcano. Fire in her belly like Marilyn Monroe, gentlemen! Of course, not my league, but through her I met Annette, the second most respectable housewife in Favoriten. She has a red, tattooed heart in the crook of her pubic area, from before she got married, when she was a dancer like Frühwirth." István took a deep breath, and I asked, "And why are you telling me all this?" He was slightly confused. "I thought you'd be interested in where I get some of the characters for my crime novel?"

Actually, I like his new manuscript, apart from a few overly explicit passages. If he removes those, then by all means, imprimatur. Above all, he'll spare us the detectives' long car rides through the misty meadows, where birches and alders are only vaguely discernible in the persistent morning fog, and the two detectives maintain a grim silence because they had a row in the office, about a very particular female detective, of course.

Once we'd gone through the manuscript, I asked István if there was anything else I could do for him; after all, he's my boss. He stood up grinning. "Write a foreword, nothing grand, but a complimentary one. You're not a real literary critic, my friend."

Okay, a foreword then. I can do that.

East Van Roux-d'Ache
Deputy Office Manager

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The Detective-Inspector

Ronald Hofstätter was finally transferred to the Vienna Criminal Investigation Department. He had successfully completed his first assignment as an undercover investigator, and the Vienna police criminal investigation department was experiencing a critical staff shortage. Ron was promoted to detective inspector, despite the reluctance of senior colleagues who had spent years serving as rookies. Ron had powerful advocates in the Ministry of the Interior; his father was a retired ambassador with extensive connections. The criminal investigation department rented an entire wing of the Rossau barracks; the young Minister of the Interior had insisted on it. The goal was to create a completely new criminal investigation department, staffed by young people with state-of-the-art equipment. This was something the minister had brought back from his time in the USA.

Ron walked toward the door of the new office. Detective Inspector Ronald Hofstätter was standing there by the door. This filled him with pride. He entered, finding two desks with computer monitors and a color laser printer in the corner. The telephone system was in the center, easily accessible for both employees. It was a cutting-edge digital telephone system for two people, offering all the bells and whistles: caller ID, voice recording, witness communication, speakerphone, and direct connection to a mobile phone. For the time being, he was alone in the office; it hadn't yet been decided who would get the second desk. Most of the other offices were already occupied. At the very back was the office of the former director, President Johannes Wallner. He was supposed to have retired by now, but they hadn't found a suitable successor. And: Wallner was still one of the most cunning and successful criminal investigators of the post-war era. He was at odds with modern technology; he could make phone calls with his mobile phone, but that was about it. Nevertheless, he was fiercely determined to carry out the minister's order. He didn't understand, of course, what a mass spectrometer did, but the people in the lab wanted one, so they got one. The criminal investigation lab in the Roßauer barracks was now by far the best in the country. A glass wall separated Wallner's office from the conference room, which was jokingly called the aquarium. Wallner attended the morning

conference every day, Monday through Saturday. On Sundays, the offices were barely occupied; you needed at least one day off.

Ron went from office to office, introducing himself and shaking hands. Everyone knew him; he knew most of them, at least by phone. He was outwardly very modest, but inwardly immensely proud of his great achievement. He was the one who had succeeded in dismantling the Turkish mafia in Vienna. His colleagues looked him up and down. Ron was 29 years old, a native Viennese, and quite handsome, at least compared to some of his colleagues. He watched his weight, ran his kilometers at the crack of dawn, and ate mindfully. He liked good food, but he knew how to restrain himself when necessary. He rarely smoked during the day, but in the evenings, when his Turkish girlfriend visited, he smoked more. He was muscular and athletically built, but not a muscleman. Eating wisely, a run in the morning, and a girl in the evening kept him fit, or so he thought. He only carried his service weapon when something unexpected was anticipated. In the more than two years he spent undercover, he had only taken his pistol once, and that was also the first and only time he had shot a guy in the thigh.

Ron still lived in the small apartment where he had stayed during his previous assignment. A small collection of vintage records and a television were all he needed, and when he read a book, he borrowed it and returned it. A personal library wasn't necessary; he kept everything in his head. His girlfriends all came from the Turkish community where he had spied for over two years as Hakim Elbagr. Hakim is both a first name and a title reserved for academics or legal scholars.

The girls often stayed with him for months at a time, and the fact that they were prostitutes and had pimps didn't bother him at all. He never paid the girls, and the pimps believed they had him under their thumb. It was important that they left the small apartment spotless in the morning when they left. He didn't need a cleaning lady. And Fatme, his current Turkish girlfriend, had been his lover for a long time, and they had become very close.

He had met Fatme almost two years earlier. His success in significantly weakening the Turkish mafia in Vienna had earned him the respect and admiration of the Turkish community. He was

warmly welcomed to sit with them and sip Turkish tea. They still respectfully called him by his alias, Hakim Elbagr, even though they knew he was a police officer named Ronald Hofstätter. The pretty, young Fatme sometimes served the tea, and that's how he struck up a conversation with her. There had been an instant connection between them. Confessing their love wasn't necessary. Ron strictly adhered to cultural norms and often sat modestly with Fatme on a bench in the courtyard, talking for hours. She was a very pretty and slim girl, she was always neatly dressed and only lightly made up, and she always smelled so good, like some kind of flowers.

Ron would have guessed Fatme was 19; she was always meticulously made up, and that deceived him. She laughed softly, cooing that she was 15, almost 16, and that her father had already been forced to sell her to one of Madame Florence's pimps because they were dirt poor and starving. Ron immediately became serious. Her father had made love to her for years because her mother had turned a blind eye and was now dead, and he had been forced to sell her to Madame Florence years ago, even though she was far too young for prostitution. Ron memorized the pimp's name. Days later, she let Ron invite her to his apartment. That's how their love story began. "You're the second man after Dad to take me so lovingly to his heart, Hakim," she whispered. Ron was appalled by Fatme's lack of general knowledge. He borrowed books from the library, which he gave to her to read. They discussed their contents at length, and Fatme absorbed knowledge and wisdom like a dry sponge. Ron grew increasingly annoyed each time Fatme lay down beside him, exhausted, drained, and drained. He ambushed her pimp and gave him a good dressing-down. He shouted that Fatme belonged to him and that the pimp had to release her, or things would get serious. The pimp wasn't used to such treatment and cowered under Ron's fists. "Okay," he stammered, "but I have no control over Fatme's owner, Madame."

Only after some time did he explain the situation to Fatme. She lowered her gaze; she had already suspected as much. Her father was desperate because she wasn't bringing home any money. And he was clinging to Fatme in his bed. As long as she couldn't stand on her own two feet, she had to endure it patiently, Fatme whispered, her eyes downcast. And she begged Ron not to mention it to her father. The poor father would starve and die of grief if his little

girl abandoned him. She was all he had left, and the name of a family of national heroes. He was dirt poor, but highly respected.

Fatme now read all day and lay down with Ron in the evenings. He tried not to think about the fact that when she went home around midnight, she would have to lie down with her father. He was proud of her because reading had made her intelligent and well-educated. He was proud of her because she waited for him in his spotlessly clean apartment with a drink, like a lover. Yes, she was his lover, and he pushed aside most thoughts about how Fatme might move forward in the future. Of course, he could have asked for her hand in marriage, but for him, it was far too soon. And at least he had managed to get her out of prostitution. He had given Fatme a bank card to his account; she could buy everything she needed if her cash wasn't enough. Sometimes they checked her payments and withdrawals together, but she was very disciplined about it. At least once a week they went out in the evening. She loved to dress up, and Ron was very proud to go to bars with such a well-dressed, elegant, and subtly made-up lover on his arm.

Ron sat at his desk, smoking as he summarized the short reports from his informants. Tomorrow morning, he had to briefly report to his colleagues at the morning meeting that the Turkish mafia had lost all influence in Vienna. He recalled his own background. His mother had been his rock. His father worked at the Austrian consulate in Istanbul, and the small family, mother and son, had moved with him. Ron had attended St. Georg College in Istanbul for six years, then they returned to Vienna. He had attended the police academy and was placed undercover in the Turkish mafia; after all, he spoke fluent Turkish with an Istanbul accent. That was where he had his great success.

His phone buzzed; it was President Wallner. Yes, he'd come immediately. The president smiled. "Can I pull you off the bicycle thefts for a bit, right now?" the old fox asked. There was only one answer. "Yes, Mr. President, with pleasure!" Wallner smiled. "I expected nothing less. You must lend a hand to the other department, carefully, of course. Bremer, the chief, has been complaining to me about his troubles, and I want to help him. He's already got three female corpses, and they're not getting anywhere. A serial killer? Perhaps. So, go see Bremer and get on with it. Bremer's a friend, believe me!" Ron moved quickly. Finally, a detective as-

signment! He put the bicycle theft files in the outbox—away with them! He informed the others that he was going to Bremer's and might have to work there for a while, on the president's orders.

Bremer greeted him warmly and readily accepted Wallner's help. He summoned the investigators: Bodnar, Eisen, and Rosenblatt. Bodnar smiled as Ron was introduced. "We're actually the Three Musketeers, but they call us the 'Yiddish Squadron.' Just a heads-up, our colleagues aren't anti-Semites, they're just plain idiots." Bodnar smiled kindly. The four of them went to Bodnar's office.

Bodnar was the head of the unit. They had two problematic female corpses and one unproblematic one. An elderly man had killed his wife with an axe; he was cooperative and gave a credible confession. Ron asked if there were any open questions in this case. The three shook their heads in the negative. Ron pushed the file aside. Now he asked about the other two cases. The three looked at each other, then Eisen said, "I'm thinking of a serial killer, the other two aren't. There are several inconsistencies and several points of agreement." Ron wanted to hear about the points of agreement first. "Both women were young, blonde, naked, and strangled with wire," Eisen said. "Both are Viennese police officers, one on patrol, the other actually on sabbatical, nothing unusual. According to the autopsies, they had both been bound at the wrists for days and were apparently sexually assaulted before being strangled. One body was left in Votivpark, the other in the park in front of the Schottenkirche. All of this points to a serial killer in my opinion." Ron looked at the other two. Rosenblatt shook his head. "There hasn't been a single serial killer for 25 years; the last one was Jack Unterweger, the prostitute murders in 1973. We consider it unlikely that we have another one." Ron opened the first act. "Were they left completely naked?" "What are the photos?" he asked, seeing them. Rosenblatt nodded. "Yes, Ronald, these are the original photos, just as they were found." Ron flipped through the pages, but there was nothing unusual to be found. Thea Küngler had studied criminology, worked first as an informant, and then became a police officer in the administrative department. She was currently on sabbatical to pursue her doctorate thesis. In the photos, she was a pretty young woman. The autopsy report confirmed what Eisen had reported. He picked up the second file, opened it, and froze.

"Susanne," Ron exclaimed, "I know her, I knew her!" He flipped through the pages again, skimming through them. "Has she been buried yet?" he asked. "No," the three of them said in unison. "She's still in Hades, at the coroner's office, down here in the basement." The three of them led him down. "The coroner is a bit of an oddball, but he's probably one of the best." Ron nodded, and they went inside. The hunchback looked at them. "The Künglers or the Stammers?" he asked, grinning. "Both," Ron replied, introducing himself. He asked his name. "Dr. Armin Gangl," said the hunchback, "but everyone calls me Quasimodo, even though none of them have ever read Victor Hugo, the idiots!" He opened two refrigerator compartments, 67 and 70. "Küngler on the left, Stammer on the right."

He sat down and waited for questions. Ron held the autopsy reports in his hand and went through each point. Dr. Gangl approached him. He pointed to the wrists; the marks were clearly visible and identical on Thea and Susanne. The mark around their necks was clearly made by a wire. "Right-handed," said Dr. Gangl. "No semen," he added, "he must have used a condom. But the marks are unambiguous: multiple brutal rapes, possibly with a dildo. Certainly over several days, absolutely certain." The doctor was very thorough. "The toxicology was the same for both. Alcohol, of course, and poppers, lots of poppers. The women showed very high doses; they must have been almost insane with desire, sexual desire. What man does something like that? What guy is so greedy and irresponsible? They could just as easily have died of heart failure at those doses!" Dr. Gangl shook his head. "Not a single trace of DNA. He must have washed her with a good disinfectant. That guy knows a thing or two about police work." Ron pulled the cloth all the way down from Susanne and examined her body. Yes, it was her, definitely. He'd met her briefly at the last police ball and had a quickie with her in the dressing room.

They went back upstairs, and Ron said he was biased. He'd had a quickie with Stammer a year ago, so he was biased. He quickly went to President Wallner. "I'm biased and can't participate in the investigation; otherwise, I'll jeopardize it." President Wallner, who for a moment feared something serious, laughed uproariously. "If that's all it is," he said, laughing, "then none of us would be allowed to investigate the case. That little one didn't miss a single guy under 60; she was very industrious!" Wallner laughed again.

“Well, carry on, my boy, that’s an order!” Ron went back to the Three Musketeers.

Bodnar was the most senior officer; he came from the Vice Squad, which he left when he became a father. A burly man, he looked more like a plumber or a lumberjack. A strong-willed character, like the late Friedrich Engels, with a large mustache. His 13-year-old daughter, Laura, was a pubescent nuisance. She regularly sat naked on his lap, wrapped her arms longingly around his neck, and he never knew what to do with his hands. Laura would rub back and forth until his hands were on her bare genitals, and then she would continue rubbing until she shuddered. His wife cleared her throat noisily in the background, of course. But Bodnar knew from his work in vice that this was over and he couldn’t take anything further with Laura.

Eisen had actually been a graphologist at the university until a love affair lured him to the police academy. He was the typical short, bald accountant with a receding hairline and glasses, whose criminological talent was discovered at the academy. He was in his early fifties and the oldest member of the Yiddish Squadron. Everyone appreciated his clear-sightedness, always focused on the facts. He rarely fell into a trap; he recognized even the most elaborate ones. He was a confirmed bachelor and made the most of it in countless affairs. Eisen was already emotionally smitten; he wanted to try his luck at the Ministry of the Interior. He was on familiar terms with the new, young Minister of the Interior.

Rosenblatt was the squadron’s best tracker. No, he didn’t snoop on the ground, but on the internet, in archives, in directories of all kinds, often bringing even the most hidden things to light. He had sold the inherited jewelry store; he had no interest in it. He had been left by his wife, the slut, many years ago, and his daughter Elli, now 15 or 16, lived with him. He only ever called his ex a slut; she didn’t seem to have a first name. He kept his private life private, but when his trusted colleagues pressed him directly, he readily admitted that almost five years ago, when his wife, the slut, had run off, he had resolutely brought Elli into his bed. Everything had developed quite naturally, and they lived together like a couple. No one objected once the truth was out in the open. His Jewish hooked nose on a face worthy of a Roman emperor immediately revealed that it belonged to a detective.

They went through the files very methodically for a week. But there was nothing more to them than what was already there. They had done a good job so far and gathered everything. Thea Küngler's file was completely clean. She had grown up in modest circumstances in Favoriten, was the first in her family to graduate from high school, and was studying criminology. She had graduated from the police academy with excellent grades and was already working on a doctoral dissertation, the thesis. She didn't have a steady boyfriend, according to her file. Not a word about her sex life, if she had one.

Susanne Stammer grew up in comfortable middle-class circumstances in the 9th district. She had passed her high school exams (after retaking one), was also studying criminology, but there was no indication whether she had known Thea Küngler. Her juvenile file contained two entries that had long since been deleted. One was for possession of a small amount of marijuana, the other for disorderly conduct. Clearly, what that meant back then, it was promiscuity at the age of 14. Ron scratched his head; he'd fallen for Stammer at a police ball and had a quickie with her. It was just superficial, casual sex without any meaning. Ron still felt a deep sense of regret. Even if Susanne had been a loose girl, she simply hadn't deserved death, that angry, evil death. Neither Ron nor the Yiddish Squadron discovered anything or anyone that pointed to Thea's or Susanne's murder. It could have been a madman, a serial killer, or just anyone.

Then, after a week, pure chance came to the rescue. Residents had alerted the police; screams had been heard coming from the empty building next door, and by the time the officers arrived, the screams had long since died down. The police discovered a woman's body, and the three musketeers raced across the city in their ambulance, flashing blue lights and sirens blaring. The perpetrator had long since fled, but he had been interrupted.

He hadn't yet used the disinfectant. He left behind the body bound with wire, the garrote, and the disinfectant. Dr. Gangl estimated she must have been murdered less than an hour earlier; the body was still warm. The crime scene was examined methodically, millimeter by millimeter, and half a dozen used condoms were found. Dr. Gangl analyzed the semen in the condoms, the DNA on the garrote, and on the body of Theresa Stanzl, 28. Theresa was

also a police officer; she hadn't shown up for duty for several days, but she hadn't yet been officially reported missing. It had happened several times before that she went on a "honeymoon" with a lover for a few days, even a week, as she later admitted with an embarrassed smile. And now she was dead.

Rosenblatt and Eisen immediately set to work researching her background. But there was nothing unusual. She had graduated from high school in Josefstadt and lived with her widowed father. There had been several anonymous complaints alleging that the two were engaged in incest. Theresa was 14, 17, 18, 19, and 20 years old at these times, and the anonymous writer seemed to be a jealous neighbor. The reports were very detailed, some of them downright pornographic. Eisen put the papers aside in disgust. It was completely irrelevant whether Theresa was having sex with her father or not; that was unimportant for police work. Nobody investigated the matter back then. Incest was essentially a minor offense that no police officer wanted to take seriously. Rosenblatt read the report her superior had written when she was hired three times. The supervisor had spread the five incriminating anonymous complaints out on the table and then said, "Everyone has to live with hostility and smear campaigns, I understand that. I just wanted to know what was going on from the start. You still live alone with your father. In these documents, in this drivel, you are accused of incest. What do you have to say to me about that?" Stanzl had asked in return, "Will this have any bearing on whether I get hired or not?" He denied it. So Stanzl didn't take a position. Theresa had a boyfriend on record, an inconspicuous and pale student in her year. Rosenblatt concluded from the wording that it was more of a study company than a sexual relationship. No direct connection whatsoever to Thea Küngler or Susanne Stammer.

Dr. Gangl shook his head as he read the toxicology report. Theresa had a blood alcohol level of 3.2 per mille; she was completely drunk at the time of her death. She had ingested three times more poppers than the others; the levels were incredibly high. "In my opinion, this alone would have been enough to cause her heart to fail. I can't definitively conclude that she was 'only' raped. Perhaps she herself incited her attacker and pushed him into brutal sex. Here I have to slightly revise the initial autopsy report." Dr. Gangl wiped the sweat from his brow. "No one takes that much poppers voluntarily, that's for sure. Your perpetrator is not

only a cop killer and serial killer, I also classify him as a completely deviant sex offender who deliberately plunges his victims into a hurricane of sexual urges." Dr. Gangl pressed for the DNA analysis to be performed as quickly as possible in the lab. The DNA clearly belonged to Frank Halter, who was imprisoned in the Karling prison near the city of Graz.

Ron immediately called Graz.

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The Killer

The prison director squirmed on the phone. “We released the Halter six weeks ago, Inspector.” He was very embarrassed when Ron shouted into the phone, asking why it wasn’t in the database yet. “We have a staff shortage, Inspector. We can’t do some things immediately.” Ron had calmed down. “I’m coming to Graz on the next train, be ready! And I want to speak to the officers who were responsible for the owner!” Ron hung up without a greeting, without any kindness. He immediately took the first train to Graz.

Prison director Robert Gessing and prison guard Udo Perschin were already in the meeting room when Ron entered. Gessing confirmed once again that Frank Halter had been released six weeks earlier, on April 4th. He had served six of his seven years and, after six years, had been legitimately released for good behavior. Perschin had testified in his favor; Halter had never caused any trouble, he was quiet and polite, but he hadn’t made any particular friends in the prison. He was legally educated and had advised some inmates. “Not at all unpleasant, that fellow,” Perschin concluded.

Ron wanted to know what books Halter had read. Udo Perschin already had the list at hand. Primarily Russian authors: Tolstoy, Pushkin, and others. He subscribed to two newspapers, the daily Kurier and the Standard, which, as required, were delivered to him with a one-week delay. Halter was allowed two hours of internet access daily; that was permitted. He had no email contact with anyone; he never used his email account.

Perschin had printed out random copies of his internet browsing history and presented them. Ron took them to Vienna. He returned to Vienna without any new information. Something had changed there. Rosa Morgentau, a police officer and Bodnar’s lover, had joined the three musketeers. The pretty, dark-haired Jewish woman smiled provocatively into Ron’s eyes. She flirted quite openly. “We’re now the Jewish quartet, the quartet is complete!” she said, smiling. She had a doctorate in criminal psychology and was a computer specialist, and she took over the online research. Ron gave her the printouts of the browser histories. “Find

out what he was searching for on the internet." She began immediately.

Eisen had completed the Theresa Stanzl file. They laid the three files side by side; all three had been murdered by Frank Halter in the past two months. Why? What was the motive? Why had Halter chosen these three in particular? What connected them? After much deliberation, Morgentau had an idea. All three had initially worked as informants before becoming police officers. They had been infiltrated into Artem and Frank's network and had testified in court. They had all given themselves to Artem and Frank to obtain information and had also testified extensively in court about the sexual aspect. At the time, they were all blonde, pretty, and young, and had been Artem's and Frank's lovers for a time. The others hadn't noticed this yet. Morgentau immediately continued her research; there were a total of eleven informants with the same characteristics, including the sexual aspect, concerning Galebnikov and Halter. Ron decided to inform the eight remaining female police officers and their superiors. They had to be given personal protection. Ron also sent the latest photo of Frank Halter, even though it was already six years old. He was the threat; he wanted to kill the policewomen. Only one couldn't be reached, Bina Mudak; she was on vacation visiting relatives in Odessa, Ukraine.

Morgentau called in the evening and said she had a lead and would come see him immediately. Ron was slightly annoyed; he had to send the Turkish girl, Fatme, away before Morgentau showed up. He drank the bottle of red wine with Rosa he had originally intended for the young Turkish woman.

He woke from a nap. Rosa had put her negligee back on, but she was completely naked underneath and sat at the table with her papers. Ron pulled on his trousers and sat down next to her. "Well, what was so urgent?" he asked quietly, his annoyance long since gone. Morgentau had discovered that Frank Halter had been thoroughly investigating the Artem Galebnikov case. He had reviewed the court files, but she couldn't find out where he had gotten a password. He had obviously read through the list of all those involved—witnesses and counter-witnesses, prosecutors and defense attorneys — several times. Artem Galebnikov was accused of espionage, money laundering, and human trafficking; the evidence

was overwhelming. Artem Galebnikov hanged himself while in pretrial detention. Frank Halter, presumably Galebnikov's son, was one of his contacts but was not charged. Then he shot and killed a prosecution witness whose testimony could have been very dangerous for both Artem and himself. Frank Halter received a seven-year sentence and was imprisoned in Graz. "That was good work, Rosa!" said Ron.

Rosa laughed heartily and interrupted him as he began to speak. "Don't worry about that, Ronald! I was Rosenblatt's lover first, then Eisen's, and now Bodnar's. Don't worry about it, that's just how it goes. — By the way, I have to go; Bodnar will be here around ten." Ron watched her with shining eyes as she dressed provocatively. "We can't continue this," he said firmly. "I'm in a committed relationship, and I'm not giving it up." Rosa looked at him for a long time. "Okay, Ronald, message received." Ron glanced at his wristwatch; it was just after 9. He called Fatme, his young lover. "Of course," she said, "I'll be there in fifteen minutes." Ron turned on the television and waited. This felt right; as Hakim Elbagr, he felt comfortable in the arms of the young Turkish girl. "A colleague came to see me on business, with an urgent matter. Hopefully, it won't happen again soon." Fatme nodded in agreement. Hakim had never lied to her, but there was no need to ask if he'd screwed with the colleague. Of course, she knew from the beginning that he was actually a policeman. He'd given her pimp a real beating and straightened him out, that's how Hakim got Fatme off the streets, and she came to him every evening for the past fifteen months. Fatme, who liked Ron very much, clung to him like a true, passionate lover.

The next day, they added Artem Galebnikov's file. It was a thick file, much thicker than Frank Halter's. They compared all the facts about Artem and Frank. Both had been born in Odessa. According to Frank's file, Artem could be Frank's "unknown" father; he had been the lover of Frank's mother, Roxane Halter, around the time in question. All three of them had come to Vienna from Ukraine in 1992. Frank's mother still lived in Vienna. Ron drove to her house with Morgentau. They hardly spoke on the way; Rosa was concentrating on driving, and he had little desire to talk about the matter. Frank's mother opened the door, a small, delicate woman with steely eyes. She spoke German quite well and offered tea and sweet biscuits.

No, she hadn't seen Frank for six years, she claimed. "Well, through the thick acrylic glass in prison. He's free?" she asked with feigned interest. Ron and Rosa looked at each other. He said, "Frank's been free for six weeks — no, seven weeks — and I'm sure he's contacted you, Mrs. Halter!" Her gray eyes flickered. "Yes, he called me about three days ago, but I thought he was still in prison. He didn't say anything about his release, though." Ron and Morgentau exchanged another glance. That was probably a lie, but they couldn't continue like this. Morgentau changed the subject.

"According to our files, Artem Galebnikov was Frank's father, is that correct?" Mrs. Halter showed no reaction. "If it says so in your files. — But as far as I know, Artem has been dead for a long time. He hanged himself in his cell, they said." For the first time, a slight tremor could be heard in her voice. "Yes, that's what it says in our files, Mrs. Halter. I'll note that you confirm his paternity, Mrs. Halter." Mrs. Halter didn't react, but she didn't deny it either. Ron was surprised at how skillful Morgentau was. Morgentau nocked the next arrow on her bow.

"From Frank's file, I gathered that you raised Frank alone?" was Rosa's next question. Ron sensed that Rosa was about to attack and quickly release the arrow. Mrs. Halter now confirmed in a firm voice that she had raised Frank alone, she wasn't looking for a replacement father for Frank, and no, she herself hadn't had a single affair. "During the interrogations six years ago, Frank stated that he 'didn't have a girlfriend, he had his mother with whom he lived.' Am I to understand that you have an incestuous relationship with Frank?!" Morgentau seemed so unshakably self-assured that Mrs. Halter reacted strongly. "Frank only had me and sometimes his father. I did everything to keep my son from going astray. He shouldn't have to go to prostitutes and lose himself there. I only did what any respectable mother would have done in my place. And certainly nothing incestuous!" She fell silent, ashamed; she was exhausted.

Morgentau looked triumphantly at Ron. He asked, "May we look around the house, Mrs. Halter?" She nodded, tired and exhausted. They went through the rooms, then up to the bedroom in the attic. The bed wasn't made yet; it looked as if it had been the result of a fierce fight, or perhaps a passionate sexual encounter. "You live alone, Mrs. Halter?" Morgentau asked. "You don't have a

boyfriend? A lover?" Mrs. Halter shook her head, visibly annoyed. "Boyfriend?! Lover?! Pah! — Aren't I too old for that?!" Morgentau grabbed her hand. "So, Frank stayed here overnight!" It wasn't a question, more of a statement. Mrs. Halter nodded unconsciously and said, "No, Frank wasn't here!" but she couldn't hide the lie in her eyes. "We're leaving!" Mrs. Halter said firmly and went downstairs. She had completely shut down, and the two police officers drove back to the Rossauer Barracks.

Morgentau steered the car and blurted out, "Frank slept at her place, I bet! We have to have the house monitored!" Ron already had his cell phone to his ear and was giving instructions. She continued to rant. "The Halter practically admitted to incest, and I'm one hundred percent certain he'd been hiding with her all along." Ron growled, "We're investigating several murders, Rosa, incest doesn't have the slightest influence in my opinion!" Rosa was silent for a moment. "But the psychological effect...?" Ron interjected thoughtlessly, "I couldn't care less!" Morgentau wasn't giving up yet. "When she opened the door, she was red and slightly sweaty. She buttoned up her housedress first, and she wasn't wearing anything underneath. I saw it and thought we'd disturbed her, maybe she'd just had sex, or maybe just sex all by herself. I didn't think much of it. But now I'm wondering if we're missing something?" Ron's face had darkened considerably. "We're investigating several murders, maybe a serial killer. I don't care about anything else!" Rosa was silent. Ronald didn't want to talk about it anymore, that much was clear. He grumbled conciliatorily, "It's completely irrelevant at the moment whether Frank is or has been screwing with his mother, and it's also completely irrelevant whether we interrupted the old woman while she was masturbating." He composed himself again. "I know, Rosa, you studied psychology, and that's where your interest stems from. Right now, I think we shouldn't attach any importance to sexuality. At least not yet, okay?" Rosa nodded and concentrated on driving.

They arrived at the office and wrote the report together. Ron said, "You questioned her brilliantly, Rosa! I wanted to say that, you were very skillful! Only, the sexual component has nothing to do with the murders. But write it in, I don't care." Rosenblatt and Eisen tried to locate Bina Mudak in Odessa. It seemed significant to Ron that Bina was born in Odessa and had only been in Vienna for 15 years. He searched through Artem Galebnikov's court file

again and found Bina. She had been an informant at the time and also a lover of Artem, and later of Frank. She had been a witness for the prosecution against Artem; she only later completed her studies in criminology and joined the police force. Ron showed his discovery to the others. “This is a concrete lead, a very concrete one indeed, if Frank saw himself as Artem’s son, which we can only speculate about at present.” They went through the files again and again.

Rosa Morgentau sat at her desk, holding the photo of Roxane and Artem. She stared at the picture through the magnifying glass, as if staring would reveal any secrets. Roxane was 14 years old at the time; it was her honeymoon. Roxane was about 5′3″ and extremely slim. She had small, girlish breasts with pointed, dark nipples. Her pubic area was barely visible beneath the blondish-reddish fuzz. Artem looked like a giant next to her. He was at least 6′5″ and weighed around 275 pounds. A broad-shouldered giant with a hairy chest, he was athletically built and quite muscular. His enormous dick hung almost down to his knees. Rosa squinted and stared through the magnifying glass. She had never seen such a large dick before, and she shuddered at the thought of how it would feel inside her. She quickly pushed the thought aside in shame. She examined his glans and the foreskin, which he had apparently deliberately retracted, under the magnifying glass for quite some time. Mrs. Halter had admitted that Frank’s dick was just as large as Artem’s. The mere thought that Frank had abused his mother for 30 years made her gasp. Rosa sighed and placed the photograph back in Artem’s file.

The next morning brought a surprise. A letter “for Inspector Hofstätter” had been delivered to the gate by a bicycle courier. The gatekeeper had taken the courier’s name and phone number. Ron called him immediately. He was out on his route, the courier said, but he was available. He had received the letter from a customer at Café Eiles at around 7:15 or 7:20 a.m. The description matched Frank’s photo. Ron called Café Eiles. They confirmed the courier’s account; they had never seen the customer before. Ron handed the encrypted message over to the lab. They found Frank’s DNA, without a doubt. It took them less than fifteen minutes to decipher the text. A very simple code; the alphabet shifted by one letter with each line. Not very common because it was easy to crack.

To Inspector Hofstätter.

You came very close to me yesterday. I was waiting for you in the cellar and would have shot you both dead. Let my mother out; she knows nothing and shouldn't be dragged into this because of me. I wanted Bina; I've had her for eight days already, and if you hurry, she'll still be warm by noon today. You'll find her, because I liked her very much. Everyone likes Bina. I'll be long gone by the time you find her. She gave me much joy and paid off all her debts to me in installments.

F.J.H.

Ron looked in Artem's file. Frank Jessipowitsch Halter. No one knew what Jessipowitsch meant; in any case, it wasn't his patronymic, as was customary. Ron read the letter twice, five times. Bednar read along, like the others. He sat bolt upright. "One sentence doesn't fit. 'People just like Bina.' - 'People just like Manner.' That must be the clue!" Morgentau was already at the computer. "There are two abandoned Manner production facilities in the city. You now have the addresses on your cell phones."

So they found Bina in one of the old Manner factory buildings in Ottakring. Bodnar and Morgentau had found her and called the others over. Dr. Gangl shook his head. No, the policewoman had been dead for at least six hours, maybe seven, but not eight. The doctor superficially examined her vagina. "A considerable amount of semen; he didn't use a condom this time. The strangulation mark on her neck is the same as with the others, a wire loop, a garrote. The wire restraints around her wrists are like the others, but this one has a gag in her mouth, a T-shirt. Probably her own. I can't say more until after the autopsy." Dr. Gangl turned away, disturbed that it was yet another pretty, young girl. Pretty, blonde, and stone dead. The series of murders was a disaster. He had heard that seven other young female police officers were on the death list.

Rosenblatt completed the dossier on Bina Budak. She was born in Odessa, Ukraine, and was now 28 years old. A translation from Ukrainian: her mother had taken her father to court; he had deflowered Bina far too young and abused her daily for years. Mother and daughter had immigrated here legally about 15 years

ago after the father's acquittal. Bina had graduated from high school in Ottakring. During her time at the police academy, she was an informant and had also been infiltrated into Artem and Frank's network. She had given herself completely to both of them and thus obtained sensitive information. She had also testified against Artem in court. She was engaged to a young legal clerk, and they planned to marry after his admission to the bar.

The Yiddish squadron was in shock. Surveillance of Frank's mother had yielded nothing. Police Chief Wallner shook his head and stared at the wall onto which the letter was projected. "He's not finished yet; he's continuing and waiting for us with a gun in his hand. He has no fear and no reason to surrender. He deliberately and effortlessly led us to the latest body. There's currently no lead we can follow. — Morgentau, take on the mother, every day. Squeeze everything out of her! And, damn it, no kid gloves! We're looking for a dangerous killer, a cop killer! There are no kid gloves here!!!" Wallner was truly furious and waved the officers away; they were free to go.

Ron ran into Bodnar at the coffee machine as he was getting a coffee. "Am I imagining things, or has the atmosphere changed?" he asked. Bodnar took his time answering. "Only since you were in bed with Rosa!" So Ron hadn't been mistaken. "Look, Bodnar. I made a mistake, you're right about that. But I told Rosa right away that it can't happen again, because of me. She must have understood. I hope you do too. Without an understanding about this, we can't continue working here." Bodnar didn't reply and left in silence.

A few hours later, Rosenblatt strolled by. After a few inconsequential remarks, he got to the point. "Bodnar explained it to me. I believe you; it was bound to happen. Rosa can't leave anyone out. I just didn't expect it to happen so soon." Eisen approached just then. He nodded when Rosenblatt had finished. He offered Ron his hand. Bodnar wasn't ready until the next morning; he'd had a conversation with Morgentau the previous evening. She confirmed Ron's text. Bodnar wasn't happy about her fickleness, but he was willing to leave Ron alone. However, they had wasted half a day on this little skirmish.

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Interrogations and Confessions

Ron and Bodnar sat with Rosa Morgentau in the meeting room, listening to her report. As ordered by President Wallner, Rosa had removed her velvet gloves and put on black leather gloves to beat old Mrs. Halter. She had torn Mrs. Halter's blouse off and began systematically beating the astonished, half-naked woman with the leather gloves. Yes, she struck her in the face for minutes on end, taking great care not to leave any bruises. She screamed at the handlers, saying she would beat her most intimate secrets out of her. Every single one! After fifteen minutes, the old woman's resistance crumbled. She had realized that she had to reveal a few secrets to receive fewer blows. She sobbed that she was ready to answer everything. "But please, no more hitting!"

As for Rosa, one has to consider her background. She had initially studied psychology, and only later, concurrently with the police academy, had she studied criminal psychology in particular. She was a very good student, one has to give her that. But she had developed a predilection for quickies, for casual, fast sex, which had become very pronounced. She had never kept count, but there were certainly hundreds whose paths she had crossed.

And then there was the issue of incest, which preoccupied her greatly. Somewhere, sometime during her studies, she had overheard something that, objectively speaking, doesn't stand up to any scientific scrutiny. Something like this: most criminals had an incest problem. Girls who had been abused by their own fathers were highly likely to become criminals later in life. Male offenders had often been abused by their mothers in their youth, or, as a rule, they abused their own mothers. Or they were now those fathers themselves, incestuously abusing their daughters. And Rosa was determined to investigate these matters with the utmost precision. What supported her peculiar theory was that the roughly 20 women and 70 men she had so far subjected to excruciatingly embarrassing interrogations had all, without exception, had some

kind of incest problem in their youth. All of them. Without exception.

As a test, Rosa asked Mrs. Halter if she had been in an incestuous relationship with Frank. She denied it, cursing, sobbing, and sniffling. Rosa had taken off her gloves and struck her quite brutally with the folded gloves. The old woman screamed and whimpered. “No, never, believe me! When he lay down next to me to sleep — we always slept naked next to each other — he would always sin by kneeling between my thighs and ejaculate over my most intimate place ever since he reached puberty.” Rosa struck again, “What else?!” The old woman whimpered and hesitated for a long time before revealing anything further. “But I only let my son grope me down there now and then, because of his childish curiosity.” Rosa’s leather gloves flapped across her cheeks, because Rosa had to beat every word out of her. Then Rosa paused. Mrs. Halter looked up at Rosa from a low angle. “But none of this is incest, Commissioner,” she squeezed out through pursed lips.

Rosa held up her gloves threateningly. She should finally tell everything voluntarily, or there would be more beatings. The old woman stopped sobbing and looked up at her slyly and contemptuously, as if she could read her thoughts. “I always flinched back then, when he was just a boy, when his big thing touched my most intimate place and he pumped around inside me for fifteen minutes.” Rosa looked at her sharply. “And you only touched his thing by accident, I suppose?” Mrs. Halter didn’t immediately grasp the sarcasm. “Oh no, I hardly touched his thing,” she insisted defiantly. “He had such a long one, just like his father, which made it so difficult for me,” Mrs. Halter whispered softly. “But he had to sin all on his own, always!” And no, she would never have done it to him, she lied. Rosa was annoyed because the old woman was lying to her again. “Tell the truth, you miserable bitch!” Rosa roared, and the gloves lashed across Halter’s face once more.

Rosa’s gloved hand trembled before the old woman’s face. The image of 14-year-old Halter and Artem with his dick hanging low flashed in Rosa’s mind. The gloves slapped relentlessly against the old woman’s shoulder. “And since he came back from prison, he’s slept in my arms every night. Yes, he’s slept here in my arms for several nights because he could fall asleep better if I put him in and took care of him with my hand.” “So you two had incest?”

Rosa fired her next barb. But Mrs. Halter looked at Rosa contemptuously and spat on the floor in front of her. “It never went that far, and it probably never would,” she snapped at the detective. And he hadn’t been here for days. Rosa had a feeling the woman hadn’t revealed everything yet.

The gloves left red welts on her withered, emaciated breasts. Suddenly, the old woman’s face recoiled; she couldn’t bear the blows any longer. “When he was about eight or nine, I showed him how to do it, the way boys do it, to release their semen. He was so ecstatic because I did it to him until his penis went completely soft. Boys have to empty themselves completely, I explained to him, because if the semen stays inside too long, it will rot and stink.”

“Back then, I spoke quite openly and confidentially with many mothers at school, and it was surprising how many allowed actual incest. Only a few simply spread their legs; most knelt on their beds and presented their buttocks to the boy. He only had to spread them until he could see the bush and the cunt, and then he could freely take her from behind. But what really shocked me was this: if the son brought a friend home for a sleepover, then the friend was also allowed to spread her buttocks wide and take her from behind. The boys took turns until they were exhausted. I found that truly repulsive, somehow whorish and utterly disgusting. The mothers who told me about it reacted snidely or angrily to my reaction; what difference did it make whether there was one or two? Whether they mounted her once or five times, that didn’t make any difference anymore, did it? No, these Mothers squatted in the meadow like cows, ruminating, and they couldn’t care less what was going on back there between their buttocks… No, I absolutely didn’t want to do that, because I knew that was real incest. It was completely out of the question, that much was clear to me from the start.

Others, on the other hand, did it themselves with their hand, but full of disgust and fear, using two fingers, because they had done it far too rarely before. They carefully and fearfully slid the foreskin back and forth between their thumb and forefinger and stared, mesmerized, at the opening in the glans. Nevertheless, they flinched when the fluid spurted out and splashed across their faces. They got used to it over time and closed their eyelids be-

cause it always splashed in their faces. But others did it quite forcefully and energetically with their fist, just as they had to do to their husbands. “No, that’s not what I wanted either. Frank should damn well do it himself.”

“Others, on the other hand, made the boy kneel between their thighs and he had to do it himself with his own hand. But almost every boy ended up sinking forward and then ejaculating all over his mother’s most intimate area. I thought to myself, I’ll do something similar.”

“So I made Frank kneel between my thighs, did it to him with my hand, and let him thoughtlessly ejaculate all over my inner thighs, and that was perhaps a mistake. I did it to him several times in a row until he couldn’t ejaculate anymore, and that was it. He accepted the change immediately, and then there was no stopping him.” Rosa interjected. “Why was that a mistake?” The old woman searched for a suitable branch in her web of lies. “Looking back, I would have preferred he’d ejaculated on the sheets or into a handkerchief. But instead, he knelt between my thighs, sinning for minutes on end with a disgusting grin, and then finally fell forward. He always ejaculated over, or, if he’d penetrated me while falling forward, inside, my most intimate region, with a mean, possessive expression. That’s what I meant by mistake, Commissioner. I hadn’t planned it that way, but it couldn’t be changed now.”

There it was again, that lurking, deceitful look that drove Rosa to a white-hot rage. “But that has nothing to do with incest!” the old woman exclaimed in despair. She looked down and then stammered through tears, “Because he had tendonitis when he was 11, he kept forcing me to do it to him, but only that one, single time, for four or five weeks, two or three times a day, because otherwise he wouldn’t leave me alone.” she whimpered, guiltily and through her tears. “But you can’t call that incest, Commissioner!”

Rosa was desperate to know the details, because the perpetrator’s sex life could be a key. Rosa stopped hitting and snarled at the Halter: “How did it really start? Tell me again, and don’t lie to me!” The woman cowered, even though Rosa stopped striking. “I wasn’t lying! You see, he always pressed his dick against me while he masturbated and ejaculated on my most intimate area. It really

didn't bother me; it wasn't new to me. I've had to do it to my husband many times. It's normal, isn't it? Some mothers masturbate their sons with their fingers or fist because they don't want to sin against God and nature. But many don't care at all and indifferently let their sons commit incest, real incest, that's how I understood it."

Rosa raised her hand, with the folded gloves, threateningly. "Because he kept trying, I pulled him out in time and gave him a good talking-to. I would never allow incest! I had to wrestle with him every day and hold his dick firmly so he couldn't put it in again, the bastard!" The woman looked at Rosa contemptuously; her lie seemed to be working perfectly. Rosa mentally pieced together the puzzle.

The old woman asked slyly, "Do you know what it's like to lie naked next to a naked adolescent your whole life?" Rosa murmured, no, but she could imagine him trying again and again. The woman looked at her with deep contempt. "Oh, you would never truly understand, good woman! Of course I had to hold it firmly so he couldn't put it in again, the bastard!" Rosa nodded; she had heard enough, even if much remained unsaid. Mrs. Halter wouldn't reveal any more at the moment.

Rosa sat down and lit a cigarette. Mrs. Halter suspected she wouldn't be beaten again and relaxed a little. She tried to cover her withered breasts with her tattered blouse. Rosa gave the old woman a cigarette, took a drag, and moved carefully. "And — you're from Ukraine?" Mrs. Halter shook her head and stopped crying. "No, I'm Circassian and I come from Trabzon on the Black Sea. Artem rescued me from the most abject poverty imaginable. I was 14 and was made up to go into prostitution. Then Artem appeared and bought me. My beautiful red hair and light blue eyes had captivated him; I knew that from the start. Wait, I have a photo from that time."

Mrs. Halter rummaged among the few books on the shelf. She held out a folded picture to Rosa. "That was me, at 14," she said. Rosa took the picture from her hand and unfolded it despite Mrs. Halter's protests. It was the same as in Artem's file. A naked couple, the little red-haired girl and a giant of a man, around 40, with a huge cock dangling down. Rosa had read in Artem's file that he

was 1.95 meters tall and weighed around 125 kilos. Someone had scribbled next to it: “25 kebab and doner, 30 raki.” An attempt to portray him as a hard liquor drinker?

Rosa looked up. “So that’s what you were like back then. But your name is Halter, isn’t that a German name?” Mrs. Halter shook her head in the negative. “No, actually Haltr, a Circassian name. The Haltr is a wooden contraption, with a hole in it and covered on top with goatskin. The goatherds chase the male goat onto the Haltr and collect the semen behind the hole in a cup. The semen is stirred into the goat’s milk, which is supposed to strengthen virility. My name was Roxane Haltr, so Roxane, the goat whore.” Mrs. Halter turned the photograph tenderly in her fingers. “At first, Artem let me believe I would one day become his wife. He took me everywhere, he bought girls and sold them to brothels in the West. He became very rich very quickly. It was a good life.”

“He started hiding the money of wealthy oligarchs in the West, which made him even richer than the girls. I had Frank after an uncomplicated birth, and Artem was over the moon with joy and pride. He had the doctor anesthetize me again and operate on me, and I always suspected he had me sterilized, but he never admitted it.”

“Frank was a sweet, good child and the star of my life. Until puberty, all I did was pull back his foreskin and let my tongue dance on his glans. Then I’d poke with my fingernail in the little opening of his glans, and the juice would just shoot and gush out. My lips would encircle his glans, and I’d drink and suck out the semen. The little guy loved that, and I must have repeated it for hours. He hit puberty at 8 or 9 and loved putting it in and pumping with it. It seemed so innocent and so cute. Then I patiently showed him how to release the juice with his fist.”

He must have been 10 when there was that brief episode with Lilly, a girl the same age from the neighborhood. Lilly wasn’t shy at all, but very determined. The first time, she shook my hand and did something like a curtsy. “I’m with Frankie.” I came along so we could practice stubble picking. “Because when we grow up, we’re going to get married and have lots of babies, that’s why we have to practice stubble so much now, Mrs. Halter.” I was speechless at

how cunningly my Frankie had ensnared this girl. I had just gotten over my unfortunate phase of squeezing underage girls between my thighs. Nevertheless, I helped Frankie force it into her little hole, and then they started ramming like rabbits. Lilly clamped the tip of her tongue between her lips, panting and sweating, chasing Frankie from shot to shot, from orgasm to orgasm. My mouth fell open as Frankie stubbled and filled Lilly up like a pro, shot after shot, every afternoon. Lilly's mother found out months later and put a firm end to the spectacle.

I never wanted him to go astray and have to go to prostitutes. Nobody took any notice that we were naked as we slept in the same bed, and nobody ever said a word to me about it. I was the mistress of a filthy rich gangster and untouchable. Artem would often stay in the West for months at a time and in 1992 decided to bring us both to Vienna. We've been here ever since, and Frank worked for Artem until his arrest. That's how it was, that was our life." Mrs. Halter smiled, lost in the past, even though her welts must have been quite painful.

Rosa put her gloves in her handbag to signal that the beating was over. She picked up her cigarettes and offered Mrs. Halter one as well. "You have to understand, I don't have any children and I want to understand what it was like between you and Frank. I have to assume incest at this point, that's just how it is." Mrs. Halter smoked thoughtfully and then said in a firm voice, "You're mistaken, Commissioner, there was never any incest between us." Rosa took a drag on her cigarette. Velvet gloves and small steps, that's how she wanted to coax everything out of her. "So, how did it all begin?" she asked, smiling.

Mrs. Halter leaned back. "Oh, you know, when Frank was 8 or 9, his urges awoke intensely. The poor little thing would tug at his dick so hard it scared me to death. So I showed him how boys are supposed to masturbate with their fists. That calmed him down more and more, and that's how he learned. I didn't want him buying porn magazines as a guide. It seemed much more natural to me that he got aroused by my body. If he needed it during the day, he'd get himself ready, spread my legs wide, and then he'd get to work, staring intently at my crotch, aiming hard, and pressing his penis firmly against my most intimate spot to ejaculate. At night, though, it was completely different. He'd lie behind me, press his

cock against my buttocks, and get to work with his hand. To ejaculate, he'd thrust powerfully forward between my buttocks to release his semen into me from behind." That's actually how I preferred it. - Yes, that's how it started."

Rosa mentally pieced together the jumbled puzzle pieces and nodded. "Yes, I can imagine it quite well like that." She offered another cigarette. "Of course, that's not incest, that's clear. But what about the tendonitis?" Rosa asked, because that was where she could jump in. Mrs. Halter seemed to wake up from a dream. "Yes, that was when he was 11. Up until then, he always did it himself, which was perfectly fine. But with the tendonitis, he couldn't do it. He cursed blasphemously and forced me to do it for him, two or even three times a day."

"It was very embarrassing for me at first. I didn't enjoy it at all on the first day, you can believe me. But he had a large and very beautiful, even cock; you simply had to love it. So I did it for him quite willingly, because it was such a beautiful, long thing. And because I could give him great relief, that was important to me, of course. He stared between my legs like a predator while I obediently did it for him. Naturally, he insisted that I let him ejaculate over my most intimate area, and he screamed at me terribly if I didn't obey immediately. He barked harshly at me to damn well insert it! I cowered in fear and inserted it a little way, then rubbed it until he came. I had to repeat it so many times until he'd had enough. I felt somewhat humiliated, and his fixed gaze between my legs sometimes made me really uncomfortable. But by the second day, it seemed completely natural to me, and so I did well to him with a wicked expression. From now on, I knew how to be a good girl. Unasked, I guided his cock a little way into my cunt, and then I rubbed it with my hand until he ejaculated. And I let him ejaculate as many times as he needed until he'd had enough. Because even that wasn't incest, since I was only doing it with my hand. When it had healed after five or six weeks, I was somehow glad that he could do it himself again." Gradually, she began to enjoy embellishing her lies.

Rosa placed her hand reassuringly on Mrs. Halter's arm. "Don't worry, good woman, because even that doesn't constitute incest. - But the insertion?" She glanced casually at the old woman; she didn't want to scare the wild game. Mrs. Halter took a drag on her

cigarette and watched the smoke drift away. “That was much later, and it became an epidemic. I think now he put it in every single night. Even though I’m a deep, sound sleeper, I’d sometimes wake up in the night, and of course he’d be all the way inside, fiddling around like crazy. But before he could ejaculate, I’d immediately pull it out and let him empty it in my hand. Then I’d always give him a piece of my mind, telling him it was incest and I wouldn’t tolerate incest in my house! But of course, that didn’t last a day; the next night it was the same thing. He was just as stubborn as his father.”

Rosa carefully placed one foot in front of the other; she couldn’t rush ahead. “And you always pulled it out, just in time, so to speak? Before he could really ejaculate?” Mrs. Halter clutched her cigarette, considering how much she could admit and how to weave her lies. “Yes, of course! I couldn’t allow the incest!” Rosa pressed her cautiously, taking just a small, insignificant step. “Always, without exception?” The word “exception” was, of course, bait. “Well,” the old woman drew out, almost inaudibly, “as long as I was the stronger one.”

Horrified by this unintentional admission, she continued, “And if I’d had one too many drinks in the evening, I’d wonder the next morning if he’d gone all the way. Yes, I often struggled with doubts and headaches.” Rosa nodded and confirmed, “If I’d drunk too much, I often didn’t know the next morning what I’d gotten up to during the night. That happens to all of us sometimes.” Mrs. Halter was visibly relieved, but she held back her next remark just in time. She wasn’t sure if the policewoman had missed her slip of the tongue. No, Rosa wasn’t a friend, but a policewoman conducting an interrogation; Mrs. Halter were under no illusions about that.

“And when he was in Graz, I always brought him cash so he could afford the prostitutes.” Mrs. Halter had made a strange turn of phrase. “That was allowed in prison, I didn’t know that before.” Mrs. Halter stared at the tabletop. “He was always such a sweet, sensitive child, and now he’s in prison, a murderer. That’s probably the worst thing a mother has to endure.” They both fell silent, lost in thought.

Rosa picked up the thread again. “And he came to see you after six years, eight weeks ago,” she noted. Mrs. Halter confirmed, “Yes, he called me from Graz, saying he was free and would be living with me again. Of course I said yes, he’s my son! It was a wonderful reunion; I hadn’t been able to hold him in my arms for six years.” Mrs. Halter closed her eyes and thought back to that day. Rosa interrupted her. “And of course he put it back in, didn’t he?” The woman was jolted out of her reverie. “Yes, right away.”

She fluttered her eyelids in alarm and slipped back into her web of lies. “Yes, as always since puberty, he forced it in every day, cursing and struggling. Of course, as I’ve done many times before, I helped him insert the enormous thing. With one hand, I spread myself, and with the other, I forced his enormous thing in millimeter by millimeter. Then I closed my eyes as he started. But I pulled it out again just in time, right before he came. I’m still adamant about this. He cursed blasphemously and yelled to put it in again so I could finish him off with my hand! I only had to look him in the eye, because he knew perfectly well that I don’t tolerate incest in my house.” She wasn’t sure if she had said too much. The lies, however, trickled easily from her lips, slimy as whipped cream. She breathed a sigh of relief; this obstacle had been cleared.

Rosa sat up straight. She picked up her notepad and read aloud as she wrote: “Mrs. Halter always rejected incest and prevented it wherever she could.” Mrs. Halter nodded and smiled. “It was only Frank who abused his mother nightly since he was twelve.” Mrs. Halter nodded again, “Yes, he abused me every night, as you put it.” Rosa continued: “Because she feared being hurt, she patiently helped him penetrate her.” Mrs. Halter asked: “What does ‘penetrate’ mean?” Rosa answered patiently: “When his thing goes in.” “Aha, okay. I spread myself down there with one hand and carefully inserted the enormous thing with the other. His thing filled me to the point of pain, and whenever he thrust, I was always afraid he’d hurt me,” added Mrs. Halter in an almost inaudible whisper. Rosa continued to note: “She took his thing out before he could ejaculate and let him ejaculate in her hand.” Mrs. Halter nodded. “Yes, I held his thing in my hand while he ejaculated in spurts,” she murmured tonelessly to herself, but with self-satisfaction, because her web of lies had now become a formal act, a document. Rosa scribbled on: “But if she was sleeping too soundly or was drunk, she missed the moment, and Frank cruelly ejaculated

inside her." Mrs. Halter nodded in agreement: "Yes, that was really mean of him. I always drank far too much, I have to admit." Rosa continued reading: "In conclusion, it must be stated that Frank Halter abused his mother against her will every night for over 30 years, since he was 12, and is the only one who can be held responsible for the incest. Consequently, Mrs. Halter is to be defined as a victim of incest." Rosa looked up; she had finished. Mrs. Halter asked, "And what will the concrete consequences of this be?" Rosa put on her professional mask. "You are completely innocent, Mrs. Halter; nothing will be charged against you. Innocent, just a victim. However, Frank's file will contain a note stating that he abused you against your will for over 30 years. But that carries little weight, since he is accused and charged with multiple counts of premeditated murder. That carries much more weight." Rosa closed her notebook. Mrs. Halter muttered to herself, inaudible to Rosa: "Yes, he fucked me every night for 30 years, and as you yourself confirm, that was really mean of him. I could never stop it."

Rosa lit another cigarette, and Halter lit another. "Now I've noted everything down for my records. Nevertheless, Ms. Halter, I would be very pleased if you could summarize it again from your perspective. I'm not writing anything else down. So, just speak freely, from the beginning." Halter took a drag on her cigarette and began to whisper.

"I understand that you're interested in whether or not we had incest. But I have to start from the beginning; perhaps then you'll understand everything better. I don't actually know exactly whether Frank saw the thrusting and pumping with Artem or with me. Back then, I was still having several affairs, mostly with men and young boys going through puberty, but also with girls, very young girls going through puberty. At that time, I had an unspeakable attraction to pubescent, virginal youth, boys as well as girls. When Frank was still very small, the little guy just watched. So he must have seen it somewhere, I'm convinced of it. In any case, Frankie started putting it in very early on, long before puberty. We would spend entire afternoons lounging naked on the bed, and I let him put it in and thrust as he pleased; he couldn't even ejaculate back then and really complete the incestuous act. I let him enjoy it because it was simply cute, If you understand what I mean.

“As a boy, he had the most beautiful penis in the world. Straight, as if sculpted in marble by Michelangelo, strong and brimming with power. How I loved gently and carefully pulling back his foreskin and taking his beautiful glans in my mouth. I’ve never done that with any other man. I would let my tongue dance on the glans until he was at the edge. Then I would tickle the opening in his glans with a sharpened fingernail, so that he came with pleasure and the semen gushed out merrily. Those were some of the best years of our lives. But then, at 8 or 9, I showed him how boys do it to make the juice shoot out. He understood immediately, and there was no stopping him.

Around 12, it became more urgent. I asked many mothers at his school because I needed advice and information. From then on, I allowed him to... He knelt between my thighs and did it himself. He had gotten into the habit of pressing his glans directly against it and ejaculating his semen directly over my most sensitive spot, which was actually quite alright. But his dick remained stiff, so he had to insert it. Since everything was still full of his semen, slippery and slimy, it slid in easily at first. Later, I had to help, spreading myself with my fingers and forcing his cock in myself. I kept my eyes closed in pure pleasure while he thrust into me for ages. It was just as wonderful to feel him pumping inside me as it had been with Artem. Frankie pumped for well over fifteen minutes, and I melted away in utter ecstasy, because Frankie kept thrusting until his cock went soft. Only years later did I notice that Frankie actually ejaculated inside me every time and repeated the whole thing several times until his dick went limp, and then, of course, I was alarmed.”

“As soon as when I noticed he was about to ejaculate, I pulled out and brought him to orgasm with my hand. I didn’t want to have incestuous sex, and he knew that. But most of the time I was dead drunk, and then I didn’t care — let him do it! And at night, when I was already sound asleep, he usually had sex with me again. But I kept sleeping, and then I didn’t care.

And when he brought a friend over to stay the night, that friend naturally slept naked with us too. Some of them were already having sex with their mothers or sisters at that age. Two told me they had incest with one of their mothers quite openly and unashamedly, even when younger siblings secretly watched. They

also secretly fucked the boy's sister. These two boys were good friends and shared the mother and sister quite unashamedly, those bastards! Only a few boys were still true virgins; I trained them very diligently. "Of course, the boy wanted to put it in too, but that was perfectly fine, because it was perhaps only fornication with minors, but I don't know. So I didn't need to pull his cock out, we weren't blood relatives. And I really enjoyed and savored all this thrusting, pumping, and ejaculation; it wasn't incest, just fucking. Round after round he had to ride me until he was exhausted."

"Strange, that just occurred to me. Once, when I visited him in Graz, he was close to tears and apologized for having fucking me night after night. I reassured him, saying it was just his hormones that had always plagued him so intensely. On that occasion, he also confessed to me that during his school days, he had prostituted me to his classmates for money, like a pimp. The boys had to pay him extra for every round, for every ejaculation. He just wanted to supplement his pocket money. An icy hand gripped my heart, because that felt awful. But I suppressed my outrage and reassured him that I, too, had given myself away for money in the time before I met Artem. I assured him that supplementing his pocket money was fine with me. He then exhaled deeply and gratefully, but tears of relief streamed down his cheeks."

"At least I can't accuse myself of to have had incest. As for Frankie, I agree with you, Inspector. It never occurred to him that he was sinning against God and nature." Mrs. Halter stubbed out her cigarette forcefully. "I don't know what you think of me, Inspector. I have a clear conscience; in my opinion, I never had incest with Frankie." Mrs. Halter's smile was only visible at the corners of her mouth. She had spread the web of her lies before the naive inspector. Truths, half-truths, and pure fabrications. The inspector had listened with shining eyes, greedily absorbing the web of lies. What a stupid sow.

Rosa mentally ticked off another item on her incest statistics list, smiled contentedly, and abruptly changed the subject. "Did he leave anything here, hide something, or keep anything when he came to prison?" Mrs. Halter opened her eyes. "Yes, he had hidden three sports bags in the basement; I was supposed to keep a close eye on them. I only opened the bags once out of curiosity; they

were crammed full of banknotes. He took them with him, but I don't know where." Rosa had him show her the size of the bags with his hands. She guessed there were millions. Three, maybe even four million.

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The New Assistant

Ron and Bodnar sat in the meeting room with Morgentau, listening to her report. Rosa, as ordered by President Wallner, had removed her velvet gloves and put on black leather gloves to beat old Mrs. Halter. She had torn Mrs. Halter's blouse off and began systematically beating the astonished, half-naked woman with the leather gloves. Yes, she punched her in the face for minutes at a time, taking great care not to leave any bruises. She screamed at Mrs. Halter, saying she would beat her most intimate secrets out of her. Every secret, no matter how intimate! After fifteen minutes, the old woman's resistance crumbled. She had realized that she had to reveal a few secrets to receive fewer beatings. She sobbed that she was ready to answer everything. "But please, no more beatings!"

Criminal psychologist Rosa Morgenthal then interrogated Mrs. Halter intensively for hours and was quite satisfied with her interrogation.

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Ron and Bodnar looked at each other. It was now clear that Frank had complete freedom of movement. With that much money, one could have bought a sizable house on the beach in the Caribbean. It was completely unclear what Frank still intended to do. That would soon become apparent.

A patrol car found the two officers unconscious. They were taken to the hospital. One underwent emergency surgery; a fragment of his skull had penetrated his brain. His condition was critical. The second officer was lucky; although the perpetrator had

knocked out all his teeth, they were already dentures. Despite the concussion, he was able to give a statement. The perpetrator, who matched Frank's description, had smashed his colleague's skull with an object, presumably a car jack, and then struck him twice himself. The protected person, Franziska Meier, had vanished without a trace.

Frank proceeded calmly, without panicking. He had a list to work through, and the bodyguards didn't stop him. On the contrary, he sent another letter to Ron.

To Inspector Hofstätter.

Those guys couldn't protect Franziska. I had every right to beat them up. You even sent a policewoman to my mother's house to senselessly beat the poor thing. I can't accept that. I get very angry when you don't leave my mother alone. She has absolutely nothing to do with this.

F.J.H.

The lab examined the letter, of course, but without any new findings. It came from Frank, without a doubt. The bicycle courier was completely clean, as always. The letter only confirmed that Frank had kidnapped Franziska. There was no indication of when, where, or even if she was still alive.

President Wallner was seething with rage. Now two police officers had also been injured, one fighting for his life. Wallner ordered that every single police officer carry the wanted poster of Frank Halter with them and help with the search. Never before had Wallner been seen so agitated. The days passed, one, two, three. And nothing progressed. Wallner was irritated. What had the wiretap revealed? Morgentau looked Wallner in the eye. "Mrs. Halter only has a landline. She almost never uses the phone, and when she does, it turns out to be completely harmless. She doesn't have a cell phone." Wallner wasn't satisfied. "Perhaps she only turns it on at certain times? When it's switched off, it can't be located; it's as dead as a brick. Did I understand that correctly?"

Everyone nodded. Ron suggested perhaps they should set up an electronic listening post in front of Mrs. Halter's house? Everyone

remained silent; only the president could authorize the mobile broadcast unit. Wallner barked at Ron to get the van. “24/7,” the president added. Ron already had his cell phone to his ear.

They were simply lucky. Ms. Halter switched on her cell phone at exactly 10 p.m. and switched it off again immediately after a few words. Frank called her back, and the conversation was recorded. The group listened to it a dozen times. All unimportant, inconsequential. But toward the end, she asked when he would be back. He replied, “I have to deliver a package tomorrow, so I’ll come tomorrow night.” This was both a good and a bad development; they now knew that he would kill and dispose of Franziska tomorrow. And that he would come to his mother’s tomorrow night. Presumably, his mother knew what the package was about.

The next day, a bicycle courier delivered a letter for Ron.

For Inspector Hofstätter.

You’re still a few steps behind. That’s good. Franziska is nice and warm; she’s 17.2 meters below the Ottakringer Brewery. You’ll hear from me again.

F.J.H.

They had to think carefully about what was 17 meters below the brewery and how to get there. They couldn’t just dig up the entire brewery floor! The brewery plans were very old. There were later additions, but nothing concrete. Bodnar had the right question: How is the brewery heated? Certain parts of the brewery were heated with their own heating systems; only the new office wing was connected to the district heating network. The new pipes hadn’t yet been included in the building plans. Bodnar crawled along the pipes and reached a small cellar. There, on the district heating pipe, lay Franziska’s body. Nice and warm.

The cellar filled up, and Dr. Gangl examined the body thoroughly, as always. It was Frank, no question. The mark on her neck was from a wire, a garrote. Of course, she was naked, and after a quick glance, the doctor said he hadn’t used a condom again. Frank knew his DNA was known and was hiding nothing anymore.

Franziska's wrists were still bound with wire; the gag was her own panties.

They opened Franziska Meier's file. She, too, had been an informant in Artem Galebnikov's circle seven years earlier and, after completing her criminology studies, had joined the police force; she was now a chief inspector. She was engaged to an assistant professor and four months pregnant. Dr. Gangl was shaken; there were too many. Thea Küngler, Susanne Stammer, Theresa Stanzl, Bina Mudak, and now Franziska Meier. Five dead young girls — the doctor had never seen such a cluster.

Rosa Morgentau went to Mrs. Halter's after lunch; Wallner had ordered it. They had to provoke Frank, poke him. And the mother was the only weak spot he had. Morgentau, who had acted rather sensitively in recent days, remembered that the mother hadn't given anything up willingly and had only reluctantly admitted anything under duress. She had persistently lied about the contacts. Rosa felt the discovery of the cell phone as a personal defeat. Without a greeting, she entered the house and struck the completely surprised woman several times in the face with her gloved hand. Rosa screamed about how disappointed she was. She ripped the old woman's blouse off and pushed the completely taken-aback, half-naked woman onto the sofa. She took the dog whip from her bag and beat the poor woman. She slapped her shoulders, back, buttocks, inner thighs, and calves until Roxane Halter's body was covered from head to toe in red welts. Rosa screamed that she would come back every day until they caught Frank. She left the old woman lying there.

Ron disagreed with the president's order to implicate Frank's mother. Flogging her was pure torture; it violated dozens of laws. The president brushed aside all these arguments. "Does anyone have a better suggestion? Can anyone tell me what else we can use to get Frank?!" Ron said into the silence, "We normally investigate within the guardrails of the law, left and right. We are law enforcers, not lawbreakers. We never stoop to the level of criminals!"

President Wallner clapped very slowly. His foxy eyes flashed. "You're absolutely right, my young knight! But — if we don't draw him out of hiding, he'll leave a dead body on our doorstep week af-

ter week. Can you live with that on your conscience, dear Ronald!?" There was a silence, thick enough to cut with a knife.

Ron knew that the president was basically right. To scare away wasps, you set fires. "Mr. President," he said, rising to his feet, "I know that your tactic is the right one, the only one really. Like everyone here, I want to bring the criminal to justice, dead or alive, once and for all. But I also know that I'm not the only one with moral qualms. And moral qualms paralyze us. We fight with one eye and one hand tied behind our backs. We will carry out your orders because we are good soldiers, all of us. Doing our job, like good soldiers who follow the leader." Ron looked around the room. Bodnar was the first to clench his fist and drum his approval on the tabletop. The others followed his example.

Morgentau now whipped Frank's mother every day. On the third day, a letter arrived from Frank.

To Inspector Hofstätter.

You're torturing my mother, you damned dog! She's taking it,' she said, weeping. She will always stand by my side, whatever you plot in your sick mind. I will beat you, I will beat you all! Be warned!

F.J.H.

It was clear that they had dealt Frank Halter a heavy blow. From his words, it was clear that the president was on the right track.

Things happened very quickly. Ron accepted the imam's invitation to his office next to the prayer room. Imam Museddin was flanked by two sinister figures whom Ron didn't recognize. The imam greeted Hakim Elbagr with professional courtesy and introduced the men by name. He got straight to the point. Fatme's relatives had filed a lawsuit. Hakim had received the court summons two days earlier. The imam made a regretful face. "Following your laws," the imam said, "you know that better than I do, you're a policeman, Hakim." The conversation went nowhere. Ron sensed the hostility of the two men, who silently sized him up. He didn't know for sure, of course, but he suspected they had come directly from

Turkey, harbingers of a new attempt to gain a foothold in Vienna. Vienna had once been a central mafia hub in Europe, one that had been dismantled with Ron's help. The imam fearfully avoided any further questions. And so Hakim ended the conversation.

The next day he was in court. The judge, Dr. Hans Fürbringer, had known Ron for a long time. He was a clever man and knew perfectly well that some in the Islamic community were trying to bring down Police Inspector Hofstätter through legal means. "How long have you known Fatme Ökdemir, Inspector?" Ron only hesitated for two seconds. He decided to stick to the truth. "Two years, more or less." Judge Fürbringer looked up from the papers. "Two years? Ökdemir was still a minor then. Do you stand by that?" Ron didn't grasp at the saving grace. "Two years, Mr. Fürbringer," he confirmed. "Two."

The judge leaned back, disappointed. "With a minor, then. That will lead to your suspension, Hofstätter, do you realize that?" Ron nodded. "Yes, I know. I accept the sentence, whatever it may be. I will not lie about this, Mr. Fürbringer." The judge looked at him sternly. "Very well, Inspector Hofstätter. We want to avoid a public trial, don't we?" Ron nodded in agreement. "A public trial could do me more harm than good, Mr. Fürbringer." The judge leafed through the papers for several minutes. "What's the sentence?" Ron asked directly, the matter clearly making him very uncomfortable.

"Taking into account your service as a police officer and your impeccable record, I can issue a suspended sentence of one year. Plus a fine of 1,700 euros. The police commissioner will be notified of the conviction. All right, Inspector?" It was a purely rhetorical question. Ron went straight to Commissioner Wallner.

Old Wallner listened attentively. He asked only a few questions. He picked up a folder and looked for a regulation in the service code. He looked very serious. "I have to suspend you; there's no way around it. So, from the beginning of the month, and it ends tomorrow morning. It will be recorded in writing in your personnel file. I can't do more for you, Hofstätter!" Ron thanked him and left.

Dr. Ingrid Kreuzer had been missing for three days and had been reported missing by her husband. Morgentau had seen the entry while skimming through the weekly reports, as she did every week. The name sounded familiar. Right, she had represented the prosecution against Artem Galebnikov seven years earlier. And now she was missing? The lawyer was a mother of two and five months pregnant with her third. Morgentau immediately alerted the Kleeblatt. Dr. Kreuzer led an inconspicuous life; there was no connection to Frank Halter other than her role seven years prior. They searched for her in all possible locations, but she remained missing until the Czech police called Wallner.

Czech border guards had found a woman's body this morning right on the border in České Velčine. They were aware of the series of murders in Vienna. Everything indicated that the body fit the pattern of murders. The president looked at the photos from the scene. Yes, it seemed to be Frank's doing. The Czechs didn't want any lengthy bureaucratic procedures; they sent the body to Vienna immediately because it had been placed precisely on the border. Dr. Gangl examined it and performed the autopsy. Everything indicated that Dr. Kreuzer was the sixth victim. The baby, a boy, was also dead, victim number seven. The lawyer had been abused just as brutally as the others, apparently for several days, as the doctor was able to determine. She had a blood alcohol level of 0.24% and had been heavily aroused with poppers, like all the other victims before her. The group was disturbed; they couldn't place every woman involved in the Artem Galebnikov trial under police protection — there were simply too many.

Nothing happened; Frank didn't budge. President Wallner had to take action. The mother was arrested and released again after 48 hours. Several times in a row. But Frank didn't move.

Ron went into his office. He wanted to print the dozen voice recordings, but he didn't know how. The printing program refused to work. The screen instructed him to swipe his badge through the card reader when the green light flashed. He did so. He was supposed to place his thumb on the flashing green light. "Thank you, Inspector Hofstätter," a voice said from the speakers. Ron was surprised and confused. Who? What?

“I’m RM3000 QXK,” the voice said, “the new AI assistant. I’m also the new telephone system, Inspector.” Ron stared at the telephone system. How could this be? “Am I correct in understanding that you want to print the transcripts of the 31 voice recordings?” Ron nodded, annoyed. “Yes, I wanted to proofread them before printing.” He was very impressed; he was talking to a computer! The laser printer started printing, and Ron picked up the first few pages.

It was amazing how clearly structured his report now was. “Very good,” he murmured. The robot replied, “I was assigned to you by President Wallner as your personal assistant. I can handle anything related to electronics. I’m still a prototype, and I use AI, artificial intelligence, to perform my duties. In addition to general police tasks, I’ve been specifically trained in CCTV surveillance. I can see, read, and hear everything through the cameras, speakers, and telephones. I have access to all the knowledge stored in the databases.” Ron thought for a moment. “How should I address you?” “RM3000 QXK, I don’t have another name yet. You can assign one if you like.” Ron only thought for a moment. “Alfred, I’ll call you Alfred. I’m Ron, and I respond to this name.” Alfred asked, “Does Alfred have a special meaning for Ron?” Ron chuckled softly. “Alfred is Batman’s clever, all-knowing butler, portrayed by the actor Michael Caine.” The portrait of Alfred/Michael Caine appeared on the screen. “I can adjust my voice,” Alfred said. Ron nodded. “Can you see me? Are we in visual contact?” “Of course, Ron, I can see you.”

Ron thought for a moment. “Do you know which two men I met at the imam’s yesterday?” Alfred answered immediately. “Yes, they arrived by plane from Ankara five weeks ago. They call themselves Memet Üzelgöy and Ali Mehmet, presumably with forged passports. They’re staying at the Hotel Ambassador, currently in room 601, and have two prostitutes visiting them. They’re high-ranking members of the Turkish mafia and have previously visited a dozen imams in Austria and Bavaria.” Alfred asked if he should find out more, but Ron waved him off. “That’s enough for now. But keep watching them, I want to know what they’re doing every day. Prostitutes aren’t interesting.”

Ron devoted the next few minutes to the case. Frank remained motionless, and no one had seen him. Tips from the public yielded

nothing. The president had the wanted poster shown on television several times a day; perhaps someone had seen Frank. Alfred, who answered with a very faint chirp, asked if he shouldn't take over all the cameras in the city to search for Frank. Ron nodded. "Have you seen him yet?" Alfred said, "Last time was the night before last at the ATM on the corner of Wellerstrasse. He withdrew four thousand euros in cash using ten cards. He then headed south, and hasn't been seen since. I updated the wanted poster, and that's how I was able to find him. I'll show you a current picture from the ATM." A photo appeared on the screen; Frank was clearly recognizable. The picture was much clearer than the seven-year-old wanted poster. Ron walked over to the cloverleaf-shaped building.

Ron went to the projection screen. "Alfred, the new picture, please!" Bodnar glared at him. "Who…?" Frank's picture appeared, and now even President Wallner stood up and came to the door. Ron hesitated for just a moment. "Alfred, please introduce yourself!" "I'm Alfred, Inspector Hofstätter's computer assistant. I have access to all databases, all cameras, cell phones, and all telephones, wherever they may be. I assist Ron with his work on behalf of President Johannes Wallner." Everyone turned and looked at Wallner. He shrugged, clueless! He remembered that he had signed hundreds of documents when the Minister of the Interior had given the order. Had he ordered this computer? No idea!

Morgentau was the first to compose herself. "Alfred, Frank Halter has been in hiding for a long time; he dumped a woman's body near the Czech border. What do you know about that?" Alfred answered quickly. "I'm familiar with the reports, just like you. I tracked the stolen car, a stolen VW Passat. It was hidden at a construction site near the Seestadt subway station that afternoon. He began copulating with the woman in the back seat at 3:17 p.m. and continued until 3:48 p.m., then copulating again from 6:33 p.m. to 6:55 p.m. Unfortunately, the footage from a great distance is very blurry, as you can see. A traffic camera captured him at 7:21 p.m. on the evening of May 12th. He was driving the car with Dr. Kreuzer in the back seat, asleep, unconscious, or drugged." The blurred photo was projected. Alfred zoomed in on the driver, then on the woman's face in the back seat. He continued. "Four hours later, at 11:22 p.m., the car was driving in the opposite direction, with Frank Halter at the wheel, the back seat empty. It was captured by three more traffic cameras on its way back to Vienna."

Three images were projected. “He parks the car near the Seestadt subway station at 1:00 a.m. and disappears at 1:06 a.m. on a U2 train towards Schwedenplatz, where a camera captures him as late as 1:27 a.m. He takes the escalator up to Schwedenplatz, then vanishes. He seems to know where the cameras are placed and skillfully avoids them.” Alfred’s pleasant voice is almost soporific. “Ms. Detective Morgentau, I can print the report if you wish.” Rosa’s pen paused. “Yes, please, Alfred!” And so it came to pass that Alfred was gradually accepted by the Kleeblatt (a local police unit) as a valuable member of staff.

Sometime around 2:00 a.m., two muffled shots rang out in Döbling. A dog walker was out with his pet and saw the brief flash, but he was too far away to hear it. About ten minutes later, he went in the opposite direction and saw a masked man throw an oblong object into a white van and drive off immediately. He found the two police officers in a private car and called emergency services at 2:21 a.m. The two officers underwent immediate surgery and would most likely survive. They could not yet be questioned. All they had was the information from the elderly dog owner, who didn’t know the make or license plate number. Police officer Erni Jäger, who was supposed to be protected, had vanished without a trace. Frank’s handiwork. President Wallner, roused from his sleep, immediately ordered Ms. Halter’s arrest. He had no intention of releasing her; he was seething with rage. Frank was taking advantage of them!

The search for Erni Jäger, the eighth victim, was in full swing. Abandoned buildings all over the city were scoured. Frank was nowhere to be found; he avoided cameras whenever he moved. It was maddening. Ron was distracted himself. He was with Wallner in the interrogation room; the old man was personally conducting Roxane Halter’s interrogation. It was astonishing how skillfully the foxy old fox elicited small, seemingly insignificant statements from Halter. They were only trivialities, but Wallner managed to extract something important from the woman. Frank used a secret door completely covered in ivy. That, at least, was progress.

A bicycle messenger delivered another letter from Frank Halter.

Inspector Hofstätter,

You haven't yet discovered the package at the landfill at the end of Feldbergstrasse.

Why?

Three male corpses were found, wrapped in plastic, mutilated, and presumably tortured. They were the judge, the public prosecutor, and a defense attorney from Artem and Frank's trial. They had been dead since the long weekend, so no one had noticed they were missing.

President Wallner was stunned. He had known all three; he had a long friendship with the judge that extended beyond their professional relationship. It made his stomach churn to see how miserably and presumably after excruciating torture the old judge had died; he hadn't deserved that. Everything bore Frank Halter's signature; the strangulation or garroting with a wire noose was unique. Wallner sat with an ashen face in front of the screen, staring at the documents. He had mobilized all available personnel to find the crime scene, as nothing had been found at the dumping site. He had done everything to intensify the hunt for Frank Halter, but there were no new leads. He stared blankly at the screen, fragments of memory of the last cognac with Judge Anselmis flashing before his eyes. Frank Halter was clearly on the verge of murdering everyone involved in the trial against his father and himself.

But Ron Hofstätter didn't witness any of this. He was walking down Türkenstraße toward the Roßauer Barracks when a syringe was rammed into his neck from behind. The assassin caught the falling man from behind and threw him into a van.

Then night fell before his eyes.

• • •

In Captivity

Ron regained consciousness with a terrible headache. He was in a cellar, locked in a barred cage. Everything had been taken from him: his ID, wallet, credit cards, wristwatch, and cell phone. The only thing he had left was a packet of tissues. And in the corner stood a bucket, probably intended as a toilet.

Not a sound could be heard. Only now did he realize that he was used to the soporific, quiet sounds of the city. It was impossible to find out where he was. He had been unconscious during transport; he could be anywhere, in Vienna or any other city. And who had kidnapped him? Criminals hoping for a ransom? He dismissed the thought. He had no wealthy relatives to blackmail.

The door lock creaked unpleasantly as it was unlocked. In the dim light, Ron could only vaguely make out the face of the small man who entered. The man sat down on a stool a few meters away. He reached up to the light switch and turned on the light in the cage. Ron now stood blinded by the bright light, able to see the man even less.

The man took his time. He picked up a notepad. Ron couldn't tell if the man wore glasses. It was several minutes before the man spoke. He spoke Turkish.

"Hakim Elbagr, or Ronald Hofstätter, police officer." It was more of a statement than a question. "I'm going to question you, Hakim, and it would be better if you didn't lie to me!" The voice was quiet and monotonous. Ron sat down on the floor and stared silently into the darkness where the man sat.

The man questioned him at length about himself, his background, his undercover work, and details from his youth. Ron answered everything that was publicly known about him — things anyone could find out with a few clicks on the internet. Many questions revolved around his school days in Istanbul. Ron was careful with his answers, not saying a word too many. He had simply forgotten some things, like the name of his geography professor, for example.

The questioning had lasted over an hour; Ron heard the pen scratching across the notepad. The man stood up. “Do you like chicken, Hakim?” he asked as he left, after switching off the bright light. Ron didn’t know if he had seen him nod his head.

An old woman wearing a headscarf brought him a plastic plate with rice and what appeared to be shredded chicken. He ate quickly and hastily with the plastic spoon, because the woman waited until he had finished. She left the water bottle behind when she left. Ron now received rice and peas with chicken twice a day, along with two bottles of water, three liters in total. The old woman seemed to be deaf; at least, no conversation ensued.

Next to the bucket lay a tattered copy of the Tages-Anzeiger. The highest-circulation daily newspaper, sensationalist and no model of good journalism. It was an old edition, over ten days old. A glimmer of hope flickered; reading was the only distraction.

A bird landed on the windowsill. Ron knew it wasn’t a sparrow, but a bit larger, its plumage black with dark blue speckles. “Hello, mate,” Ron croaked hoarsely. “Looks like we’re both locked up, me here, you there.” The bird cocked its head, one of its eyes seeming to size him up. Ron bent down and picked up all the grains of rice he’d dropped while eating hastily. He stood on tiptoe, and the bird flew away as he dropped the rice onto the sill. Seconds later, the bird was back, eyeing the rice suspiciously. He pecked at one, seemingly trying it. The bird looked around suspiciously, wondering if anyone might try to steal his food. He pecked at it, grain by grain. Ron stood on tiptoe again to poke a finger through the shattered glass. The bird eyed the finger, but didn’t fly away.

No, he was far too small to be a raven. And he was curious, too. Ron felt the beak gently pecking at his fingernail. “Well, what’s your name, my big guy?” Ron murmured. “I’ll just call you Bird, all right? Heaven knows what you’ll be when you’re fully grown, a raven perhaps, or an eagle?” Somehow, it felt comforting to have a living cellmate, even if he couldn’t speak.

A grumpy-looking man with a pistol tucked into his waistband led him over to the interrogation room, where the bald man was already waiting for him. Notepad and pen, the grumpy man remained standing by the door. Ron knew immediately, of course,

that he wouldn't be able to overpower him, and even if he did, what then? Without a plan, any attempt would simply be foolish.

An hour of questions, constantly circling back to how he could infiltrate the Turkish mafia undercover. Oh, he readily and willingly provided all the names. They were all already dead. But the guy would have to research that first; valuable time for whatever would be lost. He couldn't harm the dead with it. But he could sow confusion, because what did X and Y have in common? That they were of Turkish descent? Ron suppressed a grin while the bald man faithfully noted everything down.

The bird seemed to have grasped that there were rice grains twice a day. Ron set aside about two teaspoons of it; it seemed just right. Only with endless patience could his fingertip stroke the bird's head. The bird shook its head, for it was an unseemly intrusion into ornithological privacy.

In the outdated editions of the Tages-Anzeiger, he could follow the events. An Islamist had carried out a terrorist attack in Vienna's city center, leaving dead, wounded, and the terrorist dead. The police had shot him. For days, the newspaper shouted the news to the world. He was a non-smoker, but he drank alcohol occasionally. Outrageous! He had acquired weapons and ammunition in Bratislava; the small border town had suddenly become the center of the arms trade. As much as the scribblers fussed over every triviality, Ron was glad that no names of the investigators were made public. Of course, all internal information had to come from President Wallner; he reserved the right to officially inform the journalists. Yes, two more people had been questioned a few days earlier. But the perpetrator was and remained a lone individual.

He read aloud to the bird from the newspaper. It felt good to hear his own voice, indeed, to use it at all. The bird listened with its head tilted; after all, it was a real civil servant reading to it. It also felt good for Ron to show emotion, astonishment and contempt for the scribblers, for these dimwits repeated some triviality at least eleven times. He giggled loudly, and the bird began to sing as well. After many days, Ron finally heard the aria, high-pitched and with very complicated notes. Ron didn't play an instrument and couldn't read music notes either, for in music class he had only been forced to look up the teacher's skirt, as if hypnotized and

mesmerized, for she never wore underwear. He always had to place a handkerchief in his underpants before music lessons to catch the inevitable ejaculations. He listened to his comrade bird, deeply moved, for even he realized that the aria contained very complicated flourishes. He admired the bird, which so cleverly and in a cascading manner spread the news of the terrorist to its surroundings.

And Ron suddenly heard voices. Yes, they had to be real voices; he wasn't hallucinating. Many fragments of Turkish, interspersed with guttural Arabic he didn't understand. The muffled male voices were coming from the barred ventilation shaft, that much was clear. Only gradually did the picture take shape. It was about the construction of a new, alternative road from Istanbul via Vienna to Cologne. Ron pressed his ear to the antediluvian grille and memorized all the names. He couldn't write anything down, after all.

For a good two weeks, he heard Turks and Arabs hatching their plans. Fragments, but unmistakably a plan. Which merchants and individuals, which imams and mosque attendants were willing, how much bribe money was to be provided for each. The conspirators only referred to each other by their first names, and there were thousands of Ahmeds, Mehmets, and Güls.

And then a new voice. An unmistakable, oily voice, perhaps a passionate cognac drinker. He mostly spoke American English; his Turkish was truly awful and very primitive. How did an American fit into all of this? No matter how intently he listened, his initial impressions remained just that. They discussed all the details with the American in slow Turkish or Turkish-accented English. And it was almost always about money: who had it, who got it, and who could pocket what percentage on the side. The oily man disappeared again after ten days. He returned, and he was very familiar with the plans.

But Ron had memorized every detail and every name. He repeated everything, murmuring quietly, until he couldn't forget anything. Now he had been held captive for over four weeks and saw no way to contact the outside world. In fact, he didn't even know if he was still in Vienna.

The grumpy old woman who brought him food twice a day and emptied the bucket brought him a bowl of cold water and a used towel once a week. It was for washing, she indicated. But she wasn't deaf and mute. While he washed, she stood in a corner, usually on the phone. Family matters. Turkish. What home remedies her daughter should use to treat her feverish child. And so on. Then she haltingly described to her daughter or daughter-in-law how the prisoner had undressed completely and calmly washed and stroke his penis and ejaculated into the washbasin. In a choked voice, she whispered into the phone that he was doing it again a second time and ejaculating into the washbasin once more, the disgusting man.

Ron had hatched the plan some time ago. As he pressed the washbasin into the old woman's hand, he stole the cell phone from her pocket. He had to speak lightning fast, because she would notice within minutes.

He hastily dialed his own phone and interrupted Alfred irritably. He rattled off names and places in one go, without pausing for breath. He had guessed correctly; the old woman showed up, so he ended the call and handed her his cell phone with a crooked grin. He hadn't been able to delete the number in time. In his estimation, the old woman was simple-minded and stupid; she probably told everything to her bosses. They would find his number at police headquarters.

And so it happened. Three-quarters of an hour later, the grumpy man stormed in, threw a black sack over his head, and led him up and down the stairs to a waiting car, and off they went on a wild, zigzagging chase. It seemed pointless to try and remember all the turns the car took without a clear starting point.

President Wallner jumped to his feet as if stung by a tarantula when it became clear that Hofstätter had been kidnapped. Immediately, everyone had to drop everything to intensify the search for Ron. The four-leaf team fanned out, questioned all informants, and stirred up the underworld. The kidnappers didn't budge; there was nothing, no demands, absolutely nothing. Niente, Zero, Nada. President Wallner held one of his rare press conferences. The press, radio, and television reported for days, but to no avail. The Interior Minister summoned him. Grudgingly, President Wallner

reported that there was nothing to report. Ron had last been captured by a traffic camera as he turned onto Türkenstraße, on his way to the Roßauer Barracks, where his office was located. The Minister was not amused.

President Wallner personally received Ron's girlfriend. He was very surprised when the elegantly dressed young woman was led into his office. She was young and strikingly beautiful; her makeup made her appear older, even though she was only 17 and a half. Wallner leafed through the slim file. "Missis Ökdemir, you are the girlfriend of my colleague, Chief Inspector Ronald Hofstätter?" Wallner immediately realized his slip of the tongue. "I meant Ms. Ökdemir, of course." Fatme smiled disarmingly. "Yes, Mr. President, I am unofficially his fiancée." Wallner stared at the file, his face flushed crimson. "And you work as...?" He didn't want to say the word prostitute. "I work as an escort, Mr. President, for Madame Florence's escort service at the Fleischmarkt." Fatme reveled for a moment in Wallner's confusion. "Detective Inspector Hofstätter knows exactly what I do for a living, of course. And that an escort girl often has to be at the client's beck and call. That was never a problem for Ronald, Mr. President." Fatme's disarming smile actually threw him off balance; after all, he was 71, damn it!

He looked up. "We are very worried; Hofstätter has obviously been kidnapped. We haven't got the slightest trace of him. Perhaps you can help us, Ms. Ökdemir?" Fatme's face immediately turned serious. "I want to do everything I can, Mr. President. I've been questioning everyone in our Turkish community for two days now, but no one seems to know anything. It surprises me, because usually everything is circulating in the gossip there. And Hakim, that is, Mr. Hofstätter, has many friends and acquaintances in the Turkish community, Mr. President." She bit her lower lip briefly. "We all still call him Hakim Elbagr, even though I know, of course, that his real name is Chief Inspector Ronald Hofstätter. We're all so grateful that he exposed the scourge of the Turkish mafia. Nobody here will forget that."

President Wallner leaned back in his office chair. "Precisely because of his popularity, I had hoped that one of his friends would know something, perhaps Imam Museddin." Fatme shook her head vigorously. "No, that was my first thought too. But Imam Museddin really doesn't know anything, and nobody lies to me

that easily." There it was again, that disarming, professional smile of the escort girl.

