

Hi Marion,

on your last two birthdays (and not only yours) most of us were "locked in" and everybody was sending digital hugs and making each other presents or kadootjes online: a lil singing here, a poem there - beautiful! This story was mine, written during the first two so-called lockdowns in Germany - I needed five months to write and several weeks to translate it for you, with the generous and humorous support from Renée and #DeepL. My way of coping with this pandemic nightmare, so it's light and bitchy with crumbs of #me-too in it - nothing romantic, ya hear: nothing for the beach.

Sorry it didn't work writing something completely new in English, but hell, my English is almost as old and rusty as myself - when did we leave the USA, 1974 (Joe says it was 1973)? Never mind, you left a year earlier, so you hopefully won't even notice.

your lil sis

P.S. I added some translations and unnecessary comments to keep my spirits up. Tried hard to keep Mom's index finger down, but – oh well. Yes, it's always the DNA.

off the beach by nick jacobse

I. what happened beforehand: kim & what's-his-name

Kim's father had always warned putting a nose or other protruding body parts into the neighbor's garden - as a gardener or a pensioner with plenty of time maybe. Or as an indifferent, pragmatic pain in the ass with a skin so thick every toothpick breaks off. And now she had one tailing her.

"QUEEN OF THE DANCE, the original with Alice McArdy. I have 2 concert tickets for April 2 in Salten and would be delighted to pass one of them to a true

music lover with no resale ambitions. To mail or not to mail: ..."

How was she supposed to know the person so nobly offering *her* concert ticket in the local SaNews was her neighbor? Sure, the concert was in Salten, a ten minutes walk from her front door - so what? Salten was not a village with two and a half cows, the SAL not a theater for farmers, and for some reason she had Hamburg as his place of residence in the back of her head.

When they announced the cities, where the concerts of "Queen of the Dance" were to take place, she had been down in Bavaria with Paps and Daniel for the first time since she left home - no internet down there, just an small old TV with antenna under one of the beds. Her efforts to get hold of a ticket later on were like diving without water:

"Already sold out in advance, sorry, can we offer you something of equal value?"

Shit. Later it turned out this was one of the last public events for months - Corona had tightened it's grip on life. Double shit.

That ad in the Saltener News didn't bring Alice and her co-dancers any nearer either: the more she struggled to get hold of at least one of the two tickets, the weirder her opponent's efforts became to keep a hold on 'em - compared to that Don Quixote was a clerk in a German department for peanuts. Money wasn't the right bait - she would have bought both tickets including electric blanket and/or a few home-knitted granny socks for a good price. Why not?

She had taken over the small but exclusive carpentry with the modest name 'Holzkiste' (= *wooden box*) from her father several years ago, except for her preference for natural stuff she didn't need luxury and was not poor; he as a computer expert unfortunately wasn't either.

She would have worn the socks.

After a few weeks of e-mails, one more sparkling than the last, his witty pranks had softened her misgivings to such an extent that it became a blind date - her first

ever...

And now - as already mentioned - she had a guy sticking like molasses.

Not that he was ugly, no no: normal height, all of his hair, teeth and limbs on him and even in the right place; specimen clean-shaven, non-athletic country doctor/lawyer with a silk scarf around his neck. Not bad at all, however: he was not the man she jumped for. In fact, she had no jumping addiction at all. Sensible and independent women don't put their hearts in appearances anyway, otherwise she would have chosen someone like Paps or her brother. Maybe.

Instead, she met Mr. What's-his-name.

"Tiara Andrieux?" Raised questioning brows, an open and confident look out of washed-out pseudo-blue eyes. Or were they gray... or brown?... did he even have eyes? *Who...?*

She nodded, although she had pointed out twice via email that Tiara was her middle name and she preferred Kim. Her father had added Tiara in case Kim turned out to be a Tiara and was too plain for her - you never know. Anybody appreciate the acquaintance of people who need a third hint? They balanced their way between the rows - the dummies that were supposed to provide distance didn't make room as nicely as the visitors alive. For sure: without the tickets, she would have passed him without even a first look.

During this first meeting, her whole attention was focused on the stage: lively music and synchronized movements, a combination that made your limbs wriggle. The rhythm seemed to grasp the whole body, a mixture of ballet and tap dancing with acrobatic interludes: wow! All with an ease, that insisted you can copy it at home.

To put it short: she had forgotten the man next to her and had to reconstruct her own presence after the concert to pay him the minimum of courtesy. A prelude as promising as an unpeeled apple at the end of a menu worth four stars.

A Monsanto apple.

She definitely hadn't been waiting for him or anybody at all, had no intentions: neither serious nor dishonorable. Grown up between two decent guys and a sickly, yes, even a bit silly grandmother, her happiness was attached neither to a man nor to motherhood - actually the same pair of shoes, right? Or as Paps would put it: "Only people who can't make use of their time have to wait".

Why change a condition that suited her? She loved her work, enjoyed going out almost as well as she loved staying home with a good book - she was independent and cultivated, a modern woman with no biological ticking or bitching around. And hard to overlook: Salten's (*may I introduce Salten to you? A place filled with human beings instead of insurance numbers - since 1989 almost all of my stories take place there*) Meg Ryan; her almost chronic defensiveness toward men came from the same corner: supposing she would roll her eyes and pant at the sight of any attractive man she didn't know? And she simply couldn't see herself as someone cooking, cleaning up and running after some spoiled majesty – no one demanded that of men. So why was a relationship so desirable? Going out once in a while, taking turns cooking for each other - wasn't that enough? Sex? Nothing you had to move together for; and in case of fire: giving yourself a hand or a vibrator is better than a bacterial vaginosis or something worse.

Well, he hadn't gotten cheeky and even said goodbye to her in front of the theater - with half a promise to see her again some time or other. Maybe.

It went on like that for weeks: at arm's length distance, but with a loose grip, because caution didn't seem necessary - she avoided the lamp hanging in her kitchen with similar routine. Much later it turned out that he had moved into the apartment underneath her's months before he offered and only a few weeks before the tickets officially were on sale - probably they had already met somewhere. By then, the time to slam a door had passed; somehow she had slipped in so inconspicuously, not even with reversed roles Goethe's: "...she pulled halfway, he sank halfway..." fitted. Goethe was a #sexist anyway, who wants him?

From then on she began to lose the oversight and it really started. Some men still have the habit of mixing up a little sex with the pissing over of territories as done by dogs: mine! Phone, voice mail - all buzzed as if programmed to flag

without evident pestering; plus the stupid circumstance that in the heat of her loose writing battle, when she had only wanted a ticket and thought he was in Hamburg, she had given away many of her habits and now met him everywhere: in front of the door, during shopping, near the "Holzkiste", in the library, while having lunch with a friend, in front of or in the organic food store, in her favorite café, on her regular walks - always charming and a little embarrassed, but with gentle, barely noticeable persistence.

What could she possibly do about that? Permanently stumbling over her own good nature, she smiled - sometimes rather crooked, but she smiled, answered his mails, took his calls - and gradually got used to him.

He wasn't a bad guy, was he? And educated. Had read a lot. Went with her wherever she wanted, would have carried her everywhere perhaps not on his hands, but in his car, which was one of those fat SUVs she loathed and had to be left on the outskirts of Salten anyway, had a good job, and manners and ideas.

And.

Nevertheless: something was missing and when she realized what or even that, they were already known everywhere as a couple, as a happy double pack. She should have listened to her intuition in the first place: no. NO!

And now? Thanks to her own slow stupidity or good-nature, her acquaintances were now his acquaintances. All liked each other, were enthusiastic, were happy about and with the beautiful couple: she was in steady hands at last, hooray!

Time rippled leisurely along, one week kicked the previous off the calendar and the varnish began to crumble off: his great education turned out to be googled, the humor flashes directly from - horror! - Simpsons & Co; and he read maybe one paperback best-seller with big letters a year. More? The luxury ballpoint pen he loved bragging with: "Unique, not available for less than 500 Euro!" was used exclusively for very simple crossword puzzles any child could have solved: why should anybody write by hand? He saw active sport as something for losers, who didn't have enough brain. He was conservative, even a bit right-wing - a bourgeois with zero flexibility and even less imagination. And stubborn. Here you go.

Like quicksand, the longer they made the rounds as an ideal couple and the more she tried pulling herself out of it, the less she seemed able to finish the thing. How, for what reasons? Even her oldest friend, otherwise always her opinion, advised her not to throw it all away, for heaven's sake.

"My dear child," she explained with a patience as if they were fifty years apart. "All men are conservative and stubborn, they hunt their prey and then don't want to give it away or share it. Mike, at least, is reliable and - even you can't deny he has a certain charm..."

"Okay, dear" had been her gruff reply. "Take him - charm, scarf and the rest!" She batted her eyelashes: "You can have my record collection as a bonus."

"Really?" came the incredulous reply. "You'd give your beloved records collection away? That bad?" And at her nod, "Would love to, Kim, really, but he's only got eyes for you, girl..."

True enough. Unfortunately. And unfortunately, the hairs she found in the soup weren't very distinctive, could have been something else. Japanese ramen, for example. Worst of all were their conversations or small talk; he avoided discussions or even unserious conversations, was like a bar of soap in this respect - awkward for someone who loved a good verbal battle.

"So what?" was the comment of that same friend subscribed to charm. "All men are scared of verbal disputes - that's why they look for a woman."

Honestly?! And vice versa? Was it because of a sort of conflict readiness, sufficient for two, that her sex comrades yearned for a man - were they likely to explode if they stayed alone long enough? That was too much, in that case she'd prefer leaving the whole battlefield to the lunatics on both sides and listen to music or read a book. Alone.

Except for that he was a dream man, wasn't he? Okay, the lack of or better the one-sided physical attraction between them existed - but people who hold inner values up as high as she did, should be sort of above such trivialities, right?

Especially since he, normally blind for her antipathies concerning himself, noticed it here, and had eagerly started googling (*I know it doesn't belong in here, but the excuse for using #Google instead of something that doesn't spy on and make money with us at our expense all the time: 'I have nothing to hide:' is stupid, almost as stupid as : 'I'm old and have nothing to lose'. What about being a good example for those to follow and might have problems getting a job or an apartment one day? Messing up their future just because WE have nothing to hide or lose, tz*) around; also asking her friends behind her back, where the hell her frigidity came from, and buying erotic videos, her favorite white wine, and trying aphrodisiac recipes, which he cooked until all the taste was gone, humming promisingly and making her laugh - not exactly his intention, but if it helps.

But she still had her own apartment, her own computer and her own internet connection, and now she duckducked (*#DuckDuckGo is OK*) - discreetly! - for help and for advice, and started looking for girls and women who were prettier, richer, whatever-er than she was, introducing them to him.

He was pleased she cared, but not interested, and in a funny sort of way offended: "Honey bunny, why do you do such things, you are all I need in this life and the next!" Honey bunny. Ugh.

In the meantime, nothing went naturally on this behalf, and of course she went out of his way or at least avoided situations that ended up in bed. He also noticed it when she played something she didn't feel and simply worked on certain spots, which she had revealed him in their innocent e-mail times: the perfect lover, hell, yes. And what was she: a press-here-push-there doll, who could be bungled up to physical peak records - was that the name of the game?

So she changed her tactics and did everything to make a quickie out of those seldom occasions. In vain, he was disciplined here and wanted her along each time, and nothing, but really nothing was too much for him to achieve that. She soon realized, the best thing was to stay outdoors or in public places, where he was a pretty big chicken.

Her only chance seemed his communicative deficiency. She started snooping for explosive hot spots, arguing with him about politics, about his clothes, about

mice, the measles and Michelangelo... It all trickled off him like greasy raindrops. He smiled incredulously - and let everything fall under the table like bread crumbs, worse: baby cracker crumbs. If she insisted on fighting something out, a normal procedure between two reasonable human beings, who could and should disagree now and then, he called her 'his disputatious Amazon'. If she didn't approve - he recommended her not to pout, that made wrinkles... *(OK, I borrowed from real life describing that man. 2005 or 2006 there was a short story contest, they wanted an erotic - not quite my favorite - story that had to do with the internet this time. Bewildered about such Bohemian villages I risked a look online, running through several contact ads for weird ideas - and there he was. Not as young as Kim, I had no problems getting rid of him without murder, but my family was very sad: "Oh, Mama, he was so nice!")*

In the meantime, even simply watching TV together got her raging.

"Nice weather Sunday - how about it: shall we go to the flea market? It's probably one of the last ones before they lock everything down," he said graciously one evening, his eyes fixed on the TV. He had lured her into his apartment with a rare and very old musical video, but wanted to watch the news beforehand. She loved flea markets, and his amusement about those funny women and children enjoying flea markets seemed to beam out of every masculine pore he had: men, real men had better things to do, of course...

"And what?" she had wanted to know, already on top of some palm tree.

"Huh?" he left his mouth open, his eyes wandering between the very important weather report and little Kim.

"What must men necessarily do on a Sunday morning? And why does His Highness deign to accompany me, a mere poor mortal, to something as inferior as a flea market?"

"Really, Kim" - oh good, when he called her Kim, he was starting to get bitchy about something - "I think flea markets are very amusing and -"

"Amusing?" she pensively interrupted him. "And what if I'd rather go to the

Computer Expo and buy myself a new laptop?"

"You can't buy anything there, honey bunny, even if it's open during Corona - they're just to show off and make big business", he promptly corrected her. "You can order a few hundred for your company, if you have one like me. Is your old one broken, why didn't you say so? If you want me to take a look at it, okidoki...- I can also get you one cheap through the company if you like and..."

"Mike," she cut him off again with a very calm voice. "My laptop works fine."

His face was rather red by then. "Oh, and why do you want me to go to the Expo with you?"

"I don't."

"Flea market then?" he shifted without even blinking.

"Mike," she tried again, "would you go to a flea market without me?"

Now she had his attention, he looked at her with a mixture of perplexity, amusement and condescension: How do I tell my child she's being silly without causing a third world war...?

"But honey bunny, what am I supposed to do there?"

"Then why do you want to go to the flea market with me, please? Do you think I can't find my way there on my own, or they'll sell me to some Arab sheik with harem enlargement needs?"

"Yes, I mean: no. Gee, I just want to make you happy."

She stared at him. "Let's wrap the ingredients together: You think it gives me pleasure to go somewhere with someone who wouldn't go if it weren't for me?"

Instead of getting angry or laughing at so much quibbles, as she would have done in his place, he just said, complacently, "So you want to go to the flea market alone - no problem, just say so." It sounded like: what an ungrateful little

bitch, how lucky for her I'm such an easy-going chap. "Do you want me to fetch my car and drive you there?" he offered, knowing his car was too fat for any street in Salten.

"I want my apartment," she said, getting to her feet.

"And the musical? I'm only allowed to keep it until tomorrow, and I don't have time tomorrow." Kim swallowed the question, why he didn't simply give her the video and ask her to bring it back herself. And when she was almost at the door:

"Do you want me to come with you, honey bunny?"

"No, thanks." she said politely - a mistake, the little word 'thanks' was meant ironically and therefore wasted on him.

"No need to thank me, Tiarchen."

She hated being called honey bunny or Tiarchen, and if she said so, she got a: "My God, are you ladies touchy nowadays - must be Corona!"

He didn't give up so easily. "I can come just before eleven o'clock" - that was her usual bedtime - "and massage your neck a little bit. You're so tense tonight!" he added indulgently.

"No," she said resolutely this time.

He rolled his eyes. "What you always think, I really just wanted to rub your neck..." etcetera etcetera.

And that's why strong independent people gave up their freedom?

Slowly a resentment, almost hatred, started to pile up inside of her - she felt like exploding. And she did explode. Regularly. He smiled. Was all understanding. Made her a marriage proposal, which she rejected with a huff - he was then unstoppable: she was so cute when she was angry, his pretty little lady.... grrrrrr.

Nobody had ever taught her how to cope with idiocratic people, what was she

supposed to *do*? He was a moderate wine drinker and non-smoker. So was she. Now she started drinking beer and occasionally puffing a cigar just because he couldn't stand the smell. He showered at least twice a day, and against his wardrobe and toiletries, her things looked like nun clothes from the last century. So she neglected her appearance even more, dressed without paying attention to what it was, and showered twice, then once a week. Since she loved moving around, anybody could smell that. Plain: she played tennis without sleeves and deodorant or shaving, and took unexpected pleasure in showing up with him in old unwashed and baggy jogging stuff.

His reaction: "Need some money, honey bunny, or do you want me to get you some decent clothes...? The ladies say my taste is not bad at all."

One day she had an egg in her hand and poof! the innocent thing landed in his mailbox. Or she'd dribble around a bit with superglue: door locks, shoes, clothes - anything that seemed glueable to her. And belonged to him.

It took a while before he realized where these new inconveniences came from; she had run out of little ideas - and patience - and was forced to use arguments with a deeper bite. His alarm bells went on, when he "coincidentally" bumped straight into her flattening all the tires of his SUV with a nail gun. Serious talks followed, after the scheme:

"He = good + smart

"She = naughty + ignorant."

He not only talked to *her*, he asked some of their now mutual acquaintances, a psychologist friend of hers, her own father.... All of it quite discreetly and without names: the wife of a friend had the problem, not he himself - and she neither of course. And anyway: what problem? Her experience level was boosted to that of a predator reported for kleptomania, and she began to look at "The Taming of the Shrew" from a different angle: wasn't Shakespeare a man...?

And again: he didn't mean to do bad, lord no, he was only a very desperate man

madly in love, looking for answers.

Wasn't that sweet? everyone agreed.

Everyone.

Her last action had a real bad smell - literally stinky. One very early Sunday morning, he had come home slightly drunk from a friend's - one of her friends by the way - birthday and splashed into it with both feet. He had to call the emergency plumber, who was there within an hour. The overpriced man was forced to call for expert help two hours later: a monster machine sucking, spitting and pumping with three men, not only in his apartment and in the basement, the manhole cover in front of the house had to be opened - his beautiful rock garden! - and so they rummaged and sucked and pumped two hours long, during which breathtaking feces bubbled out of the toilet on the first floor, because the tenants of the apartments above him - a total of five lots in one of these beautiful old half-timbered houses in the center of Salten - at some point felt their nightly liquids or worse pushing their way down and got up to relieve themselves; and guess who lived downstairs, directly underneath the sharp bend, before the mess eloped in the sewer system? Of course the gentlemen in overalls had no intention of bending their knees to wipe up the stinking gloop that oozed through his bathroom and then the rest of his beautiful apartment on this now no longer early, but beautiful Sunday approximately eight times.

One look at the bulky stuff they had fished out of the sewer and he realized who was responsible for the fecal muddle: his expensive built in music system, his beautiful parquet floor with underfloor heating, his inherited and very precious Afshari oriental carpets as well as several Chippendale antiques - all of it was ruined. Trash. *(This stinky piece really happened, but I was the one living downstairs, upstairs lived an old couple who preferred kitchen paper to wipe their asses - too unique not to write about it)*. The decisive drop that made his pot explode was the realization that he would also have to throw away his precious Italian shoe collection, two decades of online looking for special offers. Gone.