President Wallner was, of course, disappointed, but a fruitless conversation was part of everyday life. He leaned forward again. "And you're engaged to him?" he asked. Fatme's eyelashes twitched briefly. "So to speak, unofficially of course, Mr. President. Perhaps I should say I'm his partner or his lover, perhaps. We're not officially engaged, although I hope to marry him one day. He's not only made me read an antique book every week so I can broaden my horizons. We also listen to his jazz records and drink expensive wine; he says that's supposed to broaden my horizons, too." Fatme's look told the President everything. The look of someone who knew where she was going.

The President smiled gently. "Yes, his colleague already told me about the jazz records." A flash of light came in Fatme's eyes. "Yes, of course we talked about that, Mr. President. Ronald and I are very honest with each other. I don't even pay attention to such a little slip-up, that intimate interlude with Ms. Morgentau, Mr. President." Her face suddenly seemed haughty, Wallner thought, and thought of the statuette of Nefertiti. "But of course, Ms. Ökdemir, he didn't even sprain his ankle during the affair." President Wallner was pleased with his preconceived notion of an affair as a side-step. Fatme's breathing hadn't quickened; her chest rose and fell as before.

President Wallner ended the conversation and stood up. Only now did he notice how tall Fatme was. He secretly envied Ron, because even back then, in his prime, he could only dream of such beauties. He accompanied Fatme to the door, and Bodnar took over, leading the young woman out. Wallner caught a glimpse of Rosa Morgentau's critical glance as she watched Fatme leave. He smiled, because of course he knew.

Bodnar, who had wanted to exchange a word with Fatme, stopped as they turned the corner and were out of sight. Bodnar, a broad-shouldered bull in the truest sense, fixed Fatme with a piercing gaze. Guys like that always made Fatme uneasy; she braced herself for defense. "Listen, girl. It's quite simple. Hofstätter was helping himself to my bride's honey pot, my Rosa's. That wasn't right at all, even if Rosa had instigated it. Not right at all. If

he does it again, I'll punch him right in the face. It's that simple, and I mean what I say. So tell him to keep his hands to himself, or else. Can you make him understand that, please?" Fatme had taken a half-step back, even though Bodnar wasn't threatening her. But at least he had said please. "Yes, I certainly will, Mr. Police Constable!" Fatme followed him silently to the gatekeeper. She was tempted to tell Bodnar that she was Mrs. Ökdemir and not some "girl" he could address informally and belittle. She decided to remain silent; Ron thought highly of Bodnar. At the gate, she offered Bodnar her hand, which disappeared into his paw. "Thank you and goodbye, Mr. Police Constable!" she trilled and walked away. Of course, Fatme knew what a police constable and a chief detective inspector were. She grinned mischievously to herself. Girl! Bodnar was annoyed on his way back; he had been a police constable 35 years ago, as a rookie. He would make it clear to Ronald. Police constable!

For days, the phone lines were buzzing; the search was extended to Burgenland and Lower Austria, perhaps a crumb of information could be found there that would advance the investigation. But no, nothing, zero, nada.

President Wallner now held a situation briefing every morning. Heaven knows who came up with the idea, but could the silence surrounding Frank Halter mean that the criminal had Ron in his clutches? Like a nasty, miserable cold, this thought took root in their minds. It was suddenly obvious; they heard absolutely nothing about Frank Halter. The president kept his mother in custody, transferring her to a different prison every few days and misusing the term "pretrial detention." He knew he was breaking the law, but he stubbornly kept this ace up his sleeve. But Frank Halter remained invisible and untraceable; a police officer sat in front of the Halters' house day and night. Yet there was complete silence surrounding Frank Halter.

Then, on a peaceful, quiet afternoon, the alarm bells rang. Ron had called his computer, Alfred. For two minutes and twenty seconds, he rattled off names and places into the microphone, talking about a route from Istanbul to Vienna to Cologne. They sat in the conference room and listened to the recording twenty times. Bodnar and Rosenblatt whispered amongst themselves; they knew Ron best. Then Bodnar remarked that it only made sense if they

were thinking of the Turkish mafia. Obviously, it was more important for Ron to tell them as much as possible about a new route from Istanbul via Vienna to Cologne than about his captivity.

Alfred, of course, had triangulated the call, and four patrol cars raced to the location. They had to search about twenty houses, but found nothing. His kidnappers had escaped with Ron.

Morgentau had plotted all the places Ron had mentioned on a map. It was clearly visible what the new route could look like. Now they called all the relevant police stations and laid their cards on the table. More than a dozen people were interrogated, and almost all of them turned out to be a match. One confessed immediately, another only after agonizing questioning. The route was scuttled before it even went into operation. President Wallner beamed from ear to ear; finally, a tangible success. And it confirmed that Ron was still alive and his senses as sharp as ever.

Ron grinned from under the black sack. Alfred had recorded everything. Alfred would check to see if it really was his voice. Alfred would inform the Yiddish Squadron team and the president within seconds. They would drop everything and listen to the recording a dozen times. In the meantime, Alfred would have printed out all the names and addresses mentioned. His colleagues would piece it all together somehow, since Ron had named the new route Istanbul-Vienna-Cologne. The president would follow up on the vague lead: “American with an oily, cognac-stained voice, maybe CIA.” It was a meager lead, but Wallner knew everyone at the US embassy and some at the CIA office, which officially didn’t exist. They would be searching with all their might. And Alfred had already determined the location of the phone call through triangulation. Despite flashing blue lights and wailing sirens, they arrived a fraction too late.

Ron’s new prison was a windowless wine cellar. He spent an entire day handcuffed to a wall hook while two grumpy men erected a wire cage. The wine cellar was enormous and had no windows. There was plenty of air, and somewhere there was a dimly lit lightbulb he couldn’t see directly.

Once again, it was the Tages-Anzeiger newspaper that he found next to the bucket, an older edition. It gave him a pang when he

thought of his bird. Yes, his bird, because something like a friendship had developed between them. He fed the bird grains of rice, and in return, it let him stroke its head with just one finger. And their arias, sung together, were priceless. And now he had abandoned his comrade to call Alfred. Ron felt like crying, but then again, his colleagues would find him quickly and free him.

Instead of the grumpy old woman, it was another Turkish woman, speaking German. He immediately dubbed her "Gestapo Sweetheart." Around 40 or 45, with a short pageboy haircut and very talkative. But nothing of consequence. Ron recognized her obvious sexual aggression; she constantly ran her hand over her ample curves. He was, of course, sexually frustrated too, but it was crystal clear that his tormentors weren't using the well-endowed guard without ulterior motives. And they thought he was completely brain-dead, apparently.

At least the Tages-Anzeiger was published daily. The English queen had died, and Charles was the new king. The paper didn't offer much more than that. Shoplifting, a senior citizen caught shoplifting, an ATM blown up. Drug-addicted teenage vandals trash a subway station. A runaway cat returned home after 10 weeks. Either President Wallner was keeping quiet like never before, or Frankie had stopped killing.

They had taken everything from him, even his cheap wristwatch and the packet of tissues. He no longer dared to show any vulnerability; the Gestapo's mistress didn't seem to own a cell phone. Her skintight, vulgar dress had no pockets. In his wallet was a portrait photo of him and Fatme, from happier times. He didn't have that anymore either. He had spent hours gushing to the Bird about his little lover, revealing her physical attributes and sexual preferences, just between us friends, and that too was gone now too.

Ron demanded that the Gestapo mistress bring him the wash tub three times a week so he could wash himself. He paid no attention to her lustful glances as he undressed and washed naked. As always, she stayed outside the cage and sat down on a chair. Calmly and calculatingly, he washed his penis, then absentmindedly rubbed it. He stared along the Gestapo mistress's long legs and peered arousedly under her skirt. She seemed hesitant about whether to put a hand inside her panties. Calmly, he ejaculated

into the water, staring at the woman. He rubbed his penis a second time, this time for much longer, stared intently under her skirt and ejaculated again into the water. He dressed with a serious expression, while the Gestapo mistress, her face flushed, carried the wash tub away.

He tried to decipher the scribbles on the old wine barrels, but he might as well have been staring at Babylonian cuneiform tablets. And besides, what good would it have done to learn that a Pinot Noir, a Chardonnay, or some adulterated Polish potato vodka had once been stored in these venerable barrels? He suspected, at least, that there were hardly any wine cellars of that size within the city limits of Vienna. So, Lower Austria or Burgenland, but perhaps Vienna after all. Pondering it was no use.

The keys rattled as the door to the wine cellar was unlocked. The Gestapo mistress walked in backwards, both hands raised above shoulder height. Bednar and Morgentau followed behind, pistols drawn. They looked around carefully and then let the woman open the cage.

Ron threw his arms around Rosa. Bednar cleared his throat jealously, “We have to get out of here, so let’s go, march!” Ron was free again after 41 days. Of course, Alfred hadn’t just triangulated his phone call; he had been closely monitoring his captors’ movements and had led the trio to this point. Ron couldn’t even describe how good it felt to be free again.

Over the next 48 hours, the entire gang was arrested. Ron had been kidnapped to have an ace up their sleeve and to neutralize the person who posed the greatest threat to the men. The entire plan was exposed, and the idea for an alternative route from Istanbul to Cologne was shelved for the time being.

President Wallner insisted on a thorough medical examination; presumably, it was a requirement. Afterward, Ron was given a week off. He went with Fatme to Dürnstein, a small town in the Wachau region. Fatme wasn’t particularly religious, but she said a short prayer of thanks when the president had her called. Her escort pimp just shrugged when she told him she was spending a week’s vacation with Hakim.

Ron sat up straight. This way he could see the Danube through the window, which had flowed past Dürnstein since time immemorial. They were both covered in sweat, Fatme and he. But they were happy and closer than they had been in a long time. In this blissful little town, there was neither mafia nor serial killers. He called the president and his colleagues once a day, and thank God it was quiet in Vienna. Ron's hand absently stroked Fatme's slender curves. "You are one of the most beautiful flowers, Fatme," he murmured. "Flowers, so beautiful to behold, yet they wither. And then they are thrown away." His hand lifted her chin. "You're an escort, and I give you credit for supporting Dad and the family this way. You're 17 now, almost 18. You'll wither like all flowers, you'll no longer be valued as an escort, and one day you'll be thrown away like a wilted bouquet. That's not right, that's unfair."

Fatme sat up. "Hakim Elbagr, what are you up to? You speak like a wise florist with a specific goal in mind, someone who wants to buy out the competition. Talk to me, I'm your wife, your lover. Or even your flower, for all I care, in God's name. Just tell me what you're thinking. Look at me, the Danube will still be here tomorrow, my love. Take me into your world of thoughts, let me share in your floral splendor."

Ron released her chin, met her eyes, and let the Danube be the Danube. "You'll outgrow the escort business, wither away. What will you do then? I won't allow you to go back to prostitution. Never. You have to create other options for yourself, come up with something else. Prostitution is just a tiny part of reality, and probably one of the most despicable. 99% of girls don't go into prostitution; they look for and find better opportunities. You're like a diamond in the rough. You devoured those insightful books in no time and absorbed the knowledge and essence behind them. You're not just clever, no, you're exceptionally clever, and I admire your analytical thinking. Things that gentlemen greatly appreciate in an escort. You could be anything, Fatme. A photographer, a painter, a sculptor, a teacher, or a nurse. Drive a bus, trade on the stock exchange, or become an astronaut. The possibilities are endless. You just have to get prostitution out of your head; I'm leaving you no choice."

Fatme grabbed his wrist. "Hakim, my darling, I can't just whip up an answer off the cuff, especially since I'm naked and don't

have sleeves. Enough of splitting hairs, you're thinking about me, and that's like balm to my soul. I'll think about it and surprise you. You also forgot about the professional boxer, my darling. As much as I'd love to punch some guys in the face, beating up women isn't on my list. But I understand what you're trying to tell me with this whole thing about flowers, florists, and bouquets swirling around in your little head. That's very sweet of you, Hakim!" She kissed his hand.

Ron lightly stroked her black hair. "My Fatme, I'm fantasizing about flowers, okay. But I've already taken action, I have to confess that." Fatme looked searchingly into his eyes. "What have you been up to, Chief Inspector General Hofstätter!?" Ron cleared his throat. "With your half-finished primary school education, you can't become an astronaut; these days, you can't get anywhere without a high school diploma. You have to get your diploma, Fatme, I'm not kidding. I've enrolled you in a high school program and paid for the first semester right away. Of course, I'll pay for your entire studies. I have all the forms at home; everything's already filled out. I've taken a nice portrait of you, where you're beaming and no one can tell you're an escort. I've already arranged with a Turkish florist friend that you've been working for him as a temporary employee aide for the past few years. At least, that's what it reads very convincingly in your résumé, which you still have to memorize. I don't need to prove to you that I'm damn good at lying. You'll be proud of your résumé, my dear. So, everything's ready; all the documents and certificates are genuine, really well forged. You just have to sign in three places, then it's off to the post office. In two years, you'll have your diploma and can achieve anything with it." So, now I've confessed everything to you, Fatme."

Fatme playfully hit him with a pillow. "And where else have you enrolled me, Detective Superintendent Inspector Hofstätter? At the Salvation Army, the maternity ward, and the priest already booked for the baptism, promptly at 8:30 on Tuesday?" Ron ducked, laughing. "Maternity ward? Baptism? Good heavens, what are you talking about, Fatme?" She paused. "Did I get your attention? Well, listen. I've thought about going to high school several times, but I've always shied away from it. Can I continue working as an escort alongside school? You seem to know, so presumably the answer is yes. And I know how valuable a high school diploma

is. A doctorate would be even better, of course, I know that too. No, seriously, my dear Hakim. Thank you, you've given me the decisive push, and I will always be grateful for that. Just thinking about it is the same as not doing it. Confucius. Now I'll diligently attend school, work as an escort in the evenings, and not disappoint you." She kissed him on the lips.

Ron glanced at the Danube. "That was the only thing that worried me. You'll come home at 4 or 5 in the morning, stand crying under a hot shower, and not want anything to do with another man. That, honestly, is what saddens me." Fatme snuggled against him. "Ron, my love, nothing will change. It's only rarely happened that I lay with a client, Hakim, you know that. And since I'm studying, I'll triple my price. I think 99% will give up, because their wallet is the only part of their body where they can still actually feel pain. You must curb your dirty fantasies, my love. I'll lie with a client even less often, I promise you." Fatme stroked his brown hair. "We never argued about it, since it's simply part of the escort service. It never bothered our relationship. And that's how it should stay." Ron nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, that's true. You lay with me because you're my lover. You never let me feel any differently. You were always unwaveringly my lover, my wife." Ron glanced at the Danube. "I want you to get your high school diploma, because that's your ticket to everything. I love you with all my heart and I have to give you this chance. It doesn't matter if you don't get home until 4 a.m. and don't want to see another man. We both know what we're talking about. You've come home so many times, crying all the time, utterly exhausted from the ordeal."

"I'm sorry, terribly sorry, Hakim." She buried her face in the crook of his neck, her lips on his Adam's apple. "Yes, I was younger, impetuous, and I imagined I needed the full experience, with all the passion. I'm older now, and I promise you I'll act more prudently. I'll dry my lips with the napkin, get dressed, and come home to you, my lover, my husband." She kissed his Adam's apple. "You said it for the first time today, 'my beloved, my wife.' A woman hears such little things as if they were coming from a loudspeaker." Ron stared at the calmly flowing Danube. "If I continue to speak so carelessly, one day you'll put me in chains, because the golden ring symbolizes those chains." Fatme snuggled even closer to him. "If I weren't following your lead, I would have put you in

chains long ago, my dear. You owe it only to my attentiveness that it hasn't happened, yet. But I've never lost sight of my goal. Never."

Ron turned away from the mesmerizing Danube. "We both know that I'm still at the bottom of the career ladder. And you won't climb the first rung until September. We're both smart enough to know that we're not ready for the big step yet. We'll know when the time is right. We, we're a good team; we can rely on each other." Fatme hugged him. "Yes, we not only discussed it, it's also the right thing to do to wait. I'm on board, Captain."

Ron was riding the streetcar home from his parents' house when the voice hit him like a whip. It was the oily voice of the American he'd heard during his time as a prisoner of war. He was instantly wide awake and followed the overweight man discreetly to the American Embassy, where the man entered. Although Ron knew perfectly well that his service ID was worthless here, they let him go ahead to the reception desk. The young soldier shifted from one foot to the other and called for his superior officer. Ron wanted to know who had been entering there last.

"Sorry," said the officer, "I can't help you with that." Ron immediately called President Wallner, who was to come to the embassy at once. "What? Excuse me? Why?" asked Wallner, who was busy elsewhere. "I humbly request that Your Grace get his ass to the American Embassy immediately, without delay!" Ron barked into the phone and pressed "Off." Minutes later, the patrol car arrived with Wallner.

Ron explained briefly and concisely what it was about. Wallner understood immediately and called his CIA contact in the house. The man came, and the two men whispered in a corner for about fifteen minutes. The CIA man made several phone calls, and Ron could tell from his body language that they were getting nowhere. Wallner took him by the sleeve. "Come on, Hofstätter, we're done here!" Ron silently followed Wallner to the patrol car.

"What, pray tell, was that?" Ron asked, pale. Wallner looked at the driver and lowered his voice. "That, my dear fellow, is what happens when you get struck by lightning while you're taking a dump. CIA policy. No man is abandoned, not even with a bloody

knife in his hand." Wallner glared angrily. "The guy disappears on the next flight, and we won't get his name. He was never there. He doesn't even exist. I'll grill all my contacts at the CIA, but I already know the result. Nothing, zero, nada."

Ron looked calmly into Wallner's face. "We could have found out what the CIA had to do with the Turks or the Arabs. It seemed to me that the oily guy had more to do with it than nothing at all. I might owe my kidnapping to him, I have a feeling." Ron paused for a long time. "I might have an idea, Mr. President. Nothing illegal, maybe a hair's breadth away from it, admittedly. But 41 days in captivity? I can't just brush that off, CIA or no CIA. It's better if you don't know anything about it, Mr. President." Wallner looked out the window. "Okay, but be damned careful, Hofstätter!"

Ron was careful. He explained the situation and his idea to Alfred. Alfred didn't need a second to think. "Spying on the Americans will be difficult. But maybe we won't even need to." Ron waited expectantly. "We just need to hack the next flights, the next passenger lists, it's really not rocket science. And then you have to look at the people, maybe something will ring a bell." Ron nodded, "Okay, that's what we'll do!"

It wasn't even a dozen people who flew out under the CIA's protection. On the second day, one man caught his attention. The passport photo wasn't exactly what he'd expected, but even Alfred couldn't work miracles. Andrew Webster, a businessman with a Pittsburgh address. Alfred found several photos online. "Yes, that's him," Ron said under his breath. He went to Wallner's and closed the blinds. Wallner quickly put two and two together and called his CIA contact. Now he could be a bit more confident. Of course, the CIA didn't confirm anything, but they took Wallner's story seriously. If Webster was pulling strings without authorization, then at least his people should know, Wallner chirped hypocritically into the phone. President Wallner promised to email the entire file on "Alternative Route Istanbul-Cologne" to the CIA, of course.

Neither Ron nor President Wallner ever learned how the CIA handled the matter. Only the remark that they were grateful for his information could be interpreted as meaning that the CIA was investigating Webster and "the alternative route." When Wallner asked him how he had come across Webster, Ron replied, "I'm

sure you don't want to know, Mr. President. Not entirely above board, but successful." Ron added that this helped him cope better with his kidnapping. The pressure of one of the guys still being at large was gone. With a sly grin, he added that having uncovered something within the CIA was something special for him.

About a year later, the police uncovered a large weapons cache in Vienna and Cologne, which was officially attributed to the terrorist organization Hamas. Ron swallowed hard; so there was still an "alternative route."

Fatme began her first year of high school on September 3rd. She had absolutely no trouble with the material itself, but there was a lot of writing, a lot of homework, etc. Ron bought her a laptop, which proved to be a godsend. She was usually home shortly after midnight when she was working as an escort. No, supporting her father and family was something she wouldn't let anyone take away from her. When Ron cautiously inquired, she just shrugged. No, the clients got everything they paid for, but "passion and the full package" wasn't available even for a wheelbarrow full of money.

He would probably never understand Fatme's close relationship with her father. Dear old Dad had abused her since she was a very young girl; he had essentially sold Fatme to a pimp. Yes, sold. "We lived in abject poverty, Ronald Hofstätter. I know what hunger feels like, Detective Inspector. You don't want to know." Fatme said in a husky voice that her father's visits were simply due to his age. And she said, "With all due respect, Hakim, it's really none of your damn business."

This quiet life was so beautiful. Truly quiet, truly beautiful. If it weren't for the Norns, who love nothing more than arbitrarily severing the threads of life, it could have gone on like this forever. Even President Wallner could afford to doze off for a few minutes with his morning coffee. The Norns were foaming with rage. And they were treacherous. They nudged Mr. Edmund, the veteran doorman at the Rossau Barracks. "Curtain up!" cried the youngest of the Norns.

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A Wake-Up Call

“Inspector! Inspector!” shouted the old doorman, running after Ron, who had nodded politely. Ron stopped. “Easy now, my dear Edmund, I’m waiting!” Edmund slowed his 130 kilos and stopped panting. He pulled a crumpled envelope from his pocket. “A letter for you, Inspector. It’s been with me for at least two weeks; I simply forgot about it.” Edmund, who had spent his entire life in the police force and was so happy that he was allowed to keep his uniform after retirement while working as a doorman, Edmund addressed everyone informally, the president just as readily as the Minister of the Interior. The Norns rubbed their gouty fingers together; everything was going according to plan. Edmund himself, of course, had no idea why the Norns had assigned him, of all people, a role.

Ron’s eyes narrowed to slits. A letter from Frank Halter, and he’s only receiving it today. “My dear Edmund, thank you so much for keeping it so carefully. But I need to know who gave it to you and exactly when?” Edmund thought hard. “It was the nice gentleman from the waterworks, he called himself — wait a minute — Schröder, from the waterworks. A nice guy, we chatted a bit almost every day, the barracks are on his way. He usually bought me a meatloaf sandwich from the stand across the street. A nice guy, but I didn’t see him for a while. And it was on the day of the international match against Denmark that he gave me the envelope for you. Yes, sure, that’s how it was, and after that I didn’t really see him again, now that you ask, Ronald.” Edmund shifted from one foot to the other as Ron took a rubber glove out of his pocket and then touched the envelope with it. “Oh dear, Ronald, have I messed up?” He looked very unhappy, because that’s only how you handle evidence. “My fingerprints, Ronald, they’ll be all over it. I had no idea it was so sensitive.”

Ron stopped him. “No, Edmund, you definitely haven’t done anything wrong, how could you have known?” He searched his cell phone for Frank Halter’s photo. Edmund was quite agitated. “Yes, that’s him, Schröder from the municipal waterworks! Except for the hair, he’s got it really short now and there’s a bit of gray in it too.” Edmund was inconsolable. “A wanted poster, it’s probably

buried somewhere in my desk drawer. I haven't looked at them in ages, I'm not exactly on active duty anymore, Ronald. Why is he wanted? I'm getting a really uneasy feeling, I chatted with a criminal and ate a meatloaf sandwich! Will I get a dressing-down from Wallner?" Ron reassured him, Wallner couldn't care less, so no dressing-down, Edmund. "You're in charge of the gate, and you're doing a fantastic job. But you have to tell me everything about the talks; it can be absolutely crucial."

Edmund concentrated. "Actually, Schröder hardly said anything about himself. He lives with his old aunt in the 2nd district, on Taborstrasse. She has a 24-hour caregiver from Bratislava. Once, he said with a wink that he often fucks the Czech woman when his aunt is asleep, because the Czech woman is sexually starved. That sort of thing, Ronald, men blurt things out without thinking much. He seemed completely inconspicuous; we all wish for a little Czech girl, I certainly do. And yes, his dog Roxi is an elderly Labrador, blond and white. He hardly said anything about work; he's having a falling out with Wawranek, his team leader. He must be a real creep, and Schröder is thinking of quitting." Ron automatically memorized everything; there might be something important in the web of lies.

He patted Edmund jovially on the shoulder. "Let's forget about that little Czech girl, you're married, you old chap!" Edmund looked at him with loyal puppy-dog eyes. "Widowed, Ronald, Hermine couldn't wait to join her Savior! Last April, you weren't even here yet, Ronald. And not a Czech girl in sight, as if I had leprosy." Ron gave him a friendly nudge on the chest. "The chicks will probably think your pipe came from Napoleon's artillery!" Edmund grinned crookedly, but not unsympathetically, God knows when Emperor Napo… oh, never mind. "Artillery sounds too good to be true," Edmund deftly sidestepped the historical gap. "And yes, I think I told him about my neighbor, Papouschek, with whom I've had a little fling for ages, back when Hermine and old Mr. Papouschek were still around." Edmund blew his nose thoroughly and said he'd talked quite a lot about Miss Papouschek.

Ron said he had to hear everything. "Papouschek, she's a real stunner! She used to dance at the Moulin Rouge, in Walfischgasse. People would queue for miles to get an autograph back then. The Rouge didn't allow her any sexual activity on the premises, it was

very strict. I drove her home every night in the patrol car, and she made up for it handsomely, my lovely Papouschek." The memories made Edmund's eyes moist, or was it the dust? "First she did it with me in the patrol car, after a few days she took me to her bedroom, far away from old Papouschek. That's how we started a real fling, every day. As required, I reported it to the group leader, he noted it in the file and shrugged, he didn't care. Carry on!"

"As soon as she left the Rouge, she received hundreds of paying admirers at her home. I had to stand behind the screen the whole time and watch over her. My group leader was only interested in whether she paid me for it, which she didn't. Yes, I told Schröder all of this little by little, and that I was an eyewitness to hundreds of these encounters. Yes, I told Schröder that for years I wasn't allowed to touch Hermine because of her Savior. I was young and handsome and had no intention of living like a monk. Papouschek really had a weakness for me and gladly accepted my armed protection. We've both gotten older now, Papouschek had saved quite a lot for her pension and was able to give up prostitution. And since Hermine is no longer with us, I stay with her all night. - Schröder told me very little detail about his caretaker, the Czech woman from Bratislava. The only interesting thing for me was that the Czech woman wanted only and exclusively the missionary position. She whined endlessly because she had to give him a blowjob after the break. She would immediately run to the washbasin to wash her mouth out, cursing all the while, if she had overdone it. Schröder found it delightful and amusing to ejaculate in her mouth. That's all I can think of at the moment, Inspector." Ron wasn't finished with him yet. "You'll have told him this and that, too. Of course, I need to know all that, and in great detail."

Edmund became uncertain. "Ronald, there wasn't much new information I could tell him. He replaced the water pipes in your wing, so of course he knew all of you. The president, Bodnar, Rosenblatt, Morgentau, and you, naturally. You were already there when he installed the pipes. Or maybe not? He knows everyone in the department, probably eavesdropped on you at the coffee machine, the rascal. Who was with whom, he even knew about Rosenblatt and his daughter Elli. He did most of the talking; I hardly contributed anything. Yes, maybe I blurted out the bit about Bodnar. That Bodnar and Morgentau hadn't spoken to each other for a week, otherwise they were like lovebirds. Rumor had it that Mor-

gentau was having an affair. But I don't know the details myself. And yes, he pricked up his ears when I said you'd been on vacation for weeks. 'They must have fired him; no one in the CID gets that much time off, Edmund,' Schröder said. I didn't confirm it; I would have known if someone was fired. I'm always the first to know so I can't let them through again." Ron glared at Edmund. "Is that right, about me and my leave?" Edmund's eyes welled up with guilelessness. "Back then, nobody knew you'd been kidnapped, Ronald. And I certainly wouldn't make a big deal out of something like that. No, Wallner even got out of his car and told me himself that you were on leave, Ronald. And of course, I believed Wallner. He didn't say a word about kidnapping, our secretive President. I even suspect his wife has long since died or run off. The way Wallner stares at the Morgentau's ass."

Ron listened to Edmund for a while longer. He continued rambling, but kept an eye on the gate and saluted everyone who was allowed through. When someone unknown stared into the empty porter's lodge, he quickly ran over, and Ron left without waiting for Edmund. He went straight to the lab. Fingerprints of good old Edmund and Frank Halter, without a doubt. They carefully opened the envelope; it could be a letter bomb. No, it wasn't. Two pages, densely written in a child's neat handwriting. "Copy to graphology, to file Frank J. Halter," Ron ordered. "We don't need the DNA. I know who wrote it. And there's nothing to decipher either," Ron said, a little disappointed. Deviations in perpetrator behavior were always important. Always. Only now did he go up to the department. Morgentau projected the pages onto the wall. They read the beautiful child's handwriting.

To the attention of Detective Inspector Ronald Hofstätter

My dear Hofstätter, the fact that the President granted you such a long leave of absence gave me pause for thought. But the fact that you're going on vacation without your girlfriend and companion was rather alarming. What fool leaves his escort model at home? No, I didn't take that lying down. But it did interrupt our game, and I enjoy playing cat and mouse with you. Or is it more like a hare and a bloodhound for you? No, neither of us are. Definitely not. I certainly don't have long ears. And you're

about as suited to being a bloodhound as a postman is to being an actor.

And speaking of which, apropos, as the English say. I've been observing your Fatme closely, photographing her a thousand times. She's a sight to behold, my goodness! I was tempted to book her for an opera outing, but my tuxedo is completely dusty and I can't fit into it anymore; I've lost a bit of weight in Karling, despite the gym and exercise. But Fatme, I'll keep her in mind; she'll be a very special treat. I'm already looking forward to it.

Well, I thought to myself, if the hunter takes a vacation, why shouldn't the hare also go for a rest? Yes, this will be news to you: I'm going on vacation with my mother, even though there's still a war going on there. She's dying of homesickness. Of course, the President has already found out that I've swapped my mother for a neighbor. Don't hurt her; she's only doing it because she desperately needs the money. She really knows nothing, neither about me nor my family, and certainly nothing about our good deeds. So, we're going, but I promise to come back.

President Wallner leapt from his chair. "Morgentau, straight to the Landl! To the Grey House. See if Halter really did escape!" Morgentau bolted like lightning. Wallner, unusually, lit a cigarette. "Back to the game!" he commanded, but the furrow of anger on his forehead was burning brightly.

Well, I'm curious to see if you have the guts to follow us. I strongly advise against it; the air there is thick with lead. And one more thing, since we're on the subject of lead. Mrs. Morgentau is a real scoundrel. The way she interrogated my mother reeks of the Gestapo. My mother cried a lot because she had to confess to everything, things that really have nothing to do with our game. I'm going to have a go at her, that much is certain. She wouldn't be the first policewoman I've strangled. Yes, yes, go ahead and run to the Minister of the Interior, have her put under guard. The citizens will feel safer without this unscrupulous Gestapo officer out in the open, and as you recall, bodyguards don't seriously slow me down. I heard the poor guy died in the hospital; it was unintentional. Kismet.

Of course, I won't say how long I'll be gone; there has to be a bit of suspense. I don't even know myself yet, or how long my mother wants to breathe the air of home. A month, a year? Who can say? I only know exactly how it will end. We'll face each other like at High-Noon, both of us with our rifles at the ready. One will blink, one will pull the trigger, and one will get away. My father, Artem, would like that very much. He'll be looking up from the depths of hell and betting on me. And I'm not going to let him lose, damn it. I owe him that.

Finally, I'm looking forward to continuing the game. Until then, just a little patience, as always, your game partner

Frank J. Halter, the same

Ron had read the letter aloud. Standing, perhaps that way he could get a better overview. He turned to his colleagues. "Clues, lots of them. But we should do it differently this time, take the text as it is first and then, in the second step, extract the clues." He turned abruptly to Bodnar and pointed at him. "Bodnar, on what day was the international match against Denmark?" Bodnar swallowed in surprise, then racked his brain. Rosenblatt blurted out, "June 28th, 0-3. The Danes really gave it to us! And Elli kept distracting me from the game, she's totally going through puberty!" Bodnar made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Spare us the details, you old incestuous pig!" Ron jotted down the date. "On this day, the Halter delivered the letter to the gatekeeper. And I've already interrogated good old Edmund; we should record all the details. Here, this is what good old Edmund stated for the record." He recounted the conversation with dear Edmund word for word. Only the president had an objection. "I never stare at Morgentau's ass, gentlemen. I know how to behave." Ron grinned because Wallner's ears had turned bright red.

President Wallner looked around the room. Bodnar, Rosenblatt, and Hofstätter looked down, embarrassed. Of course, Wallner was always staring at Morgentau's ass. And there was something else Wallner had to clarify. "My wife is doing great, she's staying with me. Yeah, she used to have that famous Czech ass, but that's none of your business. She's here, no matter what Edmund makes up. She's lying on the couch, stuffing herself with chips and watching those unbearably stupid shows and soap operas. A quick hello, she

doesn't take her eyes off the TV-screen, and I just can't stand them anymore. So I go over to the neighbor, Ludmilla Becherowa. She's only 46, but she was once the national figure skating champion and makes the best coffee in Vienna. The Arabs would flock here if they knew her secret. Where honest Christians add a shot of grappa or plum liquor, she adds a shot of cannabis oil." Bodnar's head jerks up. "Cannabis oil?" Wallner waves it off. "Just relax, Bodnar. Medicine from the pharmacy, with a prescription, all legal. I assume." Bodnar turns his back to him, forms a ring with his thumb and forefinger, and thrusts his other forefinger in and out with an obscene gesture. Rosenblatt has to look away, fighting back a laugh.

Wallner senses something is amiss. He rows frantically to escape the maelstrom. Ron leans against the doorframe, his facial muscles under control. Wallner desperately takes the oars again. "Ludmilla is brilliant, and for years we've been playing a game she invented. Something like, 'I interrogate you, and you're the taciturn police chief I can't get a word out of.' A delightful game, gentlemen. Of course, she can't get anything out of me, only the most outlandish tall tales. Spicy, most of the time, Ludmilla loves to be smutty." Wallner breaks off and looks from one to the other. "And you're staring at her ass, at her magnificent Czech ass, Chief?" Bodnar asks hypocritically. Wallner erupts. "Discrimination, Bodnar? My wife and Ludmilla both come from the Czech Republic. They both had, or have, magnificent asses, my dear friend. Your Rosa would pale in comparison!" Wallner said triumphantly. Ron's expression betrayed nothing. He felt a certain pity for his boss, whom they were making run into a wall like unruly middle schoolers driving their teacher. And it'll end with a seized piston; this engine was defective.

Wallner jabbed his index finger into Bodnar's lumberjack chest. "You young folks, for you, sex is always associated with romance, drama, and tears. We older folks don't need all that stuff; a neighborly helping hand, a neighborly gesture, and gentle neighborly physicality are enough, dedicated solely to physical pleasure and completely innocent. You won't understand that so quickly, Bodnar!" Rosenblatt finally collapsed. "Oh, Saint Anthony!" He whispered tonelessly, "A wiry, spry president wedged between the athletic thighs of the ice princess!" Rosenblatt suppressed the urge to slap his thighs and roar with laughter. Wallner had stumbled back

a step when, at Rosenblatt's interjection, he realized he had just dropped his trousers in front of the entire team. The Norns, never one to shy away from a good-natured prank, bumped elbows gleefully. The youngest chirped, "Curtain up, next act!"

Wallner's cell phone buzzed. Very few knew this number. A benevolent goddess wanted to help him out of this predicament. Wallner growled, "Yes!" and again "Yes," and several more times. "Repeat the name!" he barked into his phone. "Aaron? Are you absolutely sure?" He listened in silence for a long time. "Copy it, and bring it to me at top speed!" He turned back to Bodnar. "Bodnar, you're going to have a serious talk with Rosa, and a big one! She has a vocabulary that's unbecoming of a government official. 'He's fucking his mom!' Couldn't that be phrased less vulgarly?" Bodnar ducked; the president was right. How many times had he told Rosa to at least tone it down in the written reports — these were official documents that had been sitting in the archives for decades. "Yes, Chief, I'm trying!" Bodnar said. He wasn't her parent or her chaperone, for crying out loud! Rosenblatt interjected, "He's committing incest with his mother," he said, "that's the right and complete way to put it." Bodnar shot him a venomous look but remained silent.

Ron had no intention of digging any further into Wallner's love life. He pointedly stood in front of the projection screen and read Frank's letter aloud again, clearly and distinctly. Tempers had cooled; they listened intently. The letter was important, Ron made that perfectly clear. Rosenblatt interrupted him. "Is it true, do you have a girlfriend who works as an escort?" Ron answered calmly, because Rosenblatt didn't seem to know. "I met Fatme during the undercover operation, and yes, she works as an escort, Madame Florence, Fleischmarkt." Rosenblatt took notes and nodded, and Ron continued reading. Bodnar's head jerked forward. "He mentions three times that he's gone to Ukraine with his mother, maybe Odessa." Ron nodded, grimly. "He just throws Odessa and Ukraine at us like that. Where he certainly isn't! Oslo, Palermo, Biarritz, or Miami are more likely." Rosenblatt leafed through the file. "His mother takes a life-saving heart medication. Yes, here it is, Atenolol. It's only produced in Italy and India. So, Palermo or Mumbai?" Wallner interjected. "It's a common medication, every pharmacy carries it." Ron agreed with Wallner; the medication wasn't helping.

Morgentau stormed into the conference room. She brandished a USB stick, but the president took the lead. “Sit down, Rosa, and take a deep breath. Rosenblatt, get her a coffee. Now, Rosa, tell me everything in order and speak like a civil servant, not a street-walker. Start from the beginning.” Rosa nodded and took a deep breath. “It’s true, Frank swapped his mother. When and how wasn’t clear. The woman is just scared and afraid we’ll take the money back. The officers will bring her before the magistrate; she won’t get more than a warning, and she can keep the money. But now to Frank. Gold-rimmed glasses and a well-forged ID, and they let Dr. Aaron Weissman see his client. A lawyer’s visit in the bar, all by the book. Only video, no audio. I’ve skimmed all the videos; he first had sex with his mother, and after the swap, with the neighbor. The poor woman didn’t know what hit her.” President Wallner interrupted her. “What a bastard! Dr. Aaron Weissman is probably one of the most decent lawyers; he certainly wouldn’t stoop to such a charade. I was invited to his birthday reception last year, with Ludmilla on my arm. His 89th or 91st birthday. This Frank Halter is a cunning bastard. He steals the identity of an innocent man, and it stands up to any scrutiny. What a devious dog!”

Rosa continued. “I know that the Halters are having an incestuous relationship; it’s in my report, in black and white. But to do it in the lawyers’ chambers… that borders on disgusting audacity. He’s sticking his tongue out at us, the slimy guy. And we’re panting along behind him, wondering how he even got hold of Aaron Weissmann. I’ve done some rough research; the exchange must have taken place on or around July 1st. That was the day the security guards were regularly relieved. Frank must have known. The new guards only saw the neighbor; to them, she was Mrs. Halter. Devilish and perfect. Dr. Weissmann… laid the good woman across the table day after day, until August 23rd, his last visit.” Rosa looked at Wallner. “Did I handle the more risqué parts well, Mr. President?” Wallner nodded, smiling. “Write it down in the minutes like that, keep it clear, and no dirty talk. We’re sworn civil servants, we’re not filming a porno here.” Ron looked at Rosa and raised his eyebrows. “Otherwise?” Rosa looked directly at him. “The President ordered me to copy the videos from the lawyers’ chambers. I’m uploading them, the first half with Mrs. Halter, the second half with the neighbor, a certain Rachel Kerzendocht. I interviewed her myself; she’s very concerned about her reputation.

She cares for her bedridden husband. She's a chaste and devout Jew and only has affairs in dire need, and only with circumcised men from the Jewish community — she has plenty of interested parties there. She only did it because Frank persuaded her and gave her a large sum of money upfront. He only talked about prison-swap, not about sexual favors; she certainly would have refused those. I mean, she's not even playing a supporting role, even though she's very agitated and aroused because she gave herself to Frank there daily... for 52 days... Mr. President. I think Frank simply overwhelmed her at first, and only then did her strong sexual nature demand its due." Wallner nodded graciously. "You see, Rosa, it can be done with decent language. Bravo!"

Morgentau scanned Frank's letter on the projection screen. "Ah, he wants to lead us to Ukraine, of course. I'd rather look in Greenland, you moron. He's really going after me, though. Well, at least I know how to conduct a successful interrogation, my dear friend. And he delivered the incest to us postage-free, because he knows when he's lost. Poor Mrs. Halter, poor Mrs. Kerzendocht. A respectable Jewess who has to sacrifice her innocence. He's not ashamed to parade the old ladies naked and humiliated. And the way he's going after your Fatme, Ron, you mustn't take that lightly. Frank Halter is a multiple murderer, a cop killer, a monster without a conscience. Fatme is now on his list, too."

Fatme arrived shortly before midnight, showered, and lay down next to Ron. Yes, of course, she had done it with the guest — quickly, professionally, in and out, without passion, without any fuss. But Ron's mind was elsewhere. He was talking about Frank. She took it calmly. "Should I be afraid, Hakim? As an escort, I'm in constant danger of being strangled by some rich idiot. That's what scares me. Your mass murderer, your Frank, can kiss my ass, forgive my bluntness. I go escorting without personal protection; it would be ridiculous. Tell me when Frank's back, and I'll keep an eye out. More importantly, I passed my first semester with flying colors. That's more important to me than your Frank and his rambling pronouncements. Don't announce the attack, attack. Sun Tzu, and Frank should read the ancient Chinese philosopher's work more carefully, because his perspective is still relevant today."

Ron hugged her warmly. “With flying colors, you say?” Fatme nodded. “Nothing but ‘very good,’ in every subject. Every single one.” Ron stood up and got the champagne from the refrigerator. “I got it the day you started your exams. I was so sure! And now a 10-day break, then the second semester?” - “A 10-day break? That damn pimp booked me every night and already charged the guys three times the rate I asked for the happy ending. If you ask me, that’s Madame Florence’s influence. She hates it when an escort doesn’t want a happy ending, the old sow. In her day, no escort girl would have dared to refuse.” They drank the champagne; Frank and Florence stayed outside.

Frank’s letter remained on the projection screen for two weeks. Frank had made his plan loud and clear. The remaining women on his list plus Morgentau plus Fatme, and then High Noon. Wallner asked, half-jokingly, how good Ron was with a rifle. Ron waved it off. “I carry my pistol every day now, and I’m actually quite good with it. I take the shooting test with the armorer every Monday, which is only mandatory once a year. I prepare meticulously, Mr. President.” Wallner nodded; after all, he himself had given the armorer permission. Ron was a good shot, that wasn’t the issue. It was just this waiting that was agonizing.

Rosenblatt went skiing with his daughter Elli for ten days over Christmas in Bad Gastein in the Salzburg region. Everyone in the department reminded him to take his service ID and weapon. Rosenblatt waved it off. That was obvious, as long as Frank Halter wasn’t behind bars, he carried his service weapon every day too. He sat with Ron in the coffee corner. The older man had come to trust Ron. “What are the chances that Frank will go after my Elli, Ron?” Ron thought for a while. “I think about this every single day, Rosenblatt. Our whole department, all of us, are the bloodhounds hounding him, and will continue to hound him. He’s threatened Morgentau and my partner by name, explicitly. Let’s hope he doesn’t know anything about Elli and Bodnar’s daughter, although I’m convinced he knows all about us. He’s thorough and conscientious, he has to be.” They talked for a while longer.

Rosenblatt said that the whole condom business was getting on his nerves, if we could speak about personal matters. Ron nodded. Go ahead, there’s life outside the aquarium, too. Rosenblatt nodded dejectedly. “Elli’s so unreasonable, she doesn’t take the con-

dom thing seriously at all. And I'll die a thousand deaths, Ron, if she lets us be unreasonable again. Three times in the night, like an attack." Ron tapped impatiently on the table. "The pill?" he asked. Rosenblatt shook his head in resignation. "The gynecologist insists the biological mother come along; it's the law. And that's impossible. I never want to see that bitch again." Ron said, "You're being unreasonable, Rosenblatt. Condoms only work if you actually put them on. Elli could have the pill for breakfast, and you'd have it under control. Forget your stupid pride, take the bitch with you, and just ignore her. Like a fly on the back of your hand, or something like that. Take the bitch with you, Rosenblatt. A pregnancy would be worse, wouldn't it?" Rosenblatt nodded, pale as a ghost. "My worst nightmare, Ron." Ron leaned forward, emphasizing each word. "Get the pill, Rosenblatt, absolutely, and quickly. You have to go through with it, Rosenblatt. For God, King, and Country. Winston Churchill. I'm just saying this off the cuff; I don't know Elli, the bitch, or your brawl."

Rosenblatt pulled out his phone. "I only have nude photos of both of them, sorry." Ron looked at the pictures of the slut first. "Her gaze alone is a mortal sin, Rosenblatt. How could you?" He flipped through the photos of the slut, slowly, picture by picture. "I understand, that woman is definitely a volcano. She would have, or did, cuckold you; I know women like that all too well." Rosenblatt nodded, crestfallen. "Nothing but debts and Elli, that's what she left me with, the slut. I'm still paying off her installments." Ron flipped through the pages. So this was Elli. A chubby, cheeky brat, posing just as provocatively and indecently as her mother. Elli wore thick, unflattering glasses. The little one posed very unashamedly, wanted to chain her father with her liberty, and was obviously succeeding. Ron flipped through the pages more slowly; Elli had something, that special something. A girl to lose yourself in, Ron thought. After the last picture, he handed Rosenblatt his phone. "Just don't let Bodnar or Morgentau see it. They'd tear you to shreds, because they don't see us as a family." He paused for a moment. "Elli is a very pretty child, with a lot of sex appeal, and I can well understand why you're taking her, Rosenblatt. Treat her well and make sure she grows up slowly and naturally. She doesn't necessarily have to become a slut like your ex. Not if you're a good father, Rosenblatt."

“A good conversation, Ron. Thanks for that. I’ll close my eyes and let the slut get the pill. For Elli, only for Elli. And of course, for God, King, and Country. You’re not the only one who’s read Churchill. Only he meant it quite differently. English women should close their eyes and let themselves be made into little babies, future soldiers, for God, King, and Country. But all right, I know what you mean. I should swallow my ex’s presence, for Elli’s sake. Yes, I suppose I should.” Rosenblatt stood up and offered him his hand. “Thanks, Ronald Hofstätter. Now I know who to turn to if I need a friend.” Ron sat down again to finish his coffee. He felt a little guilty because his phone had secretly copied all the photos and data from Rosenblatt’s phone. An old, bad habit from his days undercover. He would be studying the bodies of the slut and Elli with relish for a long time, maybe even showing them to Fatme. She’d be amazed.

Ron lay on his bed, watching the videos from the lawyer’s office chronologically. He connected his phone to the large flat screen; that was a good idea. He didn’t even know what he’d expected. The only extraordinary thing about incest was the knowledge of it. Technically, there was nothing special about it at all. He considered that Mrs. Halter was probably approaching 70, Frank was 52. He was very well-endowed, but Ron wasn’t particularly interested in that. He tried lip-reading, but he wasn’t getting anywhere. The two of them talked, though Frank seemed to be talking to her most. His lips were barely visible; there was probably no point in consulting Ms. Koppe, the official lip reader. He tuned out when Fatme came home from escorting. She was the main focus; Frank and his mother could wait until tomorrow.

Fatme came out of the shower and asked what that was all about. He explained. “Oh, I would have liked to see that too, but I’m already too tired.” Ron nodded; he was barely halfway through. She could watch it tomorrow. Fatme thought for a moment. “Yes, tomorrow afternoon I’m going to Dad’s to give him his money. I’ll definitely be home for dinner; I still have to study. But we can watch it together. Okay?” Ron nodded and hugged her gently. “It’s actually police work, in part. It’s okay with me if you want to see it too, Fatme.”

The next evening, Fatme came for dinner. Ron had fried shrimp, one of her favorite dishes. He just looked at her — when-

ever she visited Dad, she seemed like a small, vulnerable girl. He hardly said anything; on such occasions, it was the gentle, tender touches with which he showed her his love. He hadn't asked how things were at Dad's in a long time. He could see how vulnerable and fragile she was at heart. Ron cleared the kitchen counter and lay down next to her on the bed. Frank and his mother were on the screen. Fatme gasped when she saw Frank's genital for the first time. "Ooooh! — And the woman, she's his mother?" she asked, and he nodded. "Actually, I'm hoping to read his lips. I'm not bad at it, but he usually turns away; he seems to know where the camera is." He kept fast-forwarding; it was always the same.

But then Fatme nudged him in the side. "That's a different woman, Hakim." He rewound. She really did look like a doppelganger. But she definitely wasn't his mother. Now there was an argument, but Frank relentlessly undressed her. She was a few years younger than his mother, her body radiating sex appeal. If he paused the image, he could even see her tears. Her body language was defensive, but she couldn't stop Frank. She covered her face with her hands when she saw his genital. "The woman says," Fatme commented, "she says she's never been with an uncircumcised man. A proper Jewish woman only does it with circumcised men, even when cheating. And look, he pulls his foreskin all the way back and talks to her, simply slapping his big thing into her hand. Look how she rolls her eyes! Disgusted yet curious, she feels the foreskin, pulling and turning it, because she's never seen anything like it. She shakes her head, no, she's never had an uncircumcised man inside her! Look how he grins as he slides the foreskin back and forth, and a glimmer of understanding crosses her face as she realizes that this is how uncircumcised men masturbate. Hesitantly, she takes his cock in her hand again, sliding the foreskin back and forth, uncertain and confused. She gestures to him that it's much too big! No, she wouldn't go for that! But he convinces her with his Charm, we can see that clearly. Now, now she's letting her shoulders slump. He's won!" Fatme's face contorted in disgust.

Kerzendocht and Weissmann had to work hard to force it into her hole. They both had to work together diligently until he got it where he wanted it. Ron rewound several times, carefully examining the sequence. So this was the chaste Mrs. Kerzendocht, and she seemed to be putting up a tiny bit of resistance against Frank,

but she didn't stand a chance. He watched it frame by frame and found the moment when she gave in, or yielded to her own powerful urges. That moment couldn't be a triumph for Frank. She looked at him uncomprehendingly during the happy ending; she should have taken much more time, she seemed to be saying. They whispered for another half hour, then got dressed again. No chance of reading the lip movements.

Fatme lay on his lap as the next round played. "All I could see was that he took her against her will. You found the moment she gave up. For the woman, it was nothing but an ordeal, not a moment of pleasure. I can empathize with her situation quite well, Hakim." She thought for a moment. "I don't know why she resigned herself to her fate. Emotionally, I would classify it as rape, even though he didn't raise his hand. He certainly forced her, I'm convinced of that." Ron and Fatme continued watching the videos. Ms. Kerzendocht became more and more open with each passing day. It was clear to see that she was becoming more and more involved and driven by her own sexual desire. Fatme had seen enough; Ron fast-forwarded and rewound, only checking sporadically. Not the slightest piece of information emerged that would give this criminal case a twist or a push. Ron was somewhat saddened by how dependent the good woman had become on her own sexual urges. Frank had driven her to the point where she threw herself at him like a cheap hussy, demanding his pleasure. It was entirely Frank's fault. In 52 days, he had managed to turn a respectable, shy wife into a cheap slut.

Rosenblatt had returned from his skiing holiday. Standing by the coffee machine, he muttered to Ron that the pill had worked and Elli had become more reasonable.

One day after another slipped by, the snow melted. It became February, then March. Ron looked at the nude photos of the slut and little Elli again and again. A feast for the eyes, nothing more.

Fatme was very downcast. "Dad will die soon, I can feel it, Hakim. He's not ill, no, it's not like that. He's just old, life is seeping away like the air from a deflated balloon. Ever since Mom died, he's clung to me as if I were his wife. But I'm not, even though I give him everything to make him feel like a real man. But his life is slipping through my fingers like sand. Can you see my grief,

Hakim?" Ron hugged her tightly. "Yes, my love, I feel it every day. At the same time, I know there's nothing I can do. I can only ask you to spend every free moment with him. I don't want you to wonder later if you shouldn't have been closer to him, if you should have been with him more." Fatme looked up at him. "Hakim, I know how insecure you felt about our father-daughter relationship. You trusted me to always love you. I could never explain to you what my father means to me. He was the first man I was allowed to lie down next to. He was the one who silently pushed his plate towards me when I was hungry. Yes, he was also the one who sold me to the pimp. But only to save Mom and me from starving to death. He didn't take a single coin for himself. He didn't drink the money away. He bought me clothes and makeup so I could please the men and bring home money. He cared for Mom better than any nurse, he accompanied her with love and care as she died. He never violated me, he held me close and loved me like no other man ever did. That's my father, Hakim."

Ron could only love her, could only keep her on her path. In a few months, she would finish her second semester. She visited Papa every other day, or every day if she could. She studied as hard as she could to keep the afternoons free, and she performed many happy endings to bring Papa money and buy him nice gifts. Ron cooked her a fine dinner every evening and held her silently in his arms. She was more vulnerable and fragile than ever. She was so grateful to him for it; she had enough time to shower and make herself beautiful for the job, for the changing, faceless men. She went through the motions, right up to the happy ending, with ease and quiet automatism. The men melted in the arms of such a vulnerable, sad beauty. Her saddest time was her most professionally successful. Madame Florence shook her ugly head; this girl was pure gold and brought in gold, seven nights a week. No, she couldn't be persuaded to work on afternoons for Madame. Not for all the money in the world.

She rested in Ron's arms, faceless men drifting past her mind's eye. "How I wish that Papa would die between my thighs. In a moment of greatest happiness. He shouldn't die so miserably like an old dog. He wouldn't deserve that." Ron stroked her hip. "Yes, I know, my love. I hope you can wrest that from your aunts. They'll do anything to make you and him suffer a lot." Ron held his

breath. It was improper to interfere in their family affairs. But Fatme nodded silently and wept her grief into his armpit.

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Spanish Intermezzo

by István Rudas © 2026

The Forster couple, Chris and Roxane Forster from Vienna, arrived at Alicante Airport at midday. Chris picked up the rental car and they drove to Las Palmaretes, about an hour's drive northeast of Alicante, near Cala d'Or. The local Catalans had nicknamed the small settlement "Manhattan" because it was largely populated by Americans. House number 17 belonged to Artem Galebnikov, but of course, a straw man was listed in the land registry. The Forsters had arrived from Vienna in the summer: Roxane Forster, 68, and her husband Chris Forster, 50, a retiree. Frankie was a seasoned operator, and no one could doubt the authenticity of their new identities and documents. Chris Forster had opened an account with €250,000 at Caixa Bank, which should be enough for a nice, long vacation.

The Forsters fit in well with the neighborhood; they were quiet and unobtrusive. If Chris hadn't thrown a barbecue party for the neighbors in the generously sized garden during the first week, no one would have taken any notice of the newcomers. Once a week, the couple drove to San Joan d'Alacant, returning from the small town fully loaded with supplies for a week in their dirty brown electric car.

He had drained the pool at the back of the house and covered it. The sandy beach was right in front of the house. Of course, it wasn't a private beach; they weren't Onassis. But Chris bathed and swam several times a day in the clean waters of the Mediterranean. Few neighbors shared Chris's enthusiasm for the Mediterranean, so he was usually alone and mostly bathed naked. Roxane usually waded into the water up to her navel in the late afternoon, because by then the surf had calmed to a gentle ripple, and the little fish swam over to Roxane to nibble at her skin and pussy. She giggled because the little mouths tickled her pussy so deliciously, and she shuddered with innocent lust. Chris, who loved to tinker with the gas grill, conjured up sandwiches with fried food for lunch and always a lavish meal in the evening. He loved cooking and grilling and was really good at it; Roxane only took care of the strong morning coffee with croissants and the large thermos of

ice-cold lemonade for the day. They only drank wine in the evenings.

Frank Halter had placed his father Artem's business, and later his own, in the hands of capable lieutenants when he was arrested and imprisoned. He had plenty of time to get his affairs in order. During his years in prison, he had little contact with the lieutenants, and after his release, he had no time at all and, frankly, little desire. He was on the warpath, highly focused and forward-thinking. He had secretly gotten his mother out of prison. He couldn't help but grin. It was a small masterpiece, meticulously planned and executed with nerves of steel. He hid his mother in the trade union hotel in Semmering and continued the charade as Dr. Aaron Weissmann for five weeks. It was thrilling to be able to amuse himself with the good Kerzendocht for over a month on the lawyer's table. In the Grey House, the prison, right under the noses of the justice system. That was a blast!

In the evenings, the Forsters sat in front of the house and watched the sunset, which was especially beautiful in this corner of the world. "Your grandmother, Jessipowa, was a real piece of trash. She completely ruined and corrupted my poor Artem, Chris." She always called him by his new name, just to be safe. She let the yellowed pages containing Artem's life story fall to the floor. "I found it distressing from the beginning that you had your grandfather's middle name. Jessipow wasn't a good man; he was a drunk, a pimp, a thug, and a murderer. You always claimed that knowing the tribe you came from meant something to you. No, Chris, you sprang from my loins, and you have nothing of Jessipow's. Nothing at all."

Chris placed his glass of ratafia, a local herbal liqueur, on the small table. "We'll never agree on this, Roxane. I am the son of Artem, the son of Yesipov. That's simply who I am. I'm not the son of no one, the son of a nobody. You were a highly sought-after woman back then, could have conceived with anyone, but Artem is truly my father." Roxane sighed deeply. "Yes, I was Artem's whore for many years; he wanted it that way. I never hid that from you. And of course, you are Artem's biological son and not the bastard child of my sexual escapades. I knew ways and means to conceive you only with Artem." They both stared at the small ripple against the sandy beach.

Roxane placed Artem's life confession on the small table and picked up her glass of rosé. "Chris, I never asked you about Frankie's plans, and frankly, I don't want to know the details. The policewoman would just beat me out of it again. But I never understood why you kept up this charade in my prison for so long. You completely ruined poor Rachel; you turned her into a slut. I talk to her every week. We used to be friends, but I'm devastated and very sad that she's now a slut who falls into everyone's arms."

Chris swirled his shot glass in his hand. He was thinking. "I can tell you two things about the whys and wherefores, Roxane, but I don't know if that will help you. Well, firstly, it was a game with the police. Just imagine President Johannes Wallner's face. How his eyes would almost pop out of his head when he realized my trick, my substitution. To imagine his stupid astonishment, that's pure magic, Roxane. Pure magic. Secondly, I have to confess, Rachel Kerzendocht was your friend, but I didn't think much of her. That bigoted attitude, that heart-wrenching concern for sick Kerzendocht, it always repelled me. But with shorter hair and the prison uniform, she was the perfect double. Yes, I only used her sexually, I don't deny that at all. On the one hand, she was a small, unassuming mouse, like most good Jewish women are. Back then, she wasn't even aware that she had a magnificent, hungry body, with all the trimmings. But I felt it the very first time, in Rachel. A sexually repressed volcano lay dormant. I did my best to bring this volcano to the surface and make it erupt with all its power. I succeeded, and I had a lot of fun with her sexy body. I don't deny that either. That's who I am, Roxane, you know it better than anyone."

Tears glistened in Roxane's eyes. "She was so sweet, so chaste, so innocent. And you ruined her, corrupted her forever. Just for fun. You don't even realize what kind of person you've become, Chris. Rachel was just a pillow to you; her being, her character, didn't appeal to you in the slightest, let alone interest you. I'm sad, Chris, sadder than I've been in a long time." She angrily wiped away the tears. "And now Sarah is your prey, you're stalking her like a hungry tiger. She's young and very pretty, admittedly, not married long, and you're going to run her over like a steamroller." Frankie's head jerked up. "Roxane, I'm not the tiger, not by a long shot. Sarah's on my heels and I'm holding back precisely because she's so pure and faithful. But she's the one driving me." Chris took a good swig of liquor. "Roxane, I belong to you, to you alone.

We make love every night because we have a unique relationship. A relationship stronger than a fling with some Long Island chick." Chris leaned forward and hugged her. "Roxane, I want to be with you for life. Until my last breath." Roxane loved the way he hugged her. She'd loved it since he was born.

Chris had told the truth. He hadn't started the tryst; Sarah Stein from Long Island had. She had set up a deck chair and was watching Chris swim in the ocean. She had no intention of doing anything with him; she had chosen a discreet bikini because she was a shy and faithful wife. She had grown up in cramped conditions in the Bronx and converted to Judaism when she married old Mr. Stein, who, unfortunately, wasn't a passionate lover and primarily had his mind on the stock exchange, where he commuted every morning to work as a trader. She may have only pleasured her husband with her mouth, but she never looked left or right. An affair would destroy her princess-like life in an instant. Stein showed no mercy; the divorce papers, (Jewish Divorce Document / Sefer Kritut) complete with signature, were surely already prepared and tucked away in a drawer or his safe. No, Sarah wasn't like that; she didn't look left or right, she only looked straight ahead. Where naked Chris swam, parting the waves with his powerful arms.

Sarah let out a whistle of appreciation as Chris came ashore naked. "Adonis, Dionysus, and the Faun all rolled into one, Chris. It must have been the goddesses who endowed you so well." Chris laughed, slightly embarrassed, and came closer. "You're Sarah Stein, aren't you?" he babbled, picking up the thread of the conversation. "I'm afraid I don't know which three guys you're talking about, Sarah. I hope they're decent people and not gangsters." Sarah smiled gently. "Nonsense, people from ancient Greek mythology, a hobby of mine." Chris nodded and sat down opposite her in the sand. He still didn't care that she was secretly glancing at his crotch. "Ancient Greek stuff, yeah, sure. They never mentioned it at my school, or I was just asleep. Or both, if you like. Gods and goddesses? No fighting, no murder and mayhem? No action?"

Sarah laughed brightly. Little did she know she was hooked. "Murder and mayhem, action? Plenty, Chris, tons! It only became peaceful when all the gods and goddesses were dead at the end. It was quiet, deathly quiet. Then the humans raised their voices,

roared their battle cries, because they now felt like gods. And bashed each other's heads in. So no, ancient mythology is more exciting than any Rambo movie, my dear!" Sarah nodded at his penis. "Is it a curse or a blessing?" Chris blinked for two ticks. "I never read complaint letters; I throw them away immediately. He's nothing special. A faithful companion, I can't complain." His grin was downright cheeky. Really cheeky. Sarah looked down. "I've only been married a short time, not even a year. And my husband's companion is considerably more modest and lazy, taciturn, so to speak." She giggled at the double entendre. "Taciturn. Lazy in my mouth." She clapped her hand over her mouth. "I didn't mean to be indiscreet, Chris. It just slipped out. Yes, sometimes it slips out of my mouth," she added with a double entendre. Now she blushed deeply, the redness spreading from her cheeks and ears down to her bikini top.

Chris rolled his eyes and grinned again. "It might not be exactly what the Bible says, but it does say that everyone serves the Lord in their own way." He looked at her curiously. "You serve your Lord with your mouth, which is very commendable for us Christians, perhaps for you Sabbath-goers as well. Am I to understand that you're still a virgin, Sarah?" Sarah held up ten fingers in indignation. "Nonsense, Chris. My stepbrother..." she paused. "Never mind, I'm definitely not a virgin anymore, sir!" Her mock indignation made them both laugh. She became serious again. "It's somehow your fault, Chris, that I tell you my bedroom secrets like a silly schoolgirl. At 24, I'm no schoolgirl, definitely not. Does your wife still fall for your charm, Chris?" His eyes slid across the sea and lingered on Sarah's face. "My wife? She's in a higher league than me, Sarah. Sometimes I act around her like a 14-year-old going through puberty."

They chatted for another hour. With flushed cheeks, she explained to him what she meant by fellatio. No, Mr. Stein had never truly taken her in his arms like a man; his powers simply weren't up to that anymore. But he desperately wanted a child, a son, an heir. "So we made a convoluted arrangement. Derek, my stepbrother, would be the sperm donor. Of course, I never told my husband that Derek was my stepbrother and that we'd been doing this since we were kids. Derek had to sign a contract. Mr. Stein explained it to him. "You are relinquishing all rights of paternity. You'll receive $100 for each sperm donation, generously." Derek

signed, and since then we've been working diligently on having a son. Derek comes three or four times a week, the dear fellow. Mr. Stein sits on the edge of the bed with a sour expression, counting every single shot donation. Derek takes the money and quietly disappears, and I lean over my husband's lap. You'll probably despise me, Chris, for sacrificing my dignity for my husband's son."

Chris had smiled broadly, but now he was serious again. "How could I despise you or your husband? He made a Solomon-like decision, and not to your disadvantage. Even if you've known and loved Derek since he was a child, the sperm donation itself is also for your pleasure!" Sarah couldn't look him in the eye. "Yes, there's something to that. I cheer and jubilee every time I get a sperm donation, so my husband keeps track. I really enjoy it; it's not about supplementing Derek's pocket money." Chris stood up; he wanted to go back in the water. Sarah stood up hesitantly. She dropped her bikini and followed him.

Hand in hand, they waded out. When the water reached their hips, he took her. Her eyes were wide with wonder, but then she helped him to force him into herself. Sarah let herself fall backward, floating lightly and gracefully above the realm of the sea god. Poseidon performed the task, steadily and powerfully, with great dignity. When it was over, she stood up and hugged Chris. "Mr. Stein can keep those 300 dollars," she joked. Chris wasn't unhappy with how things were going. Of course, he would tell Roxane after dinner, but with a clear conscience.

He found Roxane with a tear-stained face and reddened eyes. "I spoke with Rachel on the phone. We cried together because she was incredibly sad that she meant so little to Dr. Weissmann. Every woman, even the lowest streetwalker, has her dignity, the thing that holds her body and soul together. And you trampled on her dignity for six weeks. She can't forgive you, and most of all, she can't forgive herself. Broken hearts lie to the left and right of your path because you can't help it, Chris."

She perked up again when Chris told her how Sarah Stein had hunted him down and brought him down. Yes, she laughed uproariously as he recounted the conversation about fellatio and Sarah's various techniques in vivid and colorful detail. Chris shook his head; no, technically the old man had never taken her, he just

couldn't. Roxane laughed until she cried because Chris described Sarah's fellatio so vividly and intensely, as if he'd been right there. Roxane slapped her thighs as she laughed. "Well, I would never have been satisfied with just that offering of lips; I would have pounced on him and devoured him whole!" She wiped her tears of laughter away with the back of her hand. But Roxane's jaw dropped open as Chris recounted the bizarre arrangement. "What a cunning little minx, by my soul! Letting her own brother wait on her hand and foot while her husband sits by like a miserable wretch, counting the sperm donations. 100 dollars a shot, you said? My boy, I'm too old for this era, because that wouldn't have happened in my day! The thought makes me seem old-fashioned, oh my God! I never wanted to be old-fashioned, and certainly not to appear old-fashioned!"

Chris had to cheer her up quickly, so he told her how Poseidon had tossed the girl before him like driftwood. Roxane grinned again. "The first time the hunted rabbit has eaten the tiger!" Roxane admired and envied the young girl. "Oh, Roxane, she's nothing special, nothing exciting. A nice diversion while swimming, that's all." Roxane was visibly reassured. She allowed her boy a little variety. "I'm so glad I have a son and not a daughter. I wouldn't have had any fun with such a cunning hussy. A harpy like that would have killed me long ago." Chris asked what a harpy was.

The news from Vienna prompted Chris to set up a conference call with two of the lieutenants. Naturally, they used code words for police, bribes and everything else. In case anyone was listening. Gernot and Jan, the Pole, were audibly in a bad mood. "The Russians and the Asians are putting our business under a lot of pressure, Boss." Chris objected to that form of address. "We're not filming some Hollywood blockbuster here. And as for the competition, get creative. Attack is still the best form of defense. Put a few heads on the skewers, and that'll take care of things. Guys, I'm stuck here in Biarritz, so you'll have to manage without me." "Biarritz?" Gernot and Jan asked simultaneously. "We thought you were in Miami, Chief." Chris was about to explode, insisting he wasn't the chief either, but then he thought better of it. "Guys, you're the chiefs now, especially you, Gernot. I certainly won't be able to join you before August or September. So, take the reins and crack down hard, okay?"

Gernot audibly gasped for air. “August, September? Well, that’s how it is then. There’s something else, boss. Every day, one cop or another shows up, gropes our girls, and demands your attention like a maniac. They’re getting bolder and bolder, more and more demanding. They stopped believing our story about you having business in Prague a long time ago.” Chris only hesitated for a moment. “Alright, let yourselves be interrogated and threatened, it’s supposed to sound credible. And then whisper under your breath that I’m recovering from my gunshot wounds in Miami, Biarritz, or wherever. Give them a good old-fashioned shootout, let me bleed and limp away. I need rest, sunshine, and a hot nurse. Okay? Yeah, yeah, it’ll all work out.”

Jan, the silent one, spoke up. “Boss, the cops are relentlessly searching for you, Gernot already pointed out. They claim you killed a dozen women. A dozen, yeah. Is there any truth to that, boss?” Chris shifted on the park bench. “Jan, don’t be an idiot. I buy women, I sell them, and if they’re pretty, I take them. Me, killing women? What’s the point? What would I get out of it?” Chris waited to see if his arguments were having any effect. After a while, Jan continued. “The cops are going door-to-door with this story, it’s no laughing matter, Chief. Our girls are completely thrown off by all this cop talk. They’re afraid of you, a different kind of fear than usual, Chief. They’re reading the newspapers too, and there have been some unsolved murders of women recently.” Chris had to dig deeper into his bag of tricks. “Yeah, there’s a policewoman, small and vicious like a terrier. She’s behind all this, she’s siccing the cops on you.” Jan huffed. “Yeah, that’s right, she’s always around, a real wild thing, that jewish policewoman, Chief!” Chris was gaining the upper hand. “She blames me for not getting what she wanted from our little fling. Not at all. She hurled the nastiest Yiddish insults at me and swore I’d regret my mother ever giving birth to me.” He waited anxiously to see if the seed would sprout. He heard Gernot say to Jan, “That’ll sort things out. A frigid woman is just as fierce as a spurned one. That explains a lot, Jan.” Gernot took the microphone again. “Boss, we understand. We’ll send the cops somewhere, maybe to Vientiane or Bangkok; that’s where the nests with the prettiest nurses are.”

Roxane waited until Frank got out of the water, where Sarah was already waiting for him. Roxane zoomed in with her cell phone camera and fixed it to the veranda railing. As she had done

so many times before, she filmed Frank fucking the lovely Sarah on the beach. Roxane's lust raged in her womb as Frank's powerful cock parted Sarah's labia. Roxane loved this moment when her son rammed his cock into the girl's cunt with a firm thrust. Yes, he really rammed it in; he liked that very much, and Sarah's protests could be heard all the way to the veranda. Roxane stared mesmerized at the magnified genitals on the screen. She stared on the screen and Frank fucked Sarah three times in a row in the sand. His balls bounced up and down as he came inside her. Roxane waited a little while, then ran naked into the water. She stood with her legs spread as the water reached her navel. The fish came and nibbled at her inner thighs and her cunny. She closed her eyes, relived the joyful, wild fucking of Frankie and Sarah. The small fishes continued to nibble at her sensitive inner thighs and her spead cunny. She parted her labia with her hand to let the tiny fish near her most intimate place. Her finger gently rubbed her throbbing clit, and she shuddered slightly in orgasm. She didn't masturbate as often as she formerly used to, but here, in the shallow water, watched only by the tiny fishes, there was something special about it! She briefly submerged herself to cool her flushed face, then strolled back to the porch.

Two hours later, Chris sat on the sand, Sarah lying across his lap after their fourth copulation of the afternoon. After his third ejaculation, she had brought his penis back to an erection with her mouth, lips and tongue, and then she had ridden him. Wildly and unrestrainedly, she slid her cunt up and down his long shaft, her buttocks dancing wildly and demandingly, as this was one of her favorite positions.

Chris couldn't let go of the conversation with Gernot and Jan. Hofstätter and his gang were still on his trail. He looked around; Las Palmaretes and Manhattan were as quiet and peaceful as ever. Sarah came to swim and shag every day, which was very nice, but hadn't she long suspected that the Forsters were fake? That their inconspicuousness was just a cover? He had to make a decision, perhaps even cut his vacation short?

Roxane initially said nothing when he brought it up over their evening drinks. "Do I still have time to pack my suitcase?" she asked. He said 48 hours; they would take the midday flight from Alicante. If she agreed, he could book it right away. Roxane said

she would call Rachel and ask her to fill the refrigerator, as they wouldn't land in Vienna until the evening. Chris looked at her, perplexed. "No, Mother, absolutely not! There's a cop sitting on our porch, and if Rachel suddenly shows up, we're done for. They've never connected Rachel with us, and that's for the best. No, please keep everything to yourself, and don't even say goodbye to our neighbors here. We'll just get in the car and leave. That's the right way." Roxane thought for a moment, processing his words. "I understand completely, Frankie. We're sailing incognito." He nodded. "The Forsters are landing in Schwechat airport, without a welcoming committee. We'll take a taxi and disappear into the darkness of the night, first to a hotel. I'll find out when you can come back to our house. The next day the cops will be back, your Gestapo woman will give you a real grilling. - Yes, you were with me in Spain, but you don't know exactly which backwater. Don't exaggerate, don't make up long stories. Just say how simply and modestly we lived here. They'll check everything and they'll find our traces. Screw it, Manhattan will never see us again. Please don't take any souvenirs, they'll rummage through your luggage like pigs. I'll transfer your photos to the hard drive, and you'll get them back when the dust settles. Roxane, the vacation ends tomorrow. It was lovely, we had each other for a few quiet months. But the day after tomorrow it's back to everyday life, everyday life full of cops. Just like before."

"I love you very much, Roxane, and this love belongs to us, only to us."

Roxane looked at him gratefully. "And what do I do about Rachel?" Frankie looked at her very seriously. "Mother, she's your friend, I didn't quite grasp that back then. When we get home, let her stay overnight. I promise you, I'll restore her dignity, little by little, every night, in installments. Now that I know how much she means to you." Roxane nodded, her eyes half-closed. "Okay, I understand. Yes, maybe you can fix this mess. She'll melt in your arms, I'm sure of it. I won't stand in your way; I know how charming you are when you want to be. But don't expect anything from me; I won't touch my friend. You know I'm not lesbian enough. Or - am I?" Roxane was completely flustered; for the first time, these frivolous, obscene images had flashed through her mind. "I don't know, I've never thought about it before. Rachel is 15 years younger than me, barely over 50. I'm a little hesitant; her friend-

ship is more important to me than that fleeting moment." Roxane sank into dull brooding. Only when Artem explicitly ordered it had she hugged and fucked a woman to pieces, quite a few in fact. But it had always felt alien to her.

The thought of Rachel haunted her that night. Of course, she had often seen Rachel naked, her trembling fingers tracing her skin. And of course, she had repeatedly told Rachel she had a beautiful body with tremendous sex appeal. But Rachel had only laughed shyly and let Roxane suck on her sensitive nipples. Roxane loved to arouse her girlfriend by stroking and squeezing her full breasts, by making her teats stiff with her lips, sucking on them and biting them until her girlfriend had to masturbate out of lust. But they never did it right; they were far too fearful and embarrassed.

The friendship with Rachel was truly something special. Rachel had once asked her if she would help her wash the half-paralyzed Kerzendocht. He, Kerzendocht, was almost completely blind and by now almost completely paralyzed. The old man was only 51, younger than his wife, but he had been bedridden for ten years. Rachel had ridden him or given him oral sex during the first few years, but he wanted variety. Rachel agreed and procured this or that neighbor for him to ride, and that made the poor fellow very happy. So they stood naked on either side of his bed, undressed him, and washed him carefully. Rachel had left it to her to wash and then to masturbate Kerzendocht's penis, because Roxane had once sighed about how much she loved penises.

Roxane was surprised that Kerzendocht's penis had hardly any foreskin left, so radically had the old Jew been circumcised. Rachel moistened his penis with her mouth, because Roxane had a special technique: she rubbed his penis firmly up and down, while at the same time her thumb constantly circled his glans. Roxane's withered breasts trembled with the effort with which she rubbed the cock firmly and mercilessly, for well over half an hour. She gasped that he was ready, and Rachel then put her lips around her husband's cock while Roxane continued rubbing without pausing. When his cock began to twitch desperately, Rachel placed her husband's fingers on Roxane's vulva and took his cock deep into her mouth. The blind man groped the stranger woman's vulva, and as soon as he found her clit, he ejaculated deep into Rachel's mouth.

Rachel swallowed everything, of course, and Roxane continued rubbing him hard until he stopped ejaculating. Roxane continued rubbing his penis vigorously as he ejaculated, letting Rachel drink and swallow the semen, stream by stream, and only stopped when it was over. It was good teamwork.

And when Rachel rode her husband's cock, Roxane sucked on Rachel's teats and bit them so hard that her friend went into a real frenzy. Often, though, the old man would stammer, "Rachel, my life, the other woman should ride me, please!" So, when he was quite ready, Roxane would straddle upon him, insert his cock and ride him hard and mercilessly, letting him ejaculate inside her. A bright glow spread across his face; he loved to squirt inside an alien vagina. Often he remained stiff even after the first ejaculation, so Roxane had to ride him a second time. The second time always lasted much longer, but Roxane persevered riding him until he ejaculated again. And Roxane had probably ridden him and let him ejaculate inside her hundreds of times over the years.

Afterward, the two women lay naked side by side, but Roxane didn't dare do more than caress Rachel's magnificent breasts with her lips and take her girlfriends large teats between her lips and bite them softly and then hard. With wide eyes, she watched as Rachel, cursing and yelling with pleasure, worked her clit from climax to climax until she was completely exhausted. - No, she would never have touched her friend intimately, never. And she would never masturbate in her presence; that was completely unthinkable.

Frankie hugged her very gently. "Mom, don't overthink it. Just get Rachel's volcano into our bed. Then you'll see. I saw the way you looked at her, Mom, the way you looked at her body. Maybe you do love playing with her and her body. Don't say yes or no now, say nothing. You'll do the right thing."

Chris packed their luggage into the rental car the next night. The following morning, they got into the car and drove off.

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Spring Murder

by István Rudas © 2026

It was April 14th. Ron ran down the stairs and to Mr. Edmund in the porter's lodge. An envelope lay on Edmund's desk. "I didn't touch it, Ronald. I called you right away. Schröder must have put it down when I briefly stepped out to pee. I didn't see him, even though I went straight out onto the street. He's not on the CCTV footage either; it only records cars. I checked immediately, but there's nothing. Absolutely nothing." Ron praised his quick reaction and took the envelope to the lab. Fingerprints only from the owner and himself. They carefully opened the envelope; it could be a letter bomb. Of course, it wasn't. A densely written page in beautiful childlike handwriting. Ron went up to the conference room and had Rosa project it onto the screen.

Attn: Detective Inspector Ronald Hofstätter

Here we are again, our game can continue. I was in Spain with my mother for six months, as you surely already know. Your Gestapo officer interrogated my mother the day before yesterday and yesterday, without having to viciously beat her up. No thanks for that; she's just doing her job by the book.

What she obviously couldn't find out is where I dumped Hanna Rosenstingl. "Dumped" is probably the wrong word. Breitenfurter Allee 12. She had a lot of fun with me, and she didn't suffer any pain. We spent two days in a frenzy of passion. She paid off her debts in many installments, in many, many neat installments, and I killed her in a flash, at the height of her ecstasy. Rosenstingl really gave my father and me a thorough dressing-down on the witness stand, as you can surely read. And that's despite the fact that Artem and I had welcomed her with open arms beforehand. I didn't torture her, even though she richly deserved it. The lovely vacation must have softened my mood.

Halali, as always, yours

Frank J. Halter

The police car sped into Breitenfurter Allee with flashing blue lights and sirens. Number 12 was an abandoned house. The door was only ajar. A rough concrete staircase led down to the cellar. There, where the staircase made a 180-degree turn, they found Hanna Rosenstingl. She was nailed naked to the wood paneling like a saint, her hands and feet biblically nailed to the wood. Her entrails had spilled out; he had slashed her open from her neck to her pubic bone with a single cut. The hunchbacked medical examiner, Dr. Gangl, straightened up. “Thank God!” Ron looked at him, uncomprehending. Dr. Gangl blinked, realizing how inappropriate it must sound. “He strangled her with the guitar string; she was dead instantly. The slashing and nailing were done post-mortem, after she was already dead. Superficially, her vagina shows no signs of violent rape. That’s why I breathed a sigh of relief; the poor woman really didn’t suffer. More after the autopsy.” He nodded to Ron and went out to his car.

Rosa caught Ron in her arms before he could collapse. Bodnar coughed behind them. Ron didn’t care; he was completely flustered. Rosa had caught him, pressing his body against her groin, and at that moment, Ron ejaculated into his underwear, his semen coming out in jerky, thrusting bursts. Rosa stared at him; she must have witnessed it all firsthand. He had seen Dr. Gangl’s fingers up close, spreading Hanna Rosenstingl for inspection. At the same time, he saw her entrails, and he felt sick. Ron stammered, “I’ll never get used to this. Never.” Bodnar patted him on the shoulder. “You’ll get used to it, Ron. Rosenstingl was over it.” Ron was reluctant to pull away from Rosa, because, strangely enough, he could clearly feel the contours of her panties and her mons pubis through the fabric. But Bodnar, that bastard, should finally stop coughing.

Rosa approached the body, her hand gliding several times over the woman’s curves, examining her. “Not a single hair, not even a fuzz. Frank went to a lot of trouble; maybe he even liked her.” Ron nodded. “I noticed that too. Her whole body shaved as smooth as a baby’s bottom.” Bodnar looked suspiciously from one to the other. “What are the ladies talking about, please?” Rosa gave him a look, one of those looks. “If you’d ever had a shaved girlfriend, you’d know she’d have tiny, almost invisible stubble. No women’s razor can remove it that thoroughly. Frank shaved her by hand after she died, and very thoroughly at that.” Bodnar’s face turned red, and

he grumbled. “And that’s important because…?” Rosa glared at him, not her usual look. “The perpetrator is changing his pattern, first of all. And secondly, he seemed to have taken a liking to Rosenstingl. He washed her very thoroughly from head to toe, but not with disinfectant to remove his DNA. No, more like a lover.” Bodnar snorted. “I’ve never washed you, Rosa.” She shot him a look that packed a punch. “But you’re not him. You don’t kill women, but you don’t wash them either. Lovers do that, usually. We should take this new aspect into account in his profile; that’s all I have to say about it. Keep that in mind when you’re typing up the report, Bodnar.” Rosa turned away abruptly, not caring that she had just given the senior officer an order.

Ron stood next to Rosenblatt. “What do you think?” Rosenblatt was also pale, but he was taking notes. “Ron, what I really don’t understand is why such a brutal cut when she was already dead?” Ron nodded grimly. “We’ll ask him, Rosenblatt, as soon as we get him. We’ll ask him.” Rosenblatt stood before the body. “A clean, smooth cut, like a Japanese sword. Am I right, Ron? Because that was my first thought. But perhaps I’m way off. Let’s leave it to the doctor to decide what to write in the autopsy report.” Ron went with Rosenblatt to his car. He didn’t want to see Rosa or Bodnar, not now.

Rosa projected her summary onto the wall of the conference room. President Wallner smoked nervously. “What do we know about our number eight?” Rosa stared stubbornly at the wall. “In any case, she’s more than just a number, Mr. President. Hanna Rosenstingl, 34 years old, police sergeant in Kagran. She was reported missing by her group leader four days ago. I spoke with him; she was diligent and always arrived on time for duty. Hence the swift missing person report. She grew up in the 9th district, living alone with her father. The usual rumors about the two of them in the neighborhood — maybe, maybe not. Unmarried, no children. Top of her class at the academy. Eleven written reprimands. I read them, of course — eleven complaints about blatant promiscuity. Her superior still recommended her as top of her class. Not unusual, since women admire and envy someone so sexually uninhibited. Top performance reviews every year; she had been recommended for higher positions. She was an informant regarding Artem Galobnikov and Frank Halter. She testified in court about her sexual relationship with Artem and Frank in detail, and

truthfully described, she had intense sexual intercourse with both father and son, separately or sometimes simultaneously with one and the other. No particular boyfriend or partner; some names are on record, none stands out." Rosa looked up. "I won't question the grieving father about the incest; it's irrelevant now."

She pulled another sheet of paper from her folder. "I found something strange in the surveillance log." She placed the sheet in the projector. No one could decipher the scribbles. Rosa's pen pointed to a specific line. "There it is. Apparently, Rachel Kerzendocht has been staying at Halter's overnight for over a week. But I haven't seen her there." Bodnar racked his brain. "The woman who replaced Halter at the Grey House," Ron nudged Bodnar. Ahhh, right. Ron exchanged a glance with Motgentau. "Guessations, speculations?" Rosa met his gaze. "Either Mrs. Halter has suddenly become a lesbian, which would greatly surprise me. Or Frank Halter can walk through walls or teleport in and out. We still have no idea if he actually sleeps at home and how he gets into the house. I'm inclined to assume that the Kerzendocht is coming because of him and is staying overnight. That makes sense, but it's pure speculation."

Ron nodded in agreement. "Anyway, that was my first thought too, Rosa. The Kerzendocht has developed a crush on Dr. Weissmann in the lawyer's office — I've already allowed myself that much speculation. Cheers, Rosa!" Wallner and Rosenblatt nodded in agreement, only Bodnar looked like a broken railway signal. "So it follows that we'll pick her up for questioning?" Bodnar fired his signal flare on a hunch. President Wallner cleared his throat. "We'll do a shit, Bodnar. I'm following your train of thought; it's quite obvious. But we've got a first glimmer of hope. No, Rosa will cling to the Halters like a burr and find out where they're from, where they're going, and who's with whom. Morgentau, you have a mission. Do it your way, with a dog whip or shawm music, I don't care. Just stay on it and find out as much as you can. Okay?" Rosa nodded, because of course she already knew that she had to approach it this way. "I'll bill the Minister of the Interior for a carton of cigarettes; Halter smokes like a chimney during the interrogation. My cigarettes, mind you." Wallner stared at the projection screen. He honestly couldn't tell how serious Rosa was. "I authorize the purchase of interrogation cigarettes from the coffee fund." Now everyone burst out laughing.

Rosa's cell phone chirped, "Ah, the autopsy report." She glanced at Wallner, wondering if she should read aloud, and Wallner nodded. Back in his day, a messenger boy or a freshman would deliver the document at a gallop. Now everything was different; it all happened so fast, accompanied only by the chirp of an iPhone. He listened attentively. Rosa nodded and nodded. "Yes, Dr. Gangl confirms everything we already saw at the crime scene. The only striking thing is how meticulously Frank washed and shaved the deceased. Rosenstingl wasn't pregnant, nor had she ever given birth. Okay, we know that too. The cut he made to open her torso was extremely precise, with clean edges. Probably a scalpel," Gangl writes. "Rosenstingl was perfectly healthy and really fit, probably from running training. She had been strangled from behind with a guitar string, a deep cut through her throat, trachea, and esophagus; she died instantly. Right-handed. Apart from the crucifixion marks on her wrists and ankles, no other injuries. No signs of rape in her vagina. If she had sex, it was without any apparent resistance. Blah blah blah. Blood alcohol level 2.7 per mille; she must have been completely drunk at the time of her death. Blah blah blah. According to the toxicology report, she too was full of poppers, just like the others before her." Blah blah blah. Signed, Dr. Gangl etc."

Rosa looked up. "A completely different perpetrator behavior. As with the other autopsies, there was a lot of alcohol and quantities of drugs, poppers by the ton. But he didn't rape her like an animal like the others. The sex must have been consensual. He washed her and shaved her carefully. A completely different perpetrator profile. Because of the vacation in Spain? Who knows. I need to think about it. Changes in perpetrator profile rarely mean anything good, folks." Rosa looked around the room. Wallner was watching very intently; the youngest had taken the lead. In his day, there hadn't been any women in the Criminal Investigation Department; the Minister of the Interior had foisted Rosa on him, and he hadn't asked why. Maybe she'd had something with the Minister of the Interior once; he wasn't known to be a misogynist.

Ron watched Rosa very closely. She had smiled suggestively when he had ejaculated in his underwear at the crime scene. Of course, she had noticed, but she hadn't mentioned it again. Ron couldn't imagine what she saw in Bodnar. He was a big, gruff man, a shrewd detective, sure, but he had days when nothing went right.

And he had a massive sexual problem with his pubescent daughter, which was why he was so relentlessly attacking Rosenblatt. Because Rosenblatt had solved the problem and was sleeping with his daughter as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Ron wasn't a clairvoyant, but he knew they would lose Bodnar if his daughter won the fight, and she would. Definitely. Ron kept to the unmarked boundaries, both with Bodnar and Rosenblatt. Candidates who stared, as if hypnotized, at the guillotine where their heads would one day roll.

Ron, however, couldn't figure Rosa out. She was what you'd imagine with your eyes closed if you described someone as "a small, delicate Jewish woman." Yes, that's what she was. But more than her sex appeal, Ron admired her fighting skills when she had to intervene. All those guys were wrong. Small, delicate? Not at all; she could explode like Bruce Lee and send even the biggest rock careening to the floorboards. And then there was her strange urge to pull every man onto her mat. She'd pulled him onto her mat too, a long time ago. With an ease and a naturalness that was unparalleled. No, he couldn't figure Rosa out. He'd ejaculated in his underwear, his body pressed tightly against hers. Only the gods knew why.

Rosa had interviewed Mrs. Halter. Only Ron was left, working with Alfred on a report for the Minister of the Interior, commissioned by the President. Rosa sank down into the chair. "I have a relatively clear picture now, Ron. Would you like to listen?" Ron nodded; anything was better than a report to the Minister of the Interior. Rosa was now puffing away as unashamedly as Wallner, even though there was a strict no-smoking policy in these hallowed halls. Ron shoved the flowerpot with the invisible plant across the table; that was the ashtray. "So, Frank Halter sleeps at home almost every night, with his mother. She really has no idea how he gets into the house. Sometimes he comes down from the attic, where her bedroom is, sometimes he comes up the cellar stairs. He never comes in through the front door; that's where our official sits. I believe her that she has no idea how the magic trick works. Let's skip the incest part; that's already been cleared up."