The stupid girl must have patiently fed her toilet sheet by sheet for days, always

as much as could be flushed down: twenty-nine kitchen rolls with his face on each sheet, his creative present for her birthday several weeks ago, one roll for each year - the vast quantities the plumbers choked out seemed to suggest all 29 rolls were used. Good timing, Tiara. Dear.

Every now and then he saw the curious and gleeful face of a neighbor in the staircase - only the evildoer herself remained invisible on day X or better: day S. She was in her bed with a stomach flu - and he silly man had wanted to stay and take care of her...

Unaccustomedly sweaty and apart smelling he stomped up the stairs towards evening, as soon as he had finished cleaning up, leaving his thumb on her doorbell button until she opened the door, hair all over the place and crumpled and sleepy in her japanese robe.

If she had been healthy, his panting, his facial expression would have warned her, because there was one thing she had come to understand in the course of their brief acquaintance: the more excited or angrier he was, the emptier his face became; when he was bored, he seemed to be enjoying himself. In any case, that Sunday his features were almost non-existent. And then the smell...

He had sort of shoved her inside, closing the door behind them with a kick, and slowly placed his right hand, reddened from unaccustomed physical work and water, on her left cheek, very lightly touching a certain spot that she had unfortunately once revealed to him: just a whiff. Opening her robe slightly, he placed his left hand unerringly a little to the left below her navel. Her sensitive olfactory nerves, her after four days of influenza weakened mind reared up like a pooped horse and then collapsed as if non-existent, and he seduced her, despite her rebellious nose and irritated stomach, on the black dirt doormat in the hallway.

At the last moment he spun her around like a sausage in the pan and after a few violent thrusts discharged himself unerringly, opening his mouth for the first time: "Appropriate, isn't it? Yes, I think that was quite appropriate." And disappeared - calm and easygoing - as if reading the newspaper or just for little girls.

She ran to the bathroom and vomited. For a long time.

Then her mind was made up.

II. still a bit beforehand: olga & roko

"By the way, Olga", instead of looking at her, Roko admired the ancient Dutch oven with the ceramic feet and delft-blue original tiles in the corner between living room and dining room, the same one that had dominated her Berlin reception room several successful decades. "Do you still have any relatives living?"

"What do you mean: 'still' - do I belong to the dinosaurs, or what - don't *you* have anymore relatives?" Anybody could see he didn't like the hint of them being the same age, it was obvious. He was still a good-looking man, but from dream man to elderly champagne advertising figure was obviously too big a leap, and the old vest Elisabeth had knitted couldn't conceal the little belly. Olga herself had kept her weight constant, like her hair, which Elisabeth used to call "Alf's quiff" after some alien: it was still full, although white - so what? Anyway: *she* didn't color her hair.

She smugly wiped her quiff out of the way before adding: "Why do you ask?"

They still met twice a year, on Olga's birthday and on Elisabeth's, which - perfect! - were almost exactly six months apart - even five years after the latter's death. Sat on chairs carved centuries, but thank God upholstered merely a few years ago, in Olga's dining room, which like the entire house was moderately furnished with the customary antique stuff, cups, pot of decaf coffee and diet cookies between them on the table. In the course of a long life, one or the other ritual usually lands on the scaffold of time - Olga's last bastion was using her more representative than comfortable living room as a reception room: the cracking of the joints when you dropped yourself as if into a deep pit and the even bigger struggles to get out again, the distances between everything, whether pot,

cup or whatever, which had to be overcome, of course in slow motion, because otherwise shards, pain or both were inevitable. Like the first reading glasses: at some point one's arms were not long enough. It was a big advantage to be able to reach everything without having to stand up, and not having to contort your neck in order to look at the visitors' mouth, because the hearing didn't get better either, and those funny little things that were supposed to fix that always beeped at inopportune times and made other strange noises, not to mention the fiddling around with the even tinier batteries. Luckily, when this status was reached, the memory how easy everything used to be was gone and it didn't mind. Almost didn't mind.

"Isn't anyone else coming?" he glanced at three more coffee cups. "Are Malte and his wife and sister dead too?"

"No," she said curtly. "Not that I know of."

"Uh-huh".

"What do you mean 'Uh-huh'? Have you forgotten how to express yourself civilly, Roko?"

"Says the right person," came back pointedly. "Professor Roko, if you please - so much civilization must be." Roko was short for Robert Konrad and Elizabeth's creation; he himself hated abbreviations. Since his wife had left, Olga was the only one who still called him thus, sometimes it pleased him because of the memory of Elisabeth, sometimes it annoyed him.

Ill-tempered he added, "Let me guess: you scared them away with your stropky behavior too?"

"Too?" she echoed, "You don't have to come if you don't want to!"

As if he had heard a long-awaited gun shot, he braced himself to get up. He was the last, had come for years only because of his wife's penultimate words: "Roko, promise me to look after Olga a little, at least on our birthdays - she has no one

else!"

And whose fault was that? Ever since Olga had sold her business in Berlin and moved to Salten - how long ago was it: fourteen or twenty years ago? - she had been nothing but a nuisance, always knowing everything better and talking for hours about how she would have done it and about all she had accomplished, she, one of the first self-made businesswomen in Germany: successful, without a husband, without children: alone and strong, yikes. Why hadn't she at least stayed in Berlin: he didn't quite believe it was because of Elisabeth, who insisted Salten was the only location one can live as a full-fledged human being. Who had convinced Elisabeth about Salten in the first place? Right: Olga. The lady, who had no one else, currently had three lawsuits running, as far as he knew. Three. At the moment. Through the open door in the hallway, he had glanced into her office: folders everywhere, piles of papers, files on tables, chairs, even on the floor - as if she still had thousands of clients and was leaving it to the thirty employees she had once had. Was that sick or was that sick?

If Olga wanted, she could dim her megaphone-like voice down to a soft cat purr. Still: "Well, at least finish your coffee," she said with a smile that reminded of the charming hostess she used to be. *(Before I started this story, I felt like writing something with strains of me-too and ambition, ignoring a main and important rule: don't write about things you know nothing about. So I grabbed a piece of real life. I got to know 'Olga' when my second daughter was pregnant with her second son, I had a job in Hamburg and didn't mind going back to Lubeck, when she seemed to need help. Of course I was broke and had no place to sleep. Heidi offered me her downstairs apartment, if I'd clean up: no problem; and to get some money I threw little notes ['Have a jungle in front, behind or underneath your house? Call me!'] in several mailboxes and so got to know Ursula Laabs, who from then on used to call me when it burned: flooded cellar, cat disappeared, garden a mess, computer/fax/whatever not working, sanding her parquet floor, hole in the outside back wall of her house 20 meters over the ground. She died a year before Mom: dementia).*

He sighed. And sat down.

"Well," she said triumphantly. "Spit it out. Andrieux is not a common name in Salten - have you run across another one of the sort?" It didn't sound alarmed - it

flashed through Roko's mind that she hadn't moved here because of Elizabeth after all and knew very well who he was talking about. As if she had smelled his suspicion, Olga reached for the inhaler. Since her second stroke, she had gotten the hang of it and smelled her lack of oxygen in advance. "You can bet on my nose!" she used to drone, although she had lost her ability to smell in her birthplace Hamburg, the result of several nights spent in air-raid shelters as a child. Before Elisabeth died, she had accused Olga of using her inhaler to bribe people: "so everybody obeys you - pronto!" 'Pronto' - who uses such words nowadays? Shit, did she miss the old girl, men usually died faster - why couldn't Roko have made a run for it like most males! Stubbornness no doubt. Tz.

The stubborn man seemed to stare through her, somehow convinced that the news about the existence of the young person who had been in his clinic for some time would upset her: why must he witness that? Why hadn't he just informed Olga by phone? Or wrote her a letter? Elisabeth's voice in his ear: "Sadly, your tact is only manual, Roko - better leave the verbal part to me," he cowardly and clumsily dodged the direct question as usual:

"Nasty business, this Corona!"

Real success neither rains through an open window nor because one is charming now and then - intuition and tenacity, if not penetrance are helpful.

Right: "Roko!" her voice seemed to bristle and mow his eardrums straight up to the brains at the same time. Dismayed, he took a brown envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket, tossed it on the table, got up and down those stairs and out of the house as fast as his age allowed: that's what you got for being good-natured - to hell with the darn old pisser.

* * *

"How long have you known about it?" she wanted to know without much ballyhoo, when he finally picked up the receiver in the evening after several hours of telephone terror.

"Not long," he dodged the question. "Wanted to make sure first."

"Does she know about me?";

"You mean?"

"Roko!"

My God, he should change his phone number or emigrate - anyway, who had landline telephone nowadays? "Geez, Olga, not everyone has time to mess around with others all day - I work full time," he reminded, annoyed.

"I know, it was in the SaNews often enough, that we are gradually running out of specialists - even in Salten surgeons are no longer decently paid - the money probably drips completely into pots for dividends, managers and footballers. Shhh. Otherwise you would have retired long ago, my dear. Not all people can retire with dignity when their time comes. Besides, a little birdie told me that since a few years you've only been doing things that any nurse could do just as well - the clinic needs your reputation, not your doddering hands," she added heartlessly.

"I can hang up, ya know!"

"Right! And why don't you? So your memory of our escapade before you married is not entirely lost?" came as dryly from the phone as if she were quoting an old plumber's advertisement from the Yellow Pages.

He was so shocked, he actually hung up, only to call back after a brief inquiry at the clinic and some calculating: "She's my granddaughter?" it came timidly.

"And mine," she confirmed coolly. "So what are we going to do? Think of something and in twenty-four hours I'm expecting you for dinner at my place! We'll have pike-perch in mango sauce with young potatoes, cooked by hand and with love. From the restaurant downstairs, don't worry. Bis die Tage (*old fashioned greeting, meaning as much as 'bye' or 'same time, same channel' or whatever you prefer*)", she

ended the conversation the way Elisabeth always used to.

"Stop!" he shouted into the hooting receiver.

The bitch had hung up.

III. in between I & II

One night, as soon as her health was restored, Kim slipped into the cellar, tightening some of the screws of the cellar door and loosening others, so that the heavy door, once closed, could no longer be opened from the inside – well, perhaps with dynamite. She had dragged all the tools out of her cellar rooms in the Holzkiste the day before: the mouse trap was ready. As the only one in the house who actively used the stuffy former bunker, a disturbance seemed unlikely - but she had waited for the quieter weekend to be sure. To be able to hear somebody in the cellar, you had to flatten your ear directly on the door, she had tested that; there were no windows down there: a musty crypt without network reception. Only her own cellar rooms were well insulated and almost comfortable - even with air conditioner; she was occasionally down there to work on projects of her own. This weekend she would not be at home, had to visit her sick father, the only person who shared her vague reservations concerning Mike, which excluded a coming along of this omnipresent 'relationship'.

Hallelujah.

The only tough nut was to lure the man out of his chair, something he never did without a good reason, this violated his so-called principles. But here she had found what she thought was an elegant, almost ingenious solution: he would not be able to resist a fake burglary with all of those treasures he boasted he had down in the cellar. He was not only proud of everything that was his, but also very nosy, so surely a quick look was the least - that was as certain as that the next

government in Germany would be a green one (*was wrong there, alas*).

Saturday morning she sat behind her apartment door with a book, a small bottle of water, a snack and a train ticket for the whole weekend in her backpack and full of double anticipation firstly over a relaxed weekend with Paps and *without him*, then of course over her little joke and its consequences: surely one and a half days of solitary confinement in unclean and gothic surroundings would turn even the laziest Goofy into a berserker, and naughty little Kim into an abandoned, thus free person... Right? She had left him a good sleeping bag and knew there was plenty of his sweet wine down there, which also kept warm; but of course she had to be sure the right person got locked in before disappearing: cheers and goodbye, honey bunny!

It was almost lunchtime, when she heard him puffing up the stairs. Up? she had time to wonder, when the doorbell rang: What?

She opened, could only open and close her mouth like a carp, while he breathlessly covered her with hurried staccato sentences:

"Ah, you're still here, thought I heard you! My sister unfortunately is also not well - must leave immediately - you don't have as far as I do - could you please show the policemen my cellar rooms before you go - they're supposed to be here in half an hour at the latest - but I'm afraid my cab will get here faster" - from below the ringing of the front door could be heard - "ha, there's the devil - here are the keys to my cellar rooms - don't do anything I would and keep your paws off my things, hear me! Took some days off and will be back in exactly one week. Greetings and good wishes go to Mr. Andrieux - kissy, my little honey bunny!"

And off he went, leaving her with a bunch of keys and a probably stupid face: police?

Oh. What now?

She raced down the stairs and unlocked, pushing a piece of wood under the heavy door. Before untrapping the door she wanted to risk a closer look at his cellar room - such an opportunity would not come again so soon: maybe she could

build in a little side prank? Better than nothing, postponed is not cancelled.

While trying the fifth key it happened: in her back it went "whuuui" and some door behind her closed heavily. Automatically, without turning around, she pushed the last two into the key hole: they didn't fit. Had she expected something else - honestly? Slowly, as if in a dream, she strode to the bunker-thick, well-locked cellar door... *(used the cellar scene from "gesiebtes brot" = sifted bread, which I wrote when taking care of Mom after her accident, 2015 during the refugee crisis. I suppose every crisis stomps a story out of me, a writing version of "learning by doing". My first was "marke solo", written 1989/90, Salten was born then. Second: "saltener bits", when asylum homes were burning. Number three 'icemakers' was a youth book for my grandkids, here kids saved the world with their gameboys and then went swimming - you can read when the TV-news warned about the #ClimateCrisis. My brain fog buried a lot, but most things I remembered when sorting out papers for Alexander, that journalist. There I also found a document from the Arbeitsamt [= employments office], which forbade me freelance working as the foreigner I was, so I wrote as a ghostwriter, translated, was an english speaking nanny, wrote short stories, glosses and that sort of stuff [found some of it, or I'd probably have forgotten], cleaned up, dug for goutweed etc. and of course took care of my kids and grandkids, who are the best ever. Funny thing is, the small pension I worked for in Germany is now out of sight – the pension insurance insists they don't know me: The same fight I had in NL to get my identity as Monique Jacobse back – only the other way round. Let's laugh about that in ten years.)*

She discovered the first tiny cam by chance while searching remnants for her self-made "sewage construction", a multi-storey wooden construction. She had grazed her own rooms and was now acting as the burglar she had invented in the hope of finding more usable scraps to filter out as much "poison" as possible from the - except for the tiny bit of water her air conditioner produced - only liquid down there. Picking locks without proper tools was no small feat, and the lack of liquid was beginning to show - exhausted, she had lowered herself to the floor, and from there looked directly into the first cam, well hidden inside the lamp that illuminated the first twenty or thirty feet of the long T-shaped corridor - lens toward the bunker door. Once alarmed, she focused her attention and found another one in front of his cellar door, overlooking the entire length of the corridor; the third and fourth she discovered in his rooms, which were filled with bulky waste and his red wine, the door was the only one she had been able to open

up without tools - the lock was a joke from another century. After the cellar vandalism last year, she had considered installing a mini-surveillance cam in her cellar and had done some research, and therefore was sure the cams had motion detectors - undoubtedly directly connected to Mike's PC. Good camouflage, expertly installed: nothing like a good electronics expert doing a good job. Right?

It was eleven o'clock in the evening, the idea of Mike seeing her rage and despair kept her from taking the cameras down one by one and smashing them against the wall. Slowly, she made her way to her own rooms and sat down at the old carpenter's table, resting her head on her arms, face down. She needed to think, and she wanted that without digital witness.

First of all: He must have watched her tamper with the basement door via camcorder and seen or at least suspected the fake "burglary."

Secondly, knowing him as she did, he would keep his word and actually visit his sister, who had always been more or less unwell since her birth, and stay there for a week - meaning another four days. God knows he wasn't stupid, why should his alibi be less good than hers?

Third: except the drops from her conditioner there was nothing liquid down here, only wine from his cellar: very sweet and very red and very undrinkable.

Fourth: she would have to drink it - aversion and allergy or not.

And fifth, she hated the man with a fervor that was so not like her, it frightened the shit out of herself. The sooner she pulled herself together and did something, the better; brooding only would only drive her crazy and didn't make the rooms any warmer. Looking for tools to pick even the good locks, she discovered a fifth camera: even smaller than the others and cleverly placed underneath a shelf.

In. *Her*. Cellar.

Her mind raced backwards: like the majority of her neighbors she had replaced the old rusty lock with a sturdy one, after some rowdies had broken in and smashed everything to bits, and this new lock had not one single scratch on it. So it was safe to assume that the tiny camera - it hit her like a baseball bat - had been installed after the episode with the rowdies and before her acquaintance with a

certain computer guy.

So far, so bad. As a neighbor and computer specialist, a look into her online habits should have been cinchy for Mike: the forums she frequented, her literary and - in this case - especially her musical interests. In retrospect, this also explained his e-mails before they got to know each other, the contents of which almost always coincided with her opinion and world view, her likes and dislikes; my God, how impressed she had been when he had even guessed her birthday...

All lies. She was so stupid! He must have based the entire strategy of his scheme 'How do I conquer Kim Tiara Andrieux?' on these informations. And she dope had felt so exposed and helpless all the time, like someone struggling with imaginary obstacles, while he had took all the hurdles without effort and had broken into her life without leaving her the slightest chance of defense.

He had known everything - everything.

Much later, she added another point to her enumeration:

Sixth: she would kill the son of a bitch, if it was the last thing she did.

* * *

They brought her to the St. Mary's Hospital a few blocks away, unconscious. When she opened her eyes days later - who was sitting at her bedside, his face a wholesomeness of innocence and worry?

"Tiara! Darling! You're back at last, I'm so glad and relieved!"

She twisted her mouth uncertainly. "Where am I?" And then, pulling her hand out of his: "Who are you? Get out!"

"You heard it, dear, my granddaughter needs her rest!" bawled a voice from nowhere. It belonged to a white-haired lady, who had played the watch dog several days, sleeping on a comfortable divan bed in front of the window. After hustling the unsympathetic young man out of the room, the old woman sat down

on the now vacated chair and stated with a beam: "You're so right, Kim, men can be such a nuisance!"

"What about sons?" it came rather tonelessly, then: "GET OUT!"

* * *

Main chorus of the few visitors who dared come despite of the new Corona rules in Salten and the French patients laying here: "How could this happen?"

And: "What a pity - Mike is such a swell guy and you were such a nice couple - and you really can't remember anything?"

Stupid question. She would have rather heard something from Paps or Daniel. All sorts of films ran through her head: the absence of one was strange enough - but both?

Their relationship had always been a close one. Her father was young when she had been born, the mother, even younger, had disappeared after her birth. It seemed natural to offer the apprentice girl a home, who had become pregnant from their boss, a married man with no intention of changing that. Many years later, the boss transferred the carpentry to the young couple.

Thus undramatic and simple life can be. Sometimes.