The thing with Rachel Kerzendocht is probably one of the strangest things. Yes, she sleeps every night in the bedroom under the roof, in Mrs. Halter's bed. She comes to copulate with Dr.

Weissmann. I swear, Ron, it's the truth. The two women have been friends for years, but since prison and Spain, everything has changed. The three of them sleep on the big mattresses, and he copulates with both of them alternately. No, don't shake your hair, Ronald, I'm just telling you what I can ascertain to be true. Frank copulates with both women alternately; the three of them have no shame in front of each other. A veritable trio infernale, but without Beelzebub. Mrs. Halter didn't want to admit it right away, but the two women also make love with each other, especially when they're waiting for him. Mrs. Halter says Kerzendocht is the first woman she's had these strange feelings for. She was completely distraught when I painstakingly coaxed it out of her. Girl sex was never voluntary for Halter, only a shameful part of her past as Artem Galebnikov's wife and whore.

She was terribly ashamed in front of me, but she admitted it, had to admit it. She looked at me very strangely, Ron. I took her hand and said, "say it out loud. That's the point of confession; when you say it out loud, it eases your conscience. That's the forgiveness every sinner longs for." Yes, Halter said, I suppose it is. She pulled herself together. "You never knew Artem, Ms. Morgentau. You obeyed his orders if you wanted to wake up the next morning. 'When London says frog, you jump.' That was him; it was one of his favorite sayings. As a young woman, I was Artem's whore, and yes, I jumped obediently, whatever it was. If he told me to get involved with this or that woman, I did it, even though women never sexually attracted me. If Artem couldn't handle a guy, he ordered me to ruin his wife and daughters. I seduced them, I ruined the wife or the daughter, and then I simply threw them on the stinking dung heap. I say this to explain my view of women. I haven't touched a girl in 30 years."

"But with Rachel, it was completely different. Yes, I invited her to stay overnight so she could have Frankie back as Dr. Weissmann. For the first few days, we didn't touch each other; we were just friends. Rachel is almost 20 years younger. And I am a withered old woman, while she is in the prime of her life. My heart pounding, I caressed her velvety skin, her feminine curves, and my emotions were on a rollercoaster for days. I was paralyzed when Rachel first touched me intimately. But it felt wonderful, so right and so beautiful, more than I had ever expected. We make love when we have to wait for Frankie. I don't regret any of it, not a sin-

gle second, Ms. Morgentau. A long-buried portal has opened, and I have stepped through it."

That's not how a criminal speaks, Ronald, but a woman of 70 and over whose sexuality is experiencing an earthquake. It will be difficult to write a report about it. The shawm music worked quite well with Halter; the dog whip was a stupid idea of our esteemed President.

Ron looked into Rosa's eyes. Her gaze was open and honest; she looked at him like a friend. "And you'll write it like that in your report, of course, for Wallner's sake, in proper, polished German, without the porn." Rosa nodded. "Yes, exactly. None of you think much of psychology, but I have a real doctorate, earned honestly and without embellishment. I know for certain that we'll only get results if we dissect Frank Halter's soul. The FBI is miles ahead of us there, Ron. Psychology should be a major at our academy, not just a two-hour slide show about Sigmund Freud's practice on Berggasse. That's just a charade. It's not the rank-and-file officers, but our officers who need to develop an understanding of psychology. We have to keep learning, otherwise we'll just be spinning our wheels like my good old Bodnar."

Ron was surprised by the urgency in her voice. "What is it, Ron?" He put his feet up on the desk. "Somehow it seems to me you're right, Rosa. But how we're going to sell that to Wallner or the Interior Minister is beyond me." Rosa laughed a cooing laugh, a menacing, icy, clanging laugh. "Just leave the Interior Minister to me, I was in the group on the study trip to the FBI. I've already got Harald in my pocket, I'll gladly let you have the President for free. Ever since that strange CIA incident, he's thought very highly of you, you've won his dirty heart in a heartbeat. You'll have to tell me the details of the CIA thing sometime, when we have a chance to catch our breath. Now I see that you've got other things on your mind. Spill the beans, Ron. I can listen in silence for a while; the Halters and the Kerzendocht thing is practically over." Rosa looked at him through the cigarette smoke.

Ron knew when to keep quiet and when to speak. "That thing at the crime scene, when you caught me. I can't get it out of my head, Rosa." She smiled like a Cheshire Cat. "Well, what was supposed to have happened? You were about to collapse, your guts were

knocking you over, that's normal if you're not a master butcher. I'm not much different. Yes, you were having an orgasm, I noticed. Is that the problem?" Ron inclined his head. "Yes, partly at least. It seemed to me you were having a great time, damn it. Eros and Thanatos, both at once. It caught me completely off guard." Rosa smiled mysteriously. "Yes, Ron, I could see it in your eyes; it took you a few moments to get ready. I pressed you against my groin; I wanted to experience every second of the battle between Eros and Thanatos up close. I'm sorry you're embarrassed. There's nothing embarrassing about it, except for Bodnar's jealous cough."

Ron realized how hot he suddenly felt. "I could feel your panties through the fabric, your mons pubis." Rosa wasn't smiling anymore; she was serious. "Yes, because I wanted to. I pressed myself against you; I wanted to be as close as possible to you in your ecstasy. Damn it, I'm a woman, Ron, in case you haven't figured that out yet." Rosa took a cigarette; it was the last one, and she crumpled the empty pack like a gangster's throat. With automatic movements, she took the next pack from her purse.

Ron had had time to think about her words. "Rosa, listen. It has nothing to do with Bodnar, only with you and me. I'm taken, Rosa, I belong to Fatme body and soul, she's the one, she's my Miss Right, I'm absolutely certain of it. Please, please, leave me alone if you mean well." There, now it was out, he had told Rosa, clearly, unmistakably despite his trembling voice.

Rosa lit another one. "I'm not good at losing, Ron. Most of the time, no one dares to reject me. I'm used to success, like a spoiled child who always gets her way. I know how flawed I am in that respect. I envy you and Fatme for the security of having each other. I've had a lot of men, but I've never had one the way Fatme has you. You're a lucky man, Ronald. And I envy and admire you, my good man. When you collapsed into my arms there at the scene of the crime, my heart skipped a beat, no kidding. I pressed you to me, between my damned thighs, which drive every man so wild with desire. I saw Eros and Thanatos battling in your features, the most beautiful moment a man can give me. Yes, back then I wanted you, I really wanted you, and I let you feel the contours, the ones I use to subjugate all men. But you didn't respond to me, only to Eros and Thanatos. Bodnar's cough deflated that balloon.

It was just a balloon. I was sad then, and I still am. I don't like losing, not really, my good man."

Ron felt a sense of security, as if he were driving straight ahead on the highway. "Rosa, I think I truly understand you. But I belong to Fatme, body and soul. Before my abduction, I hadn't fully grasped the magnitude of this security. Until then, I would have been putty in your hands. But now we've climbed so many stairs together that I don't even want to look back. I'm not dizzy; Fatme is holding my hand, and I entrust my life to her. Please understand and set me free. I would only follow you into the bushes with broken wings." They looked at each other silently, for a long time. The cigarette burned Rosa's finger. She flinched. "Yes, Ronald, yes. I know when I lost. You belong to Fatme, and I'll respect that." Ron stretched both arms across the desk and took her hands. "Thank you, Rosa."

Rosa smoked, lost in thought. "Oh, there's something else, Ronald. But it won't be in my report. On the way back, I was seized by a sudden urge and visited Hanna Rosenstingl's father. I wrote my doctoral thesis on classical and modern interrogation methods, and when I open it today, I'm ashamed of my cheeky work, my greenhorn arrogance. But they swallowed it, those academic apes. This comes to mind because I hadn't intended to interrogate the old man. I only wanted to express my condolences in person, certainly not over the phone. But the good man was favorably disposed toward the police, if only for Hanna's sake. He held my hands, and tears streamed down his wrinkled face. Yes, Hanna had been with him since she lost her mother at 16. "I trembled like an aspen leaf when I made Hanna a woman. She had many affairs afterward, but at night she lay with me, and we made love. We have a fabulous father-daughter relationship, Inspector. One that is surely pleasing to the Lord. Every evening we knelt there and spontaneously made up our prayers. We asked the Lord for his blessing, because I raised my Hanna very religiously. And Hanna often thanked the Lord for the fire in her ass; for her, it was a gift, a special favor. She loves our Lord like a loving father."

"That won't go in the record, Ronald. I don't want to take away Hanna Rosenstingl's last shred of dignity. She was one of us, a policewoman." Ronald nodded thoughtfully. Yes, it was right and good. It was astonishing how sensitive Rosa could be. "I can read

your thoughts, Ronald. I'm Bodnar's lover because he sees a daughter in me. I know about his struggle with his daughter's puberty, yes. I appreciate precisely this honesty in Bodnar. He will ultimately lose the battle, without a doubt. His daughter will turn on him like a hyena, no doubt about it. But I've decided to hold my ground to the bitter end. Stubbornness is in my blood." Ron nodded in agreement. "I've often wondered what you see in that woodcutter. Good to know now, or at least have an inkling."

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The First Shot

by István Rudas © 2026

Frank Halter was elusive. He appeared and disappeared like a ghost.

Police Chief Johannes Wallner had sat with Hanna Rosenstingl's father after the funeral. Tired and worn out, he arrived at the office hours after the others and groaned as he took off his uncomfortable black coat. He walked silently into the conference room, put two fingers between his lips, and whistled shrilly three times. His men dropped everything and ran into the conference room, into the aquarium. The president had never summoned them so rudely. Rosa, quick-wittedly, muted the phone system.

President Wallner stood before them. He wanted to keep his speech as short and to the point as possible. "Guys, we've been chasing Frank Halter for almost a year now. Yes, we're still behind, and he's always a half-step ahead. The officer outside his house is dozing peacefully; we couldn't be doing any better, for God's sake! Every electronic surveillance attempt is useless; Halter doesn't use electronic devices, pays everything in cash, and apparently doesn't have a cell phone. As far as we know. We've searched the house three times, but found nothing but used women's stockings. We're the vanguard of the Austrian criminal police, damn it, not some pimply schoolboys!" With his last words, he slammed his fist onto the table, and Bodnar flinched.

Wallner shrugged. "I'm ordering you: from now on, each of you will spend a whole day in the Halters' house, from sunrise to night. In a shift work, a different one each day, until we get him. Look, snoop, search, interrogate, and be a nuisance. Grab him, however you can. Lay him down, securely tied up, at my feet. And just so we're clear, I'll be doing random checks. And if I catch any of you dozing or asleep, he or she will be automatically fired without notice. No discussion. Drink coffee or pop pills, I don't care, but stay wide awake like guard dogs and catch the guy. Rosa, you take charge and assign the shifts. That's it, folks." Wallner slammed the door behind him as he stomped from the aquarium into his office. The four of them stared at each other.

Rosa spoke first. “Bodnar, you start tomorrow at 6 a.m., bring food and drinks, we won’t be a burden to Mrs. Halter. Then Rosenblatt, Hofstätter and me. That’s the wheel, and if you want to swap, let me know beforehand. Shut your mouths, you heard me, we’re the spearhead, not some pimply schoolboys, not even you, Rosenblatt.” He just grinned, “Yes, sir, Chief Inspector — or is it Inspector-Chief?” They spread out at their desks and organized their things, because now they would be losing at least one day a week, more likely two, to close-up surveillance.

Ron strolled past Rosa’s desk. “We should have done this a year ago, the boss is right. But we’ve never moved into a suspect’s living room, not since the Kaiser’s time.” Rosa nodded grimly in agreement. “Wallner may be old, but he’s far from being stuck in his ways. He’s boldly changing course and charting a completely new course. That surprises me in a good way. We’ll get this guy, that’s for sure.” Rosa dialed a number on her cell phone. “Yes, Mrs. Halter, this is Morgentau from the Criminal Investigation Department. Yes, thank you, you too. Well, I just wanted to let you know that starting tomorrow morning, a colleague will be coming to your house every day, all day long. No, you don’t need to prepare anything; we’ll bring our own things — food, drinks, everything. Please don’t cause any trouble. Chief Inspector Bodnar will be there tomorrow morning; you know him. Yes, Mrs. Halter, every day starting tomorrow, all day long. We’re only looking for your son; it’s certainly not directed against you. Yes, I know, Mrs. Halter. Of course, he’ll find out, but we’re going to catch him, no matter what. Yes, thank you, and have a good day too.” Rosa hung up.

“She’ll tell him tonight, Rosa,” said Ron. Rosa nodded. “Sure, Ron. But I’m no longer willing to treat Mrs. Halter like dirt. She’s not our killer, her son is. And no guilt by blood-relation, Wallner or no Wallner. He entrusted me with the leadership, and I’m leading as I intend to lead.” Ron nodded, resignedly. “I hope we haven’t made a blunder, Rosa. But it’s true, you’re leading, and we’re happy to follow you. You’re a capable detective, no question.” Ron went to his desk and muttered to Alfred. Alfred had overheard and seen everything. “Morgentau’s ethical conduct is impeccable, 100 points. Strategically, completely off the mark, Ronald. No hunter whistles and waves to the deer before aiming. Morgentau has just told Frank Halter not to take a single step toward the house. Regrettable, very regrettable. You won’t find

Frank Halter there anymore; he's very clever and strategically astute." Ron said, "Exactly my words. But you heard, Morgentau is leading the operation. Wallner's orders." Alfred said, "Your people should take their chargers and not turn off their cell phones; standby is fine. I'll be your eyes and ears, Ronald."

Bodnar may have had his quirks, but he was a good detective. He greeted Mrs. Halter politely and explained his assignment. He was wide awake, not a hint of dozing. He kept moving constantly, especially in the basement, where he turned everything upside down. There had to be a secret entrance somewhere, but his search, as thorough as he was, yielded nothing. He turned the whole house upside down, rummaging through all the cupboards and drawers. Apart from the shaving kit in the bathroom, there wasn't a single trace of Frank Halter. Finally, in the evening, he sat down with Mrs. Halter and questioned her, mentally comparing her statements with the file he knew by heart. She might have forgotten this or that, but essentially, he found nothing new. They had eaten a peaceful dinner, and Bodnar accepted a schnapps. "I'm on duty, but so what?" He was already on his fourth when Rachel Kerzendocht arrived. Bodnar's eyes feasted on the curvaceous woman.

Bodnar squeezed every last drop of information out of those two women, my goodness! He effortlessly revealed everything: how the two women shared Frank amicably, how they made love until he arrived. It was an unfair fight, two simple housewives against an interrogation specialist. The air was thick with sexual tension, and Rachel, with her curled red hair, shed her garment after garment; the Catalan herbal liqueur was doing its job. Bodnar put his jacket over his phone; Alfred mustn't see that. Rachel lay completely naked on the kitchen table, beckoning to the commissioner. Bodnar stared at her full breasts and the hungry, enticingly glistening cunt. Kerzendocht asked, "Are you really a Jew, Inspector?" He let his trousers fall. "It depends on how you want to hear it. Yes, both my parents are Jewish and I am indeed circumcised, but I'm not very religious and my wife is a Christian." Rachel stroked her cunt lustfully and grabbed Bodnar's cock. She examined the stiff man thoroughly. Rachel breathed a sigh of relief, because Bodnar was circumcised, but still had quite a bit of foreskin. Rachel pulled the foreskin all the way back and forced his penis fully inside. "Inspector, I like it best when you pull it all the way out each time and

then ram it back in hard, would that be possible?" Bodnar nodded; of course it was. Exactly as she wanted.

Nature took its course, and Mrs. Halter stared silently at Rachel's disgrace. Bodnar pulled his cock out after each thrust and rammed it back into Rachel's cunt like a jackhammer. Tears streamed down Roxane's cheeks as Bodnar thrust and pumped into Rachel, just inches from her eyes. She stared into Rachel's wide-open cunthole before Bodnar rammed his cock in again. Rachel sighed softly, just as she wanted it. After 10 minutes, Bodnar was still stuck inside Rachel's fuckhole, now deep inside. Roxane stared, her eyes blinded by tears, at Bodnar's cock, which was deep inside Rachel's cunthole, pumping his semen hard into. His balls bounced up and down with every spurt he shot into her girlfriend. Sobbing, Roxane placed her fingers on Rachel's mons pubis as Rachel brought herself quickly to orgasm with her finger.

Bodnar, once again disillusioned, realized he'd made a huge blunder. But nobody would know. When the women started making out, he indignantly chased them upstairs to the bedroom in the attic. He sat on the top step and watched as the two women made love with gleeful shouts.

Bodnar jolted awake; he had fallen asleep. At 3:30 a.m., he called a police car and had him drive him home. By 8:30 a.m., he was already in the office, typing his report from his notebook. The report skipped over everything after the first shot of herbal schnapps and ended uneventfully at 3:00 a.m., the end of his shift. Bodnar was in excellent spirits; he'd thumbed his nose at the president and dodged at least two grounds for dismissal. He'd arrived home, his little daughter was fast asleep in his bed, and he lay down beside her fully dressed. His hand slipped under the waistband of her pajamas upon her warm cunny, and then he fell asleep.

Rosenblatt took over, greeting Mrs. Halter at 7:30 a.m. He couldn't tear himself away from Elli any earlier. He, too, expertly ransacked the house, and he, too, found no secret entrance in the cellar. In the evening, his daughter called, but he couldn't leave, whether she pouted or not. He had to stay until at least midnight; there was no getting around it. He, too, couldn't resist the herbal schnapps. He really got going when he frankly described his rela-

tionship with Elli to the two women. They didn't even flinch. Incest, okay, so what? Rachel was doing her awkward housewife striptease again, and when she lay enticingly and invitingly naked on the kitchen table, Rosenblatt's mouth watered. Kerzendocht inspected his cock very closely, for she didn't quite believe he was a circumcised Jew, since he still had a lot of foreskin. But he convinced her, and she laboriously inserted his thick cock into her cunthole. Kerzendocht also loved it when he pulled his cock out after each thrust and rammed it back inside hard; that was what she liked best. Rosepetal nodded; he certainly would to do it the way she wanted. Roxane's tears flowed as Rosenblatt began to plow her girlfriends cunthole. Roxane stared into Rachel's round, open fuckhole, and Rosenblatt rammed his cock in deep, deep, and brutally. Let's skip over that part quickly; Rosenblatt also sat down on the landing and watched the two of them making love with loud, smacking sounds. No, Rosenblatt didn't fall asleep; ten minutes before midnight, he called the police car to be driven home.

Ron arrived at Mrs. Halter's at exactly 6:00 a.m. She rubbed the last bits of sleep from her eyes, and Rachel, the Kerzendocht type, scurried past them without a greeting. Ron did what the others did; he too searched the house thoroughly, inch by inch. He also found no secret entrance, but he did find an external hard drive under her used underwear. A thorough search required holding your nose, as the manual says. The hard drive only contained private vacation photos, Mrs. Halter claimed. She patiently dictated all the passwords she could think of. After half an hour, finally, the right password. He went through them picture by picture; it was boring. Really just vacation photos, nothing else. His laptop was secretly copying all the pictures, and when she said she would only hand over the hard drive under protest, he backed down. "You know, getting a court order is a bureaucratic nightmare. I've seen all the photos; that'll have to do."

He politely declined the herbal schnapps, "I'm on duty!" and left Mrs. Halter and Mrs. Kerzendocht to drink alone. He didn't even flinch when the tipsy Kerzendocht began her striptease. He examined the naked woman on the kitchen table with a connoisseur's eye and indicated that she had a very beautiful body. "Oh, you know, I'm in a committed relationship, really committed. To me, other women's bodies are just flesh, hair, and a farthole. I'm like blind, my pulse hasn't quickened at all." Mrs. Kerzendocht

pouted, but he couldn't have cared less. He followed the women upstairs to the bedroom in the attic. He, too, sat down on the landing and watched them making love. He remembered how, at the beginning of their relationship, Fatme had brought her flame, Elif, to bed with him, and he had watched them with wide eyes. Back then, he had slept with both Fatme and Elif; it had been a joyous time. Elif disappeared, Fatme stayed. During those months, he had experienced girl sex live for the first time; the practice was far more exciting than any theory. He filed it under "Other Experiences" and checked it off. Fatme hadn't had girl sex since, and that suited him just fine.

Ron sat on the landing until 3:15, wide awake, and had photographed and filmed the two of them dozens of times. For his own use, of course, but he would mention it in the report. He called a patrol car and had them drive him home. Fatme was already asleep; he didn't wake her.

Rosa also arrived promptly at 6:00 and watched in astonishment as Kerzendocht flitted past. "Greetings to you too, Ms. Kerzendocht," Rosa called after her. The day passed as usual; Rosa also politely declined the herbal schnapps. When Kerzendocht began her striptease, Rosa placed her hand on her arm, never taking her eyes off Kerzendochts magnificent breasts and her gaping fuckhole. No, she wasn't interested, thank you. The two women giggled as they went upstairs to the bedroom in the attic. Rosa also sat on the landing, took photos and videos, and reminisced about the girl-on-girl sex of her youth. In any case, she knew that much: she would interrogate Bodnar and Rosenblatt until they were thoroughly embarrassed. The nonchalance with which Rachel performed the striptease alarmed her to the utmost.

And so it went, day after day. Rosa couldn't get either Bodnar or Rosenblatt to confess. Both of them used the Kerzendocht, of course, because they weren't stupid, nor were they averse to pleasure. When Rosa was on duty at the Halter house, she sometimes felt the predator's hot breath on her neck. But it was just her overactive imagination. Two months of close surveillance continued without any tangible results. Ron had looked through the vacation photos with Rosa. No clues, maybe the blonde on the beach, wrestling with Frank in the sand. But her face was unrecognizable. So, nothing again.

Rosa was on duty again. She paced the house, again imagining she could feel the predator's hot breath on the back of her neck. Then, as if from nowhere, a paw closed around her mouth, and she inhaled chloroform. Her hand, halfway to her weapon, fell lifelessly. She plunged into an abyss, deeper and deeper.

Bodnar, who arrived the next day, was surprised that Rosa had left her phone and bag there. With a queasy feeling in his stomach, he called the office. Ron jumped up, alarmed, and ran to Wallner, reporting the situation. Wallner closed his eyes wearily. Only one conclusion was possible: Rosa had been kidnapped. Bodnar grilled the guards, but they knew absolutely nothing. He was even surprised that Ms. Morgentau had left her shift mid-shift. She had noticed it while waiting for Mrs. Kerzendocht, around 7 p.m. Bodnar was pacing like a caged animal. Finally, finally, Ron called back. He would come with Rosenblatt and the President to look for clues. Bodnar's heart sank. Rosa had been kidnapped, damn it!

No trace of Rosa. Wallner issued a massive manhunt, contacting all police stations and every officer in Vienna and within a 50-kilometer radius. The notice included a photo and description: female detective kidnapped, likely perpetrator Frank Halter. Ron sent a more recent picture of Frank from the vacation photos. Ron's gut told him Halter had made a big mistake. The wanted notice was printed by the media and broadcast on the television news. Not a single useful lead, just many well-intentioned calls and even more not-so-well-intentioned ones, which they meticulously followed up on. Ron raced to a construction site, but the suspect wasn't Frank, just strikingly similar. Two weeks of 24-hour shifts; Ron slept in the office, his head on the desk. Alfred had the phone muted and answered his calls politely. It was never anything important, and when Fatme called, Alfred spoke in a computer voice and reassured her that Ronald was asleep and would call back in the morning. Fatme, of course, knew about Alfred and was somewhat reassured. She didn't know Rosa personally, but she knew she was more than just a colleague; she was a friend.

Two weeks after the kidnapping, sheer luck intervened. Or were the Norns at odds over whether to sever Rosa's lifeline or not? Three widows, Hermine Knobloch, Erni Warnecke, and Josi Tiefenthaler, were a close-knit group of resolute women who had decided not to sink into the mire of widowhood. They met every

morning at Café Rubin on Breitenfurter Straße; it was their regular haunt, their headquarters. They made grand speeches and raised their glasses of Chardonnay, the unifying element from God's vineyard in France. After three or four hours and many a glass, they would agree on which grievance Josi should hammer out on her laptop at home and email to the district council and Vienna City Hall. Yes, that's how they were, our feisty Musketeers.

On the way home, Hermione stopped. She was the youngest and still had quite good hearing. "Don't you hear anything? There's a woman screaming, coming from the construction site!" She shoved the other two across the street to rescue a damsel in distress. Yes, now the others heard it too; it wasn't their imagination. Emboldened by the Chardonnay, they strode forward. A surreal sight. Down there, in the half-finished basement, a damsel was chained to the steel beams, a man was lashing her bloody back with a leather whip, and the girl was screaming hoarsely in pain. Erni and Hermione rushed forward to the makeshift railing and shouted at the top of their lungs. Josi, the practical one, pried three planks from the jumble of building materials and armed the Musketeers. They ran, waving wooden planks and yelling, as fast as they could to the other corner of the construction site, where an unpaved concrete staircase led down. All three were shouting at the top of their lungs. By the time they reached the bottom, the executioner was long gone.

They ran to the girl — no, she was a young, slight woman. They untied her bonds, and Rosa fell to the ground. Naked, her eyes wild, and half out of her mind. "Is he gone?" she croaked, and Josi bent over her. "Yes, the guy's gone!" Rosa tried to cover her nakedness with her hands. "Phone?" she managed in a hoarse, croaking voice. Hermine handed her the cell phone. She dialed the office. It was Alfred; he was the only one who spoke with a Meidling accent. "It's me, Alfred. I've been freed. Please come and get me," she paused briefly, "Where are we?" Erni said the construction site was behind Breitenfurter Allee 73, and Rosa repeated the address for Alfred. "And Ronald, bring me something to wear, I'm naked, Alfred." She handed back the cell phone. She quickly covered her breasts and looked up at her rescuers. "I'm Rosa Morgentau, a detective. He kidnapped and tortured me for two weeks. The officers will be here soon." Erni handed her her scarf to cover her nakedness. Josi took off her jacket and put it around Rosa's shoulders.

“Can you stand up, Ms. Morgentau? We should go upstairs and wait for your colleagues there.” The three of them helped, and Rosa was finally on her own two feet, unsteady, but on her own two feet nonetheless. They led her to the concrete stairs. “He tortured me, but he didn’t break me.” She repeated this sentence incessantly until they reached the top.

The police car came racing up with flashing lights and sirens, followed by Rosenblatt’s Mercedes. Rosenblatt, Bodnar, and Ron jumped out of the cars, followed by two uniformed officers, pistols at the ready. Bodnar gently took her in his arms, unable to utter a sound. Rosa stared at Ron. “He tortured me, but he couldn’t break me. He was furious, and I just laughed at him. If he’s going to kill me, he should at least do it with a sour face. I wiped that grin off his face.” Ron stepped next to Bodnar and handed Rosa a tracksuit. “It was the only thing I could grab quickly, sweetheart. Take it easy now, we’ll talk later, okay?” Bodnar led her behind a construction shed and helped her dress. Of course, no one had thought about shoes. Ron barked orders. “Bodnar, you drive her to the AKH (General Hospital) immediately. Don’t take your eyes off her, Halter might try to intercept you, so be on your guard! Rosenblatt, you take down the personal details of the three women and drive to the office; you’re our command center. Call the forensics team on the way, the big guns. I’ll stay and secure the crime scene. I’ll call the president myself right away. Now, let’s go!”

Ron first called his home; Fatme didn’t answer. He recorded three sentences on tape and then called the president. “Mr. Wallner, Rosa is free and alive. She has a badly bruised back, and Bodnar is driving her straight to the Vienna General Hospital (AKH). We should probably post two police officers there; the wicked Halter might turn up. Rosenblatt is on his way to the office; he’s supposed to be the point of contact. I’ll stay here and wait for the forensic team. They’ll leave no stone unturned, because the Halter had to flee in a hurry and must have left at least his toolbox behind. Could you possibly take over the media, and interior minister, Mr. President? We’re understaffed.” Ron took a deep breath. Wallner laughed into the phone. “Wow, Hofstätter, she’s free! Free! And she’s alive, our Rosa! You have no idea how relieved I am. A badly bruised back? Will she recover?” Ron assured him that Rosa was unbroken. “Her back looks like mincemeat, but that’s just on the surface. She’ll recover, Mr. President!” Wallner

grinned into the phone, as if Ron could see it. “The owner had to flee, didn’t get the chance to kill her? That’s good, he’s no longer two steps ahead of us. We have a valuable survivor. We may have finally caught up.” Wallner hung up.

Ron waited for the crime scene investigators. A full-scale operation. They would arrive with at least two vans, packed with all the equipment, at least six officers. They might even have a sniffer dog with them; it was a shame he hadn’t ordered it right away. His eyes scanned the scene, nothing would escape his notice. His thoughts drifted to Rosa. No, she wasn’t broken, she hadn’t lost her mind. Her back was mincemeat, that much was clear. A few weeks off work, okay. He decided to drive straight from here to the Vienna General Hospital (AKH); he wanted to speak with her himself. Bodnar was her support, but he was too close to the scene for a dispassionate interview. He called the office; Rosenblatt was there. “Bodnar brought her in without any trouble and is sitting with her. Wallner has ordered two officers to the Vienna General Hospital (AKH) for her protection. Wallner is on his way to see the Minister of the Interior. Everything’s calm here, Ronald. You can relax.”

The police had priority at the AKH. Rosa was x-rayed and examined from head to toe. Bodnar had insisted on a comprehensive toxicology report. He suspected that scoundrel Halter was capable of anything; perhaps he had poisoned Rosa. He explained the situation and his suspicion to the doctor. She understood immediately. “Will do, Commissioner. I’ll personally arrange everything necessary and let you know tomorrow around 2 p.m.; I have your card.” Rosa’s sore back looked worse than it medically required. She was covered with a thick layer of ointment and given a tight bandage. An hour later, she was sitting upright in bed, hooked up to an IV. Bodnar held her hand and listened to her. Rosa told him everything, starting with the chloroform. Bodnar didn’t have a free hand to take notes, but he remembered every detail. He had only one question at the beginning. “Did Mrs. Halter have anything to do with it?” Rosa shook her head. “No, she was sitting at the kitchen table doing crossword puzzles. No, she didn’t know anything about the robbery beforehand. Later… well, you’ll have to beat that out of her, but not with violence, nothing will come of it. First gain her trust, then ask questions. Classic interrogation, without fists. If you use violence, she’ll tear the guard down.”

Ron arrived an hour later and relieved Bodnar. “Get a good night’s sleep; we need you freshly washed and ironed tomorrow morning.” Bodnar swallowed his retort and slunk off. Ron sat down next to Rosa. He had a notepad and pen in his hand. He brushed a strand of hair from her face; he didn’t have the patience for holding hands. He wrote everything down, absolutely everything. The attack with chloroform. Yes, he must have come from the cellar. She was standing with her back to the cellar stairs. She woke up with a pounding headache in a wine cellar. “A very old wine cellar, just some huge, ancient wine barrels. I was handcuffed to a water pipe. The wine cellar was only a five-minute drive from Breitenfurter Allee; on the last trip, he didn’t take any detours — he wanted to kill me there.” Ron looked up from his notes. “Yes,” Ron confirmed, ” “we found guitar wire in his bag. The tracking dog followed his scent for 150 meters to a parking lot, where the trail ended.” Rosa said it was definitely a white Ford Transit. She could see everything under the blindfold. “He’s torched the Ford by now, no question,” Ron said. Rosa suggested he probably used, or had used, the wine cellar quite often. “He had a lot of stuff down there; it wasn’t some random place like the construction site. Who knows how many victims he raped on that old mattress where I could sit and sleep. He’d hang me on a rather long chain so I could use the bucket and drink the tap water and wash myself halfway.”

Rosa gritted her teeth. “I was fed twice a day, reheated frozen food. He must have a refrigerator and a microwave, but I couldn’t see it. The dim lightbulb burned day and night. He gave me an old, smelly blanket to cover myself with at night. He brought food on a tin plate with a plastic spoon. Mass-produced. He raped me every day, several times, six or eight times, I don’t know exactly. Some days much more often. I remained passive and didn’t resist; I wanted to go on living. Between his navel and penis, he had a strange compass tattooed on him, just the rays pointing in the wind directions, not a circle. Twelve or thirteen centimeters in diameter, dark blue. I’ve seen compasses like that on Russians before. My hands were tied, and he always had great difficulty forcing his cock in. He isn’t circumcised like the Jews. He always fucked me for a long time, ten to fifteen minutes. He grinned crookedly when I came.” I always spat in his face afterward, but he took it without a word. We hardly spoke. “You’ll be begging me to do it for you,” was his standard line. So I spat at him; that was answer enough for me.

He listens to the police radio all day. He reads the daily newspaper every morning. I've watched him; someone feeds him information from the classified ads section. Every two or three days, he finds an ad, then sits down with a notepad and pen and deciphers it manually. The ads are never in the same place — well-planned. He gets a phone call two or three times a day; he always says, "One moment, please," and goes outside. He's careful, never showing any weakness. He must have at least a bathroom above the wine cellar, because he showers, shaves, and wears light perfume every day. Old Spice or something similar. He's very clean, but the wine cellar is a filthy hole. Above on the makeshift work surface that serves as his shelf and desk, he has attached two pieces of chipboard. Nineteen female portraits, eight of them with a red X through them — our murder victims. On the other piece of chipboard, eight men, three of them with a red X through them — the three judges we found. I stared at the faces for hours, but I'm absolutely certain I don't know any of them.

Ron folded his notebook. "You need rest and sleep; this is incredibly tiring. Get some sleep, Rosa. The two officers at the door aren't letting anyone through who they don't know personally; they don't care about IDs. We know how easily the Halter can forge an ID. A very good precaution by Wallner. He's probably doing somersaults because we have you back alive." Rosa held him back. "Ron, do you have a picture of Fatme, a portrait maybe?" Ron showed her several pictures on his phone. "Yes, that's her! The last woman on his menu! I'm sure of it, absolutely certain." Rosa's eyes filled with tears. "He's serious, Ron. Neither Wallner nor any of us are on his 'list', not even me. But Fatme is the last one in his line. Oh my God!" Rosa reached for his hand. "Fatme! What a bastard! If you really want to hurt someone in the long run, you kill the person you love most. That's not advanced math, that's a mafia's rule. Oh Ron, just watch out for her!" He promised to come back tomorrow. Ron left, shaken to his core.

Ron went straight to the office. He jotted down his notes on the screen, wrote "provisional interrogation Rosa Morgentau" at the top, and the date and time. Part 1, he wrote next to it. He uploaded the document to the intranet so all his colleagues could read it. Everyone had already left. He smoked another cigarette, then another, and fed the empty flowerpot — the one with the invisible plant — with cigarette ash, thinking about everything.

Bodnar had obeyed his order and gone to bed early. Later, his little daughter lay down next to him, and he half-woke. His hand slipped beneath the waistband of her pajamas, the only concession she had ever extracted from him. Laura spread her thighs and he rubbed her hot clit for 15 minutes until she had a delicate, hard trembling orgasm. This light finger play had no meaning for him, no weight. He would never give himself up for incest; he had told her that a hundred times. He slept soundly until morning. Ron strolled home; he would be there before Fatme and throw two steaks in the pan.

Fatme arrived shortly before midnight, took a hot shower, and they devoured the steaks and the flatbread from the Turkish bakery. A glass of Spanish red wine completed the meal. Fatme had overheard his message and was happy that Rosa had been rescued alive. Ron put down his cutlery and leaned forward. “Fatme, you’re in mortal danger. The killer has added your photo to his hit list. I hate to say it, but he means business. Could you send me a picture of the client before the escorting session? I want to make sure he doesn’t book you normally and get his hands on you. He’s got plenty of money, the bastard.” Fatme took a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll do it that way. The pimp takes a picture of the client, new security regulations, blah blah blah. And you send me a text, ‘OK’ or ‘Run for your life.’ Yeah, we can do that. That should be enough. Although, if I were the killer, I’d send a picture of the taxi driver. I’m not stupid.”

Of course, Fatme was right. For every action, there was a countermeasure; they both knew that. But you had to do everything possible, even if the idea was full of holes like Swiss cheese.

No sooner had Ron entered his office the next day than his phone buzzed. He picked it up. It was Frank Halter. Alfred’s display on the phone system read: “Over a dozen relays around the globe. No chance.” Ron nodded grimly. “I would have expected a letter from you, Frank,” Ron said provocatively, raising his hand. Alfred put all the department’s phones on speakerphone. “Oh, are we on a first-name basis by now, Detective Inspector? Well, fine by me. I actually wanted to check on Rosa; I hope she’s alright?” Ron remained calm. “Thanks for asking. You just gave her a bad beating, but she’s okay and will be back on your trail soon. It should drive you crazy, because this was your first shot that went so disas-

trously wrong. That's how I recorded it. You make mistakes, sportsman. Morgentau will lead us to your wine cellar, we'll take you down nice and easy and lock you up for good." Ron paused and looked through the glass panels where his colleagues were listening breathlessly. Even the president had jumped to his feet and was staring at his phone.

"Point goes to you, Ronald. I can call you Ronald, can't I? And as for the wine cellar, it's been empty and deserted since last night. I never intended to let Rosa live; that certainly wasn't a good idea. On the other hand, I wanted her to suffer and deliberately showed her my outstanding list. I'm sure she mentioned it." Ron thought for a moment and let out a forced laugh. "Yes, that really wasn't a good idea. We'll track down the ladies and keep an eye on them. I'm sure you're stupid enough to get caught like that. It's actually disappointing; this game has really become boring. If there's nothing else to do, then goodbye." Ron knew his bluff was on very thin ice. He wanted to provoke Frank Halter; maybe he'd lose his temper now. "Well, dear Ronald, then I'll see you when I'm arrested. I'll call you again, because I still have a few things to do. Goodbye." Crackle, the line was dead. Alfred answered. "He called from an unregistered cell phone, routed his call through a dozen relays around the world — there's nothing I can do about it." Ron nodded; Alfred had certainly done his best. Where did Halter get all these skills? He didn't use any electronic devices, we thought. But this call proved he was more capable than we thought. Or he had accomplices we knew absolutely nothing about.

The weeks passed, Frank Halter had disappeared, Rosa Morgentau was back in the saddle after days. No, she declined the president's offer of extended leave, time to process the trauma. "I'm continuing to work because now he's done it personally, the bastard. I want to put a bullet between his eyes myself. He's practically begging for it. But thank you for your concern, Mr. President." Wallner relented; secretly, he admired the young woman. She had the heart of a detective and real guts.

Of course, Wallner knew that both Bodnar and Rosenblatt were licking the honeypot of Ms. Kerzendocht, week after week. But he couldn't fire them as easily as they deserved. He would cut his spearhead in half; he couldn't. Not now.

Fatme was becoming more and more vulnerable, thinner and thinner. Ron could only be the rock in the storm, the strong oak against whose trunk Fatme could cling and cry without having to explain her tears. He regularly canceled on the pimp and punched her out of trouble. He didn't even acknowledge Madame Florence's whining. Fatme was grateful that she could visit her father every afternoon. Ron thought it was right that Fatme was by her father's side as he died. But every night she went to the escort, lay exhausted and sad in the client's arms, and let him fuck her with a mournful expression as often as he could.

She came home, showered, and lay down next to Ron. "I was so detached again while the guy fucked me. And these pigs apparently like it when I'm heartbroken, Ron. Please forgive me for coming home so late, but I didn't care how often he fucked me. I didn't even get any pleasure when he licked my clit to orgasm during the breaks. I always orgasmed as if I weren't heartbroken, but I didn't enjoy it. That was the only difference. The Persian licked me to orgasm during the three breaks and he was visibly proud. My tears only increased his lust. I wasn't just heartbroken, but I felt more humiliated than I'd ever felt before. He gave me a thousand-dollar tip, and I didn't even thank him." Ron held her tightly in his arms. "Don't think about it too much. He's not the first Persian to lick your clit. And there will be many more, I think. Sleep now, love, let go and dream."

One late afternoon, he came home to find Fatme sitting motionless in a chair, staring into space. She hadn't even taken off her jacket. She looked up at him wide-eyed. "Hakim." She stared at her fingers. "I called the imam; he always respected my father. He's taking care of everything — the medical examiner, the authorities, the funeral tomorrow at the Islamic cemetery in Liesing. Will you come with me, Hakim?" Ron immediately agreed. "I'm taking the day off and I won't leave your side, love."

Ron took off her jacket and lay down with her on the bed. Fatme buried her face in the crook of his neck. Only now could she cry. "He died in my arms, peacefully and gently. I first made him hard with my mouth and tongue; after all, he's an old man, and it took a very long time until he was hard enough. "Thank you for taking such good care of me, child," he said, stroking my head. Then I mounted him and rode him very reverently and very gently

for about half an hour, as I usually do these days. I bent down and kissed his lips while he squirted. He opened his eyes again and whispered, “Thank you for making me so happy, Fatme.” He closed his eyes again and stopped breathing. God, or Allah, or Yahweh heard my plea; he died in my arms, and for that I am very grateful. I sat for a while and said goodbye to his soul; it flew out the window. I called the imam, and he is taking care of all the necessary arrangements. I should go home and cry, the imam said. I didn’t call anyone else, not even the fake aunts. I never want to see those harpies again. I wandered through the city center with my eyes open, but without looking. I didn’t want to disturb you at work because you are the only one I have left in this world.” Ron held her close, stroked her back, and murmured soothing words, meaningless, incoherent words. He had never known her father; he was only sad because of Fatme. Yes, he would be her father, brother, and lover. The thought made his knees tremble. He immediately called Madame Florence’s pimp. “Shut up, Charly! Fatme won’t be back for at least a week, there’s been a death in the family. And don’t call her, she’ll call you when she’s able to work again.”

He walked into the cemetery as Hakim Elbagr, at Fatme’s side. She had linked arms with him and wouldn’t let go, not for a second. It was astonishing how many had come to say goodbye to her father. Ron returned every smile; the community loved him. Even the Jewish baker had come, dressed up and wearing his large black hat. Ron went up to him and offered his hand. “Thank you for coming, Mr. Mejer,” he grumbled. The line of people passing by and shaking Fatme’s hand was long. He didn’t know the aunts, but Fatme’s body language told him so. Her face was like stone; she offered them only her fingertips reluctantly. She didn’t acknowledge the crocodile tears; even now, their tears were false and vile.

The innkeeper wasn’t very pleased when the Muslims came to eat. They ate, but they didn’t drink, at least not in the cemetery, those Muslims. He sighed at how foolish it had been to open his inn by the Islamic cemetery. Other innkeepers were raking in the profits; their real money lay in the drinks.

Fatme threw herself into her studies, which she had neglected in recent weeks. Now she was going full throttle; it was already the

end of May, and the second semester would end in mid-June. At the same time, she was writing a private essay, which she dedicated to her father. She began with her earliest memories and wanted to end with her father's death. It was about only three people: herself, her father, and her mother. Fatme insisted on writing everything down truthfully, every tiny detail, including the sexual ones. How she clung to her mother's body because she loved her father and wanted to be loved by him, to be gently pumped like her mother. How her mother gradually died, and she took her place and became his little wife. Ron, of course, was allowed to read it. He got a glimpse deep into the family bedroom, unvarnished and very clear. But it answered so many unasked questions. And it exposed the sexual lust and disappointment of the so-called aunts, whom Dad, disillusioned after his wife's death, banished from the bedroom. Ron hugged Fatme.

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The Last Shot

by István Rudas © 2026

Since Rosa returned from sick leave, everyone noticed that she had changed. More mature, older, tougher, and in a way, more dangerous. Every morning she went down to Hades, and Dr. Gangl changed her bandages. She smiled because Dr. Gangl gazed so lovingly at her small, round breasts with their pointed nipples. He grinned, not the least bit embarrassed. “Quasimodo was a real man, beneath that hump and the tattered rags.” Rosa smiled gently and understandingly. She handled everyday tasks quickly and easily, and then she threw herself into the Frank Halter case like a bloodthirsty tiger. She dissected every document down to the molecules, had probably listened to Halter’s call to Ron a hundred times, and read the transcript word for word. Yes, she sometimes whispered to Alfred, because the computer only thought logically and wasn’t influenced by emotions.

Ron had chuckled when Alfred asked for his permission. But that, too, was perfectly logical; Alfred was actually assigned to him as his personal assistant. Now he sometimes sat next to Rosa and listened to her discussion with the clever computer. It was very interesting, but they weren’t getting very far. Alfred had considered millions of possibilities. He asked if he could make a comment. “I see that you and Ronald are sitting together. So I’ll offer my suggestion; it’s completely far-fetched, but perhaps worth considering. You’ve obviously examined the basement floor at the Halter house. But there’s a new type of ground-penetrating radar now, called lidar. It can detect the tiniest things beneath the floor, beneath the concrete basement floor. The Kepler University in Linz has one. Just a thought, but perhaps something might be found. Shall I put you in touch with the head of the institute there?” Ron and Rosa exchanged perplexed glances and said in unison, “Absolutely!”

The professor in Linz was thrilled to use his gadget, especially since President Wallner agreed that, if successful, the professor could refer to the criminal police — naturally, only after the case was closed. Three men arrived from Linz; the lidar looked like a lawnmower. And now they were scanning the basement floor. And

lo and behold, the professor drew a rectangle on the floor with chalk. There was an underground tunnel running beneath the house, coming from here and continuing on to there. Ron stared at the chalk mark. Directly beneath the rectangle, there seemed to be a large lump of metal and some electronics. The professor scratched his head. “No entrance in sight.” Rosenthal dropped his coffee cup on the floor and was about to apologize. But Ron had lain down and was staring at the slurry of coffee and dust. A hair-line crack was gradually appearing where the slurry was seeping in. The secret entrance. Bodnar said, “We’ll let the forensics guys hack the electronics, okay?” President Wallner leaned forward. “Exactly right, Bodnar, absolutely right. But first, get the pickaxe out of the van. We’re doing it the Russian way.”

Bodnar swung the pickaxe and tore open the concrete. The professor stuck his head and a flashlight into the hole. “A metal ladder, a disused sewer. Ah! A metal structure, possibly the door opener with its electronics. Simple, but effective.” Everyone peered into the hole, then Bodnar completely obscured the area. They went down one by one; Rosenblatt followed the sewer to its end, where there was a locked iron door leading to the street. Rosa meticulously photographed the entire scene. The secret was out; Halter would probably discover it soon and curse. Rosa felt that Frank’s relationship with his mother had become even closer since his time in prison and on vacation, so they would continue their close surveillance, paying particular attention to the secret entrance. She sat down with Bodnar and Rosenblatt for private talks to give them a piece of her mind. It didn’t help their investigation if they licked the honey pot of Kerzendocht. Both of them just shrugged. Would she make a big deal out of it? No? Then we’d carry on. Of course, Bodnar and Rosenblatt had already planned everything. They were certain they wouldn’t be fired. Wallner needed every single man. Rosa’s shoulders slumped. But ever since, relations between her and Bodnar had been strained; she had become aggressive and grumpy.

Bodnar and Rosenblatt now sat more often in the coffee corner, whispering. An observant person would soon realize that Bodnar was questioning and interrogating Rosenblatt about incest. Bodnar looked at the nude photos of the slut and then at the ones of Elli, his eyes blazing and saliva dangling from the corner of his mouth. The images danced the cha-cha-cha in his poor brain. But

no, he would never sleep with his daughter, never, Bodnar said. Yes, he too had nude photos of his wife and daughter. Rosenblatt scanned the pictures of Bodnar's unremarkable wife. But he clicked his tongue as he attentively examined the cheeky, obscenely posed daughter Laura. Bodnar just looked at him.

Rosenblatt muttered that these pictures and videos of the slut were probably 15 years old, and Bodnar nodded. Only in a few pictures was the slut just posing naked; mostly, Rosenblatt had photographed or filmed her masturbating and having sex. The slut's body could only be described as "sinful." Rosenblatt usually chose an angle where the cunt and clit were visible in the foreground, with her full breasts and pointed nipples above. The slut usually stared into the camera, which captured her at the moment of climax. The clit was indeed shaped like a small boy's penis, less than two inches long. The slut rubbed it from bottom to top, and at climax, she squeezed the tiny shaft with two fingers so that the tiny glans bobbed, red and swollen, between them. Bodnar held his breath; in some videos, the slut was being fucked by a yooung boy. All that was visible was his penis, driving the slut's cunt wild. "She had a thing for young boys, none older than 15," Rosenblatt murmured, "she's always been a slut."

The first videos showed Elli, giggling and panting as she masturbated, at age 6 or 7. Bodnar's cock throbbed with excitement. There were only videos of Elli masturbating and reaching climax. Bodnar held his breath. Again, her tiny, penis-shaped clit was clearly visible. She, too, stared into the camera during her climax. Bodnar instantly fell for Elli. He stared into Rosenblatt's eyes. "Your little one, she's something!" he exclaimed softly. Rosenblatt grinned. "Just you wait, she's about to let both her friends fuck her!" And indeed, she grinned as she let one boy's cock fuck her and cum inside her. Immediately, a second cock went into action, fucking the little one a long time until she orgasmed and shooting his load into her tight little cunt. Bodnar was sweating profusely. He had to have her, he had to fuck Elli!

Rosenblatt put away his iPhone and reached for Bodnar's. Bodnar murmured, "The first videos of Yvette during her pregnancy, also from 15 years ago." In the foreground, Yvette's finger danced on her clit, above which arched her round belly. Rosenblatt, to whom nothing in the world was unfamiliar, opened his eyes wide.

Yvette's eyes rolled upward in orgasm until the irises completely disappeared, leaving only the whites of her eyes visible. "During her pregnancy, she had to be fucked or masturbated twenty times or more a day," Bodnar added in a hoarse voice. "We loved each other very much back then, and she always made sure we had exciting threesomes because she's bisexual." Yvette's tongue was now licking a pussy and clit in close-up until she reached orgasm. Rosenblatt nodded. "You got lucky with her, old man. If she had bigger breasts and wider hips, I'd like her better." Rosenblatt flipped through the pages, and now he clicked his tongue. Laura must have been eight or nine when she first let Bodnar film her masturbating. And yes, her eyes rolled upwards in ecstasy until you could only see the whites of her eyes. More videos followed; Laura became increasingly skilled at masturbating, Rosenblatt noticed. "You'll have a happy day with that little one," Rosenblatt murmured. Bodnar shook his head vigorously. "Not in a million years, she's my daughter!" he whispered indignantly.

Rosa, of course, knew that Bodnar put his hand under his daughter's waistband, quite innocently, naturally. Rosa gave him real headbutts, not slaps, not anymore. Sometimes she wanted to punch him in the face, but she didn't want to, or couldn't push him away. "Wake up already!" she screamed at him when they were alone. "There's no such thing as innocent finger play, you idiot! The law is unambiguous: it's incest, child molestation, and so on. Why do you act like the law doesn't apply to you?" Bodnar squirmed. It had just happened that way. It was a substitute for real intercourse, and he adhered rigidly to that boundary. His daughter left him alone when he performed the finger play and also accepted that he wasn't up for intercourse. His daughter had learned at school how to please boys. Her hand would slip onto Bodnar's cock, and she unashamedly gives him the happy ending with her fist. Bodnar grinned like an idiot. Yes, for several weeks now. Rosa glared at him angrily. "You're such a donkey, honey. You're already sliding down the slippery slope, but you don't even realize it. I'll leave you when you hit the bottom, you idiot! Leave you, without discussion!"

Ron always gave Fatme the go-ahead. Frank Halter never showed his face around her, even though he knew for sure where she worked, what the pimp's name was, and he definitely had his phone number. He really had a bad feeling in his stomach, that

was for sure. He had discussed the situation with Alfred and entrusted him with the complete surveillance. Alfred was to monitor without restrictions; the privacy of everyone involved was secondary in a case like this. Alfred thought he should at least inform the president, because he had to document everything and couldn't falsify his own protocols. Ron nodded; he would inform the president, but he never did.

Bodnar entered the president's office. "I have something private to discuss, boss." Wallner nodded and gestured to the chair. Bodnar lowered the blinds; it was supposed to remain private. Wallner pushed the papers aside, lit a cigarette, and waited attentively. "Mr. President, I request my resignation. Perhaps early retirement; that would be very kind." Wallner signaled that he didn't understand a word. "Mr. President, I'm 56 now. I was a loyal civil servant for over 35 years, at least until the day before yesterday. I've become dishonest; I'm no longer a loyal civil servant. I've tarnished my honor and that of my family. I would only be a burden in your ranks, Mr. President." Wallner leaned back. "Are we talking about Kerzendocht or your daughter?" Bodnar was utterly taken aback. Apparently, nothing escaped the President's notice. He took a deep breath, but Wallner continued speaking. "What you and Rosenblatt are doing with the Kerzendocht would, of course, be grounds for firing you cock-driven donkeys on the spot if I knew. But I don't know, I don't want to know. Are we finished, are you going back to work?"

Bodnar remained seated, letting his shoulders slump forward. "I didn't mean to bring up the Kerzendocht incident, Mr. President. Rosenblatt and I deserve to be seen as pimply schoolboys. The Kerzendocht acts like a convenient harlot, but she certainly isn't one. No, it's the other matter, that's what I was really talking about." Wallner slumped back in his chair. "Your daughter, then? Laura?" Bodnar nodded unhappily. "I've disgraced my family. I deserve a good kick in the pants, Rosa warned me. And now it's all over, Rosa has fired me. I'm no longer a decent policeman, certainly not a loyal public servant. I'm asking you for a simple dismissal so that at least I don't lose my pension." Wallner leaned his head against the wall. That he had to work with immature men like Bodnar and Rosenblatt, well, ... "Listen to me carefully, Mr. Bodnar (he addressed Bodnar formally for a reason), listen to me. You were and still are a good and decent police officer, and a good

detective to boot, I must say. I wouldn't dream of firing you or anything stupid like that. You're going back to work, and that's my final word."

Bodnar sat there like a drowned rat. The president had addressed him informally all his life, and with the unexpected formality, he emphasized his authority and his arbitration. Bodnar was paralyzed; it had taken an unexpected turn. Wallner leaned forward, his Roman nose hinting at why he used to be called the Falcon. "Look, Bodnar. Rosenblatt's sleeping with his daughter, and he's not even trying to hide it. Did I fire him? Did I transfer him to the archives? No, you see, I can tell a capable detective when I see him. I couldn't care less where, how, or with whom Rosenblatt does it. He's doing a very good job, so why should I shoot myself in the foot just because he has a private life that, strictly speaking, is none of my business as long as his daughter isn't committing a crime? To hell with him, to hell with you! You work for me, and that's that. Maybe you shouldn't broadcast your incest with Laura as much as Rosenblatt did; that would be decent. I'm NOT making a note of it in your personnel file, just like I didn't for Rosenblatt. I don't know, I don't want to know, and it's absolutely none of my damn business. Now get to work, I'm sure you have enough to do!" Wallner grabbed the stack of papers and didn't even glance at Bodnar again. Bodnar left silently, lost in thought.

Ron sat next to Rosa, and they went through the recordings from the cellar. Rosa said suddenly, "I broke up with Bodnar yesterday, I'm serious." Ron jumped. "Breaked up with him?" Rosa nodded. "I warned him; I wouldn't tolerate incest, even as a lover." Ron looked at her. "Incest?" Rosa nodded. "Rosenblatt and Bodnar, those idiots, don't just sleep with the two old ladies twice a week, they sleep with their daughters too. Both of them. I'm certainly not prudish or uptight, but that's a red line for me, and I warned Bodnar that I'd be gone if he couldn't control himself. At least you're not a cock-crazed idiot, Ronald."

Ron laid his head in his hands. "How sure are you, Rosa?" She tilted her head to the side. "100%. Bodnar told me himself. He rode straight into her trap at full gallop and made Laura his wife before he sobered up. And there's no such thing as being half-pregnant, Ronald. So, 100%." Rosa frowned. "For years he gradu-

ally gave in to her. At first, he just slipped his hand under her waistband and gently stroked her, nothing more. That went well for a while. Then she got him to do the fingering. That was the second time I yelled at him and warned him. She'd done it to the boys, so she did it to him too, the whole shebang with a happy ending. She's been diligently milking his seed every night for the past six months, slurping his juice. I gave him proper headbutts and screamed bloody murder, as you can imagine. And two or three days ago, she snapped the trap shut and the idiot made her a woman. I know how to provoke that sort of thing; I was 15 once too. But my father took me in his arms and said, 'We'll leave that alone, young lady.' And I'm grateful to him that he wasn't a dick-driven moron, God rest his soul."

"And what do we do next?" Ron asked. Rosa thought for a moment. "Bodnar wanted to talk to Wallner about leaving. I predict Wallner will give him a real dressing-down, and he certainly won't want to hear anything about leaving. The president is convinced that the four of us are the best. He won't let any of us drop out between stations. Not until we have the Halter. After that — who knows?!" Ron tilted his head. "Whether we like it or not, we're split into two groups. You and I and Alfred, Rosenblatt and Bodnar. The two of them will be united because they both ride with their daughters and because they both climb upon Kerzendocht." Rosa flinched slightly. "What, you know that too?" He looked at her, amused. "I'm a detective inspector, not a parking enforcement clerk. I've known since the first week of the surveillance, when Kerzendocht lay naked and truly magnificent before me on the kitchen table. Bodnar and Rosenblatt, they're good, but sexually unreliable. I put two and two together and got three. And the president knew it immediately, too. But as their superior, he has to look the other way or fire them both. Fire them? Never in a million years!"

Rosa and Ron agreed to continue the close surveillance, now that they knew how Halter could sneak into the house. The net was closing in on Halter. The president gave the surveillance his blessing — keep it up!

Ron's phone buzzed. It was Frank Halter. Ron raised his hand, and everyone fell silent instantly. Alfred put everyone on speakerphone. "God bless, Halter, what brings me the honor off your

call?" Frank Halter remained silent, surprised. "God? Which God? The one who had my father murdered in prison, or the one who doesn't stop me, even though he certainly doesn't find my works amusing?" Ron was in good spirits. "Both, Frankie, both. But I'm sure you didn't just want to philosophize with me?" Halter paused briefly. "Well, you've finally found my special entrance, a hearty bravo from me. It took a year, but good things come to those who wait, don't they?" Ron turned serious. "You're no longer a ghost to us, Frank. Just a simple stage magician who amazes us with tricks and fake wallpaper doors. But we've found your trick, you can't play the vanishing-the-wall anymore." Frank replied immediately. "You demolished it with a pickaxe, Mother told me." Ron asked slyly, "Have we restricted your range of action?" Frank laughed. "If I hadn't been prepared, you really would have locked me out. You should know that's not the case, Ronald. I see my mother and Rachel whenever I want. Morgentau will confirm that I enjoy sleeping with women; I used to sleep with her at all hours of the day and night." Ron forced a laugh. "Yes, since then Morgentau keeps a tube of lube in her purse, in case you come back for her, Frankie." Frank thought for a moment. "I should have strangled Morgenau right there on the spot, the ungrateful bitch! She squealed with delight, Ronald, squealed with delight like Juliet at Romeo! Let's not leave anything out. The truth is the truth and will remain the truth. She squealed like a piglet and then squealed with delight at the end! Or isn't that in her report?!" Ron saw out of the corner of his eye that Rosa flinched.

He decided to object. "Everything except the squeaking is in the report, neatly laid out. And that you have a compass tattooed right there, otherwise your thing wouldn't know where to go." He waited, had he touched a nerve? Frankie chuckled. "Oh, that! A boss from Yakutsk gave me the compass rose when he briefly captured me. It's considered a mark of shame among Russians, a sign of pedophilia. The guy had every reason, too; I'd defiled his sheltered little daughter when she was 12. I slit his and his wife's throats, and three lustful days later, I did the same to the daughter; I had no use for her anymore." Ron was silent for a long time. "You're a disgusting pedophile and murderer, but we both know that." Frank didn't reply. "Well, back to the point. What exactly was the reason for your call?" Ron asked.

He could hear Frank's soft laughter. "Well, I was wondering if you had a court order when you demolished my house, my property? A court order?" Ron explained. "For this action, the CID don't need a court order, nor the consent of your mother, who, according to Artem Galebnikov, is the rightful sole owner. And she was standing right there, mouth agape. You can't have a say; the house doesn't belong to you, my smarty-pants friend. All you own is the cell where we'll lock you up and throw away the key." Frank could be heard sharply inhaling. "The Nurembergers don't hang anyone unless they've got him first. A clever saying. First, you'd have to catch me, and that's not going to happen." Ron ventured onto thin ice again. "The women are under surveillance. We're not stupid enough to put a uniformed officer on their doorstep. Surveillance, I said, Frankie. Ghosts you'll never see. And we'll simply grab you as soon as you enter the perimeter. You'll only incur considerable personnel costs, but we can handle it. Nothing is too expensive for the good feeling of seeing you handcuffed at his feet, the Chief of Police. Yes, the Chief of Police nods and slaps his thighs with pleasure."

Frank didn't react quickly or rashly. Ron's threats bounced off him. "It was nice chatting with you, Ronald. I'll get in touch again when it suits me. All right?" Click, he'd hung up. Ron looked around. The Chief of Police had opened his glass door and was giving him a thumbs-up. Bodnar growled, "Throwing dirt at Rosa, that's exactly what he wanted. Search warrant. That's ridiculous." Rosa stood up and went to the restroom. Rosenblatt, who had been diligently taking notes, said, "It was definitely just idle chatter. He wanted us to know that he didn't care that we'd found the secret entrance. He apparently intends to continue visiting and stamping his mother and Kerzendocht. He thinks we can't stop him. Everything else was just talk. There's absolutely no evidence that he ever slit the throats of a Russian mob boss, his wife, and their daughter. It may be true, or it may just as easily be a tall tale. It has no bearing on our investigation."

Ron went into the women's restroom. Rosa was squatting on the floor, her eyes red and teary. She said nothing when he sat down next to her. Overcoming his shyness, he took her hand. Her tears flowed freely again. "It's true what Frank said, Ron. Every word. Damn it, I'm a woman, and my body reacts the way a woman's body reacts. No matter what my mind says. I spat at him

every time, but that spitting came from my brain, not my gut." She leaned her head against his upper arm. "I'm ashamed in front of all of you, Ron. I kept from you how pleasurably and ecstatically my body reacted. I only reported that I spat at him, full of contempt. That's true, too; that's how my mind, that's how my dignity reacted."

Ron was still holding her hand. "We all feel this way, Rosa, don't worry. Remember how my body reacted back then. My body reacted to Hanna Rosenstingl's stunningly sexually attractive curves; that was pure Eros. My mind, my intellect, saw the entrails, the monstrous violence inflicted upon a human being; that was Thanatos. My facial expression fascinated you because, ultimately, Eros won out. The last time that happened to me was at school when I discovered that the music teacher wasn't wearing underwear, displaying her cunny to those sitting in the first row. In every music lesson, Eros won, grinning maliciously, because I ejaculated in my underwear, in every lesson. She crossed her legs, and I stared at her shaved pussy and had to cum again and again, Rosa. Don't judge yourself, especially not so unfairly. Everyone in our department understands your reaction, Rosa." He added, "No Frank Halter can divide us that easily apart."

Ron had no idea whether his bluff about the surveillance had worked. Of course, Rosa had only ever compared all the women and men involved in the Artem Galebnikov or Frank Halter court cases in some way, but she couldn't find a single match with the people on Frank Halter's hit list in the wine cellar. Well, except for Fatme, of course. Ron tried to put himself in Frank's shoes. Frank wanted to torment Rosa, he'd admitted that. Could it be that he hung up portraits of completely uninvolved, random people just to make Rosa believe he had another dozen people on his hit list? Then, however, his bluff would be exposed as nothing more than hot air.

He brought up this dilemma the next day at the aquarium. The reactions were mixed. Rosenblatt and Rosa thought the bluff had been blown. Wallner and Bodnar were convinced that Frank had fallen for it. Ron himself believed both were possible. He stood up. "If Frank throws a body at our feet within the next ten days or two weeks, then the bluff was completely ineffective. If there's no body, there's a chance the bluff worked. But it's also possible that the

whole hit list was just a hoax to give our Rosa a good scare. Putting my friend Fatme on the list would only amplify the effect on Rosa. Seeing through that guy is beyond me. I admit it."

They strictly maintained the close surveillance. The house was only unguarded between midnight and 6 a.m. Only a uniformed man sat on the bench in front of the door, reading a newspaper or dozing. Bodnar, and later Rosenblatt as well, lost all inhibitions. Mrs. Halter remained unnaturally passive and hid her face in a pillow whenever the two men shagged her. Of course, it had been Mrs. Kerzendocht's idea, but the men eagerly took advantage of it. Kerzendocht only wanted her friend to share in the sexual bliss, and her age really didn't matter. It was a cheap, slutty charade. Ron grabbed Kerzendocht by the arm when she tried to sneak past in the morning. He interrogated her harshly and relentlessly in the kitchen, not caring that Mrs. Halter was mortified. Ron's first thought was that this, exactly this, would drive Frank Halter into a white-hot rage if Rosa's analysis of the mother-son relationship was even remotely accurate.

Kerzndocht was a treasure trove. She hadn't seen Frank Halter in years; she didn't really know him at all. But dear Dr. Weissmann came almost every night to make her and Roxane happy. Her eyes sparkled; no, she wasn't an actress, she was a simple housewife who was on cloud nine when it came to Dr. Weissmann. No, she said, Bodnar and Rosenblatt were both circumcised Jews, so she had absolutely no problem mating with either of them, no matter how often. And, she said shyly, her gaze lowered, the doctor was the first uncircumcised man she had fallen in love with and let him fuck her, even though she felt very guilty about it. And the doctor was quite angry when he learned that the officers were also enjoying themselves with Roxane. The burly one and the bald one, yes, they were taking care of Roxane too. Yes, they were constantly mating with Roxane, sticking it all the way in and thrusting into her quite properly, Rachel told the doctor clearly and distinctly, because he didn't want to believe it. Several times, of course, which brought tears of anger to Roxane's eyes. Yes, the smitten Rachel told the enraged doctor, both men were really pumping Roxane hard several times in a row, and she simply couldn't understand why her friend resisted the climax so vehemently, even though she was mostly surprised by it. Yes, said the doctor grimly, no one can resist that.

Ron immediately brought up the idea of extending the surveillance to the entire night, but Wallner waved it off wearily. “Hofstätter, midnight until 6 a.m.? We could only do that with a court order and would have to provide a solid, written justification for each individual night. A nightmare, I tell you. We’d have to rouse a judge from his bed every single night. Politicians are keeping a close eye on these court orders right now, ever since the scandal in Klagenfurt. No, once or twice, that might be possible, but certainly not every night. And don’t go it alone, Hofstätter, they’ll hang us by the scruff of the neck based on the sacred hours; no interior minister will be able to help us with that. We’re all patrolling and handing out tickets to illegally parked cars.” Ron asked if the president hadn’t heard this too? The bureaucratic horse neighing. Wallner didn’t find it funny at all and growled, “I can hear two of them: the bureaucratic mare and the fat, politically motivated brewery horse.”

Ron consulted with Rosa. She leafed through the laws on the screen, even consulted an AI and Alfred too. The law was clear. Midnight to 6 a.m. was the official resting time for citizens, and yes, the thing about the court order was exactly as Wallner had said. Ron asked her directly, “And what if we, just by pure chance…?” Morgentau spread her ten fingers to ward off the Beelzebub. “Guys, Ronald, I don’t go on patrol anymore, and I don’t write parking tickets anymore either. On my career ladder, it’s only up, never down. I don’t do that, and I strongly advise you against it. No police chief and no interior minister will slow your downfall. You’ll fall flat on your ass, my friend.” Ron reluctantly abandoned the thought. “Bureaucracy, brewery horse, and Morgentau against me — I guess I have no choice,” he said, shaking his head. “And Frank, that guy, knows it perfectly well. Six hours gives him plenty of time to… er… massage both women.” Rosa chided him, “Ron, what a choice of words!” They both laughed uproariously.

The close-up surveillance had resumed. For the president’s sake, Ron had only postponed midnight until 3:00 a.m., and the relief shift usually arrived as early as 5:30 a.m. Frank Halter’s window of opportunity had shrunk considerably. Bodnar and Rosenblatt were becoming increasingly brazen, now lying next to the amorous women and shamelessly using the lulls in their respite to have sex. Rosa went down to the cellar when the ladies dozed off

and sat beside the broken floor, flashlight and pistol at the ready. She must have been distracted for a moment, because a hairy arm grabbed her and dragged her down into the hole. The flashlight and pistol tumbled across the brick floor of the old sewer. Defenseless, she lay on the ground, her last hour had struck. The pistol was somewhere out of reach. She was at Frank Halter's mercy.

Frank ripped off her uniform skirt and panties. In the beam of his flashlight, she could see him clearly. He laughed boomingly as he pulled down his trousers. "I know it would be better to kill you right now, Rosa. But today it's not your blood that excites me, but... I'm craving some firm female flesh, and you've always done it so well for me, my little dove! So be peaceful, and I won't kill you today. I promise." Rosa's paralysis broke. She carefully reached for him and made him stiff. Then, sighing and cursing, she forced him inside her. Yes, she squealed like a piglet and whooped and cheered in ecstasy. He continued, his pent-up desire overflowing. He raped her a second and third time, then Rosenblatt was heard entering the house with a clatter. Frank broke free during the fourth round and ran out the front exit of the sewer.

Rosa got dressed again and climbed back up to the basement after retrieving her flashlight and pistol. Rosenblatt asked why she looked so battered, but Rosa didn't answer. Rosenblatt dropped her off in front of her house. Rosa didn't arrive at the office until noon. She wrote everything in the report, except for the squeals, cheers, and jubilation, of course. She included the rape, and that Frank hadn't intended to kill her. Ron had read the report and questioned her, but all he could do was shake his head. "And then suddenly you have a wire noose around your neck, Rosa." She shook her head. "No, I believe him that he doesn't want to kill me anymore. I can feel it clearly, Ron, he just wants to have sexual amusement with me."

Rosa was right. Frank seemed to know exactly when she was on duty, and as soon as she sat down by the hole in the concrete floor, he pulled her down and "only" raped her. Rosa had been with a lot of men, but she'd never made so much squealing, cheering, and jubilation for any of them. She kept her pistol holstered, but as long as he wasn't threatening her, but "only" raping her, she saw no reason to shoot Frank. She took note of Ron's head-shaking the next day, but she stuck to her guns for weeks. If she'd known what

other atrocities he was planning, she would have arrested him, without a doubt.

Of course, Rosa remained on her guard, because she had no doubt how quickly his mood could change. She always let Frank know when she was taking the safety off her pistol in its holster and preparing it to fire. “I really don’t intend to kill you, Rosa,” Frank whined agonizingly. “I love your squeals, your whoops, and your cheers,” he said every time she provocatively took off the safety of the pistol in front of him. “Just in case you change your mind, Frank. I’d hate to put a bullet in the head of a good stud; that would be a regrettable waste of a good fuck machine,” Rosa said with an icy expression. He should know why she didn’t shoot him, but also that she undoubtedly would. He was impressed by her toughness. The president had certainly read her reports, but he gave Rosa free rein. He had no idea what Rosa was planning.

Ron’s hand stopped mid-motion as his phone chirped. Charly, the pimp. “Charly, you call me at the office!” he snapped. Charly remained subdued, still clinging to Ron’s fists in his face. “Inspector, Chief, it could be important. I was supposed to go over the appointment with Fatme this afternoon, a very delicate client, we always discuss these things beforehand, always. Well, she’s not answering, your phone only goes to the answering machine. I went to your house and rang the bell downstairs like crazy. Nothing. I went upstairs, your door was wide open, no Fatme. I’m at a loss, Chief. It’s urgent. Perhaps you know where she could be.” Ron heard Charly swallow nervously. “Wide open? You didn’t try to pick the lock?” Ron asked suspiciously. Charly swore up and down. “Wide open, I told you. No joke, Chief.” Ron’s stomach churned. “I’ll call you, Charly!” and hung up. He looked down at Rosa. “Fatme!” Ron ran into the men’s restroom and vomited.

He had to sit down. He filled Alfred in. First, he had to start with the Turkish community. He gave Alfred the names and numbers of those who didn’t know him very well. Alfred was to ask short, precise questions and avoid any conversation. Within an hour, they had called everyone, about 70 people. Everyone promised to keep their eyes open. He called everyone who lived in his building. Then he got a tip from Mrs. Walotschek. She had seen Fatme; she seemed ill, and her boyfriend had to support her and half-carry her. He was taking her to the doctor, the boyfriend

said. Yes, it was just before noon, just before the midday bells, less than five minutes before. “Why? Has something happened?” Ron reassured Mrs. Walotschek and asked about the boyfriend. She described Frank Halter quite accurately. “A really handsome man, in his prime!” She sighed, for she was known not to be very strict about her marital vows. Ron thanked her and hung up. “Rosa, Frank has kidnapped Fatme, we have a witness. Almost exactly 4 hours ago, at precisely 12 o’clock.”

Ron called everyone into the conference room and informed them. Wallner immediately put out the search. “A four-hour head start, Hofstätter, that’s a lot. You’ve got the line. Guys, drop everything, finding Fatme takes priority.” Ron’s phone chirped. It was Fatme’s number. He answered and heard Frank’s disgusting laughter. Ron raised his hand and Alfred put everyone on speakerphone. “Routing worldwide,” Alfred typed on the display. Frank laughed. “No, I’m not using her phone, I’m just spoofing her number to get a quick response. Spoofing.” Ron’s voice trembled slightly. “Release her immediately, and you’ll score major points. I guarantee it will be noted favorably in court. Let her go; she’s a civilian, not a soldier. Please, Frank, let her go. I beg you. Don’t do anything rash, or you’ll never see your mother and Rachel again, at least not alive. They’ll both die a very painful death. My word on it.” Ron had said it very seriously, but now his hands were trembling, and the cell phone threatened to slip from his grasp. Rosa sat down next to him and placed her hand on the back of his. The trembling quickly stopped.

Frank spoke to Fatme. “Greet your friends, Fatme,” he said to her. She called out in Turkish, “Hakim, that bastard has me…” Frank apparently pushed her away and said admonishingly, “No English, Fatme, only German!” Fatme’s voice was clear; she wasn’t panicking. “Ronald, I’m still unharmed, and the guest didn’t treat me badly. I…” Frank apparently pushed her away and took over. “Ronald, old pal, I’m going to have a great honeymoon with Fatme. Not to Spain this time, of course. I’ll treat her well, as long as she doesn’t scratch and bite. I just wanted to let you know not to expect her for dinner. I’ll call you again when I feel like it.” Click, the line was dead. Ron rested his forehead on his forearm and closed his eyes.

Rosa said, “Alfred, play it again, and could you amplify the background noise, bring it out, please?” She turned the volume up to maximum. Rosa tilted her head toward the speaker and closed her eyes. She paid little attention to the spoken words, focusing instead on the ambient sounds. The loud rush of bathwater being run drowned everything else out. No other sounds could be discerned. “Cunning,” Rosa grumbled, straightening up. “Ron, threatening his mother and the other woman was illegal, you need to understand that. Maybe he’ll snap. Maybe not, maybe he’ll take it literally and won’t kill Fatme right away. Maybe you’ve bought her some time.” Ron straightened up. “Rosa, I meant every word, exactly as it was. I don’t care if I end up in jail. If he kills Fatme, then so be it.” A cold shiver ran down Rosa’s spine. Wallner approached. “Morgentau, did you tell him? We’ll have to cut his stupid threat from the tape. That’s completely unacceptable, Hofstätter, although I can understand it, of course. But as a detective, you have to control your emotions, otherwise I’ll have to pull you, seriously.” Ron looked Wallner in the face, swallowing the first paragraph and only delivering the second. “I understand, Mr. President. I’m in control from now on and intend to remain in charge. She’s my fiancée, the case is mine. I won’t have feelings for her again until we’ve got her released. My word of honor, Mr. President. Please don’t pull me out.” Wallner left.

Ron looked at Rosa. “Shall we begin?” Rosa nodded, Bodnar and Rosenblatt rolled over some chairs, and they sat in a circle. “What Fatme first said in Turkish,” Ron began, “means, ‘That bastard has me…’ then she broke off. You heard what she said after that. One clue she gave was that he had already raped her, but without hurting her. In the escort service, they refer to someone as a client or guest if they want sex for money. Fatme knows it’s wiser to let him rape her than to let him get rough with her. That way, things usually turn out alright.” Bodnar agreed; that was the custom in the vice squad as well. Ron looked around the room. “No further clues. That’s all we have.” He looked clear and appeared professional. “We have almost nothing. Now it’s time to go door-to-door, contact all the informants, distribute Fatme’s and Halter’s photo, offer a reward, say 50 grand, for a crucial tip. Bring money into the mix, I’ll cover it. Kiss ass or kick it, it doesn’t matter. No guy can hide so well that nobody notices. Someone saw something, heard something about a vacation or a trip. You guys know how it works, so let’s get going!”

All four of them threw themselves into it, the phones were ringing off the hook. Bodnar went to this bar or that, bought everyone beer, and kept on the line. Rosenblatt sifted through hotel and other bookings. Frank had to be inconspicuous, so he checked in whenever he took a room. Rosenblatt went off to the Hotel Beethoven in Laimgrube, but while the guests fit the general description, they weren't the ones. The father stood there, very embarrassed, in his underwear. His little daughter sat stark naked, spread-eagled on the double bed, laughing provocatively in Rosenblatt's face. Hour after hour passed; they did their work with utmost concentration. Of course, they all knew what Frank Halter meant by "honeymoon." He would rape Fatme, just as he had raped Rosa, again and again. No one said it out loud, but they felt sorry for Ronald. He kept his worries to himself, making the rounds of the Turkish community. His good reputation helped him a lot in his work. Tips might come from here, gossip, rumors, and real information might also come from the Turks. And when Hakim Elbagr asked them for help, they took it seriously. Hundreds of eyes and ears — that sounded reassuring. Ron didn't go home until around midnight; he had to eat, shower, and sleep.

Nothing. It was discouraging, but Ron kept them busy. It wasn't the first time they'd had to navigate the demimonde, working their way through different social strata. Late that afternoon, Rosa finally got an interesting call. She sent the woman pictures of Fatme and Halter. "Yes, that was them, definitely. They'd booked the apartment online and paid in cash a week in advance. No, not by card, but in cash. The man had come in person to pay the 800 in cash and then received the keys. That was rather unusual; I had the bills checked at the bank right away — no counterfeits. They drove a nice, dark blue VW Passat, fairly new. I noted the license plate number, of course." A rental car from Hertz Alt Erlaa, driver's license from Vienna, registered to Ing. Karl Lebknecht — no, not Liebknecht. Rosenblatt and Ron sat in front of adjacent screens, checking everything in real time, while Rosa repeated the information aloud. The woman said they'd left that morning, dropping the keys and a note in her mailbox. They'd taken the country road south. There was nothing else to report.

Rosenblatt looked up from his notes and the screen. "Anna Frühwirth, born April 21, 1998, single, no children. Graduated from secondary school in Wiener Neustadt, one sealed juvenile

file. Prostitution at 16, reprimand, no punishment. Built an apartment building in 2018, six apartments for rent. She served four weeks in prison in 2018, plus a €25,000 fine, among other things for prostitution and establishing a prostitution ring with high school girls. Four women live with her in her building. District police report from 2021: Suspected clandestine prostitution. But no issues with renting out the apartments. That's all." Ron nodded to Rosenblatt. "Thanks. A fine harlot, but with a keen eye for details."

Alfred chirped. "Vehicle found, BP gas station south of Wiener Neustadt. Footage from the gas station's security camera." Everyone stared at their screens. At the very edge of the parking lot was the dark blue Passat, a man leaning against the driver's door. It wasn't clear if it was Frank Halter, but the license plate matched. About eight minutes later, an American classic car rolled up, a convertible like something from the 1940s, purple and white. No one recognized the make. After a brief exchange, Frank and Fatme got into the convertible, she apparently in handcuffs. The convertible drove to the western exit and disappeared. Ron turned to Rosenblatt to give him the assignment, but Rosenblatt just growled, "I'm on it!" There had been two classic cars, purple and white, in the Wiener Neustadt district. He printed out two addresses and handed them to Bodnar, who was already on the phone with the Wiener Neustadt Criminal Investigation Department, fully briefing them. Bodnar relayed the two addresses. Then they waited tensely. Never before had they been so close to Frank Halter.

The first, a burly rocker, had already gone for a ride that morning on his Harley Davidson, clad in leathers with a woman on the back. The grumpy neighbor had no idea which chapter he belonged to, but she knew for sure it was one with a skull and crossbones. Behind the house were four American classic cars, immaculately maintained, among them the convertible they were looking for. The grumpy old woman had no idea what he did for a living; he usually lay under a classic car, tinkering. That was all there was to it. The hood of the convertible, a Cadillac Fleetwood Eldorado, was cold.

The second guy wasn't there either. The neighbor was gushing with excitement. He had flown to Vietnam ten days ago; he had told her himself and given her the keys — watering the plants and

feeding the cats, as usual. He went to Vietnam three or four times a year, probably had his sweetheart there, the eccentric old woman giggled. He usually brought back one or two girls from Vietnam, little schoolgirls. They had no shame, she ranted, they sunbathed stark naked in the back garden where no one could see them. Days later they were gone. She had confronted Freddy Eder about it, and he had acted very surprised. “They go work in the restaurant business,” he had said. They weren’t his girlfriend, although she suspected quite a few things.

Eder certainly wasn’t one to turn down a good time, she said, the naked schoolgirls made his blood boil, that much was certain. She had seen it several times: the schoolgirl giving Eder a handjob in the blazing sun, finishing with her mouth, as one should, of course. No, of course it was a different girl each time, Inspector! She often observed a little girl climbing on top of him, riding and giving it to him good, from beginning to end, a different one each time, of course. In the blazing sunshine, outrageous! Anyway, he wasn’t faithful to his sweetheart in Vietnam, the windbag! He was on familiar terms with all the younger wives in the settlement; that says something, doesn’t it? Her torrent of words died down; there was nothing more to be gleaned.

The neighbor’s restless eyes darted about; she didn’t seem to realize that she had unnecessarily admitted to spying on Freddy Eder’s private life. The officer managed to elicit from her the confession of how outraged she was that Eder only had sex with the Vietnamese girls but didn’t take her, even though she had clearly offered herself to him several times. The officer continued the interrogation cautiously. What did she get for watering the plants and feeding the cats? She was careless, our spy. She leaned forward and whispered in his ear. Freddy Eder did it to her, once before and once after his vacation, in his bathroom, in the whirlpool, always several times in a row. He thrust into her until he went soft, the old woman giggled. That was all she got for plants and cats, she said, red with embarrassment. The convertible was parked in front of the house, a Buick Electra 225 Convertible, the police officer noted. Unfortunately, the officer hadn’t checked whether the engine was still warm. Bodnar thanked his colleague and hung up. “No match,” he grumbled, disappointed.

Ron addressed the group. “We can assume that Halter took another car somewhere, for which there is no record. Fatme was still alive, and that’s a good sign. He took his time and hadn’t killed her. As in other cases, he spends several wedding nights with his victims before strangling them. We can hope that Fatme still has some time. Alfred will go through the recordings of all the traffic cameras around the two addresses; perhaps we’ll find out what kind of car we’re looking for. Rosenblatt, send photos of Fatme and Halter to every police officer in and around Wiener Neustadt, along with a description. Anything that might be important. Do the same to every hotel, guesthouse, etc., in the area; they should also keep their eyes open. Bodnar, make me a list of all the properties and real estate belonging to Artem Galebnikow, Frank Halter, and Roxane Halter. Every single shed, no matter how small.”

Ron and Rosa typed up the report together. He was so glad she was giving 150%, even though Fatme must have been more of a rival to her. He sat down with President Wallner for half an hour and discussed every detail with him. Wallner would brief the Interior Minister, as is required for any major manhunt.

Ron stayed in contact with the watchful Alfred while he showered and changed into fresh clothes after two days. He was just about to start cooking when the doorbell rang. It was Rosa. She came into the apartment, carrying her laptop in a bag. “I’m just keeping you company, nothing more.” Ron said, “There’s roasted ground beef with spaghetti and canned sauce. Similar to spaghetti Bolognese.” Rosa nodded, “Sure, I’m really hungry.” She worked on her laptop while he cooked. They ate without rushing; he had served cold beer. “The fridge is full of beer, we need to make room for carrots,” he chuckled as he fetched the third beer. Their only topic of conversation was Fatme’s kidnapping, until deep into the night.

“I’m sleeping on the sofa,” Ron announced, but Rosa objected. “What do you always say? We need you well-rested and ironed tomorrow. I’ll do the ironing. No, don’t worry, no romantic nonsense. Just a friend who serves with Eros, but this time without Thanatos. A friendly helping hand, as Wallner had put it regarding Ludmilla. So, don’t be a silly frog and come to bed!” Ron hesitated. Rosa, in a negligee with nothing underneath, smiled at him kindly

and honestly. “Fatme would understand,” he sighed finally, lay down in bed, and turned off the light.

His hand slid down Rosa’s back. It was scarred, probably ugly scarred. “He disfigured you, that makes it very personal for you, Rosa. He owes you something, and you will get your revenge, you will give him a good thrashing and I will look the other way, I promise. He’s scarring me right now, the miserable swine. It will give me satisfaction when the judge properly tears him apart in court and locks him up.” They were silent and smoked in silence.

Alfred hadn’t been able to find anything concrete. “The only things that caught my eye were a dirty-yellow Mercedes 220 D and a dark green, relatively new Range Rover. Both were equally likely, but I’d still bet on the Range Rover.” He’d lost track of the Mercedes on the way to the Vienna Forrest; the Range Rover had headed straight south, where its trail disappeared on the country roads. Ron was grateful to the computer; it was reassuring to have such a watchful eye behind him. Rosenblatt hunched over the screen, but without success. There were tens of thousands of Mercedes and Range Rovers. Bodnar, still sleepy, investigated Freddy Eder to see if there was any connection to Halter. All he found out was that Eder regularly sold Vietnamese girls to massage parlors, etc. He wrote a separate report and emailed it to the vice squad. But they got nowhere. That evening, Rosa remarked, “It’s my turn today. I’m bringing steaks and frozen fries. Red wine?” Ron smiled broadly. “Spanish is never out of place.” He went home and took over the cooking, something he was better at than Rosa.

The close surveillance of the Halter house had been discontinued since Frank had kidnapped Fatme. Bodnar was agitated and nervous; obviously, his daughter was giving him a hard time. Ron was sometimes annoyed; a detective wasn’t supposed to be agitated or nervous. So he decided to send Bodnar to the bars more often, hoping to find a lead on Halter or his associates. It was a dead end, and nothing came of it, but the department worked more calmly and with greater focus when the impulsive man was out of the way.

The week passed, then a second, and a third.

Ron's phone chirped. He answered; it was Frank Halter. Ron raised his hand, silence was immediately declared, Alfred switched on the speakerphones, President Wallner jumped to his feet and stared through the glass door. Ron's pulse raced when he heard Frank's voice, the tension of three weeks making his knees tremble. Frank asked Fatme to say hello to Ron. Ron heard Fatme's voice for the first time in weeks, in what felt like an eternity. "I'm unharmed," Fatme said, "the guest said today is my last day. Thank you for everything. Goodbye! Goodbye!" Frank took the phone. "I'm quite touched, Ronald. But I have to tell you, Fatme's no good. I expected more from an escort girl, much more." Frank's laughter turned into nervous grumbling. "Well, has that left you speechless, Ronald?" Ron was as calm as an ice cube. "I'll make you eat your own balls, you scum."

Ron ignored the president's gesticulating. "I'll give you that in writing, you miserable pig. Playing the tough guy around women, huh? You'd shit yourself around a real man, crawling like a worm." Frank grumbled. "Eat my balls? That's not going to happen, not in a million years." He took a deep breath. "Fatme's golden sheen turned out to be cheap costume jewelry. That was very disappointing and sobering. Under other circumstances, I'd throw her at your feet and tell you to keep her, she's no good." Frank breathed heavily. "Today, I was disgusted by her passive disinterest, I can tell you that. I've decided to cut our honeymoon short. I'm going to give her one from Rosa's magnificent Heckler & Koch pistol, right after I've finished you off."

Ron said, "If you do that, you're choosing a bullet; they're not going to put you in prison. It's your decision, and it's neither brilliant nor wise." Wallner threw his arms up to the sky in despair. Halter's murder wasn't to be announced! You didn't say something like that out loud, damn it! Ron felt a cold hand squeeze his heart. "Well, if there's nothing else …" but Frank interrupted him hastily. "Slow down, Ronald, wait a minute. If I'm seeing this right, it's High-Noon now. I want to be standing right in front of you, looking into your eyes, when I put a bullet in your brain. So grab your rifle, goddammit, and get going. At Gasometer C, out in the open, that's where Fatme and I are waiting for you. Up on the roof." Click, the line went dead.

Wordlessly, Ron grabbed his jacket and ran downstairs after Rosenblatt. They hailed the first police car they could find, and Rosenblatt sped east with flashing lights and sirens blaring, running red lights without taking his foot off the accelerator. Ron took his pistol from its holster and checked it carefully. “I’ll go up there alone, have an impenetrable cordon set up around the gasometer. Don’t let a single mouse through if Halter wins. You’ve got to get him, damn it. Very clever of him, the gasometer’s packed full of apartments, so that’s how he’s planning his escape. So, be thorough.” Rosenblatt didn’t take his eyes off the road or his foot off the gas. “First shot, right between the eyes. Don’t waste any time, take him out once and for all.” He sped on at breakneck speed, having already left the other police cars far behind.

With screeching tires, they pulled up in front of Gasometer C. The city of Vienna had built three enormous gas storage tanks 150 years ago; since then, they had been repurposed — shops, apartments, a disco. They got out of the car and looked up. “Take the elevator, or your hands will shake,” Rosenblatt said. Ron nodded and nodded toward the parking lot. “Form a cordon all around!” Then he ran into the imposing building. The elevator was waiting at the bottom; he went all the way to the top. He got his breathing under control, but his pulse was still racing. He found the door marked “Maintenance” and kicked it in brutally with his shoes. His fear of heights took his breath away when he saw the larger window with the iron ladder. There was no way around it; that was the only way to the roof. He climbed out, overcoming all his fears, and scaled the iron ladder, the pistol between his teeth. He cautiously peered around as he reached the roof. There, directly opposite, stood Fatme, her tattered dress flapping in the wind. She was clutching the rusty, man-high vent valve with both hands. Behind her, Frank huddled, one hand around her waist, the other holding the pistol at the ready.