Three days after throwing out Mike and the old lady, her brother came shuffling in with her old backpack full of clothes. He had heavy steps, and even his mask was black, the deep circles under his eyes darker than usual.

Kim felt her blood circulation vanish out of her head as if sucked down by one of Rowling's dementors: "Paps?"

He swallowed and nodded.

"Spit it out, I'll find out anyway."

"Heard about your" - he grimaced - "basement adventure and even read about it in the newspaper. You are now famous, sis. I would have visited you in the hospital days ago, but there's Corona going on and the doctors assured me you're fine, something Paps was not. I just came from the cremation..." He hesitated before adding laconically, "It wasn't Corona, but it wasn't a mere cold either - at his age... he should have stayed in his bed."

She frowned. "It's not at all like him to get up - why...?" she broke off. Her father had raised them both almost by himself, Daniel's Mom died when he was five, their "Grandmother" had never been healthy and passed away fifteen years ago - their little family hadn't been exactly lucky up to now. These blows seemed to multiply the sense of responsibility their father had already, forcing him to look after his own health almost as nitpicking as he did after his children.

"Because of me," she answered her own question, barely audibly.

"You didn't show up, we couldn't even reach you," he defended himself, as if he could have prevented it, or perhaps even had to. "We were all looking for you like maniacs - didn't look like you to simply disappear, especially when Paps is sick. Even Mike had no idea where you were..."

"Who's Mike?" it came automatically over her pale lips, while her mind raced in the opposite direction.

Daniel decided to change the subject. "Ran into your real grandmother in the hallway, she introduced herself and seems to be watching your room like the Swiss Guard - you have contact?" he asked incredulously.

"Grandmother? Our grandmother died fifteen years ago, remember?" she muttered, before losing her conscious again.

* * *

A day later Lockdown number two was imposed throughout Germany, a status quo Salten had already put itself into a month before on an extra-monthly citizens' meeting, which took place on several thousands of computers and smartphones, and tablets (*did I mention Salten had conquered the internet in 'Saltener Bits'? It was a great advantage Mom was probably one of the first non-nerds to learn how computers work after Dad had his strokes - chapeau!*) and ever since Corona had popped up; the same large majority had also consented to take over French Corona patients in the smaller hospital. Bewildered, the fresh grandparents decided to play on the safe side and get 'dat girl' out of the hospital despite the holes she was always falling into, pushed by a bothersome young man luring around and insisting he was her fiancé and making energetic efforts to ship her off to his sister. Fortunately, a prominent grandmother with the same name weighed more than a puny pseudo-fiancé who had been thrown out by the patient herself in front of the hospital staff as soon as she had opened her eyes; nobody had seen the grandmother follow a few minutes later.

Without much ado, Olga had the apartment upstairs: solarium, massage room, sauna and refuge of her Persian cat, Julia - cleared and cleaned up; and on that very same day the brand-new grandfather guarded the sick girl inclusive her bed and a nurse up the stairs. Chance seemed to know what it was doing for a change by getting Kim such grandparents the very moment she needed them, and since no objections came from her brother, the girl laid safer than many a pope: whoever wanted to get up there, had to pass an exclusive restaurant and an old woman, who was determined not to risk anything and had hired a discreet security service with cams all over the stairway and outside.

Step by step or paragraph by paragraph, Olga finished off her juristic wars, throwing some detectives on that strange 'fiancé' instead, who was on the verge of

bankruptcy and had applied for support from the government as a "Corona victim". Woah. Well, she still had connections and didn't mind using them. She heard he was one of the best moles of an international company and had been sent to Salten to push some real business into town; his last failure was trying to get electric scooters on the streets. You'd think that should be no problem since cars were not welcome in Salten, but no, Saltens prime eco rule: "Don't produce or buy things you wouldn't like to get rid of by yourself later" was unbeatable. The young man had the bad reputation of trying to "buy" people - in Salten. Oops. Even she knew that was one of the worst things a businessman could possibly do here, so she had no scruples passing everything about the young man to the Saltener officials she knew. After a few words with Kim's best friend, Olga extended the tasks of her detectives and found out that the "subject", as she called the young man with very thin lips, had already cleared his cellar rooms and had canceled the lease for his apartment underneath Kim; Olga hesitated a little, before "borrowing" the keys to Kim's apartment: they found two bugs with parts of fingerprints. Her opinion: the girl only had to sue the man to push him off the plank of no-return.

But would 'the girl' appreciate her efforts?

IV. might as well start

It was not planned. He wasn't a criminal or anything like that. Simply a businessman, one of the best by the way. The basement thing was something else, just a reflex, a reaction - nothing more. All right, a bit crude, but wading in a cesspool for hours to save orient carpets, antique furniture, genuine vintage tableware - and then the shoe collection, his pride and joy: what was that, pillepalle or what? And the oh-so-lovely innocent Tiara had obviously planned it many weeks. Same thing with the cellar story: *he* was supposed to be locked up in

a dark tomb for days - was it his fault Tiara's parents had been so shamefully lax with their spankings? Such things were not usual in a relationship, but nevertheless concerned only these two, were personal. Private.

True: the incident with her brother was different. Yet also in this case he had somehow slipped in. It was not planned. His friendship with Daniel had been good from the beginning, they were buddies and had done various things together without female company - what men do when the weekend is long and women don't feel like it or have no time: Watching men's stuff on Mike's really good home cinema set, drinking together, that sort of thing. Not exactly one heart and one soul, but agreeing on some typically masculine things and in stressy relationship matters loyal enough to keep the collateral damage minimal. So what? Women did it like that too. He had helped Tiara's younger brother with some electronic stuff, and received some insider tips from the banker in exchange: a win-win situation. Until Corona came. He didn't blame Daniel, who also had lost some money, though not as much as Mike - Daniel was not interested in things like stock market, investment etcetera. Called it baby stuff:

"These things happen, Mike ol' boy. Shit happens. It's only baby stuff, ya know - like monopoly."

So no plan, no revenge or anything of the sort. Not at all. Sure, if people thought he had nothing better to do than pour water down a mountain slope for weeks on the other side of Germany, to make the cabin slide slowly down with himself inside - come on, he hadn't even known the name of the mountain until Daniel had invited him to come along. Okay, Daniel hadn't exactly invited him, it was a bit the other way round: he himself had wanted an open talk from man to man - was that a crime? His work, his relationship, his whole life was fucked up - some debtors were after him despite Corona. Everybody needs an empathetic ear now and then. And a place to hide. Okay, he had also planned to borrow some money.

The hut seemed the right place for that, had apparently belonged to the family a long time. "Paps" had inherited it at some point and had grabbed his kids every summer to get them all some healthy mountain air as long as they were young

enough to let themselves be grabbed; later Tiara started her own life, Daniel was too lazy and their father didn't enjoy it alone - last time was an exception. Daniel seemed to need the same change of location, had decided to check up things and clear his head at the same time; now how could he, Mike, have possibly known that?

Kim and Daniel had grown up like siblings; the resemblance between them was coincidental: from a distance, from the side, and from behind. They were both of the same stature and had the same hair length and color. That's all they had in common; for some reason or other the girl had sucked all of the power, leaving Daniel hanging over some fence all the time. Or on a couch.

"They must have switched chromosomes somehow, darn!" the proud father used to joke, when his emancipated daughter was not near. In contrast to her poison-green ones, Daniel's eyes were dark brown, framed by racoon-like shadows, that couldn't possibly come from lack of sleep or too much work. He was lethargic, completely lacking his sister's versatile drive; in fact, he had enjoyed the lockdown, Salten voluntarily jumped in earlier than the rest of Germany - yes, he was on the verge of quitting his job. Daily. Home office was no longer enough for him. He had pricked his ears last year, when he heard Salten was seriously considering an Unconditional Basic Income: Yay! The sting of arrogance would then be gone, he didn't know many people, who could afford working without payment, and he owned half a carpentry, mountain hut and house - the latter they had all lived in until Kim moved out. He hoped, no, expected, his sister would now move back in - there was enough room for both. Kim loved teasing him, but accepted him the way he was; when they had lived under the same roof, she had occasionally taken pity and arranged a girlfriend for him. Honestly, why couldn't people just leave him alone? Lots of people could do his job at the bank better and would've loved taking over and maybe even desperately needed the money - so what the hell? Especially since the girlfriend he had five years ago had planted a vegetable garden, he enjoyed taking care of since she left: hey, his pumpkins were the best ever! Kim was the same, her few employees shared the work and the money and were not rich, but happy. That was Pap's stamp all over - maybe only possible in a city like Salten. The confessions and

self-criticism in his father's will didn't change anything, he was sure Kim would see it like that too, but at the same time he had jitters to show her the will and was determined to wait until she was fully recovered. Did that sound like an excuse? It was! So what?

Another point they differed in was his dislike of being alone. Sadly, he loved active women and exactly these had problems accepting his tendency to be comfortable and frugal, which was why he was forced to change them every few months, depending on how long they endured him; this had got him the undeserved status of a Casanova - and of a lone wolf ever since his sister had moved out. The energy it took him to find a new one was almost too much for him. Everything was too much for him right now: Paps and his will, Kim's "accident"...

Of course, looking after things in Bavaria was also an excuse, it wasn't really necessary. He had lost his father, almost his sister. Mike's popping up was like an invitation, even if the man whined around rather a lot.

"Oh yeah, pretty rotten time for you - but do you know what?" he started beaming. "Why don't you come with me? A little company sounds good, and we can take turns driving, if you can accept that my e-car can't drive faster than 120. You gotta decide right now though, I'm going this minute and will stay a week at most; after that I want to take care of my sister, who's better off where she is at the moment."

Did Mike have a choice? Just now, he felt like a pariah: Salten didn't want him, Hamburg wanted money he didn't have. He knew the Tiara train was gone, but in the foggy state of nothing he was at the moment, why not try to find things out: what about her amnesia, was it real, and if so, was it irreversible? Except for the two bugs in her apartment, which he hadn't been able to get to, there was no evidence of his spying around, he had removed the cams in the cellar and deleted all files several times. Despite her temperament, she was a reserved person and had never left her keys to him or let him alone in her apartment for only five minutes; in fact: he had only been there three times. Three times! He had never

experienced anybody so mistrustful, he himself was different: open minded and all that. So the big question remained: what did she know and was she going to sue him? In the meantime, he had a bit of time to plan his next steps: America maybe?

Germany is not small, driving from the "hohem Norden" (*everything north of Hamburg is called the "far north"*) all the way down was quite a distance. The streets were like stretched ghost towns, the few cars they passed were oddly modest, making themselves small as if they were doing something indecent or had their grandma folded in the trunk. Daniel was happy to leave his mourning cape in Salten and got quite silly and loud. They took turns driving, chilled and grooved to the music, and had food brought out four times on the way. It was nice. For himself too. No slime this time, he was as happy and silly as Daniel. Really.

In addition to the two toilets, a kitchen and a large pantry, the cabin had three rooms upstairs and three downstairs - it all looked neglected and smelled musty; some of the supplies had expired, the last thorough overhaul must have been a while ago. There was no network, not even a landline; Mike had discovered a transistor radio and a small TV with an antenna upstairs under one of the beds - what was that: keep the dangerous life outside? Pretty silly, nothing for him.

The big slide happened two days after their arrival. Thanks to the solid carpentry work the cabin slid compactly and snug almost fifty meters down the slope; Daniel's sports car, which had been parked right next to it, following like a leashed puppy. They had been asleep and hadn't even woken up. And now they were stuck. Like his sister, Daniel was not impressed by electronic frippery, this and Mike's unwillingness to spoil Daniel's and his own good mood with bad news that buried everything these days and normally started with a C, had kept him from taking out his phone and showing off in the first place. It was the newest and could receive and send wherever you were, even from the bottom of the Pacific - thus the boast of the creators. He had simply kept his mouth shut and let it all happen - was that already a crime? Nobody could blame him for the landslide,

nobody could prove that he had contact to the rest of the world in the first place - how was that going to work? His smartphone even had several numbers that could be suppressed, and best of all: the GPS had never been on. Whew.

Sure, not doing anything was not honest, but they were fine: nobody was hurt, the pantry was filled with canned goods and water, tea and coffee, alcoholic beverages, juices and whatnot. Even if they had been in distress or injured, it would have been only a tiny misdeed not to call for help. This was not the case.

As Daniel himself had said once: "These things happen. Shit happens... - baby stuff."

He had sent the first SMS while "chopping wood", an activity he had voluntarily taken upon himself - Daniel didn't seem to know anything about the neatly stowed wood piles at the side of the hut.

It was simple and short and could mean anything and nothing:

"Hello lady, how much is your brother worth?"

He had deleted the message from his phone as soon as it was sent and then switched it off. Without a trace. No one would ever be able to prove it had been from him, and even if: what exactly? It was a spontaneous test balloon, he hadn't committed anything, not even a plan. It was like burping in the snow.

He didn't expect a speedy answer. On the road Daniel had done a lot of babbling, so he knew about Tiara laying unconscious half of the time in her grandmother's house, a very successful lady with heaps of money. The information about Daniel's not having mentioned he was heading for Bavaria, was also valuable.

And now Germany was locked in. Perfect. Almost like an invitation. Whether they stayed here or at home in Salten, what difference did it make? Neither of them would be missed, and they hadn't been stopped a single time on their way down: indeed, why should they? Except the sick French people in Salten's smaller hospital, there were hardly any infected people up there. Couldn't be better if he

had planned it for weeks.

Daniel took the slide down the slope from the light side, showing his best immature side and being infectiously silly. They behaved as if they were on a Robinson Crusoe trip, using dice to find out which of them would be Friday when it was only Tuesday, if Saturday had been killed and why Monday was double. That sort of stuff.

* * *

The message came just as Kim had finished stuffing her clothes back into the rucksack, Daniel had brought her when she was in the hospital. She was shaky on her legs, but determined to end this grandmother farce the very same day she woke up there: who the hell did the old lady think she was? The professor was also present, in fact: he slept in the massage room, so they both witnessed how all of the blood seemed to be drained out of the already narrow face of their granddaughter as she read the message.

"What happened?!" honked Olga alarmed, while Roko gently directed the girl back to her bed.

The young woman was aware this was too much just now, she would need help: Okay, let them take over - I'm off! went through her mind as she handed Roko her phone like a sort of rapier. And off she was.

The preference was like a slap in the middle of Olga's face, but it didn't burn long: a chance was a chance - probably her last. She was determined to do and put up with everything, always had been, and was ready to answer every question truthfully - questions she had turned over and over in her mind for years, waiting, almost hoping for something awful to happen so she would have the possibility to answer.

And the questions came.

At the moment, there was nothing anybody could do but wait. And talk.

Although Kim was recovering fast, she knew she was not up to the task. Not alone. The brief blackouts were more physical than mental, so she stayed in bed, almost falling asleep after each pragmatically brief question she asked, and yet Olga noticed the young woman was listening intently, sucking each word in:

"We were two cousins with only one study place, and from the beginning on it was clear that I would be the one; Klara had always been more domestic, a light allergy also made her life like a piece of hell as soon as she had to go somewhere. She trusted especially my ambition and that I'd be successful; before that, we went to the same school in Salten after the war and made an early agreement that I would support her later. Unlike me, she was modest and didn't need much: little house in the country was enough for her. Even before I got pregnant, we settled everything in a contract..."

"Heard they call this sort of thing horse trade", Kim interjected, her eyes flashing greenish out of their narrowed slits.

"I wouldn't call it that", Olga hadn't even batted her lashes. "After my unplanned pregnancy popped up, funny enough the contract seemed unnecessary and we didn't even think about it anymore. Like bulky chunks falling in their holes by themselves. She knew I'd be all the more after it, and she was thrilled by the prospect of raising a child on her own without having to deal with 'unpleasantries' like sex and birth. Allergies like that make you lonely, you know. But what am I slobbering - you knew her. My new part was not to meddle and make the extra task affordable for her, as well as I could. Nobody had money or parents with money at that time - not in our circles. The study place was donated by an aunt who had emigrated to Sweden at an early age; she had a business with her Swedish husband that had been doing well enough to be able to put aside a money each month. Like many at the time, she had wanted to study and later saved it for her son, who died young. We were her only relatives.

That's how it was. You accuse me I abandoned your father out of career lust - my honest answer: no and yes. To my defense I can only say that the opportunities he had through me were better that way - you'll have to puzzle the rest together

yourself."

"What opportunities are you talking about? A normal school education and then an apprenticeship? He and his wife got the carpentry from Daniel's biological father."

"Is that what he said?" The question came from Roko.

"Let's just leave it that way," it came brashly from Olga, who had enough and disappeared downstairs to her own floor with her robe and hair flying.

"Yeah yeah, go on and run away, when something doesn't suit you!" she heard her granddaughter shout after her.

Olga thought herself too old for "I didn't, you did" games - even with her own granddaughter. She said as much when Roko came down a little later.

"What you call games can rob people their peace of mind, ya know," he orated. "Has the successful all-knowing Olga Andrieux ever thought about that yet?"

"Says the right man!" she snorted.

He blushed despite professorship and old age: "Don't forget, Olga, you didn't leave me any choice!" Dignified he added: "Honestly, I hold that against you - that was not correct!" He puffed himself up a bit, trying to look convinced of his role.

"Really?" she sneered. "Of course you would have confessed the alcoholic slip you had before the wedding, divorced and then taken care of the brat all by yourself? Be glad I saved you the illusion of always behaving correctly for decades, you coward!"

This time it was his turn to stalk down the stairs in a huff, remembering he had a home of his own.

"Yeah yeah, go on and run away when something doesn't suit you!" Olga

couldn't resist throwing after him, cackling over her own silliness: life from seventy onwards could be so much fun, if only one's body would stop lagging behind all the time.

* * *

"Roko?!" she yelled to his answering machine half an hour later, forgetting her habit of dialing so long until a human being picked up. She still had to pack, damn it, why couldn't the fool just get on the phone like everyone else? Roko was a creature of habit, she knew he was at home. "My spy just called. The last sign of life from the cell phone of the missing brother came from a town south of Garmisch-Partenkirchen. Plain text: we have his location and are about to jerk off in my car, stopping at your place beforehand in case of the unexpected honor that you intend to accompany us. Tudelu (*the internet denies knowing a word like that and thus refuses to translate – machines are so stubborn!*)!"

Of course he wanted to. Wanted to? He had to:

The last time Olga drove the three of them around was decades ago, the citizens of Salten had started to build barriers (*it took a while to realize this was stolen from life also, probably not only Bilthoven had started doing exactly that before I left*) on the streets in front of their houses to stop the racing, but it was still possible to drive your car if you knew where. They had come from a cultural event in Hamburg and were sucked in by the topic; Olga was so focused on getting her point of view right, that she rammed a very old building, having left the street more than usual - it was always like that. Elisabeth had insisted on reporting the incident to the police and hadn't spoken to her best friend for weeks, because Olga refused: "Monument protection, my foot, that's the governments alibi for not having to mend old broken things with our taxes! I bet my money goes directly into one of those trees or other obstacles they put in the middle of the street, so nobody can drive on 'em. If it makes you happy, I'll donate to the local orphanage!"