A well-meaning handyman had laid down a scrap of carpet for better footing. The thickly painted, formerly retractable and rounded silo roof was damp and slippery as ice. Ron scrambled up and stood on the carpet scrap, never taking his eyes off Fatme and Frank. He had a firm footing on the carpet and bent his knees, his other hand supporting his pistol hand, and assumed a firing position. “Hey, I’m here, Frank!” he shouted, aiming down the barrel. The icy wind carried Frank’s laughter away. Ron wondered if he

could shoot past Fatme, but the killer used her well as cover. “High noon, Ronald, high noon!” Frank shouted triumphantly, grumbling as he laughed. “Just the two of us, man against man!” Frank was elated with his victory. “Oh yeah, and Fatme. Are you going to shoot her to get to me?” Ron couldn’t see an inch of Frank, who was cleverly ducking behind Fatme.

“Bacaklarınızı açın!” Ron yelled in Turkish, which meant “Spread your legs!” Before Frank knew what was happening, Fatme spread her legs wide. Ron saw Frank’s legs and fired immediately, twice. The bullets ripped through Frank’s knees, practically exploding his kneecaps, and exited at the backs of his knees, leaving devastating craters. Fatme screamed shrilly and jumped aside in terror, still clutching the rusty metal pipe. Frank was still standing, his face contorted in disbelief and horror. Ron’s third bullet struck Frank in the abdomen. Frank screamed bloody murder and threw his arms up in the air. Ron’s last bullet ripped across Frank’s skull, splitting the bone. His arms flung high, Frank jerked backward and upward like a rag doll. He fell backward in slow motion, his lifeless body hitting the edge of the roof and then sliding over the edge. Frank floated like a blackbird, fluttering into the abyss, and hit the asphalt 75 meters below.

Ron straightened up. Fatme had screamed her lungs out and fell now silent, then cautiously circled the semicircular roof and threw her arms around Ron’s neck. Rosa crawled over the edge of the roof and holstered her pistol. “You’re bleeding, Ronald, you’re bleeding!” Rosa shouted into the wind. Fatme let go of Ron and looked down at him. “There’s a hole in your pants, Hakim!” she whispered, stunned, staring at Rosa. Rosa said, “A gunshot wound in the thigh, we need to put a tourniquet on it.” She looked around and spotted Fatme’s cloth belt. “Your belt, Fatme!” she commanded, impatiently untying Fatme’s belt herself. Rosa knelt behind Ron and tied off his thigh just below the groin, tightening the knot as much as she could. “We need to get out of here fast, he needs to get to the hospital as quickly as possible.” Rosa was the first to climb down the iron ladder, followed by Ron and Fatme; the hardest part was over. After they’d climbed through the window, Ron looked at Rosa. “I don’t feel a thing, no pain at all.” Rosa nudged him in the side. “Sure, Mr. Wooden Leg. It’s the adrenaline pumping through your veins, nothing but adrenaline!” Rosa supported Ron. “I was aiming down the barrel of my pistol, and I

would have put a bullet in his face if you'd missed, Ron. But four accurate shots in under five seconds, that really surprised me." While they waited for the elevator, Rosa offered Fatme her hand. "I'm Rosa, Rosa Morgentau, Ron's colleague and friend." Fatme returned the handshake. "Fatme, Fatme Ökdemir. I'm also Ron's friend. I'm so glad to meet you. Ron speaks very highly of you, Rosa."

Fatme sat beside Ron's bed in the hospital. The bullet had narrowly missed his femoral artery and lodged in his thigh. The operation had lasted over half an hour; the bullet was out, and the bandage was secure. An IV was running into his arm. Ron was still asleep. Rosa wanted to take Fatme with her, but she shook her head firmly. "When he's awake, when I can hear his voice." Rosa nodded; she would be back in three hours.

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Twilight of the Gods

by István Rudas © 2026

The office was buzzing like a beehive. President Wallner had taken over; there was a lot to do. After the hunt, the big cleanup began. The president went down to the forensic medicine morgue to see Frank Halter himself. Dr. Gangl explained everything. “Two shots, precise to the knees. One shot to the intestines. One shot across the cranium, the skull. That split his skull bone and tore away lots of brain matter. The other injuries were the result of the fall from a great height, but he was already dead by then.” Dr. Gangl glanced briefly at the president. “Hofstätter is a good shot, four precise shots from 30 meters. Wadcutter ammunition, Hofstätter played it safe. Not just a tickle, but a man-stopping, lethal shot.” He turned fully to the president and looked up into his eyes. “I see the eight poor women before my eyes, as well as the three dead judges and the dead bodyguard. I see Ms. Morgentau’s battered back before me, which I had to oint and bandage for weeks afterward. I’m glad that this senseless slaughter is finally over. I’m only human, and I feel the horror just like everyone else.” Wallner silently squeezed his hand, then left.

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Fatme sat by Ron’s bedside for four days and four nights. She only got up when Ron dozed, then she washed her face and used Ron’s toilet. Like him, she received the simple hospital food. Rosa came by regularly. Fatme shook her head, “No, thank you! I’m staying with him, no matter how long it takes.” It was a statement, not a point for discussion. Ron was mentally alert again by the first afternoon, and by the third day he was already limping around the room, until the nurse shooed him back into bed. He was discharged late in the morning of the fifth day. Leaning on Fatme’s arm, he limped to the taxi.

Fatme stood under the hot shower for almost an hour until the boiler was empty. Ron sat beside her at the stove, where she cooked under his guidance. Rosa had done the shopping, Fatme sliced the pork loin and fried the small medallion pieces in butter. Then she fried the broccoli, the carrot slices, and finally the halved

tomatoes. Rosa arrived right on time with the flatbreads from the Turkish bakery, and they ate happily. They didn't skimp on the canned beer; the refrigerator was still bursting at the seams. The meal was delicious.

Ron pushed his plate back. "Fatme, I have to tell you something. Rosa and I did it every night, really properly, with ejaculation and wildly, over and over again, until we were exhausted..." Fatme put her fingers over his lips. "If I were your girlfriend, I would have slept with you just like that, no question. That's perfectly normal, Hakim. To make sure you stay and can be a strong man." Fatme placed her hand on Rosa's forearm. "You're a good friend, Rosa, and thank you. - And now we won't talk about that anymore. Tell me instead how little Bodnar managed to lure the old grump into her cave." Now all three of them laughed with relief, and Rosa recounted the story with meticulous accuracy.

After each encounter, Rosa had lain on Bodnar's broad chest and coaxed every detail about Laura out of him. They had been real, in-depth interrogations. Ron had no idea how good Rosa could be at pantomime. Perhaps Rosa embellished it here and there, but the story was spicy and delightful, and Rosa loved to be raunchy. Rosa used both hands to bring the pantomime to life. Ron and Fatme laughed until they cried, because when Rosa mimed Bodnar's wrinkled face during the happy ending, or when he mounted Yvette and his smug, self-satisfied grin when he pushed Yvette away afterward, or when Laura had milked his seed with strained sweat, they doubled over with delight. Of course, Rosa mimed Yvette and Laura perfectly, the tip of her tongue tucked into the corner of her mouth and sweating from the exertion of milking and slurping. And Rosa's whole body wobbled as she strained to milk the air with her fist like a wild woman, her tongue tucked into the corner of her mouth. And then, like a chaste virgin, she flinched in surprise when she had her lips drawn over the invisible glans and the invisible fluid splashed into her mouth, and then they both shrieked with pleasure.

Fatme and Ron held their breath as Rosa bent over backwards and shrieked, "Fuck me, Daddy, fuck me good!" And then she turned around, playing the old man: "Yes, come here, you dirty cunt, I'm going to fuck you senseless now, I've always wanted to!" Now Rosa played both roles alternately: the deflowering, the long

fucking, and — pfft! pfft! pfft! — Bodnar's laborious ejaculation. Ron and Fatme rolled around, clutching their aching sides, because they had to laugh and whinny.

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Rosenblatt slapped Ron on the back in delight as he limped back into the office. "Didn't I tell you, Hofstätter could hit a fly from 100 meters! Bravo, Hofstätter, you've put an end to that monstrosity... and saved us a lot of trouble. I mean, of course, all the paperwork, hey!" Rosenblatt sat down with Ron by the screen and showed him all the reports and documents that he and Bodnar had produced. "Rosa dictated the showdown to me; she's an eyewitness, after all. Speaking of eyewitnesses, you two have to go to the magistrate and give your statements, you and Rosa as witnesses. A fatal shooting — that's the rule."

Bodnar came over. "Ron, the press conference with the old man was top-notch. Not a word about the Wild West or High Noon. The victims' portraits were displayed as posters behind him; the press also received them by email. He named all the victims and said a few words about each one, so you could get a sense of the eight policewomen, the bodyguard, and the three judges. He was very emotional when he spoke about the judges. "For me, they weren't just names on slips of paper dangling from a dead toe." - "No, they were friends of mine, good friends." The hunt had lasted 11 months and 17 days. Then 75 officers surrounded the cop killer Frank Halter, a brief exchange of gunfire, and the serial killer was dead. One officer was shot but is already on the road to recovery. The Galebnikov and Halter cases are closed and will be archived, for good this time." Bodnar gesticulated wildly. "And then the chief stood up and stared at the crowd, like a lion tamer at his lions. It was deathly silent. And then he thundered, 'Ladies and gentlemen, please either quote me verbatim or put down your pen.' Television broadcast this press conference three times, three times! And the next day, at least in the better newspapers, there was no nonsense; Wallner was quoted word for word."

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Wallner entered the aquarium with a bottle of Glenfiddich, and Rosenblatt quickly fetched five glasses from the coffee bar. The

president poured. “We gave 150% for a year, and now we’ve finally caught him. Despite all the cunning, treachery, and tricks, your solid detective work and a bit of luck made us victorious. Let’s drink to that!” Wallner raised his glass in their toast, remaining standing with it, and continued. “And let’s raise a glass to the health of our good Bodnar. He’s leaving us after 37 years as a police officer, vice squad member, and detective. He’s taking early retirement at the end of this week; the personnel department has already taken care of everything. Bodnar, here’s to 37 years of loyal service! Cheers!” They drank, more or less surprised. Wallner sat down. “Bodnar, I told you so. That Kerzendocht incident took you out of the running. You’ve become sleep-deprived, unfocused, and unreliable. I can’t let the spearhead go blunt, you understand. Early retirement is fine, isn’t it?” Bodnar nodded, a lump in his throat. “Thank you, Mr. President!” he finally managed. Wallner turned to Rosa. “The new guy starts next month; I chose him myself, not the minister. A capable fellow, five years of police service, a detective through and through. He’ll fit in well with us, I think.”

The Scotsman, of course, hit them right in the guts, but an hour later everyone was at their screens, getting on with their work.

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Fatme allowed herself exactly five minutes of break, then pulled out her laptop and dove into the material for the third semester. But she wasn’t fully focused. She went shopping and tried to cook. Spaghetti and ground beef; she had found a recipe for Bolognese. She was in despair; the half-kilo of ground beef was burning in the pan. When Ron came home, he took it in stride. They ate spaghetti with canned pesto sauce and drank beer. Ron flushed the burnt ground beef down the toilet; it was better if the fish in the Vienna Canal got sick. Fatme was still sitting at the table, turning the beer glass between her fingers. Ron sat down next to her and waited patiently.

Fatme glanced up briefly and then looked down again. “Hakim, I’m pregnant. Frank, of course, hadn’t brought any pills. He took me every day and grinned wickedly because my body reacted so quickly during sex. I was ashamed of it, even though I usually enjoy the ecstasy. You know how easily it goes for me, even with most of the guests. Now I’m pregnant. I’ve taken four pregnancy

tests yesterday and today, all positive. I don't want his child, I don't want to carry his child to term." Ron took her hand and stroked it gently. "It's kind of murder, but I don't want his child, I'd rather die," Fatme whispered. Ron roared, "There's no dying here, Fatme, don't talk nonsense! He raped you and got you pregnant. No discussion necessary. Don't make it so hard on yourself, you're not turning against the child, but against the rapist, and rightly so. Of course I'll go with you to the clinic, I stand by you, I'm your man, Fatme." She squeezed his hand and smiled. "I was sure you'd take my hand and hold on tight, Hakim. Thank you, and thank you again."

"But I won't let you get away with the mincemeat murder. We'll practice until we can eat it. Cooking isn't hard, I think. You'll learn it in no time." Fatme breathed a sigh of relief. They were a goddamn good team, she and Hakim. She didn't contact the pimp until 10 days after the abortion. Life went on; the kidnapping, the rapes, and her captivity lay far behind her, shrouded in the mists of the past.

She carefully applied her makeup, smoothed her evening gown, and went to her escort appointment. The pimp swallowed hard when she told him that the triple price had just doubled. "That's right," she emphasized, oblivious to Charly's distressed expression. She told him casually that the price would double and double until it simply became too expensive for the clients. They would stop coming, and that was the whole point. But Fatme was wrong. The clients readily handed over the bills; after all, it was just printed paper, wasn't it? They all wanted a happy ending with this expensive, high-class woman, no matter the cost!

✨

Ron knew she would continue escorting, even after they had taken their vows before the Imam. She would continue escorting until she decided, for example, that she was too old. No, since Frank had been with her nonstop for three weeks, it was essential for her to experience other bodies and orgasms with other men, in addition to those with Ron, her "married" orgasms. They had talked through entire nights, and Ron realized how much she had changed. Fatme lay with her face on his chest, her tears streaming down it. He held her head, her hair, and caressed her, for they

were closer than they had been in a long time. Fatme was now walking a tightrope; she no longer simply processed her paying clients professionally and quickly, “in-out-in-out-thank you, Madame.” No, she wanted to feel her own emotions; she no longer wanted to see her body merely as a money-making machine. No, she wanted, she needed feelings, sensations, ecstasy, orgasms with many different men. The men had paid for the privilege of taking her completely, that was okay. But she only surrendered so that she could feel it too — the arousal, the surge of emotions, yes, even the orgasm, even if she sometimes had to use her clit to help.

Fatme’s tears dripped onto his chest, but her whispering voice was steady. “Hakim, I have to be honest with you. And more importantly, I have to be honest with myself. Who I am, and not who I pretend to be. The first time I was allowed to lie down with Dad, I was breathlessly curious and ready to receive him completely. The tearing of my hymen wasn’t the spectacular thing; it was the beautiful, even sacred feeling of him gently and tenderly pounding me to climax for many minutes, and only then, ecstatically, he pumped his seed into me, jet for jet, kissing my lips after every single jet. He kissed my lips with every jet and I was overjoyed. My body signaled how right and how beautiful being pumped into was. Even when Charly rented me out the first few times, long before I started escorting, I breathlessly anticipated the moment when the man would penetrate me. That was the real thing, the way I, how my body reacted to his thrusting and pumping, and what I felt. And when I started escorting, I wanted to experience that again and again. Yes, that was me, that was my true self.”

When you later asked me to save the ‘full passionate program’ for you, I agreed. I certainly didn’t give the guest everything just to get close to you. But it meant denying my true self. It was Frank who reawakened me. He tried, of course, to get me drunk and make me compliant. He made me swallow poppers, a whole lot of them. Only then did my body react, entirely according to his will. I became more driven than ever before, and he grinned from ear to ear because now he had me where he wanted me. Every day, in the face of death, I returned to my true self. I let my body feel and experience things again and no longer denied my ecstasy. Frank, that idiot, naturally attributed it to his equipment and his ‘fabulous skills.’ Pah! But I knew it was only me who gave my true self complete freedom. And precisely in those situations, with imminent

death before my eyes and insatiable Frank between my thighs, impaled by his enormous member and pumped like a steam engine, then it was like scales falling from my eyes. It was his enormous thing that held my flesh in his iron grip and dragged my flesh in and out of my fuckhole, giving me orgasms in no time at all, and I jumped like a little goat from orgasm to orgasm while his monster dragged the flesh of my fuckhole in and out. No, I would never again pretend to be my true self, never again. When I resumed escorting, my true self experienced true, genuine feelings again when I was pounded or licked by the client, yes. Hakim, I know now who I am. Who I want to be." Fatme's soul trembled, but she simply couldn't imagine it any other way.

Ron was no longer so sure whether he would and could continue to approach escorting with such detachment. Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely because of this, she clung to the idea of marriage. "No, you don't need to convert to Islam, Hakim," she had said. "It's quite enough if only one of us belongs to that abominable medieval religious and cultural community. And I won't raise my children to be Muslims, that's for sure. I'll raise them without the straitjacket of my religion or yours, and when they're older, they can decide for themselves." Ron had smiled; he hadn't expected anything different. "And if we do marry," Ron added, "it will only be to make the official declaration of our deep connection. But it's not time for that yet, my love."

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Fatme tells her story

Fatme's sexuality awakened around the age of seven. Before, she hadn't paid any attention when her father had sex with her mother in the evenings. Now, however, it was extremely interesting, and she snuggled her small, naked body close to her mother's nudity whenever her father bent over her open thighs. Fatme laid her face on her mother's inner thigh to get a close look. Her mother spread her labia and grasped her father's stiff penis, which she slowly and deliberately pushed in, deep inside, until it was completely enclosed. Then he thrust gently in and out, and this lasted quite a while, probably ten minutes. Fatme, her face resting on her mother's inner thigh, watched as her mother became increasingly aroused; obviously, her mother loved this sex very much. She began to pant loudly and wiggle her hips, whispering, "Ali, I'm coming!" And then Fatme knew that just seconds later, Mama was writhing and twitching, clinging to Papa, her face contorted in pain. Mama had explained to Fatme that this was perfectly normal, that it wasn't pain, but rather the wonderful inner explosion. Now Papa straightened up and lifted Mama's buttocks by her hips. He fucked her furiously fast and ejaculated inside her, because that's how babies were made. Mama grinned shamelessly and patted Papa's buttocks as he fucked her furiously, ejaculating inside her. Fatme could see from his penis and thick urethra that the semen was shooting through, and Papa's testicles were bouncing up and down. So that was what fucking was all about, and Fatme stared for a long time into Mom's cunt, from which Dad's slime was oozing out again.

Mom didn't masturbate very often, maybe two or three times a week, right after breakfast, when Dad had left the house. Dad didn't really mind, but she wasn't supposed to do it in front of him. Little Fatme, who regularly skipped school, was allowed to be there, though. She watched Mom very closely, on the one hand, how her finger did it technically, and on the other hand, Mom's facial expressions were extremely interesting. Strained, yes — but at the same time full of gentle passion. Mom masturbated very gently and for at least 15 minutes. When Fatme turned eight, she did it too, and Mom would glance over at her and nod because Fatme

was doing it right. Fatme now masturbated at the same time as Mom, which created even more closeness and connection.

Mama became ill and knew instinctively that her end was near. She worried deeply about Papa and Fatme's future. She went to a matchmaker who suggested three older girls: Yasmin, 29; Elif, 28; and Aishe, 31. Mama spoke with Papa for a long time; he was not even 50 and had to sleep with all three girls and decide which one he wanted to keep after her own death. Papa initially refused, but eventually relented. When one of the girls came for sex in the evening, Mama would retreat to the guest room. The girls came every evening for a whole year, sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs, and sometimes even in groups of three. Fatme, by then 12 or 13, had been given specific tasks. First, she had to spread the girl's labia with her fingers and guide Papa's penis so that he could penetrate her slowly and deliberately. Secondly, Fatme had to pull Papa's penis out in time so that he wouldn't ejaculate inside her and unintentionally make her a baby. Fatme did this second task reluctantly, because it was so exciting to watch Papa's urethra as the semen shot through and his testicles bounced up and down.

Yasmin was 29 and had already slept with hundreds of men; she was the most experienced of the three. But she was always very depressed and miserable, yes, you could say that. You could always hear her say, "Mr. Ali, you can fuck me as you please, that's fine. But please don't cum inside, I don't want a baby yet, I'm still too young for that. So, please don't cum inside!" Now Fatme bent over Yasmin and spread her labia wide. Yasmin's cunt was already quite large, and her clitoris had remained very small despite vigorous, frequent masturbation. Fatme now pulled back Papa's foreskin completely and guided his penis until it found the entrance to Yasmin's cunt. As always, Papa pushed his penis slowly and deliberately into Yasmin's cunt, all the way in. Fatme didn't withdraw her hand but left it resting on Yasmin's labia until the end. No matter how much Yasmin slapped her dad's buttocks to make him go faster, he wouldn't be rushed and fucked slowly and deliberately as always. After a long thrust, Dad whispered, "Fatme, now, I'm about to come!" and Fatme carefully withdrew his penis. Fatme grinned maliciously because Dad had already ejaculated hard into Yasmin's hole even as he pulled out. Fatme would then pull out his penis, masturbate the ejaculating Dad's cock for a second time with her hand, and let the stream spray into Yasmin's

fuckhole from the outside. We have to know, that Fatme liked it very much to masturbate her Dad's cock, that's for certain. Yasmin kept glancing uncertainly at Fatme, wondering if she had really pulled out in time. Fatme grinned, "Of course, Auntie!" Auntie was the respectful way to address a woman older than oneself. Dad usually fucked Yasmin a second time, but now Fatme let him ejaculate completely inside her before she withdrew his penis. After fucking, Yasmin always masturbated because she never had an orgasm during sex. Then Papa sent Yasmin home.

Elif was about 28 and not particularly pretty. But she always came home clean and lightly perfumed, because she loved her cleanliness. Fatme wasn't sure if Elif even knew that babies came from ejaculation. In any case, Elif liked letting Papa ejaculate inside her, again and again. Fatme only pulled Papa's penis out when he asked her to. Fatme would then pull out his penis, masturbate the ejaculating man' cock with her hand, and let the stream spray into Elif's fuckhole from the outside. Fatme would masturbate the ejaculating man' cock for a second time with her hand, so that the father would moan in plesaure and let after some minutes the jets spray into Elif's fuckhole from the outside. Elif didn't orgasm during sex either, and only over time did Fatme find out that Elif masturbated about once or twice a month, but she was incredibly embarrassed. Of the three girls, Elif was the one Fatme liked the most. But Papa wasn't very fond of her, because in his opinion, Elif was an uneducated idiot who only had sex on her mind. In the long run, that wouldn't work; Dad expected a bit more personality from a wife.

Aishe was already 31 and a mountain of a woman, she must have weighed 180 kg. But she was the funniest of the three of them; she was intelligent, educated, and sexually very active. Despite her weight, Dad liked her very much, and when time allowed, he even fucked her three times before evening. She was the first woman with a completely shaved pussy Fatme had ever seen. But this pussy was very deep hidden under all that fat. Fatme grinned sheepishly as she searched for her labia before fucking. As always, she pulled Dad's foreskin all the way back and guided his cock to Aishe's entrance. As always, Dad penetrated slowly and deliberately until he reached the end, because Aishe had a very small, tight pussy. Fatme could see the joy and ecstasy with which Dad fucked this woman. She really knew a lot about fucking and always

came, which made Papa very proud. She didn't like it when Fatme pulled his penis out. "I'm on the pill, I'm not crazy!" But Fatme liked to masturbate Dad's cock and masturbate Dad's cock for a second time with her hand, so that the father would moan in plesure and let after some minutes the jets spill into Aishes's fuckhole from the outside. And so Papa, panting and sweating, ejaculated again into her little hole, because Aishe was very tight. Fatme knew that because of her terrible weight, she wasn't suitable for Papa. Nevertheless, Fatme was always happy when Aishe came to fuck her. Aishe stroked her hair when Fatme's face rested on her inner thighs during sex. Fatme was always very surprised at how much Papa's penis stretched Aishe's little hole and then fucked her slowly and deliberately. Aishe liked this style very much; you could see it when she gradually worked her way up the hill to her orgasm. During the breaks, Fatme played with Aishe's clitoris, which Aishe also loved. But it would never have occurred to Fatme to rub her aunt to orgasm; that would have been an unseemly transgression of moral boundaries.

Fatme disliked going to school. In fact, she only went to have a little sex. Her particular boyfriend was Mehmet, a brutish guy with a big BMW, which he mainly used for sex. As long as Fatme was still a virgin, Mehmet let her masturbate him and watched her masturbate herself. But she wasn't in love with him, because he changed his girlfriends like he changed his shirts. They usually drove to the edge of the woods, to a secluded spot. There, Mehmet would have sex with his "girlfriend of the day" in the back seat, and Fatme would watch them from the passenger seat. Mehmet usually had his buddies there, and when he was finished, he'd open the back door and let the next one have his way. Most of the girls already knew; only a few were truly surprised. That's how it happened that Mehmet's girlfriend was fucked by half a dozen guys in a row. Later, when Fatme was no longer a virgin, she let herself be fucked in the back seat like the other girls; she found it very funny and had an orgasm with every guy. Finally, she uninhibitedly masturbated in front of the boys, because they enjoyed watching her act. So that was Fatme's school time; she learned nothing, or almost nothing, except public sex and public masturbation.

Papa sat by Mama's sickbed all day. His whole heart belonged to his wife, and he wanted to care for her himself until her last

breath and be with her as she died. He gave up his job, and they went hungry. That was Kismet, fate. He ate very little, giving everything to his wife and Fatme. Nevertheless, they quickly became impoverished, and hunger was their constant companion until the end of the year. His wife decided that none of the three aunts were suitable for him, and he promised to kick them all to the curb as soon as she died. Mother passed away peacefully, and they buried her the next day. Papa kept his word and stopped inviting the three aunts over for sex. He had slept with them every day for a year and had had enough. Fatme lay beside him, and they held each other in their arms; it was easier to grieve together. “Papa, I can do it for you with my hand, because I do it for the boys, too.” Papa thought about it for days. Then he agreed; he wasn’t cut out for abstinence. Fatme sat up and slowly pulled his foreskin up and down. She knew he liked it slow and deliberate. “May I drink your semen, Daddy?” Fatme whispered, and he nodded. Before he came, she put her lips around his penis, let her tongue dance playfully, and continued to rub it. He ejaculated deep into her throat, and she swallowed his semen just as she did with the boys. Afterward, Daddy took her in his arms and caressed her. Could he masturbate her clit? Yes, of course, Fatme said, willingly spreading her thighs. Daddy was really good at it; he wasn’t as rough and clumsy as the boys at school. She closed her eyes and let her orgasm build and wash over her. For the time being, this mutual masturbation was good and sufficient; they soon got over their grief.

“Daddy, wouldn’t you like to sleep and fuck with me like you did with Mommy, Yasmin, Elif, and Aishe?” He scratched his head. “Yes, actually, but it has to be your decision, my love. I’m not the type to rape my own child, okay?” Fatme nodded; she understood that quite well. After all, she was almost 14 and one of the few virgins among her peers. Yes, she longed to be fucked by Daddy; she knew that. “Daddy, I never let my boys fuck me. I told them my dad would be my First, and that’s what I want, with all my heart. Yes, I want to give you my virginity and become your little wife too, if you choose me over Aishe, Daddy!” She put her arm around Daddy’s neck. “Please, take me, because I want to be your little wife until you find someone else to marry, okay?” Papa hugged her tightly. “You’re so sweet, Fatme, you always make me so happy. I even forget I’m hungry.”

“The first time will sting, maybe even hurt, my love,” he murmured. “I know, Papa, I know. I’ve heard it from all my girlfriends, and that I shouldn’t be afraid, it’s a portal through which I must enter into womanhood. I really want you to be my First, Papa — not one of my boys. I’m very attached to you, Papa!” She couldn’t manage any more declarations of love at the moment; she was very excited. Papa adjusted her. “I’ll guide your cock as always, Papa,” she breathed, pulling back his foreskin completely. Then she guided his cock to the entrance of her virgin cunt. She noticed his tears. “Daddy, I love you so much. You don’t need to cry, you won’t hurt me. I’m exactly the right age to have my hymen broken. And I’m so incredibly happy that it’s you and not Mehmet or Freddy or Lorenz. Please don’t be sad, Daddy.”

Knowing something purely theoretically and experiencing it practically were two very different things. Fatme felt his penis making its way in, slowly and carefully. She felt her hymen stretch, but she wouldn’t scream for anything in the world, scaring Daddy with pointless cries. For what seemed like an eternity, her hymen stretched more and more until it was about to tear. Then, a tiny prick, and the hymen ruptured. She felt his penis now fully penetrate her. Deep inside. “You are a woman now, Fatme, my love. And it makes me so proud that you let me do it,” he whispered. “I’m going to fuck you like a real woman now, and we’ll learn how to fuck together in the next few days.”

She would remember this first fucking for the rest of her life. Daddy fucked her slowly and deliberately, for perhaps 15 to 20 minutes. It was a strange, completely new sensation, the way his cock thrust in and out of her, slowly and deliberately, just as he liked it. She gazed at his dear face, full of affection. She felt the lust and the desire for orgasm gradually creeping higher in her loins, making her clit of pleasure and the immense lust raging in her clit. She pressed her clit tightly against the shaft, so that with every movement, it scraped against the shaft, sending tiny flashes of pleasure through her. Fatme whispered, “Daddy, I’m coming!” and then the orgasm rolled in and washed over her. She squealed with pleasure and clung to Daddy. This orgasm was somehow completely different from the ones she had while masturbating. Daddy now grabbed her by the hips and lifted her ass, so that her cunt opened like a blooming flower. He fucked her very hard and powerfully, and his semen shot into her in powerful jets. She purred

with lust and grinned inwardly; so this is what it felt like to make a baby! He kissed her eyes, and his penis remained still inside her until it began to soften. He lay down wearily beside her. “Daddy, wasn’t that wonderful?” Fatme whispered, afraid that the beautiful feelings would escape. Daddy nodded; he was exhausted and needed to doze off a little.

She let Daddy fuck her thoroughly every day, sometimes several times a day. With Daddy’s help, she learned to race up the hill to orgasm and then stay there, bouncing from orgasm to orgasm until he came. These orgasms were the most wonderful she had ever experienced. She felt very clearly how her relationship with Daddy was changing, and a strong bond was forming between them. She didn’t go to school as often anymore to have a little sex. Of course, from then on she let Mehmet and all his buddies fuck her in the back of the BMW; sometimes there were five or six guys taking turns fucking her. And, to be honest, she had the most wonderful orgasms when she was being fucked by half a dozen cocks, and now she was urging Mehmet to order his friends to the parking lot. Mehmet shook his head at the little one who let everyone fuck her so insatiably. But the best fucking was in the evening or at night with Dad; he was definitely the best of them all.

The poverty and hunger were oppressive. Fatme approached her father about selling herself for sex and earning money that way. Papa was utterly horrified. But after a week, he picked up the thread again. How did she envision that? Well, Fatme already had an address at hand: a classmate was a busy prostitute and had given her the phone number of a pimp. Papa called this Charly, and he was immediately interested. He worked for Madame Florence, the most famous Madam in Vienna, who ran her business from her Fleischmarkt residence. Now, tough negotiations ensued between Papa and Charly, who wanted to buy her on behalf of and for Madame Florence. Papa drove the price up to dizzying heights until they reached an agreement. And so it came to pass that Papa sold his Fatme to Charly for Madame. Fatme, now over 14, thus entered prostitution. But it was worth it; Papa no longer had to go hungry. Dad bought Fatme some pretty, daring dresses and makeup, then let her go to Charly’s.

Charly wasn’t the type she would have willingly gone with. She had to undress completely in front of him, and he thoroughly ex-

amined every inch of her body. Then he took some nude photos for Madame. Fatme asked, bewildered, if he wanted to fuck her? Charly laughed raucously, that cur. “Madame would chop my penis off herself and feed it to her dogs! No, what do you think? I can do anything, but I can’t fuck any of the girls without Madame’s explicit permission! Oh my God, you must have grown up in the sticks with the seven dwarfs! You still have a lot to learn. You can’t run this business without a clue. So remember, if you have your eye on one of Madame’s men or girls, be sure to ask her permission first. Otherwise, you’ll be in deep trouble!” Fatme nodded; she would learn all of this.

Charly looked at the wardrobe that Dad had bought. He chose something simple, something girlish. He helped her apply her makeup properly — just a little, so she would look like a little girl. Then he led her into the back room, where her first client was waiting for her. A senior teacher, whose eyes lit up when he saw the little schoolgirl. Charly took the money and gave Fatme half. “Now, during your trial period, I’ll take a half. Later, when Madame takes you on, you’ll give me 30%, like all the other girls. Can you remember that?” Fatme nodded; she could certainly do math. She asked quietly what happened next, what she had to do. Charly smiled. “You go back inside to that nice gentleman, his name is Gerd. You will be kind and friendly to him and do everything he wants. But if there’s something you don’t want to do, tell him, he’ll accept it. And I’ll keep watch from behind the spanish screen to make sure he doesn’t get rough, otherwise I’ll punch him in the face. I’m responsible for your protection, Fatme. So, good luck!”

Fatme went inside and sat on Gerd’s lap. “I’m Fatme, may I call you Gerd?” Gerd smiled arrogantly. “I’d prefer it if you called me Mr. Director, Fatme.” He desperately wanted to kiss her on the mouth, but she only offered him her cheek. “You mustn’t kiss me on the mouth, Mr. Director!” she said firmly. They whispered back and forth, then it was quite clear what Gerd — excuse me, the Mr. Director — wanted. She should sit backwards on his lap, and he wanted to fuck her from below and caress her breasts. No, she shouldn’t undress completely, just take off her panties and unbutton her blouse. Fatme made sure he put on the condom, because that’s what he had paid for. Now he fucked her from below, and his fingers glided over her small mounds and her nipples, because

she didn't have proper breasts back then. After five minutes it was over; it was much easier than she had imagined. She went home; Charly would call her when he had a client for her. She went home, told her father everything in detail, and gave him the money.

She worked this way for almost a year and a half. To earn a little extra money, she served Turkish tea at the Turkish community center in the afternoons. No one there knew that she was a prostitute. Charly usually got her three or four clients in the morning, and the money was more than enough to support her father and the family.Charly fucked her once a week; Madame had approved it. Charly shook his head because she orgasmed every time she was fucked. "You have to control your passion, otherwise you'll burn through all your energy far too quickly." She couldn't; the orgasms came like clockwork. And she felt refreshed after fucking the clients, not drained. Charly watched over her from behind the spanish screen and continued to shake his head. In the afternoons, she served tea, and around that time, plump Aisha would occasionally come to Papa to let him have sex with her. Fatme knew this, of course, but she wasn't jealous of Aisha in the slightest. She knew how much Papa enjoyed having sex with the fat woman. That's how it came about that she met Hakim while serving tea.

Lightning struck. Cupid's arrow pierced her heart and made her hold her breath. Fatme knew in an instant that Hakim was "her" man. She had not the slightest doubt. What frightened her were the rumors that Hakim was involved with the Turkish mafia. She wanted nothing to do with the mafia or anyone from those circles. Nevertheless, she sat down with Hakim, and they talked about this and that. She wasn't at all surprised that lightning had struck Hakim too. And what was even more surprising was that Hakim was completely innocent. He was a wonderful man, about ten years older than her. He looked at her for a long time. "Yes, the bit about the mafia is partly true, Fatme. But it's very complicated, and I want to explain it to you openly and honestly one day. Right now, I can only hope that you'll still want to see me despite the half-truths." Fatme swallowed hard. There was a secret he couldn't reveal to her now. Well, she would trust him. "But I'll tell you one thing, Hakim: if you really are in the mafia, then I'll never see you again. You can be sure of that."

Fatme laughed heartily when Hakim tried to guess her age and said 19. She giggled and looked straight into his eyes. “Hakim, my makeup is deceiving you. I’m only 15.” This caught Hakim off guard. He hesitated, unsure how to explain it to her. “You’re far too experienced for 15, Fatme. That’s what fooled me, not your makeup.” Fatme shyly placed her hand in his, for they were sitting in the public courtyard of the community center; this was how respectable couples met in public. “I have a secret too, a complicated one, Hakim. I’ll tell you, right after you’ve explained the whole mafia thing to me.” They talked about their respective sex lives. Hakim confessed that all his Turkish girlfriends came from the sex work industry; it was always casual and without any romantic baggage, just physical intimacy for a few days or weeks. Fatme nodded understandingly. “That sounds like you’re not ready to commit yet?” Hakim thought for a moment. “Yes, you’re probably right about that. I’m only 28 and much too young to start a family.” Fatme squeezed his hand and placed it on her chest. “I’m just an ordinary Turkish girl, and I was born here in Vienna. I only know the secret, solitary sex of all virgins; my finger is my constant lover. And I lay with my father.” Hakim murmured that he understood the part about finger sex, but not the other part. That she lay with her father. Fatme knew it was an important moment, but she didn’t want to lie to Hakim, ever. “My mother died about two years ago, and since then I’ve been sleeping next to my father instead.” Hakim looked at her with wide eyes. “Does that mean…?” and Fatme answered immediately, “Yes, it does.” They were silent for a long time, then Hakim said, “I want to talk to you about this, about this father secret, once we’ve solved the other secrets, okay? Until then — let’s keep quiet about it, alright?” Fatme nodded. “Yes, Hakim, that’s a wise decision. I was afraid you’d get up and leave right away. But you’re giving us a chance, you’re giving me a chance to explain and unravel the threads. Thank you, Hakim.”

They sat on the bench in the courtyard every afternoon now, as was proper, and told each other everything, except for their secrets. One day, he invited her to his apartment. Fatme immediately agreed and went with him. “I’m not a virgin anymore, Hakim,” she said softly. “Daddy made me a woman two years ago. And today I want to belong to you, if you’ll have me.” They made love until late that evening, then she looked at her watch and said she had to go home to Daddy. He looked at her with great concern as she dressed and walked her downstairs to the front door.

It was three months later in his apartment. Hakim asked her to sit at the coffee table. He placed an ID card on the coffee table. “Fatme, Hakim Elbagr is a fake name. I’m Detective Inspector Ronald Hofstätter, a police officer. Until yesterday, I was living undercover in the Turkish mafia. They’ve been exposed now, many are in custody, and I gathered the information so they can be brought to justice. This was a joint police operation with the German, Dutch, and Spanish police. The Turkish mafia isn’t dead, of course, but we’ve dealt them a serious blow. Fatme, I haven’t been allowed to reveal this secret until now. And I sincerely hope you’ll stay with me, even though I’m a police officer.” Fatme looked at him wide-eyed, examining the ID card. “And who knows about this?” she croaked hoarsely. “Imam Mueddin has known for two days; he helped us cross some good people off my list. He trusts me, the Imam.” Fatme looked straight at him. “I’m glad you’re not a real mafioso. And I think you’ve done our Turkish community a great service. At least, I believe so.” Fatme twirled the ID card in her fingers. “And of course, I want us to stay together. Even more so now that you’re no longer a mafioso.” She glanced shyly at him. Hakim nodded. “Yes, I do too. I want to live with you and get to know you really well. I’ve loved you since the very first moment, but now we want to do everything properly, okay?” Fatme nodded in agreement. “And now for my secrets, Hakim.” She looked rather sad.

“Hakim, in the afternoons I serve tea or lie with you. In the mornings, I work as a prostitute and give the money to my father so he can live a good life.” Fatme held her breath and looked into Ron’s face. He thought for a very long time. “Did someone force you into prostitution?” he finally asked, more sharply than he meant. Fatme shook her head. “No, I myself suggested it. We were starving like birds in winter, so I proposed. Only after much resistance did Papa sell me to Madame Florence at the Fleischmarkt, or more precisely, to the pimp Charly, who’s directly responsible for me.” Fatme looked down. Hakim took her chin in his hand so she would look him in the eyes again. “And — do you enjoy being a prostitute, Fatme?” She said immediately, “No, no! But I have no other way to support Papa and the family.” Hakim held her chin firmly. “Would you give up prostitution right now if I gave you regular money for Papa and the family? Say, two thousand? You can take it, it’s money I ‘earned’ from the Mafia. So no problem.”

Fatme was stunned. Hakim would give her money so she wouldn't have to work as a prostitute anymore? She looked at him, beaming. But then her face darkened. "But what do I do about Madame Florence, about Charly?" Hakim only hesitated for a split second. "Forget Charly, I'll deal with him personally. The thing with Madame is more complicated. She'll take everything away from your dad again, that can't be allowed. I'll call her and see what's possible, okay?" Fatme's eyes filled with tears. "You're going to do all this for me, Hakim?" He looked at her firmly and resolutely. "From this moment on, you're not going to work as a prostitute anymore, and that's exactly what I'm going to tell Charly. I'll tackle the Madame thing first thing tomorrow. I absolutely don't want her to hurt your dad." Fatme sighed deeply. "Thank you, Hakim, for taking my first secret so wonderfully. I actually expected you to throw me out on my ear, me, the gutter swallow. But no, you set me free without shining armor and a white horse." Fatme laid her forehead on the back of his hand. "And now my second secret, isn't it, Hakim?"

"My mother died almost two years ago. Since then, I've been living with my father. At first, I only used my hand on him and let him ejaculate in my throat; he really likes that. Later, I asked him to deflower me and make me his little wife. He did, honorably and very tenderly. Since then, we have sex as often as he still can, but I lie in his arms every night, whether we have sex or not. He's in his mid-sixties and has sex with me at most twice a week; otherwise, he masturbates my clit sensually because he's very good at it and he simply loves it. And I love being fucked by him. He used to have another woman he had regular sex with, the chubby Aisha, but she's married now. This thing with my father is something I will never give up as long as he lives. Forgive my crude language, but every word is true." Fatme nestled her face into his hand; it was another moment when everything could shatter into a thousand tiny pieces. Hakim was very serious. "Forgive me, Fatme, if I'm not really thrilled. I need to think more about what this means for me and for us. I'm half-hearted, to be honest. I fully understand how and why the incest came about, and I can honestly accept that. But the fact that you can't let it go, that you don't want to let it go, that's a tough pill to swallow. I can't give you a good answer right now, not right now. Give me some time to think about it. Maybe we can talk about it again in a few days, okay? My world would fall apart if I rejected you because of this. Please, give me time to

think. I absolutely don't want to make a big mistake, Fatme. You mean a lot to me."

Ronald met with Charly late that evening and demanded that he give up on Fatme. To give up completely, Fatme now belonged to him alone and no one else; he would, of course, still speak to Madame. Charly was only used to such talk when a desperate father wanted his daughter back. A wad of cash, or a few punches, was how he dealt with such fathers. Ronald was cut from a different cloth, and Charly grew increasingly meek. Madame had given Fatme to him, and so on. Ronald's fists ended the nighttime argument; he put Charly in a headlock and left him no choice and no air. Charly swore like a sailor, but he backed down. "Okay, okay. Let's stay cool, Inspector. Fine by me, but settle it with Madame in person; I can't do it." Ronald let him go.

Madame didn't discuss it over the phone. "Who knows who's listening in, my dear Inspector. Just come by, and we'll sort everything out privately." Ronald went to the Fleischmarkt. Up there, on the seventh floor, was Madame's penthouse. The overweight old woman lay shrouded in a veil on a chaise longue, but Ron had no time to admire her naked voluptuousness. Of course he saw her melon-sized, soft breasts and her cunthole with its finely trimmed pubic hair; he wasn't blind. She negotiated with the iron fist of General George Patton. For over two hours, they haggled over coffee and chocolates. Ron left with a partial victory, and Madame smirked at her far more valuable partial victory.

Ronald told Fatme that same evening. "First, the really good news. You won't be working the streets for Charly anymore, Fatme. Not a single day. And Madame revoked his right to regularly fucking you." Ron skipped over the fight with Charly; it was unimportant. "What's important is that Madame has agreed that you won't be working the streets for Charly anymore." Fatme looked at him with wide, round eyes. "Madame said so?" she asked incredulously, because they said Madame was as tough as nails and didn't give anything away for free. Hakim nodded. "Yes, she told me herself. I think we can trust her word. She may be whatever she is, but she's the type who keeps her word."

Ron paused and lit a cigarette. "Of course she had a condition, of course. Madame doesn't give anything away for free." Fatme

looked at him expectantly. “She wants you as an escort for two evenings a week for now. She’ll earn ten times as much from you, even though you’re still entitled to 70%. So you’ll earn significantly more too.” Fatme interjected that she didn’t know what an escort was or what her job entailed. Ronald gathered his knowledge. “A rich man books an escort for an evening. As an elegant companion to the opera, a concert, or a fancy restaurant. There are tiered prices, and in the highest category, the guy is allowed to have sex with the girl.” Ron paused before continuing. “There is one catch, though. Charly remains your “agent leading officer,” Madame insists on this explicitly, even if he is no longer allowed to fuck you for free. He arranges everything for you, collects the money upfront, and pays you afterward. He negotiates with the client and then tells you what’s been agreed upon and what’s been paid for, so you know exactly what the client has paid for. On the one hand, you’re an elegant lady accompanying a gentleman. An escort girl is expected to have a much higher level of sophistication than a common streetwalker. Although in the end it mostly just boils down to in-and-out. And Charly will continue to fuck you, that’s guaranteed, Madame or no Madame.”

Fatme thought about it. “I have to be elegantly dressed, beautifully made up, and perhaps adorned with jewelry. An opera, a concert or an expensive restaurant. Hakim, I’m fine with the wardrobe, makeup, and hairstyle. But I’ve never been to an opera, a concert, or a fine restaurant. I’m afraid I’ll disappoint the gentleman.” Ronald looked directly at her. “Of course, Madame has already thought of that. Charly will not only give you detailed information beforehand about the client and any special requirements, but also about the composer and the plot of the piece. Most operas are actually quite simple stories that can be told in five minutes. Madame has also been in the escort business for quite some time, and you’re not the first inexperienced girl she’s sent out. I’m quite sure she’ll discuss the choice of client and your briefing with Charly in great detail and with great care. The guy is actually disgusting, but Madame is quite satisfied with his performance. So don’t be afraid.”

Ron lit another cigarette. “I’m thinking about the other thing much more. That you’re supposed to keep fucking with complete strangers.” Ron looked down, but his attention was entirely focused on Fatme. She sighed deeply. “The alternative is that she’ll

ruin Dad financially and socially." She bit her knuckles. "I have no choice, Hakim. She mustn't destroy Papa, and I'm convinced she could. I've let other men fuck with me before, even that ugly Charly every week, so that's not the problem. The problem is our relationship. How could you bear the thought of me fucking with other men? That's the only problem, and I'm not taking it lightly. Ultimately, the only question for me is whether I continue to support Papa or whether I betray him and let him die, just to keep you. You already know my answer to that."

Yes, Ronald already knew the answer. He could only keep Fatme if he continued to allow her to mate with her father. And now with other, nameless, rich gentlemen as well. He stood on the sandy beach before the line etched in the sand; now he had to jump. Now. Hic Rhodus, hic salta! And there was only one alternative: abandon Fatme, leave her. The very thought made the wound that Cupid's arrow had inflicted in his heart bleed. No, he couldn't, he wouldn't. Abandon Fatme here and now, just because she had to sleep with other men without having a choice? Was he a man or a trembling weakling?

Ron sat down next to Fatme on the couch. His fingers, holding the cigarette, trembled. No, no, and no again! Fatme meant a lot to him, no, she meant everything. He had always avoided falling "really" in love. But here, now, with Fatme, he had found the love of his life. And he wasn't about to let his petty, narrow-minded morality tear it apart. Never.

Ron took Fatme's hand and kissed her fingertips. "Fatme, I will bear it as long as I know that you love me. That you love only me, that I am the only man for you. Then I can bear anything. I intend to do so, and I ask for your support if I waver." They sat for a long time in silence. Fatme rested her head on his shoulder. "I'm your wife, Hakim, from the very first moment. Unwaveringly. Sleeping with other men has always been just a business transaction for me, nothing more. I only do it for the money. My money, or in the future, for the money that Dad could never repay Madame. I sleep with you because I love you with all my heart. Because my heart overflows with love for you. I've never loved so unconditionally before, and I never will again if you send me away now. I would be incredibly sad, Hakim."

Ron was deeply moved. She had never expressed her love so clearly before. Warmth washed over him. He had always felt her love; now she was saying it openly. “I love you with all my heart, Fatme. It’s the first time I’ve ever loved a girl so deeply and unconditionally. My petty, bourgeois self is screaming bloody murder, but I’m not listening. I’m an adult and I know when I’m making a good decision, and this decision is good and right. I won’t be jealous of your clients because I know how it all fits together and how it came about. I am your husband, Fatme, unbreakable. Forever.”

Ron immediately called Madame and told her that he and Fatme would comply with her demands. She simply said that she hadn’t expected anything different. Charly would contact Fatme. They kept the conversation brief; everything had been said. Fatme lay down on the couch and buried her face in his lap as she wept. “I’m so afraid, Hakim, for you and me. Will we both be able to endure this? Will our relationship survive it?” Ron stroked her hair. “Yes, we’ll make it through, because we’re both very strong. And together we’re even stronger.” Fatme nodded, weeping.

Ronald started his new job at the heart of the Criminal Investigation Department in the Rossau Barracks. His apartment was on Ruprecht Square, less than a ten-minute walk from his new workplace. Charly didn’t call Fatme until a week later. She was to come and discuss her first assignment with him in person. When she arrived, Charly congratulated her on her promotion to escort girl. There were only a handful of them, and Madame Florence kept a watchful eye to ensure everything remained discreet, elegant, and expensive. The client was a Saudi businessman who frequently used her escort service. Charly described the man and his habits; she was to accompany him to an important business dinner with high-ranking officials and local businesspeople. The Saudi understood German and could also speak some, so it wasn’t a disadvantage that Fatme didn’t speak English. Madame lent her a valuable necklace and a matching bracelet, and Fatme had to return it to her afterward. The Saudi had slept with all the escorts so far and wanted to do so again now; after all, he’d paid for it. “But if he repulses you, for whatever reason, then you don’t have to sleep with him, Fatme. Madame made that very clear.” Fatme nodded; she understood everything. And the Saudi looked quite acceptable in the photos. “Charly,” she asked, “did any of the other escorts say anything negative about him?” Charly thought for a moment and

shook his head. “No, they all unanimously said he was a pleasant person and didn’t ask for anything unusual. He usually wanted to sleep with them a second or even a third time, and they described him as very potent. Missionary and doggy style, otherwise…” “No, they all unanimously said he was a pleasant person and didn’t ask for anything unusual. He usually wanted to have sex a second or even a third time, and they described him as very potent. Missionary and doggy style, nothing else.” Later in the conversation, Charly mentioned almost casually that the inspector had given him a good beating because Fatme now belonged entirely to him and would never work as a prostitute again. Fatme’s jaw dropped; Hakim had never mentioned that. Fatme grabbed Charly’s hand. “If you like, you can fuck me now. Not a word to Madame, of course. But I need you as a strong protector, so you can fuck me now if you like, Charly.”

Fatme was very excited the next evening. She took a very long shower, washed her hair carefully, and trimmed her pubic hair. Charly had recommended that she wear her tight-fitting, dark red bodysuit, which accentuated her figure very well. After she had put on the necklace and, now made up, went over to Ronald, he whistled through his teeth. “Wow! You look like a very elegant 20-year-old! Yes, the gentleman will look upon you favorably, I’m sure of it.” He hugged her. “Shall I accompany you to Charly’s?” She declined; it was only a short walk to the meat market. And Charly would wear his best suit and take her by taxi to the Saudi’s hotel and pick her up again afterward. The Saudi had agreed to be the First to a young girl.

Fatme didn’t get home until after 2:00 a.m., completely exhausted. She quickly showered and slipped into bed with Ron. She said the evening had been wonderful. The client was a cultured man and treated her like a princess from the very first moment. She spoke very little during dinner; the businessmen conversed in English and had a lot to discuss. She never found out what they were talking about. Ron asked, how it had continued? The client asked very politely if he could have sex with her. Yes, she agreed, and he fucked her three times. The third time, he couldn’t ejaculate anymore. During the breaks, he pleasurably licked her pussy and then her clit until she orgasmed. He did it very gently and sensitively, Fatme whispered. She had dozens of orgasms and was happy but quite exhausted; she had given it her all. At the end, he

handed her an envelope containing three thousand American dollars as an extra thank you for the pleasurable sex. Ron hugged and embraced her. She should give some of the money to her father, but also buy herself one or two very elegant dresses, because she would need them in the future. Hugs and smiles, they fell asleep.

The weeks drifted by. Ronald and his squadron were on the trail of a serial killer, and it was very exciting. Fatme went escorting two or three times a week; Charly was worth every penny. Madame had called her briefly and said how satisfied she was with Fatme's escorting, and Fatme was a little proud of herself. She was doing a good job and earning a lot of money. Almost all the clients wanted to fuck the escort girl; there was hardly one who didn't. Fatme sat down at Ron's computer and searched for information about the man from the previous night. They were often quite big names she'd slept with. Every night, she told Ron in all detail how the escorting, the fucking and the licking had gone.

One day, she and Ron got onto the topic of escorting again. Ron voiced his concerns for the first time. When she came home late at night or early in the morning, she was exhausted and worn out from the night's events with the client. He said he wasn't happy that she was exerting herself so much that she was no longer available to him. He felt that the "full program of passion" was rightfully his, not having an exhausted and drained girlfriend. She immediately understood what he meant. He was absolutely right. She suggested that in the future, no client should get the "full program with passion"; that should be reserved for Hakim only. And she kept her word. Of course, she let the clients have sex with her, but she remained passive and let her orgasms roll off her back easily. Ron was right; he should be the only one to get the full treatment with passion. It was an adjustment for her to remain passive while being fucked. Of course she had orgasms, even during this in-and-out fucking, and definitely during clitlicking. But when she passively allowed her orgasms, she lost much less sexual energy, that's true.

It felt a little strange, this new passivity. Well, she didn't need to seduce the client; he'd paid for it. She smiled sweetly and invitingly, which didn't hurt Hakim. Quite a lot of clients wanted to lick her clit before sex, which she granted and actually enjoyed very much. So she often let them lick her clit to orgasm and then said to

the client, “Sir, I’m ready to have sex now!” She guided his penis into her vagina herself; she couldn’t stand it when someone rammed his penis in like a wild beast. No, she did that much better herself. But now, instead of actively having sex with him or arousing him, she simply lay there passively and let him thrust and pump. She had promised Hakim that. Nevertheless, she had an orgasm almost every time, then she writhed and twisted, but she tried to just passively accept it. She didn’t smile when the man was about to ejaculate. Sometimes she had to help him by masturbate his cock which stuck inside her by hand when he desperately begged her for help. Almost all the older men did that. If someone wanted to have sex again, she was of course willing and ready, but she never asked anyone herself again, no. Then she went to the bathroom and cleaned her cunt. The evening was over, she got dressed and went downstairs to Charly in the hotel lobby. When she got home, usually before midnight, she took a long shower and slipped into bed with Ron. She told him about having sex with the guest, and she was still full of sexual energy. Now she was exactly how Hakim wanted her, an active, charming lover who now demanded the icing on the cake of her day of sex and got it. Ron said that’s how he wanted her. The whole shebang with lots of passion.

And so a year passed. Fatme now worked as an escort seven evenings a week. Madame was very fond of her and the money she brought in. But Fatme couldn’t be persuaded to do it in the afternoons, because Madame couldn’t earn enough from her. Her afternoons belonged to her Papa she said firmly to Charly and even the Madam herself. There she would lie tenderly snuggled against him and stroke his penis. On some afternoons, Aishe would come by and let him fuck her, if he wasn’t too tired. Aishe had given birth to two babies, and she was absolutely convinced that Fatmes Papa had fathered them. Her husband was a really good husband and father, but he knew very little about sex; he never learned anything what Aishe had shown him. Fatme always stroked Aishe’s clit, but without masturbating her, because that would have been an unseemly intrusion. No, she very much enjoyed stroking Aishe’s little clit because it was shaped like a small boy’s penis. And Aishe sighed with lust when Fatme stroked her clit, and when she got really turned on, she masturbated herself, quickly and hard. No, Fatme was happy that Dad enjoyed fucking Aishe so much. No, Fatme’s afternoons belonged to Dad alone.

Toward the end of that year, Fatme had just turned 19, and Ronald became very uneasy. “Frank Halter, the murderer, has it in for you now because you’re my wife.” But Fatme refused to be rattled or allow a bodyguard. They agreed that Charly would send Ronald a photo of each guest, and they had agreed he would reply with “OK” or “run for your life.” Ronald wanted to make sure that Frank Halter didn’t just book her through the escort service and get his hands on her that way easily. But the murderer was very clever and didn’t fall for her escorting. He had something better in mind. One day, she had just gotten ready to go to her father’s, when a hand went over her mouth and she was instantly rendered unconscious by the chloroform. That’s how Frank got hold of her.

Frank took her to a remote house in southern Styria, near the village of Zehensdorfberg, where his father, Artem Galebnikow, owned a remote house. She remained handcuffed to the wall by one wrist, even while Frank was having sex with her. Yes, he had sex with her repeatedly a day, for over three weeks. He was fascinated by her body and fucked her as often as he could. She couldn’t tolerate alcohol at all and fell asleep almost immediately. So he gave her poppers and experimented to find out how many he needed to give her to really get her aroused; it ended up being around six vials. Fatme, who was very familiar with her own lust, had never been as horny and driven as she was now by the poppers. She desperately wanted to be fucked, right now!

She stared, her eyes glazed, at Frank’s enormous cock. No, she had definitely never seen one so big before; it was almost twice as long as Hakim’s. Grinning, Frank pulled back his foreskin, revealing the large, impressive glans with its prominent opening. Fatme involuntarily licked her lips. Frank laboriously forced his monster into her cunt, and Fatme had to hold her breath, so large and powerful was his cock filling her.

No, she had definitely never had such a huge cock inside her before, definitely not. She had to keep holding her breath, so powerful and intense was the sensation of this gigantic cock pounding in her cunt. Frank was obviously very skilled at fucking. He effortlessly found their shared rhythm; they were perfectly synchronized right from the start, and Fatme cheered inwardly as she practically ran effortlessly up the hill, towards orgasm. She stared into Frank’s eyes and clung to him as her orgasm erupted and washed

over her. A knowing smile flickered around Frank's lips, and she could have strangled him for it. But now it was like with Dad; she stayed on top of the hill, bouncing from orgasm to orgasm, hanging stiffly in ecstasy for ten minutes, holding him tightly. "There you go!" Frank growled, grabbing her hips, lifting her ass so that her cunt opened even wider. He fucked her furiously, now spurting inside her, jet after jet. She could feel each jet splattering into her cunt like fat, wet cowpats. Frank left his cock inside her until it softened, then pulled it out, grinning like a schoolboy who'd pulled off a great prank.

The thought shot through Fatem like a whip crack. Frank's abduction had interrupted her contraception, and of course, he hadn't taken her pills. She had read the warning hundreds of times that stopping the pill greatly increased the risk of pregnancy. If Frank continued as before, fucking her eight times or more a day, he would 100% get her pregnant. This fear now hung over her like a black cloud, and she suffered terribly.

Fatme craved for poppers; she wouldn't let Frank fuck her without them. Okay. She'd also figured out why Frank could bring her to orgasm so easily. His enormous cock filled her so completely that with each thrust, he pulled all the flesh of her vagina in and out, including her clit, which was soon about to explode. Okay, now she knew. But because she let him pump her full of poppers, she kept greedily grabbing Frank and his monster. He seemed to enjoy that immensely. Of course, the little idiot imagined, it was his legendary fucking skills that drove Fatme wild.

Frank had promised Ronald in his phone call that he would enjoy fucking Fatme from wedding night to wedding night. Fatme could well imagine Hakim's despair, but on the other hand, she was certain that he hadn't given up on her, but was desperately searching for her with all his might. She was handcuffed day and night, one hand on each hand. On nice days, she went out into the sunshine with Frank, chained to him. Frank fucked her on the lawn in front of the house; she usually couldn't get poppers there, yet she still willingly gave herself to him. She had to admit it to herself: purely sexually speaking, she had never been fucked as well as by Frank. On the one hand, she was a prisoner, completely at his mercy and at his whims; on the other hand, she desperately wanted to be fucked by him, day and night. From the very begin-

ning, she gave him the “full package with all her passion” and felt herself betraying Hakim in the process. But her desire was stronger than any other consideration; Frank’s fucking always reminded her of her father’s fucking, and she wept with joy, lust, ecstasy and arousal.

She had long since stopped counting the days. She didn’t count how often Frank fucked her, nor how many orgasms she had while being fucked. Numbers had no value here, in God’s own beautiful nature. Frank treated her well; apart from the handcuffs, she had no complaints. She had even gotten used to him going to the toilet with her chained up — what was the big deal? Frank went outside every day and talked on the phone for long periods; he obviously had to keep in touch with his people. She wasn’t allowed to make phone calls, though. Ronald had surely already called Papa and told him they were seriously looking for her, and that Papa shouldn’t worry too much. And he’d certainly informed Charly as well. Fatme’s thoughts revolved mainly around how she should tell Hakim. That she had found herself, here in this predicament. That she had found her true self. That passivity during sex was wrong, that she was deceiving herself, deceiving herself. In her mind, she had already rehearsed it a hundred times, how she would tell Hakim, and how he would understand. Yes, there was a danger that he wouldn’t understand, that he wouldn’t want to believe it. They would break up, because she didn’t want to pretend anymore, never again. She wanted to be herself, not be fucked by clients like lifeless driftwood. No, she wanted to, she needed to live out her sexuality in order not to freeze or wither away. Hakim had to understand it, he simply had to.

After three weeks of captivity, Frank said he’d had enough. He wanted to face Ronald and shoot him. Frank was simply fed up with all these games. “You’re great to fuck, Fatme,” he said, “there’s a volcano slumbering inside you, and when I see it erupt, it warms my heart.” Fatme lowered her gaze. “I know, Frank. I’ve seen the volcano erupt again and again these past few days, and I’ve enjoyed it, this volcano, as you call it.” She looked up at him uncertainly. “So, you’re going to kill me now?” Frank laughed silently. “Nonsense! Of course I’m not going to kill you. You’re a great girl, wonderful to fuck. No, I’m going to kill Ronald Hofstätter, our game is over.” She was still looking at him. “And thenafter you’ll kill me?” Frank laughed again. “No, you idiot, of course not.

Why would I? You never did anything to me, and you were always great in fucking. Live and keep on fucking like there's no tomorrow!"

Fatme stood on the roof of Gasometer C, clinging to a rusty, man-high piece of metal. It was the vent pipe, but Fatme didn't know that. Frank had put her there and said he would crouch behind her and then shoot Frank. "Yes," Fatme said, sending up a silent prayer that he wouldn't shoot Hakim, the brute. Frank had given her only a light, tattered dress to wear, no underwear, because she didn't own any clean ones anymore. The cold west wind made her dress flap, and she shivered against her exposed cunt. Frank held her around the waist, and they both stared at the other side of the roof, where Hakim's head appeared, the pistol clamped between his teeth. Hakim didn't take his eyes off them for a moment and stepped onto the roof, onto the patch of carpet that had been laid out there. Ronald shouted, "Here I am, Frank!" and bent his knees slightly, getting into a firing position. Frank grumbled loudly, "So now we're both here, you and I. And Fatme too, how could I have missed that? Are you going to shoot her, Ronald, to have a clear line of fire?!"

Hakim shouted, "Bacaklarını aç!" which means "Spread your legs!" in Turkish.

Without even thinking, Fatme spread her legs wide. Hakim fired immediately, twice. As Frank flinched, Fatme jumped aside in a panic, but continued to cling to the rusty piece of metal, screaming at the top of her lungs. Frank screamed back and threw his arms up. Fatme could see another bullet strike his skull, his brains spurting out the back. Frank fell backward, lifeless like a rag doll. He fell to the edge of the roof and then to the ground below. Fatme stopped screaming in horror. Hakim stood up and holstered his pistol in his shoulder holster. Fatme wasn't particularly afraid of heights and now ran barefoot and lightly around half the curve of the roof, falling into Hakim's arms. Just then, a uniformed policewoman appeared at the iron ladder and climbed up beside them. "Ronald, you're bleeding!" shouted the policewoman, who also had her pistol holstered. "We need something to apply a tourniquet," she yelled. She looked around frantically, then spotted Fatme's fabric belt. "Your belt, quick!" She shouted, and since Fatme was standing there completely clueless, she ripped her belt

off. She knelt behind Ronald and tied off his leg high up. “I had him aimed over the barrel, Ronald,” the policewoman said, “and if you’d missed, I would have shot him right in the face, on my soul!” The policewoman ordered that they had to leave immediately; Ronald needed to go to the hospital right away. She was the first to climb down the iron ladder and helped Ronald, who was pale with fear of heights. When they got to the bottom, Ronald said, “I don’t feel a thing, no pain at all!” and the policewoman nudged him with her elbow. “Yes, of course, Mr. Wooden-Leg! It’s just the adrenaline gushing out of your hair. Of course you don’t feel anything yet.” She turned to Fatme and offered her hand. “I’m Rosa Morgentau, Ronald’s colleague and friend.” Fatme shook her hand. “I’m Fatme Ökdemir, Ronald’s girlfriend. He speaks very highly of you, Rosa.”

Ron lay pale in the hospital bed, still asleep after the anesthesia wore off. Frank’s bullet had thankfully missed his femoral artery, and had been surgically removed. He would make a full recovery, the surgeon said with satisfaction. Rosa left, and Fatme stayed by his side. Fatme couldn’t leave now; she had to stay with him. In the late afternoon, Ronald awoke, gradually regaining color in his face. “Did I get him?” was his first question, and Fatme confirmed it. “You shot him in the head, and his brains squirted out the back, then he fell off the roof.” Hakim smiled contentedly. “Now that’s over, and he’ll never touch you again.” Then he brooded. “I didn’t even see Frank shoot me,” he said, astonished. “I really didn’t see it, didn’t notice it.” He shook his head from side to side. “Well, that’s how it is with witness statements. I may have been one of the main players, but I didn’t see such a crucial detail at all. That’s actually quite disturbing, don’t you think?” Fatme replied that she hadn’t seen it either. She had only noticed a shot that hit Frank in the head. Hakim smiled. “After you obediently did the splits, I could see his legs perfectly. So I immediately fired twice, right into his knees. Then you jumped to the side screaming, and I had a clear line of sight. I shot him right in the genitals and then again in the skull to make sure he was dead. He was already dead when he fell backward into the abyss.”

Fatme stayed with him in the hospital for five days, then Hakim was discharged. At home, she took a long shower and remembered how she and Frank had showered together every morning, handcuffed to each other, and the thought of Frank made her shudder.

Following Hakim's instructions, she made pork medallions and roasted vegetables. Rosa arrived right on time with flatbread from the Jewish baker. They all enjoyed the meal, and Ron pushed his plate back. He began, "Fatme, I have something important to confess. For the past three weeks, Rosa has been laying with me, and we've been fucking like crazy, with ejaculation and everything. And..." Fatme placed her fingers over his lips. "Stop it, Hakim. That's alright, I would have lain with you in her place, just to make you feel like a man. Rosa, thank you for that." Fatme looked at them both kindly. "Now tell me something new, how did little Bodnar manage to get that old curmudgeon between her thighs?"

Rosa, of course, knew every last detail. Now she pantomimed everything, but in between, she spoke what she was portraying. She imitated Bodnar as he mounted his wife, Yvette, and fucked her while cursing, at least once a week. Hakim and Fatme laughed uproariously as the old curmudgeon pushed his wife aside after his laborious ejaculation. Now Bodnar turned to his daughter, little Laura, who was already quite the handful. Bodnar masturbated his daughter every night since a whole year, and Hakim and Fatme laughed uproariously because Rosa so skillfully pantomimed the strained Bodnar and his heavenly delighted daughter. Now Laura grabbed her father's invisible penis and masturbated it, then she took his invisible glans in her mouth and greedily slurped and swallowed his semen. Rosa masturbated the invisible penis in the air, and her body swayed with the vigorous rubbing, and Hakim and Fatme slapped their thighs in excitement. And then came the great moment. Bodnar was still quite tipsy from his tour of the bars, and Laura cunningly lured him between her thighs. Rosa made the Jew Bodnar cross himself before he thrust forward and — with a loud plopp! from Rosa — deflowered Laura. And now there was no stopping them. Rosa whispered that Bodnar had said Laura reached orgasm even more easily than Yvette, that after the first big one it was a real fireworks display, and that the little one jumped from peak to peak like a little goat. Hakim and Fatme laughed until they cried, they had enjoyed Rosa's pantomime so much.

Fatme lay on Ron's chest. "I need to talk to you, Hakim. It's something very important. It's about me, my true self. For your sake, I became passive during sex, no more 'full program with passion,' only you got that. But that's a mistake. When I'm passive,

I'm not myself anymore. I only realized this when Frank really fucked me hard, like he wanted to shoot me to the moon. He laboriously forced his gigantic cock into my cunt, and I only helped him when I rediscovered myself. I helped him in because I wanted to be fucked, as weird as that may sound. Only when I completely let go, in that strange situation — he could kill me at any moment — only then did I feel who I really am. I always resisted being called that, but deep down I'm a whore, it's as simple as that. I realized it because I gave myself to Frank willingly and freely; he didn't need to get me going with alcohol or poppers. No, I wanted it myself, I wanted to be fucked by his monster cock until I didn't know which way was up. I wanted to feel that gigantic cock pounding inside me, I wanted it to push me up the hill and send me hurtling into orgasms endlessly."

"I don't know if it was really just because Frank had such a gigantic monster cock, or if I just imagined it. But since I went back to escorting after that, I've given every client the "full program with passion," and I immediately felt that it's the right thing for me. That's my true self; I want to give myself completely, experience my orgasms fully, and I want to experience all of that with many, many men. I don't know if you can handle that, but I can't do without it anymore." Fatme's head rested on Ronald's chest, and he stroked her hair. "Fatme, I already know all that without you even saying a word. And look, where am I? Did I run away? Did I send you packing? No, I'm still here, and you're still here too. Is that answer enough for you?"

Fatme wept with happiness. Hakim was the best, and he belonged to her, she belonged to him. He stroked her hair. "Make sure you don't get pregnant again. Aborting Frank's child damaged us both equally, even though it was truly necessary. But I don't want to go through it a second time." Fatme nodded and whispered, "I know, Hakim. And getting pregnant by Frank certainly wasn't my fault." She lay on Hakim's chest for a long time, letting him stroke her hair.

When Ronald came home, Fatme was sitting at the dining table, fully dressed in her coat, staring blankly at the kitchen counter. He greeted her quietly, and only then did she look up at him. "Hakim." He knew immediately what had happened. "Dad died this afternoon," Fatme said softly, looking at him. He took off her

coat and laid her, still dressed, on the bed, then lay down beside her. “Just yesterday Aisha was here, she let my Dad fuck her twice with great pleasure and went home humming happily. Today at midday I lay down next to my Dad. He looked into my eyes with a radiant smile when I brought him to a hard-on with my mouth, something he really likes. Then I mounted him and rode him slowly and deliberately, as is his way. It took a very long time again, he’s over 70 after all. He cupped my breasts, my nipples, with both hands while he came with a soft hum. ‘Stay with me a little longer,’ he whispered, and I stayed seated on his cock. He closed his eyes and his penis went completely soft. I looked at him. He wasn’t breathing anymore. Dad was dead. I stayed sitting on him for a long time, his soft penis inside me. I think at that moment his soul flew out the open window. I called Imam Mueddin; he’s handling everything — the medical examiner, the city administration, the funeral tomorrow at Liesing Cemetery.” Fatme closed her eyes. “The imam told me to go home and cry it out. But I just wandered around downtown with my eyes open and didn’t notice anything. I thought for a long time about whether I should call you, but then I didn’t want to call you in from work.” Ron stroked her face. “Just let your tears flow, you loved Dad very much. And tomorrow I’ll take the day off and go with you to the funeral, of course.”

After Dad’s death, Fatme was overcome by something strange. She wanted to have sex with very young boys, little lads. She didn’t know where these strange desires came from. So she lured little Ali into Dad’s deserted apartment; he was probably eight or nine. She undressed him completely and told him to undress her completely as well. He pointed with his finger. “What do you call this?” Fatme smiled. “This is my cunt, Ali.” He chewed and swirled the word around in his mouth, “Cunt, cunt.” Then he looked up, “May I take a good look at your cunt, Aunt Fatme?” She nodded and spread her legs. Ali examined it with all ten fingers; he was very thorough. “I’ve seen Mom’s too very often, but she didn’t let me examine it.” Fatme replied with a smile, “That’s my clit. I can rub it, just like you rub your cock when you want to squirt.” He nodded eagerly. “Mom always lets me do it when we’re sitting at the kitchen table and I’m supposed to be doing my homework. When Mom notices I have an erection, which I always do, she takes it out and plays with it until I ejaculate; she loves doing that. Then I must rub it as often as I want, and Mom watches with a smile, and I have to ejaculate

into her cupped hand, again and again. She always says that's how it's supposed to be and that I should keep doing it until nothing comes out anymore." Fatme swallowed briefly, then asked, "Do you actually know how babies are made?" Ali nodded eagerly. "Dad thrusts a lot into Mom's cunt; I've secretly watched it several times. And then he ejaculates inside Mom's cunt, his sacklet bounces up and down merrily; I think that's how he makes her the babies. And I spy on Daddy always making this way the neighbors wife the babies in secret, and young Lucy's from the second floor he makes secretly the babies too . But Mom told me once she doesn't want another baby, just the fucking."

Fatme had him where she wanted him. "Can I take a good look at your penis, then you can put it in and cum inside, okay?" Ali nodded and held his penis out to her. Fatme carefully took it in her hand and pulled back the uncircumcised foreskin completely. His penis looked just like Aishe's clit, only it was significantly larger. She examined it from all sides, then lay down on her back. "Come on, I'll guide your penis in, Ali." And she guided his penis in and showed him how to fuck her. He was very quick to learn, and his penis only went soft again after the third time he came. Ali asked if she thought he could fuck his mom too? Fatme smiled. "Yes, of course, you just have to catch her once when she's already naked, for example, in her bed or in the shower." Ali scratched the back of his head. "No, in the shower won't work, she always locks the bathroom. But in the morning, after she's made Dad breakfast and he's left for work, Mom always lies down in bed again. I think she rubs her cunt really hard then, maybe." Fatme chimed in. "Yes, exactly in that situation, when Mom is rubbing her cunt really hard, you can crawl under her covers and quickly stick your cock in, into her cunt, because then she'll be completely distracted and won't resist. And she won't bite your head off." Ali nodded, his eyes shining. He would try it that way tomorrow. Fatme was confused by herself, by her urges and her rather strange advices, and sent Ali home.

Ali came every afternoon to fuck Fatme. Some days in, he came beaming. "Aunt Fatme, aunt Fatme! I did it!" Fatme looked askingly. Ali grinned. Since days, I sneak into Mom's bedroom after breakfast. I stood only there, stared at her wiggling her cunt with two fingers. Not dating, to interrupt her. Today, I had waited, until she was absentminded, I lay between her thighs and rammed my

stiff cock inside. She didn't even flinch. So I fucked her from the side and squirted inside. Then I continued to pound her Fuckhole. Now she exploded in her peak and then calmed down. She looked at me, asking, "what are you doing?" but she didn't need an answer. Immediately she understood, she relaxed herself and let her knees fall apart. Now, having a cleared access, I continued and she sighed smiling, when I shot my juice inside. She didn't scold me, she gave me a kiss on top of my hair. - Aunt Fatme, she had let me do it!" Fatme kissed his forehead. "See? Now you can fuck her every morning, Ali!"

And then there was Albert, a serious boy with round glasses. He was also around nine, maybe ten. He wasn't at all surprised when she undressed him. And he liked to undress her himself, then waited eagerly. He nodded almost contemptuously when she asked him if he could ejaculate yet. Of course, he wasn't a baby anymore. And had he ever had sex? Of course, he said, in a really condescending way. And how did that happen? "Actually, it's a real secret, and I'll only tell you if you can keep it to yourself, Aunt Fatme." Fatme nodded, of course she would keep the secret. "For a few months now, I'> her by force to have sex with Mom in the morning when we shower together. Real sex, like Dad. I've seen him do it to her often enough, always from behind, when she's lying flat on her belly or on all fours like dogs, she really likes that. That's how it is, now you know." - Fatme was quite surprised, does she let herself be fucked so easily? "Oh no," Albert grinned mischievously, "but I did fuck her against her will in the shower a few months ago, and she whimpered like a wet cat while I was fucking her and was very grumpy afterwards. But then I told her that Frankie fucks his mom, the pastor's wife, every morning in the shower against her will, and that's what I want now, too. My mom doesn't actually like it at all, just like the pastor's wife, and she's always pretty angry when I do it to her. But she can't do anything about it, and her protests go in one ear and out the other. No, actually she doesn't like it at all, but I do it every morning anyway. I fuck her against her will from behind and press her against the tiles and make her whimper. Sometimes I make her brace herself against the tiles and stick her ass cheeks out at me. I figure if she really didn't want it, she could shower alone, without me, but she always showers with me. So I think she likes it. It was somehow true, even though she then gossiped as bigotedly as the pastor's unmarried daughter." Fatme then asked how old he was exactly.

Albert thought for a moment. “Eleven years and eight months, Aunt Fatme.” Now Fatme let Albert fuck her, right there, on Dad’s bed. She even managed to persuade him to go a second round, and the boy came inside her with a contented grunt.

Fatme quickly shook off this unholy urge. As an escort girl, she had enough men to fuck; she didn’t need little boys to fuck. She never told Hakim about it; she was deeply ashamed of that episode with the two dozen little boys she had let fuck her.

Life slowly moved on. Fatme finished evening school and graduated with honors. Ron bought champagne again; now she was at a good point. She could start something new, study at university, trade on the stock market, or become an astronaut. “Or a professional boxer, you always forget that, my dear. Punching men in the face, yes, that would sometimes be just the thing.”

Years later, on a sunny day in May, they stood before Imam Mueddin and took their vows. Now they were truly married, and Fatme and the other escort-girls who had come wept bitterly. But Fatme assured them that she would of course continue working as an escort, no question about it.

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Tired Heroes

Bodnar lay sleepless in bed, Laura sleeping peacefully beside him. His hand lay under the waistband of her pajama bottoms, caressing her soft, sparse pubic dawn; it had a calming effect on him. He had been stunned when Wallner dismissed him and sent him into early retirement, just as he had announced. Even so, it came as a surprise, precisely at the moment the Frank Halter case was closed. He had gathered his belongings from his desk and left without a word. He walked silently past Rosenblatt, who had extended his hand. Laura had dropped her pen onto the homework book, crept into bed with him, and lovingly undressed him. She had become Bodnar's little wife days ago, maybe a week ago, and since then she had used every minute to fuck with him. Yvette sat motionless on her bed, watching them fuck with a look of despair and dismay. She covered her ears; the dominant patriarch had once again conquered a female and subjugated her.

But Bodnar's mind was far away. How had all this shit even started!? Back when he was still in vice, he had rescued Yvette from the mire abyss; otherwise, she would have died a wretched death on the streets. He liked the little one; she was the most grateful wife in the world, a lustful wildcat who challenged him sexually every night. He had had quite a few lovers before, but none like her. He had never had a girl or a woman who orgasmed so easily and so often during sex. She ended every day by masturbating, no matter how many times she had orgasmed during sex before. He loved the cheeky, wild and unbridled way she lived out her sexuality. He had to grudgingly acknowledge that he had also preserved her libido. She masterfully feigned remorse and unhesitatingly embarked on the next affair. He might beat her, punch her in the face. Her desires controlled her life, even as she grew older.

Yvette truly loved him, with all her heart. No, she distinguished very clearly between gratitude and love, a love that only blossomed in the first months of their marriage. He was a good-natured Grumpy bear who usually turned a blind eye to her prostitution. She quickly discovered how receptive he was to variety. She had a full phone book of willing girls and women, and now she thrilled him with many magnificent threesomes. She herself was bisexual

and devoured the girls and women before his greedy eyes. Then it was his turn to properly fuck her partner. Yvette was very proud of his magnificent, potent virility. He reminded her of her father, who had made her a woman at 13 and for years had sex with her next to her grieving mother in the marital bed, ultimately turning her into a whore. But he was an impressively potent man, and Yvette admired him greatly. Now it was she who provided her husband with so many women, as an added bonus to their marital sex — probably hundreds. When one woman knelt before the other to lick her clit, he knelt behind her and slid his penis between her buttocks. Most of the time, he was content to simply insert his penis into the woman's cunthole; only rarely did he fuck her in that position.

He was always moved when Yvette lured a virgin into her bed. He wasn't a sentimental fool, but whenever he had to deflower a girl, he was always moved to tears. Yvette wouldn't tolerate any objections, and if necessary, she held the terrified girl in her arms like a vise so that Bodnar could deflower her. She didn't care at all that they were essentially raping the poor child; after all, she had come of her own free will, and now there was no turning back. Yvette held the girl tightly in her arms and watched as he gently and sensitively, yet firmly, broke the girl's hymen, then continued to fuck her softly and gently until she orgasmed. Very few girls experienced orgasm so soon after being deflowered; now Yvette's tongue could complete the act. The girl lay sprawled before her, speechless; she had never experienced so much pain, pleasure, and ecstasy. And now the woman licked her aching cunt and her small, sensitive clit to beautiful, delicate orgasms. Bodnar was a policeman through and through, so he never asked the girls' ages to avoid feeling like he was committing a crime. These wonderful threesomes and deflowerings forged a strong bond between him and her. But on bad days, her promiscuous promiscuity with other men enraged him. Then he would beat her senseless, and when his anger had subsided, he would masturbate Yvette as a sign that he still loved her. Yvette recognized this and wiped the tears from her eyes.

Even after the first few months of her marriage, she frequently let her father fuck her again on her free mornings and afternoons when Bodnar was at work, because the old man fucked her exceptionally well, far better than anyone else. Perhaps this was just her

imagination, perhaps simply because he had been her First and had fucked her for years as a young girl in her parents' bed in front of her mother. Her mother had watched silently and tearfully as her husband deflowered and fucked her own daughter after the mother had given herself to him in passion. Yvette had always snuggled against her mother's body, pressed her face on Mommy's inner thighs and watched attentively as her father fucked her mother, and her mother orgasmed like a champion. The mother could never understand why her husband had to fuck her daughter. Yvette always looked into her mother's dark cunthole, from which her father's juices slowly trickled out. The mother always became aroused while watching the incest; she closed her eyes and masturbated slowly and very reverently, watching the incestuous act with a few tears in her eyes. Yvette's heart rejoiced when she saw her mother masturbate, for then her mother forgot all her suffering and gave herself completely to her passion. Yvette gazed at her mother's beautiful, heavily haired fuckhole and her small, pointed clit, which she gently rubbed up and down. She and Yvette looked into each other's eyes, and they were two women who, at the same time, masturbated, were fucked, and orgasmed again and again.

Yes, for her father had taught little Yvette to run up the hill to orgasm while being fucked and then to jump easily from orgasm to orgasm. Yes, little Yvette loved her lustful mother and her father, who made her jump from orgasm to orgasm. Little Yvette closed her eyes with a smile as her father lifted her by the hips at the end and ejaculated inside with rapid, furious thrusts. Yes, Yvette smiled happily and felt every spurt her father shot into her little pussyhole. Even now, married to Bodnar, she went to her father's in the late morning and again in the afternoon to be properly fucked twice a day. Her father was now in his fifties, but still potent enough to fuck Yvette twice a day. He still attracted Yvette like a magnet, and she let him fuck her as often as she could discreetly. She was pleased that her mother, even at her age, still masturbated while watching them fucking, just as she had always done as a young woman. Only now she had mellowed and smiled as she allowed her husband and daughter a little forbidden pleasure. And so it happened, in an unprotected moment, that her own father impregnated her. Yvette, however, acted as if the child were Bodnar's; otherwise, he would have chased her away or even killed her. - Of course, Bodnar had known for a long time that Yvette let

her father have sex with her every day, but it didn't bother him. And of course, he suspected that Laura was the product of this incestuous relationship, but Yvette remained stubbornly silent.

Their child, Laura, always crept into her parents' bed, because watching her parents make love was the most exciting thing for the girl since she was seven. She usually pressed her hot, sweaty face against Yvette's inner thighs to watch the fucking up close. She couldn't get enough of watching his thick cock stretch Yvette's tight fuckhole and pound and thrust inside it like a steam engine. Breathless, she stared at his dick when, at the end, he pumped his semen into Yvette's hole in strong spurts. Laura knew that this was the real purpose of fucking and that this was how babies were made. But Yvette didn't want any more children and used contraception very strictly.

Laura must have been 12 or 13 when the big fight broke out, and of course it was Yvette's whoreing that sent Bodnar into a rage. Blind with fury, he slammed his fist against Yvette's lips. She had defended herself by scratching and biting and was now wiping the blood from her mouth. "Go ahead and grope the child, you incestuous pig!" she shrieked like a madwoman, "She's not even your own child!" Bodnar froze. Not his child?! No matter how hard he beat her, she would never reveal the father's name. The venomous serpent of suspicion, the goddess Apate, bit its own tail and completed the circle. It explained why little Laura was so foolishly lustful, why she absolutely had to be present when her parents made love, and why she always dragged his hand under the waistband of her pajamas. The realization sank in. The realization sank in and it explained why little Laura was so madly horny, why she absolutely had to be present when her parents fucked, and why she always dragged his hand under the waistband of her pajamas so he must caress her cunny and her clit. Even when she sat backward on her dad's lap while watching TV, she pulled off her panties and yanked his hand down to her cunnie's cleft. He ignored Yvette's disapproving glances and stroked Laura's cleft with heart-pounding pleasure. Laura leaned against him and spread her legs wide; he caressed her tiny clit and only stopped when the little girl was on the verge of orgasm. Then he waited and did it again and again. Yvette stared at her daughter's cleft and cunny and missed half the show. She would have surely thrown herself at him, screaming, if he had ever brought Laura to orgasm. He reassured Yvette with a

grin, saying there was nothing wrong with it and that the little girl wanted it herself.

Since that row, he slept in the guest bed, the room adjoining the bedroom without a door; it had probably been the dressing room in former bourgeois times. Bodnar and Yvette now slept in separate beds, listening intently and sullenly to each other's sighs and moans. Siblings in adjacent children's rooms, who hated each other with a passion. Laura didn't have to choose; she naturally slept with her father, pulled his hand under the waistband of her pajamas, and drifted into girlish fantasies while he caressed her tiny cunny. Laura masturbated every night, and Bodnar was very surprised the first night; he hadn't known that before. Laura explained that she had copied Yvette and had done it every night since early childhood. Bodnar, of course, knew from the beginning that Yvette masturbated every night before falling asleep, and he had initially watched her with interest, but at some point, he had seen it. Now Laura pulled off her pajama bottoms and spread her legs apart like a frog.

She instructed him on what to do: to place his hand and fingers very gently on her vulva. Then she slipped her hand under his warm, large hand and vigorously masturbated her clit. He had never seen Laura like this before; panting heavily and sweating, she worked her clit for a good ten or fifteen minutes. Bodnar realized that she masturbated just like Yvette, her finger rubbing her clit in a circular motion, not up and down like some of his extramarital lovers. The girl was sweating with excitement, her eyes rolling back in lust, so he could only see the white of her eyes. She was pressing her finger against her clit in a circular motion with loud gasps. Laura's gasps grew louder as she approached ecstasy, and now her juices flowed over his fingers. She let out a soft piglet's squeal as orgasm shook her body, and in her ecstasy, she pressed one of his fingers against her clit. She whispered, "I'm not finished yet, Daddy," and continued. She usually masturbated two or three times before falling asleep, until she was satisfied. "I've wet your fingers, Daddy," she whispered shyly, cleaning them with her pyjama sleeve. She pulled her pyjama bottoms back on and kissed him on the cheek. "Good night, Daddy," she whispered, pulling his hand under the waistband of her pajamas and placing it on her vulva. Bodnar kissed her forehead. "You did very well, my little one." She fell asleep almost immediately.

Bodnar's flat hand then rested warmly on her mounds, and his middle finger lay calmly along the cleft, the "valley of the dolls." Both her mons pubis and the mounds were hot, round and filled with hot blood from masturbation, and the soft, blond fuzz tickled his palm slightly. She dreamed and fantasized vividly, but he felt how the purely platonic touch began to form a previously unknown, yet intense father-daughter bond. Yes, a delicate, soft and innocent plant was growing deep within the grumpy Bodnar's heart. No, Yvette's plant was broken, withered and dried up, and Bodnar learned to ignore his wife completely. Nevertheless, she was still his wife and looked longingly at her husband and daughter, the two of them nestled together in their sleep. Once a week, Bodnar would stalk into Yvette's room at night and take her wordlessly, selfishly, and without emotion. Yvette and he didn't exchange a word; she had always been very easy to orgasm and would gasp loudly until the orgasms washed over her body. Laura would follow him, her eyes wide open, tormented by despair, envy, and jealousy.

For a whole year, Laura fantasized whenever she felt the warmth of her father's hand. Every night, she masturbated intensely, pressing his flat hand against her clit in ecstasy. She took his fingers and let them glide over her clit. She let his finger plunge into the "valley of the dolls," guiding it over all the wrinkles and dimples to her clit. Her father kept his eyes closed and growled like a bear as she guided his finger in her cunny and over her clit. Bodnar knew how innocent and pure of heart these excursions Laura undertook with his finger were and passively allowed it. The little girl put her lips to his ear. "I always do it, just like Mommy does, Daddy," she whispered her confession in his ear. But it took weeks before she could definitively place her father's finger on her clit. "Mommy does it every night too, just like me," she whispered, but Bodnar simply wasn't listening to her. The hunt for Frank Halter haunted him. "Yeah, yeah," he growled absentmindedly, "everyone does it, especially the promiscuous harlots." He didn't care that Laura was working her clit next to him, panting and sweating profusely; his mind was elsewhere.

Like Rosenblatt, he too had fallen for Rachel Kerzendocht. Kerzendocht was a special kind of woman. An ordinary housewife, a shy and devout Jew without any particular charm, a wallflower. But with her clumsy striptease, she revealed her womanly, curva-

ceous, sinful body. And Bodnar succumbed to every woman who was lustful and driven by desire. Rachel told him, and then Rosenblatt as well, that fucking like the uncircumcised Christians was truly dull, bland, and boring for the woman. She really wanted to be fucked hard. He had to pull his cock all the way out each time and then ram it right back in like a chisel. That would send little electric shocks to her clit and her brain, and that was exactly what she wanted. He and Rosenblatt also enjoyed the new technique; they rammed their cocks into Kerzendocht's cunthole with such force that it made her shake and shiver. Yes, this went against everything that simply shouldn't happen to a detective, but it did. It didn't bother his conscience in the slightest, since Rosenblatt felt the same way.

Laura continued, unwaveringly carrying on step by step. She now took his finger, intending to do the same to herself as her mother did. This was too much for the self-appointed moral guardian, who beat his conscience black and blue. But he couldn't undo Laura's actions. Bodnar's heart stopped for a moment as Laura took his finger like a pencil and drew circle after circle on her clit. Her tongue, tightly clamped between her lips, she diligently continued drawing the picture, panting and sweating. The child left no spot untouched, meticulously filling every empty space with color. Laura guided his fingertip along the moist path, letting it dance on her clit for many minutes. Her fingers gripped the pencil tightly as ecstasy made her tremble and twitch. And after the ecstasy, she wrapped her girlish arms around his neck, she sighed deeply and whispered in his ear, "You must thrust into me like Yvette, please—please!" But now he firmly rebuked her. "Never, Laura, never! You are my daughter, and I am not a child molester!" But Laura merely shrugged and continued her whispered begging relentlessly, every night.

Laura wept silently, for with tears she could get anything from Papa, anything at all. Bodnar's eyes trembled; he couldn't bear to see Laura cry. Of course, Yvette followed all this with unease and vigilance, as she did every night; she could hear even the faintest whisper. "If you won't pound me like Yvette," the little girl whispered calculatingly, triumphantly sizing him up beneath veiled, tear-filled eyes, "then at least do the finger play for me, Papa, please! The way Yvette does it, the proper finger play!" Bodnar's heart softened, as did his mind. "Very well, then soften up, like

Yvette does when she needs it badly. You've surely been spying on her," Bodnar grumbled, with the queasy feeling of a loser. Laura nodded in a whisper, "Yes, Papa, of course I'm spying. She does it every night after you've fallen asleep." Laura pulled her pajamas all the way down and spread her legs, bent like frog legs. She had won again, and it felt divine, simply goddamn divine. Bodnar's fingertip found her clit, of course. He had remembered well how Laura had guided his finger and did the same, painting the colorful picture with a steady hand. He watched Laura's slightly twitching and sweaty face, full of affection, pouring all his love over her clit and cunny until she trembled and twitched all over. Yvette was almost consumed with jealousy whenever Bodnar sat up and masturbated Laura. It was a small price for him to pay to avoid having to really thrust, he defended himself against the grumpy vice cop inside. And from now on, Laura demanded his finger play every night.

Yvette watched them in the dim light, masturbating slowly and absentmindedly in a cross-legged position for perhaps an hour. Then she leaned back and began the intense final stretch. Bodnar and Laura sat up and looked over; he pressed Laura's face against his hairy chest as if to hide her from seeing. Only Yvette's lower body was visible, her thighs spread wide. Her finger raced across her clit as if driven by furies; she panted and gasped pitifully. At her climax, she tugged and pulled at her poor clit like a madwoman. She continued rubbing for minutes after her orgasm, then folded her legs together. "She does that every night, Dad, long after you've fallen asleep," Laura whispered, and he pulled her close.

He had been whispering with Rosenblatt in the coffee corner. Rosenblatt was a good friend, and had openly and frankly described his affair with Elli to him. For Rosenblatt, it was the most natural thing in the world; he didn't allow rules or laws across the threshold of his bedroom. This was his privacy, his private kingdom, and the princess got the king. It sounded so simple when Rosenblatt spoke of it. With glittering eyes, Bodnar slowly leafed through the slut's nude photos and videos. Of course, he recognized her lustful nature instantly; he knew all such women from his time in the vice squad. Greedy harpies who weren't just after the man's money, but who also greedily devoured everyone to stuff them into their large, insatiable emptiness. He understood perfectly now why Rosenblatt called her nothing but "the slut". But

Elli, posing obscenely, almost took his breath away. The daughter was just as much a slut as her mother, and he wasn't at all surprised that Rosenblatt had taken her. Elli still had plenty of baby fat, but her breasts were gradually taking shape in the style of the great slut. Her pointed teats stood out boldly, aggressive and by no means innocent. At the climax, she pulled and tore at one teat. Her very femininity was already a weapon, ready to devour foolish Danaans. Both the slut and Elli burned themselves indelibly into Bodnar's retina.

He reluctantly handed Rosenblatt the phone back, the big slut and the little slut dancing the cha-cha-cha in Bodnar's mind. "No, Rosenblatt, I'll never fuck with my Laura, not in a million years!" He reluctantly handed his iPhone to Rosenblatt; after all, he had collected plenty of nude photos and videos of Yvette and Laura. Rosenblatt commented with a connoisseur's eye. "Yvette, well, maybe not my league, Bodnar. More breasts and more hips, that's where I need her. But Laura, she's much slimmer and more delicate than my Elli. Those small, girlish breasts, magnificent and like the finest porcelain! And the soft, light blonde fuzz enhances her girlishness even more. Elli already has to trim her bush with scissors, old champ. Laura will probably challenge you more and demand more from you than Yvette!" Rosenblatt's eyes caressed Laura's beautiful, girlish body for minutes, while he watched her masturbate shy and shameful in front of the camera. "One day, when you're ready, Bodnar, we'll have to share the girls!" But Bodnar shook his head and said firmly, "Not in a million years, Rosenblatt!" At the same time, a scream rose within him, a scream of desire for Elli, the little slut. Yes, a steamy friendship developed between them, and they exchanged their nude photos and videos, giggling like naughty schoolboys.

Rosenblatt came up with the idea. "Bodnar, what's one of Frank Halter's weaknesses? His mother, yes, his beloved mother. It would cut him to the core if we stopped treating her with kid gloves. If we used her like Kerzendocht, brazenly and quite indecently. It will cut him to the core, shatter his twisted masculinity, if we take her for our amusement and fuck her properly like Rachel. It will drive him crazy, and he'll make mistakes. What do you think?" Bodnar had to agree; Rosenblatt understood something about psychology, not just Morgentau. Bodnar pointed out that the old woman was really old, wrinkled and withered, only in the arms

of Kerzendocht did she still awaken. Rosenblatt nudged him in the side. “Get a grip, old friend! For God, the King, and England!”

Bodnar bit heartfully in Laura’s teats as her ecstasy began to roll. Yvette coughed like someone with lung disease, but Bodnar ignored his wife; this wasn’t her business, it was none of her concern, damn it!

Bodnar had been playing this finger game with Laura for months now, and she finally stopped talking about fucking and being fucked. She wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered, “I learned how to do it to boys at school.” Nothing more, just a casual remark after the fingering game. Laura straightened up and pulled Bodnar’s trousers off. She knelt between his thighs, pulled back his circumcised foreskin, and exposed the glans. “Daddy, are you really a circumcised Jew?” she asked, playfully pulling his foreskin back and forth. “Yes,” he growled, “a circumcised, damned jewish dog, that’s what I am!”

Laura flinched; she hadn’t expected the aggressive tone. “I’m only asking because you have the same foreskin as Freddy and Johnny.” He conceded. “They only cut off the very tip, little one.” Laura nodded and inspected his penis closely. “A beautiful penis, and much bigger than Johnny and Freddy’s.” Bodnar said nothing; there was no comment to be made. “I’ll do it for you, Daddy. Just sit back and relax!” the little girl commanded. “I’ve done it a hundred times with my two friends,” said Laura. “Freddy’s mom doesn’t mind, us playing naked on Freddy’s bed. She just grins mischievously when she comes in unexpectedly, but after a while she leaves grinning again. She once told Freddy that a boy always needs a good girlfriend who lets him cum nicely. That’s just how she is, Freddy’s mom.”

Again, she clamped her tongue between her lips and did it to him, quickly, expertly, and sweatily, rubbing him hard until he ejaculated. He watched her while she rubbed him. She was 13, maybe 14, and very slim, almost boyish. She didn’t have proper breasts yet, but on the small mounds, he could see her pointed, stiff nipples. The pale pink nipples trembled in sync with her vigorous rubbing motions. He stared at these dancing nipples; they were so different from Yvette’s. He asked where she had learned how to rub boys? She said Johnny and Freddie, her best friends,

had let her try and practice. “And then what?” he asked. “Well, the two of them are allowed to masturbate in front of my cunt, and when they come, I spread my labia with my fingers and they can ejaculate inside, as far as it could go. No, they’re not allowed to fuck me, I made that very clear to them. My dad will do my first time when he’s ready.”

He had to avoid her intense gaze. “Sometimes Freddy’s mom catches us, but she just grins happily, she stays under the door, waiting until both guys are kneeling in front of my pussy, jerking off and ejaculating. ‘Boys, don’t ejaculate inside, don’t make the little one unhappy!’ she says then, and we nod. I say, ‘Mrs. Monroe, I’m not letting the boys have proper sex yet, quite honestly.’ Then she grins from ear to ear and leaves, grinning contentedly like a cat. I think she really enjoys watching the boys kneeling in front of my pussy, jerking off and ejaculating upon my pussy.”

She stared at the opening in his glans and continued rubbing firmly. “I always thought Jewish men didn’t have foreskins.” He understood her question. “Circumcisers don’t cut off the whole foreskin, just the very tip.” “Aha,” she nodded, “I see.” With wide, open eyes, she watched his spurting ejaculation, letting his semen splash across her chest and wiping it away with her sleeve. “I can do it for you every night if you like, Dad.” He nodded. “Yes, that would be really nice if you sometimes do it for me, Laura. “You just have to rub while it’s squirting and also for a little while longer so that it’s really nice for me.” He later slipped his hand under the waistband of her pajamas and fell asleep almost immediately, while Laura continued to masturbate vigorously.

Laura whispered, “Is it really okay to swallow it, Papa? The others say it’s de-li-ci-ous.” Bodnar was too tired to stop her. “Fine by me, Laura, it’s not poisonous,” he whispered wearily. Laura’s lips lowered over his glans before the ejaculation and closed tightly around it, and she continued to rub him. Her tongue danced on his glans; she obviously knew very well what she was doing. Soon he had to ejaculate, and the semen spurted deep into her mouth, and she swallowed it all with a pleasurable and shy shudder. Yvette looked over from the other side and coughed loudly and emphatically. Her Laura knelt between his thighs, eagerly milking his semen, her tongue clamped in the corner of her mouth by her lips,

and now she bent over to drink and swallow Bodnar's semen like a cheap streetwalker!

Yvette held her breath until Laura had slurped and swallowed everything. All she could do was cough loudly in disapproval. Laura ignored her cough completely and cleaned Bodnar with the sleeve of her pajamas. - He had swallowed hard. Laura had taken him by surprise, without warning, without any fuss. Her comrades had instructed her precisely how it was done; they had certainly given Laura a demonstration on a live subject. Yvette sat up agitatedly in bed and coughed emphatically and very disapprovingly. Bodnar jumped up angrily and stomped over to Yvette. He threw her brutally onto the pillows and took her roughly and brutally, panting and puffing like a bull. She is and was just as much of a slut as Rosenblatt's ex; she had no right to cough here!

It was clear that neither Hofstätter nor Morgentau approved of his and Rosenblatt's actions. Ron said, "Frank Halter will be annoyed, yes. But he's not stupid enough to make a colossal mistake over this. He thinks like a killer, not an altar boy, folks. He'd drown dead his own mother if it suited his purposes." But Bodnar remained unmoved. He met Morgentau's accusing glare. "No, we're not the idiots, not us!" he grumbled. "Your father was a rabbi, and you're still the sweet little pastor's daughter, Doctor! There's no such thing as the perfect detective, in shining armor on a snow-white stallion. Wake up, Rosa, we have to deal with the lowest scum of this city and get our hands dirty! It's not us who are delaying the arrest. It's you who lets him rape you regularly, God knows what good that's supposed to do! You just let him screw you over like crazy instead of putting a bullet in his head!" Bodnar turned around and simply left them standing there. Ron said laconically, "There's something to that, Rosa!"

Bodnar had returned from his bar crawl. He was quite tipsy, but not drunk. He had the feeling he'd only been sent to the bars so he wouldn't annoy everyone at the office. Laura lay half-naked on his bed, her bare legs spread like a frog, rubbing her clit with intense sweating. She smiled sweetly at him and whispered that she'd been working on it for hours. He threw himself onto the bed and watched her performance with a warm shudder. He watched approvingly for a while and then undressed. He placed his dick on her chest. Laura paused only briefly, pulled back the foreskin, and

took the glans with her lips grinning and continuing to masturbate. Yvette was also lying on her bed, giggling and snickering on the phone, and stroking her breasts. Bodnar grinned; all that was missing was him joining in. But it didn't occur to him. Laura was panting and sweating and whispering with his glans between her lips, that she was far from finished. She had already come so far that she only needed a few moments to reach her next ecstasy.

Laura's ecstasy made her tremble and twitch wildly. At the climax, her lips bit down hard on his glans, almost painfully. But he grinned; what a little devil she was! She grabbed him and, with a mischievous smile, pulled him between her frog-like spread legs. The head of his cock touched her moist, dancing cunny. Bodnar grinned through the glittering curtain left behind by the drinks and aperitifs. "I think you want to take me over the edge today, my little one." Laura wiped the sweat from her face and continued with her clit. "No, Daddy, I just want to feel you very close, very close." Tiny beads of sweat detached from her forehead and ran down her heated cheeks. Bodnar's loins grew hotter as the head of his dick touched her dancing vulva. "You're about to push me over, my love," he gasped helplessly, his passion burning brightly.

A heavenly light shone across Laura's face. "Thrust, really thrust like Yvette?" Bodnar nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe today is your big day, your lucky day." Laura looked at him with wide eyes. "Yes, Daddy, today is my lucky day. You want to take me like Yvette, finally!" He shook his head. "No, child, I want to be gentle and tender with you, not rough and brutal like with Yvette!" Heat spilled down from his navel. "It'll sting the first time, little princess," he murmured. Laura smiled knowingly. "I know, Daddy!" and pulled him forward impatiently. "Well then, in God's name!" murmured our good Bodnar and thrust forward. Her hymen offered little resistance; it tore with a soft pop, and he pushed his cock deep into her virginal little hole. He hadn't felt such a delicate, fine, and tight fuckhole in a long time, perhaps only in the beginning, when Yvette had brought him virgins to deflower.

Laura flinched slightly, but didn't make a sound. She gazed wide into his eyes, amazed like a child before a wonderfully glittering Christmas tree. He fucked her gently until she, as easily as Yvette, leaped violently from orgasm to orgasm. He lifted her ass so that her pussy opened like a blooming flower, and then he ejac-

ulated inside her. After their shared happy ending, he slid to the side. Laura snuggled against him, her lips on his neck. “Daddy, how many times can men actually go?” she asked. He was still drunk. “It depends. Once, twice, or three times, if you ask me.” She pulled him between her thighs, and he did it to her a second and a third time. Freed from all his demons, he poured his seed inside her without hesitation - once, twice, and three times.

Yvette had ended her spicy phone call and stared in disbelief at the scene in the guest bed. “You did it, you monster!” she shrieked, her first words in months. Bodnar fucked Laura slowly and deliberately, who squealed with orgasm again and again. He held out his outstretched hand to Yvette, his index finger extended. “Shut your mouth, I’m telling you!” But Yvette continued to shriek and hurl the most obscene names at him. He stopped the fourth round with a growl and climbed out of bed cursing. Naked and broad-shouldered, he stomped over to Yvette. She continued to shriek that he had raped the poor child! That was the last straw. He slapped his wife, the likes of which she had never received before; spit and blood flew from her mouth onto the carpet. “Shut your mouth, I said!” he said in a voice that seemed to rise from the depths of his soul. He felt the blood rushing to his loins. He grabbed Yvette and took her as roughly and brutally as he hadn’t in a long time. Yvette then curled up on the sheet. Bodnar lifted one of her legs until her genitals were open like a ripe fruit, defenseless, and masturbated her quickly and expertly. He hadn’t done it for months; it was always a sign that, despite all his roughness, he still liked her somehow. Yvette closed her eyes and quickly had a second, third and fourth orgasm. Bodnar slapped her buttocks roughly several times, really hard. “I don’t want to hear another word, do you hear me? Run and get her the pill, if you have an ounce of decency left!”

Bodnar had slept off his drunkenness; Laura was still fast asleep. He heaved himself out of bed and stepped into the shower. There he woke up, more sober than ever. He had done the terrible thing; he had thrown away his honor like a used tissue. A police officer, a vice squad officer, a detective never did such a thing. Not in a million years. He crouched on the shower tray under the spray. He would have to go to the president and submit his resignation, six years before retirement! The water was now ice-cold; he turned

it off. He stood up with difficulty, a Hercules carrying the heavy world globe on his shoulders.

Wallner had almost laughed at him and ordered him back to work. The president didn't want to hear anything about saying goodbye, not when you were in the middle of a murder case! Bodnar told Rosenblatt about Laura, his voice trembling, as they stood by the coffee machine. Rosenblatt just gave him a friendly, buddy-like pat on the shoulder, then left. Bodnar wasn't sure if Rosa had heard him. Actually, it didn't matter; he'd become a miserable worm, a worm like Rosenblatt. Bodnar sat down at a small table and wept into his coffee cup. Ron came by and glanced at him briefly, then sat down. "Bodnar, if you need someone to talk to, I'm here." He placed his hand reassuringly on Bodnar's forearm. Bodnar looked at him through his tears. "It's something private, Ronald." Ron nodded and shrugged. "Sometimes the sky comes down without asking the time." Bodnar looked at him. "It's something private, Ronald. Nothing professional." Ronald shrugged. "You're certainly not so down because of your thing with Kerzendocht. I'm here, Bodnar, I'm ready to listen. Whatever it is." Bodnar was silent for a long time.

"I was just with the president, I offered my resignation. He just laughed at me and sent me back to work. He thought I wanted to leave because of the Kerzendocht situation. But that's not the case. At the CID, it can always happen that you fuck with a sweet fig, but that wasn't it, Ronald. The president didn't get it." Ronald was silent; they were alone in the coffee corner, the others were working at their desks. Ron was silent; Bodnar should talk, he just wanted to listen.

"Rosa gave me the boot, with a proper kick in the pants. I deserved it, because she made it perfectly clear that she would leave me if it turned out to be incest." Bodnar's tears had dried, and now he tried to read Ronald's face. "I fell right into my daughter's trap, like a lousy beginner. I'm just as much of a worm as Rosenblatt." Ron didn't even flinch. Bodnar wiped his tears away with the back of his hand. "It all happened so slowly, step by step. Rosa warned me from the very beginning that I was heading towards incest, but I laughed at her, not in a million years, Rosa! It happened so slowly, so insidiously, that I didn't realize it in time." Bodnar wiped his nose with his jacket sleeve.

“It was all because of that unfortunate marital spat. I gave Yvette a good thrashing; she just can’t stop behaving like a whore. One word leads to another, of course. Then she screams that I should just keep groping my daughter, that she’s not my child anyway. That’s when I saw red. Sure, I’d always suspected that Laura was her own father’s daughter, but Yvette finally blurted it out. Since then, we’ve slept in separate rooms, in separate beds. It’s true, I always enjoyed stroking little Laura’s cunny and clit when she sat on my lap while we watched TV. I didn’t think it was indecent, okay?” Bodnar looked at Ron, but Ron remained silent.

“Laura is already 13, and since the marital spat, she’s been sleeping next to me on the guest bed. Only now have I discovered that the little one masturbates every night like her mother. She’d pull my hand under her pajama bottoms, place it on her pussy while she masturbated once, twice, or three times. Rosa already scolded me then, telling me not to let my hand touch her cunny. Like an idiot, I laughed at Rosa. It’s no big deal! Then, after months, Laura showed me how she wanted to be masturbated. I hesitated for a long time, but then I agreed because she begged me to fuck her! My own daughter! So I took the lesser of two evils and have been masturbating my little one ever since.” Bernard gazed thoughtfully at the tabletop.

“Well, and one day she started giving me a handjob and swallowing my cum. She learned it from her friends, and she’s not half bad at it.” And then, a week ago, I came home from my pub crawl, where I was supposed to be tracking down Frank Halter’s henchmen. I guess I wasn’t entirely sober anymore, and that’s when Laura lured me between her legs. I deflowered her and fucked her, by my soul! And since we fuck every free minute, like rabbits. I’m so ashamed, Ronald. Wallner hasn’t fired me yet, but he’ll do it at the first opportunity. Rosa, though, she fired me, immediately and without batting an eye, just like she said she would. I’m lost, Ronald, no one can help me now!” Bodnar hung his head.

Ronald took his hand. “Bodnar, I don’t approve any incest, but I’m sure you know that. I’m sure it felt good to get it off your chest, that’s okay. But I can’t let you let this get you down. Our squad needs every man, and professionally speaking, incest has no bearing on our work. We treat Rosenblatt like a good investigator, whether he’s fucking with his daughter or not. We want to treat

you like a good investigator too; we can't do without you, Bodnar, Wallner's absolutely right about that. You're upset and hurt right now, so take it slow, I want you to. Grab the files, scan them and number them carefully, and enter them into the database. That will help us a lot, and it'll take your mind off things. You don't need to feel useless, Bodnar." Bodnar nodded gratefully. "You're right, Ronald. It's a worthwhile task that one has to do eventually anyway. I'll get right to it. Thank you, Ronald, for listening to me!" Bodnar was grateful that he could make himself useful and distract himself with a dull, routine task.

Bodnar went home earlier than usual. Yvette had dragged Laura to the gynecologist, had her thoroughly examined, and then went to the pharmacy with the prescription. When Bodnar got home, Yvette was sitting at the table with the sour sulky Laura, explaining everything about the pill, menstruation, and the catastrophe of an early pregnancy. The two of them were speaking to each other for the first time in months. He gave Yvette a quick wink, and she retreated to her bedroom. Laura immediately hugged him, pressing her face against his upper arm. "Dad, the doctor touched me down there, shone a light inside, and rubbed my clit really hard until it was completely stiff. But he didn't finish, the stupid man, he just stared at it through a magnifying glass until it was soft again. I felt like a brightly painted circus horse." Bodnar reassured her. "He has to examine you thoroughly, otherwise he can't prescribe the pill, but you need it, starting immediately. So there's no pregnancy if we're stupid and do it again." Laura nodded, appeased. "But rubbing the clit until it's stiff?" she asked doubtfully. But then she looked up. "Than it's okay, Dad."

Bodnar asked what else was on her mind. Laura looked at him uncertainly and whispered that Yvette probably wouldn't approve if she told him. "Yvette apparently knew the doctor from before, and she nodded when he asked if he could take my pictures. He must have taken a hundred pictures of himself rubbing my clit until it was stiff. I'd never seen it so clearly before; my clit became completely stiff and red. I'd never seen it so closely, but suddenly my clit popped out from under the hood like a thorn. But he didn't finish, the bastard. He kept taking pictures and licking his lips until my clit was completely soft again and finally disappeared. And suddenly his penis was inside me, so thick and fat that it almost burst me open. He just thrust in-out, in-out, in-out and then he

ejaculated immediately, the bastard. Yvette pulled him out and scolded him. He could have her, but not me, damn it! She lay down on her belly over the desk, she hiked up her skirt and pulled her panties aside. She grabbed him and shoved his semi-erect penis labourously inside her cunthole. She forced him to do it to her, and then again immediately. They were barely half a meter away from me, and I finally stopped crying and stared at their shagging genitals. I stared closer than I had in a long time at Yvette's fuckhole and Lothar's cock, which only gradually became hard again and, after a long thrusting, ejaculated inside her. His balls bounced up and down as he pumped it in. But she wasn't satisfied and shrieked that he had to fuck her a second time, the bastard! He had to pump her endlessly until he finally managed it a second time. He just couldn't manage to ejaculate a third time. She scolded him because he fucked much worse now than before, this Doctor Lothar. Then we went to the pharmacy.

As they lay in bed that evening, Laura snuggled up to him. She never wore pajamas again; now they both lay naked, skin to skin. "Daddy, I always wanted Yvette's place, I always wanted to be your little Yvette." Bodnar said nothing for a long time. "I've been a man of honor all my life. Yesterday I threw my honor away. It wasn't right that I made you my little Yvette, Laura. I'm your dad, not your lover. That's Johnny and Freddie and who-knows-who else. One of your friends should have taken your virginity and popped your cherry; that would have been the right thing to do. They should have fuck you and ejaculate, that's the prooper way. As your dad, I'm not allowed to touch my daughter, and certainly not to take her virginity or fuck her. That goes against everything we believe in. Can you understand?" Laura understood, but she didn't grasp anything. And so, in the end, they did it every night, full of shame and full of pleasure, and Yvette buried her head in the pillows; she didn't want to see or to hear it, she didn't want to be beaten up anymore.

Laura whispered in his ear so loudless that Yvette could barely hear. "I let both boys fuck me every afternoon now, that's right, and of course they're allowed to cum inside me. Freddie's mom stands in the doorway and watches shamelessly as they take turns fucking me and cumming inside me. I reassured her that Dad got me the pill so he wouldn't get me pregnant. No, of course I didn't tell anyone about us, Dad! And then Freddy looked at me wide-

eyed and told us. “Like every day after breakfast, my mom lies down in bed to masturbate; she doesn’t make a big secret of it. I walk past her open door, and she calls me. So I go in; she’s gently stroking her pussy because she’s just done it. I stare at her pussy, and despite the wild bush, you can see everything. The large labia, the small labia growing directly out of her clit, and her large cunthole, gaping wide open, stretched by the dildo. She beckoned me over and grabbed my hard-on, but really hard. “Would you like to fuck a real woman, Freddy? Or is it enough for you to fuck Laura’s little hole?” I couldn’t say a word and just shook my head. I had to kneel between her thighs and she fisted me. She only ever did that on weekends when we all showered together. First she’d do it to Dad, then to me. She’d spread her labia with her fingers and let everything from outside squirt inside – it was outrageous! “Think about it, Freddy!” she called after me. That plunged me into deep despair, I can’t possibly fuck my own mother!” So I kicked him in the shin. “Of course you can, you asshole! This is a unique opportunity to do it with a grown-up!” - “And that she’s your mom, that’s really irrelevant.” I gave him some good advice, now he fucks her every morning while she masturbates.” Bodnar pressed Laura even closer to him. He knew neither Freddy nor his mother. But now he closed his eyes in rapture and could see it. The boy fucking his mother while she passionately masturbates.

He whispered to Laura for a long time. He had to describe in minute detail how he used to fuck the Kerzendocht and the Old Halter, twice a week. Her curiosity was stronger than her jealousy. He described everything to her truthfully, and she grimaced — how on earth could he possibly be having sex with a 70-year-old?! He demonstrated how he had sex with the two women, pulling his cock all the way out and then ramming it back inside hard. Laura felt very uncomfortable with the experiment, when they tried it. No, she didn’t want that. He said he would do the same with Yvette now; didn’t she want to participate? Laura nodded enthusiastically, and they whispered about it for ages. Then he went over to Yvette, and Laura crouched down on the floor by the bedside. Yvette was utterly astonished when Laura spread her labia apart with her fingers. She flinched as he rammed his dick inside her and she groaned loudly. She flinched with every thrust, but then she understood where this was going. The little electric shocks throbbed in her clit, and it wasn’t unpleasant. Laura kept her pussy open, and he rammed his cock inside again and again. She

felt how fast these electric shocks propelled her up the hill, at an insane speed. Her face contorted into a grin, and she orgasmed, more intensely than she had in a long time. Bodnar nudged Laura, “You can let her go!” and then they simply left Yvette lying there. Yvette watched them with wide, round eyes; it was a great demonstration, and a wonderful experience.

For Bodnar, early retirement was like a blow from a club. He lay on his bed watching television, without really watching. Yvette had come up beside him and said she was moving out, that she was moving in with Waltraud temporarily until she found an apartment. Bodnar nodded absently. Yvette said she simply couldn’t bear to see him and Laura infighting anymore. Bodnar didn’t take his eyes off the screen. “I can’t undo anything, Yvette.” She turned to leave. “I’m going to file for divorce, Saul.” She hadn’t called him by his first name in years, not for 15 years. Bodnar’s hand slid up her legs under her skirt, then he took hold of her fingers. “Lie down next to me, Yvette, before you leave.” She was completely surprised, but she lay down next to him. They treated each other gently and tenderly, just like at the beginning of their relationship. Then he took out his iPhone and showed Yvette the pictures and videos of Rosenblatt’s big and small sluts. Yvette’s eyes widened, she became incredibly aroused, and wondered. “Rosenblatt’s?” Bodnar confirmed, yes, that was them. Yvette stayed for another hour; the nude pictures and videos had really turned her on, and she demanded a second round, then she left. For good.

Bodnar gazed at the two sluts for a long time. Rosenblatt’s suggestion of borrowing the girls simply wouldn’t leave his mind. Yes, maybe yes, but he wouldn’t leave Laura alone with Rosenblatt for a single moment. A dinner together? Suddenly it hit Bodnar: Yvette wouldn’t be there, she wouldn’t cook. Maybe they’d bring some Thai food. Another thought intruded: thick, broad, and overweight. Even for Laura’s sensible diet, he needed a replacement for Yvette. Yvette, who was now in Waltraud’s arms. Waltraud was just as lustful as Yvette, both were bisexual, and many years ago he’d often had threesomes with them, very enjoyable ones at that, Bodnar smiled to himself. Cooking, doing the housework!? Breathlessly, he mentally ran through the address book of his flings. Yes, maybe her. Or her? No, she had a family now, a husband and children. Another one came to mind. He only thought of her because he’d had a wonderful fling with her years ago. Or — maybe her?

Yes, that was her, he'd get in touch with her. She was a childless widow, sexually in the "lustful" category, and she masturbated day and night, much more often than Yvette. And she could really fuck divinely well; it had been always a pleasure with her. But she was rather clumsy at managing her life and muddled through more or less. She accepted her lovers' money, but she was anything but a skilled clandestine prostitute. Shy and ashamed, she asked her lover for money, and silently accepted whatever the gentleman wanted to give her. Yes, he could fish her out of the pond; at around 32, she could have a positive influence on Laura and at the same time be his young and compliant lover. He would phone her tomorrow at noon.

In his mind, he had been flipping through the pictures of the big and little slut, and now Rosenblatt's suggestion of a daughter swap came back into focus. Two approaches presented themselves. He and Rosenblatt could take turns visiting each other and each have a threesome with the respective daughter. Of course, he would do it with Elli at Rosenblatt's first, because only then could he be sure that Rosenblatt was truly serious about the daughter swap. Bodnar's lips twitched as he imagined himself fucking little Elli thoroughly until he couldn't anymore. Only then would he let Rosenblatt slide between Laura's thighs. He was quite certain that Laura would gladly let Rosenblatt fuck her if he, her father, agreed. Yes, she would enjoy it, without a doubt. — Or they could go straight for it, all four of them together, and take their own daughter and the other's in turn. And he would take the little slut, again and again, until he couldn't anymore. Bodnar fell asleep smiling, his cell phone between his fingers.

Weeks later, he invited Rosenblatt and Elli to dinner. He had taken it from the Thai kitchen, and they ate and drank happily. Laura drank red wine for the first time and was soon a little tipsy. They played spin the bottle until all four were naked. Laura, engulfed in Rosenblatts arms, looked over at Bodnar — was she allowed to? Bodnar nodded, and Rosenblatt lay down between Laura's thighs. He lay down between Elli's thighs, and now the joyful daughter-fucking began. Bodnar fucked Elli again and again; she was truly divine in the art of fucking. It was quite as he had imagined. Elli's pussy was much tighter than he'd expected. She didn't orgasm during sex, but after each tryst, she brazenly ended it with her middle finger and laughed cheekily and tri-

umphantly in his face. - Rosenblatt had to change his technique because Laura didn't like being rammed in at all. But then she let Rosenblatt fuck her again and again, she cried out happily and laughed in his arms. The girls went from cock to cock. They didn't stop fucking until around midnight, all exhausted and happy. Rosenblatt grinned. "Next time at my place, Bodnar."

Bodnar briefly took stock of how things stood. Every item on his mental inventory list sent hot and cold shivers down his spine; there was plenty that was great, and just as much that wasn't so great:

He had been fingering Laura to orgasm for months now. For a long time, he had avoided it, merely caressing her little pussy rather than giving her a proper fingering. But the little witch was only satisfied when he fingered her properly every evening, letting her lean back with a smile and enjoy the exquisite sensation. Every single evening — even after they'd already had a long, intense fuck. He was fucking Laura every evening now, and sometimes in the afternoon, too. His stamina served him well, since on some particularly intense days they would fuck five or six times. It was none of his business, really, but Laura was starting to develop a genuine sexual appetite. Aside from him, she had been fucked by Lothar the gynecologist, then by her two best male friends from school, and now by Rosenblatt as well. Was she going to turn into a slut like Yvette?

After that huge marital row, he'd only fucked Yvette once or twice a week; still, she was a great pal and a truly hot piece of ass in bed. Now she was gone, having fled to Waltraud's place. He didn't begrudge her the lesbian lovemaking with Waltraud — after all, Waltraud was a real treat in bed herself. Was Yvette still whoring around during this time? — No, that was none of his business anymore. Maybe she'd actually file for divorce; he certainly wouldn't.

Rosa had given him the boot — harshly and coldly. But she'd been right to do it. It was a real shame, though, because fucking Rosa was always a special pleasure — watching her trigger her own orgasm by working her pointed tits in a way no other girl did. Ah yes, that was a shame — a real pity.

Just like Rosenblatt during the surveillance phase, he had been fucking Old Halter and the slightly younger Kerzendocht every night. At first, it had been strange, unusual, and perhaps even bizarre. But over time, it turned into a great pastim — something that meant nothing to anyone involved and served solely to satisfy the urge of the moment. The idea was actually to wound Frank Halter's masculinity — criminals who were angry or emotionally agitated tended to make mistakes. He didn't really care whether or how often those old hags reached orgasm — that truly carried no weight, held no significance.

Now, once or twice a month, there was a shared dinner with Rosenblatt, followed by fucking her daughters together. He fucked Elli — the little slut — again and again with genuine pleasure, though he couldn't have said offhand what made her so special. As far as he could tell, Rosenblatt was only the fifth man Laura had ever been with. Laura found fucking Rosenblatt delightful; he located her G-spot right away and made her orgasms ripple out like pearls on a string. Despite initial reservations, this "I-fuck-your-daughter" arrangement went like clockwork.

Rosenblatt was dead set against continuing to mount Kerzemdocht. "That file is closed," Rosenblatt said, shaking his head, because Bodnar kept visiting the sexy Jewish woman.

He had actually invited Jenny over on two afternoons and given her 200 euros after fucking her. Laura later remarked that, yes, bringing Jenny into the fold would be fine; after all, she spoke the language of the younger generation perfectly; there wouldn't be any problems there. He would make the proposal after the third time they fucked, and she would most likely accept.

He was officially retired now. He planned to buy a new laptop and organize the vast collection of photos and videos into a neatly arranged archive, they had no business sitting on his phone. He briefly scrolled through them: Yvette and her friends and his own extramarital conquests from back then; the Halter and Kerzendocht; Rosenblatt's big slut and little slut; Laura; and dozens of videos of girls and boys from Lauras circle jerking off. No, this chaos had to be cleaned up — once and for all.

He watched the videos Laura had transferred to him: lots of sweet, petite, and immature girls busily jerking off, giving it all. He smiled watching the little angels fingerworks and fell asleep with his phone on his chest.

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Rosenblatt smoked silently in bed, Elli slept softly beside him, his hand resting on her bare bottom. It was beautifully shaped, round and womanly, but Rosenblatt wasn't paying attention to its beauty now. Ronald had been right all along; he had to get the pill for Elli. She was so young and stupid fearless. She hadn't even started her period yet and hadn't given pregnancy a second thought. The princess had to have her king; finally, he was hers alone. The evil queen had left after watching the king gently and with obvious pleasure deflower the princess. He had fucked his princess late into the night, making her squeal with delight as she leaped from orgasm to orgasm. The king was proud to have conquered the princess's cunt. Only then did the evil queen retreat, pouting; she had lost the whole game in one fell swoop. The slut was just furiously jealous because Dad had eyes only for his Elli ever since. He was quite happy that Elli laid with him and not the slut. There was no connection between his ejaculation and pregnancy; Elli never considered that.

Rosenblatt now had to call the slut, and the frigate came roaring across the bay under full sails. She didn't have a decent job and didn't need one; she picked up guys at the disco, and she could live very well on the money, even saving some for the future. She wasn't stupid; she avoided drugs and bad guys alike. Rosenblatt greeted her frostily; he hadn't invited her of his own free will. She accompanied Elli to the gynecologist and looked over her shoulder as the doctor examined Elli thoroughly. The slut hadn't seen Elli's cunt since she was a baby; Elli's was beautifully and femininely shaped. Elli had beautiful, full labia, a deep, dark fuckhole, small and very narrow labia minora, and a rather large clit shaped like a small boy's penis. The slut sighed, because her own clit was also shaped like a small boy's penis, complete with a small glans and a proper frenulum like the little boys she occasionally took with her for sex, because she loved to spoil little boys. (She would loiter around the schools at lunchtime and pick out a boy. At home, she would undress him and herself, grinning inwardly when the boy's

penis became erect at the sight of her nakedness. Playfully, she would pull the foreskin back and forth over the glans and quietly ask him if he wouldn't like to fuck her. Most of these children had never had sex before, but now they were learning it, all afternoon long.) She couldn't help wondering if Elli masturbated as often as she did. They left the prescription at the pharmacy; Elli would now be able to get the pill completely legally. Mother and daughter didn't exchange a single word; the gulf between them was unbridgeable.

The slut simply pushed Elli aside when they went to bed that evening. "I expect compensation for my cooperation," the slut growled, lurking like a female jaguar. Elli was stunned by how roughly the slut took her father. The slut had some fancy tricks up her sleeve to get him hard again and again. Then she fucked the poor man, grinning, and let him squirt inside her, still grinning. From every angle, in every position, she collected payment for each monthly prescription individually. It wasn't until around 2 a.m. that she took off in a taxi. Elli took her father's head in her lap. "Was it worth it, just for the pill?" she asked anxiously. Rosenblatt nodded, exhausted. "Yes, Elli. I would never forgive myself for getting you pregnant. I'm only doing what's necessary, Princess." Elli caressed his head and whispered, "I would have still loved you even if you had gotten me pregnant, Dad. I'm so down that Mom so thoroughly screwed you over, so cruel and heartless as she is. You must get a divorce, Papa, otherwise she'll be a burden to you at the worst possible time. Sooner or later, Mama will run afoul of the law or a loan shark and drag you down with her. She's been doing that her whole life; you're still paying off her debts. She's still officially your wife, Papa." Rosenblatt just wanted to sleep. "Yes, Elli, yes." Finally, he fell into a deep sleep.

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For Rosenblatt, who loved women's bodies more than a concoction of ice cream, whipped cream, and a maraschino cherry, working in the Halters' house was a nightmare and disgusting. No, he had no problem with little Kerzendocht, because once she'd taken off her impossible housewife clothes, she was actually quite attractive. She was always clean, well-groomed and lightly perfumed, which accentuated her very feminine curves. No, he enjoyed her. He now regretted having made the suggestion to Bodnar. Upstairs,

in the bedroom under the eaves, old Halter quickly undressed to lie down next to young Kerzendocht. Never had the difference between a woman's body in full bloom and an old, withered one been so obvious. Halter was very wrinkled, her breasts hung like sacks, and her sparsely gray-haired cunt was anything but attractive.

Rosenblatt had taken to waiting for the women's pause in their lovemaking, then he would ask sweet Kerzendocht to dance. It was a pleasure, for the eyes and for his manhood as well. With a heavy heart, he turned to Mrs. Halter after ejaculation. She trembled with excitement and fear. He took her with contempt and penetrated the old woman's wrinkled, dry cunt with his semi-erect penis. The penetration seemed to hurt her, but he didn't give a damn; he had to fuck her, and in front of Rachel's critical eye. Actually, it was Rachel who had urged him and Bodnar to fuck her old girlfriend too, because Rachel knew firsthand that Halter loved to fuck. In the first few days, Bodnar and Rosenblatt had only fucked Rachel, and the old woman had watched them up close with tear-filled eyes. So Rachel had asked her if she wouldn't like to be fucked too? Old Halter had nodded in surprise, without really thinking about it. That's how it all started.

The old woman turned her face away, burying it in the pillows. She knew it was about Frankie, that it was all about dishonoring her. Tears of anger and humiliation glistened in her eyes, but she didn't want to give the guy the satisfaction of crying, of letting the tears flow simply from the contradictions of her own actions. Rosenblatt fucked the old woman the same way he fucked Rachel, pulling his cock all the way out each time and ramming it back in wildly. Roxane didn't let on how painful this was for her. This was a horrible, painful fuck. The guy rammed his cock in wildly each time; she wanted to scream, but she gritted her teeth. Her thin body was shaken back and forth because the guy was obviously having a hard time coming. Rosenblatt didn't want to embarrass himself in front of Rachel and thrust into the old woman for what seemed like an eternity. At first, her cunt was bone dry, but now it was gradually becoming moist and wet, making it easier for him to fuck her.

Actually, he was completely indifferent to the old woman, but he watched her wrinkled face very closely, observing her rising arousal. It was really only the thought of Rachel watching him that

made him want to give it to the old woman good and hard. She fought against having an orgasm during this long ramming and pumping, but she usually lost and orgasmed involuntarily. Rosenblatt watched her orgasms with a satisfied look. The orgasms in her old age were much gentler and very unspectacular, trembling and tense only. Yet she was very ashamed of them, and tears of shame or anger ran down her cheeks. Now he grabbed her hips and lifted her slightly, then fucked her hard and ejaculated with a grunt. His eruption felt to her as if he were shooting her, shot after shot. She stared at his face as he came, half contemptuously and half gratefully, because apart from him there was only Bodnar, who fucked her like a madman and came inside her so juicyly, the rascal! But then it was over, and he escaped into Kerzendocht's arms, who gently stroked his circumcised friend. Yes, Rachel whispered, yes — being with a circumcised man felt right to her. He rested while Roxane and Rachel comforted each other and tenderly made love. Then it started all over again, until 2 or 3 in the morning, he took turns fucking them both until he couldn't anymore.

✨

While Fatme was kidnapped, Rosa lay with Ronald. She had time to admire the peacefully dozing man during the breaks. Yes, she felt more than just sibling love for Ron, and in the most beautiful moments, a terrible thought would creep into her mind, a truly terrible one. What if Frank killed Fatme and she could stay with Ron? But she quickly banished the thought; it would be dishonest. She didn't deserve such a cheap victory. No, she was Ron's colleague and girlfriend, and she was laying with him to give his tormented self a break, to free him from the kidnapping for a few moments. Yes, she gave him everything, everything a lover would give her beloved. Yes, she knew perfectly well that she was surrendering to him because she loved him, somehow. At the same time, she knew she would return him to Fatme immediately and without hesitation should she be freed.

Rosa's fingers stole their way to her sensitive nipples, her teats, for she could arouse her pointed nipples so delicately that she had an orgasm. She had learned this from a girlfriend during puberty and had been doing it her whole life — wonderful teats orgasms. She needed only two fingers; she twisted one teat and then the

other endlessly. As the heat rose in her loins, she pulled and plucked wildly at both nipples until orgasm washed over her.

Ron was a very good lover, no doubt about it; only Frank was better in bed. She got her money's worth every time with Ron, squealing as she ran up the hill, cheering and exulting in his arms during orgasming. Rosa had fucked with hundreds or been fucked by hundreds, but only two had truly impressed her. In first place was Frankie, the criminal, who had driven her wild with his enormous giant cock for weeks. And Ron came in second, because she felt something, something incredibly good and wonderful in his arms.

More clearly than ever before, she now realized how wrong and empty her frantic rushing from one adventure to the next was. What Ronald and Fatme had was right. The only right thing, the only true thing. It was time to grow up and reach for what was right. She was no longer a girl; she had matured into a woman.

✨

Johannes Wallner lay listlessly and wearily in Ludmilla's arms, his lips encircling her large, juicy nipples. Ever since they had closed the Halter case, he had felt utterly listless and tired. He knew this was his last case; he would be speaking with the Minister of the Interior and demanding his retirement. For over 50 years, he had been a police officer, body and soul. He had always given 150%, he had dedicated himself entirely to his service, he had single-mindedly worked his way up the ranks to become Chief of Police. His wife had become a stranger to him, and Ludmilla, well, she was Ludmilla. After the tempestuous beginning of their affair many years ago, she now demanded nothing of him, not even a purely sexual conquest. At first — he was barely 50 — they made love all evening long, and she let him cum inside her as often as he wanted; she had become infertile from performance-enhancing drugs and now wasn't afraid of getting pregnant.

She couldn't really resist the advances of the boys and men, because deep in her soul, she wanted to be fucked by every one of them, even though most were certainly no experts in that art. Only the athletes from the figure skating club were really good at it. There were hundreds of them over the years who had pressured

her to have sex with them and fucked the reluctant woman in the afternoons shameless and enduring, because the evenings belonged only to Johannes and her.

She had never told Johannes about her escapades; she was her own mistress, absolutely. He certainly didn't need to know that she often masturbated for hours at night, indulging in the most beautiful fantasies of romping with kings, princes and super athletes. Above all, she loved the new, young faces in figure skating. Strength, muscles, and athletic acrobatics — she could get all of that from the boys. As much as she loved her affairs and quickies, the harmony and the undeniable inner closeness with Johannes — no, no one could compete with that. Of course, she had also tried lesbian love, but that was definitely not for her. Girls and women were always competitors; that had been deeply ingrained in her mind during her long years on the ice. Nevertheless, she seduced all the young ice princesses, often simply to prove who was truly in charge.

Ludmilla was very proud of her large, magnificent breasts, and Johannes loved them especially. He often lay on her chest, his lips engulfed in her thick, juicy nipples. Of course, he knew how much he could cheer her on and ignite her passion by sucking and biting them. In earlier years, he would then have sex with her immediately, or she would masturbate quickly and greedily, snuggled in his arms. Over the years, he had come to love sucking, licking, and gently biting her dark nipples while his hands caressed the Czech lowlands, even though he knew every hill, every fold, and every dimple of this magnificent landscape by heart.

Every Wednesday morning, Ludmilla went to the ice skating club and skated a few laps, just to experience the wonderful sensation. She didn't do any tricks; she calmly circled the area because hardly anyone else was around at that time. Except for the athletes, who trained every day from morning till night. They nodded to each other; the athletes knew her and who she had once been. She had fucked with each of them at least once, or many times, but she had fucked only very few of the girls, only the young ones in fact. Most of the girls knew that their partners had been fucking with her, the national champion.

Ludmilla fondly remembered how it all began. She was only 29 and had come to Vienna on a whim. The police general sized her up and showed her the apartment next door. She never doubted for a moment that he wanted her. Of course. They had cuddled for a long time, then she pulled him onto the bed. He was truly astonished at how firm and tight her cunthole was. She had whispered in his ear that only a few men had ever fucked her. The first was her father, but she only let him fuck her once a week. Later, only her trainer, who loved her very much, even though he was gay. Johannes just nodded absentmidedly; he was engrossed in fucking.

Ludmilla, who thoroughly enjoyed his thrusting, remembered how it all began. Her mother, a down-to-earth, matronly type from the countryside, was suffering because her husband couldn't get an erection anymore. Her friends advised her to use a trick. Sunday morning, Ludmilla went into her parents' bedroom and had Mom take off her pajamas. She had the little girl sit on her lap with her back to her and masturbated the child in front of her incompetent husband. His eyes lit up as he stared at his child's little cunt. His ears turned bright red as the mother gradually had the girl's mood moved upwards. Her husband got a nice hard-on, and now the mother could push the orgasming girl aside. She pulled her husband between her thighs, and now he could really fuck Mommy properly. Ludmilla initially watched the proceedings with incomprehension, but soon understood that this was part of married life and that this was how babies were made. She soon got used to the Sunday routine; she loved the orgasms her mother gave her with her finger, and then she dared to lay her face on her mother's inner thigh to see it all up close.

But after a few years, the miracle cure stopped working. Now Mom had to bring out the big guns. Sunday mornings, she spread Ludmilla's legs wide and tempted her husband. "Joschi, would you like to fuck some really young?" Dad was hesitant, but now he got hard just looking at Ludmilla's wide-open cunt. Several Sundays passed before poor Joschi finally found his voice again. "Tascha, do you really want me to fuck the little one?" His mother looked at him sternly. "Well, if you can still get him up, you can fuck the little one, yes!" Ludmilla, 13, listened breathlessly to the dialogue. Dad briefly rubbed his cock. "Look, Tasha, how stiff it is now!" Mother nodded, and Dad moved closer. Ludmilla felt the hot shaft slide along her inner thighs and reach her cunt. "It'll sting a little,

love," Mom murmured, gently stroking Ludmilla's head. Mother grabbed his cock and rammed it in, hard and fast. Ludmilla didn't even flinch; her hymen tore instantly. Dad beamed. "I'm in, Natasha, I'm all the way in!" Mom grabbed him. "Come on, come fuck me!" Ludmilla was still quite numb on the one hand, but on the other hand, she missed being fucked, because Mom was now being fucked by Dad;and Mom was overjoyed.

Dad was allowed to briefly insert his cock on Sunday mornings and fuck Ludmilla for perhaps a minute before Mom grabbed him and, smiling happily, let him fuck her. Ludmilla was angry and told Mom so. Okay, said Mom, he can fuck you next Sunday and even cum inside a little bit, but then he's mine again! It was a good arrangement. Dad fucked her first and came inside, then he had to quickly go between Mom's thighs and finish her off. Okay, that worked well for quite a while.

Ludmilla knew from the beginning that her trainer was gay. He was sitting in the locker room while she undressed, and he ran one hand over naked Ludmilla's curves, over her delicate ass. Of course, she asked him if he didn't want to fuck her? He scratched his head. "Yeah, actually, sort of." She lay down on the wide bench in the middle and pulled his pants down a hand's width. She took out his cock; it was short but quite thick, just like the trainer was short and very thick. But he was a very good trainer, and Ludmilla ranked him right after Dad. He panted and gasped while he fucked her. "I don't usually fuck girls, or women. - But you're an exception, Ludmilla!" He didn't ejaculate as much as Papa, but he did, and that was okay. But he only fucked her every few weeks; he was gay, he complained.

That changed abruptly when Patek arrived, her first ice dance partner. She was in love with him from the very first moment. But, unfortunately, she was always second best. Patek, this wonderful dancer and athlete, was bisexual. And the coach fucked him every single practice day. Ludmilla sat on the bench next to them, tears welling up in her eyes, while the coach fucked her Patek in his asshole. It didn't really look any different from normal couples, she thought. She was heartbroken and stared at Patek's semi-erect penis, from which the semen slowly oozed. His semen really belonged to her, she thought, half-angry. The coach was now on cloud nine; he now fucked Ludmilla five times every week in front

of Patek and then immediately afterward Patek's ass. When the coach wasn't there around she let Patek fuck her senseless. She loved this guy, but he wasn't really in love. Yes, he enjoyed fucking her, but he wasn't as in love as she was.

The coach, head over heels in love with Patek's ass, pushed his two protégés to their limits, forcing them to dance on the ice for eight to ten hours every day. They won one or two small competitions, and then the two became national champions. Ludmilla also competed the same afternoon in the singles free skate and became national champion herself. The two embraced, tears of relief and triumph flowing freely. Ludmilla and Patek had reached their peak, as Czechoslovakia didn't participate in the European Championships that years. Ludmilla and Patek, both 22, danced together for another year, then Patek went to England. Ludmilla was devastated; she had lost not only her dance partner but also her lover. They wrote to each other for a while, but it was over, irrevocably over.

In the evenings, she was at home, waiting for her Johannes. She wore only the thin, transparent veils he had given her as presents, which accentuated her naked figure so well. She was patient and never pressured him into erotic races, although she of course loved them.

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The Russian rooks had arrived and were now perched on the ledge outside the aquarium. Their only goal was to spend the winter in warmer Austria. There was plenty of food, and no one shot at them here. It must be Saturday or Sunday, they croaked to each other, nodding wisely, because there was no one around. On weekdays, yes, there was activity, bustling activity, in the aquarium and the offices.

On Saturdays and Sundays, evil could be evil undisturbed; all the evil would be dealt with on Monday.

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Foreword

István Rudas © 2026

I was sitting by the pond in Vienna's Stadtpark. For an older man with a walking stick, it's a blessing to find a bench where you can rest. I was alone, but I wasn't the only one here by the pond.

Across from me, on another bench, sat a young girl. No, actually a young woman, about 35. She had a paper bag on her lap, from which she took pieces of stale bread and tossed them to the pond's inhabitants — the waterfowl. They were old acquaintances: mallards, great crested grebes, coots, and three majestic gray heron ladies.

Of course, I watched the young lady very closely, since I don't need glasses for distance vision yet. She was young, very slender, and well-proportioned — to sum it up briefly. Her long blonde hair fell over her shoulders like a wavy cascade of water. She was wearing a short, floral summer dress that revealed both her bare shoulders and the curve of her full breasts. In this sweltering heat, everyone was wearing as little as possible — only we older gentlemen were sweating in our long black jeans, with belts and suspenders, of course. The young woman with the sad look was tossing pieces of stale bread to the birds and talking to them. That was unusual; few people talk to animals — thinking, I suppose, that they'll be understood.

Her snow-white knees fascinated me. In my mind, of course, I'd been working since that morning on coming up with an idea for a new book suitable for all ages. It was getting on my nerves that everyone was making such a big deal out of the fact that I hadn't yet managed to write a book suitable for all ages. Thousands of people read my more than 40 novels because I've posted them online for free. But that wasn't the point. Could I even write anything suitable for all ages anymore, or had my old brain already rotted away so much that I couldn't pull it off? Last year, with the best of intentions, I wrote a mystery novel, and at first it really and truly was completely suitable for young readers. But as I wrote, my pen slipped, and the mystery ended up reading much better and more

fluidly with a sequel that wasn't suitable for young readers. It was exasperating; was I really incapable of it?

It all started when I turned in my German Matura essay; the topic was "Goethe and His View of Women." I, chasing after an "A" or "Excellent" and without the slightest clue what the master poet thought about women in general — let alone in particular — cheekily filled the entire booklet right down to the last page. The prompt made it clear that the young man wasn't gay, and, unwisely, they left it up to my overactive imagination to herd one woman after another into his private chamber with him — and once I got started, there was no stopping me. Of course, it earned an "A," since an "Excellent" had long since ceased to exist by then. Imagine my astonishment when the old German teacher — whose declared favorite I had been all those years — had me summoned to the teachers' lounge. I had to read my essay aloud to all my teachers, both male and female. Oh, good Lord! The gym teacher — a former Olympian, no less — shook his head and rolled his eyes, just as the Prince of Poets himself might have done. I read on, falling into a state of sacred rapture over the thoughts, life, and feelings of love of the divine Privy Councilor Wolfgang von G. — and my French teacher wept her eyes out with emotion, which, unsurprisingly, led to a full-blown fling shortly thereafter. I was confused for a moment; had I discovered a golden path that led straight to the unspeakable? — But I digress.

She had delightful knees, that young lady whose sight gave me such pleasure. My gaze followed that of the mallards, who, from a perfect, more advantageous position, traced the delicate lines of her snow-white, delightful inner thighs. Ah, Leda and the swan! I am a forever depraved old man; I will never be able to write a G-rated novel to prove that I'm capable of putting more than just dirty stuff on paper.

It must have been the god Hermes who stepped in at that moment. A young couple walked past us, by the pond. A young girl in a Ferrari-red electric wheelchair and her bald boyfriend. Holding hands and chatting happily, the two walked and rolled along, the Ferrari humming softly. Oh, Hermes, you're the best!

An idea took root. A red wheelchair — Ferrari red — a disabled girl and her boyfriend, chatting happily and holding hands. The

idea flashed through my mind. An alien — that young guy with the shiny bald head, like it's so trendy these days? An alien? No, that sounded wrong and cliché. A time traveler? Oh yeah, brilliant — that was it!

The young woman across the way, who spoke to the birds just as Saint Francis once did, looked so unspeakably sad that it really tugged at my heartstrings. She told the birds about her suffering, her sad story. Yvonne — yes, I'll call her Yvonne — had just dumped her Alessandro from Argentina, because she was a child of the 21st century and not some medieval girl who'd let herself be enslaved by a macho man. The young woman defiantly wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, and the mallards nodded approvingly. If you have backbone, you don't give in to a macho guy from South America! The young woman smiled despite her sorrow when our eyes met. I let my gaze radiate cheerfulness and encouragement. Oh, I should sit down next to her, put my arm around her, and listen to her troubles. But that's not who I am — I don't sit down next to a beautiful young woman uninvited and offer her grandfatherly comfort, even though I certainly could.

Hermes, you're a friend! I had everything I needed for a little story — maybe it'll just be a short story with family-friendly content. But wait — my time traveler was, after all, a sexologist, recently widowed, and had taken some time off to think things over. Here, in our time?

Yes, all the ingredients were there. The Ferrari and the girl, the bald boyfriend, and Yvonne. Gods and goddesses from ancient Greek mythology — and I'll even find a way to squeeze in my special friend, Caliph Harun al-Rashid, as a mischievous old man. Suitable for all ages. You can count on it.

My friend Hermes smiled. "István, I just bet Dionysus — whom you also know as Bacchus — a small barrel of schnapps that you'll make it this time. So pull yourself together and don't make me lose!"

Yes, exactly. I promised that Yvonne's snow-white inner thighs would stay out of the story — just to keep up the pretense that, surprisingly, the text would be suitable for all ages. — Because, oh

gods and goddesses, it will inevitably be about — naturally, G-rated — sex, from the first chapter to the last.

Sorry, Hermes!

• • •

István Rudas
Vienna, August 29, 2026

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Legal Notice:

István Rudas
4 Stiegengasse
A-1060 Vienna
Contact:

Before The Kettledrum Stroke

Of course, I know that great composers like Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms were strongly warned against beginning a symphony with a Kettledrum Stroke. But I did it anyway. And of course, I'm not an idiot — I wouldn't dare compare myself to these cultural giants. I wanted readers to sit up and take notice right away and ask themselves, "What on earth is this!?" And then, once they've calmed down, they can enjoy the story.

And don't underestimate me — my reaction is usually a mix of sweet and sour, sweet and venomous, and downright sour. Of course I know what a Kettledrum Stroke is, so don't complain. Please. The otherwise unassuming gentleman in a tailcoat and bow tie raises his timpani mallet high, far behind his head, his eyes fixed on the tip of the conductor's baton. Of course he knows exactly when to strike the timpani. But the devil take him if he didn't fix his eyes on the quivering tip of the baton and wait until the maestro flicks his little stick upward. That's the signal; just a thousandth of a second later, the timpanist strikes the drumhead — which is made of plastic these days — with full force. That's exactly how the good old Haydn wanted it, back in London in 1792. "The monocles must fall from the dignitaries' faces," the maestro instructed the timpanist back in those days.

That's how — and only that way — you handle the Kettledrum Stroke. You don't just pound away like an unmusical donkey, no! The symphony surges and glides majestically up and down, lulling the well-fed dignitaries to sleep, playfully inviting them to drift off into a gentle slumber. The Nereids caress the noble gentleman with their moist, soft arms and smile as the good man gently drifts off. And then comes the moment of silence. The baton twitches, the timpanist strikes, and the monocles fall. That's how it's done. So let's begin with the symphony, and wait with bated breath for the moment of complete silence — the moment of the timpani crash.

Our protagonist's name is Julia Herrnthaler. She's 20, soon to be 21. Fascinated by the pantheon of ancient Greece, she's studying history through a distance learning program. Yes, distance learning, because she uses a wheelchair, and universities aren't really accessible. She is a quite pretty young woman, slender and well-proportioned. She usually wears her dark-blonde hair down and shoulder-length, even though that requires a lot of care and frequent washing. But it's the hairstyle she feels most comfortable with. Her symmetrical face is reminiscent of the classical faces of ancient statues of Greek goddesses; her nose is straight as a sword, yet not overpowering. Her eyes are sometimes light blue, sometimes gray-blue, depending on the weather and the color of the sky. One would be well advised to look into her eyes instead of gazing out the window to check the weather. She wears only light makeup when she goes out, and she uses only a colorless lipstick, for her lips are naturally beautiful, full, and a vibrant shade. Her body is, on the whole, beautiful, well-proportioned, and truly shapely.

She usually wears semi-transparent blouses without a bra, because she's proud of her small, firm breasts with their pointed nipples, which she likes to show off. Let them stare! Her lower body and legs are usually covered with a plaid blanket with a Scottish pattern when she's out of the house. It's safe to assume that both her lower body and her legs are shapely, although her legs probably aren't very muscular because of the wheelchair. At home, she wears computer glasses because she works at a computer a lot. She calls her electric wheelchair her "Ferrari" because of its bright red color. In her apartment, she walks freely on her own two feet because she knows exactly where to hold on; she only uses the wheelchair when she's out and about.

Strictly speaking, Julia is an orphan; but she has a wide circle of relatives, so she has plenty of "family." She knows her parents only from photos — they died in a car accident when she wasn't even 2 years old. She has a few friends, but only one "best friend," Yvonne. Yvonne is already 26 and has a series of romantic relationships, which provides plenty of conversation topics between the friends. Yvonne is working on her doctoral dissertation in philosophy; she is very cultured, well-educated, and bisexual, so she and Julia regularly become very close. Yvonne comes to visit only once a week and spends Tuesday afternoons with Julia. No, you

can't say that Julia is lonely like many other women in wheelchairs.

Almost every day, Julia drives her Ferrari to the pond in Vienna's Stadtpark and spends an hour there, whether in the sunshine or the rain. She brings along a paper bag filled with crumbled stale bread, which she tosses to the ducks and other waterfowl in the pond — and, of course, she smiles indulgently when the sparrows squabble with the larger birds over the breadcrumbs. She loves watching the birds so much, and Julia knows why. The birds are kindred spirits — they could fly away, but something keeps them tied to this pond. Birds that don't fly are, in a sense, also wheelchair users: their little legs certainly aren't designed for walking. Julia looks at the plants, beautifully tended by the city's parks department, the pond, the bushes, and the birds — her little paradise in the middle of the big city.

She only glances superficially at other people — mostly passersby or retirees. There's a reason for that, too; she used to enjoy striking up conversations, but they were usually very superficial or meaningless. Having grown older and wiser, she no longer felt the urge to strike up a conversation with everyone and anyone. She followed world events through newspapers and TV news; that was all she needed. It was hard enough as it was to tell real news from fake news. She wouldn't miss those little hours by the pond — neither the weather nor her studies nor her reading could keep her away. Even when it rained, she would throw on a cape — not even that kept her away from the pond. And the birds' behavior in the rain was particularly interesting.

It was here, by the pond, that she had also heard the pick-up line of the century. A pimply-faced boy — certainly no Adonis — had been staring at her for a long time from a park bench across the way; from behind his thick glasses, the 14-year-old or so was trying to trace the contours of her inner thighs beneath her miniskirt, since she wore neither a thong nor anything else in the summer. Now he had moved over to the park bench next to her Ferrari, cheekily placed his hand on her knee, and leaned forward curiously to look at her crotch. Visibly disappointed that she'd quickly pressed her thighs together, he muttered, "Can you even have sex with a woman in a wheelchair!?" No one had ever come at her with such a stupid line before — for heaven's sake! She'd shot

him an icy glare straight from the Arctic and muttered back, “You’ll have to ask my dad about that, my dear, because he lies between my thighs night after night and obviously thinks it’s perfectly possible — and that you have to water the little plant diligently.” The guy felt a chill run down his spine and a flush rise to his cheeks, and he quickly took off — that insolent lout.

Her interest in the world of ancient Greek gods was sparked by her grandfather, as this was his pet subject. Grandpa and Grandma treated her with the utmost care, because little Julia suffered from brittle bone disease. Julia never suffered a broken bone while in their care — that didn’t happen until later, in kindergarten and at school — but she quickly learned how to avoid such injuries. She often spent entire afternoons sitting on Grandpa’s lap while he read her stories, legends, and fairy tales from thick books about ancient Greece. Since the gods were very sexually active, Grandpa had to educate her thoroughly about sexuality at a fairly early age — Julia listened with her mouth agape, for it was highly strange and interesting what the gods and goddesses got up to among themselves or with the poor human children.

Grandma, who was sitting in the other armchair knitting, coughed a little sheepishly when Grandpa answered the girl’s questions about his own sexuality openly and honestly — including the part about the neighbors. Grandma coughed, but she wasn’t really opposed to it. Patiently, Grandpa explained how and why boys and girls were sexually active; now Grandma’s coughing grew louder, and with it she slowed the flow of her grandfather’s speech. “I won’t send our granddaughter out into the world with the same ignorance that our uninformed parents had to deal with!” he exclaimed indignantly, and rescheduled the sensitive topics for a time of day when Grandma was out at coffee with her friends. Grandpa lovingly made sure that “his girl” knew everything there was to know about sexuality as soon as she left the nest.

Of course, she immediately noticed the friendly man who had been coming to the pond at the same time as her for days now and sitting down on one of the empty benches. She watched him out of the corner of her eye. What struck her first was that he had no hair at all — none on his head, no eyebrows, and no facial hair. On his bald, round head he wore a small cap made of dark blue velvet, richly embroidered with gold and silver thread, which was appar-

ently just a piece of headwear and didn't seem to have any religious or other special significance. Just like her, he watched the birds intently, and only now and then did he cast a quick glance her way, but she pretended not to notice. His clothes — a shirt with an open collar, a sleeveless doublet, and light-colored long pants — showed that he must have been slender and athletic. Unlike her, he didn't have a paper bag of stale bread with him, but when he took a sandwich out of his pocket for a snack, he tore off a few pieces of bread and tossed them to the waterfowl and sparrows. Julia smiled to herself; it seemed as though he was trying to get her attention with this little gesture. He arrived every day at about the same time as she did.

A few days later, the weather was overcast, and a light drizzle was falling. Julia took a break from her studies and got ready to go out. She grabbed her cape, a plaid shawl, a small fold-able umbrella, and the paper bag with stale bread. From her apartment on Coburgbastei, the drive in the Ferrari took exactly 7 minutes to reach the pond in City Park. The young man was already sitting on his bench; he had put on a clear raincoat, was holding a small bag of stale bread, and was generously feeding the waterfowl and sparrows. She pulled the Ferrari up to her usual spot, and when their eyes met, he gave her a brief nod in greeting. Julia remained frozen in her seat; they were the only two people in the midst of this flock of food-hungry birds. They both fed the birds without it looking like a competition.

Julia struggled with the little umbrella, whose ingenious designer had come up with the smartest folding mechanism but hadn't anticipated wind, crosswinds, or even shear winds. But now a gusty, hot southwesterly wind from the Sahara swept through Vienna's Stadtpark, trying to yank the umbrella out of Julia's hand — and in an instant, the precious canopy flew several meters across the asphalt. Quick as lightning, the man was on his feet, darted after it, and caught the wayward umbrella just before it reached the bushes. He brought it to Julia and handed it to her.

"Thank you very much, sir!" said Julia, delighted, as she folded up the unruly cloak. "It's just a light drizzle now, so my cape will do," she added, throwing back the hood; her hair flowed down to her shoulders like a golden waterfall.

“That won’t last long either; it’s already getting lighter back there,” he said in a beautiful, melodious voice. He held out his hand. “My name is Alfred, but everyone calls me Alfie,” said Alfie.

Julia looked at his hand. “I can’t shake your hand, Mr. Alfred; I have brittle bone disease, and you might break my fingers. And my name is Julia — everyone calls me Julia, just Julia.” She smiled at his hand.

Alfie thought for a few seconds. “Just put your hand on mine,” he said, holding out his open palm, “no bones will break, Julia — just Julia.” Julia placed her hand on his open palm for just a moment. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Alfred! And please, just Julia — no ridiculous suffix, please.”

Alfie smiled. “In Scandinavia, everyone is on a first-name basis — everyone, every single person — so why don’t we just do the same? And just call me Alfie or Alfred; I left ‘Sir’ and the ‘Mr.’ at the coat check at the park entrance.” He smiled warmly and charmingly.

Julia smiled subtly; that’s how conversations usually started at the university, too, if you were open to it. “So you’re not from around here — maybe from Scandinavia, Alfie? I hear a slight foreign accent.”

“No, from Huntington Heights, a suburb of Chicago. My parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents are originally from Germany, from the Hanover area, and all of us kids had to learn flawless High German — it’s an almost ironclad family tradition that comes in handy when I travel to Germany or Austria. In Switzerland, it’s more of a disadvantage to be mistaken for a German, but so be it.” Alfie sat down on the nearest bench. “Brittle bone disease, you said? I read something about it once, but unfortunately I don’t remember much of it anymore.”

This wasn’t the first time Julia had explained her condition. “Brittle bone disease is so named because your bones break very easily. It’s a congenital genetic disorder that is primarily passed down through the female line. Thank God I have a specific variant; I don’t suffer from nausea, headaches, or a reduced libido like so many others with the same condition. However, I will likely not

live to see my fortieth birthday. I've known this for a long time, and I'm preparing myself for it."

Alfie leaned forward. "You've already been given a death sentence? — By God, that's unimaginable! Come on, isn't there a cure, any medication, or even some kind of hocus-pocus?"

Julia shook her head. "Yes, I take medication for all sorts of things, but I don't take the libido suppressants. My libido is fine just the way it is." Julia lowered her gaze; she had to put on the brakes here. No further exploration of her libido with a stranger.

Alfie shook his head. "That can't be right; I can't just accept that without saying anything. We fly to the moon, we manipulate genes with gene scissors — and yet we can't do anything about brittle bone disease? Or is it just because the market is so small that it isn't profitable for the pharmaceutical companies? Not profitable!? — 'Only in a degenerate society does one weigh human lives in gold and silver,' said the wise King Hammurabi of Babylon, millennia ago." Alfie was truly deeply shaken.

Julia said nothing. Of course she knew who Hammurabi was, and the fact that this statement had likely been necessary three or four thousand years ago to starkly underscore human depravity said something about humanity. "I'm studying history at the university — with a focus on Hellenism, mind you — but I know exactly who Hammurabi was." She didn't even know why she said that. "You may not be studying anymore, Alfie, but the fact that you can quote Hammurabi so well is a testament to your broad humanistic education." Finally — just get away from this topic of medication and illness. That didn't belong in a casual, relaxed conversation with a stranger.

Alfie nodded. "Yes, Julia, I received a really good — and, above all, thorough — education. My grandfather declared me his favorite grandson and left me a generous savings account for my education. Without him, I wouldn't be where I am today."

Julia couldn't help but jump in. "And where are you now, Alfie? On vacation, apparently, but other than that?"

It took Alfie a few seconds to reply. “Yeah, it looks like a vacation — I took a sabbatical year. I’m a curator — sort of like a librarian, I suppose that’s what they’d call it in Austria.”

Julia took a small packet of sweet pastilles out of her purse. “Would you like one, too? Sugar-free, of course.” She handed him a piece of candy. “A librarian? I guess my idea of a librarian is pretty old-fashioned — a little gnome plagued by gout, with thick glasses perched on his nose and constantly coughing from the dust of centuries. But you don’t look like that at all, Alfie!”

Alfie smiled. “I go for a run every morning and go — or rather, used to go — to the weight training room twice a week for general training. I take care of my health; that’s just the norm over in the States, so it’s nothing special. And as for the dust of the ages, well, of course the National Library also preserves real paper books, but where I work, we only use microfilm, hard drives, and germanium crystal storage — whatever’s modern these days. We don’t have dust here, and no gout either, thank God!”

Julia smiled slightly. “I was just speaking figuratively, Alfie. I can see you’re not some gout-ridden gnome — far from it. More like an athletic young man in his mid-thirties who doesn’t look like a librarian on the outside.”

Alfie smiled. “I’m 42, not a day younger. And the fact that I became a librarian at such a young age is really only thanks to my thorough education. Like you, I majored in history, with a focus on the turn of the millennium, and I studied and completed seven additional minors. Geometry, cosmology, physics and chemistry, geology and mineralogy, and sexology. I think that was everything. By the time I was 34, I had finished my studies, held eight doctoral degrees, and applied directly to the National Library as a curator. I was assigned to the “1968 to 2038” department and held my own pretty well in that snake pit that the National Library happens to be.”

Julia corrected him. “You slipped up, Alfie — you said 2038, but you probably meant 2018, because it’s 2025 now, if I’m not mistaken.” Alfie blinked briefly. “Yeah, sorry, I just slipped up — of course, 2018. Fifty years. 1968 to 2018 — the era of unbridled sexuality across broad segments of society.”

Julia couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right here. Alfie tossed a breadcrumb to a black-headed bird. "An American coot," he explained. Julia smiled gently. "Zoology wasn't your thing, Alfie. No, that's a Eurasian coot; we don't have American ones here. Over there, those lovebirds are called mallards; the cute little black ones are called great crested grebes; and the three long-legged ladies way in the back are gray herons. I've known them all for years."

A long silence. Was Alfie not keen on being lectured, or were his thoughts elsewhere? Julia broke the silence. "Sexology? That really stands out from the other natural sciences — it surprises me a bit." Alfie looked up; his mind was clearly somewhere else entirely.

"Sexology? Yes, that was an opportunistic decision on my part. I was hoping to land the job as curator starting in 1968; the curator at the time was already on his way to retirement. 1968 marked the beginning of the sexual revolution — women's liberation thanks to the pill — and if I knew a little more than just the basics about sexuality, it would improve my chances of getting the job, and that's exactly how it turned out. It was a good decision. I owed it to my grandfather's memory to strive for something special in my career. And he would surely have been proud of my achievements — good old Grandpa Arthur." Alfie looked over at the gray herons. Julia realized she had to steer the conversation in a different direction, because it had become very personal indeed.

So she dropped another bombshell. "I'm 20, turning 21 soon," she said, "as far as I know, women in America don't like to reveal their true age. I don't mind — I'm 20 and unmarried, a single cripple with an expiration date." Alfie shot her a look that didn't seem very friendly. "Cut the crap, Julia, please! Okay, you're twenty — fine. But I don't see you as a cripple, damn it, and that 'expiration date' stuff — well, we'll see. I'm going to stay here by the pond and toast you with champagne on your 41st birthday — deal?" He looked her straight in the eyes. "I accept that you're suffering from an illness, but I don't accept your 'cripple' remark — not at all. Look me in the eyes and tell me if you understand me."

Julia tugged at her blanket, since she'd taken off her cape minutes ago. "That was a really stupid thing to say, Alfie. I take it back.

Okay, I'm not a cripple, and I'll bite the ass of anyone who dares call me a cripple. Deal?" Alfie nodded, "Good girl!"

He arched his back. "I'm 41, turning 42 soon. I was married once; now I'm a widower, and I have two adult children, Waltraud and Heinrich; they live in downtown Chicago, right in the belly of the beast. I live alone in Huntington Heights, a mile from the City Limits, and I don't have a steady girlfriend — I'm not in the mood for a new relationship or a meaningless fling. Is that the information you wanted to hear?"

Julia nodded thoughtfully. "I'm sorry to hear that your wife passed away, Alfie. It still seems to be painful for you. On the other hand, it's nice to hear that your children also live in Chicago, so they're not far away." She was silent for a long moment. "I'll probably never have children of my own — I don't want to pass my illness on to the next generation. I've even thought about getting a Sterilization if I ever find a real life partner."

Alfie placed his hand on her forearm, a look of urgency in his eyes. "Sterilization these days is irreversible. And the disease is passed down through the maternal line, so the risk is only 50 percent. Think it over carefully — maybe your future husband will want children? From what you're saying, it sounds like you don't have a steady boyfriend right now?"

Julia nodded. "Yes, that's true. At least not a male sexual partner. Who would want to be intimate with a frail, sick woman!?" Alfie scratched his bald head. "Okay, I get it. It'll probably be hard to find a sexual partner under the current circumstances. But don't give up hope — true miracles happen to people in your situation; you just have to seize the opportunity." The smartwatch on Julia's wrist beeped softly. With a tap of her finger, she turned off the alarm. "My free afternoon is coming to an end; I have to get back to work," she told Alfie. She said a quiet goodbye and drove off in her Ferrari.

She drove the seven minutes to the Coburgbastei, lost in thought. The Ferrari handled the two steps with ease, and she rolled up to the elevator. Something wasn't right — not at all — with this Alfie. He was friendly, open, and unexpectedly honest in his answers. She was surprised by her own reactions — she'd re-

vealed personal details to him as a matter of course, without hesitating for even a second. Maybe it was his charm; maybe there was something about his manner that made it so easy for her to overcome the usual barriers, as if they didn't exist. She couldn't get the situation out of her head; she dutifully did some research online and halfheartedly typed a few lines of her thesis, but her mind was back at the pond, sitting next to this likable, mysterious guy named Alfie.

The next day, it was pouring rain. She pulled the hood of her raincoat tightly over her face, leaving her fair-weather umbrella behind with a scornful glance. As always — every day, no matter the weather — she rode to the pond in the city park. The downpour had been coming down hard for over an hour already, and there was no sign that it was going to let up anytime soon. She thought briefly of Alfie; in this lousy weather, he probably wouldn't come. She was all the more surprised as she rolled toward the pond. Alfie sat unflinchingly on the bench next to her usual spot. His flimsy raincoat — which wasn't designed for a truly miserable downpour — hung uselessly around his shoulders. The poor guy was soaked from head to toe, like a drenched poodle.

Julia rolled over to her seat and greeted him loudly, drowning out the sound of the rain. He greeted her warmly and ran a hand over his bald head. "I guess I'll have to blow-dry my hair for a long time today, Julia," he joked. She smiled back, but the rain was so loud that she could barely hear him. Determined, she asked, "Wouldn't you rather go home and dry off? You'll catch pneumonia!" Alfie shook his head. "I live on Pálffygasse — it's a bit of a walk from here," he muttered. Julia pulled herself together. "Alfie, I'm not going to stand by and watch you catch pneumonia. Besides, with this lousy weather and the rain pounding down so loudly, it's not really possible to have a conversation — even though I would have really looked forward to chatting with you, my friend." She glanced at the waterfowl, every last one of which had scurried into the bushes. "I'll give them my stale bread, then we'll go to my place; you can dry off and warm up there. Period. No arguments," she said resolutely. "We'd better toss the stale bread under the bushes," she said, and Alfie stood up, took the paper bag from her hand, and emptied it — along with his own — under the bushes. She drove ahead in the Ferrari, and he followed

her curiously. “You live in a posh neighborhood,” he remarked as she unlocked the iron front door.

Alfie stopped at the apartment door. “I can’t just mess up your beautiful apartment,” he said pitifully. She had already slipped off her cape and was looking at him. “Okay, all right, Inspector. Alfie, take off your wet clothes and hang them over the radiator over there. And don’t be shy — I’ve seen more than one guy naked, even a few made of real marble, so.” She turned the Ferrari around and turned her back to him. Alfie stood there for a few moments, indecisive, then stripped naked. He closed the apartment door and placed his wet clothes on the radiators beneath the windowsills. He turned around, and she looked him over from head to toe. A handsome man, in his early forties, though she thought he looked more like he was in his mid-thirties. “You can sit on the couch or my bed — I don’t have any other places to sit,” she said, without blushing in the least, since, of course, she hadn’t mentioned her office chair. Alfie sat down on her bed and looked at her openly. “Thank you very much, Julia, for offering this to me, a stranger. I know how to behave, but weren’t you afraid to sit across from a naked stranger?”

Julia shook her head. “What do I have to fear? Just broken bones — that’s all I’m afraid of. And if he attacks me, *So what?* “That doesn’t bother me much. Sex is just an everyday thing, even if it isn’t for a girl in my situation.” She looked at his body without hesitation. “If you’re embarrassed to be naked, I can take my clothes off too, if that makes you feel better, Alfie.”

Alfie shook his head. “No, that really isn’t necessary. I’m a grown man; I’m not at all embarrassed by nudity — it’s something completely natural.” They were silent for a while longer, then Julia drove the Ferrari into its “garage” with the wireless charging station and stood up. She knew where to steady herself in her apartment and walked over to the kitchenette. “How about a cup of hot Indian tea — Darjeeling?” Alfie nodded gratefully. “That would be nice, Julia. A cup of tea would warm me up from the inside.” Julia continued chatting, “On Wollzeile, just a few minutes from here, there’s an Indian shop that imports Darjeeling directly, without any middlemen.” While the water for the tea was boiling, she fetched a large bath towel from the bathroom and draped it over his shoulders. “Wrap this around yourself — it’ll warm you up a

bit, too." She sat down next to him and didn't get up again until the teakettle whistled.

She brought the teapot, dainty cups made of thin Chinese porcelain, and the matching sugar bowl on a tray. She moved the coffee table closer to the bed and placed the tray on it, then poured two cups of tea. They sipped the hot tea in small sips. "My grandpa bought this one-room apartment in case he became a widower," she said, a touch of melancholy in her voice. "Now it's my student pad, and Grandpa is resting in peace, right next to Grandma." She absentmindedly dropped three sugar cubes into her teacup.

"Alfie, I lay awake half the night. There's something mysterious about you; somehow I can't shake the feeling that behind the librarian's facade there's a completely different person." Alfie was silent for a long time, holding the teacup in his hand as if to warm his fingers. "I'm afraid I can't help you there, Julia. I really am a librarian, even though over there they *curator* says. I am indeed a widower, and I have two children who live in downtown Chicago and lead decent, orderly lives. I have no dog, cat, or parrot; I live alone in my house. I really don't have a steady girlfriend or partner, because I'm not yet interested in entering into a new relationship or a romance. — None of this is mysterious, unusual, or even in the slightest bit special. I can't understand what's bothering you.

And I really don't want to worry you, Julia — I just wanted to get to know you better, that's all. I first saw you rolling out of the university in your wheelchair, and your face captivated me instantly — it's as simple as that. It was easy to figure out that you sit here by the pond every day at lunchtime. And I don't have any sinister intentions whatsoever. Yes, I'm curious to get to know you and learn as much as possible about you — everything you're able and willing to share. That's all, Julia; I'd have to be an open book to you — no enigma, no Similacron, no hocus-pocus."

Julia sighed. "Yes, that's exactly what my thoughts have been revolving around at night. I know all that, and yet it still makes my hair stand on end, and I'm going crazy because I can't figure out what's bothering me — or rather, what it is that seems so mysterious to me. I just can't figure it out. I know you're a widower and you don't have — and don't want to have — any sexual affairs,

okay. But how do you deal with your sexual urges, Alfie?" Alfie had straightened his back; he had to be very careful not to let a slip of the tongue happen here. "Well, that's a very direct and very private question. I think you know how people generally deal with sexual tension when they have neither a wife nor a lover." Julia squirmed with discomfort. "Sorry for barging into your private garden with my big mouth. But that was part of what was keeping me up at night."

Alfie looked down at the floor. "I suppose you're right, Julia. It's not as simple as you might think. Like everyone else over there in the States, I use a little machine that helps me relax sexually. That's the truth, but I don't really like talking about it." Julia nodded, letting out a sigh of relief. "So that's one of your secrets. Okay, if you'd like, I'll apologize for prying, and I certainly didn't mean to ask anything inappropriate." Alfie looked up. "And what about you — how do you feel about it?"

Julia blushed. "Me? Well, I'm no different from 'normal' girls — I use my finger and plenty of lube. My grandpa showed me how to do it. My grandpa, because my parents died in an accident when I was a little kid. I grew up with my grandparents, you know." Alfie nodded. "I read a little about your condition online. It mentions 'frequent loss of libido.'" Julia shook her head. "It all depends on which variant you have — there are at least 18 different variants of my condition. I have a strong, overflowing libido, but I don't take any pills meant to curb it, as my doctor suggested. I don't think you have to tinker with every little thing if it's not necessary. I'm perfectly happy with my libido as it is right now. Period." She paused for a moment. "Is that a problem for you?" she asked quietly. Alfie shook his head. "No, Julia, why would it be a problem for me? I'm trying to picture it, and I'm sort of getting the idea. You'll have to explain that 'overflowing' part to me someday."

Julia poured more tea. "I tossed and turned all night because I just couldn't get it out of my head. When you talked about the year 2038, it sounded completely normal to you. It startled me, because it's only 2025 — and it seemed strange to me that the National Archives would be planning that far ahead; but it's not impossible, of course. But then you said you'd misspoken — well, when I see a big fly or a big lie, I can tell the difference between the two. "We shouldn't pave the way for getting to know each other with lies, Al-

fie!" He nodded. "No, lies can destroy everything, even though there are always situations in life where you have no choice but to lie. I'm sure you'll agree with me on that. And yes, in hindsight, I've also been thinking about my slip of the tongue. I'm expected to retire in 2038; I just recently spoke with the director about it. That sneaky slip probably came from that direction — maybe it was just the so-called 'cognitive cross-talk effect.'" Julia nodded understandingly. "Okay, I'm familiar with that effect. It happens to me sometimes, too — a thought from one conversation sneaks its way into another conversation." Julia's smartwatch beeped softly.

Alfie got up and went to get his clothes. "I know, Julia, you have to get back to work. We'll see each other again tomorrow at the pond, right?"

Julia continued to work diligently on her thesis, doing research online and reading through articles that seemed important; she even copied some of them into a work folder so she could possibly include them in the footnotes later. Her thoughts kept returning to Alfie. No, she hadn't known that people in America used "little machines" for masturbation. She browsed the internet a bit, and sure enough, there they were — some for men and others for women. In the pictures, they looked unremarkable, and she couldn't immediately picture how they worked. But with a little imagination, she understood the mechanisms. No, that probably wasn't for her. On the other hand, Alfie had said they were very widespread. Her finger hovered over the "Order" button, but then she decisively dismissed the idea.

Alfie would retire in 2038, by which time she herself would be 34. She thought long and hard about whether that little, fat lie might actually be trying to hide a completely different secret — a really big secret. It didn't sound implausible — after all, he'd recently spoken with his boss about retirement. But how plausible was it that a 42-year-old was already making plans for retirement? And then take a sabbatical year? That didn't make any sense. She would ask him. Because if there was one thing she really couldn't stand, it was loose ends dangling from the ceiling without answers — like electrical wires to which the electrician hadn't yet attached any light bulbs. But now she turned her attention back to her thesis — she was behind schedule for this semester, but she planned

to work on it over the summer and then submit it at the start of the winter semester in September or October.

The next day, the next downpour hit a quarter of an hour before she set off for the pond. It was pouring buckets, and she was almost certain Alfie had been caught off guard by it. It would surely take him more than half an hour to get from Pálffygasse to the pond. Maybe he didn't even have his flimsy raincoat with him. Well wrapped up in her cape, she drove the Ferrari to the pond. Alfie was already sitting on the bench; he'd slipped on that irresponsible, useless raincoat and was grinning broadly as she drove closer. He greeted her, shouting loudly over the pattering rain, and she shouted her greeting back.

She parked the Ferrari in its spot, and he called out, "I bet that if I buy myself a nice cape like yours right now, there won't be a downpour for the next two thousand days, right!?" Julia shook her head. "You'll end up with webbed toes, you unreasonable stubborn fool! We'll scatter the stale bread in the bushes again, and then we'll go to my place to warm you up and have some hot tea. Period. No arguments." Alfie scattered the stale bread among the bushes, patted a completely surprised male mallard on its green little head, then trotted alongside the Ferrari in the rain, toward Julia's house.

Alfie took off his wet clothes and laid them on the radiators. He grabbed a bath towel from the bathroom and wrapped it around his hips. He stood next to Julia in the kitchen and gave her a hand. He carried the tray with the teapot, two small porcelain cups, and the sugar bowl into the room and set it on the coffee table; then they both sat down on her bed, which was covered with a blanket. They sipped the hot tea in small sips, and Alfie asked how her morning had gone.

Julia set down her cup. "Even though my grandparents left me not only this apartment but also a sizeable bank account and securities, I work from home in the mornings in customer service for a furniture store chain — IKEA. I used to spend about four hours in the mornings answering customer questions, but now I have an AI — Google's Gemini — help me with that. Now I barely need two hours to do the work; the AI's suggestions and response texts are usually perfect and error-free. And — I'm still paid as a part-time

employee, and I have social security and health insurance. As I said, I wouldn't have to work alongside my studies, but it's good practice for interacting with real people — and also, to some extent, for earning my own money. That's very important to me, Alfie — I don't want to just rely on Grandpa's bank account; I want to be active and creative. My studies don't suffer in the slightest; I'm constantly working on my thesis, and that's exciting and challenging enough."

Alfie nodded. "Yes, I understand that whole 'own' money thing quite well. My children, Waltraud and Heinrich, also started taking on jobs very early on to supplement their allowance. No, Hilda — my wife — was certainly not stingy with their allowance, but we could tell how important it was for our children to earn their own money on the side. Looking back now, I think this also helped ensure that they never joined a street gang or turned to drugs." Julia nodded; it felt good to be on the same wavelength as someone.

"And this morning I also went to see my doctor. Thank goodness all my test results are within the normal range; she's also satisfied with the lab results. She shook her head because my genital area is a little chafed. Her recommendation to use lubricant is very sound; but it goes against spontaneity. Consequently, we had a long discussion about my libido, because she thinks it needs to be reined in, but I don't agree with her. I don't want to tinker with it unnecessarily as long as my libido doesn't seem unpleasant or pathological to me. She understands that very well, but she's not really satisfied — I can tell, even if she doesn't say it out loud." Alfie tilted his head. "Of course, I don't have an opinion on your libido yet, Julia — how would I even know how you define an 'exuberant libido'!? But I agree with you on this point: if you're comfortable with things the way they are right now, then there's no need to tweak anything — why bother!?" They were silent for a long time, lost in thought.