Since Elisabeth had a problem with her eyes and was not allowed to drive,

from this day on Roko was misused as a chauffeur.

And now this crazy woman seriously thought he'd let his only grandchild bounce with her all over Germany?

As it was forbidden to park or even drive the car in the city and nobody had an own garage either, Olga had ordered the nurse to pick up her car and stay in it in case someone came - a nurse was as good as a doctor, right? The old lady had then shoved the seats back and thrown all the blankets and pillows she could find behind in a big hurry to avoid a wheel clamp after already getting copped twice. If Kim got suffocated, they would hear it. She hoped. When the car stopped in front of Roko's house an hour later, the Professor was standing on the pavement, holding an aluminum suitcase in addition to his traveling bag.

"I hope there are no dueling pistols in there?" Olga snorted.

"Excellent plan. Good man", Kim, whose head had appeared in the gap between the front seats like a jack-in-the-box, praised dryly.

"Take it easy, ladies - as some people may know: I'm a working man and..."

"Nobody asked you to come along", Olga words seemed to cut his off like a guillotine, although she dreaded the long trip with a sick person who fell asleep every few minutes.

"...so I had to", Roko lifted his voice slightly to finish his sentence, "agree to take a few samples for the Munich clinic with me."

"But on the way back!" determined Olga ungraciously, looking up and down the street, but not wanting to admit her dread of traffic cops: she needed her car, damn. "We're in a hurry, old man, hop in!"

"All right", he slyly pretended a defeat, putting his luggage down as if he had plenty of time - he knew about Olga's traffic problem. "If you let me drive...?"

Her face twitched. She hated being the copilot, especially those last years

sitting behind next to Elisabeth as if they were children, with Roko in the front, whistling and butting in their conversation: "Psst, I can't concentrate" now and then - men could be such ass holes. But then she shrugged, opened the door and went around the car: Bavaria wasn't next door, he was not twenty and would get tired and they also had to drive back, right? With a dishonest scowl she gave Roko the exact address.

Kim had fallen asleep again. They thought.

"So," the young woman said with a voice that sounded familiar to Roko and seemed to throw all arguments out of the window. "How come you know about the cabin?"

Roko raised and lowered a shoulder, which seemed to both indicate his innocence and his inability to focus on anything other than the vehicle below, in front and behind them.

"Signed it over to my cousin at some point, figured with those masses of grandkids, she had more use of it than me."

"Masses?" it came indignantly from behind, the oldies needed to see neither the raised brows nor the crossed arms to realize them: "Carpentry too?"

"Tz," snorted Olga. "I had agreed with Klara to fill in when and where I could. Didn't I say that already?"

"And in return you want me to kiss your feet?"

Olga lifted her left leg with for her age remarkable agility, using both hands to push her stockinged foot backward between the seats. "Help yourself. They had other fetishes in my days though."

Kim took a deep breath before she burst into laughter, in which Olga promptly joined. The similarity between these different women elicited a smirk from Roko.

"Fine," Olga commented, after they had probably laughed their stress off more than anything else. "Was prepared for another battle, this car is spacious, but my staircase is kind of missing as a fallback option. So", she continued her report without being asked. "As mentioned earlier, your brother's cell phone was last located in that area. Daniel picked up the last meal about 250 km from the cabin, along with a man whose description strongly resembles the subject - so I just combined, that's all. Nothing Miss Marplish about that."

"Shouldn't we notify the police?" came from Roko.

"No!" the two women disagreed in unison.

"Furthermore," Olga continued, as if the interjection had not occurred, "I found out that the slope on which the cabin stands has slid about 45 meters towards the valley, thanks to excessive rainfall after a long dry period. Welcome to the climate crisis."

Silence.

And after a while, from behind: "Suggest you guys be quiet for a while, so I can figure out a text that demands a sign of life without sounding desperate."

"Excellent plan!"

They heard it beeping in the back, then soft snoring sounds. The seniors lowered the volume of their conversation, trying not to smile.

Occasionally they stopped at gas stations and bought things they thought young people liked: from chips to rusks, coffee and cola. The oldies were careful not to eat too much themselves - Olga: "If I can't see what trickles down is alive or dead, squatting outside is nothing for me - we can catch up later."

"Next time I'll buy a caravan with autopilot," she grumbled, after Roko had driven through the night and it started brightening up. "Do you want me to take over? You missed red again, and that wasn't a crosswalk earlier, it was a hedgehog

that was faster than you."

"I didn't", Roko barked back softly.

"All right, that was a flying saucer. Roko, pull over - there's a bus stop up ahead. Pronto!"

He swallowed some fancy opinion as he opened his seatbelt and the door, and decided to close his eyes after changing places without much ado, the best attitude to have when you couldn't change things. He fell asleep immediately.

"Oh", he said several hours later. "Did I nod off? Anything happen?"

"The object sent a photo of Daniel in front of KlimaVor8 (*nonexistent and very important daily news in all main channels of TV in Germany and the rest of the world - instead, we get some wallstreet junk*). Tzz," Olga bobbed her head, "if Klara knew: TV in the hut, oioio."

"Aha, he has mutated from a subject to an object - how gratifying. And hmmm?" he inquired cautiously, jerking his head backwards.

"Hmmm," it came from the indicated direction, "is fine."

"Fine," Roko repeated satisfied. "How far are we?"

"About ninety minutes to go. Will you take over?" Olga stopped at the side of the road without waiting for an answer. They were driving on a country road, there was not much traffic. "My fingers are falling asleep - und mein Arsch stirbt gerade!" (*= and my ass is dying! Olga had the habit of speaking English, when she thought it appropriate, which sounds more effective in another language - so now and then the lady'll curse in German*).

"Olga!" Roko snarled, as if Kim was only seven, quickly getting out of the car before the witch could change her mind.

"So", came a hard voice from behind as soon as they had picked up speed.

"Now let's talk plain turkey: Klara had said a banker was Pap's biological father - how does that match?"

The car swerved, but was under control in time to let a green little Trabant (= *car made in East Germany before the Wall fell*) pass, who showed gratification with his middle finger.

"Ol-ga!" the driver repeated, this time from a deep grotto.

The old lady laughed heartily. "Excuse me, as a student you weren't exactly the Bank of America, but my lover was - had more money than was good for him. The fact that he was sterilized didn't matter, there was a stigma on unmarried Moms at the time, the scandal would have broken his neck, so he decided to help out. Voluntarily, by the way - I didn't even have to ask, just to put that right. It may also be that he liked me a little, the relationship lasted eleven years and was one of my best. The money was for the birth and to cover up the first rounds for my cousin and your Paps. Even Confucius would have admitted it's better for the mind, the soul and everything else to milk a banker than to rob his bank. I never took a silly penny from him for myself! Yes," she reluctantly admitted, as if there had been objections, "he helped me get the initial credit for my business, but that was official, I paid it back with interest etcetera – banks weren't in the habit of giving a female nobody a loan then. Not even today, I bet... - Klara used to say: 'Now let's talk plain turkey,'" she turned around to Kim with difficulty, her back not being as agile as her legs. "We knew: she can do this, and I can do something else. But Klara insisted on playing with her own deck of cards, otherwise I would have liked to come over as an 'aunt', but she loathed dishonesty. What can I say: 'I'm sorry'? It was the best solution, damn it!"

"So I am after all?" muttered Roko. It didn't sound sad.

"That's too high for me," Kim was not through with the topic. "Why did the banker take my brother into his bank and promote him all the time? What did he get from that? Why?"

"Oh," Olga went on nonchalantly. "I had asked him. How do you know? Not even Klara, who was fussy about such things and hated asking for favors, knew about that. It was top secret."

"Oh" said her granddaughter in the same tone. "It *was* top secret."

"The girl fooled me", Olga said half to herself, chuckling.

"Now we're talking about secrets," Roko interjected, as if to imply that he was still there. "What actually happened between you and that Mike guy? Was it so bad?"

The oldies heard the already familiar noise of their granddaughter sleeping.

"A 'mind your own business' would have done the job", the driver shrugged.

"Liebe Tante! (= dear aunt; German idiom, usually meaning the contrary)" Olga added Elisabeth-like, also raising a shoulder.

V. bavaria blues

The cabin had torn a wide and messy swath. It looked like a giant had forgotten his age and rolled down on his side; had there been a tree or two in the way, the cottage would have not survived the trip in one piece, those few bushes and shrubs on the half-steep slope, the kids had used for years as a slide while sitting on slabs or sleds, couldn't keep up the thick tree trunks their father had gradually inserted instead of the 'store rubbish' as he called it: what was he a carpenter for? And yet it took the trio a while to scramble down: the partially hidden craters and roots, the mud, the age of the seniors and Kim's lack of stamina kept them up as if ten times the distance.

It was lunchtime when they entered the hut. They found both men in their beds, fed up with too much food, alcohol and too little movement and sleep. Mike was

immediately wide awake and, as expected, played the innocent card. On the spot Kim began frisking his things, ignoring his monotone interjections: "Tiara, honey bunny, what are you looking for?" And with a dirty grin, as she emptied the pockets of the clothes he had on: "You sure missed me, huh?"

"Keep an eye on the object!" the bunny ordered before heading upstairs. The cursing and rumbling above their heads directed the four pair of eyes like a slow tennis match, it sounded like somebody was trying to create a situation more appropriate for a landslide. After almost twenty minutes, she came back, snow-white and wrinkles all over her face.

It was too much.

"Kim," the brother said gently. "You should lay down. Please."