Then Alfie said, "When I was still in college, I had a part-time job as a tattoo artist for five years. I liked the work because, even with the stencils, you still had to have a sense of shapes, colors, and creativity. I took the job more by chance, since I don't have any tattoos myself. But it was always nice to get up close and personal with other people, to touch every centimeter of their skin, to touch their limbs or their genitals — I think this job also shaped

me, not just the desire to become a curator, that is, a librarian. As a tattoo artist, you develop a unique sense of the human body, of skin, and, of course, of female genitalia. Society is absolutely crazy about genital tattoos, and I became a sought-after specialist. One thing, however, set me apart from many other tattoo artists: back then, I never initiated anything sexual, unlike so many others. My attitude toward sexuality was shaped mainly by my grandparents, Arthur and Katharina, and by my mother, Isolde."

Julia chimed in. "My grandfather, in particular, shaped my understanding of sexuality, because he believed that young people — that is, children and grandchildren — shouldn't be sent out into the world ignorant or half-informed. Looking back, I agree with him and am very grateful that he patiently and lovingly guided me through my sexuality, even though now, in my current state, I can't even think about having a sexual partner. How did it go for you? Can you tell me about it, if you're not embarrassed?"

Alfie looked down at the floor. "No, I'm not embarrassed — it's just that I rarely talk to others about it. My grandparents, Arthur and Katharina, basically laid the foundation for me: respect, listening, and discussion — the three pillars of a good relationship. My mother taught me the practical side of things. I was her only son, and I was the only one of her children allowed to sleep naked next to her. I came to understand that nudity is something natural. And that you can — and should — have trust and closeness with another person. And that it's completely natural to use the little machine without shame when you're close, like a mother and son. That was extraordinary even for an open and enlightened society like America's. But all of this enabled me to have a good, trusting, and truly heartfelt marriage with my wife — heartfelt in the sense of coming from the heart."

Julia smiled and took his hand. "Once again, we're getting into topics I usually avoid — like my libido or our sexual history. I guess it's because I feel like I've known you for ages and that you've been my friend for just as long. We've known each other for maybe a week or ten days — and yet you've never felt like a stranger to me. Until now, I've only ever had that feeling with my friend Yvonne, my best friend and only sexual partner. And I have to admit, Alfie, I really like that feeling." Alfie didn't pull his hand away from hers. "It's strange, the two of us," he said. "I saw you

roll out of the university building, and your face — your expression — captivated me instantly, in a fraction of a second. I did everything I could to get closer to you and get to know you, as if I had to, without becoming an intrusive stalker. I don't usually do that — there are enough people within my circle with whom I have or need to have contact, professionally speaking."

They sat side by side in silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts. Then Julia asked, "I've been wanting to ask for days now — what do your kids do for a living?" Alfie's face lit up. "Heinrich is a surgeon specializing in the human hand. He's launched a major project to program surgical robots to perform very complex hand surgeries. And Waltraud — she works for the State of Michigan's health care system; she studied psychology and mainly supervises school psychologists throughout the state. You can probably imagine how proud I am of my children. And one day they'll settle down somewhere and start a family — I have no doubt about that. "And, of course, they'll make me a grandpa — an old, very old grandpa, of course." They both smiled because he'd said it with a broad grin. Julia thought to herself that she would never have children or grandchildren.

The smartwatch on Julia's wrist beeped softly; she turned off the alarm with a wave of her hand. Alfie got up and got dressed. "Alfie, I'll give you my phone number so we can get in touch when the next downpour drives us to the Teapot. Okay? But please don't pass the number on to just any Hinz or Kunz, as we say in Vienna, claro?" Alfie typed the number into his cell phone. "I don't know your 'Hinz' or your 'Kunz' — especially not the latter — but those two won't get your number; only everyone else will," he grinned, laughter lines forming around his eyes. He dialed the number right away, and Julia's smartphone rang softly. "Now you've got my number saved, too," he explained. He kissed Julia on the cheek, then slipped out quietly.

Julia glanced out the window only now and then; outside, the once-in-a-century downpour was raging. There was already flooding in the city, and the U2 and U4 subway lines had been suspended because parts of the track system were already submerged. The Wien River, usually a leisurely trickle with no particularly striking features, had turned into a raging torrent and damaged large sections of the U4 subway infrastructure. She turned her at-

tention to her thesis, which compared German and French legends and myths concerning the ancient Greek gods. She spoke French fluently; her grandmother was from France, after all, so Julia had learned French playfully from a young age. Julia had copied hundreds of articles and stories from the internet and was now reading a German and a French parable or legend side by side in two browser windows. It was a very productive afternoon; she had added a good 8 pages to her manuscript, mainly in the form of keyword-style notes, which she would later turn into complete sentences, paragraphs, or footnotes.

She jolted awake from a wild dream. She sat upright in bed for a few moments, then glanced at her wristwatch. 5:20 — way too early to get up. What had she been dreaming about? Scenes flashed before her mind's eye like wisps of fog. Leaning on a ski pole, she had been making her way through deep snow toward the isolated house; with every step, she sank up to her hips, and the storm — perhaps a blizzard — whipped snowflakes into her face and into her eyes. Finally, she reached the house and stepped inside. She walked down a long hallway and entered a bedroom. On the double bed lay a naked woman and a naked boy. It was Alfie and his mother. They were holding hands and both smiled blissfully, lost in their own world. A small box rested on each of their abdomens. She wanted to rush over and warn them, but just then the weight of the snow crashed through the ceiling, and she felt as if she were suffocating in the snow. As she was suffocating, she woke up, drenched in sweat and distraught. Relieved, she took in her living room-bedroom in the dim light of the breaking dawn. It was just a dream. A silly dream. Nothing but a silly dream. She fell back asleep moments later.

All morning long, she worked through a double batch of customer correspondence for IKEA while looking out the window with concern. The torrential downpour paused for no more than five minutes here and there, giving way to a typical summer drizzle — only to rudely push the poor drizzle aside after a few minutes and unleash the downpour on the city once again. She heard the news reports about the flooding in the city. Around noon, Alfie called. He said with a smirk that he'd finally bought himself a proper cape, one just like hers. Julia said she hadn't sat by the pond with her birds for two days in a row, but she'd love to head out there again despite the downpour. After a second, Alfie said,

“Okay, I’m heading out; I’ll be at the pond in about 40 minutes. With the new cape, of course,” he added.

Julia was the first to reach the pond. The waterfowl clearly liked the wet, muddy ground. Julia had bought an extra half loaf of bread at the bakery and was now tearing off small pieces and tossing them to the birds. She had actually expected the pond to have overflowed, but there was no sign of it. Maybe the water level was a centimeter higher than usual, but there was no sign of overflowing. Twenty minutes later, Alfie arrived in his new cape — it was dark green but made of sturdy material. He’d bought it at a military and hunting shop on Mariahilfstraße. Julia nodded approvingly when he added that not a drop of rain would get through — guaranteed. Julia backed the Ferrari up a little so she could park right next to the bench where Alfie was sitting. That way, they could talk in hushed tones — because of the loud rain. Julia said that yesterday afternoon she’d managed to write a full 8 pages of notes for her thesis, which was quite a lot. And despite a stupid dream that had rudely jolted her awake that morning, she’d worked four hours for IKEA that morning and caught up on her backlog. Alfie asked, “What stupid dream?”

Julia recounted what she could still remember. Alfie tilted his head. “Well, of course there are blizzards in Chicago, but they’re rare. And there’s a stone-paved path leading from the street to my house — your struggle with deep snow comes from your subconscious. And even if the weight of the snow were to break through the roof — there are three children’s rooms and a bathroom in the attic, since we’ve always wanted three children. And the bed scene — your poetic, romantic streak got the better of you there, my love, because Mom and I never held hands like that. There were never any indecent advances between Mom and me. And the machines don’t bounce around to simulate intercourse either.”

When my little machine had calmed me down, I’d rest my cheek against Mom’s chest and sometimes cry, because I always felt so sad afterward. I listened to the gallop of her heartbeat and watched, fascinated, as the piston of her little machine thrust rhythmically into her bush, her fingers buried deep within it. But it’s interesting how much these things preoccupy you, even in your dreams.” Alfie tilted his head, and raindrops now rolled down his face. “You’ve painted a picture in your mind because it seems spe-

cial to you to see Mom and me lying naked side by side. And because you've never seen those little machines before. But you sense so keenly that sexuality bound Mom and me intimately together. That's interesting — very interesting. And it's true, …" He was about to say something, but then he fell silent, lost in thought. Julia turned off the Ferrari's heated seats. "We don't need to talk about it, Alfie; maybe it's not the right time." She lowered her head — she didn't really want to pry into his sex life with his mom right now. She knew instinctively that was the case.

"Tell me, Alfie, what do you do all day long? You're practically on vacation — on a sabbatical. That's when you go visit a guru in India, climb an eight-thousander in Tibet, or learn Catalan love songs. For example." Alfie laughed into his nonexistent beard. "Catalan love songs? Tibetan eight-thousanders? An overweight, smelly guru in Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu? You read too many Agatha Christie mysteries, girl. "No, on my sabbatical I can devote myself to a main task without having to worry about my day-to-day duties as a curator," Julia immediately pressed. "And what important task have you set for yourself, dear Alfie? Following a pimply girl from the university and pretending it's not stalking?" They both laughed out loud, and the relentless, miserable rain couldn't dampen their lighthearted, friendly, and cheerful conversation.

Alfie grew serious again. "No, it's okay that you asked. Six months ago, some rowdy teenagers — or young hooligans — set fire to part of our library during a drinking binge. Of course, the sprinkler system and the fire department did their best, but all the documents in my department — covering media reports and publications from Europe from 1968 to 1985 — were burned. Two neighboring departments also suffered heavy losses, but other curators are handling that. Officially, I'm on a sabbatical, but I've agreed with the director to spend a year in Europe — on full pay — collecting whatever I can so it can be archived again.

I've rented two adjacent apartments on Pálffygasse — the smaller one for myself, and I had the larger one cleared out, which I'm now filling with the treasures I've collected. I sit at the computer for 8 to 12 hours a day and order everything I can still get my hands on. I've rented a post office box where I pick up my treasures every day with a little shopping cart. At first, I needed a cargo taxi, back when I was still getting a lot of deliveries. The

chubby postmaster always gives me a funny look, even though I think she's the funny one with her unsightly, unkempt lady's mustache. Once a week, I take the cargo taxi to the recycling center. That, in a nutshell, is my current task. And I'm grateful for every minute I get to spend in your company. That more than makes up for all the eight-thousanders, Catalan love songs, and disgusting Indian gurus. I'm very hardworking and want to restore the old data sets — it's kind of my duty. Although the director thinks it's a commendable extra task; other curators would just shrug and say, "It's fire damage, period!" But that's just not how I'm wired."

Julia leaned forward. "I have a much better picture of you now, Alfie. Until now, I just thought you were a tourist, which in itself wouldn't be so bad. But now I see that you're working hard here and throwing the National Library's dollars out the window on a rescue mission. That commands a respect I didn't have for you before. Yes, you're still a man shrouded in mystery to me, but you've lifted the veil over one secret and let me peek beneath it, revealing a glimpse of the Callipyge. I see you a little more clearly now than before. Thank you for that!" She squeezed his forearm beneath the sturdy cape. "Somehow I'm glad that you're not just some stray American like the others, but that you're working hard here, in the service of Her Majesty!" He grinned. "Yeah, like James Bond, but without the Beretta." She grew pensive. "If there's anything you need me to look up or research for you, just say the word — I'll do it!" Alfie shook his head, "No, thanks. I'm pretty quick at doing research myself, believe me. And of course, I use every AI there is on God's green earth. They already know me like the back of their hand."

He grinned. "By the way, you're right — the National Library has deep pockets, and I get every dollar I ask for. The books, tomes, and old magazines cost a staggering fortune, and right from the start I set up four scanners that run fully automatically around the clock. The director doesn't even bat an eye when I ask for another sack of dollars. She knows I'm not spending it on wine, women, and song. Without her support, I'd have been sitting on the banks of the Seine in Paris long ago, feeding the swans with my tears and stale bread." Julia had to laugh — what a quirky guy this Alfie was!

“Tell me, Alfie, I’ve been meaning to ask you this for ages: you don’t have any hair on your head or any eyebrows — is that the result of chemotherapy?” Alfie looked up, puzzled. “Chemotherapy? — Oh, you mean cancer treatment? No, not at all — I’ve been spared from cancer so far. No, my parents had all of my hair and my two sisters’ hair removed when we were kids because they followed a very controversial medical opinion. They don’t do that anymore these days; hair growth is a natural process, and the controversy has died down. My sisters draw on their eyebrows, wear false eyelashes, and wear wigs of all different colors and styles. Irmgard, my youngest sister, once said half-jokingly that there’s a silver lining — you don’t have to wash your hair every day, and you can wear a different hairstyle every day. It doesn’t bother me personally; in the U.S., many men are bald, and it no longer carries any negative connotations — it doesn’t automatically mean you’re a gangster.” Julia understood. “Here, too, there are many men who shave their heads, and it certainly doesn’t carry any criminal connotations. But I know some people who lost their hair and eyebrows during chemotherapy — that’s why I asked.”

The downpour stopped as abruptly as if Saint Peter had flipped a switch. They slipped out of their raincoats as the sky quickly cleared and the July sun came crashing down again. “It’s going to be a hot summer,” Julia said, “I’ve been listening to the radio with half an ear while I work.” Alfie nodded and muttered that he’d already heard it on the evening news. He shrugged. “Julia, I won’t be coming here for the next two days — I’m going on a trip, maybe even a quick trip to the States. But I’ll be back in two days, right on time.” Julia smiled, “You’re a free man, after all, and you do as you please — or as your boss demands. I’ll bring the birds enough stale bread — you don’t need to worry about them.” Julia’s smartwatch beeped softly — the bird feeding was over. Alfie stood up and held out his open palm to her. She placed her hand on it, and he said, “Goodbye, Julia, see you in three days!” Then he turned and walked away. Julia watched him go for a long time. She turned the Ferrari around and drove off. What was it she was feeling? Was it just a sense of longing at not being able to see her companion for the next two days, and was Alfie really just a companion — or already a friend who had grown dear to her heart? Oh well, Yvonne was coming over this afternoon; she’d discuss this question with her best friend — maybe that would bring some clarity?

Of course, Yvonne couldn't shed any light on the matter either, even though they both turned Alfie over and over in their minds, chewing him over and examining him from every angle. Alfie was an extraordinary but also complicated man — the two friends agreed on that. Yvonne sighed, "Julia, when it comes to a boy or a man, you have to listen to your heart more than your head. Your heart is much smarter than your head. Your head has already ruled out the usual suspects — the seducer, the sex-obsessed guy, the gold digger, or the financial fraudster — so now sit back and listen to your heart. Maybe he's the first serious boyfriend of your life, girl! I really hope that's the case — it would make you even happier. The way you describe it — how he was captivated the moment he saw you as you rolled out of the university building — that's not cheesy; that's just how life works. I've experienced this, too — it only takes a split second to fall for a guy. And most of the time, you're right, even if problems later pile up like dust under a dresser and destroy that dazzling fascination. That's real life; that's the real world we live in and fall in love in." "Yeah, Yvonne — she was a real friend." Julia smiled; she was still miles away from being in love, but no sooner had she said it out loud than a nagging doubt took root in her heart. You know, one of those ugly doubts with bad teeth, sneaky little eyes, a crooked grin, and dressed in rags. The kind that's haughty and arrogant, absolutely certain it knows better than you do. Half in a panic, she asked herself if she was in love with Alfie — could that even be possible?

Alfie arrived at the pond right on time on the third day. He kissed Julia on the cheek as they greeted each other joyfully. He didn't mention his trip at all; instead, he asked how her work with the IKEA customers and her thesis were coming along. Julia reported that she had discovered a modest, unassuming website in a hidden corner of the internet that linked to a very old book from the 19th century. Back then, during the height of Neoclassicism around 1870, an eccentric writer named François Anatole Thibault had collected and written down ancient myths and legends from ancient Greece — most of which had been passed down orally — that fit perfectly into her thesis. Legends in which Hera didn't yet have a halo and Zeus was busily cuckolding. She was certain that hardly anyone thought of this old eccentric anymore these days; this discovery would be a little gem, something special in her thesis.

Alfie had been listening intently; he liked her passion and enthusiasm for the subject. For a while, they watched in silence as the birds shared the breadcrumbs, following a very specific hierarchy. First, the female gray herons took their share, and last were the great crested grebes. And all this without any screeching, threatening flapping of wings, or snapping of beaks. “Well-behaved dinosaurs,” Julia murmured.

Alfie reached into his pocket and pulled out a dark brown glass jar. It was octagonal and about 15 cm tall. It could hold a quarter of a kilo or 300 ml. “Julia, I couldn’t stop thinking about your brittle bone disease and the unbearable hopelessness of it all. I’ve brought you a powder — it doesn’t just dull the pain or provide relief; no, it will completely cure your disease within 90 days. This medication isn’t experimental — it’s approved. And it’s very hard to come by because it’s ridiculously expensive, even by American standards. But the National Library has deep pockets, so I took the liberty. Of course, I explained the purpose in detail to the director, and she just smiled mischievously as she approved it: “Just don’t lose your heart in Europe, my dear!” she admonished me, half in earnest. But there’s no danger of that. I just wanted to help you because I can help you and the others can’t.”

Julia’s heart leaped so hard it took her breath away. “But — how can that be? Don’t we Europeans know what you Americans are researching and manufacturing?” She stared at the glass jar. Alfie opened it and poured a white powder — about half a teaspoon — into the palm of his hand. He licked it up and swallowed it. “It’s not poisonous; otherwise, I’d be dropping dead right now. The pharmacist explained to me that it stimulates the genes responsible for the formation of Type I collagen — whatever exactly those may be. That’s why you have the disease. In the States, no one has this disease anymore; toddlers are treated with this 90-day therapy as early as their second year of life and are cured. Period. That’s why I knew so little about your disease. So, please take one level teaspoon of this powder every morning 20 minutes before breakfast, and you can drink tea with it if you like. They just added a sweet orange flavor for the kids. If your body still isn’t producing collagen after 90 days, I’ll get a whole barrel of this powder, damn it! I want to see you healthy, and above all, I don’t want you to be joining your ancestors at 40, girl!” Alfie handed her the container. “Get well, Julia!”

Julia felt both hot and cold at the same time as she placed the vessel on her lap. “I — I’m completely overwhelmed, Alfie. I don’t know how to put it into words. That you made such a long trip to the States just to get me a cure. That you even gave my illness a second thought, even though I’d already been written off, according to the medical knowledge here. That you find the time, on top of your actual job, to still think about me and my illness. You’re a truly extraordinary man, the kind of friend you don’t find every day. Thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart! To lead a normal, healthy life without fear of broken bones — that’s like the Holy Grail, unattainable and unreal.” Julia fell silent. “I’ll have to bring a sample to my doctor, because she’ll want to examine it. We have a relationship of trust when it comes to my health, so I have to tell her about this.” Alfie nodded. “Of course I know that — this doctor takes very good care of you, my dear. Bring her a small sample — not too much — because the contents are meant for a 90-day healing regimen. Your body will need every single grain.”

Suddenly, tears streamed down Julia’s cheeks. “Yvonne and I have been going back and forth about whether you’re a friend to me or not. And I told her that, to me, you’re a friend whom heaven has unexpectedly sent my way. And now I know it, with complete clarity: you’re my best friend, a man who asks for nothing but generously gives to me. I’ll do everything I can to be just as good a friend to you, Alfie, my friend!” She gently placed a hand on his forearm — a physical gesture of trust and friendship that sealed their bond. Alfie looked her straight in the eye, his eyes deep and unfathomable like a mountain lake a thousand meters deep. “I want to be your friend, Julia, and it would be an honor for me to be able to call myself your friend. You’re my only friend — he paused briefly — my only friend here in Europe.”

Julia’s smartwatch beeped, rudely interrupting the intimate moment. Annoyed, she silenced the alarm. “Alfie, just four or five days ago, it was a downpour that drove us to take shelter in my apartment. Now the July sun is scorching our brains right out of our skulls. Would you come with me to my apartment and maybe have a cold lemonade? I’d love to have you all to myself right now — completely selfishly.” She paused briefly. “I feel as brittle as glass and as fragile as paper-thin Chinese porcelain. I’m afraid I might shatter at any moment. Even my ‘overflowing’ libido brought me only seconds of oblivion; then that feeling came crash-

ing down on me again, like a hostile glass bell jar placed over my soul."

Alfie nodded and stood up. "But of course, Julia — that's what friends are for — when you want someone by your side, when you want to escape the hustle and bustle of public life together. When you feel as fragile as thin Chinese porcelain and even your 'exuberant' libido doesn't really help." She drove off in the Ferrari, and he trotted alongside her. Once they arrived at the apartment, she set the glass container with the remedy on the kitchen counter and placed the Ferrari on its charging station. She stood up and held onto a shelf for support.

"Please don't get me wrong, Alfie, but I feel the need to lie naked next to you on the bed, skin to skin, and to caress your body, to get to know it. No, I don't want sex — that's not even remotely on my mind. I just want closeness — nothing but intimate closeness." Alfie nodded in agreement. Julia took two bottles out of the fridge. "Unfiltered elderberry juice, straight from the farmers' market — mixed with mineral water, it's the best refreshment in this sweltering heat." She poured the drinks and set the glasses on the nightstand, along with an ashtray and cigarettes. She began to undress, and so did Alfie. They lay down on the bed, and Alfie said, "I used to smoke as a teenager thirty years ago, but I haven't since. I'm not addicted to nicotine. But if we think of it as a shared campfire, then it's okay with me." His eyes drifted over the slender, delicate body of his beautiful girlfriend. "You're a very beautiful girl, Julia — inside and out!"

Alfie's fingertips traced the two tattooed snakes winding their way up her inner thighs. "Really, first-rate work!" he said. She looked at him with wide eyes. "There's one more — the big snake!" she whispered, spreading her thighs. Alfie's eyes sparkled. A huge snake's head adorned her pubic area, with its jaws wide open and fangs bared. "Go ahead and take a look, Alfie," Julia breathed. His hands reached out to explore. Her labia were artfully incorporated into its throat; her clit formed the uvula. The small labia ran as sharp as a knife's edge from her clit all the way down, guarding her sanctuary from indecent gazes. He examined her clit very closely; it was reddened and badly chafed. He said nothing about it and reached for her knees to gently close them again. "I used to tattoo snakes like that myself; most of the time, the girls wanted to scare

their lovers away before the act. What a foolish idea! That won't stop anyone."

Julia placed her hand on the back of his hand. "I had it done at Brad's Tattoo Shop because he knew how to avoid breaking my bones. First, the two snakes — I'm liking them more and more; they seem to get even more erotic by the day. And I love the bewildered looks passersby give the two snakes — I'm such a naughty girl! Two weeks later, the big snake went in — Brad understood exactly what I expected of him. But when he insisted that I had to relax on my own while getting tattooed, I almost ran away.

That's how his assistant, Leila — a perverted woman — treated me. She did it to me over and over again with a smirk, because she took pleasure in the fact that I wanted to die of shame every single time. Brad didn't care; he cleaned his equipment carefully and barely looked over. I don't know why I was so prissy, Alfie — I'm probably just a dumb cow, that's all. Brad didn't ask for anything other than to do it to me right there in the studio, carefully, right in front of the jealous Leila. I felt a certain satisfaction because her jealous eyes nearly popped out of her head." Alfie placed his hand on hers, reassuringly and silently.

He propped himself up on his elbows and looked into her eyes. "You mentioned Yvonne earlier. You once said she is your best friend and only sexual partner. Am I to understand that you're a virgin, Julia?" Julia's fingertips, which had been gently and curiously tracing his chest and the insides of his thighs, paused in their movement. "No, Alfie, I haven't been a virgin for many years — not since I was 16. I gave my virginity to my grandpa when I was 16; he deserved it, and he alone. It was a sublime, sacred act, and I cried with joy back then in Venice. Since then, I've had sex time and again; I just had to make sure my bones stayed in one piece. And just recently, I had wonderful sex with a cute boy; at the beginning of this year. I hosted Reginald for two weeks — a third-cousin my own age who lives in New Zealand and came to visit us, his relatives in Vienna. Me and my three unchaste cousins — the flighty trio." Alfie smiled; she'd told him about the sinful, unchaste roller-coaster rides of the naughty triplets.

"He slept here, where you're lying now. He lives in Stratford, a small town at the foot of Mount Taranaki. And he's having an af-

fair with his older aunt Jamie, who also suffers from brittle bone disease, just like me. He's a trained physical therapist and first met Jamie as a patient. She opened her heart to him; she'd had a lot of sex in her youth, but ever since osteogenesis imperfecta had mercilessly struck at age 22, she'd avoided men and sex. She cried about how much she missed physical intimacy and sex. He took the crying 32-year-old in his arms, and they became lovers. That's why he knows exactly how to have sex with a woman like that without breaking every bone in her body.

I liked him, I trusted him, and I let him have sex with me, even though I knew, of course, that during the day he worked my cousins' fields, plowing the furrows and diligently sowing seeds, all morning and all afternoon. "I have very fond memories of those ten days of sex with him; he's a gentle and tender man, that Reginald. And just as exuberant as I am — because he wouldn't settle for less than three rounds, that devil of a man — I couldn't fall asleep until well past midnight," Julia said, blushing slightly. "So no, Alfie, I haven't been a virgin for a long time."

She fell silent and looked at him searchingly. Alfie took two cigarettes and lit them. "Thank you for confiding something so intimate in me, Julia. I was expecting more of a yes-or-no answer. But it's reassuring to know that you're having sex and that you'll be able to continue doing so without hesitation after your recovery — perhaps a little more relaxed and fearless." Julia's finger paused on his chest. "Is that a pacemaker?" she asked, feeling the barely visible device that could be felt beneath his muscles. Alfie shook his head. "No," he said, and then he thought for a long time. A very long time.

The baton in the conductor's raised hand trembled; its tip quivered as if it were shivering. Only the timpanist knew that he was about to strike the timpani with his mallet with all his might, in a thousandth of a second, snatching the audience from the cozy, gentle embrace of the Nereids and the rising and falling of the symphony's long Atlantic waves.

This — this was the silence before the drum roll.

The Kettledrum Stroke

The tip of the baton trembled as if it were shivering. The timpanist watched the trembling with keen eyes. Then the tip of the baton shot decisively upward, and the timpanist struck the B-flat timpani — the timpani with its deep, melodic sound in B major — with all his might. The audience gasped.

Alfie pulled Julia close into his embrace. He had to hold her tight, because the The Kettledrum Stroke would sweep over her like a blizzard.

“Julia, I have to confide my biggest secret to you, because we don’t want our friendship to be built on big lies and omissions — which are really lies, too. This is very difficult for me, because I’ve sworn an oath never to reveal this secret. Do you understand my dilemma?” Julia’s fingertips traced circles on the non-pacemaker. “No, actually, I’m completely lost. You want to confide a secret to me, but you’ve sworn never to reveal it. If I’m understanding this correctly, I have no right to want to know your secret, and it would probably be better if you kept it to yourself. But you know Sophocles’ dilemma: ‘Once you’ve lifted a corner of the veil, you have to find out which Callipyge is hidden beneath it’ — in other words, which beautiful ass is hiding underneath. “There’s no ‘undo’ button,” the old peeping Tom should have added; once you’ve peeked under the corner of the veil, you can’t undo it or make it as if you’d never seen it. I know now that you have another secret — perhaps bigger than any of the others. I can no longer pretend I don’t know.” Her fingertips glided down from his chest to his navel and stopped there; they were not allowed to go any further. She let her flat hand rest on his navel and held her fingertips back, just millimeters from the proud head of Bacchus, despite the temptation.

Alfie sighed deeply, just like Atlas, who had to carry the globe on his shoulders.

“Julia, please listen to me carefully and let me finish what I have to say. My secret is that I’m a time traveler. I set out from the year 2932 to track down the historical documents destroyed in the fire — you already know the rest. My name really is Alfred von

dem Steine, born in 2,891. I really am from Huntington Heights near Chicago, and I really am a curator at the National Library. You already know everything else; every single detail I've revealed to you so far is true. And yes, as curator, I'm responsible for the period from 1968 to 2038. And this device isn't a pacemaker — it's a monitoring device used by a committee to oversee every move a time traveler makes, and it's, so to speak, the counterpart to the machine that lets me travel back and forth — or be recalled in a tenth of a second if I screw up. Time travel is incredibly risky; only a very few are granted this privilege, and only when absolutely necessary. Time travel is kept secret from the public. In return, I can use the monitoring device to establish contact with, for example, an artificial intelligence. The powder — your cure — comes from the year 2932, and in 2025, it's still a long way from being discovered. — That's the gist of it, Julia." Alfie stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette in the ashtray.

That — yes, that — was the big, smashing drum roll.

Julia had stared at him in disbelief and punched him in the chest. "Yuck, Alfie, we promised each other we wouldn't pave our way with lies!" Alfie looked at her calmly and seriously. "Every word is true, every single one," he said with absolute conviction, "everything I've told you so far is true. Every single one. I've kept a lot from you because a lot of it embarrasses me — mostly sexual stuff — and because you might then think I'm some kind of pervert. And I didn't want that. I'm much more sexually experienced than you, and those are exactly the embarrassing situations I wanted to spare myself and us. Getting straight to the point would have driven a wedge between us, so I kept my mouth shut to avoid lying to you, dear Julia." He gently wrapped his arm around Julia's shoulders and pulled her very carefully toward him. "Every word is true, Julia. I'm not lying to you; I'm just breaking my oath, and I think the committee is going to rein me in, demote me, and drag me before a court of law any second now." Julia looked at him in horror.

"Time travel is physically impossible at all — thousands of brilliant minds have already figured that out," Julia snorted angrily and fell silent, tears rolling down her cheeks. "And I thought we could be friends — real, true friends. But not in a loony bin. Not if you think I'm some completely dim-witted chick you can pull a

story like that on, spout such nonsense." She pulled away from him. Alfie remained dead serious. "Every word is true, Julia — no madhouse, no tall tales, and certainly no psychedelic mushrooms I might have smoked. It's all true, but it's hard to believe the truth when you're in the wrong time continuum. Galileo would have stared at you in disbelief if you'd shown him your cell phone, which lets you talk to your cousin in Stratford, Australia — 12,000 kilometers from here. Think about it — are you as skeptical as Galileo?"

Julia's mind slowly began to race. "And how do you overcome the space-time paradox, Alfie?" Alfie said very calmly, "I honestly have no idea how this works technically — not even the theory. I have no idea how our scientists are able to create the Einstein-Rosen bridge, but it's what made intergalactic space travel possible for us. That's how we were able to make contact with a dying galactic race — the originators of the UFO phenomena. Time travel emerged, so to speak, as a byproduct — the best-kept secret in my world. Perhaps only a handful of scientists and engineers understand how it all works. But I'm here — proof to me that time travel is possible. I traveled to the year 2932 in one-tenth of a second to obtain the cure for you that my AI there knew about. Although it took me several days there to acquire it, I returned in the very same second I had left. No magic, no hocus-pocus — just time travel."

Julia rested her head on his chest. "My head is spinning, Alfie. Have I gone crazy, believing such a tall tale? I have no idea what the Einstein-Rosen bridge is supposed to be — we haven't heard a word about it in class. But whatever it is, you seem to believe it exists." Alfie said, "The way this bridge is explained to us is that it's like a worm biting and boring a straight tunnel through an apple — the shortest distance from A to B — hence the colloquial term 'wormhole.'" Julia looked up at him skeptically. "Tell me everything you know about Marie Antoinette!" Alfie seemed to think for a tenth of a second.

"Maria Marie-Antoinette, born Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna of Austria-Lorraine, was born in Vienna on November 2, 1755, as the 15th child of Empress Maria Theresa. She was executed by the revolutionaries in Paris on October 16, 1793, nine months after her husband, Louis Capet, who had also been executed by guillotine.

Even while strapped to the execution block, she was completely stripped of her clothes by the executioner's assistants and sexually abused by them multiple times in front of the jeering mob — the worst form of dishonor, yet ordered by the Revolutionary Council. As the wife of Louis XVI, she was Queen of France and Navarre from May 10, 1774, to August 10, 1792; since September 4, 1791, she had held the title "Queen of the French." Contrary to popular belief, she had numerous secret love affairs, which today would be described as "quickies." Toward the end of her short life, she had only one serious and noteworthy affair with the Swedish diplomat and military officer Hans Axel von Fersen, who attempted to free her from captivity in September 1793, but the attempt failed miserably...."

Julia interrupted him. "And you got all that from your AI in the future?" Alfie nodded. "Yes, using the communicator. But I don't keep a constant connection, because the AI has to report all my requests to the committee." Julia said that two years ago, during her senior year of high school, she'd written a term paper on the queen that included that information, "but I couldn't have quoted it off the top of my head like that. That was an impressive demonstration, Alfie. No, I don't think you or I are crazy, so no mental hospital for now. But encountering a flesh-and-blood time traveler — that's some pretty wild stuff. Yvonne is going to be absolutely thrilled!"

Alfie stared at her. "You mustn't talk to anyone about this, not even Yvonne. That would be the end of me — or at least the end of my mission. You hold my life — or at least my time here with you — in your hands. Be smart and keep quiet, even if it's very hard. The committee would send me back immediately and put me on trial. Please don't do that to me. It's actually surprising that they haven't intervened yet — there must be a reason for it. Maybe they're taking their time, or maybe they've been keeping a close eye on you and trust you. Unlikely, but possible. But that must be the case, since they haven't transferred me back yet. So let's continue to act as naturally and inconspicuously as possible." Julia's fingertips twitched curiously and inappropriately. "The committee — they're not your friends, are they, Alfie?" He shook his head. "Good heavens, no. They scrutinize my every move with a critical and sullen eye. No, by God, they're no friends, but they hold the thread of my life in their hands. They can let me be, or transfer me

back in a thousandth of a second, or simply strand me here and throw away the key."

Julia's eyes remained fixed on Bacchus's little head. "And everything you told me about sex — is it all true?" Alfie smiled subtly. "I haven't told you a single lie about that, though I did keep some embarrassing details to myself; but I actually did keep the most important thing from you. For nearly half a century, an insidious virus has been rampant among us. It infects almost exclusively the female body — apparently because it needs their hormonal balance to survive — and is transmitted only through sexual intercourse, or sometimes to female embryos or through blood donations. Women are therefore not allowed to donate blood. And the virus is absolutely fatal to men; its symptoms resemble those of the Ebola virus. Every possible — and even impossible — measure has been taken, but the virus is a master of camouflage, so that while a serum is effective in the short term, it really only lasts a short time — not even 24 hours. So now we stand on the brink; sexual intercourse means certain death for men.

Children are conceived exclusively in fertility clinics, under the strictest hygiene precautions, using Mom's egg and Dad's semen. A humiliating, shameful procedure — at least it was for me. While the mom's gynecologist carefully retrieves a few eggs, you lie next to her and the young nursing assistant collects your semen with her gloved hand. These are usually Asian girls, because American ones aren't willing to do handjobs to strangers. She takes a break and waits with a cheeky grin until Mom has gotten you ready again. Then she keeps going, stopping only when you have not a single drop of semen left. And your wife watches in disbelief, right until the end. I've died a thousand deaths. So my sisters and I were conceived in a clinical vial, just like my children. I've never been physically intimate with a girl or a woman — not even with my wife." Alfie swallowed; he'd stayed as close to the truth as he possibly could.

Julia's eyes widened. "Good heavens! That must have terrible consequences for society. I know what life is like without sex; I think you become peculiar and eccentric — at least, that's how I see myself a little bit. Although, of course, I have experienced physical intimacy and continue to do so. On the other hand, I'm gradually beginning to understand how and why your mom took

you into her bed — to prevent you from becoming a godless fellow, a bizarrely twisted oddball. And now your little machines make sense, too, because you're not allowed to have real sex."

Julia rolled her eyes. "I can't believe it. Here I am lying in bed next to a real time traveler, casually chatting about sex and non-sex, instead of trying to fathom the incomprehensible nature of the wormhole. You must think very little of me, Alfie. Although I assure you that, after Yvonne, you're only the second person with whom I've ever chatted so casually about sex."

Julia ignored the beeping of her smartwatch; work and school were the last things on her mind right now. Her thoughts revolved around Alfie, the time traveler, and the incomprehensible. "I understand your main task better now. You're collecting all the documents here from the period starting in 1968, and you've set up 4 scanners at Pálffygasse that tirelessly scan everything day and night. When you're done, you'll set off on your journey home with perhaps a dozen hard drives in your backpack and then set them up again at the National Library just as they were before — or perhaps a little improved. "What madness, all of this!" she exclaimed, burying her face in his armpit, for tears were streaming from her eyes once again.

Julia opened her eyes. She had to get her bearings; she was lying in the crook of Alfie's arm, and he had been watching her sleep. She must have dozed off, and that showed just how comfortable she already felt with him — even though they hadn't gotten any closer physically than simply lying skin-to-skin. Yes, she admitted to herself, she'd been hoping a little bit before that she'd have sex with Alfie. But then came the bombshell — Alfie wasn't just any American on a tour of Europe; no, he was from the future. 2932. Julia's eyes wandered over his body, lingering on the sleeping Bacchus, on the sleeping Dionysus, who hid his little head under the hood. No girl, no woman had ever had sex with him. He lived in an abstruse, confusing time, where people didn't have direct sex, where children were created in fertility clinics after the man had been milked dry like a dairy cow, and where sexual release was provided by "little machines."

A shiver ran down Julia's spine. No, she didn't want to live in an era like that. It would be a time when her grandfather wouldn't

awaken her sexuality, when gods and goddesses would stare into the yawning void of the universe and not waste a single thought on seducing and ruining even a single human child. She wouldn't be writing her thesis on the unbridled sex lives of the ancient gods, but perhaps a treatise on the proper care of exotic houseplants or the mating croaks of toads at full moon. No, it would be an absolute, absurd catastrophe — really!

Alfie's hand glided lightly, like a feather, from her shoulder down her upper arm, along her forearm, and all the way to her fingertips. "You're a beautiful girl, Julia, a beautiful young woman. Brittle bone disease hasn't disfigured your body; you can't see any traces of those old fractures at all anymore. I see your beautiful, proud body and hardly think about your illness — not in this intimate moment." Had she been thinking out loud? "You're writing your thesis on the ancient gods because you're exploring their sexuality — and your own — in it; am I right, or am I mistaken?" Alfie looked at her with a smile; he clearly really wanted to know.

"Yes, you may be right, at least in part," she said thoughtfully. "Even back when my grandfather used to read me the legends from those thick books and gently introduced me to my sexuality, it became clear to me that the gods had emerged from a bewildering tangle of incest, patricide, and infanticide — that it was a wild jumble of bodies, heads, genitals, and limbs, enough to make one dizzy. But my grandfather had it all figured out, and he patiently guided me to that era when the gods inhabited Mount Olympus and when incest, intrigues, and deceit went hand in hand, without much murder. This was the golden age, when sex took place mainly between gods and goddesses. When the goddesses were pushed into a secluded corner like ordinary maids.

But then came the era of decline, when the gods discovered the small, mortal humans who left the theater stage after no more than 60 or 70 years and crumbled to dust. The dams burst; girls, young men, and respectable wives became pawns in this hellish tournament. The end? Gods and goddesses killed one another and vanished behind the scenes. Humans took the stage; screaming wildly, they chased girls and women and bashed each other's heads in, and they roared at the sun or the moon that they were now the gods! — Yes, from the moment my grandfather guided me with a knowing hand into my sexuality, I began to draft my thesis,

and I've been shaping it ever since, right up to today, when I must put it down on paper. You're absolutely right; without that starting point, I wouldn't be who I am today, and I'd probably be writing a completely different thesis — about exotic plants or the love-crazed croaking of toads during a new moon."

Alfie said he'd love to read the manuscript — after all, it was her work and her world of ideas. Julia said there was only a rough draft with lots of blank spaces and notes on what still needed to be added; she'd be embarrassed. Nevertheless, she later gave him a USB drive with her manuscript. Two days later, he brought her a sheet with corrections — pointing out mistakes or major errors she'd made — as well as suggestions on which notes still needed to be added. Yes, he had read through everything right away and then used his AI to help, but that was okay, Julia said. "I had originally agreed with Yvonne that she would proofread my work. But now I'm glad you're reading it — you're great at it." Alfie smiled. "I've written a total of eight dissertations for my doctoral programs, and I've proofread my own children's papers. And as a faculty advisor, I read my students' papers week after week. So I have quite a bit of experience in this area."

July and August blanketed the city with a scorching heat wave from the Sahara. Every day at noon, they drove to the pond to see their little flock of birds. By then, it had already become a routine for them to lie naked on the bed in Julia's apartment afterward, skin-to-skin, and discuss everything under the sun. Julia didn't want to know what wars would be fought in the future or how the political powers of nations and continents would develop; she simply wasn't interested in any of that. She was far more interested in everyday life — how people lived, worked, and made love under the yoke of the virus. How, specifically, they dealt with sexuality. And whether they remembered the ancient gods of Olympus.

Julia's specialist had sent a sample of her healing powder to a renowned laboratory. The lab director was tearing his hair out. Yes, it was clearly recognizable as being mRNA-based, but that was all. Sequencing yielded no useful results; they couldn't decipher what genetic code was being carried, the lab director lamented, calling it gibberish of a completely incomprehensible composition. A mixture of Chinese and Romani. The doctor could only confirm to Julia that it wasn't toxic and did indeed contain a

highly complex genetic code carried by an mRNA strand. Julia dutifully took the healing powder every day, just as instructed. And after 25–30 days, the doctor was able to confirm that her body was indeed producing that special collagen again — in tiny amounts, but still.

So Julia regained hope that one day she might overcome brittle bone disease, just as Alfie had said.

Julia, lying alone on her bed, smiled as she ran her hand over the gentle curves that led from her firm breasts down to her stomach, to her belly button, and then on. Hope gave her a sense of purpose, a good reason to enjoy her life, her daydreams about Alfie, and her overflowing libido to the fullest.

In the Clutches of the Law

July and August were sweltering. The flood damage had been cleared away, and now people and animals alike were gasping for air in the scorching summer heat. Julia's windows faced east, so she had morning sun, but during the day her apartment was in the shade, allowing her to work — sitting on her office chair in just a negligee — without breaking out in a sweat. When she rolled over to the pond, she wore a sleeveless T-shirt whose fabric let the sunlight through and gently tanned her skin, but also allowed her breasts and nipples to show through — because that's how she wanted it. She loved that her body, that her skin, was sun-tanned. Sometimes she took a day off work and drove the arduous route to the New Danube, where there was a nudist beach. There she let the sun tan her, just as Alfie did — it was his first time at a nude beach. Of course, he'd read about it, but in Chicago, such a thing hadn't existed for a long time. He had to slather himself thickly with sunscreen because he was afraid of getting sunburned. Julia never used sunscreen, because her skin was used to the sun; it would turn a little red at first and then tan quickly. She was used to the curious and lustful glances from men, but thankfully, hitting on girls was frowned upon at the nude beach.

She had her tablet with her and read her documents when she wasn't chatting with Alfie or when Alfie was dozing. Alfie covered his face with his T-shirt and dozed in the sun; he was often working through the night these days, so he could afford this luxury — spending time with Julia here on the beach or at her apartment — with a clear conscience. Julia always brought her cooler bag, so they could drink their own lemonade and didn't have to rely on the overpriced drinks from the beach vendors. They both loved these sunny vacation days and didn't go to the pond.

On other days, Alfie would come to her apartment; she'd stop working and lie skin-to-skin with him on the bed. Unlike her, Alfie was groaning from the heat, so she took a damp washcloth and washed his body from head to toe, letting the evaporating moisture cool his skin. She knew every inch of his body; she hadn't blushed while washing him in a long time. He dozed off, and she sat down at the computer to continue working on her thesis.

The myths and legends she read came mainly from the second half of the 19th century, the heyday of Neoclassicism. How different the German and French legends were! The French texts were cheerful, cheeky, and tongue-in-cheek — they called a hammer a hammer and an anvil an anvil without any hesitation or beating around the bush. The German texts, on the other hand, were already heavily self-censored; after all, you couldn't call a hammer a hammer — or even mention it at all! The poets and writers were aware of society's repressive pressure, so they either hid the hammer and anvil entirely or modestly concealed them behind a rosebush. Julia smiled knowingly and diligently noted down the offending passages. Sometimes she read the passages aloud to Alfie, and they discussed the differences.

Later, Julia wouldn't have been able to say exactly when she'd started touching him intimately. It had happened completely naturally, because when she washed him with the cool, damp cloth, she touched him there too, claro. His body reacted to the harmless touch; Bacchus poked his little head out and looked around curiously. Smiling, she reached out and did what her grandfather had taught her. Moaning and groaning with pleasure, Alfie relaxed, and she continued to wash him with the cool, damp cloth, smiling contentedly. It became second nature, and Alfie just looked at her with wide eyes. "You do it far better than any little machine, Julia." She nodded knowingly, for he hadn't brought a little machine from the future with him. "Grandpa patiently taught me, and now I can put it into practice." There wasn't much more to say about it.

Just as naturally, she would rest her head on his broad chest whenever her desire threatened to overflow, murmuring that she, too, wanted to relax now. Her finger blindly followed the familiar path. A butterfly spread its wings, fluttered back and forth, and settled on a small hillock, on a flower's calyx, only to spread its wings again moments later and flutter on, from hillock to hillock, alighting on a flower and plunging its proboscis deep into the flower's pistil. Oh, there were so many little hillocks there, so many blossoms that opened their pistils to the butterfly's proboscis. And then the butterfly gradually transformed into a hawk, which now circled widely in the sky. These circles grew smaller and smaller until the hawk locked onto its target and dove toward it like a rocket, driving its talons into the flesh. Julia buried her face, trembling, in Alfie's armpit as her body twitched in the

hawk's talons, and her lips kissed the delicate skin. When she looked up, Alfie was smiling. "So that's your definition of 'exuberant,' sweetheart." Julia nodded wearily, "Yes, that's me — exuberantly happy and wonderfully relaxed." She no longer hid this secret from him.

A text message from Alfie alarmed Julia. "They're arresting me…" she read the incomplete message. She suppressed her panic and called Yvonne. Yvonne was wide awake immediately. "Arrest is the key word here, Julia. You have to go to the police station and have them look for him there." Julia picked the nearest one, the police station on Juchgasse next to the 'Wien Mitte' train station. She grabbed her purse and rolled her Ferrari for 15 minutes, past the Stadtpark. The reception area was completely empty; she rolled up to the counter, but could barely see over the edge of the desk. The young officer in uniform motioned for her to roll around the counter and she looked at her curiously. Julia explained that her boyfriend had recently been arrested.

The clerk frowned. "I'm not allowed to give you that information," she said. "Well, what's your boyfriend's name?" she asked, typing in "Alfred Von dem Steine, American citizen." "Yes, dear young lady, he's listed here, but that's all I can tell you." Julia's shoulders slumped. "Wait," said the clerk, "I'm going to take a smoke break right outside the door." Julia got the hint and rolled out onto the street. Moments later, the clerk came out and awkwardly lit a cigarette. "In the Gray House, pretrial detention," she muttered into the flame of her lighter. "No, unfortunately I can't tell you anything more specific — that's all it says." Julia mumbled her thanks and rolled away. She called Yvonne. Yvonne thought for a moment. "You can only go in there with a lawyer, sweetie. But he's American — just call the embassy; they'll send someone."

Julia called the American Embassy in broken, school-level English. She was transferred, transferred again, and after five or six transfers, she got a young man on the line who, thank goodness, spoke German. He wrote down Alfie's name and his address in Huntington Heights, Chicago. That was all Julia knew. She had told him she had limited mobility and was in a wheelchair. He said he could be at the Landl — the Gray House — in two hours, at 1:00 p.m., and asked if she could make it there too. Of course, Julia said, breathing a sigh of relief. She called a taxi that could accom-

modate a wheelchair user and had herself driven to the Landl, the downtown prison. She waited patiently, and at a quarter past one, a young man approached her and held out his hand.

She touched his hand with her fingertips and said, “I have brittle bone disease, so I can only use my fingertips, Mr. ...?” “Andrews, Frederick Desmond Andrews,” he said. “I work at the U.S. Embassy. I just checked our records and found seven people with the last name “Von dem Steine” in downtown Chicago, but not a single Alfred and no one in Huntington Heights either. “Well, we’ll see.” Good Lord, was she dragging the nonexistent Alfie even deeper into the shit!?

Andrews led the way, showed his ID, and they were escorted to a burly correctional officer who was more nibbling than puffing on his cigarillo. “Smoking is strictly prohibited here, just like everywhere else. Here, help yourself,” he said, pushing the overflowing ashtray across the table with a crooked grin. He motioned for them to sit down and picked up a thick folder. “Yes, he’s here, in pretrial detention. Unfortunately, that’s all I can tell you, Mr. Andrews. And it goes without saying that we treat him like a gentleman — after all, he might be innocent. I’m just following my instructions, Mr. Andrews, and I’m not authorized to provide any information about prisoners in the political section.”

Andrews nodded. “I see. But could you tell me who I should contact and which department I can reach out to for more information?” The officer looked at the file. “A Captain F. Münzinger, extension 1423, is the officer in charge. Wait, I’ll give you the phone number.” Andrews wrote it down and stood up. “Thank you very much,” he said and walked out into the hallway with Julia. “I’ll have to discuss this with my superior; I can’t just ride ‘Yippie-Yeah’ into the Corral like that — you understand, don’t you, Ms. Herrnthaler?” Julia nodded. Andrews promised to call her in two hours at the latest; after all, he had her cell phone number. He left quickly.

She had told Yvonne everything. Yvonne said that if she couldn’t make any headway with the embassy, she could consult a lawyer, but that would be expensive. Julia waited anxiously for Andrews’s call. He actually called, even before the two hours were up. “Well, we spoke with Münzinger on the phone. He was pretty

annoyed that the embassy had gotten involved so early on. Yes, there had been an anonymous tip, and the American had been arrested on suspicion of espionage. He acknowledged that the man would, of course, receive legal counsel, and tomorrow at 2:00 p.m. he would visit the prisoner at the Gray House with Andrews so that Andrews could see for himself. With the prisoner's consent, a search of the two apartments on Pálffygasse had been arranged; his colleagues were already on site. In any case, Münzinger concluded, if this were indeed a case of espionage against the Republic, they would contact the ambassador through official channels, as required." Andrews waited to see if Julia had anything to say about it.

"We've known each other for a few weeks — maybe two and a half months — Mr. Andrews," said Julia. "Of course, I can't vouch for Alfred; I don't know him that well. But I'm absolutely astonished that he's supposed to be a spy. That strikes me as very strange; I surely would have noticed something. A spy? No, Mr. Andrews. It must be a case of mistaken identity or a misunderstanding — Alfie is absolutely, positively not a spy!" Andrews seemed to nod over the phone. "Keep in mind that a girlfriend is often the best cover for a clever spy, and very few girls notice his double life. But I'm certainly not implying that your friend could be a spy. At least he's not one of our spies — I can assure you of that!" he chuckled. Turning serious again, he said, "I'll bring a colleague with me tomorrow who will meticulously examine Mr. von dem Steine's documents and passport. Then we'll see."

Julia hung up after Andrews promised to call her back tomorrow around 3:00 p.m. Julia talked for a while longer with Yvonne, who was quite pleased with how things were going. "Don't worry, Julia, everything's on track now. That's all you can do right now." Julia drove out to the pond that very afternoon to feed the birds. Then she threw herself into her work and immersed herself in the myths of ancient Greece.

At night, she tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep. What if they discovered that Alfie didn't even exist? He would never reveal his time travel — they'd lock him up in the loony bin on the spot. What if they thought his passport was a forgery? After all, his passport didn't bear the likeness of President Donald J. Trump, but most Americans still had passports featuring the American bald

eagle. That couldn't be his undoing. But what about the house search? Would they buy his explanation that he was collecting and scanning lost documents? What if they investigated whether and when there had been a fire at the National Library? And whether an Alfred von dem Steine even worked for the National Library at all? Question after question to which she had no answer. Loose wires dangling from the ceiling. She fell asleep restlessly, dreaming wild, frightening, and violent dreams, but when the alarm clock woke her at seven, she couldn't remember any of them.

She was sitting by the pond feeding the birds, but she drove home as early as 1:00 p.m. and waited for Andrews' call. He called at a quarter to three. "I was just with Münzinger at Mr. Von dem Steine's. I can reassure you, Mrs. Herrnthaler, he's well taken care of; he's dressed in civilian clothes and is being treated courteously. Münzinger and I spoke with him for 20 minutes. My colleague thoroughly examined the passport — it's definitely genuine, thank God. He is definitely an American, and I've sunk my teeth into this case — I have every right to do so. Münzinger asked him questions about the house search. The answers were quite satisfactory. Mr. Von dem Steine works for a patron, searching for and scanning documents, books, and newspaper articles from the last century. Münzinger was able to confirm this information; nothing else had been found. He remained silent about the patron's name — there was no obligation to disclose it. If a patron wished to remain anonymous, he was entitled to do so."

Andrews paused. "There isn't the slightest indication that he's spying for a foreign power — and certainly not for our country; I've checked it twice and three times. Münzinger said that without concrete evidence, they wouldn't even be able to present the case to a magistrate and would have to drop it. Münzinger seemed relieved to me, because catching a real spy was something truly extraordinary and would drag a whole trail of red tape in its wake. No, he would close the case immediately and release Mr. von dem Steine. Münzinger shrugged; he had to investigate every suspicion, even if it ended up being a dead end, like this case." Andrews hung up.

The next morning, around a quarter past nine, Alfie called; he was already downstairs at the front gate. Julia pressed the door opener and waited for him. Without a word, and in tears, she threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, how wonderful to have you

back, my little spy!" she sobbed, overjoyed. She invited him to sit down and made some tea. She served croissants and a cold platter for breakfast. She watched him silently as he tucked heartily into his breakfast. "In prison, I got a cup of brown sludge at 5 a.m. that wouldn't even pass for coffee in wartime," he grinned. "It was an interesting experience, 48 hours in pretrial detention. I've checked that off my tourist to-do list — I don't plan on visiting again." He lit a cigarette. "That was really nice of you to get the embassy involved — it sped up the process considerably." Julia said it had been Yvonne's advice, and she was absolutely right.

Julia said there might be a problem with his passport. Andrews had written down the passport number and would surely figure out that he was a U-boat, an underground operative. Alfie wasn't fazed. "I'm confident, Julia, don't worry. I'll just blame it on the passport office's sloppiness, of course — it won't be a problem." (And that's exactly how it turned out; they never heard from Andrews again.) Alfie set off quickly; his scanners had surely been waiting for new input for 24 hours or even longer.

Julia had gotten her hands on the pill. She was absolutely determined to have sex with Alfie, but she didn't want to take any risks. She was just waiting for the right moment, because now, after the espionage scandal, Alfie had to focus on his main task. No, she would wait until everything was back to normal, just like before the espionage incident. At noon, she strolled over to the pond and fed her birds. She had also bought birdseed, grains, and dried berries from a pet store so the birds would have something other than stale bread to eat. The man at the pet store had agreed with her — the birds needed supplements like minerals, salts, flaxseed, and hempseed for natural fats. "I've learned something important again," she thought to herself. From now on, she would buy birdseed so the birds wouldn't just get stale bread.

A few hours later, she was lying on Alfie's bare chest again. She asked him for the hundredth time what it was like to be intimate with his mom.

Alfie patiently described it for the hundredth time. "We lay still and silent next to each other, not touching one another; each of us was focused on ourselves. Our little machines were running, humming quietly. My little machine is easy to describe; really, it was

just a primitive contraption, and it was done after only a few minutes, whereas Mom's always took a very long time. But how Mom used her machine — I never figured that out for sure in my earliest youth; I never asked her and only rarely spied on her. That was the boundary of her privacy. Presumably, there was some kind of tongue that Mom used, but I didn't know that for sure back then. There was a vibrating plunger — I knew that for certain, because I could usually see it in action. I always assumed that Mom first let that hidden tongue do its work, and when she was already panting loudly, she'd switch on and activate the piston. But maybe I was wrong, and my imagination was running wild like a crazy bronco." Julia nodded thoughtfully. "It seems plausible to me — the wet tongue first, and then the dildo at the end. That way, it makes sense. At least that's how we humans do it."

"Once my little machine had relaxed me, I rested my face on Mama's beautiful chest and listened to her heart pounding and racing. Mama, born Isolde von Hohenheim, had been the most fieryest mare at the Hohenheim horse stud farm in her youth. I mainly watched Mom's facial expressions as they shifted from a soft smile to focused, introspective attention and finally to a relaxed, blissful smile. When I lifted my head, I could see the vibrating plunger tirelessly thrusting into her bush. Her fingers were always in her bush; she'd adjust the plunger's movements, and her finger would circle a little. My sisters had shown me long before how girls do it. Mom tensed up toward the end and set the plunger to top speed — that fascinated me a lot back then. When she reached the end of the stroke, she pushed it out, looked at me happily and relaxed, and little stars twinkled in her eyes. Mom knew for sure that I was watching the plunger pistoning, but she didn't say a word; she probably wanted me to see it. We never talked specifically about how I or she used the little machine. She surely thought I could have seen everything."

He thought for a moment. "Just once, back when I was still a little kid, she showed me exactly where this wet tongue was licking and how she shoved the plunger deep into her bush so the guy could really pound her. But I forgot all about it right away — it was really boring, and I was just a little kid back then. Sex was boring; I categorically rejected that stupid little machine, and Mom should keep doing it for me herself by hand." "How old do you think you

were back then?" Julia asked. "I think 7 or 8 — that's when I hit puberty and my little guy became fully functional."

Julia always closed her eyes when he told her about it. Yes, she could picture it — the boy's face against Mom's breasts and his gaze fixed on the pestle as it pounded. Yes, she could easily imagine that. "I think your mom was smart and wise. Introducing you to sexuality — yours as well as hers — in this way was exactly the right thing to do under the circumstances." Alfie nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, she was — a very good and conscientious mother who didn't let me go astray during puberty and my teenage years."

Julia asked if he'd ever been able to see the plunger directly, like… well, inside? Alfie thought for a moment, formulating his words in his head before speaking. "I was in middle school — probably 15 or maybe even 16 — when Mom let me see it, all of it. From the front, not just from above, down from her chest. No, she let me kneel between her thighs and gaze in wonder. Filled with awe and a sacred shiver, not with greedy lust as I would be now. How she stretched out her little mound toward the wet tongue to be licked, while her finger circled lightly and tirelessly. How that kindled her fire, and she finally pressed the button. Now the piston began to thrust, and I was allowed to see it very clearly as it drove into her bush and then into her body. My whole body trembled; my mother had never given birth to a child, and everything looked as delicate as it had with my sisters.

The plunger dug its way through drilling a hole and dutifully pounded its way in and around inside. Of course, I knew in theory how the girls did it with their fingers, but now I saw it up close, because Mom didn't just guide the plunger with her finger — she made her finger dance and jump busily. And I understood that she was only revving the plunger to full throttle to intensify her climax. From then on, she let me watch whenever I wanted. Mom's glances were always shy and full of shame, because she was letting me see her sinful thoughts and her best-kept secrets. And she had gotten into the habit of reaching out to me just before her final ecstasy and letting Genghis Khan's blessing rain down on the piston and her most sacred part. I think she longed for closeness, for union. As a fiery mare at the Hohenheim stud farm, she'd never lacked for that." Alfie closed his eyes. He'd come so close to the

truth that it made him dizzy. He didn't dare take the final step — the most painful one — not yet.

Julia put off the topic of Genghis Khan for later and interjected, "Your sisters!?" Alfie didn't want to leave her hanging and found a way to skirt the truth. "Mom once asked me what she could get the girls for their — I think it was their fifteenth — birthday? I suggested little relaxing machines — they made them for young girls, too. Same functions, but everything a tad smaller. That's how my sisters, the twins, got their first little machines. And I think that was just the right thing to do, and it came at just the right time." Julia sensed that a big fat fly and a big fat lie were lurking in the undergrowth here, but she pushed the thought aside. She had no right to pry. She could guess as much.

She told Alfie about the dream she'd had that night: once again, she had floated into his mom's bedroom and seen her and Alfie lying there, with the little machines on her lower abdomen. They were holding hands, looking into each other's eyes, and smiling. She floated around the two of them and spotted the dildo thrusting into her bush, and she heard Alfie's mother's panting sighs. But it wasn't a nightmare; instead, she rose high into the air and landed in a meadow full of flowers, their blossoms turning hungrily toward the sun. Alfie smiled, because he liked it when someone experienced something beautiful in a dream.

Julia asked where his father had gone? Alfie's face expression darkened. "Dad fell madly in love with Almut, Mom's youngest sister — she was 15 or 16 at the time. They committed the sin of the flesh for months right under Mom's nose, and Dad died a miserable death from the virus." Julia paused in her movements. "Oh, I'm so sorry — how terrible!" But Alfie waved it off. "Almut didn't take the testing very seriously, and that ice-cold vixen let Dad walk right into his doom with his eyes wide open — it was his decision, after all."

Julia could tell this was eating away at him. So she changed the subject. She wanted to know how society as a whole was reacting to the virus. "It's a bloodbath," Alfie said, "there are far too few men for far too many women. Some of the smarter ones live without sex, just like me. Others rely on condoms and tear into the lambs and sheep like wolves; unscrupulously, they stop at neither

virgins nor shy wives. — I dare say that my great-grandchildren, freed from the yoke of the virus, will reintroduce polygamy out of necessity so that, like the Bedouins of old, they won't die out as a people." Julia nodded thoughtfully; he might be right.

Alfie, just like Julia, had found his rhythm between work, feeding the birds, and lying on her bed. He worked late into the night and made sure his scanners ran tirelessly day and night. He was glad he'd bought the most expensive models; the devices could easily distinguish between books, newspapers, and magazines. They retrieved the next item from the stack and turned the pages on their own, one by one. Where appropriate, they scanned two pages at a time. They slid the finished item into the tray and picked up the next one from the input conveyor belt. Each scanned item was given a descriptive folder name that included at least the title, type of item, and date of release. This allowed him later — 900 years later — to have them neatly cataloged.

Damn, it was Tuesday — and Yvonne's afternoon! And Alfie was lying naked on her bed, sleeping soundly. "Can I…?" Yvonne asked Julia, and took off her clothes as she usually did, so all three of them were naked on that sweltering afternoon. Yvonne lay down next to the sleeping Alfie and looked him over from head to toe, taking a very close look at the naked guy and the sleeping Dionysus. Julia wasn't sure if it was right to lie down next to Yvonne, but then she decided to go for it — Tuesdays always meant girl-on-girl sex, every damn Tuesday afternoon. And Yvonne should stop staring at Alfie's thing, that sex-crazed slut!

Alfie woke up a little later, held out his hand to Yvonne, and told her his name. "Yvonne Pospischil," she said, and they shook hands. The "Von dem Steine" fascinated Yvonne, but Alfie said with a smile that in the U.S. there was no nobility and no "Von" as in Germany. Julia reached for a cigarette and offered one to Alfie and Yvonne as well. She found the situation very embarrassing — first, the girls having sex next to the sleeping Alfie, and now they had to pretend nothing had happened. Yvonne's fingers brushed against Alfie's inner thigh, and she stared at the head of Bacchus, which had risen and was looking around curiously. "May I…?" Yvonne asked Julia, but she just shook her head, firmly refusing. "No, don't — Yvonne, behave yourself!" Could she have said yes? No, of course not; girlfriends shared everything, absolutely every-

thing, but there were limits, too. “Alfie is mine, please respect that!” Julia said, giving Yvonne a slap on the buttocks. “You’ve got five on every finger, so please leave him to me — he’s my one and only!” Yvonne reluctantly took her fingers off the shaft and head of Bacchus and turned to Julia: “So this is your spy?” All three of them laughed freely.

Of course, everything revolved around Alfie’s arrest. He thanked Yvonne again for advising Julia to enlist the embassy’s help. That led directly — and unspectacularly — to his swift release. He and Julia proceeded with great caution. Not even the slightest hint was to be made about time travel. Alfie blamed the mess with his passport on the sloppy negligence of the passport office, and Yvonne nodded in agreement. “Here, too, there’s far too much sloppiness on the part of the authorities; with my French first name, I know a thing or two about that.” Julia and Alfie took turns telling Yvonne everything worth knowing about Alfie, since she wanted to learn all about Julia’s new boyfriend. Without having coordinated their stories, they stuck as closely as possible to the facts and the truth — that caused the fewest complications. The afternoon flew by in the blink of an eye. Alfie couldn’t take his eyes off Yvonne’s breasts; they were what one would call ‘massive’. Not a gram of silicone — all raw, feisty nature. They then discussed Julia’s thesis and Yvonne’s current lover. “He’s useless and certainly no stud,” Yvonne sighed. She glanced at her watch and got dressed slowly, lasciviously, and frivolously. Let Alfie stare all he wanted — she knew full well just how beautiful she was. She gave them both a little kiss on the cheek and left.

Julia pressed herself against Alfie. “While you were sleeping, we were having girl-on-girl sex. I would have been so embarrassed if you’d woken up right in the middle of it, Alfie.” He ran his flat hand over her back; she was so slim that he could have counted her ribs. “It’s really none of my business — she’s your partner, Julia, not mine.” Julia teased him: “But you’d probably like her, wouldn’t you?” Alfie didn’t pick up on her playful tone and replied in all seriousness: “She’s probably a beautiful and desirable young woman in your world. She really is very shapely, but next to you she pales in comparison. To me, she seemed dominant — almost domineering — and I can’t stand that. Besides, first of all, I don’t want to be her two hundred and seventy-ninth conquest after the two hundred and seventy-eighth — and to know that tomorrow the

two hundred and eightieth will already be in bed with her. Besides, and secondly — my first physical encounter with the female sex should be with someone very special, not with a slut, if you'll forgive me for using that vulgar term." Julia punched him in the ribs. "Yvonne isn't a slut — she's promiscuous, yes. But not a slut!"

She picked up the breadcrumb again. "So you want your first time to be with someone very special?" He remained silent and didn't pick up on the hint. Julia waited in vain.

"I saw my doctor this morning. She did a bone density test: a 17% increase! Alfie, your healing powder is working — the improvement is phenomenal! I've been on a high all day and have been dying to tell you how overjoyed I am! 17%, and that's after about 50 days!" Alfie purred contentedly. "That's good news — damn good news!" Julia gave him a squeeze from the side. "So, what do you think — am I special enough to be your first?" Alfie held his breath. "That's exactly what I was trying to say earlier: you and no one else!"

Her overflowing libido felt like a lump in her throat. She wanted — no, she had to — feel him, the gentle lapping of the waves as well as the surf thundering powerfully against the rocks. Julia murmured in a husky voice, "You can hold me gently by the hips while we have sex now." And she turned on her side, presenting her ass to him. Alfie gently placed a hand on her hip, and they had sex for the first time. Julia rejoiced almost silently, letting the butterfly flutter busily from blossom to blossom and, finally, letting the hawk swoop down with a cry of joy.

They lay there, tightly entwined, letting their heartbeats slow to a rhythm. Julia kissed him for the first time — a deep, sincere, and heartfelt French kiss. "Alfred von dem Steine, I want to be your girlfriend, your sexual partner, your wife — as long as you're here in my time!" Alfie gently pulled her close. "Julia Herrnthaler, I take you as my girlfriend, my one and only sexual partner, and my wife, for as long as I'm allowed to stay in your time!"

Yeah, that really was a damn profound change.

Alfie muttered about how liberating it was not to have to think about the deadly virus. Julia smiled, "Of course, my doctor tests

me regularly — I might have caught something from Yvonne — but all the tests have come back negative so far. So yes: you don't need to be afraid when you have sex with me, Alfie, my husband!" Julia let the words melt on her tongue: my husband!

Julia didn't think about sterilization anymore, because she was on the pill, and that was fine. Her daily life hardly changed, except for the sex, of course. Julia admired his sexual stamina. "Your little machine did a great job getting things started, Alfie. You're way more potent than any of my previous lovers — and even most of Yvonne's lovers. And that makes me damn happy to finally be having sex; in a way, you're giving me back a bit of normalcy, Alfie, my dear husband!"

Oh, she could say it out loud over and over again, shout it out to the world: Alfie, my husband!

The Hottest August

This August was the hottest on record. The polar ice caps melted, and polar bears wandered confusedly through the dirty-gray landscape. Meteorologists couldn't warn humanity often enough: "The climate is getting warmer — much too fast. And we have only ourselves to blame; we're sawing off the branch we're sitting on."

And we fools just stand there looking completely dumbfounded and confused: What? Who? Why!?

Julia looked down at herself in surprise. Her breasts were getting bigger — no doubt about it. The doctor had smiled, "...that's because of the pill, Mrs. Herrnthaler. Stop taking the pill if that guy isn't worth it!" Julia smiled back and said nothing. Alfie — Alfie was her husband, and he was worth everything, absolutely everything. She would keep taking the pill, she told the doctor. The now-routine bone density test showed a steep upward trend. "I've never seen anything like this before, Mrs. Herrnthaler. Those little pills you're taking are having a surprising effect. Keep it up, and you'll be the first person to defeat brittle bone disease. I'd be overjoyed!" said the doctor.

Julia continued to drive the Ferrari outside the house. At home, she now dared to stand or walk freely more often without stopping herself. It was an exhilarating feeling. She let a little more hope creep in. Maybe — just maybe — she would overcome the illness. She had read a lot about mRNA technology. It was like a vaccination at the genetic level. The genes were essentially reprogrammed and passed the information on to their neighboring genes on either side. This was the discovery that had been used to successfully vaccinate people against the coronavirus since 2020. A medical breakthrough — a step whose full significance could not yet be fully grasped. People cautiously compared it to the discovery of penicillin.

Alfie looked up at her as they were getting ready to leave. Julia was wearing a semi-sheer blouse that beautifully outlined her breasts, a black leather miniskirt, and Roman sandals — and noth-

ing else. No bra, no panties, no thong. Alfie clicked his tongue. “From her toes to her navel, from her neck to her navel — all natural, my hat’s off to her!” Two snakes wound their way up from her ankles along the insides of her thighs and met above her sacred spot. “That dim-witted Parsifal should be scared to death and never dare to cross this threshold, right!?” Alfie joked. Julia’s expression was a mystery. “I just want to let the snakes get some fresh air after the long, gloomy winter,” Julia said. Alfie grinned cheekily. “Let them get some fresh air, huh!” She pulled her miniskirt down a little lower. “I’m proud to have something to show off,” she said defiantly. “Oh, come on, you’re an exhibitionist — a damn hot one at that!” said Alfie, and that was that.

Julia smiled when she sat by the pond with Alfie and passersby stared at her T-shirt — the girl in the red wheelchair had quite the cleavage! Oh yes, she was still as proud of her breasts as a peacock — she admitted that to herself. Alfie, too, now bought half-loaves of bread for the birds; they went to the pet store together and bought birdseed so the birds would have everything they needed. Julia wiped a tear from the corner of her eye when a pair of mallards appeared, with eight little ducklings in tow. She felt a sense of pride, as if she herself had become a mom. Alfie smiled, too; after all, he had often stroked the drake’s little green-feathered head to encourage him to mate with his mate — and voilà, there were the ducklings, all without a fertility clinic.

Alfie was standing next to her in the kitchen; he had bought an Italian coffee maker — the kind where you pour the coffee beans in from the top, which finely grinds the beans before brewing and can make two cups of coffee at once. He had been looking for a machine like that — 900 years later — but it simply didn’t exist, any more than unground Arabia coffee beans did. His eyes sparkled; coffee like this was far superior to anything sold as “coffee” in Chicago in the 2930s. His nostrils quivered as he let the first caffè made from real Arabica beans run through the machine. Julia had always been more of a tea drinker, but she didn’t turn down a delicately scented, fragrant espresso. Alfie’s hand rested on her asscheeks, his eyes gleaming. “This is something that won’t exist in 900 years, my love. Coffee made from beans freshly ground right before your eyes, flowing straight into the cup. Just one of millions of sins, just one of the wonderful ‘old’ things we’ve lost along the way to the new future.” For her, neither coffee beans nor

a coffee maker were anything special, but she could sense Alfie's excitement and joy — and somehow understand it, too. In the future, people will know only the standardized food products manufactured in factories. The senses of smell and taste had become insignificant; the profits of the food monopolists were far more important.

Alfie drank his first cup of coffee with his eyes closed, without taking his hand off Julia's back. "Stay a while, you are so beautiful," he quoted from Goethe's 'Faust'. Julia looked at his face; it seemed to glow from within. Alfie was neither pretentious nor self-important. He could enjoy a cup of coffee as if it were a Texas steak from a charcoal grill or a luxury yacht from Ferretti. She smiled; "We should stay like children more often," she said softly, "children whose eyes can grow wide and round at the sight of a waffle cone with five scoops of ice cream. We forget how to love the little things and appreciate their value — that's just the way it is."

Alfie opened his eyes and set down the empty cup. "Do you know what the first thing I did was when I came to your time? I drove straight to downtown Chicago and tracked down my great-great-grandparents. Yeah, almost like a stalker, but they were easy to find in the phone book. I just watched my ancestors' family for 10 days. I couldn't talk to them without jeopardizing my mission. But they mean something very special to me. And watching the girls and young moms on their morning runs — those beautiful bodies in skin-tight leggings — it really warmed my heart." Julia nudged him in the ribs. "You were just staring at their ass butts, you little pig!" Alfie laughed. "You bet! I'm not speaking as a biased family member, but they all have really shapely parts in those leggings, no question about it." They both laughed, and that was just fine.

Julia looked up from her screen and took off her glasses. "I'm always delighted by how French writers deal with the behavior of the gods — with a smile and without hesitation. In German sources, Zeus's union with Leda in the form of a swan is "mentioned" in a sober and dry manner, like a weather report. The French, on the other hand, describe the incredulous gazes of those who witnessed the unusual event. Of course, for only the Spartan queen Leda could recognize the father of the gods and surrender

herself to him. Yet the French descriptions do not shy away from the impropriety of the situation and depict the indecency directly and with many lighthearted flourishes, without making it read like filth. That would never even occur to a German. I'm dedicating an entire chapter to Leda, Zeus, and the swan because it best illustrates the differences. I'm curious to see how this will go over with my advisor. I have a feeling she's already sharpening her red pen." Alfie raised his head; he'd been dozing a bit, catching up on some sleep. "Don't lose sight of your goal, Julia. Your task is to earn your degree, not to be a champion of truth-seeking. You can always write a detailed book later, once you've got your academic degree in your pocket and framed on the wall." It was good that Alfie had this clear perspective, that he didn't mix one thing with the other. He was encouraging her to stay focused on her goal — that was all.

Julia sat with her knees drawn up next to the sleeping Alfie; she had wrapped her arms around her knees and rested her chin on them. She was crying silently but bitterly. Alfie woke up. "Oh, darling, what's wrong? What's the matter?" Julia let herself sink forward onto his chest; her tears were now streaming down his hairless chest. It took several minutes before she — listening to his heartbeat — calmed down, still sobbing softly. "I'm crying because I'm heartbroken. One day you'll have finished your work, and then you'll return to your own time. The thought of it is killing me. Knowing that we only have the blink of an eye together. That this day is drawing nearer, inevitable, and that one day you'll have to leave. No, I won't try to hold you back. When I became your wife, I knew full well that this was only a temporary marriage. That every day is a gift, that I have no claims on you whatsoever. But it makes me unspeakably sad, Alfie, my husband!" Alfie embraced her and tried to comfort her; his hand brushed over her skin, caressing her, and he murmured disjointed words of comfort. He'd rather bite his tongue off than make empty promises to her.

No, Julia didn't cry very often. She had both feet firmly on the ground; there wasn't much that brought tears to her eyes. Alfie had said he wouldn't finish within the sabbatical year — it would take a few more months — and the director had agreed. She was glad that Alfie was such a dedicated curator — like hardly anyone else. What other curator would sacrifice a year of his life to personally oversee the collection for the National Library? Who wouldn't just shrug and settle for the fact that it was a fire accident through

no fault of his own? No, the director wished there were more curators with his character on her 200-person team. Alfie wasn't artificially prolonging his stay. He kept the scanners running day and night; he emailed people all over the world to obtain documents, letters, photos, and even seemingly insignificant newspaper articles — he was like a predator that had tasted blood and couldn't be led off its trail, even though there were quite a few setbacks. But that was part of the job; you couldn't always win.

Julia had dressed up; she put on her nicest outfit, her new sturdy flats, and applied some subtle makeup. Alfie wondered what this was all about. Julia smiled and linked her arm through his. "Today we're celebrating the 90th day since I started taking your remedy. From now on, my body is taking over — the powder has done its job. I've placed the empty glass container on top of the sideboard. Then I wrote a label that says, 'Inside here is what's left of the brittle bone disease.' I'd like to walk to the pond on your arm today — without the Ferrari. I want my birds to see that I can walk on my own two feet, that I'm no longer disabled. Not today, anyway." Alfie smiled. How happy she was! He took his dark blue velvet cap, embroidered with gold and silver thread, out of his backpack. "That's a curator's cap — that's how they recognize us in the library. It's the only elegant thing I have to wear." They walked to the pond; Julia generously brought a large paper bag of stale bread and birdseed. Then they went to the Marriott Hotel on the Ring, one of the city's more upscale hotels. They sat high up in the lunchroom, drank wine, and ate steaks made from Scottish Angus beef. It was Julia's special day.

Julia drove her Ferrari to the university. She presented the draft of her thesis to her advisor, and they discussed all the details. The professor was not dissatisfied. Julia had struck the fine line between pornography and reporting on sex so precisely that no problem would arise here. "Of course," Julia smiled, "when I quote sources verbatim, I don't cut a single word. After all, one should read the original, not a castrated forgery." The professor pushed her chair back and pondered. "Julia, submit the final draft in September, and you'll get your Master of Science degree — guaranteed. What I keep thinking about is whether you could — and would — pursue a Ph.D. All you need to do is expand, supplement, and polish up your thesis. I think this would be just the right thing for you. You've become a true expert in your field, and you can be

proud of that. And I'm retiring in less than 10 years, my dear." Julia swallowed but said nothing. She thought she'd really enjoy a career as an assistant professor under Johanna — very much so, in fact.

Julia began revising her manuscript from scratch and preparing a fair copy. After all, she had to submit four copies of her thesis, and one copy would be archived at the National Library. Neat work and precision were now essential. Still, she stuck to her daily routine. She handled the correspondence for IKEA every morning, drove to the pond at noon, and fed the birds with Alfie. The afternoon was reserved for her thesis, and she was as busy as a bee. The fair copy grew and grew. She took great care to include a footnote with the source for every citation; that was considered important. Alfie read her manuscript over and over again; he had no objections, just the occasional suggestion on how she could improve the readability flow of a particular passage.

Yvonne was going through a rough patch. She had dumped her Argentine macho. He had revealed macho, patriarchal tendencies that she couldn't handle. She was, for God's sake, a grown woman of the twenty-first century, not some wallflower from the Middle Ages whom the guy could enslave. She'd kicked him out with a symbolic kick in the ass; the relationship had absolutely no future.

The three of them were lying on Julia's bed. It was Tuesday afternoon, and they were smoking peacefully after having sex. Alfie held back from commenting, because the relationship issues of that time were very complex. Emotional intimacy, sex lived out freely and unrestrainedly, and the clash of different personalities were far more complex than he remembered. Julia, on the other hand, was engaged in a lively discussion with Yvonne, since she had witnessed the beginnings of this relationship and the time that followed firsthand. She had warned Yvonne right from the start that the boy wasn't quite right. But Yvonne's hormones were running wild, dancing the Cha-Cha-Cha during what was, admittedly, great sex with Alessandro. Julia's Cassandra-like warnings were powerless against that. And now, now the feverish excitement had cooled off. The hot iron sizzled in the ice water and slowly cooled down.

Julia shook her head vigorously; girlfriends could even share a toothbrush, but not their husbands. No way! Yes, it was clear that Yvonne was in desperate need of sex, but Julia wasn't going to lend out her Alfie. Not in a million years! — No, it wasn't about jealousy or even resentment for Julia. It was about the fact that Alfie was her husband and not Yvonne's — not even as an exception. Yvonne should find someone who was available; Alfie certainly wasn't.

She talked to Alfie about it later, of course. Alfie shifted around on his butt. "Julia, there can't be any lies between us — they'd ruin everything. I'll admit that Yvonne is a really tempting girl sexually — maybe even a sex bomb or a sex goddess, as they say these days; I do have eyes in my head, after all. When I see the two of you having sex, it's obvious. I'd be a goddamn liar if I didn't tell you how much I love looking at Yvonne's body and watching her in action. And she doesn't hold back about wanting me — desperately wanting me. You have sex with me because we don't have to fear a deadly virus. Women in your time take the pill and control their own pregnancies. Nothing — absolutely nothing — would stand in the way of Yvonne taking me between her thighs — I've thought about it a thousand times, honestly. But despite all that, I took you as my wife, not her. I promised you that you'd be my only wife, with no exceptions. And you're the only one I love the way I haven't loved a woman in a long time." Julia snuggled up against him. "And you're my husband, my only husband, even if you're one with an expiration date." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I don't even want to think about the day you'll leave and never come back. I'm afraid I'll die right then and there, because without you I'm lost in this life." Alfie said nothing — what could he have said? There was no "Yvonne option"; they both knew that, and they stuck to it like glue.

Friday was Julia's graduation. The University of Vienna, the Alma Mater Rudolphina Vindobonensis, had been holding the graduation ceremony according to a festive ritual for centuries. The dean and the other professors wore medieval ceremonial robes and headdresses. Before them, arranged in a semicircle, stood the newly minted doctors and masters, all in their finest attire. The audience — mostly family members of the doctoral candidates and master's graduates — had also dressed up for the occasion. Alfie had bought an exquisite suit and a ruffled shirt com-

plete with a glittering tie, and had put on the librarian's cap embroidered with gold and silver thread. He did it for Julia's sake; as part of her family, he simply had to look his best. Julia wore a pink one-piece dress that accentuated her beautiful figure and had her hair styled very elegantly by a hairdresser; she wore only subtle makeup. She sat in her spotless Ferrari, holding a beautiful bouquet of flowers on her lap — a gift from Alfie.

The ceremony lasted as long as it always did. The toddlers were already getting restless, but everyone hung in there. Alfie burst into frenetic applause as Magister Julia Herrnthaler rolled up in front of the dignitaries and accepted her diploma in the dark red scroll. Even the professors sitting on the panel came out from behind the podium and shook Julia's hand. She rolled back to her seat, and only then did tears of joy roll down her cheeks.

Professor Johanna Newerkla, Julia's doctoral advisor, had invited everyone to a celebratory dinner at the Kupferdachl restaurant in the city center. She was very proud; she had guided one doctoral student and five master's students to the finish line — that was quite an achievement. A lovely banquet for 12 people had been set up in the back hall of the Kupferdachl, and Professor Newerkla spared no expense — after all, this was her celebration, her Christmas and Easter rolled into one, so she wasn't about to skimp. As luck would have it, Julia's Ferrari was seated to her left and Alfie to her right. Visibly moved and close to tears of joy, the professor gave a short speech, recounting the ups and downs of each individual thesis and the courage, diligence, and efforts of her "children."

They dined, drank, and chatted. The doctoral student and the master's student knew each other very well, of course, and jokes and anecdotes flew back and forth across the room. Julia had a long conversation with the professor. "Hanna," Julia said — since everyone in this circle was on a first-name basis — "Hanna, I don't want to promise anything I can't deliver. But I can promise you right now that I'll enroll in a doctoral program. I want to make you proud, Hanna, because you've looked after us young ones, cared for us, and even given us a kick in the rear sometimes when things weren't going well. Yes, I want to do the Ph.D., and right now I don't see any insurmountable obstacles. Time and money aren't an issue at all — my grandpa made sure I'd be well provided for dur-

ing my studies, God rest his soul! And I know you'll drag this stubborn donkey back into the stable, tooth and nail." The professor beamed. "Oh, then I already have a doctoral candidate for next semester. A doctoral candidate in Hellenistic studies. We haven't had one of those since the war. It's going to be a blast, my dear. And I know I won't have to cut you any slack or go easy on you. You yourself strive for perfection and academic precision, and I can count on that." She turned to Alfie.

"And you, Mr. Alfred, are you Julia's boyfriend?" Alfie nodded. "We've been together for just under a year now; I'm her partner, so to speak. It was only through Julia that I learned more about Olympus — much more than I did in high school." The professor continued to question him. Alfie stuck to his story, which was mostly true and only omitted the part about time travel. "No, I live in Chicago and work as a curator at the National Library. I've been a widower for a year and took a sabbatical to think about my why, how, and where. I actually studied history and sex education over there in the States before I was hired as a curator. A curator is a cross between a librarian, a museum administrator, and a jack-of-all-trades."

The professor was delighted that Alfie had known the late Professor Hans Strotzka, who was a world-renowned psychiatrist and a student of Sigmund Freud's school of thought. Alfie lied, saying he had studied under Strotzka here in Vienna for two semesters, because of course he knew all about Strotzka. And the professor was even more delighted. "That must have been quite a while ago," the professor mused, since Strotzka had been dead for years. "I think it was 1989 or 1990," Alfie added, already regretting his lie. A quick mental calculation — the date was complete nonsense. But he'd already gotten himself into this, and there was no turning back.

He carefully steered the conversation back to Julia. "Julia and I have discussed her doctoral studies at length. Her main concerns revolved around her energy levels. She gave it her all to produce a perfect thesis. Now, standing at the summit, she gazes proudly at the panoramic view. She sees the next highest peak and isn't sure if she still has the energy for that climb. But as long as I'm still here, I'll actively support her. You may have to get up on your own in the morning, but sometimes the other person helps you make

progress on your writing. “Without my mother’s help, I would never have finished my thesis or my doctoral dissertations.” Alfie fell silent and thought of his late mother, who had kept him on track with a firm hand, routine, and tenacity.

The professor turned back to Julia. “So, Julia, where are the two of you going on vacation now?” Julia’s breath caught for a moment. “Alfie and I haven’t even talked about it yet. I don’t think I’m the best vacation companion with this wheelchair. We’ve never gone on a trip before.” Julia sought Alfie’s eyes. He gave her a reassuring nod and replied, “We’ll discuss it at home over a cup of fine Arabic coffee. I don’t really feel like going on a trip right now, to be honest.” The professor smiled. “I’m flying to the island of Santorini next week for six weeks; I have excellent accommodations there and a very dear friend, Challos. He’s so different from the people here in Vienna, and I love immersing myself deeply in Greek culture and the wonderful sea.” Julia grinned. “Is Challos your lover, Hanna?” The professor grinned back. “Well, if you don’t tell anyone, yes, he’s my summer fling — my Greek lover — and has been for years. And don’t let my ex husband find out — he’d go berserk, even though we’ve been divorced for years. He’s always been as jealous as a yellow pus-filled pimple, my Karl.”

Julia’s grin grew even wider. “Hanna, as long as our legs carry us, our hips sway, and our fingertips can still touch our toes, we should follow the example of the ancient gods, bend down to the people of Earth, and seduce them thoroughly — with all due respect, of course.” The professor glanced at Julia’s wheelchair. “You can’t be serious about the hip-swaying, my dear?” But Julia kept grinning. “Oh, don’t worry about it, Hanna. Alfie and I — we’ll do it like porcupines: carefully, veeeery, veeeery carefully.” Alfie, Julia, and the professor laughed heartily.

The doctoral student leaned forward. “What are you laughing at?” Julia wiped the tears of laughter from the corners of her eyes and said, “We’re laughing about how porcupines probably have sex.” The doctoral student looked at her, puzzled. Julia blurted out, “Very, veeeery carefully!” Now the doctoral student laughed too, though it was probably unusual for Hanna to laugh at such jokes. He had never thought of Hanna as a woman. She had supported him in his research on Greece’s path out of the financial

disaster from 2009 through 2022, and it became a highly acclaimed study.

Julia was glad she'd taken the Ferrari. She hardly would have made it through the long ceremony and the banquet on her own two feet. And the Ferrari didn't care that she was a little tipsy now. She drove through downtown hand in hand with Alfie and felt absolutely wonderful. When they got home, she admitted to Alfie that she was tipsy — just a little — but she needed his help to get out of the Ferrari. "I guess our birds will have to go hungry today," she said regretfully. But Alfie disagreed. "When I went for my run this morning, I fed the birds because I figured we wouldn't have time to do it later." Julia breathed a sigh of relief.

How attentive he was, how carefully he thought through his next steps and acted on them. She didn't know anyone else who was so clear-headed and forward-thinking. Yvonne was the exact opposite — a textbook example of chaos. Except she didn't live with Yvonne; she lived with Alfie. Alfie, her lifesaver. The one who'd gotten her the medicine. Alfie, who'd proofread her thesis over and over again. Alfie, who'd come to her doctoral graduation as if he were family, who'd dressed up so as not to cause a stir. Alfie, who conversed brilliantly with her professor. Alfie, who was always there when she needed him. Alfie, who was the kind of attentive person she had always imagined her husband to be. Yes, she was grateful to fate, to heaven — yes, to the Greek gods — that she had met Alfie. Or rather, that Alfie had noticed her and had immediately fallen madly in love with her. And had pursued her like a ghost, persistently and purposefully. — Julia let him undress her and immediately dozed off on the bed.

Fall

Alfie lifted Julia out of the Ferrari; she was as light as a feather and giggled a little, slightly tipsy, as he laid her gently on the bed. Slowly and deliberately, he undressed her, carefully draping her clothes over a chair, and sat down beside her. He stroked her face, her cheeks, her forehead, and her long blonde hair. She smiled at him, and he kissed her gently on the lips. Then he lay down beside her and embraced her. They snuggled up together, and Julia fell asleep instantly. Alfie watched her as she slept peacefully, and he thought about the beautiful moments they'd shared together today at the graduation party. Fall had arrived, but the summer heat had no intention of giving way to fog and morning dew. No, certainly not today, nor tomorrow — maybe the day after tomorrow. We'll see.

Julia stirred in her sleep, and Alfie leaned down toward her. She mumbled something about the banquet, and he nodded, even though he couldn't make out what she was saying. "Yes, my darling, I noticed too how Heinrich was devouring Johanna with his eyes." Julia murmured in her sleep, "Oh, don't worry about it. Johanna usually knows what she's doing, and if she invites a grad student between her sheets, that's her goddamn business. Oh, Alfie, forget about Heinrich — he's insignificant." A blond-curled angel full of childlike innocence whom Johanna had treated herself to as a pastime with a sly grin, amid all the dry statistics and lists full of numbers and Chancellor Merkel's decrees. Johanna was surely his first woman, and she certainly had a ton of fun with him."

Alfie sat in front of her computer, going through his lists, while Julia slept off her buzz. He still had a long list of contacts to work through; he probably wouldn't finish until Christmas. He'd spoken with the committee and his director; they'd nodded in agreement, since he'd be bringing back significantly more material than he'd had before the fire. Alfie was satisfied, and he was looking forward to the coming weeks, during which he'd continue his work. Fall was a time of change, and Alfie was ready to face the challenges that lay ahead. Secretly, he was glad to be with Julia for three or

four more months. She had grown dear to him — no question about it.

They drank an Arabia coffee and talked. The professor had brought up the subject of a vacation and, in doing so, stirred up more than just the question of a vacation. Alfie explained that it had always felt like a vacation to him when he flew to Arizona or Florida with his little tattoo kit. Word of mouth had made him a sought-after tattoo artist with his own unique style; wealthy women or their daughters booked him for a genital tattoo — his specialty. Julia grinned wryly, "...so, did you?" Alfie looked at her kindly. "Only the fear of the deadly virus kept me from eagerly reaching for the fruit. The only thing you might call sex was that the ladies relaxed themselves before and, of course, during the tattooing, because the genitals had to be completely relaxed for the tattooing. So no, there was absolutely no sex, my dear. None, zero, nada."

Julia looked up at him. "Oh, I'm so sorry! The most delicious figs are dangling from the trees, and you poor thing have to go without — the fruit really was hanging too high. And you tattooed that Texas cow with the swaying udders; your greedy gaze followed her finger as she pleasured herself nonstop, and you waited briefly until she stopped trembling and shaking. You tattooed her with that neutral, aloof gaze — like a Turkish eunuch in the harem, thoroughly cowed by the virus. I'm grateful that you refrained from mounting all those willing, horny cows with the jiggling silicone udders, that you're alive, that you're here, that you're my husband, Alfie." Alfie smiled. "Yeah, you nailed it, my love. I've seen it a thousand times and smiled encouragingly at everyone not to stop — which was certainly a problem for the younger ones at first. But her mom was on my side, supporting me as best she could, until the girl — shy and timid at first — began to go along with it, with sparkling sinful thoughts in her eyes, nonstop until I was done with the artwork."

Julia gazed out over the tops of the sycamore trees, which towered high into the sky outside her window. The sun shone through the leaves, casting a warm light on her face. "We used to go to the Semmering regularly with Grandma and Grandpa; they had rented a little castle there. But once, when I was about 16, we took a sleeper car to Venice; I lay on the lower berth, snuggled up in

Grandpa's arms, because I didn't want to climb up to the loft bed — a highly risky climb. Grandpa was quite wealthy, so we stayed at the best hotel in the city, the Danieli. Back then, I didn't need crutches or a wheelchair — my brittle bone disease hadn't fully developed yet. I linked arms with Grandma and Grandpa on either side and walked between them through the narrow streets and squares of this wonderful city.

It was shortly after Ferragosto, the August 15 holiday that is sacred to Italians. At that time, there were hardly any tourists in Venice, and we had the city all to ourselves. With wide, round eyes, I marveled at all the wonders. Back then, in Venice, I felt very close to Grandpa, because it was he who had introduced me to the wonders of sexuality in those years, gently guiding my finger toward its destination. I was already 16, for God's sake, and I was sick and tired of those reserved, virgin-like ecstasies. Grandpa's face glowed and shone as he lay down with an earthly girl like Zeus, the Father of the Gods, and Grandma, her eyes wide, pressed her fingers to her lips as if she were startled. But it was something completely natural — all three of us knew it. That's how it happened, and I was overjoyed, Alfie, the happiest girl in the venerable Hotel Danieli. In Grandpa's arms, I experienced just how sublime and sacred the act could be when celebrated lovingly and without impurity.

The illness now broke out in full force, and Grandpa had to treat me like a raw egg. Grandma was just afraid he might get me pregnant right in front of her. But she quickly lost that fear in the time that followed, because Grandpa never got me pregnant, even though we were always as ravenous as rabbits. The Rabbit Grandpa and the Rabbit Girl. Grandma always smiled bemusedly, because although we had to maneuver carefully like a train pulling into a hangar, we didn't know how to use the handbrake and couldn't stop until the train was complete. "My libido was running wild, precisely because I 'forgot' how to walk," she giggled softly. Tears glistened in the corners of Julia's eyes. "Oh, yes — that was the vacation that made the biggest impression on me, Alfie."

Julia looked up. "Should I read you Grandpa's farewell letter? Grandma and he chose to take their own lives about three years ago." Alfie nodded, "Just read me the parts that are important to you — not anything too personal. No, leave that out." Julia rum-

maged through the desk drawers and lay down next to him again. “I have to snuggle right up close to you, Alfie, because I’m going to cry like a baby.” Alfie nodded, wrapped his arms around her from behind, and rested her head on his chest. Julia cleared her throat and began to read:

Julia,

Yesterday was your high school graduation, and Grandma and I are proud of your achievement as the top student in your class. We send you a big hug and are so proud of how hard and well you’ve worked all these years!

Luzia and I have grown old — old and frail. We’ve decided to take our own lives on our own terms. We’ll take the poison and, clinging tightly to each other, step into the future, wherever it may lead. Hell, but also heaven, are easily transparent constructs invented for humanity, just like the gods of Olympus. We’ll probably wake up on a distant star, perhaps in a Garden of Eden — not a bad idea. But it’s even more likely that we’ll simply never wake up again. Lay us side by side to rest in eternal peace — our bodies, at least.

Luzia and I were happily married for 65 years; there were far more highs than lows, and for that I am very grateful to her. At the beginning of our relationship, Luzia was the one with fire in her ass — she was a highly sought-after girl the whole time. I suffered just a tiny bit from her affairs, but she was worth waiting for until the volcano stopped bubbling. Then came the golden years — decades of happiness as a couple, a time when neither affairs nor flings troubled us, and when we raised Lothar, your dad. He was the apple of our eyes, a wonderful young man. And when he spread his wings, he brought Emily into our family — your mom, Emilia. We, Zeus and Hera, looked upon the little family with pride. And at their wedding, I met Emily’s friends. That’s when the volcano within me awoke. Luzia smiled gently as the sweet girls, one after another, offered themselves to my desire. I swear to you, I used neither the cunning nor the treachery of Zeus, the Father of the Gods, to lie with them. It was a joyful, carefree time, and Luzia’s gentle, smiling consent was my sunshine.

You were 21 months old when the tragedy happened. Luzia and I really had very little time to grieve; we took you in, and after much consideration, we decided not to officially adopt you. You were and are Lothar and Emily's child, period. Back then, my emotions were still boiling over, but Grandma and I raised you in a safe and nurturing environment — you never lacked for anything.

You were 8 or 9 when I started reading to you from 'Olympus', and you were absolutely hooked. Right from the start, I had to tell you a great deal about human sexuality, because on Olympus, sex was as essential as the air we breathe. You wanted to know why, what, and for what purpose the gods and goddesses were willing to do certain things. You grasped Zeus's wickedness just as quickly as Hera's no less wicked nature. They had different strategies and methods, but the goal was to devour one another to the last drop of blood — you realized that quickly. Now I had to reveal all the secrets of sexuality to you, but Luzia wouldn't go along with it. We argued about what would be right for you, our daughter.

So that's how we did it behind Luzia's back. I gently guided your finger and taught you how a girl is supposed to do it. You were thrilled, bursting with lust, and unstoppable! I held your wrist to make sure you took a break so your little heart wouldn't burst from the exertion. You were desperate to experience the male counterpart as well, so I taught you how to do it to me — I taught you how to bring a cock to climax, how to make it empty. You were so moved, so awestruck, and filled with holy ecstasy that I knew just how right it was for you to have learned all of that back then. I didn't tell Luzia about it until many weeks later; she grumbled and complained at first, but she calmed down quickly. I didn't corrupt you — I just educated you very thoroughly.

We sent you to the best schools. You were allowed to invite all your girlfriends over for sleepovers, and neither Luzia nor I ever spied on you to see what you and the girls were secretly up to. We wanted you to explore and understand your sexuality. And when you invited boys over, Luzia had a serious talk with you: everything was allowed, except for actual sexual intercourse. She explained to you why it would be pretty stupid to get pregnant right now — besides, your illness was becoming more and more apparent. I'll admit here that I didn't quite believe everything was fine, so I spied on you. But to my relief, you only gave them hand jobs,

and Luzia and I were proud of you because you showed self-control.

We're getting to the sensitive part, because I've been against incest from the very beginning — I've discussed it with Grandma hundreds of times. Luzia knew my story, after all. When Mom bathed me when I was a teenager, she'd do it at the end. She would look at me intently with her plain peasant's face and say that it wasn't incest, that all moms do it to relieve their boys, because that's what nature intended. I swallowed hard; maybe that was even true, even though Mom certainly had no idea about these things.

I was 15 and spending my vacation with Aunt Thea and Uncle Karl; they had a cabin by the lake. Aunt Thea asked me all sorts of questions, and she laughed heartily when I admitted what Mom was putting me through. Aunt Thea was a fashion model — and also a nude model — and I had to watch for hours as the photographers came for the shoots. And that's how Thea seduced me — Thea, Mom's younger sister! Uncle Karl just laughed and slapped his thighs — it probably looked very funny, the tall beauty and the skinny 15-year-old boy. But that's how Thea became my first.

And Mom clasped her hands over her head and talked on the phone with Thea for hours. Mom changed; the childlike innocence with which she had done things up until then was gone. I'm telling you this because it isn't written anywhere else, and I want you to know about our family — not just about gods, goddesses, and the seduced girls.

Mom twisted the facts — and quite drastically at that. I didn't make any moves or give any sign that I wanted to have sex with her — no, never! But now she said, in a tearful tone, how humiliating it was that her son had been seduced by his aunt and was now demanding the same from his mother! From his mother! I cringed and kept my mouth shut; I didn't understand a thing anymore. Day after day, the wailing went on and on; Mom exposed herself, filled with shame, because her son supposedly demanded it. Yeah, for crying out loud, I sat there silently in the bathwater and didn't demand a thing!

But Mom stuck her ass out at me, spread her ass cheeks, and whispered that I should just go ahead and look — that this was exactly what I'd been demanding so vehemently. I watched with great interest, but I'd never demanded anything. But Mom got carried away — after all, she was just an uneducated, neglected wife who didn't have a clue about psychology. Her mimicry of Thea was now complete; she forced me to stand up and penetrate her from behind. May the gods and goddesses forgive me, but my instinct knew what to do.

I did it, and that's how the incest with Mom began. It went on for years, even after I'd already started having girlfriends from school for sex. Mom insisted on it, even after my wedding night with Luzia. She looked down on me for how clingy I was to Mom, and so on. So one day — about six months into my marriage to Luzia and after having regular sex with both of them — I drew a firm line: Mom was only allowed to visit us if she kept her hands off me. Luzia was a huge help in getting me away from Mom.

I'm telling you this because it was the prelude to our vacation in Venice when you were 16, Julia. Luzia knew exactly that you were as fired up as a loaded gun back then. She also knew full well that you'd choose me to be your first. And she told me to just throw my past with Mom in the trash once and for all, to be man enough for our granddaughter, and not to chicken out like a coward. It was damn hard for me — I'm just not cut out for incest by nature.

But then we did it, and Luzia was just worried that I might accidentally get you pregnant. Yes, Zeus, the father of the gods, would have done exactly that, but not me. Years ago — without Luzia's knowledge or consent — I'd had a vasectomy, my vas deferens cut, back when I was chasing after Emily's willing girlfriends. That's how I took on some of the responsibility. I knew I could never get you pregnant, but I didn't dare admit it to Luzia — not even to this day.

I loved you as if you were my own daughter. I loved you as if you were my beloved affair. That's all I can say to you.

Please, understand us. I'm 86, Luzia is 82, and we're both incredibly tired. We've lived our lives; we've experienced many beautiful and many sad moments. We've had a long, good life; we've

been together for over 65 years, just like Philemon and Baucis. We don't want to die miserably with sippy cups, diapers, and Alzheimer's. We want to sleep our eternal sleep side by side — perhaps you can arrange that, or make sure we get two spots next to each other? No, you don't need to plant an oak or a linden tree, though that would be a lovely gesture.

We loved you like a daughter; we gave you everything you needed or wanted, and the notary will transfer all of our property to you. Our greatest hope is that you'll either pursue a wonderful course of study or a fulfilling career — something that's wheelchair-accessible. And that you'll find a damn prince who'll discover your glass slipper and love you at least half as much as Luzia and I have, and treat you like a queen, just as we have all our lives.

Engelbert
your grandpa

Julia had bravely held back her tears, but now she rested her face on Alfie's chest and let the tears flow. Alfie held her gently in his arms and set Engelbert's letter aside so it wouldn't get wet. He sat in silence and let Julia cry against his chest; she should think of her grandpa and grandma, because they were like a mom and dad to her. When Julia's sobbing subsided, he fished out his pack of cigarettes, lit two, and handed one to Julia. She took a tissue and blew her nose. "Of course, I wasn't allowed to cram two bodies into one coffin, but I arranged for two plots and had them buried in a shared grave, coffin next to coffin — that was permitted. And weeks later, I had an oak and a linden tree planted, because I understood Grandpa."

She had once shown Alfie a photo of the grave; they had a shared headstone made of dark red marble. Beneath their names and dates of birth, she had the following engraved: "Μαζί στη ζωή, μαζί και στον θάνατο," which roughly meant "Together in life, together in death." And below that: "Βίον ανθόσπαρτον" — "A life strewn with flowers" — which was not only a wedding wish but also a testament to the special nature of their marriage. They talked for a long time about her youth with Grandma and Grandpa, about Grandpa's "private lessons," and about how events had unfolded and played out in Venice at the Hotel Danieli.

“I always looked away when Grandpa was doing it with Grandma, but he didn’t do it very often. Grandma would always laugh and give him a little tap on the head, ‘The volcano’s boiled over again, huh, old man!?’ Grandpa explained to me that they didn’t do it as often anymore because they were too old to have a baby now, but they still tried sometimes. I understood that — Grandpa was a bit like Zeus, that sly old fox.

I had been sitting on Grandpa’s lap while he read melodiously from those thick tomes, and I felt his warm hand slip under my little skirt. Ever since he started reading about that rascal Zeus, he’d been doing that — for months now. Grandma coughed, but she just kept knitting. I made myself all soft so he could slip a finger under the hem. Zeus’s finger. “Grandpa,” I whispered in his ear, “did Zeus really get Metis pregnant?” Grandpa nodded, “Yes, he did, that sly fox!” We both grinned when Grandpa read aloud how Metis took off her veil and lay there completely naked in front of Zeus, luring him to her. Grandpa looked up from the book and described Metis to me in great detail — she had big breasts like Grandma and a tight ass, too. He loved the word “tight” and liked to use it at every opportunity. “If she weren’t firm and stark naked, Zeus wouldn’t have slipped into her bed at all,” Grandpa explained, “That’s true, really!”

“It tickles so nicely,” I whispered, and he nodded — after all, the whole thing with Metis wasn’t over yet. “Grandpa,” I whispered in his ear, “It’s going to happen again any minute!” and he nodded. “That’s how it has to be, little one, just don’t squirm too much, or Grandma might notice something!” I nodded and clenched my teeth, because Zeus was just lying on Metis’s belly and making his baby inside her — that’s what Zeus always did, just like Grandpa did with Grandma. Grandpa’s caresses were so exciting, but he just kept reading quietly. “And Metis really liked that,” I whispered, because I’d heard the story a thousand times already, “... and then Zeus just took off, and there she is, Metis, with his baby,” I concluded, because that’s how it always went with Zeus — that’s why he was such a sly fox. He’d make a baby with anyone, then just take off and act like it wasn’t him.

“It’s twitching, Grandpa,” I whispered, because it always twitched before it came. Grandpa nodded, “It always twitches first, then it comes and grabs you ever so gently!” And then it came —

the Metis gave birth to a demigod son, and I felt a tremendous twitch, but I bravely clenched my teeth. Grandma didn't look up and kept knitting, and my little legs were shaking as if I were cold. But my heart was pounding fast, and I felt pretty hot. After a while, he did it again, and again, until the stories were over and the fire in the fireplace had slowly burned down. Grandpa and I — we had a secret that Grandma never found out about. And I — I loved that secret."

The determination on his striking face after the shouting match with Grandma about sex, sex education, and being a child. Grandpa waited until Grandma had left for her coffee party, then he took Julia into the master bedroom, and they undressed, giggling as they got naked. She sat on his lap, and he did it to her a few times with his finger so she'd remember what lust and release felt like. He had taken her finger and guided it into her slit — serious, focused, and infinitely gentle. But she instantly succumbed to her overflowing libido, let her finger race through her slit, and exploded over and over again. She didn't want to stop at all.

Grandpa had finally stopped her wrist. "Don't overload your heart with too many explosions," he said worriedly. She could do it at night, of course, but then she had to stop in time. She had touched Grandpa's powerfully stiff cock with candor and curiosity and asked him how to go about it with it. He explained the anatomy to her using the object itself and the functions in theory. She then, with a shiver running down her spine, tried to put the theory into practice and didn't give up until she succeeded. She giggled and grinned from ear to ear. Grandpa said she had learned something important.

And this went on until she was 16. For her birthday, they took a train trip to Venice, because the illness was now advancing unstoppably. She didn't dare climb up into the loft bed — a daring climb for a frail girl. So she snuggled into Grandpa's arms in the lower bunk and did it in secret, from Bruck an der Mur to Villach and beyond. Venice, the most beautiful city in the world. And one evening, at the Hotel Danieli, young Helena gave herself to Zeus. She trembled, not because her hymen had broken, but because her union with Grandpa was so sublime and sacred. Grandma sat with her knees drawn up in her cotton nightgown in the far corner of the large bed, her hand to her lips, her eyes wide open. She had

agreed, of course, but Zeus was not supposed to get the earthly girl pregnant.

Julia-Helena and her Zeus were just like rabbits. Grandma smiled indulgently because the two of them just couldn't get enough of each other. They always did it right in front of Grandma; they'd never sneak off behind her back — it was a matter of honor! But her heart belonged to Grandpa, her Zeus. And for Julia, it was heaven on earth. Yes, she'd had a few little flings later on — actually, only four. Brad, the tattoo artist, was number five, Julia said with a bashful look. And after she graduated from high school, Grandma and Grandpa had left; they didn't want to rot away like old vegetables in their old age. Julia was indescribably sad, but she understood why the two of them had chosen to leave on their own terms. They had fulfilled and completed their parental duties. Julia had to spread her wings.

She told Alfie all of this with great seriousness, because she wanted him to have a good understanding of her youth. Alfie nodded; she really had had a wonderful, exciting, and fulfilling youth.

Alfie smiled at her. "Julia, do you feel like going on vacation? Would you like to go somewhere with me?" But Julia shook her head. "No, Alfie. For me, the best thing is to lie here with you and feel completely like your wife. I try not to think about the fact that the year is already over and that one day you'll have to leave. I don't need the wonders of a new setting or city to make me shudder with awe. I feel at home in your embrace — no wonder in the world could be more beautiful. I owe my recovery to you; I can walk tall and proud like any other woman and no longer fear breaking a bone. Well, I still drive my Ferrari — purely out of convenience and nostalgia. I've gotten used to the speed, and I love it when the wind blows through my hair. I'm glad you no longer have to treat me like a fragile child, Alfie, but as a fully-fledged woman with healthy bones."

Alfie was quite happy that neither of them felt much like traveling. He threw himself into his research and work, while Julia took a fresh look at her thesis and was searching for a title for her dissertation. The professor wanted to hear a suggestion, since Julia was no longer a young girl and didn't need motherly guidance.

Her daily routine hadn't changed. Every morning, Julia worked for IKEA for about two hours and handled customer correspondence with the help of AI. At noon, she drove her Ferrari down to the pond and fed the birds stale bread and vitamin-rich birdseed. This hour was a steady anchor in her daily routine, when she sat next to Alfie and they could talk about things that had nothing to do with their day-to-day work. Matters of the heart, matters of the soul, and things that got under their skin. Alfie, who as always had worked through the night, slept in Julia's bed throughout the morning. After lunch, she lay down next to him and then threw herself into her new project: her doctoral dissertation. In the afternoon, Alfie brewed a wonderful cup of Arabia coffee, which provided a brief break. Of course, he never failed to bring along some sweet cookies or pastries to go with the coffee.

Tuesday afternoons were still reserved for her soulmate, Yvonne, whose love life was always like a roller coaster ride. Of course, Alfie lay next to the girls as their lips, gasping with desire and lust, snapped at each other's lips; he caressed their beautiful bodies sensually and with obvious pleasure. In his entire life, Alfie had never been so closely and directly involved in such an intense female friendship, yet he felt right at home when the girls included him in their girl-on-girl sex without any unnecessary fuss.

Julia's firm rejection of Yvonne's relentless advances surprisingly softened because Yvonne drew him in irresistibly, like a magnet. Julia and he never spoke again about her previous refusal of Yvonne; Yvonne's advances had become the norm. Bacchus kissed both girls passionately, and he was as happy as a child with two waffle cones and two servings of five scoops of ice cream each. He participated enthusiastically in the discussions, for he had spent enough time with Yvonne to find his way through the labyrinth of her soul. Alfie smiled cheerfully, for the two girls truly loved each other with all their hearts, like sisters, like twins. Their personalities might be as different as gold and platinum, but each was a precious metal. Truly.

The two girls woke up and stretched comfortably, like purring kittens. Alfie kissed Yvonne's lips and asked how she had come to be a man-devouring hetaera. Yvonne smiled, "A man-devouring hetaera!?" She shook her head with a smile, "You'll be easily disappointed, my darling boy. The short answer is that I'm my mother's

daughter, because she was a true man-devouring hetaera, if you'd like to call it that. For a detailed answer, I'll need a cigarette to keep my fingers busy." Alfie lit a cigarette for her and Julia. Julia snuggled into her girlfriend's lap and looked up at her. "Well, my mom was the very embodiment of what you'd call a man-devouring hetaera. Consequently, one day she disappeared, leaving Dad a meaningless farewell note, never to be seen again. My dad, the unwaveringly loyal police commander Pospischil, crumbled like a sandcastle. He took early retirement, started drinking, and sought out this or that neighbor's shy wife or underage daughter for sex."

But I, a rebellious 15-year-old, spied on him and found out just how loose and listless these neighbors were — rotten, spoiled apples without a shred of spark, nothing more than willing sluts. So I decided to seduce him, to trap him between my thighs, and to show him what his girl is capable of — far more than those wet, filthy neighbor women. Bearing in mind what I'd picked up from Mom, I snatched the poor guy and forced him to become my first and only. For a short time he blossomed; for about three years he plowed my furrow with enthusiasm and sowed his seed. He loved my breasts and quit drinking from one day to the next. Mom had always stared strangely at the blossoming and sprouting of my young body. Oh, how proud I was of my boobs! I withheld them from Dad until he was willing to give up drinking. It was pure blackmail, nothing else. When I turned 18, he pressed five savings books, stuffed to bursting, into my hands. "All my stashed-away money, Yvonne. Use it wisely and make something of your life — don't waste it like your mom did!" He walked away and never came back.

I began my studies, worked hard at them, and earned my first doctorate at age 24. I hardly touched Dad's savings — after all, I was receiving a pension in his name because he was presumed dead. When he left, I felt a void in my soul — a yawning void. I then set my sights on boys — young, unspoiled little flowers — and devoured them greedily to fill the void. There must have been hundreds of little angels with curly heads and untouched bodies, yet they could not fill the void — only toil diligently in the furrow — but that was still very unsatisfying.

My lovers grew older and more numerous, though each one was more stupid than the last. One *doctor* sleep around? Yeah, they

sure could. But they wouldn't even have been able to spell the word "doctor." I started studying philosophy, and a petite woman in a wheelchair crossed my path. We weren't lesbians, but we both loved making love to each other because I could be sensitive to her illness. Both of our libidos are equally exuberant, and that more than makes up for the illness. Finally, a partner who could spell every foreign word. That's why I'm overjoyed with Julia, and I can, with a clear conscience, let one or another dim-witted guy plow my furrow night after night — because I love plowing very much, too. — That was the long version, Alfie. — And yes, the fact that you're good at spelling, too, is a real stroke of luck." Alfie took her in his arms and caressed her large breasts. "Thank you for telling me that; it completes the picture I have of you."

Alfie didn't let it get him down or make him lose heart. No, you couldn't win all the time. Some leads turned out to be fruitless, went unanswered, or were meaningless. Sometimes he did find the source material that had been offered, but either he already had it or it wasn't suitable for his collection. Then he would gaze grimly at the portraits of his children, Waltraud and Heinrich. "Keep at it, don't give up. Keep revising and resubmitting your dissertation until it's accepted." He had told them this time and again; he was their father, not just some uninvolved janitor. His children's smiles always lifted his spirits. He tackled the next piece — a Vasco da Gama braving the storms of the Indian Ocean. And the thought of finding peace and sleep in Julia's bed the next morning was comforting.

Julia, on the other hand, struggled with the subject matter, with the gods of Olympus. "Leda and the Swan" had already been discussed at length and in great detail in her thesis; she neither wanted nor was able to expand on it further. She read the myths and legends over and over again. Hera, the sister and wife of Zeus, the father of the gods, and Zeus himself remained the central thread running through it all.

Julia leaned back, stretching her hunched back to relieve the tension. She wanted to give her dissertation a title: "The Olympic Empire," "The Empire of Olympus," or something along those lines. She had scribbled "The Sex-Obsessed Zeus and His No Less Lustful Hera" on a piece of paper and written underneath it: "How

the Sex-Obsessed Gods Willfully Destroyed Mount Olympus Itself." But then the note ended up in the trash bin.

She had gathered material, organized it carefully, and there was quite a lot of it:

Hera watched his escapades jealously, her face contorted, as her husband Zeus undaunted pursued all the young, beautiful goddesses and mingled with mortals to possess and ruin their daughters and wives:

> **Metis**, the Titaness of Wisdom: Zeus's first lover. Because it had been prophesied that her son would overthrow Zeus, he devoured the pregnant Metis. Their daughter, Athena, later sprang directly from Zeus's forehead amid excruciating headaches.
> **Leto**, another Titaness: Zeus impregnated her before or during his marriage to Hera. Hera relentlessly pursued Leto and forbade any solid ground from offering her a place to give birth. On the floating island of Delos, Leto finally gave birth to the twins Apollo and Artemis.
> **Demeter**, the goddess of agriculture: Zeus mated with his sister, according to some later myths, in the form of a snake. From this union came Persephone, who later became the queen of the underworld.
> **Mnemosyne**, the Titaness of Memory: Zeus visited her in the guise of a shepherd. They slept together for nine nights in a row and fathered the nine Muses, the patron goddesses of the arts.

When it came to mortal women, Zeus used his powers of transformation in particularly creative ways to remain unnoticed or to seduce, impregnate, and get them pregnant:

> **Europe**, a Phoenician princess: Zeus transformed himself into a beautiful, gentle white bull. When Europa climbed onto his back, he carried her across the sea to Crete. Our continent bears her name today.

Leda, the Queen of Sparta: Zeus approached her in the form of a majestic swan seeking refuge from an eagle. Leda then gave birth to two eggs, from which, among others, the beautiful Helen (the catalyst for the Trojan War) hatched.
Danaë, a princess of Argos: Her father locked her in an underground bronze tower because an oracle had foretold that her son would kill him. Zeus nevertheless reached her — as golden rain that fell into her womb. She gave birth to the hero Perseus.
Alcmene, the mother of Heracles: Zeus took on the exact form of her husband Amphitryon, who was away at war. He made the night last three times as long as usual so he could savor the time with her. The result of that night was the most famous hero of antiquity: **Heracles**
Semele, a princess of Thebes: Zeus loved her while in human form. However, the jealous Hera persuaded the pregnant Semele to ask Zeus to reveal himself in his true, divine splendor. Since no mortal could survive this, Semele was consumed by a bolt of lightning. Zeus saved the unborn child, sewed it into his own thigh, and later gave birth to **Dionysus**, the god of wine.

Zeus's desire knew no bounds when it came to gender. He fell in love with the Trojan prince **Ganymede**, the most beautiful of all mortals. Taking the form of a giant eagle, Zeus carried the young man off to Mount Olympus, where he served as the cupbearer to the gods and became Zeus's lover.

Julia snuggled up against Alfie's raised knee and continued reading to him from her notes:

Zeus, that lecherous fellow, was far from finished with his escapades between the thighs of gods and mortals,

Eurynome, an Oceanid, a sea goddess: Zeus seduced this daughter of Oceanus. From this union came the three Charites (known in Roman mythology as the Three Graces),

who are the embodiment of grace, beauty, and joy in Aphrodite's retinue.

Nemesis, the goddess of righteous wrath: Nemesis was determined to escape Zeus and, while fleeing, transformed herself into a goose. Zeus saw through the ruse, transformed himself into a swan, and overpowered her. Nemesis then laid an egg, which was found by shepherds and given to Leda — and from this egg, the famous Helen hatched.

Asteria, the Titaness of the Stars: To escape Zeus's relentless pursuit, Asteria transformed herself into a quail and plunged into the sea. There she transformed into a floating island called Asteria, which later became known as Delos — the very place where her sister Leto found refuge to give birth to Apollo and Artemis.

Antiope, another princess of Thebes: Zeus approached her in the bizarre form of a wild, drunken satyr (a lustful mythical creature with goat's feet). Antiope became pregnant and gave birth to the twins Amphion and Zethos, who later built the city walls of Thebes.

Aegina, a river nymph: Zeus abducted her, taking the form of a blazing fire or a mighty eagle, and carried her off to an uninhabited island. Her father, the river god Asopos, pursued Zeus in a rage but was struck down by his lightning bolts. The island was named Aegina after her; their son, Aiakos, became the grandfather of the hero Achilles.

Elara, a mortal princess: Fearing Hera's merciless revenge, Zeus hid the pregnant Elara deep underground in the darkest caves. There she gave birth to the giant Tityos. Since Tityos grew to such gigantic proportions, he tore open his mother's womb at birth, which is why he is often considered the son of the Earth (Gaia).

Callisto, a nymph from Artemis's retinue: Callisto had taken a vow of chastity. To gain her trust, Zeus promptly transformed himself into his own daughter, the goddess Artemis. When Callisto became pregnant, the deception was exposed. An enraged Hera transformed her into a bear. Zeus later saved her from being hunted by placing her in the sky as the constellation Ursa Major.

Julia's voice trembled as she read all of this aloud to her Alfie. She was in the middle of her topic — in the midst of the intrigues, the deceptions, and the sexual escapades of Olympus — because, of course, Zeus wasn't the only one who was getting intimate with the goddesses and mortal women.

It's just that the other gods were much better at hiding their misdeeds and dirty deeds from the whole world. The storytellers and mythographers took their cue from Zeus and lacked the patience to tell us how these other fellows cornered the goddesses and mortal maidens in a secluded spot and there brazenly reached for the untouchable — their undergarments. The "untouchable" — for if anyone touched it, it was always rape. Quietly, secretly, and unnoticed by all, they followed the Father of the Gods' example and tore the "untouchable" off the girls. Saliva dripped from the corners of their mouths as they got aroused by the girls' nakedness, these guys. And so they defiled, had sex with, and ruined the girls, who trembled with shame, disgust, and fear.

Julia defiantly wiped an angry tear from the corner of her eye. How many stories, tales, and legends have never been written down about these schemes!?

Zeus's escapades to get his hands on the undergarments of the most unattainable women often ended badly:
The Beautiful Queen **Lamia**. Zeus loved her, which provoked Hera's most extreme wrath. Hera killed all of Lamia's children and robbed her of sleep. Driven mad by grief, Lamia transformed into a child-devouring monster. Zeus, moved by compassion, at least granted her the ability to pluck out her own eyes so that, free from those terrible visions, she might finally sleep.

Yet Hera, Zeus's wife, was considered the epitome of marital fidelity and chastity, even though she likely engaged in quite a few secret affairs, without anyone daring to record them in writing. Or perhaps they did? Julia dug out the legends of old Thibault and appended them to the end of her summary about Hera. But now she was going through Hesiod's records and fragments. Wasn't there, after all, someone who squeezed his way under Hera's un-

derwear, who, brazen and frenzied with lust, thrust himself between her divine, oh-so-chaste motherly thighs?

The Secret Lover: **Endymion** This is probably the strongest evidence of a real affair: According to the writings of the ancient poet Epimenides (and ancient fragments by Hesiod), the beautiful mortal Endymion was a secret lover of Hera — and presumably not the only one. She freely allowed this handsome mortal to slip beneath her undergarments as well as between her snow-white thighs, so that she might be warmed by his passion.

When Zeus discovered the affair, he was beside himself with jealousy. As punishment, Zeus condemned Endymion to an eternal, endless sleep. (In better-known myths, this story is attributed to the moon goddess Selene, but in the oldest accounts, it features a vivid description of Hera's insatiable, divine lust.)

Conception on one's own: **Hephaestus** When it comes to infidelity in the broadest sense, one must consider Hera's pregnancy with the god of smiths, Hephaestus. The Immaculate Conception: Out of anger that Zeus had fathered Athena alone (from his own head), Hera decided to conceive a child entirely without Zeus as well. The Secret Version: In a few very rare, divergent legends, however, it is rumored that Hera did not conceive Hephaestus solely through the power of her will, but rather that she cheerfully mated with the giant Parthenios — one of Zeus's most vehement opponents — in order to get back at him.

Sought After and Attacked: **Ixion** and the giants. There were men who loved Hera so passionately that they tried to seduce her in secret and force her to have sex with them. **Ixion**, the mortal king was so obsessed with Hera that he tried to secretly approach her during a feast on Mount Olympus. Hera seemed to play along, but placed a cloud (Nephele) in his bed that looked exactly like her. Ixion did not notice — and Zeus banished him to an eternally burning wheel in the underworld for this attempted adultery. **Porphyrion**, the king of the Giants, was filled by the gods of love with such a frenzied longing for the secret between

Hera's thighs that, in the midst of the battle (the Gigantomachy), he tore off her clothes, and was just about to mount her when Zeus stopped him with a bolt of lightning. Before she was incorporated into Greek mythology as the "wife of Zeus," Hera was a powerful, independent **Mother Goddess of Prehistory**, not averse to the carnal. In these ancient, local cults (especially in Argos), she likely had her own partners — both mortal and divine — who were later systematically erased from the stories by the priests of Zeus in order to secure the supremacy of the Father of the Gods.

But who were these fearless men who tried to seduce Hera, slip under her undergarments, and cheekily squeeze themselves between her divine thighs?

Ixion, King of the Lapiths: He was a guest on Mount Olympus and attempted to seduce Hera. Zeus saw through his scheme and formed a cloud in Hera's likeness (the lovely Nephele). Ixion mated with this cloud (giving rise to the centaurs). As punishment for his attempted adultery with the queen of the gods, Zeus had Ixion chained to an eternally burning wheel in the underworld.

Endymion: In a few rare legends, a mortal youth managed to lie with Hera. Zeus then punished him with an eternal, endless sleep.

Io When Zeus seduced Io, Hera caught them in the act. Zeus quickly transformed Io into a white cow to hide her. Her revenge: Hera pretended to be unaware, demanded the cow as a gift, and appointed the hundred-eyed giant Argus as her guardian so that Zeus could no longer approach her. After Hermes killed Argus on Zeus's orders, Hera sent a giant hornet that stung the cow — Io — relentlessly, driving her mad and chasing her across the entire earth. In memory of Argus, Hera placed his hundred eyes in the feathers of her favorite animal, the peacock.

Semele When the mortal Semele was pregnant with Zeus's child, Hera transformed herself into an old wet nurse and sowed doubt in Semele's heart as to whether her lover was truly the father of the gods. She persuaded Semele to de-

mand an irrevocable oath from Zeus: that he reveal himself to her in his true, divine form. Zeus had to obey — and since no mortal can survive the sight of pure lightning and thunder, Semele was instantly consumed by fire.

Leto When the Titaness Leto was pregnant with the twins Apollo and Artemis, Hera imposed a universal ban. She swore that no spot on earth where the sun had ever shone would grant Leto a place to give birth. She also sent the Python snake to hunt Leto. Leto finally found refuge on the floating island of Delos, which was not considered solid ground.

Callisto After the nymph Callisto had been impregnated by Zeus, Hera's jealousy struck again. She transformed the beautiful girl into a shaggy bear. Years later, Callisto's own son, the hunter Arcas, came upon the bear and, unaware of her true identity, was about to shoot her. Zeus prevented the tragedy at the last moment and placed both of them in the sky as constellations (the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper). But even then, Hera took her revenge: she forbade the sea goddess Tethys from ever allowing the bears to bathe (sink) in her waters — which is why these constellations remain circumpolar to this day and never touch the horizon.

Heracles Hera's greatest hatred was directed at the hero Heracles, the son of Alcmene. Even when he was still an infant in his cradle, she sent two poisonous giant snakes to kill him (but little Heracles simply strangled them). Later, she caused him to suffer a temporary bout of madness, which led him to kill his own wife and children — the subsequent famous "12 Labors of Heracles" were his atonement for this act. Hera's hatred of Heracles was so deep that even his name was an irony of fate: Heracles translates to "Glory of Hera." His entire existence and all his heroic deeds were based solely on the fact that Hera's harassment forced him to rise above himself.

Even before he was born, Hera delayed his delivery so that his cousin Eurystheus would be born first and thus claim the right to the throne. When Heracles was a few months old, Hera sent two enormous, venomous snakes into his nursery.

While his twin brother Iphicles ran away screaming, the divine child grabbed the reptiles with his bare hands and strangled them, laughing.

There is a bizarre myth about how Heracles came to be immortal. Zeus secretly placed the sleeping infant Heracles at the breast of the sleeping Hera so that he might drink her divine milk. When Hera awoke and noticed the strange child, she pushed him away roughly. The milk that spurted into space as a result formed the Milky Way (a galaxy, derived from the Greek word for milk: gala).

Heracles grew up, married Megara, and had children. Hera, who could not bear his success, struck him with a sudden, violent bout of madness. In this state, he mistook his own family for enemies and killed them. When he came to his senses and realized the tragedy, he went, deeply traumatized, to the Oracle of Delphi. As atonement, he had to enter the service of King Eurystheus — with Hera pulling the strings behind the scenes to dictate the famous 12 impossible labors (such as fighting the Hydra or capturing the hellhound Cerberus). For nearly every task, Hera sent additional monsters or obstacles to ensure his failure.

When Heracles finally died from the poison of the centaur Nessus and his mortal body was cremated, Zeus raised his immortal soul to Olympus. Once there, the impossible happened: Hera made peace with him. His superhuman endurance had earned her respect. To seal the peace, Hera ritually adopted him and gave him her own daughter, Hebe (the goddess of youth), as his wife.

The Plague of Aegina. When Zeus abducted the nymph Aegina to an island and fathered a son, Aiakos, with her, Hera was unable to catch her lover directly. She sent a terrible plague of snakes and insects, as well as a toxic heat wave, to sweep across the entire island of Aegina. The water in the wells turned foul. Almost all the human inhabitants died in agony. In desperation, Aiakos prayed to Zeus, who then transformed the ants of a sacred tree into humans — the so-called Myrmidons, who later became famous as Achilles' elite warriors in the Trojan War.

Echo The nymph Echo was not actually one of Zeus's lovers at all, but merely a pawn. Zeus used Echo's incessant chatter to engage Hera in conversation while he was enjoying himself in the woods with other nymphs. When Hera saw through the deception, she condemned Echo to never be able to speak on her own again. From then on, Echo could only repeat the last words someone else had just spoken — the origin of the word "echo" as we know it today.

Ino and Athamas Ino was the sister of Semele (the mother of Dionysus). After Semele's death, Ino took in the divine infant Dionysus and secretly raised him disguised as a girl to hide him from Hera. Hera found out. She infected Ino and her husband, King Athamas, with a murderous madness. Athamas mistook his eldest son for a deer and shot him with his bow. Ino, in a state of utter madness, grabbed her other son, threw him into a boiling cauldron, and then jumped off a cliff into the sea with his body.

The Olympic gods' reaction to Hera's extreme wrath was a mixture of fear, helplessness, and passive resistance. Since Hera was the most powerful goddess of Olympus and the ruler's official consort, hardly anyone dared to openly oppose her. When they did, it usually ended in chaos. The gods responded to Hera's campaigns of vengeance in essentially four different ways:

The Rebellion: At one point, Hera's tyranny and jealousy toward Zeus got on the other gods' nerves so much that they banded together against the couple. Hera, Poseidon, Apollo, and Athena instigated a mutiny. They surprised Zeus while he was asleep and bound him to his bed with a hundred knots. They mocked him and sought to redistribute power. The sea nymph Thetis, who was madly in love with Zeus, secretly summoned the hundred-armed giant Briares to her aid, and he freed Zeus in the blink of an eye. The punishment: Zeus was merciless. As punishment, he chained Hera to the sky with golden shackles around her wrists and tied anvils to her feet. She had to hang in agony above the abyss until the other gods swore never to rebel against Zeus again.

Many gods felt deep compassion for the victims of Hera's wrath, but they helped only in secret so as not to become targets themselves. Zeus often enlisted the help of his son Hermes (the messenger of the gods). It was Hermes who, on Zeus's orders, lulled Io's guardian (the hundred-eyed Argus) to sleep and beheaded him. He also rescued the unborn Dionysus from the flames of the dying Semele and brought him to safety.

As **Leto**, when Hera, while pregnant with Apollo and Artemis, was chased across the entire earth and forbidden to give birth anywhere, the sea gods deliberately looked the other way when the floating island of Delos granted Leto asylum. They helped Leto circumvent the curse without directly confronting Hera.

Hera's own children had extremely mixed feelings about their mother's outbursts of rage. After his birth, Hera had cast Hephaestus from Mount Olympus because of his ugliness. In revenge, he later built a magnificent golden throne and gave it to her as a gift. When Hera sat down on it, invisible chains snapped shut around her. No god could free her. It was only when Dionysus got Hephaestus drunk and brought him back to Olympus on a donkey that he relented and agreed to release his mother in exchange for the beautiful Aphrodite as his wife.

Ares, the god of war: He was the only one who often shared Hera's wrath. During the Trojan War, Hera repeatedly sent Ares into battle to destroy the Trojans — simply out of revenge for the fact that the Trojan prince Paris had chosen Aphrodite over Hera in a beauty contest.

Nymphs, river gods, and lesser deities trembled before Hera. When Zeus seduced a nymph, even her own sisters would often turn their backs on her to avoid falling into Hera's crosshairs. When the river god Asopos tried to rescue his daughter Aegina, who had been abducted by Zeus, not a single god came to his aid — they all stood by in silence as Zeus struck him back with lightning, because no one wanted to risk Hera's subsequent vengeance on the entire region.

Hera's position was so unassailable that Mount Olympus was

essentially a constant political minefield: Everyone knew about Zeus's affairs, but they all pretended not to see anything so as not to jeopardize the fragile peace among the gods.

Athena and Apollo had extremely different relationships with their stepmother, Hera. Both were illegitimate children of Zeus and thus living proof of his infidelity. But while Athena became Hera's closest ally, the relationship between Apollo and Hera was marked by deep mistrust and traumatic memories. Here's how the two prominent divine siblings dealt with the jealous queen of the gods:

Athena, the goddess of wisdom and strategic warfare, was Zeus's absolute favorite daughter. She sprang directly from his head. Since she had no biological mother in the traditional sense (Zeus had swallowed the pregnant Metis), she posed no direct threat to Hera nor served as a reminder of "another woman." Like Hera, Athena was a guardian of social order, civilization, and justice. Both abhorred brute force (as embodied by Ares). The Trojan prince Paris had chosen Aphrodite as the most beautiful in the famous contest of beauty. This deeply wounded the pride of both Hera and Athena. During the Trojan War, the two goddesses worked hand in hand to ruthlessly destroy the Trojans. They hatched plans behind the scenes and jointly manipulated the battlefield. Despite her closeness to Zeus, Athena was wise enough to recognize when her father was becoming too tyrannical. She actively participated in Hera's plot (described above) to bind Zeus. However, Zeus later forgave her for this more readily than he did the others.

The relationship between **Apollo**, the god of light, music, and prophecy, and Hera had been filled with hatred for him from the very beginning. He had never forgotten Hera's brutal pursuit of his pregnant mother, Leto. Just four days after his birth on the island of Delos, the newborn Apollo took up a bow and arrow and killed the Python — the monster that Hera had sent to bring death to his mother. Apollo spent his

entire life protecting his mother, Leto, from Hera's relentless harassment.

When Hera incited the giant Tityos to rape the beautiful Leto, Apollo and his twin sister Artemis didn't hesitate for a moment and came to their mother's aid: Together, they struck down the giant with a hail of poisoned arrows.
During the Trojan War, Apollo and Hera were bitter enemies. While Hera supported the Greeks, Apollo protected the Trojans (especially Hector) and even sent a devastating plague to the camp of Hera's favorite Greek warriors.
On Mount Olympus, an icy, armed truce reigned between the two. Apollo respected Hera's power as queen, but for the most part kept his distance from her. Hera, for her part, knew how powerful and deadly Apollo's arrows were, and avoided provoking him directly.
Athena used her diplomatic wisdom and skill to coexist with Hera as equals and to fight their common enemies. Apollo, on the other hand, remained the loyal son of his mother Leto throughout his life and always treated Hera with cool, aloof wariness.

Alfie had been listening intently to Julia. Now that she looked up at the end of her notes and said that this was perhaps 10% of her material, he pulled a sheet of paper out of his backpack. "Meanwhile, I've been doing a little digging and found the following at the University of Thessaloniki: an old, orally transmitted legend. In ancient times, a wanton girl lived in the surrounding countryside — the lustful Kalkidike. She was after the taciturn, well-endowed shepherds of the region and conquered them, one after the other, shamelessly and unstoppably. She gave birth to triplets and insisted with absolute certainty that Zeus, the father of the gods himself, had impregnated her while disguised as a shepherd. No one took her seriously, except for the aging Hera, who knew full well that Zeus had nothing to do with it. She was enraged by the girl's audacity, so she transformed her into the Chalkidiki Peninsula; her children became the three headlands of Kassandra, Sithonia, and Athos."Alfie smiled. "It would be a good idea to weave the story of wayward Kalkidike into your work, wouldn't it?" Julia picked up the note. "Yes, I could very well include it in the chapter 'Charlatans, Liars, and Fake Stories.' Thanks, Alfie, for finding the time to share these little gems with me on top of your own work."

Julia's dissertation kept growing and growing; she had to start preparing a fair copy quickly, and soon she had completed the first 750 pages. She had actually pieced together the Olympian Empire based on the divine couple Zeus and Hera and produced a very comprehensive work on the divine couple and their history. Yes, there was still a lot to add, footnotes to compile, and here and there a bit of text to invent so that it read smoothly and coherently.

Alfie read through her final draft again and again, his red pen tirelessly marking purely grammatical errors or mistakes that distorted the meaning. But he was convinced that Julia's dissertation would be met with great enthusiasm and academic recognition.

Lost in thought, Julia sucked on the end of her ballpoint pen. Everyone was talking about Zeus — the guy was the most prolific seducer and sire in the history of the gods. But no one spoke of Hera. She embodied marital fidelity, the very image of the faithful and steadfast wife who had a glutton for a husband — the poor, unfortunate woman. But it was precisely this politically expedient emphasis on the pillars of marriage — which were supposed to hold social life together — that was the big lie told by the historians. A steadfastly chaste Hera was the anchor for maintaining law and order.

This was where Julia wanted to start. She researched and delved into the depths of ancient Greek mythology to shake Hera's image of purity. It didn't sit well with her at all to portray only the unrestrained Father of the Gods, while his wife had the spotless reputation on Mount Olympus. That was unfair, because while Zeus worked with the thunderous clang of his hammer, Hera operated silently with a scalpel. She kept digging until she could peel away a layer of Hera's image — just a little, but still.

Julia typed away, page after page.

This is the most consistent and psychologically profound interpretation of these secret myths. When viewed in this light, Hera — the supposedly "chaste" queen of the gods — becomes a master of subversive warfare who defeats Zeus with his own weapons. Zeus continually humiliates Hera in public through his countless affairs with mortals, nymphs, and goddesses. Hera, who — as the ruler of

Olympus — cannot simply leave him politically, chooses the ultimate, secret betrayal for her revenge: She secretly allows herself to be mated by none other than his existential archenemies — the Titans and cosmic giants. In my research, this dynamic of "sexual retaliation" can be perfectly illustrated by three points:

Choosing Partners:

A blatant provocation against Zeus's rule! Hera does not choose insignificant demigods for her misdeeds. She turns to the beings whom Zeus fears most — and whom he has vanquished in brutal cosmic wars (the Titanomachy and the Gigantomachy):

Talos / Typhon: The Cretan sun god Talos or primordial cosmic forces represent the old order that Zeus overthrew.

Eurymedon: As a Titan, he embodies the generation of Cronus that was banished to Tartarus by Zeus. By allowing herself to be impregnated by Titans, Hera not only breaks her marriage vows but also commits high treason. She sexually allies herself with the opposition to conceive illegitimate children who have the potential to overthrow Zeus from the throne. Other ancient commentators ("enioi"), however, suggest that it was a secret and romantic love affair in which Hera voluntarily gave herself to the Titan. In either case, by becoming involved with Eurymedon (the ruler of the wild giants) and allowing him to copulate with her lustfully, she conceived a child with the most dangerous anti-Zeus faction in the universe.

The Perversion of Revenge!

The Deceived Deceiver. Zeus's greatest weakness is his monumental pride (his ego). Hera knows this. However, a public affair on her part would destroy the institution of marriage, which secures her own power base on Earth. So she takes her revenge in secret: she gives Zeus's enemies what he cherishes most — her untouchable, divine body — and mates with them. She forces Zeus into the humiliation of having to raise cuckolded children in his own home (Mount Olympus) — such as Hephaestus or Prometheus — while he must put on a show of a perfect marriage for the world to

see. She gets back at him for his "billions of affairs" by undermining his supposed absolute control over Olympus from within.

The biological deception (parthenogenesis as a disguise).
This brings my entire investigation full circle: The "fatherless conception" (parthenogenesis) of Hephaestus, celebrated in the official texts (Hesiod), is, from this perspective, the most ingenious cover-up in world literature. Hera presents to Olympus an act of adultery and a bastard child sired by a Titan as an "autonomous, feminist act" without a man. She uses the myth of pure virginity as a shield so that Zeus cannot publicly execute her, while in secret she knows exactly who truly fathered the god of fire.

Julia leaned back. There was a very interesting passage — a fictional dialogue between Hera and Zeus about the attempt to seduce the **Ixion**, who was absolutely convinced that he had slept with the "Iron Lady."

In the Satires of Lucian of Samosata ("Dialogues of the Gods" from the 2nd century CE), the biting Syrian-Greek satirist wrote humorous vignettes that ruthlessly mocked the Olympian faith. In the 5th and 6th "Dialogues of the Gods," Zeus and Hera are sitting at the table in the midst of a marital quarrel: Hera is giving Zeus a brutal dressing-down over his latest lover, the Trojan Ganymede. She accuses him of destroying the dignity of Olympus. The punchline: When Zeus arrogantly shouts back that Ganymed simply "kisses him better than she does," Hera merely smiles contemptuously in Lucian's subtext. Why? Because in the very next chapter (Conversation VI), the mortal Ixion appears — a man Hera has so skillfully manipulated in secret that he believes he has actually slept with her. Here, Lucian illustrates the bitter paradox: Zeus loudly boasts about his affairs, while Hera quietly castrates him — both intellectually and sexually — through the deceptions of her admirers (the "cloud adulteries").

The philosopher Chrysippus of Soloi shocked the ancient world with his analysis of a highly erotic painting — now lost but notorious in antiquity — depicting the obscene Stoic paradox. It depicted Zeus and Hera in an explicit, intimate pose (Hera performing oral sex on Zeus). The satire behind it: Ancient critics used this image to mock the divine couple. Hera's hidden betrayal: In the philosophical interpretation, however, this image served as proof of Hera's true tactic. She uses the most intimate act not out of love, but to cloud Zeus's senses. By seemingly submitting herself completely to him and catering to his desires, she robs him of his mental clarity. It is the visual embodiment of Dios Apate (the deception of Zeus): She silences him in bed so that she can forge her secret alliances with his enemies behind his back (such as her clandestine liaisons with the Titans or Cretan gods, or her support of the Greeks at Troy).
Nowhere do they clash more brutally than in Book 15 of the 'Iliad' — immediately after Hera, using Aphrodite's magic belt, seduces Zeus on Mount Ida and sends him into a deep sleep. Zeus's Awakening: Zeus wakes up and sees that the Greeks are turning the tide of the war because Hera has betrayed him. He rages with fury, threatens to beat her, and reminds her of how he once punished her by hanging her from the heavens with anvils attached to her feet. Hera's Masterstroke: Hera doesn't even flinch. She swears a (deliberately ambiguous) oath by the River Styx that she did not instigate the sea god Poseidon. She lies coldly to the Father of the Gods, while still reeking of their shared act. She disarms his physical wrath with a wall of clever words and feigned innocence. Zeus is powerless against this combination of sexual attraction and perfect cold-bloodedness.

Julia is considering quoting verbatim the dialogue between Zeus and Hera from Lucian's *Dialogues of the Gods*:

HERA
Zeus! What do you think of this Ixion?

ZEUS
Oh, my dear, I consider him a very good man and a pleasant companion. If he were unworthy of our company, he wouldn't be here.

HERA
He's unworthy! He's a scoundrel! Send him away!

ZEUS
Huh? What was he up to? I really need to know.

HERA
You absolutely have to know this; although I hardly know how to tell you. That wretch!

ZEUS
Oh, oh; if he's a "wretch," you absolutely have to tell me everything. I know what "wretch" means, thanks to your sharp tongue. What, did he sleep with you? Did he have sex with you, impregnate you?

HERA
And with me! Of all people, me! It's been going on for a long time. At first, when he kept looking at me, I had no idea... And then he sighed and groaned; and when I handed Ganymed my cup after drinking, he insisted on having it, stopped drinking to kiss it and bring it to his eyes; and then he looked at me again. And of course, that's when I knew. For a long time, I didn't want to tell you anything; I thought his fit of madness would pass. But when, during the feast, he actually had the audacity to pounce on me, I left him behind, weeping and crawling, after he was done, and covered my ears so I wouldn't have to hear his insolences, and came to tell you about it. It's up to you to decide what you'll do about this scoundrel.

ZEUS
Phew! I realize I have a rival — and one who's after my own lawful wife. There's a scoundrel who's drunk the nectar for his own purposes. Well, we have no one to blame but ourselves: We make too much of these mortals by letting them sit at our table. When they drink our nectar and behold the beauties of heaven (so different from those of Earth!), is it any wonder that they fall in love and

hatch ambitious plans!? Yes, love is all-powerful; and not just toward mortals: even we gods have already fallen victim to it.

HERA
He has made himself my master; there's no doubt about it. He does whatever he wants with me — he leads my husband around by the nose. — You follow him wherever he wants, and assume any position he commands; you are his property, his plaything. I know how it will be: You'll let Ixion get away scot-free because you slept with his wife; she is the mother of Pirithous.

ZEUS
You remember my little escapades quite well, don't you! — Well, my opinion on Ixion is this: It would never be appropriate to punish him or exclude him from our table; that wouldn't look good. No; because he loves you so much, he's so deeply hurt — yes, even to the point of tears, as you tell me —

HERA
Zeus! What are you trying to say!?

ZEUS
Don't worry. Let's create a cloud figure in your likeness, and after dinner, when he's lying awake (which he will, of course, since he's in love), let's place it beside him. It will relieve him of his pain: he'll imagine that his desire has been satisfied.

HERA
Never! That presumptuous scoundrel!

ZEUS
Yeah, I know. But what harm could it do if Ixion conquers a cloud?

HERA
But he'll think I'm the cloud; he'll take his anger out on me as much as he wants.

ZEUS
Now you're talking nonsense. The cloud isn't Hera, and Hera isn't the cloud. Ixion will be deceived; that's all.

HERA
Yes, but these men are all the same — they have no tact. I suppose

when he gets home, he'll brag to everyone about how much he enjoyed the embraces of Hera, Zeus's wife! Maybe he'll even tell them I'm in love with him! And they'll believe it; they won't have a clue about the cloud.

ZEUS
If he says something like that, he'll soon find himself in the underworld, going round and round there for all eternity. That'll keep him busy! And he'll get what's coming to him — not because he fell in love — I don't see much harm in that — but because he talked so much.

Alfie was less than enthusiastic. The fictional dialogue between the divine couple didn't fit the overall concept, even though here Hera purports to candidly describe her involuntary encounter with Ixios — which would certainly fit Julia's image of Hera. But it simply doesn't fit the concept. Julia remained undecided. Alfie was probably right; the fictional dialogue was and remained an anachronism. And Hera's debauchery was well documented elsewhere; she really didn't need the fictional text. Wearily, she moved Lucian's dialogue into an archive folder. The legends of good old Thibault offered enough material to demonstrate Hera's licentiousness.

In the preface to her thesis, Julia had noted that she would embellish the examples and legends of the Father of the Gods' exploits poetically, at her own discretion, to make the stories more readable. Of course, she wouldn't alter the meaning of the accounts; she would simply avoid having this or that come across as dry as a weather report. Alfie thought this was a good idea — it allowed her to elegantly sidestep the most foolish criticisms. Julia had a knack for making these fictional passages flow smoothly. And, following an idea, she set all her additions in italics so that the reader would know what was original and what was added fiction.

Yvonne, too, had received a USB drive containing the draft manuscript. She read it very carefully and actually uncovered a few inconsistencies that even Alfie hadn't spotted. Julia breathed a sigh of relief; having two proofreaders who worked so meticulously was invaluable to her work. Sometimes Yvonne would dis-

cuss one passage or another during her Tuesday afternoon sessions. She thought it was a bit of a shame that Julia strictly adhered to academic rules and didn't allow herself any lapses in wording that might have made her writing a bit more risqué. She thought that publishing a book alongside or after her dissertation — one that certainly scored points for its risqué content — would be a real coup. Julia nodded in agreement, but she knew she wouldn't do it. She was aiming for an assistant professorship at the university, not a career as a porn writer.

They celebrated Christmas on a Tuesday so that Yvonne could join them. Alfie had found a mini Christmas tree and decorated it together with Julia. She said she hadn't celebrated Christmas since her grandparents took their own lives three years ago. Alfie had bought two little dolls and placed them under the Christmas tree; "These are Grandma and Grandpa," he announced. Julia's eyes welled up; now she felt at peace with the universe, since Grandma and Grandpa were celebrating with them. Yvonne had roasted a magnificent Chateaubriand, and they ate the festive meal by candlelight, with soft Christmas music playing from the speakers. Julia sighed — these were wonderful Christmases, surrounded by her family. Yvonne gave her an outrageously expensive Chinese silk scarf, and she gave Yvonne a gold-plated bracelet by the artist Frey. Alfie gave the girls a loving smile and delicate, elegant gold necklaces with a locket in which a photo of the three of them was hidden. Yvonne and Julia had pooled their money and bought him a small wooden box from Tunisia, richly decorated with mother-of-pearl inlays, where he could hide his secrets. Alfie smiled, because he had no secrets. There was no Enigma, no Similacron, and certainly no hocus-pocus surrounding him, he emphasized.

They celebrated New Year's Eve — or rather, New Year's Day — as a couple; Yvonne was out on the New Year's Eve trail in downtown Vienna, armed with a bottle of champagne. Julia was snuggled up against Alfie's chest on the sofa, and they listened to the "Cologne Concert" with Keith Jarrett — a very moving piece that went perfectly with the aged cognac Alfie had tracked down somewhere in the depths of Vienna. Only the pops of fireworks and the crackling of firecrackers disturbed the beautiful concert. It was their first New Year's Eve — and perhaps their only one. Julia had tears in her eyes. "Please stay — you're so beautiful!" she whis-

pered those timeless words. Yes, she would have sold her soul to the devil if that beautiful moment could have lasted. Truly.

Autumn Wind

Alfie woke up and sat up abruptly. Julia had sat down next to him, and he could tell right away that she had been crying bitterly — her eyes were still red. He pulled her close, put an arm around her shoulder, and let her head rest on his broad chest. ““What's wrong, my love," he said softly, "what's troubling you?" She placed a hand on his shoulder and pressed her face even deeper into the crook of his neck. "It's nothing, Alfie, I just read an unspeakably sad story; it really moved me." Alfie exhaled; thank God it wasn't about his time here being limited. "Tell me about it, Julia. I'd love to hear it, because I want to understand what has touched you so deeply, my love."

Julia nimbly stood up and took a few sheets of paper from the desk, then sat back down in his protective arms. "I'll read it to you — I printed it out. No, it has nothing to do with the gods. I've been browsing a bit through Konrad, Bechstein, Schwab, and others from the last century; I just wanted to clear my head from my obsession with Hera for a while. I felt I was getting lost in the intrigues of the ancient historians, who always had to write with an eye toward politics and society. They had to describe Hera as the guardian of marriage and family; every tiny scrap of extramarital escapades was rigorously eliminated, even though I don't think there was any shortage of them. — I found a fragment in Schwab, and it fascinated me from the very first line. "I'll read it to you, okay?" Alfie nodded and settled into a more comfortable position. And Julia read aloud:

The Ballad of Suheddin
According to Gustav Schwab.

Suheddin, bent low over his horse's neck, galloped along the dusty desert road, heading west, away from the sunrise. He had only a thin galabijah — a light outer garment — thrown over his bare shoulders; he had fled headlong. He patted his horse's neck. "What kind of idiot could have called you 'Al Eajiz,' the Lame One? You're flying along like a real racehorse, my good fellow!" The

horse shook his head disapprovingly. Of course he wasn't lame, the fellow. It was just that whenever an unwelcome rider mounted him, he'd play the part of the lame oaf to get rid of the guy quickly. Suheddin nodded. "You're a smart guy, my friend, and a good friend at that. You immediately realized I had to get out of there fast, and you carried me safely through the narrow alleys of Baghdad, past all the checkpoints and the palace henchmen. You reacted to my bare feet, since I wear neither boots nor spurs. You're a smart fellow, Al Eajiz!"

Suheddin was lying next to Su on the sofa, his hand resting on the veil with which he had covered her hips after their lovemaking. They whispered words of love, foolish things, matters of the heart. "When the heart is full, the mouth overflows." And suddenly, old Aya was standing there. "You must leave immediately, Lord Suheddin; Prince Mirza's henchmen have orders to capture and imprison you. They must not find you here with the princess!" The kind old maid vanished as silently as she had appeared. Su — Princess Suleika — sat up straight as a candle. "He did it, that old swine! He claims the right to take me as his wife; he brazenly and indecently lifted my veil — that old lecher — and saliva dripped from his lips, that mangy, lecherous old goat! He must have slandered you to the Caliph, for that's the only way he can get you or get rid of you — that cowardly dog!" Suheddin quickly draped the thin galabijah over his bare shoulders and kissed the princess on the lips. "I'll be back as soon as I can, my love!" She nodded toward the curtain next to a door. "Take my sword, which is hidden behind the curtain, my love, and be brave!" She rummaged through the odds and ends under the sofa. "Here, a pouch with a few silver coins — that's all I have on hand." Seconds later, he was gone, moving silently on bare feet, the money pouch and Suleika's dainty sword in his hand.

His horse needed neither a compass nor instructions. It trotted along the dusty road; to the southwest lay the sea, the nearest port. Its master surely wanted to reach the port of Al-Basrah, the horse thought — it made perfect sense. It was the only direction that made sense. Suheddin stared intently ahead, casting only the occasional glance back, where the sleeping city of Baghdad was slowly fading behind the sand dunes. No one was following him.

His thoughts drifted back. He had been a guard in the caliph's personal guards; he had stood in the throne room, one of 50 soldiers forming a guard of honor before the caliph's throne. The old caliph was all alone; only three of his wives sat a short distance away. Suheddin could not believe his eyes. Princess Suleika, one of the caliph's younger daughters, was staring at him. Discreetly, of course; otherwise, it would have been improper. He had known the girl for some time; after all, he was often on duty when the guards watched over the ladies and girls in the inner courtyard of the palace. Yes, they had to bring jugs of fresh water to the naked ladies, who were washing themselves in the blazing sunlight, splashing each other with the water from the jugs, and washing one another. Like all the guards, he kept his eyes downcast when he approached the ladies. A guard would have had to be blind and deaf to serve, move about, and linger among the naked ladies in the courtyard. Of course, he had looked at all the naked princesses, but Suleika was the only one who looked at him openly and with a friendly smile. He had always looked away — a guard had to. Yet her gaze burned into the back of his head. And now, in the throne room, where this and that was being discussed once again, she looked at him intently. He stood like a marble statue — that's what guardsmen do. Yet his gaze met her friendly, blushing gaze.

The horse took a quick leap; a snake lay in the middle of the dusty road. Al Eajiz knew snakes were not to be trifled with. Suheddin glanced back warily; there were still no pursuers in sight. And then, one evening, the old maid appeared in the quarters. She motioned to him with her chin, and he followed her down the hallway. "I am Aya, a servant of Princess Suleika, Lord Suheddin. The princess asks you to come up to the eastern roof at the time when the star Az-Zuhara is seen rising. Be punctual and discreet, Mr. Suheddin," said Aya, and left without saying goodbye after he had nodded in agreement. He sat rooted to the spot in the courtyard, gazing intently toward the west, and when Venus rose radiant from the horizon, he crept up onto the eastern roof. There was no one to be seen, only old Aya, who coughed briefly. He stepped silently toward her, caught sight of the princess, and bowed deeply. She held out her hand to him, and he reverently kissed her ostentatious ring. Aya whispered, "Take a seat on that bench, Princess; I'll keep watch." That was Suheddin's first encounter with the princess, and it would not be his last.

The horse didn't slow down, even though it was already drenched in sweat. Suheddin saw the silhouette of the post station in the distance. He had to water the horse. But that was dangerous — perhaps a squad of pursuers was waiting for him there. But the post station looked deserted; the people were surely already asleep. Suheddin dismounted and hid behind a boulder. No, it wasn't really a boulder, but rather a block of sand compacted by wind and weather. He gave the horse a pat on the flank. "Go over there very slowly — I see a watering hole. Drink some water and come back, but be very, very quiet, my big guy." Al Eajiz shook his mane and trotted quietly toward the watering hole. He drank greedily, looked around cautiously, and quietly returned to Suheddin. The ride toward the southwest continued.

Suheddin, a soldier in the Caliph's personal guard, could hardly believe his good fortune. Princess Suleika was in love with him; she gave him her heart as they grew closer. Long ago, her loyal servant Aya had shown him the secret path by which he could enter the princess's chambers unseen. The good woman knew what was in her charge's heart, and the guard soldier Suheddin didn't strike her as a fool either. She faithfully stood watch so that he and Su, the princess, could spend plenty of time on her couch. Of course, Aya was getting on in years, but she still knew a thing or two about love. She didn't worry too much — the princess was clever and cunning and would surely find a way to keep her sweetheart by her side.

Suheddin's heart overflowed, and he spoke to his horse of his love. "You were there, my beloved, when my eyes searched the emptiness for you. You gave me water when I was thirsty. You gave me bread when you saw how hungry I was. You covered me with your veil when I was cold at night." The horse understood every word; after all, he knew only too well how much the wounds that love inflicts on the soul can hurt. "I held your tender, white hand, my beloved, as I stepped over the abyss; there you were beside me, guiding me. I kissed the tears from your eyes when you wept over the dead little bird on your windowsill. I kissed the nectar from your lips, for it is sweeter than honey. I washed your alabaster-white breasts with cool water when the heat of the samum had the city in its stranglehold. I kissed your white loins every time I put your veil back on, my beloved. I ran away from you in tears when Prince Mirza's henchmen tried to seize me." The horse Al

Eajiz pricked up his ears, for Suheddin's pleas of love touched him deeply. But the clever animal knew that back there, beyond the 16th post station, lay the safe haven; there they would board a ship bound for India or the land of Ophir and sail away. They would be there before dawn. He just had to pace himself wisely — that was important for a smart horse.

Suheddin's keen eyes spotted the next post station; there appeared to be several inns there as well. Perhaps he could find some feed for his horse, since they still had a long way to go. He breathed a sigh of relief — the light was still on in the stable. He could probably buy some feed for a few silver coins, provided they weren't already looking for him there. They approached the stable cautiously. He dismounted and walked the last few meters alongside his horse. "My good boy, go stand over there next to the mares — maybe they'll share some of their feed with you." A light pat on the flank, and the faithful animal trotted into the stable. A mare moved aside a little and let him get to the feed. Suheddin didn't speak the language of horses, but Al Eajiz had apparently let his masculine charm work its magic.

"Peace be with you," Suheddin greeted the old man, who was sweeping the floor with a broom. "And peace be with you too, young sir!" the man replied, setting the broom aside. "Ah, I see your stallion has found a spot next to Lakia. She's a good girl, believe me, sir." Suheddin fished a silver coin out of Suleikas money pouch. "His name is Al Eajiz," he grumbled, "and of course I'll pay for the feed, good man!" But the man waved him off. "I saw the tag on the bridle — the horse comes from the Caliph's stables. Our good ruler's horses are always welcome here. You don't need to pay anything, young man!" Suheddin took a step back. "The palace has put a bounty on my head, and you'll surely get into trouble if Prince Mirza finds out that you're helping me."

The old man spat on the ground. "Oh, him! May God forgive me, but I couldn't care less about the prince. He'll be our next caliph, and on the day he ascends the throne, I'll leave the country on the first ship I can find — as surely as God helps me!" He spat on the ground again. "Prince Mirza!" he exclaimed, shaking his head. "Tell me, if you've come straight from Baghdad, you must be hungry and thirsty. You can have a cup of wine, a chicken drumstick, and a flatbread — I wasn't very hungry this evening." He

walked over to a small table and made an inviting gesture. “Don’t worry, I’ll put it on the prince’s tab — he can certainly afford to pay for it!” Suheddin grinned. “You’re going to get into trouble for helping me.” But the old man waved it off. “Tell me, what kind of idiot would name such a magnificent stallion Al Eajiz, ‘the Lame One’? I can’t see anything lame about him, young sir!” Suheddin laughed. “I’m in the Caliph’s personal guard — may he live long! And every time we see him, we grin and wonder about the complete idiot who gave him that nickname.”

Al Eajiz had eaten and drunk from the trough. He had promised the lovely Lakia a tête-à-tête when he was on his way back, and the good girl snorted, blushing. Now he stood in the doorway, waiting impatiently. Suheddin rose from the small table and drained his cup of wine. “My thanks to you, good man! And don’t bow your old back too low when the prince rides past. He doesn’t just want the Caliph’s throne — he also wants to seize my bride, defile her snow-white thighs, and dishonor her. That is why I must flee.” The old man nodded in farewell, and, refreshed, they rode on.

The last post station. When he sat up straight in the saddle, he could already see the sea. To the left was the steep mountain range, and to the right, the sea. And right in the middle, where the road ran, was a line of horsemen — perhaps a hundred of them.

The Prince’s Pursuers.

Al Eajiz stopped in his tracks; he saw that there was no way forward. And then a rider broke away from the center and rode toward him. Suheddin’s heart clenched. Prince Mirza. The man who was determined to make his princess his wife. The scoundrel who had brazenly torn off her veil and ogled her flawless body as if it were a pound of meat at the market. The man who didn’t shy away from having him — his rival — murdered.

Facing off against a hundred armed men was not an option. He patted his horse’s neck. “I think, my big guy, this is where our paths part. I’ll fall in the sand, and they’ll take you back to the stable.” — No matter how hard Al Eajiz looked around, there was no escape. He would charge right through the formation and mow down those guys — he simply owed that much to Suheddin.

Tears glistened in Julia's eyes again. "The fragment ends here. Either Schwabe didn't finish writing it, or it's been lost." Alfie hated tears, especially Julia's. He took the sheets from her hand. "You have to read the backs of the pages, too, girl! The rest of the story is on there." And he flipped the printed pages over and pretended that the backs weren't just blank white pages. "Ah, there it is!" He cleared his throat briefly, composed himself, and read aloud from the blank pages:

Al Eajiz stood motionless, like a statue. He waited for Suheddin's command to charge. But Suheddin looked at the prince, who soon caught up to them. The prince reined in his horse. "Ah, there's our runaway! Your escape was completely pointless, guard — I saw this coming. I read your foolish thoughts before you'd even finished forming them. I offer you two options: You come with me and end up in the darkest dungeon, forever. But at least you'll be alive. Or I'll chop you to pieces right here on the spot and trample you like a worm. That would be the second option, and I'd prefer it. You didn't really imagine that a princess would take a mere guard as her husband, did you? No, she'll belong to me, body and soul. I'll plant my boot on the neck of that unwilling princess and mock you, you worm! But I've taken a very close look at the princess, and I tore her veil so I could see her properly. If she weren't a princess, I'd take her for a goat herder. Her body is, after all, no more beautiful than that of an ordinary goat herder, merely adorned with jewelry and precious stones. Her chest and body are hidden by jewelry because she doesn't want anyone to see her ugliness. Nevertheless, she's still just a goat herder, and she'll open the Caliph's heart to me, whether he wants to or not!"

Suheddin spat on the ground. "Prince Mirza, you are a fool! You dare to slander the princess by calling her a goat herder, and I will not let you get away with it — I will cut you to pieces and throw your stinking corpse to the dogs, as surely as God helps me! Prince Mirza, you are a cancer in the body of Baghdad, a parasite who drips poison into the caliph's ear. You are no man of honor; you have never let your sword dance in battle — you lack the guts and the nerve for that. A man of honor would now leap from his horse and cross swords with me. Isn't that right, Captain?" he called out to the captain, who had followed the prince. Prince Mirza, carefully made up and dressed in elegant, fine clothing, cast a sidelong

glance at the captain. “The Caliph has forbidden all duels, hasn’t he?” The captain didn’t move for a moment; the princess’s insults were unworthy of an honorable man. But then he said, “If anyone were to challenge me like that, I’d hack him to pieces, Prince Mirza!” The prince’s small eyes darted back and forth like sparrows trapped in a cage. “A mere foot soldier cannot insult me — I am a hundred times his superior!” Not a muscle twitched on the captain’s face. “I wouldn’t let a rival get away with insulting me! And even if he were a peasant or a stable boy, he’d forfeit his life! I would draw my sword, if only for my honor and the honor of the lady of my heart!” The prince was trapped. Even if he were to murder Suheddin right now, the captain would not hold back his opinion — no, he wouldn’t. Slowly, he dismounted from his white horse.

Suheddin slid gracefully out of the saddle. He gave Al Eajiz a pat on the flank. “Make way, my friend — it’s time to get down to business!” His horse took a few steps and then turned around. Suheddin slowly drew the small scimitar of Suleika from its sheath; it was a short but finely curved blade made of fine Damascus steel. A light sword, forged for delicate ladies’ hands. Prince Mirza drew his curved sword — a large, heavy blade, also the finest work of a master blacksmith. Suheddin knew that if he lost, the prince would enslave his Suleika in a merciless captivity, rape her at his whim, hand her over to his men for their amusement, and throw her to the wolves to be devoured.

That unbearable thought gave him a strength that no one else would have had in that situation. He didn’t know how good the prince was at fencing; in fact, no one really knew. No one had ever seen him with a drawn sword in his hand. He himself had been a soldier long enough to be able to assess his abilities. Of course, there were better fencers in his company, but he had always fought bravely and had returned from every battle so far without even the slightest scratch.

Prince Mirza and he circled each other. Suheddin’s sword was very short, which was a disadvantage. The prince slashed and slashed at him; Suheddin could only parry the blows and move as swiftly as an antelope. The prince, a fierce fellow, struck Suheddin recklessly. He was a cowardly brawler and believed he could hit the agile, evasive guardsman with one of his wide, sweeping blows.

All his fighting skills still stemmed from his youth, when he had beaten others to death with a wooden club. What stupidity lay behind all that arrogance and overinflated self-confidence!

The prince's sword hand gradually grew heavy, and he attempted a feint that was easy to see through. His leather slippers sent sand flying in Suheddin's direction, but Suheddin could only laugh it off. Dodging that was basic stuff. Twice he managed to leap right through the swirling sand, just as he had practiced a thousand times. He inflicted two deep cuts on the prince's forearm, and the prince's bleeding sword hand was now in grave danger. The prince was already gasping for breath and wiping the sweat from his eyes. Suheddin watched with satisfaction. Only a light sheen of sweat covered his forehead; agile as a gazelle, he leaped, causing the prince to strike at thin air under the force of his own blows, letting him wear himself out. Suleika's kiss touched his cheek; her lips were as light as a breath of wind. "His own heavy sword will tear his arm right off!" his beloved whispered.

Al Eajiz neighed loudly, drowning out the wind, and his neigh reached the line of men. The line began to move. Some soldiers had moved forward and were watching the duel from a distance. The captain had also dismounted, drawn his scimitar, and appointed himself the referee. Of course, he immediately recognized that the prince was not fighting honorably, but was merely a savage brawler who wanted to crush the young man at any cost — but certainly not in an honorable duel. The captain called the prince to order as if he were a mere recruit in combat school. The prince crouched down in anger — that wasn't how it was supposed to go! The captain was his captain, and he yelled at him to stay out of it! The captain fell silent; after all, the prince was a prince, not a recruit.

Suleika's Damascus blade sang in Suheddin's hand as he swung it. A faint hum, a high, soft sound like a sigh from afar. "I am with you, my beloved!" Suleika's lips whispered amid the blade's hum. "That dishonorable man tore off my veil and exposed me before everyone's eyes! I curse his black soul!" the blade sang in his hand. Suheddin sensed that Suleika was guiding his hand, that she did not want to let the hated prince and treacherous usurper escape. That scoundrel who had brazenly torn away her veil and revelled in the sight of her naked body.

Suheddin could hear her bell-like voice as if it were a whisper in the distance. “Now, my beloved, strike quickly like a hornet!” Suleika whispered. In a flash, he lunged forward and plunged the blade deep into the prince’s chest. The prince sank to his knees, a look of disbelief on his face, as the heavy sword slipped from his hand. Suheddin leaped to his side and severed his neck with a powerful stroke. The prince’s head rolled into the sand, and his lifeless torso fell forward onto the sand. The captain’s eyes flew open. He thrust his sword back into its sheath and wiped his sweat-drenched face with his sleeve. Suheddin stood silently before the corpse, not moving.

The captain turned to his men. “Mr. Suheddin defended the princess’s honor — and his own — in a fair duel. He fought fairly and honorably, just as a guard soldier should.” His men looked on indifferently, and most of them didn’t even know which princess the captain was talking about — there were so many princesses. But they looked at one another and nodded. Yes, it had been a fair duel, and the soldier had emerged victorious. The captain stepped up to Suheddin and tugged at his sleeve. “Give me your sword. I have an order — an arrest warrant — Suheddin. Come with me; I’ll take you to the caliph, who will judge you.” Suheddin nodded silently and handed Suleika’s sword to the captain.

The caliph sat upright on the throne — he had been given a meticulous account of the duel. Suheddin had been led in; now he bowed low to the ground and offered his greetings to the ruler. The executioner standing beside him pushed him down by the shoulder; a criminal was supposed to kneel before the caliph. But the caliph waved the executioner away and said, “Stand up, Suheddin; a man of honor stands upright before his ruler. I have, of course, heard about the duel; you beheaded the prince and allowed yourself to be captured without resistance. Now, tell me!”

Suheddin’s voice was firm and resolute. “The prince forced me to flee; he wanted to kill me because the princess did not love him. He ambushed me outside the port city with a hundred men. He slandered the princess and dragged both her honor and mine through the mud. I wouldn’t care if some high-ranking official insulted me. But to denigrate the princess — I could not and would not let him get away with that. The prince wanted to cowardly back out of the duel, but the captain would not allow it. I defeated

him and cut off his head; he will never revile the princess again. I have nothing more to say on the matter, Your Highness!"

The Caliph, Harun al-Rashid, raised an eyebrow. "You call me 'High Lord,' not 'Caliph' or 'Commander of the Faithful' like everyone else. Why?" Suheddin's reply came back instantly. "Because you are not, High Lord. You are not only the Ruler of the Faithful, but you also rule over the unbelievers — those who dance around the golden calf, the fire-worshippers of Ahura Mazda, and the children of Israel. You rule over them all, and come to think of it, you even rule over the cockroaches in our granaries. You are the Ruler of All, Your Highness!" Harun al-Rashid smiled. "Cockroaches, hm?" He stroked his beard and smiled. "You have a sharp tongue, young man. Now, how is it that Princess Suleika's honor is so close to your heart?"

Suheddin knew it was no longer about Prince Mirza; it was now a matter of his own life. Defiantly, he jutted out his chin. "Well, Your Highness, when the princess learned that Prince Mirza desired her as his wife and insolently demanded her as if she were nothing more than a bag of silver coins, she wept bitterly on my shoulder, Your Highness, and not on the prince's shoulder. She wept on my shoulder after he had insolently torn off her veil and inspected her body as if it were a pound of meat at the market. She knew that the prince was a cancer on the body of Baghdad, a venomous snake that sang into your ear to the sound of a shawm and laid claim to your sword and your throne — demanded them, indeed, vehemently demanded them. She wept because her father, struck by blindness, failed to see through the unworthy man and nurtured the serpent at his bosom. "My Lord, ask your daughter!" Suheddin lowered his gaze. To concede any more of his love for Suleika would have been unseemly.

Caliph Harun al-Rashid looked intently at Suheddin's face. "I know you, but I can't quite place where from." Suheddin smiled. "I was one of the four who accompanied you on your forays through the city when you, disguised as a common nobleman, wanted to get a feel for the pulse of the city. Not quite twenty years ago, Your Highness." A look of recognition flashed across Harun's face. "Yes, the silent boy whom the captain recommended to me, saying he was a natural-born bodyguard. You were as silent as a fish back then, my boy, but your knife whirled through the air faster than

any arrow. I remember it very well. And now I see you've learned to speak. And you don't hold back your opinion. Even though you could talk yourself into serious trouble, Mr. Suheddin." He leaned toward his vizier, Al-Bahr, who was the same age, and they whispered for a few moments. The Caliph looked up.

"You engaged in a duel, even though I have strictly forbidden duels. You beheaded an heir to the throne. These are serious offenses, and I will withdraw to deliberate on whether and how I will punish you. But my friend Al-Bahr sees himself vindicated in your words and in the princess's words; from the very first day, he warned me against committing a folly — as if a caliph could ever commit such a folly. I was smitten with the prince; he had a silver tongue and a sharp, analytical mind — no one would dispute that. But he also sent all four of my sons to their deaths — two to the wars against the Romans of Byzantium and the other two to the feud against the bloodthirsty Barmakid dynasty. I didn't listen to my wise friend Al-Bahr, who saw through the prince's cowardly scheme to remove the four greatest obstacles on the path to my throne without getting his own hands dirty. And yes, I was foolish enough to give him my daughter as his bride. My friend, I will spend four days in introspection, remaining silent and listening only, for Prince Mirza is still very much present in my mind. Perhaps I should be grateful to my friend Al-Bahr and to you — perhaps. A caliph must be neither blind nor infatuated; justice must guide him."

Harun al-Rashid rose with a groan, the weight of the years bearing down on his shoulders. "I shall give you an order shortly, Suheddin. My daughter Suleika disappeared on the day I promised her hand to Prince Mirza and he went to her to inspect the purity of her body, as he put it. No one has seen her since. I ask you as a grief-stricken father, not as a ruler: ride out and find her, bring her back to me. I beg you with all my heart, my son!" Now, for the first time, Suheddin bent his knees and said: "My Lord, I will mount my horse at once and search the entire city. I solemnly promise you that I will not return without your daughter. Tomorrow, at the noon audience, I will bring her to you — unharmed and safe. You have my word on it, My Lord!"

The caliph turned to leave, muttering bitterly, "...and ruler of the faithful, the infidels, and the cockroaches!" Suheddin ran off to

the stable to saddle the Lame One. Old Aya was standing in front of the stable. “Follow me, Lord Suheddin.” She said nothing more, turned on her heel, and led the way up to the princess’s chambers.

He followed her up the stairs, staring at the swaying asscheeks of the faithful servant. Aya had never before draped such a flimsy veil around her hips — or perhaps he had simply never looked closely enough. With every step, the buttocks beneath the veil swayed gracefully back and forth, so graceful and lovely. Socrates would have sung a song of joy for this magnificent Callipyge — that old womanizer! “I’ll ask one of my dragoon friends to take Aya out for a nice ride, because she deserves a good ride, the good soul,” he thought to himself, and her bare butt continued to sway so gracefully beneath the gossamer-thin veil, all the way up a hundred steps. Aya’s buttocks, completely bare beneath the transparent veil, moved gracefully like the flanks of a plump mare. Suheddin rubbed his eyes; between those plump flanks, he thought he could make out her dark bush. Yes, he confirmed his thought as he gazed approvingly at her gracefully bobbing ass — Aya deserves a good ride. He had seen Aya’s graceful ass a thousand times before, but had never given it a second thought, never really looked at it. He chided himself, for as a child of his time, he saw female servants only as genderless beings. Aya’s eyes had always fluttered excitedly when Suleika lay with him, but he had never truly noticed her sexual arousal.

Suleika jumped up from the couch and threw her arms around his neck. She cried — cried with joy and relief. “I never left — we just spread the word that I’d run away out of fear of the prince. And I would have slit Mirza’s throat on our wedding night — no doubt about it.” Suheddin sat down demurely beside her, and they had so much to tell each other. The loyal Aya stood guard as always. Fifteen years ago, she had nursed Suleika as a baby at her breast, and the girl was like a daughter to her. She had pocketed the prince’s bribes without batting an eye, without presenting even the slightest favor in return. She loved her daughter, the princess, and had lived through the ups and downs of love with her. Aya blushed from the roots of her hair all the way down to her nipples when Suheddin whispered to her with a wink that he would send one of his dragoon friends her way, because she probably deserved it one more time.

At the audience the following morning, Princess Suleika entered the hall wearing her most exquisite veils, with Suheddin half a step behind her. The Caliph rose with difficulty and walked toward his daughter, drawing her into his arms. His eyes rested silently on Suheddin's face. He needed men like Suheddin — men of true steel who would not be lulled by the sound of shawms. Men with a mind of their own and backbone, men who would ride off immediately and bring his daughter back to him. Suleika followed her father to the throne and sat down proudly beside him, the exalted Caliph. He reached for her hand and held it tightly.

Harun al-Rashid beckoned Suheddin closer so that he could bring his ear close to the Caliphs lips. "Suheddin, you devil of a man, my daughter is sitting next to me again. Thank you, thank you, thank you! And now listen, my son: I have bribed two of my judicial advisors to vehemently demand your head. And likewise, two others who will just as vehemently demand your acquittal and promotion. Consequently, you will likely have to wait twenty years or more for your verdict — that is what I have decided. And in the meantime, continue to bask in the glow of my fatherly goodwill!" Suheddin straightened up, his eyes shining with deep gratitude, but he could not utter a word and stepped back again.

The audience continued. "Well, my daughter, I hear you spurned Prince Mirza, even though he lifted your veil and licked his lips in anticipation?" Suleika interrupted him. "Did you know that that sly prince tore my veil from my body in front of everyone and appraised me like a camel at the market?" The caliph shook his head; he had known nothing of it. "I was only told about it recently, and I was uncomfortable with the thought that your fiancé would inspect your body and your virginity with his own eyes in such a crude manner, like an uncouth stable boy."

He bowed his aged head in shame. "Let's not speak any more of the prince and his inappropriate behavior. — What will become of you, my Suleika? You're no longer a child, but a girl at exactly the age when your father must marry you off as quickly as possible so that you don't bring shame upon him. Look around you — here among the princes and men of honor — don't you see a worthy husband?" Suleika looked around with a grin, as if she were considering each and every one of them. "Yes, Father, of course I see

him among all these honorable princes and sweet young men. Of course I see him, and he sees me."

Harun al-Rashid was more than happy to play along with this little farce — a bit of lighthearted entertainment amid important debates and decisions. "And now, will you reveal the secret to us?" he asked with a smile. But Suleika was enjoying the comedy. "No, Father, no. The time hasn't come yet; I haven't lifted my veil yet; I've never slept with him, because I've never slept with a man, dear Father." Harun al-Rashid grinned across his entire old, wrinkled face, for Suleika had already slept with quite a few sweet boys, but none of them were yet men. Harun thought he could hear the cheeky, deceitful chatter of her mother. What cleverness his daughter displayed! His heart swelled with pride. "But you must hurry with your choice, my daughter, for your father is gradually growing old, blind, and deaf — the ruler of the believers, the unbelievers, and the cockroaches," he chuckled.

Suleika rose and knelt before him. "Then allow me, my Caliph, my ruler of all this, to lift my veil before him and to lie down with him. For you have taught me that one should never buy a cat in a bag." Harun al-Rashid slapped his thighs, laughing. "Did you hear that, my friends? My daughter is asking me for permission to take the cat out of the bag to see if his virility is really any good!? — Oh, what a clever, what a cunning child! She reads my own words back to me and twists them with great cleverness and skill to make them fit her purpose!" he exclaimed, laughing heartily.

He wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes. "You are my daughter, undoubtedly born of my fiery blood, combined with your mother's cunning and cheeky wit! You would never jump into cold water with your eyes closed; no, you'd send your maid ahead to make sure the water is only waist-deep. — But don't send your old Aya; she'd buy that strapping young man even from a hook-nosed, hunchbacked, and lame deaf-mute — that's how eager she is for a good ride!" The Caliph slapped his thighs with laughter, for of course he knew about the gaping emptiness in Aya's bed. The people in the throne room smiled or laughed, some at the top of their lungs.

Suleika had taken her seat again; her gaze flattered Suheddin's eyes in a charming way. Of course, she had slept with him many

times before, but she didn't need to rub that in her father's face.

And as the audience turned its attention to more serious matters, the narrator quietly slipped away. A faint smile played on his lips, for now everything was in order and back on track. He did not doubt for a moment that Suheddin would soon be promoted to general and elevated to the nobility. And, and, and.

Alfie put the papers down. A mischievous gleam shone in his eyes. "See, Julia, how beautifully and nobly Schwab brought the story to a close? Everything's going like clockwork, as they say here in Vienna. No more tears, my dearest. Suleika and her Suheddin will be together. And faithful Aya gets a strapping dragoon, on loan, of course. So, no more tears — at most, tears of joy, pleasure, or emotion." Julia's negligee had slipped from her shoulders, and she had reached for her bare breast as Aya led Suheddin up the stairs to Suleika's chamber and he thoughtfully gazed at her gracefully swaying asscheeks. No, Alfie would have felt it was wrong to portray Suheddin as a saint without a body and beyond reproach — with a wink, of course. She hung on Alfie's every word with childlike curiosity. Alfie, who stared at the blank pages and improvised the story on the spot — making it exciting, entertaining, and not without humor. Alfie, who described the old caliph Harun al-Rashid so vividly as an elderly gentleman, as if he'd been there himself. Alfie, who knew so well how to describe Suheddin's gaze on Aya's gracefully swaying ass. Oh, Alfie, what a quirky guy you are! she thought with a smile. Yes, this Alfie — he was her man. Forever and ever.

Julia was cured of brittle bone disease. The doctor nearly did a somersault when she looked at the bone density measurements from the past few months. Whatever might have been encoded in that little packet of mRNA, it did exactly what it was supposed to. Julia's bones were strong and healthy — no question about it. The fact that Julia still enjoyed taking her Ferrari out for a spin was simply a matter of habit and convenience. A wheelchair user never had to stand in line anywhere, and that was just one of the advantages. And by the pond, she sat in her own wheelchair with heated seats, while Alfie sat on the park bench without heated seats. Alfie laughed, "Heated seats? What's the point of that?" Julia, however,

felt right at home. Shaking people's hands without having to worry about breaking a bone — that was something.

Julia empathized with Yvonne as she witnessed her friend's roller-coaster rides up close. Yvonne had a real talent for reeling in those guys who, while good in bed, were closer in character to amoebas than to sincere Christians. Julia still strictly refused to let Yvonne bring her latest conquest home with her. They had incorporated Alfie into their Tuesday afternoons and their girl-on-girl sex with ease and sincerity; by now, that was just fine the way it was. Julia had sex every day, and she had absolutely no desire to get involved with Yvonne's conquests. There was one thing her grandpa had emphasized time and again: if sex became a habitual pastime, a race, or a soulless duty, then she was on the completely wrong path. Sex without love was like a fish out of water. It might squirm — because fish and sex just squirm — but both were dying. Julia never forgot her grandpa's warning words. He was a very wise man, and he didn't teach her trivialities, but only solid, joyful experiences. Getting involved with Yvonne's suitors — that would truly be the kind of trivialities Julia didn't need.

She thought long and hard about Alfie's story of Suheddin and Harun al-Rashid. One thing was clear: there were other interesting things to read as well, not just legends and myths from the ancient Greek pantheon. Time and again, she would take a break from her work on her gods and read one story or another. At first, it was just a change of pace — a mental gallop across new, different, or unknown meadows. But she soon realized how enriching it was to immerse herself in the world the author had created. Indeed, she quickly set aside boring or trite fiction if it didn't get under her skin. Her membership in the Vienna Public Library, which dated back to her high school days, experienced a new lease on life. With just a few clicks, it was so easy to borrow a book — many of them even in purely digital form.

It was probably just a coincidence that Julia met a group of people with disabilities who used wheelchairs. She had seen a brochure in the doctor's waiting room and jotted down the email address. On a whim, she attended one of their monthly meetings. Somehow, the issues raised by the women in wheelchairs seemed trivial — or even banal — to Julia. Yes, they had to write to the city council about the lack of accessible entry here and there. The city

council then promptly replied, saying how well they understood the situation, but — drumroll! — there wasn't enough money, as both the female and male city council members wrote regretfully. Julia had actually already decided to wrap up this interlude and call it quits.

But then she met Rocky. His name was Robert Niehaus, the only son of a fairly well-known couple of surgeons. Somehow he'd come to be called Rocky — and certainly not because of the movie character played by Sylvester Stallone. It had just happened at some point. Rocky was in a wheelchair because of a spinal cord problem; he was 13 and a half and a pretty good student. Although he was — quite rightly — very proud of his computer skills, he had no friends, neither boys nor girls. When Julia saw him for the first time, she immediately thought of the character Dwarf Long Nose from the children's books she'd read as a child. Rocky had a prominent hooked nose, a small hump, and, like many wheelchair users, rather atrophied leg muscles. He lived just a few streets away from her, on Riemergasse, in a beautifully maintained old building from the previous century. His parents were quite successful but rarely around — doctors who gave him every luxury except one: their presence as a father and mother. From their very first meeting, Julia sensed how clingy he was, how much he longed for "someone else."

She didn't mind that he insisted on parking his wheelchair right next to her Ferrari when they first met at a meeting. That he reached across the gap between their wheelchairs and held her hand, just as other children press their pink bunnies or green teddy bears to their chests. She sensed his hunger for closeness, and it was an almost maternal feeling on her part to let him hold her hand. Oh yes, she knew how much one could suffer from such feelings, even though she was privileged in that regard and fate had not treated her unfairly. She noticed how listlessly Rocky voted at the end of the meeting on the wording of the next letter to the authorities. The boy wasn't unsympathetic, that little guy Longnose. And he definitely didn't belong to that circle of pitiful disabled people.

That made his invitation to his house all the more surprising. She absolutely had to see his computer setup; he had designed it all himself and built it with his own hands — every single screw.

Julia found it unusual that a boy as young as 13 would design his own computer system and build it himself, with his own two hands. Rocky grinned. “A screwdriver, tweezers, and a soldering iron — it’s really no big deal,” he said in the tone of little Gyro Gearloose. Julia glanced at her watch. “For half an hour, but no longer. I’m writing my dissertation and have a strict schedule that I always stick to, even if you wanted to show me the Pyramids of Giza, Rocky.” He nodded; half an hour, but at least 30 minutes, he said with a smile. “I won’t distract you from your work, Julia. I just want us to maybe become friends — real, good friends, perhaps. You’ve got what it takes; I knew that from the very first second. I’ve already got enough non-friends and non-girlfriends,” he said, and he was completely serious.

They rolled side by side down Riemergasse, and she gave him a rough outline of what her dissertation was about. Rocky knew quite a bit about the ancient Greek pantheon, since he read a lot and loved to read. Julia’s heart warmed; finally, someone who didn’t just know Zeus, Hera, and Aphrodite from skimming past them. Someone who got straight to the point: “You want to prove that Hera’s a pretty rotten apple, a bit of a wild slut, aren’t you? And not the saint everyone wrote her up to be.” Julia was completely amazed: a 13-year-old who hit the “bull’s-eye” in less than 15 minutes. They drove through the underground parking garage, where they took the elevator up to the penthouse. About 500 square meters of luxury, elegantly, tastefully, and expensively furnished. Rocky introduced Julia to Anni, who seemed to be the housekeeper or a jack-of-all-trades. “Would you like some elderberry lemonade? We buy it from farmers in Burgenland, and in my opinion, it’s the best for miles around.” Julia said yes and followed him. He had a small, windowless bedroom, the walls neatly covered with pictures of naked girls. There was no door between his sleeping area and his “office,” his “study.” Seventy-five square meters, meticulously tidy and very neat. “If you work with computers, you can’t be a slob or a mess-maker,” he said with a serious expression.

Julia was surprised — after all, she had a computer with a printer and a scanner, of course. But this — this was a monster of a computer. No toy — this was a real “installation” that truly deserved the name. Prominently displayed were two gray, chest-high towers bearing the names “Rocky I” and “Rocky II” in silver let-

ters. “Those are my servers, each with 96 terabytes. That — that’s quite a lot. They’re mirrored with RAID for data redundancy. And back there, that big black behemoth — that’s the backup generator, in case of power outages. It lasts for two hours, that thing.” She spotted two scanners that were almost identical and four printers. “Why would a sane person need four printers? Four?” Julia asked curiously. Rocky smiled, “A laser printer for text and so on. Its twin is the backup in case the sister twin breaks down. A photo printer, and over there in the back, the big color laser printer — that’s where I print out the ‘Girl of the Month’ for my bedroom. I bought the printers and scanners because building them from scratch would require a larger workspace and a lot of specialty tools. My parents do give me a lot of money for my hobby, but they don’t want to shower me with cash — that’s not their style. They want me to learn to budget and pay off my bank loan in installments, and I think that’s just the right thing to do.” He made a sweeping gesture with his hand. “Around 250,000 to 300,000 euros, give or take.”

Anni had placed two glasses and a pitcher of lemonade on a small side table. “She’s not allowed to come any further in — ever since she damaged almost everything with her cleaning obsession, she’s only allowed to go as far as the little table, not a millimeter further. We get along pretty well that way. I vacuum once a week; I also have two extra vacuums for the insides of my appliances. — Well, what do you think, Julia?” Julia took another look at the beautiful, functional office. “You’re very professional for your age — or rather, for your youth — and I like that about you, Rocky. I don’t know the first thing about computers, but I’ve gotten the impression that you take this very seriously and handle it like a true professional, Rocky. And I find that very endearing about you. I guess a toy train set would bore you.” Rocky looked her straight in the eye. “After high school, I want to study computer science at the university and then start a company where I’ll build the best computers and servers myself. That dwarf Longnose is totally unsuitable for surgery. Of course, I’m also allowed to watch Mom in the Operation Room when she reduces labia or fixes or beautifies clitorises — that’s how she makes a ton of cash. I love watching because I get to see so many different kinds of twats without Mom smacking me — if you know what I mean.” Julia rolled her eyes. “Twat isn’t a nice word for a beautiful body part, you little pig!”

Julia glanced over toward his bedroom. “Tell me, how would you describe yourself — ‘over-computerized’ or ‘over-sexed’? I’m assuming that, as a computer specialist, you understand English.” Rocky thought about it for a long time. “Actually, both, if I’m being honest. When I’m sitting at the computer, I’m completely focused and don’t think about sex for a second. And when I’m lying on my bed, touching myself, and looking at my girls with lust, then I think only about sex, not computers.” Julia nodded; it was a good — and above all, honest — answer. “If we’re always honest with each other, we can be real friends one day, Rocky.”

He looked up expectantly. “Real friends, with sex and everything?” Julia shook her head. “No, Rocky, definitely not. I have a husband, Alfie — the best husband in the world. I wouldn’t sleep with anyone else for anything in the world, and please don’t be mad at me for that. But my love for Alfie is something special, unique, maybe even sacred. So yeah, no hookups or anything like that, even if it makes you sad, little man.”

His face lit up. “Even in kindergarten, the girls called me ‘little man’ because of my big thing. Back then, I could still walk on my own and didn’t need a wheelchair. The girls would squeal with delight when I took it out — after all, I was the only boy. They always wanted to touch and feel it again and again. That was okay; I was, after all, their dear Little Nose. When they played with it and I read them the unabridged version of ‘Dwarf Little Nose’ — which I’d written myself, of course — they’d giggle and squeal whenever Little Nose hypnotized the three princesses with his sweet talk and then had his way with them one after the other. My Dwarf Long Nose was just that kind of naughty little guy I would have loved to be myself, if I’d had legs. The attendants at the Marxist kindergarten were very open-minded and modern and rarely intervened, because the girls were allowed to touch him however they pleased. Just playfully, though, because many girls had already seen real sex, and they were supposed to process it playfully with Dwarf Long Nose. We children were supposed to learn how to deal with our childlike sexuality — and that’s exactly what we did.”

Julia smiled. “So, for you, the nickname ‘Dwarf Long Nose’ isn’t offensive at all, Rocky?” He laughed. “No, not at all! I was proud of my guy who’d grown way too big, and I was just as proud that the girls saw me and my guy as ‘Shorty Nose’ from my made-up story

and accepted us." Julia glanced at her smartwatch. "We should do this again sometime, if you'd like, Rocky. To become friends — close friends — but not the kind who make out, okay? I'd interrogate you about your 'Dwarf Long Nose' and his little friend like a Gestapo officer, and in return, you can ask me anything that doesn't directly lead to sex. Deal?"

Rocky was beaming from ear to ear. "Oh, how wonderful! You want to come back! I'd love to jump up and do a Hilly-Billy dance, but I can't manage that anymore. Shall we set a date — a real date?" Julia thought for a moment. "I always set aside two hours on Thursday afternoons for reading; I could skip that and come over to grill you about this and that and so on. Would that be okay?" Rocky crinkled his face into deep wrinkles and pretended to be thinking very hard. "About this and that and so on?" He smiled. "Thursday, you say? Two hours? Well, let me think about it. Thursday afternoon — I'd actually have dance class then, South American and Latin dances, if I could walk instead of rolling around in a wheelchair. So yeah, deal — Thursday's booked!"

He paused. "I'm going to take a closer look at your Ferrari — through the eyes of an engineer — because I'd like to build an electric car like that myself, one that can climb stairs like your Ferrari. That's a challenge." Julia's smartwatch beeped softly. "I have to head out, Rocky — work calls, and I'll call back. So Thursday, let's say at three — 3:00 p.m.?" Rocky nodded. "You'll find your way to the underground parking garage — it's always open. I'll be waiting for you downstairs by the elevator at exactly 3:00 p.m., not a second later. Because you can't take the elevator without a key." Julia stood up and got into her Ferrari. Rocky drove her down to the underground parking garage, then crowed cheerfully, "Goodbye — see you Thursday at 3:00 p.m. and zero seconds!" and Julia drove home, lost in thought.

Of course, she told Alfie every little detail about Rocky while they were relaxing in bed, smoking. Alfie's eyes widened. "A Marxist kindergarten? Oh, we don't have that anymore — no Marx anywhere, nowhere! And the girls played with his thing, as you say? In kindergarten?" Julia wasn't sure either. "That Rocky, the little runt — he was pretty precocious even back then. Maybe that played the decisive role." Alfie nodded, but the matter was far from settled. "That kid's oversexed, if you ask me." He bit his lower lip. "I'm not

buying your categorical ‘no’ that easily, Julia. You and Yvonne — you two dragged me into your Tuesday games, and I have sex with her, too. I get that you’re curious about this Rocky, but I’m not buying your categorical ‘no.’ Just see how things develop. Only if nothing develops does your ‘no’ really make sense — otherwise, it doesn’t.” Alfie shook his head. “Thirteen! At thirteen, I was lying next to Mom with our little machines, and we were just relaxing. I wasn’t even close to thinking about sex at that age, especially since my dad died so miserably back then.” Julia sat up straight as a board. “Having sex with a 13-year-old is considered a serious crime, my dear! Don’t lose sight of that. I could ruin my entire career. With a 13-year-old! My God!” The matter troubled Alfie more than Julia would have believed. Apparently, there was a connection to his relationship with his mother that hadn’t yet been revealed, but she wouldn’t press him for details. But to keep something from him — that would be a lie, a betrayal.

On Thursday, at exactly 2:59:30 p.m., Julia was waiting by the elevator in the underground parking garage. Rocky arrived right on the dot, but without his wheelchair — instead, he was wearing a T-shirt and boxer shorts. Her gaze immediately fell on his thin legs. “I practice walking without my wheelchair for an hour every day, on doctor’s orders,” Rocky said as they rode up. Glasses and iced lemonade were already waiting; Anni remained out of sight, and they sat down at his desk, which was made of acrylic glass. He had gotten a second swivel chair, so Julia “parked” her Ferrari and walked over to the chair. Rocky, his legs wobbly, fetched an ashtray from his parents’ apartment next door; he himself didn’t smoke, not even a joint. It was a matter of principle. “Smoking would harm my libido,” he lectured.

He looked at her expectantly as she drew the smoke from the joint deep into her lungs and, a few seconds later, exhaled it in little rings. “And now I’m curious about the Gestapo officer,” Rocky said with a smile. Julia backed off a bit. She was just curious and wanted to find out everything — everything he could reveal. Rocky smiled. “I’m only 13 and a half; you don’t have any secrets at that age, Julia. Those come later, when you’re an adult, I think. And my little guy hasn’t seen anything of the world yet, unfortunately. But I’d be happy to make something up for you — I’ve already seen it all on the internet.” Julia spread her fingers. “No lies, nothing made up, Rocky — just the truth and only hard facts.”

He looked through his desk at Julia's legs. "It's a miracle that you're completely cured of brittle bone disease, Julia. A true miracle — I looked it up online, and there's no cure, at least not yet." Julia felt her way through the facts. "My husband, Alfie — he's from the Chicago area — and he bought me a treatment in the U.S. They're already much further along there than we are here in old, slow-moving Europe. An mRNA treatment that repaired my defective genes. I've been able to walk on my own for about a year now, but I'm not ready to give up my Ferrari just yet. As if I hadn't paid off the bank loan yet — okay?" Rocky smiled. "Bank loan — that rings a bell. I'm still stuttering my way through the payments too, but that's really unimportant. Not exactly what you'd want during an interrogation by a tough Gestapo officer, Julia," he grinned.

"I've read that the disease is often accompanied by a decreased libido, while for others, you have to tone down the libido," Rocky said. Julia grinned through the sacred smoke. "My libido is absolutely overflowing — it's been that way since I was a kid. I'm not letting anyone tone it down, not in a million years! That's just how it is." Rocky laughed softly. "It doesn't work that way. You're the Gestapo woman — you're supposed to be interrogating me, not the other way around." Julia laughed. "We're quite the pair, Rocky. I set out to interrogate you about this and that, and now you have to listen to me go on about my love life. Okay, just one more thing to complete the picture: Alfie and I have been having sex for two years — pretty much since we met. And once a week we play a mixed doubles match as a threesome with my best friend, but without a referee. Just the ball, the court, and us without tennis rackets. Simple, uncomplicated, and athletic." Rocky pursed his lips. "Uncomplicated? Simple?" Julia took a drag on her joint; she felt as light as a butterfly.

Rocky suggested they lie down on his bed, where she could take a really good look at all his girls. They were all totally different, yet somehow similar in their beauty. Julia hesitated — it was all happening too fast for her. "How exactly am I supposed to understand this 'and so on' business? You said the other day that you lie on your bed, admire your hot group of girls, and enjoy yourself? Or did I miss something?" Rocky grinned crookedly. "No, you remembered it all correctly. Maybe you should add that I sometimes lie on my bed for hours on end. Maybe you'd also categorize my libido as sometimes exuberant — just for the Gestapo report, of course."

Julia laughed her head off. Of course she's high from the joint, but she's picturing it all in her mind, and then she laughs. "I should call you Loki, the god of deception and trickery. I can see you longing for your mom, and her just telling you to go ask Anni. Yeah, she's your mom, and you just don't do that to your son — that makes sense, doesn't it? And Anni — excuse me — she's probably completely deaf when it comes to your brilliant ideas. "Oh, Rocky, you're worse than the Gestapo ever imagined. You're definitely going to hell, my boy — to the 'overripe teenagers' section," she exclaimed with a laugh.

Okay, if he was taking the ashtray with him, then she would lie down on the bed next to him and inspect his playmates. She had already lit her next joint and was high as a monarch butterfly in Mariposa Monarca, Mexico. Swaying slightly, she walked over to the bed and let herself fall onto it. Rocky didn't hesitate; he pulled off his boxers. "Oh — holy — Carmen!" she exclaimed when she saw him for the first time. The boy was only thirteen and a half, but his thing was bigger than Alfie's — and three times as big and massive as Grandpa's. She averted her unchaste gaze and fixed it on the beauties on the walls. Rocky didn't have bad taste; she had to give him that. The girls' poses were entirely natural and graceful — nothing sleazy. Rocky's hand moved up and down on his Dwarf Long Nose and Julia couldn't avert her gaze . "I've had a few from the wheelchair club here — younger ones, but older ones too. Most knew the score, while others had never done it before. I always got my way — a lot of fucking, fooling around, the whole program. But it never got violent. Mom would cry sometimes; she was sad because I'd turned into such a dirty kid and was taking advantage of those poor girls in wheelchairs, or so she said." "Rocky, please put your clothes back on. We had agreed: no fucking, no fooling around, no nothing. So please, be a good boy! Wait until I've floated away in my Ferrari — then you can have your fun." They lay side by side in silence, and Julia only risked the occasional sideways glance at his boxers. Rocky had slipped a hand inside his underwear and was jiggling things up and down — for a good ten minutes. He had asked Julia to tell him in detail about her surging libido. She obliged, describing the butterfly and the hawk that swooped down and sank its talons into her flesh. Somehow, she didn't find it embarrassing that Robert was pleasuring himself while she spoke. Yet for the final stretch, he pulled his "Dwarf Nose" out from under his boxers and finished the job. Julia should

have said “Stop!” right then, but she didn’t; the joint had put her in a mellow mood. And so, she found herself on a slippery slope, without a doubt.... Robert started up again — initially keeping things under his boxers — while listening to her breathlessly. That afternoon, Rocky did it five times in total. He did it under his boxers every time, but for the grand finale, he brought the whole “Dwarf Nose” out and let it rain down onto her inner thighs. She smiled; the boy had a surging libido just like her. But no — anything further was out of the question; she had made up her mind about that, butterflies or not.

The following Thursday, Julia let him take off his boxers right after they lay down on the bed. She was already on her second joint and felt indescribably light; she was practically floating among the pretty girls smiling down from the walls. She floated in bliss as Rocky undressed her, piece by piece. He whistled through his teeth when he spotted the two snakes on her inner thighs. “Wow!” For a split second, she feared he might discover the Big Snake, but he didn’t see her secret. He stared at the two snakes while his hand moved up and down on his “Dwarf Nose.” “Are they afraid of water?” Rocky asked, and she grinned in blissful detachment. “Oh, not at all — they can handle a little rain!” She asked him to tell her about his morning bathing — about the ‘and-so-forth,’ that he did underwater. Rocky pressed himself close to her. “Is this okay?” he asked, and she nodded. “So, you wanted to grill me about the ‘and-so-forth,’ Miss Gestapo Sweetheart. I’ll start, since you apparently haven’t got a clue about a tough interrogation, Julia.” He buried his face in her armpit. “In the morning, when I bathe, Anni sits on the edge of the tub and watches me — with cold, fishy eyes — as I do it underwater. ‘You’re a filthy little brat,’ she says, shaking her head, yet she never looks away. ‘You’re going to the deepest, most wretched hell, because what you’re doing there is pretty disgusting, Robert.’ But she gives a crooked grin when the little white worms float on the surface.”

“When Mom came in for a bath, Anni usually stayed away. Mom would sit on the edge of the tub too, but she’d just smile sweetly at the ‘and-so-forth.’ ‘Don’t listen to that spiteful old woman,’ Mom would say. ‘For one thing, there is no hell, and for another, your ‘and-so-forth’ is perfectly normal and natural, Robert. — Maybe Anni’s just jealous because she doesn’t have a strapping boy in her bed — a strapping boy like you. So, don’t let it

get you down, Robert. You're a good boy, and you certainly won't go to hell because of the little white worms floating in the bathwater; I guarantee it.'"

Julia slipped her arm under his head so he could rest comfortably on her shoulder. "I'm totally with your mom on this, Rocky. The 'and-so-forth' part is actually fine; otherwise, I'd have to sit in hell right next to you because of my own overflowing 'and-so-forth.' But you don't seem to have any respect for Anni, and I don't think that's right. She's an employee, not riffraff. She might have a skewed view of things — sure. But she isn't disrespectful toward you; she's just voicing her concerns." Rocky growled, "Voicing concerns — and watching the spectacle at the same time! That doesn't add up, Julia. I've got eyes in my head; I can see right away when a bolt and a nut don't fit together."

Julia was truly high from her joints. At the crucial moment, Rocky turned around and let it rain down on her snakes. Five — no, six — times in those two hours. Julia didn't find it embarrassing at all anymore; she watched what he was doing closely, a faint smile on her face. He had just as overflowing a libido as she did. Julia was grinning like an idiot. "It's raining in the jungle," she joked, and Rocky gave a pained smile. "You said they weren't afraid of water." Julia's eyes were swimming a little in her euphoric haze. "Oh, no, of course they aren't afraid of water, Robert. It's just a bit unusual — it's brand new to me, having a boy flood my snakes, that's all."

The path led steeply downward.

Julia asked if his mom touched him while he was bathing. He rolled his eyes. "Back when I wasn't very good at it yet, she always liked doing it for me so I'd learn. Anni would stand there, rolling her eyes heavenward with a pained, toad-like expression. Mama would do it over and over again, only stopping when nothing more came out and I was completely drained; that was the right way to do it, she'd told Anni and me. She'd swirl the little white worms in the bathwater with her hand, look at Anni, and say she'd better take care of 'Dwarf Long-Nose' every morning, or else there'd be hell to pay. Anni would roll her eyes heavenward and say, 'Yes, Madame!' But Mama has stopped doing it for me now; no amount of heart-rending begging works anymore." Julia smiled. "Oh, I un-

derstand that perfectly. Your mom doesn't want to fall into the incest trap; she's a smart woman." Rocky asked if her mom had fallen into the incest trap. Julia shook her head. "No, my parents died in an accident when I wasn't even two. I grew up with my grandparents." She thought for a moment. "My grandpa didn't want to send me out into the world ignorant. He gently guided my finger so I'd learn the 'and-so-forth' properly. My grandpa was a kind-hearted man — the best grandpa you could imagine."

Rocky shook his head. "My grandpa and grandma haven't come to see the little cripple in a long time." Julia gave him a tap on the back of the head. "You'd better cross the word 'cripple' off your list, you silly computer expert. A cripple is someone who snatches a grandma's purse or shoves her on the crosswalk. Or someone who steals the coins from a beggar's cup. That's a cripple, and you're not one — you're Dwarf Long Nose, the one little girls love to grope."

Rocky rolled his eyes. "That was a hundred years ago, Julia. Nowadays, I have to thank Saint Jerome if one of the girls at the high school lets Zwerg Nase lure her curiously behind the bushes."

Her watch beeped softly. "Storytime's over, Rocky. Shall we reschedule the next interrogation about the girls from the high school for next Thursday at the same time!?" Rocky nodded and stood up unsteadily. He walked her down to the underground parking garage. "I know now that we're going to be good friends, Julia. Very good friends — no messing around, no frills, and none of that stuff. That's how you want it, right?" She nodded and drove off.

Alfie grunted and snorted as she told him everything. "We both know it's not about size. And you say, he did it inside his boxer-shorts, three times? It's interesting how he's into his mom. I know exactly what's going on in his heart — I was his age once, too. Most guys probably have that fantasy, as long as their mom doesn't have bad breath. And, if we're to believe the statistics, for most of them it remains just a fantasy. Thank God!" Julia bit her tongue to keep from replying. She thought of the incestuous goings-on on Mount Olympus, which men had probably made up. At least in the legends and myths, it played out in such a way that the numbers would just fly right past the statisticians' ears.

Once again, Rocky picked her up in the underground parking garage; once again, he came without a wheelchair, wearing just a T-shirt and boxer shorts. “I’m practicing walking and standing every day now, without a wheelchair. I overheard Mom and the doctor talking — my spine is really shot and is deteriorating from the inside out, every day. ‘He probably won’t make it to 30,’ the doctor said regretfully, and Mom cried like a baby. I at least want to be able to walk again before I die, Julia.” When they got upstairs, two glasses and some iced lemonade were waiting for them. Rocky went straight to his sleeping area and lay down naked on the bed; Julia parked the Ferrari and followed him, feeling a little anxious. “No fooling around and no nonsense, Rocky, please don’t! You can snuggle up to me — that’s okay. I’d love to give you warmth and closeness.” With an expectant look on his face, Rocky undressed her, piece by piece. She took great care to ensure he did not catch sight of her secret — the Great Serpent. Rocky actually snuggled up to her and wrapped an arm around her chest, his lips right against her ear. “I’ve always longed for someone with whom I can discuss my interests and to whom I can snuggle up physically. Because I miss that so much!” Julia understood what he meant.

Rocky lay next to her, enjoying the closeness and warmth of their bodies. His hand rested on her breast, but in a completely innocent way. Julia took a drag on her joint and felt his “Dwarf Nose” against her thigh as he worked away ceaselessly. Yes, he would flood the snakes again — time and time again — but she was actually used to that by now. He whispered about how Anni bathed him every morning and how she did it reluctantly, full of disgust. Anni was very upset — bathing a boy as big as him like a toddler was the absolute worst! But she did it, grumbling and reluctantly. The boss, his mom, had ordered it. Rocky told Julia about his fantasies, how he planned to seduce Anni. Yes, he described in minute detail exactly how he could manipulate her and pounce on her. How he would achieve his goal, without any violence at all. She would surely go along with it; she wouldn’t put up any serious resistance, because she didn’t want to lose her job.

Julia looked at him from the side. “Come on, think about it again! Isn’t it a form of violence when you force her to do your bidding so she can keep her job? This is a truly insidious form of violence, Rocky. Shame on you! And here’s another thing. You should never do that with employees or subordinates. How willingly are

they getting involved with you? Not at all, believe me. There's always dynamite in there — it can explode at any moment and blow right back in your face! And one last point: would you print out a picture of Anni and stick it on the wall right here, among your playmates?" Rocky swallowed hard. "Oh, come on, Anni doesn't belong here — she's no beauty, for crying out loud!" Julia smiled. "See, that's my last point. I can see all around me that you have good taste in choosing your playmates — really good taste, in fact. Beautiful, graceful, soft-to-the-touch girls, every single one of them. So why are you chasing after Anni? I'd say she's downright ugly, even though no one is really ugly. You only want her because she's always within reach. A very convenient, lazy, and undignified point of view, I'd say. But what about the girls at the high school?" Rocky swallowed hard. "They only go behind the bushes with me because they're curious about my Dwarf Nose. There's not a trace of affection, Julia. That kind of curiosity is like a direct insult — they just want to know what it feels like with the Dwarfs Nose. I hate them for it, even though I enjoy the closeness, the nakedness, and the rain streaming in."

Julia stroked his hair, his head. "Keep pursuing the girls from high school. One or two of them will realize what an enchanting, sweet prince is hidden inside Dwarf Long Nose. Always remember how popular Dwarf Long Nose used to be — back then, the girls weren't shy around you." Rocky buried his face in her armpit; he didn't want her to notice how bitterly he was crying over the girls at the high school — his Dwarf Long Nose.

Robert lifted his tear-streaked face. "Julia, can I stick it between the snakes?" Despite being high, Julia's breath caught for a moment. But his eyes were clear. "Okay — but no Ficki-Facki, no Schnickschnack, no messing around." Rocky nodded. "I just want you to see how I do it, Julia. I want to show you how I do it." She nodded and pressed her thighs tightly together. — Didn't she realize how steep the path had already become here? — Rocky lay across her thighs and slid his little guy stuck between the snakes. "They aren't afraid of water, Robert; they're just a little surprised." Julia smiled. "Yes, that's understandable, Rocky. But they'll get used to it." Rocky kept thrusting between the snakes, and Julia took a drag on her joint. She was high and enjoying Robert's closeness and warmth. No, this wasn't Ficki-Facki, Schnickschnack or messing around. It was just Robert's overflowing libido wanting to

water the snakes. She smiled — there was nothing wrong with that, after all, was there!?

From that afternoon on, Rocky worked only between the snakes, pouring over them, while Julia gazed at his doing and puffed on her joint. She enjoyed his Schnickschnack in a strangely twisted way — something she would have admitted to herself, had she stopped to think about it. She smiled; after all, what was the harm? She asked him to tell her about the girls in wheelchairs who had been there before. Rocky told her about them one by one, without a trace of inhibition. The trickiest ones were the young girls who had never done it before; he sometimes felt foolish having to explain the theory to them first. The others were easy to handle — they knew the score and wanted it for themselves. His backside hovered in mid-air for a moment when she asked which age group he was talking about. He thought for a moment. “The youngest was a seventeen-year-old virgin, a paraplegic after a swimming pool accident. The oldest was a fifty-three-year-old divorcée who basically let anyone have a taste of her honey pot.” He kept thrusting and watering the snakes. He told her about each one individually; he had a good memory and a keen eye for details. With her eyes closed, Julia could picture it all; it was thrilling and highly arousing.

Another time, he brought up his mom. They had moved past the “Anni phase,” and he realized he should leave the employee alone. Now he dared to confide his most secret fantasies about his mom to his best friend. How intensely he dreamed of his mom and her body. How much he was drawn to her. Julia shook her head. “Would you put a picture of your mom up on the wall here?” Rocky nodded in agreement. “Oh yeah, she’s a real beauty and would outshine all the girls when it comes to looks and beauty!” Julia had to change her strategy, take a detour. “But you do see her naked when she has time to give you a bath, and so on?” Rocky nodded up and down. “Yes, Julia. She’s just centimeters away and yet out of reach! She never lets me touch her skin. A long time ago, my hand strayed from beneath her backside around along her butt crack to the front, just as she was pleasuring me so nicely — you know how it is. ‘Keep your paws to yourself, sonny!’ she said sternly. I haven’t touched her since, Julia.”

And now he was describing to her, in vivid, explicit detail, what his mom's body looked like. Excitedly, his fingers absentmindedly pinched Julia's nipples. She ignored it and listened intently. Oh, she knew all those details already — that wasn't what mattered. His voice carried a longing for his mom's touch, for her embrace, for her kisses — for child's kisses. Julia shuddered or felt a chill as she listened to him and the tone of his voice. No, this wasn't the sex-crazed jerk who was after incest. This wasn't the teenager who was desperate to have sex with her, no matter what the consequences might be. No, this was a boy in dire straits, who missed his mother as a mother, not as a sexual partner. Rocky pulled himself together when he admitted to his eavesdropping. Mom was more or less just drifting through life alongside Dad, and she had some occasional affairs, mostly with men. And Rocky, that hapless little guy, sank into deep depression the more intensely and passionately Mom lay in the arms of a lover. Rocky recognized these bouts of depression very clearly and successfully shook them off. Julia pulled him close. She felt so sorry for him.

Julia blew the smoke into the air in little, playful curls. "I'm not going to lecture you on incest, Rocky — I've got my own story, after all. But your mom's right — it's a sin against God and nature, not just against human laws; we don't give a damn about those anyway." Rocky stared at the group of girls on the wall and nodded. "I dream about my mom, but of course they're just dreams — nothing physical. I might be oversexed, but I'm no idiot, Julia. They're just thoughts and longings spinning around in my head. Not my hands — I've got those under control." Julia pulled him close. "I understand very well that you're missing closeness and warmth. At the same time, I'm convinced that you're the star in your mom's eyes, even if she's currently drowning in work and barely has any time for you, my boy."

The path was now so slippery that a fall was inevitable.

Rocky slipped, sliding along the snakes. His Dwarf Nose thrust all the way in, right into the Great Snake's maw, deep and to the end. Julia was so startled that her joint fell onto the bedspread. Terrified, she grabbed Rocky's hips. "Rocky, stop!" She shoved him back hard, maneuvering his hips with her hands so he had to pull his Dwarf Nose out. Only the plum-shaped head remained stuck inside. He nodded as she earnestly admonished him: "No

Ficki-Facki — and no Schnickschnack, that's what we agreed on!" He kept thrusting and she could no longer pull the plum out. She reached for the joint and took a desperate drag. A sense of calm and indifference washed over her. Rocky's plum thrust inside like a madman, and Julia held her breath. Rocky had crossed the red line; this was real fucking — just with the plum, not with the whole "Dwarf Nose." Nevertheless, it was the real, genuine article: real Ficki-Facki with the plum. She couldn't stop it. Rocky arched his back as it began to spurt. Exhausted, he collapsed over her, and now the whole Dwarf Nose slid deep inside. With a strange indifference, she felt the twitching and spurting of the plum, deep inside. She had always managed to tame the hawk before, but now the dam had burst. She groped for her magic button, and less than three seconds later, the hawk sank his claws into her flesh. Her trembling subsided, and she pulled the Dwarf Nose out. Four or five times, each Thursday.

Once doesn't count, she told herself. But she was sorely mistaken — though, in a way, she didn't really care. It was the usual routine now for Rocky to first shove his Dwarf Long Nose deep into her pussyhole — hoping she would let him continue — She had to push him back by the hips, but she never managed to force the plum out. Indeed, the plum remained inside her while his hips thrust and worked, Ficki-Facki with the plum. And as he spurted, he slumped forward, allowing her to clearly feel the plum twitching and spurting deep within. Almost automatically, she let the hawk sink his talons into her flesh; after all, it didn't matter whether Rocky noticed her exploding libido or not. Yes, this went on Thursday after Thursday — four or five times — for months. She still didn't dare tell Alfie about it. He would simply laugh at her, and rightly so. In a moment of clarity, Julia knew she had to put a stop to it — to the whole thing, everything — and never set foot in Riemergasse again. She held off a little longer, waiting for a favorable opportunity to arise.

Another time, the conversation turned to his mom. They had moved past the "Anni phase," and he realized he should leave that employee alone. Now, he felt bold enough to confide his most secret fantasies about Mom to his older friend — how intensely he dreamed of Mom and her body, and how strongly he was drawn to her. Julia shook her head. "Would you stick a picture of your mom up on the wall here?" Rocky nodded affirmatively. "Oh yes, she's a

real beauty; she'd outshine all the other girls when it comes to looks and beauty!" Julia had to change her strategy, take a different approach. "But you do see her naked, don't you — when she has time and bathes you, and so on?" Rocky's head bobbed up and down. "Yes, Julia. She's just centimeters away, yet completely out of reach! She never lets me touch her skin. A long time ago, my hand strayed — under her bottom, along the crack, and right around to the front part — just as she was making it feel so good for me, you know? 'Keep your paws to yourself, sonny!' she said sternly. I haven't touched her since then, Julia."

And then he described his mom's body to her in vivid, explicit detail. In his excitement, his fingers absentmindedly pinched Julia's nipple. She ignored it and listened intently. Oh, she knew all the details; that wasn't the important part. His voice resonated with a longing for Mom's touch, for her embrace, for her kisses — childhood kisses. Julia shuddered — or perhaps felt a chill — as she listened to him and the tone of his voice. No, that wasn't the sex-crazed creep out for incest. That wasn't the teenager desperate to screw her, regardless of the consequences. No, this was a boy in dire need — missing his mother as a mother, not as a sexual partner. Rocky steeled himself to admit he'd been spying. Mom was just sort of drifting through life alongside Dad, having the occasional affair — usually with men. And Rocky — poor, unfortunate "Dwarf Long-Nose" — would sink into a wretched depression whenever Mom lay in the arms of a lover, male or female, with particular passion. Rocky recognized these bouts of depression clearly and managed to shake them off. Julia hugged him close; her heart went out to him.

Julia blew smoke into the air in funny little rings. "I'm not going to lecture you on incest, Rocky — I've got my own history, after all. But your mom is right: it's a sin against God and nature, not just against human laws — and to hell with those, really." Rocky stared at the lineup of girls on his wall and nodded. "I dream about my mom — but just dreams, of course, nothing physical. I might be oversexed, but I'm no fool, Julia. It's just thoughts and longings spinning around in my head. Not my hands — I've got those under control." Julia hugged him close. "I completely understand that you're missing closeness and warmth. At the same time, I'm convinced you're the apple of your mom's eye — even if she's drowning in work right now and hardly has time for you, my boy."

Julia glanced at her smartwatch; she still had a few minutes before she had to leave. She sat up and cupped Rocky's face in her hands. "Rocky, I have to tell you something that might hurt a little. I won't be coming here to see you anymore. No, you didn't do anything wrong. I have to stay away — for my own sake. We agreed: no frills and no hookups, and you've stuck to that like a man of honor, a gentleman. I'm just afraid I won't be able to keep that agreement. I can feel how we're both drifting further and further apart, step by step. I have to make a radical break with my past. I'm not going to seduce a 14-year-old and corrupt him. Be a good boy — keep your hands off Anni and your mom — and please focus on the girls at high school. Show them the enchanted prince hidden inside Dwarf Long Nose. Fall in love, chase after them, lift up their little skirts. Let your fingers slide beneath the hem of their panties — and then let "Dwarf Nose" slide in there too, and let them be curious — that's how it should be; that's the right way for a clever boy like you.It hurts my heart, too, but I can't come anymore. I really can't." Tears ran down Rocky's cheeks.

He understood and grasped every word, and he didn't see anything wrong with it. Julia knew herself better than he did, and if she didn't want to cross her line, then that was fine. But still, it hurt like hell to lose her. He wiped the tears from his eyes with his sleeve. "Yes, losing you as a friend hurts like hell. And not because we did anything wrong or because we crossed the line. I'll cry for a long time because you've grown dear to my heart. But still, you've given me something, Julia. You came to see me Thursday after Thursday; you listened to me patiently, just like a girlfriend; you opened my eyes to certain things and showed me the right path. Thursday after Thursday, I was able to snuggle up against your warm body and feel something like affection and a sense of belonging. I'll frame these gifts deep in my heart and hang them on the wall. It doesn't matter if I'm crying right now. What matters is that you'll still be in my soul, in my heart, somehow. Yes, I'll keep my fingers away from Anni and Mom, because it feels wrong. I'll take better care of the girls at school, just as you said. You gave Little Nose confidence and hope that one day a Cinderella would discover the enchanted prince and willingly go behind the bushes with Little Nose. And for that, I thank you, Julia, my best friend!" He buried his face in her bosom and wailed, crying out all his pain.

Julia lay next to Alfie, nestling her face against his chest. He listened in silence as she told him — just as she did every Thursday — how she'd let little Rocky, Dwarf Long Nose, hug her that afternoon until her smartwatch beeped. Alfie's hand rested warmly and reassuringly on her back. He listened with a smile, clearly sensing her arousal and sexual desire. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself so much with him, my love. He may be a child by definition, but he's also a 14-year-old with big, hungry eyes. He wanted closeness and skin-to-skin contact, and you gave it to him because you have a big, compassionate heart, Julia." Alfie was glad that she was so at one with her maternal feelings and her social empathy. That was something that was definitely part of who she was.

"I won't go back to him, Alfie. I said goodbye to him properly and honestly. I know myself and the devil in my body pretty well. First we'll lie next to each other fully clothed. Then we'll lie next to each other naked, skin to skin. And the next time, we'll cross the line. I won't allow myself to ruin a 14-year-old. That's not who I am; that's not my character. I'm far from having to give in to every impulse of my sex drive. I'm a human being; I have a mind of my own, and I want to take full responsibility for everything I do or don't do. And what I certainly won't do is seduce 14-year-old Robert and ruin his childhood."

Alfie took the joint from her hand and took a deep drag. "I'm really sorry about Robert. I would have been fine with you letting loose for once. But I'm sure you've thought it through and are doing what you can live with."

Julia rested her chin in her palm. "That's something you won't read in my dissertation: for all his power, the king of the gods had no power over his own lusts. In short, a dick-driven idiot. Yes, that's what he was — not a man who changed the world and gave it a positive nudge, like Hammurabi or Ramses III. He was the ultimate womanizer, nothing more, and the ancient Greeks were simply foolish enough to admire it, caught up in a sort of mass psychosis. Of course, you won't find any of that in my doctoral thesis; after all, you taught me to work with a clear objective and not to ruin things right off the bat with my obsession for the truth."

Alfie took the joint from her hand again and took a deep drag. "You said it, and I couldn't agree with you more. I ought to wonder

why I haven't put it quite so clearly before. But I know the reason: Zeus and the gods vanished from our culture without a trace because we gradually realized he was just a dick-driven idiot — nothing more. His breath had an expiration date; it's as simple as that. Even if we won't read it explicitly in your dissertation." He absentmindedly slid the strap of her negligee down. "Sex is powerful. Sex is great. Sex can make us feel wonderfully happy, relaxed, in love, and drawn to one another. But sex isn't some all-singing, all-dancing cure-all that represents our be-all and end-all. There is more — so much more — in the land of Ophir waiting for us to discover and experience it. We are destined to lift the veil a little and catch a glimpse of the 'Callipyge' — those beautiful curves beneath the veil; old Sophocles knew that, the old lecher."

Julia smiled. Yes, that was her Alfie. He could phrase things so poetically that her fingers would twitch, wanting to jot it down, to quote him. And he was right. We really are destined to lift veils and peek curiously at the 'Callipyge', even though the rational mind yawns in boredom and dismisses it, having seen it all a thousand times before. She thought of Yvonne — of the moment she first saw Alfie asleep, how she had lifted the sheet quite matter-of-factly to verify that the bald guy was, in fact, a guy.

Yes, that's how we are.

Sophocles knew that.

He was a bright fellow, that Sophocles.

Swan song

Alfie worked almost day and night. He has long been on the screen from evening to morning, 14 hours a day. Wrote emails, answered emails and downloaded documents. Tireless. The four scanners in the apartment next door were humming and whirring; they had been working nonstop for a year and a half. Alfie only went to the neighboring apartment once, usually in the morning, took the documents that had already been scanned and stacked them in the corridor, where the men from the garbage collection picked them up every day and took them for paper recycling. With a handful of dollars, Alfie could delegate this activity. He filled the large input loading lanes with new food, with hundreds of books, journals and magazines. Marybel, Jezebel, Isabel and Pombel worked tirelessly and were incredibly proud that they filled the hard drives with terabytes non-stop. No, Alfie was no fool to give his machines names and to provide the three ladies with an experienced man. When he christened the Pombel, he corrupted the name of the Marquis de Pombal, who, among other things, led Lisbon to new prosperity. Well, he looked back proudly from the door, the girls and the marquis had food for the next 24 hours and would fill the hard drives page by page. He locked the door carefully.

It took him 40 minutes to get downtown to Julia's apartment. She would greet him in her negligee like every morning and hug him, the Arabia coffee would be ready in no time and then he would lie down in her bed and immediately fall asleep. She would kiss him awake at lunchtime with her warm womanly body and they would roll together for the 7 minutes to the pond, it was a fixed ritual like the sunrise. Although Julia could walk normally, she drove the Ferrari to the pond, which was as certain as the sunrise. Sitting in the Ferrari gave her the opportunity to show her beautiful breasts openly and a little bit of her pubic hair to attract the attention of passers-by. Our shy Julia is certainly a little bit cheeky, isn't she? The mallard ducklings had grown up and two guys had wandered off and were exploring the world outside the pond on their own. The six little sisters stayed together at the pond, where there was food and they could swim in the pond as they pleased. The parents were away one day and there was duck

breast in the town hall that day. The mayor of Giza was visiting from faraway Egypt, and duck was kosher, halal for the distinguished guest.

Alfie usually cooked lunch. He had never cooked before, but he couldn't see Julia eating any sandwich from any supermarket with any filling just to avoid wasting valuable time and accumulate completely unnecessary fat around her hips from the sandwiches. That shouldn't work! He skipped all the sandwiches and cooked fresh vegetables, sides and fresh meat from the butcher. Everything was fresh from the farmers market, he much preferred shopping there. In his time there was none of that, just uniform waste from the food factories. He had never learned to cook, but he could. Recipes were easy to decipher; he didn't watch a single cooking show on television, but interpreted the recipes conscientiously. They had lunch together, Julia broke away from the world of gods for these 20 minutes and let Alfie entertain her. Eat well and healthily, and the fat rolls were gone in no time.

He usually had a button in his ear and listened to the news. He was completely overwhelmed, the librarian in his chest shouted ecstatically. He followed the events up close and in real time, which he would one day exhibit in his museum. "Imagine, Julia, you were there as the boy king Tutankhamen circles in his chariot in battle against the horde of Hittites, as the wheels rattle over a boulder and he falls, shattering his knee. As he lies half-conscious on the sick bed and the murderer hired by his successor bashes his skull in. It makes a difference whether you are there live or whether you are there 4,000 years later and read about it in a glossy illustrated book."

Julia smiled. How similar their work was! She also collected everything, the smallest scraps that could still be found today, in order to immerse herself in the murderous, magical and mythical world of the gods. Her world was also a museum, so to speak; she too had to learn to discover and uncover politically and socially demanded cleansing in her legends and myths. To recount their sexual adventures, their frauds and swindles, their small and large crimes and to describe a clever analysis of the political and social control mechanisms, yes, that was their mission. The ancient Greeks didn't create the world of gods so that those of us born later would have something to read by the bonfire. No, the legends

and stories were intended to shape, educate and guide ancient Greek society. And that was Julia's job, to bring it to light, to give us a clear picture, because our society also needed to be further shaped, educated and guided.

Alfie, this jack of all trades, always brought a little sweet dessert with Arabia coffee. So they smoked a good digestive cigarette and then got back to work. Julia sank back into her lore, Alfie grabbed the wicker basket and went hunting to find the ingredients for tomorrow's lunch menu.

But sometimes in the afternoon he would sit alone by the pond and talk to the waterfowl. The mallard sisters, but also the three gray heron ladies, listened to his melodious voice. He told them about the board committee, which was becoming impatient, and about the director, who was fighting like a lioness for her Alfred. He had returned home for a jump and brought a backpack full of hard drives, more than 850 terabytes of past history. He jumped back to Julia's time as quickly as possible; he hadn't been gone for a second. But they gave him a reprieve, maybe two more months. Yes, he had been with Julia for 16 months and was grateful for every additional day.

How often did he toss and turn, half asleep, wondering whether he should return to his time in 2932 or whether he should stay with Julia forever? All he had to do was destroy or severely damage the communicator in his chest and they would no longer be able to transfer him back at the push of a button. Of course, they could send sheriffs, but that was unlikely. He had heard rumors that some time travelers never returned. No, it wasn't dinosaurs that had eaten them, it wasn't gladiators that had speared them, no, but they had found a much more useful life in another time. Just like him.

At night he now spoke almost every day with the director, Dr. Jessie Huntsman. She was about the age his mother would be today. And she took the time for her best man. She played neither a mother nor a siren, she simply felt responsible for him, for his spiritual salvation. She was interested in his work and they discussed in detail what his new department should look like. The space required, the showcases and screen spaces, the printers and

copiers for students and visitors, the storage space on the servers and how much money she had to spend for all of this.

But she also felt responsible for his soul; that was a quality of her dazzling personality. Alfie let her in on everything; she knew about Julia, her doctoral thesis, Yvonne and also little Robert. It was a shock to her right from the start that Alfie took Julia as his wife — really and seriously. Jessie Huntsman wasn't jealous in the least, she had followed the development of this relationship from the beginning, she saw how the sight of the angelic glow on Julia's face shot like lightning to Alfie's loins as she rolled out of the university building. She understood how one thing led to another. She was just afraid that Alfie would give up his assignment or even his job at the National Library. The thought was absolutely real, she saw it much earlier than Alfie himself. She just knew she wouldn't give it up without a fight. The committee would tear her head off, that was as certain as Amen in church.

Her own personal file already bore the taint of a renegade, but how could she have prevented Charles Stellarion Frenkel from being proclaimed King of Araucania and Patagonia? (King Charles Stellarion Frenkel, that legendary time traveler who had married the Mapuche princess years earlier and was raised in 1790 to the throne of Araucanía by the people following the death of the old king). None of these considerations applied to the committee; they were all tough concrete heads who only clung to dots and commas, without any human emotion. Jessie Huntsman, on the other hand, was of a completely different breed. She looked after the spiritual well-being of her around 200 employees. She took the word in the truest sense: the soul had to be whole. Everything else was secondary, affairs or divorces, botched ski holidays or inheritance disputes in the family. All of this could be tackled, analyzed, solved and done. But she would never shrug off a soul hanging askew in the closet. Jessie Huntsman was not only a technically excellent manager of her department. No, she was a manager who took on more responsibility than just having proper balance sheets or budgets drawn up. This is how we have to see the relationship between the headmistress and Alfie.

As I said, apart from her, he could only talk to the birds. They nodded wisely because they understood everything well and because they picked up a grain while nodding. Alfie loved Julia as he

had never loved any woman, not even Hilda. It would be so easy to stay with Julia. But he would betray his mission, and he would betray the kind-hearted director. This was more important to him than the betrayal of the National Library; that had no real weight. The National Library was definitely screwed. A termination — *so what?* someone else would be found quickly, no doubt. But the thought of betraying the director hurt him. He still had 6 weeks to decide. He shook himself before standing up and bidding the birds farewell.

Alfie's neighbor on Pálffygasse was Roland, a former cyclist. A taciturn but extremely friendly man. They always greeted each other and he once went over to borrow a few sugar cubes for his coffee. Roland saw Alfie's look at the 6 shiny racing bikes hanging on hooks from the ceiling. "I drive my route every morning, keeps my body fit and my mind awake," grumbled Roland Garber. They had a very friendly chat, and Roland's eyebrows twitched when Alfie confessed that he had last ridden a bike 30 years ago, when he was a teenager. Roland lifted a wheel off the hook. "It's an older piece, but just right for doing another round." All bikes were sparkling clean, oiled and the chains greased. Roland took care of his bikes; he would never let them go to waste. He handed Alfie the Cannondale and asked him to do a few laps again. Roland had lent him a helmet for the first ride. "Your life is always in danger in this city traffic, Alfred." Yes, he rang Alfie's doorbell early in the morning and cycled along "his" route with him at a leisurely pace. Trembling with awe, Alfie mounted the bike and followed the old gentleman. It was a really well thought out loop, you avoided the main traffic and used as many paths next to green spaces as if you were in the countryside. Roland told him about a specialty store that his two sons ran, where the prices were affordable and the quality was as honest as a handshake. Alfie bought his outfit, two pairs of cycling shorts, four fitted shirts, a helmet, gloves and the special shoes.

Of course he could have bought a new bike, but refusing Roland's loan would have been an unnecessary affront. And yes, now he understood why Julia had talked about the wind in her hair. The wind glided over his bald head, brushing away the last remnants of sleep like dust and leaving him to think as he pedaled hard. It was a new, good discovery to drive Roland's route for 20 minutes before showering and having a morning coffee. His

thoughts revolved around the director and Julia; there was nothing more important. He had smiled with satisfaction when the headmistress told him that she would nominate him as her successor when she retired. It would be an honor, Alfie said to the face of Jessie Huntsman on the video call across 900 years. “And Grandpa Arthur would look down proudly from his cloud,” he added. “Grandpa knighted me and sent me on a quest to prove myself and make him proud. He was a good man, my grandpa,” Alfie said. Jessie nodded, even though she had no idea who this grandpa was. “He raised you to be an extraordinary man. Decency and honor and backbone don’t come automatically with your mother’s milk.”

The wind blew around his bald head and made his thoughts clear and free. He had loved his Hilda; it had been a love match — at least for his part. In the first year they made love day and night, with intimate spray and a condom of course. And Hilda was a good wife and a great mother, without a doubt. Only the devil in her loins worried him; she suffered like a dog when one of her lovers died from the virus. And when she took Orlando as her lover, a blonde-haired angel of 14, she gave him everything and took everything from him. Sweet Orlando, who was dying in her arms — like a burnt-out candle wick, his eyes went out and broke, the virus had taken him away, heartless and merciless. Hilda locked herself in her bedroom for days and took her own life. She had ruined too many men and she could no longer bear the fact that she was the one to blame for Orlando’s death.

Waltraud, Heinrich and he stood at her grave, blind with tears, and witnessed the end of the world. He withdrew, apologized at all public occasions and avoided people. He had seen how Hilda had blossomed in Orlando’s arms, how she had exulted and rejoiced in her happiness in the boy’s arms. Hilda brought the shy Orlando into her marriage bed and let him share in her ecstasy, because he was not a stranger, but her lover, her Alfie. She held his hand and almost crushed it in her ecstasy. The beautiful Orlando gave him shy glances as he dutifully drove Hilda to new heights, lap after lap. Hilda held Alfie’s hand, just as she held his hand when she let her little machine hum on her body until late into the night and finally brought it to an end with her hand, shouting and rejoicing. Tears welled up in Alfie’s eyes because he was crying for his Hilda

and the shy Orlando. A 14-year-old teenager who didn't deserve to die like a dog in Hilda's arms.

Alfie turned around at Türkenschanzpark and sat on a park bench, taking a short smoke break. His eyes slid over the parked cars, because this parking lot was 'the' parking lot where businessmen and girls exchanged their juices hastily and breathlessly. No, Alfie was neither a voyeur nor a Peeping Tom, his thoughts were elsewhere as his eyes indifferently followed the undulating, rolling and rhythmic beating of waves behind the fogged car windows. No, Hilda was not an easy girl who would have had such cheap and shameless fun in a parking lot like that. The devil in her womb fell in love when the hormones followed the compass — it was that simple and merciless. And Waltraud also had this devil in her womb, he thought sadly, she too would experience the ups and downs of physical love like poor Hilda. Waltraud had tearfully assured him and Heinrich that she would live a chaste life like a nun in a monastery, but father and son knew about the power of the devil who lurked between her thighs. Alfie angrily stubbed out the cigarette butt and threw it into the trash can. Now we went back, slightly downhill, with the wind on the bald head.

Every morning Alfie did a lap around Roland's route. Today was Wednesday, yesterday he was in Julia and Yvonne's arms having sex with both girls. Alfie pedaled and increased the pace, it went slightly uphill to Türkenschanzpark — he had been lying between the thighs of both girls and now he pedaled, trampling against the thought of physical love, as if to make him forget it. Yvonne was a good, honest person, she wasn't a cheap slut. Yes, she changed her boys' like others changed their shirts, but it was always an honest thing on her part. She reminded Alfie painfully of the devil in Hilda and Waltraud's womb when he lay with her.

Not many girls surrendered to this devil without a fight, Julia for example. She had rebuffed the devil and forcefully separated from little Robert, because she knew exactly about the devil in her womb. No, Julia and Yvonne were completely different, only when it came to girl sex they were like twins, eagerly snapping at each other's lips. How did the director put it? "Keep your love for Julia like the intoxicated rush of the wedding night and the rush *honeymoon*, on honeymoon. Store that rush in your soul and come back before the rush wears off and the routine of everyday life wears

you out and burns you out." Oh, she was very smart, that Jessie Huntsman, she stuck to facts and realities, but she also knew about love and falling in love.

Cigarette break at Türkenschanzpark. Yes, it was a frenzy in which he and Julia reeled. For the first time in his life, he was more in love than ever before. But in his mind there also lived a serious, critical and incorruptible Alfred. "Julia's feelings will be dulled by everyday life. The devil in her womb will really take a toll on her and there will be one Robert after the other. Today she loves you madly, today she is still in the high of your honeymoon. But her giving in and her consent when she accepted you into the girl's sex and actively included you having Sex with her girlfriend Yvonne, that should give you something to think about. She only gave in gradually and hesitantly to Yvonne's urging, but finally she gave in, "That's the crucial fact. Nothing is set in stone and for eternity. Robert after Robert, they will bounce her in ecstasy like a flat stone on the surface of the water, but in the end the stone will sink, don't forget that!" Passersby shook their heads, a professional-looking cyclist smoking!

Alfie shook his head too, remembering Julia's words about how hot she felt when the little Dwarf Long Nose exposed himself in front of her. How she struggled with the sweet temptation and the bitter renunciation. And what did he have to say to that, he, the stupid oaf? "Size isn't everything, Julia!" Oh, what a great platitude, invented by small-cocked envious men. Julia's eyes had shone feverishly as she described Robert's nakedness to him in minute detail. How would he have reacted if she had succumbed to the temptation?

He angrily put the next cigarette back in the pack, only one, not two during the smoke break! He couldn't imagine that Julia wasn't in his arms and someone else was giving her the gift of ecstasy. He shook as if shivering, the thought was absurd! Julia was in his arms, not Robert's. Julia made love with him, she renounced the great Robert. They gave each other the ecstasies, not Robert, not the Dwarf Long Nose or anyone else. And — she sought to be close to him, she lay softly in the crook of his arm so that her exuberant libido could tremble at his side. There was only her exuberant, overwhelming libido, snuggled up to her Alfie — and no Robert

anywhere! But the other Alfred had driven his poison arrow into his heart, the doubts remained.

Once a week he went over to Roland to clean and oil the Cannondale and properly grease the chain. They didn't talk much. The old man smiled mildly as Alfie told him about his first bike. It may have been a pink girl's bike, but it shone and gleamed with chrome and that impressed everyone. Once Alfie had talked about his lover, Julia. Roland had looked up. "I'm married and have grown children who we raised to be good, honest Christians. The best sex is when you've conquered the Großglockner Pass, believe me." This settled the issue once and for all.

He couldn't get the thing with Yvonne and Robert out of his mind. He had ignored Yvonne's temptations for a long time. He had taken Julia as his wife, not Yvonne; he was able to align himself with these guardrails and hold on. It was Julia's hand that took his hand during girl sex and gently glided it over Yvonne's most sensitive femininity. Oh, he shouldn't sulk grumpily at the foot of the bed, he should calmly step in front of the door, stretch out his palm and feel the raindrops on his hand, feel Yvonne's nectar with his own hand! It was Julia who forcefully pushed Yvonne aside and took him right there; she broke the rules of girls' sex quite freely and shamelessly. And it was Julia who smiled in confusion as Yvonne immediately took him too, unbridled, wild and dominant. Julia, who just smiled in confusion and didn't screech in protest. He surrendered to Yvonne's octopus-armed embrace because Julia smiled and didn't scream bloody murder.

Alfie pedaled hard, it went uphill to Türkenschanzpark and his thoughts were, to put it mildly, completely confused. Julia had patiently listened to Robert's suffering, week after week. She let him hug her when they lay on his bed. She hadn't stopped Robert's hand as it slipped under her shirt and found her teats. Yes, week after week they lay naked together, little Robert and motherly Julia, his big friend. She just gently pushed him back when he wanted to rush forward. Cuddling is enough, she said. Breathless, Robert pressed himself against Julia's side, his hand moving ceaselessly up and down over his Dwarf Nose, and Thursday after Thursday, it trickled down her trembling inner thighs. Julia understood his automatically bursting wetness, because he didn't at-

tack her, but rather his instincts had to take hold, no matter what! The poor guy.

And then the bang. Julia had shied away from taking the last step. Was it the fear of being caught with a minor? Was it fear that the scandal would destroy her academic career before it even began? What was she shying away from as she let it rain over her trembling inner thighs Thursday after Thursday? Alfie shook his head, not knowing the answer. She had just told him that she had to end it, that she didn't dare take the last step after the last step, she had said through tears. Dwarf Nose was never allowed to take her properly, she couldn't open the final gate to let the devil in her body off the leash, she sobbed. The dams would break, she had said through tears, but she simply couldn't allow that. Never ever!

Alfie had taken her tear-stained face in his hands and calmed her. The last, decisive step hadn't happened, he had murmured, she hadn't let Dwarf Nose win in the end, hadn't allowed herself to be tainted or defiled. And isn't this last step the one she wants to avoid? Alfie said, half questioning. Julia nodded through tears. She felt that Alfie largely understood her and her confusing feelings. She sobbed that she only ever let Robert whet the snake tattoos between her pressed inner thighs, a little bashful Ficki-Facki without penetration, she sobbed. The snakes could easily handle a little bit of wetness. Julia tried a shy, embarrassed smile through her tears, for months the snakes were flooded without incident. It was okay, she sobbed, it was really okay!?

But the tip of Dwarf Nose's nose did dip inside — that tip, which looked like a plum, did somehow conquer her. Somehow — just a little, really only that exploding plum, she sobbed — never the whole Dwarf Nose, no! She would never allow that final, absolute step! Through a veil of tears, Julia looked to Alfie for help. She had grabbed Robert's hips and instantly pushed him back, forcing him to withdraw Dwarf Nose's full length until only that plum-shaped tip remained inside. She simply couldn't manage to pull his plum out. No, she couldn't let him go any further — she had whispered this to the heavily pounding, panting Robert; she had sworn it to herself!

Rocky had crossed the red line. His plum was inside her and he was doing the real Ficki-Facki — the cheeky lad! Julia had held her

breath; she had forbidden him to do that, after all — this was the real Ficki-Facki , only not with the whole 'Dwarf Nose', just with his plum only. Oh, real Ficki-Facki with the plum! She flinched — as if struck by a whip — when the plum exploded spitting deep inside her. And Robert had slumped forward, exhausted, and thrust his "Dwarf Nose" inside to the hilt; she could clearly feel him twitching and spurting inside. Julia's shoulders shook because she was sobbing so hard. Alfie shook his head slowly, in disbelief. "Why just a little, why only with the handbrake on?" Julia hid her face in the crook of his arm, she was completely ashamed. "Because it wasn't just a one-off slip-up, Alfie," she sobbed, crying miserably.

The loving couple made room as the cyclist sat down on the bench next to them. The girl giggled as she looked over at the cars in the secretive parking lot. Her gaze met Alfie's, a look full of sinful shame in foreboding and anticipation. Alfie flinched, because that was the look Mom gave him before she pressed the plunger button to full speed, a sinful, shameful look that had always confused him. Mom had smiled softly and closed her eyes, listening inwardly to herself and now he placed his face on her breasts to hear her galloping heartbeat.

Alfie put the cigarette back in the pack. He didn't feel like smoking today. He stood up, nodded encouragingly to the couple and cycled off. It wasn't a good start, now he had his mother and her smile in front of his eyes. A smile that he actually loved so much. This evening, during the video call with the director, he would say with determination in his voice that he wouldn't be coming back, but that he would of course fulfill his order and send her all the hard drives. But he would stay here, with Julia, with Yvonne and with Dwarf Nose. He pedaled resolutely; somehow it felt good to have finally made a decision.

Yvonne came to lunch and was totally perplexed. She couldn't understand that Julia had pulled the ripcord after 99% of the way with Dwarf Nose. "That's so stupid, Julia," Yvonne muttered in disbelief. "You're not just missing a roof tile, you've got a total damage on the roof! No billowing, no sliding and no tobogganing, just letting it wiggle around in the damp throat of the Big Snake, nothing else! You pull the ripcord after 99%. You're impossible, girl! A skydiver whose feet are already touching the ground and

then she pulls the ripcord and lets him crash on his ass! Julia, you're embarrassing and impossible!" Yvonne looked at Alfie for help, but he shook his head, he supported Julia's decision. Okay.

Alfie watched Julia and Yvonne sleeping on the bed, completely exhausted. Yes, that was his honeymoon. The two girls with whom he had spent so many wonderful hours. He had told the director that night that he was finished. He would start packing tomorrow and be transferred back at the agreed time in six days. The director breathed a sigh of relief. "Your honeymoon is over, Alfred?" She asked and he nodded. "Yes, I notice that the honeymoon is over. It became clear to me weeks ago that everyday life now begins. I want to end it where it isn't lame, ordinary and burnt out. I will take the memory of my honeymoon with me into my time, even if the renunciation and the abrupt end hurt me like hell." He pressed the 'disconnect' button, not wanting Jessie to see him cry.

He gave the bike back to Roland. "I'm heading off, probably to the States. Thank you Roland, you were a big help with the Cannondale. Thank you and goodbye!" Roland asked what was happening with the two apartments. Alfie said, "They now belong to my wife, Dr. Julia Herrnthaler. I have no idea whether she will rerent or sell them." They shook hands, it was a firm, honest handshake.

Julia put her doctoral thesis on hold. She spent most of her time lying on the bed crying or dozing, breathing in Alfie's scent in the sheets. He had told her that on Wednesday night at two o'clock he would return to his time, forever. He had told her very gently and considerately. The news still tore her heart, she sank into his arms and howled like a castle dog. She caught herself. "So in five days, I'll stay behind, Alfie?" He nodded and hugged her. "You always knew that I would carry out my assignment. You knew that our marriage would end like this, had to end like this. I never gave you hope for anything else. I am an honest man, I will not betray the assignment, not the director or you either. As a renegade you would have me around every day, but I would develop a fat belly, become lazy and sedate and would spend my whole life accusing you of having stolen my future. No, Julia, that would be one endless bitterness, no happy ending." Julia nodded tearfully. "Should I cancel Yvonne for Tuesday?" she breathed tonelessly. Alfie looked at her for a long time. "No, why should you? Since I've known you,

you've been in Yvonne's arms, every Tuesday, without exception. Let's celebrate our farewell with a little orgy. I'm sure Yvonne wants to say goodbye to me too." Julia nodded. "I'm going to call Johanna and say I'm going on vacation with you for a week. Period."

The men from the garbage collection picked up the last packs of books and magazines. Alfie gave everyone a generous tip, the project was over and he thanked them. Then he went to the notary to finalize the deal with the apartments.

He placed the apartment keys and the documents from the notary on the table in front of Julia. "Julia, the two apartments are now yours. And Marybel, Jezebel, Isabel and Pombel, they also belong to you, that's on the separate sheet. You can keep them, give them away or sell them. They have a resale value of around 300,000 euros. Here I have noted the contact details of interested parties for you, and you should sell them, not scrap them." Julia looked from leaf to leaf. "You didn't rent the apartments, you bought them?" Alfie smiled in confirmation. "Yes, I wanted to give it to you from the start, I bought it the day after our first conversation with this idea in mind and you can rent it out or sell it. Maybe you want to give one to Yvonne, she still lives in the dark hole where there is only the sinful double bed. Your decision, the apartments are officially yours." Julia turned the key ring in her hands uncertainly. "I gave the furniture to Caritas, I gave my clothes, etc. to the homeless charity, and they were happy to accept everything."

Alfie gently pushed the strap of her negligee off her shoulders. "I'm completely free now, my backpack is packed with hard drives. There are over 1,600 terabytes, or 1.6 petabytes, of data from the old world that I'm taking with me into my time. A medal will be hammer-nailed to my chest because that's significantly more than there was before the fire. The director cried with joy in front of the screen last night, and that was the first time I saw the good woman cry. She had, without me informing, my salary doubled a year ago, after a juicy shouting match with the *state secretary for historical matters*, a real old scumbag. Despite all the sadness, a golden future awaits me, and my grandpa Arthur is probably dancing a Hilly-Billy with joy on his cloud." Julia looked up, her smartwatch had been beeping softly. "Are we going to the pond, Alfie?" They

went to the pond. They would come to the pond every day. “This peace, this majesty in the middle of the city, and the birds — yes, I’ll probably miss those guys for a while.”

Yvonne was blown away. “What, you’re flying over tomorrow morning? And what about Julia!?” Alfie had come up with a fine and juicy story. “I didn’t keep it a secret from Julia from the start that I was fleeing the States because of a bloody blind affair. Jenny, she’s a treat, I have to admit that, at 36 she’s still the hottest thing between Maryland and California. But she wanted to eat me up, with all my skin and hair, that’s what it is, but I knew I was just a disposable item and that was out of the question. Now she has her fifth husband for his well-deserved eternal rest bed and is free to swallow me. She’s not only a cannon in bed, but she’s also extremely rich, a multi-billionaire, and now it’s getting serious, Yvonne, we’re talking about a lot of good dollars here. She’s offering me a seat on the board of directors in her company that produces computer chips and that Julia would lie in my marriage bed. That was the point where she jumped in the triangle, but I insisted, bigamy or nothing, that was her choice. Julia is my wife, period! I am a good negotiator, Yvonne.

Yvonne sank back on her heels and her fingers gently traced Julia’s snakes on her inner thigh. “What do you think about all this shit, love?” she asked Julia. She looked up. “Bigamy isn’t new to me, Yvonne, the two of us and Alfie, you probably remember how it works. I can’t throw my doctoral thesis into the trash bin, so it’s my own decision that Alfie and I are separated for six months or so. But with your help, Yvonne, I’ll probably fill the void in my bed, what do you think?” Yvonne grinned ear to ear. “With the guy out of the way, I’ll finally lie with you every day, love. And while poor Alfie is plowing for his dollars between Jenny’s thighs, we’ll both grab the Dwarf Nose, both of us, sisterly! That’s how we do it!” Julia grinned crookedly. “Will you please leave little Robert alone, you greedy bumblebee! You’ll give up on the Dwarf’s Nose, you sex-hungry glutton!” All three of them laughed and it was the most wonderful afternoon of girl sex and mixed double matches. Yvonne said goodbye to Alfie with tears.

Julia lay with her face on his chest. “Just three more hours, Alfie. What’s going to happen, do you just cross the street and disappear with your bulging backpack in sulfur smoke?” Alfie laughed.

“I’ve thought of something much simpler, Julia. I’ll put my backpack on when the seconds tick down. Then a magnificent drum roll and I’ll be gone, without any clouds of fog or the smell of sulfur. What do you think?” Julia drummed on his chest. “Don’t talk nonsense like that, Alfie! Drum roll!? You’re getting childish in your old age, my husband!” Alfie smiled. “Let’s enjoy the last few hours, let’s celebrate a good, honest farewell with everything that goes with it!” Julia sat up and untied the ribbon in her hair. “Drum roll! What a romantic philanderer you have become, Alfie!” And they loved each other, with all their hearts and souls.

Alfie sat up. “I’ll get dressed, I’ll be in front of the committee in two minutes.” He put the heavy backpack over his shoulder. “I am your husband, Julia, forever and ever!” He kissed her for the last time, putting his whole heart and soul into this farewell kiss.

Julia pulled the negligee over her chest. Alfie, her Alfie, just sat there and looked at her, smiling. He wanted to leave with her face in front of his eyes. He wanted to remember her the same way.

A glow surrounded him. He smiled even more and sent her another air kiss. Now a deafening drum roll began, then he was gone. Julia was frozen in shock. She laughed, crying and laughing. “Oh, you dear childish guy, you!” she exclaimed through tears and laughter. She was blinded by tears as the drum roll slowly faded away. Her heart didn’t want to break, it didn’t want to stop and give up amidst all the stabbing pain. Her hand crumpled the negligee on her breast. The heart, that damn overfull heart, should finally stop beating and let her fucking sink!

Alfie was gone.

Julia cried all night until she dozed off and got up late in the morning to make herself some coffee. Out of sheer habit, she placed two cups under the drip and laughed when it was finished. No, Alfie was gone, she would have to drink his coffee too. Yvonne came at noon to hug her and kiss her tears away. Julia was happy to only be able to mourn her Alfie a little bit during girl sex. Yvonne also noticed that someone was missing from the mixed doubles. She had no reason to cry, Alfie was on the plane to the USA and she lay with Julia, comforting her body and soul.

Yvonne didn't forget anything, she insisted. Julia dialed Robert's number with trembling fingers. Yes, something had happened, she said. "My girlfriend and I would like to visit you if you would like to have two plump, busty girlfriends, my dear dwarf nose. Yes, to read aloud of course, you stupid." Five minutes later she rolled with Yvonne at her side in the Ferrari into Riemergasse, into the underground car parking lot. Yvonne squeezed herself into the elevator with her ample breasts and assessed the boy. Rocky chased Anni away after she brought a third glass.

Julia lay trembling on Robert's bed, this would be her first time. She looked shyly and timidly at his astonished face and at his huge instrument. His eyes wide with surprise; up until now he had only seen the snakes snaking up her inner thighs, but now he saw the wide-open jaws of the Great Serpent for the first time. Her portal lay in the middle of the masterful tattoo, in the middle of the gaping jaws of the Great Serpent, but his fellow was big and strong and covetous with greed, not afraid of the monster's huge fangs. At the sight of Dwarf Long Noses's upright instrument, Grandpa, Reginald and Alfie disappeared immediately.

Robert's battering ram got to work, Julia's tears dried up in the rising intoxication, the intoxication in the arms of the dwarf Nose. She experienced for the first time what she had denied herself for weeks and had only fantasized about in secret minutes. Finally, in the height of ecstasy, she finally looked into Alfie's eyes, small laugh lines around his kind eyes, his lips pursed for a kiss. She wanted to call out his name, but all she could manage was a pained croak, her whole body twitching and shaking in ecstasy.

Julia waved her hand, she had had enough after this first violent chapter, Rocky's battering ram had raged in the mouth of the Great Serpent like a drunken berserk. Julia had given up, trembling, preferring to think about Alfie as she watched Yvonne demand everything from the dwarf. Everything. Chapter by chapter. And I would be lying if I said that Yvonne didn't enjoy Rocky and the ballads from Dwarf Long Nose.

In the evening they rolled home. Yvonne held onto the handles of the Ferrari as if she were pushing it. No, she held on because her knees were weak as pudding. "I'm going to give up Massimo today. We'll come back to see Robert, to see Dwarf Nose, tomor-

row?" Julia nodded absently, "Whatever you want, little one," she said to Yvonne.

She had to think about something depressing. Rocky hadn't been able to control his pens. Julia had asked, with a big lump in her throat: "Mom?" He nodded affirmatively, not interrupting his panting lecture. It made Julia very sad, but that was the way it was. After her wild but cathartic chapter, exhausted and sad, she left all the reading work to Yvonne; she suddenly didn't feel like it anymore. Rocky had done it to Mom.

Julia cried with happiness when she came home from the doctor. She was carrying Alfie's child under her heart. She looked up gratefully at the cloudy November sky. "Zeus, you rascal, you had a hand in it again!" She didn't tell anyone that she was pregnant. At first, with little enthusiasm, she went alongside Yvonne to Robert, who had taken a fancy to Yvonne. Absolutely sure.

But Rocky always wanted to first ram his battering ramrod into the mouth of the Great Serpent, into the shy, reserved Julia, and only then did he turn his attention to the insatiable Yvonne. He quickly found the spot that made the silent Julia pant, gasp and tremble. Robert had matured by years and he confessed to Julia that it was Mama who had finally stripped him of his childhood. Smiling, of her own will and so full of love.

Julia was no longer angry with him, he was just the dwarf Nose, and everyone knew what kind of guy the Dwarf was. Robert scratched the back of his head. "And Anni now has to listen to Dwarf Nose's ballad every morning in the bath water. It was no different for her. She saw how I did it to my mother. And Anni is really greedy, she doesn't say any bigoted nonsense anymore. Yes, I know, the dynamite. But I pay close attention to what she finds out and what she definitely doesn't." Julia smiled weakly; it no longer seemed so strange to her to listen to the ballad of the dwarf nose. One or two chapters, yes, maybe three.

Yvonne was blown away. "From Alfie? Oh my God, how wonderful, a child of love, the purest love I've ever seen!" Julia strictly refused to be treated like a raw egg. Yvonne was only supposed to be her sexual support when they went to the Dwarf Long Noses together again and again. Yvonne was supposed to hold her and love

her when Rocky really got into it and when the surf crashed violently against the rocks and made her tremble with fear and trepidation. Yvonne should hold her there and touch the shy and timid Julia with a magical finger, yes, she should do that, please. But she should keep the pregnancy to herself, Robert would eventually notice that she had a baby bump.

Julia threw herself into her doctoral thesis with all her might. She wanted to have it finished and submitted by the end of the semester. Maybe she would go to her doctorate while still heavily pregnant, which made her smile. She didn't forget about her birds; she drove the Ferrari to the pond every lunchtime. She explained to the birds that their dear Alfie, her bald man, had now traveled far away, a whole 900 years away. The birds nodded wisely, of course, because Julia had brought back tasty grains that could only be picked with a wise nod of the head. The mallard girls chatted wildly when she whispered to them her secret that she would also be getting a chick from Alfie in about nine months.

The doctoral thesis went well. The sentences flowed from the keyboard because she had now also become a knowledgeable person. She knew exactly what it was like to be impregnated by a god or a time traveler. Yvonne caught her up from her desk and energetically took her to the dwarf. Yvonne meticulously insisted that Dwarf Nose looked after Julia well and adequately, chapter by chapter, because later, there was only children crying after midnight, giving breasts and changing diapers.

Yvonne shook with horror, the baby would eat up Julia's free time and would no longer give the dwarf Nose a chance to read to her. Julia had smiled, what a nonsense! There would be no unnecessary interruption. In any case, Yvonne was not allowed to miss any of Robert's lectures and she wanted to actively participate again as soon as possible and not just watch passively. It will probably be possible to take the little one with you in the crib. Rocky's mom, who was hardly ever seen, had once held her hands with tears in the corners of her eyes: Julia heard how happy Rocky's mom was that he now had solid, intimate girlfriends, even two very beautiful girls. So far he had only imposed his will on helpless disabled girls, on disabled girls who, bewildered and crying, surrendered to his urging. Rocky's mom cried with joy, her poor boy finally seemed to be in good hands.

Julia visibly blossomed like a flower, the now daily ballads of the dwarf Nose made her cheeks turn a fine pink, she liked to laugh again and happily patted Yvonne's ass cheek with the palm of her hand when she couldn't stop finishing the last chapter. She often wrote late into the night because her escapades with Yvonne ate up the hours like hungry wolves. But she was no longer consistently sad, even though she missed Alfie very much. He would definitely have a lot on his mind, because he had described to her how he and the director wanted to redesign the entire department. She placed her hand on her little tummy, on the little miracle that was growing inside her. Rocky had looked embarrassed at first, but she reassured him that the father was her Alfie, her beloved husband, who had flown to America.

It was the first time that Yvonne didn't go upstairs when the two of them came home from Robert's lectures, worn out and exhausted. Yvonne really wanted to go to the supermarket. Julia immediately realized that someone had been there and clutched the can of pepper spray. It smelled strongly of Arabia coffee, and the table was covered with a dark blue cloth that certainly didn't come from her household. She cautiously rolled closer, but there was no one there except her.

She drove the Ferrari to the table. There was a small and a larger case, like the ones jewelers use. Curious, she opened the smaller case — a beautiful gold signet ring. She held her breath as she opened the larger one.

It was stunning. A piece of jewelry, a necklace, exquisitely shaped, garlands of pure gold and small precious stones. She didn't know much about jewelry, but it looked very elegant and very expensive. Then there were two gold bangles decorated with blue and white enamel. And a pair of earrings, gold and precious stones, flashing and sparkling. She clutched her heart, she had a premonition. When she put the necklace back, the case slipped a few millimeters and she discovered the letter hidden underneath. Six pages on heavy parchment, densely written with dark blue glittering ink, in a very beautiful cursive handwriting that can only be written with a flat steel nib. She turned on the reading light and put on her glasses. She knew who the letter was from. She held it to her chest for a few moments, then read:

Dear Julia,
my beloved wife!

I arrived safely and started work straight away, even though I was showered with honors, adulation and champagne.

I was in wonderland when I found out you were pregnant with little Alfred. I danced in the office, probably the most awkward Hilly-Billy dance you can imagine. I'm beside myself with joy, you can't imagine it. You only know me as a level-headed and serious Parsifal in search of the Holy Grail. But I can also do something different, I spontaneously hugged the surprised director and kissed her from head to toe when she told me the good news. I rashly tore open her blouse and kissed her breasts and her teats like a foolish idiot! She smiled and tolerated my lips on her teats for long minutes until I came back to my senses. She buttoned her blouse again with a smile and grinned crookedly, because she had never experienced such overwhelming joy at the good news she had announced to me.

We both knew that it would cause a tiny rift in the space/time continuum, but not a catastrophic one, since we are all still there unchanged. Of course, no one other than her is allowed to know about it, especially not the rigid committee, as you can probably imagine. Nevertheless, I will invite Waltraud and Heinrich to a festive dinner and tell them in person about you too. I will show them pictures of you (not the nude photos and our naughty videos of course) and tell them how much I love you. That I took you as my wife and made you the mother of their little brother, 900 years ago.

The board has only allowed me to see you from a distance every few weeks, in the visigraph, a kind of telescope through time. However, I plan to see you and Alfred from afar every day, that will be fine. I see how much Yvonne cares about your well-being and that you go to Dwarf Robert's lectures together. Knowing that the committee will perhaps read these lines one day in the future, I say to you: I am delighted with all my heart that you have overcome your initial shyness and are now hanging on Robert's lips, just like Yvonne, when he reads you the ballad of the dwarf nose, chapter by chapter, the little rogue with the big nose... I was afraid that you would completely isolate yourself and close yourself off to

the worldly things. No, I wish you and Yvonne many more enjoyable lectures with Robert.

I suspect you stopped taking the pill in full consciousness as the farewell approached. I didn't know it, but my joy is even greater now. And now I have to reveal one last secret to you, although it is very embarrassing for me. My mom showed me the method by which she could physically unite with dad, but only very rarely and with a pounding heart. A virus-killing ointment, a virus-killing intimate spray and a standard condom. For her and Dad, this only happened at all holy times, because the method is not foolproof.

Mom hasn't had a virus in her womb her whole life. Maybe the virus didn't like her hormone mix, because it wasn't in the right composition until after puberty. Today I sometimes think that Mom's womb was still in puberty, letting the devil rage in her pubescent womb. Still, she tested herself every month, sent my sisters for testing every 10 days, three times a month. She was afraid the twins would infect and kill me. She smiled quietly when my sisters and I made a fuss in the girls' bedroom. That was okay, we children should explore our sexuality, explore everything.

As they grew up and housed dashing junkers, Mama took her share when she could. Mama immediately threw the little machine away and waved the Junker in; the living thing was always better than the stupid pestle. I smiled at how diligently Mom forced her daughters' playmates into breathtaking service; oh yes, thank God she wasn't a food eater or a pale prayer sister. It wasn't until the end of my twin sisters' puberty, around the age of 17, that the virus was discovered and since then I've never been in the girls' bedroom again.

Mom looked at me with that certain look when I was old enough and asked if I would please step in for the pestle? She pushed the little machine aside, when the little tongue had kindled her fire and brought her to the edge of the cliff, then I stood in for the pestle, because I wanted it so badly myself. She loved to jump from peak to peak, straight towards the highest peak, from which she could then throw herself with hurrah, down into the tender arms of her son. For years — even as *curator* and Hilda's husband — I stepped in when the tipping point had been reached well and she was just one step away from liberating ecstasy.

She died in my arms, her weak heart breaking in the moment of supreme pleasure and in the ecstasy of her fifth and highest peak of this special evening. I was 28, deeply affected and resolved never to make physical love again — never again would a girl or woman die in my arms, never again would I want to look into fading and breaking eyes. I never told you that, it was just too embarrassing and too painful at the same time. Maybe you understand that. But what I'm getting at is that my mom did it completely right and steered me in the right direction. Hug our Alfred lovingly, motherly and undaunted. This is my wish, nothing more. It will be both a lesson and a holy trembling for him.

The board has allowed me to enter your home chained to a sheriff and deposit my gifts in person, but only if you are not present. The committee distrusts me and they are happy to do so. I know they would never allow me to see you in the flesh again. If they knew exactly what was going on with both of us, they would put me in chains, I had broken so many rules. I'm still very upset about my overtime, my darling, they originally only gave me 360 days. But I wouldn't want to miss any of the 582 days with you, not a single one.

I designed the jewelry myself and had it made by a very skilled goldsmith. But the special thing is that all of them are made of Swedish steel at their core, the legendary dragon steel, which was used in ancient times to make swords. And then the goldsmith covered everything with high-quality gold. The coat of arms on the signet ring is supposedly the coat of arms of those von dem Steine, who were reliable knights and robber barons in the service of the Hanoverian rule as early as the 13th century.

I wanted to signal to you that my love for you is as strong as the strongest steel and made of gold, like your hair above and below. And then I left another surprise where we used to keep the reserve packs of Arabia coffee. The sheriff didn't notice because we drank good coffee to distract us and I escaped the good man for an hour in a time rift.

In the thick leather pouch you will find a lot of gold coins, many Greek drachmas and some Roman aureus and solidus coins. They're really real, but they're actually just replicas that are really real. *You get my point?* Pretend you inherited them from your

grandpa, just say he was a big coin collector, your grandpa. Sell them, or better yet, auction them off piece by piece on the Internet, because they are worth a fortune if you don't carelessly sell them in bulk. This will be my contribution to the education and studies of Alfred. Of course it can't replace the absent father, but it can perhaps pay for a profound education. You will know when he is old and mature enough to tell him about his father.

Without you I will miss physical love. I can assure you, I'll probably take Mom's recipe to heart and I'll definitely be poaching through the entire city of 19 million, from flower to flower, to find someone. Someone in whose eyes I recognize you. Maybe I'll even find a direct descendant of yours, my heart. And I wanted to honestly confess that to you, because I was awakened by you and I simply can't and don't want to do without the physical anymore.

Waltraud had himself tested like every month and the virus was detected for the first time. She and Heinrich immediately moved into separate bedrooms because she doesn't want to kill her brother. When I heard that from Waltraud, a weight was lifted from my heart, because now the two of them are showing more common sense and responsibility than before. Hilda and I let them both have their way; it was their childish and adolescent sexuality and not ours. It was and is real love that connects the two, and not just sexual greed or dominance.

Otherwise everything has stayed the same, I still don't have a dog or a parrot. Well, maybe a few ladies who will try it with me, although I've already become a very strange codger, a budding lust newt, to be honest. Because I demand pleasure, physicality and ecstasies etc., hard and without scruples. Of course I stick strictly to mom's recipe, I don't want to let the virus kill me, I promise!

Greetings to the dwarf Nase and especially to Yvonne. Make up whatever it takes why I'm still in the States and not showing up. A fatal car accident, maybe a plane crash?

When I close my eyes, I see you. You and sometimes Yvonne. But you were always my wife, my only, my true wife, but she was just a girl with whom we both had a lot of joy and whom we shared. Maybe you were a girl at the beginning, but day by day you became more and more my wife, the one I adored, the one I will

always adore. The muse who kissed me awake after my morning nap and rolled with me to the pond.

I see you pulling your negligee over your head and putting it away, there should be nothing between our bodies but air and love.

I see you as you loosen your hairband, as your hair slides down to your shoulders like dark gold and your shining eyes announce to me the paradise of your love.

I see with flying breath how you let your snow-white thighs slide slightly apart, unfolding the proclaimed paradise.

I see you closing your eyes and smiling because you're looking forward to me like a snow queen.

I see you, Julia.

I see you.

You.

yours forever and ever
Alfie