"And who's going to look after" - her head jerked at Mike - "him?"

"All of us!" assured Olga. "Which room has no windows and can be locked?"

"Wait a minute," Mike's composure began to shake. "What gives you the right...?"

That was as far as he got. At the sound of his voice, Kim's spirits reared like a an old but furious stallion, and without further ado she twisted Mike's arm behind his back and maneuvered him into the little WC downstairs.

"Will you please keep searching and think about where he might have hidden that phone of his?" she asked before curling herself up in a blanket on the couch and making the already familiar sleeping noises.

The old folks looked from themselves to Kim and then back again.

"What kind of a granddaughter did you get us, jeepers?!" Roko wanted to know, eyebrows all the way up.

"Don't pretend you don't like it," she countered, chuckling. She turned to the

brother of this sensation: "We're looking for his smartphone. How about it, where was he when you weren't together: outside, on the roof, getting fresh air?"

He slapped his forehead: "Right, Mrs. Andrieux, he always went to fetch wood voluntarily, although according to Kim he's even lazier than me. Shall I show you where...?"

"No dear", Olga interrupted the young man. "Squeeze your mattress in front of the WC door and sleep. Your sister will make a mess of all of us if he slips away, but first we need that cell phone. And we're on first name terms here, hear me: we are family (*I miss Olga's anglicisms in this translation, the real one used to recite poems as long as Joe's legs*). Have a nice nap.

Coming, Roko?"

They found the cell phone behind a loose log at the right side of the cabin. Roko had paid special attention to this corner, as it was apparently where the wood was chopped. It was locked. Neither of them being tech-savvy, they decided to wait in the dining room until the siblings were awake again.

They didn't need much sleep, they had time.

So they thought, when a discreet knock at the door made them freeze in midair. Dismayed, they looked at each other and hurried to open, hastily closing the door behind them from the outside, before the object in the bathroom could become aware.

Two young police officers were standing in front of the door, probably exactly two meters away and correctly equipped with face masks: "That must have been quite a downhill ride", said the smaller one, smiling (*it was hard not to make a burlesque out of this, like the one I had at the police station years ago in Utrecht to make a Dutch human being out of myself instead of a foreigner with "ungeklärt" [= unsolved] in my German passport. Why they hadn't arrested the gray haired lady, who had no papers and even threatened to pull out the plants growing in the middle of the building, is still one of the most incomprehensible - and funniest - things I've ever experienced*). "Are you all right?"

The masks inspired Roko to introduce himself with his full name and title before answering the question truthfully: "Not exactly." Holding a warning finger in front of his pursed lips, the scholar moved further away from the house - the uniformed couple almost tiptoeing behind him, always at least two meters between them. Flattered, Roko inhaled to make a speech, but noticed the telltale twitch around the corners of Olga's mouth in time and hastened to explain that he was down here on behalf of the Corona Group.

"I have some virus samples of the French, who are laying in our clinic in Salten, that much I'm allowed to reveal, it was in all the newspapers. It would be good if you would nevertheless keep people away for safety's sake - we have everything we need. Oh, and please notify the Munich clinic that my grandchildren kept me up a bit, but I'll come as soon as possible. Thank you!"

Enthusiastically, the officers saluted, turned on their heels and disappeared.

This was too much for Olga, with her hair flying she hurried to close the door behind her, before bursting into a roar of laughter. She almost knocked over her granddaughter, who wanted to know what was going on, reluctantly grinning.

Roko, who had followed more slowly, listened to Olga's dramatic version, shaking his head.

"Virus samples?" Kim's eyebrows went up. "People believe everything when someone waves a title in front of their noses - I thought that stopped since it showed lots of docs are only copycats?"

The professor defended himself against the insinuation of having lied: "Those are indeed samples of the French in the aluminum suitcase, Munich would like to compare them with the ones they already have. Ever hear about mutations?"

By the way, is it this, what you've been looking for?" He held out the smartphone to her as if it was a dirty tissue. "Unfortunately locked."

After a brief inspection, Kim explained the phone could only be unlocked via fingerprint. "Mike's fingerprint, to be more specific - I remember seeing him do it

a few times. No problem," she added, eyes flickering, "we'll put some of my grandmother's pain drugs in his wine."

Olga noted the word 'we' with delight, ignoring the 'grandmother' part, while Roko once again wiggled his head, lifted his hand and started counting fingers: "Not bad for one day: illegal parking, assault, imprisonment, poisoning..."

"So what?" Olga reluctantly interrupted his list. "Give it to me, I'll put it in - I'm too old to get locked in anyway."

"They don't care how old you are, Olga", Roko put in.

"I know", she hissed back. "But ever since me-too and the climate crisis are official topics, people seem to like ladies better and decimated you men to mere boomers!"

Kim had difficulty keeping her face sober: "You guys are impossible, really. I'll get the stuff, it's old, but probably OK - and anyway, it's tasteless. Klara's last few weeks would have been very painful without." At the last sentence she had to raise her voice to drown out the noise the toilet object was making.

They looked at each other.

"Well, he probably doesn't want to go on the toilet," Olga guessed. "Let's tie him up and let him out!"

What about the car keys, are they in a safe place?" she added. "The nearest den is an hour by car, he won't make it walking - especially since it's about to get dark."

Kim's: "How do you know?" was drowned by her brother's: "Let's have a proper breakfast first!" The young man was standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking like he was about to join in the noise.

It became a late 6 PM breakfast, but plentiful. Because he had come first, Daniel seemed to consider himself the host and went back and forth twice, simply

putting everything edible on the table. Mike's ankles had been tied to the front chair legs with nylon stockings as a precaution.

"Ahem," the object/subject protested. "You do realize, I hope, that this will have nasty consequences - I mean: for you guys nasty consequences? It's only a matter of time before the police will show up, a number of friends know exactly where I am and should start worrying" - he took a glance at his expensive watch as if some countdown was about to start: "just now!"

Nobody laughed.

"Well, I don't know about 'you guys'," Olga announced, "but I'd like to finish my meal in peace - maybe it's more convenient to lock up noisy people hanging around and pestering everybody..."

It was not necessary.

The atmosphere was peculiar: they were extremely polite and yet extremely greedy - like comedians at a children's birthday party. Olga seemed to be additionally amused about something, giggling and even kicking randomly under the table, which got her grouchy looks from all sides - even from Mike, who sat demonstratively silent between Olga and Daniel in order not to risk being kicked out. Every now and then the old woman got up, dancing to and from the kitchen with a glass or a wine bottle.

"Olga," Roko said reproachfully.

"Yes, Professor - what can I humble creature possibly do for Your Majesty, the King of Corona?"

"Perhaps you should rethink your drinking habits a little?" he suggested stiff. "The wine has lots of sugar and..."

"You're sooo right," she interrupted, holding up her glass: "Cheers to all the sugar beet farmers of the north!"

"So, you people from Salten!" cried the old lady, when everyone had eaten enough, enjoying her own buffoonery . "I hereby declare that the object still refuses to reveal the location of his doohickey, and suggest we lock him in the WC again. What do you guys think of that? All those who don't raise their hands will be locked up with him, hick."

"I guess that was another word with X (nothing = nix)", Daniel announced, as they all found themselves around the dining room table again after washing and cleaning up, this time without Mike. He added consolingly after a glance in Olga's direction: "No reproach, I can smuggle a bottle of red wine in the toilet later, along with some blankets and pillows - after all, we were once alone on an island together, maybe he trusts me."

"Why?" Olga wanted to know.

"Well, it's supposed to get cold tonight."

"I meant the word with X - 'nix' I suppose? Do you really think he's stupid enough to drink anything but water straight from the tap, or even snack a stick of butter without having us lick it first? Didn't you notice his snitching from my plate or glass, whenever I disappeared to get some more booze?"

"Meaning?" asked Roko impatiently. "Plain talk, please, Olga - I'm sure the young people would like to catch up some sleep."

"Meaning that all the red wine merely moistened my lips and my fortunately red blouse - I don't like that sweet stuff", she tried not to look too triumphant.

"Is it enough?" her granddaughter was the first to understand. And then: "No reason to kick me under the table though. Really!"

"Sure it's enough. The object doesn't need blankets, pillows or nylon for the time being. Let's wait until he falls off the toilet, just to be on the safe side, okay? - Oh, was that your leg?" she grinned mischievously at Kim. "Had to make a bit of the wine disappear somehow, ya know, the drunken fidgeting and kicking was a

good distraction."

Kim rolled her eyes. "That's why he was even more stodgy than usual at the end, even went to the bathroom without protest. Wake me up when it rumbles, please. Good job", she added reluctantly before getting up, yawning, and curling herself up on her regular spot on the couch without another word.

"Can you do that too?" Roko turned to the brother of this miracle of falling asleep.

"No," the latter had to admit enviously. "But be careful, she can still listen when she's asleep."

"You're not really tired yourself, right?" asked Olga hopefully.

"I'm fit - haven't been cooped up in a basement for a week."

After a clicking sound of her palate, Olga disappeared upstairs and returned with four photo albums: "Founders keepers, losers weepers!"

Not even ten minutes later they heard it rumbling next door and hurried out, Kim in tow, whose ears were apparently really on continuous reception.

The contents of Mike's cell phone were a positive disappointment. He had heaps of acquaintances - Kim noticed with a snort that he had simply adopted her friends in green - but no private stuff, no emojis; chatting seemed to float on the same level as flea markets. Not even with his sister. The last almost personal message was five weeks ago and went to the old lady, who cleaned up his apartment once a month and was grandiloquently called 'my housekeeper': he had fired her without notice, demanding his keys within 24 hours. The rest were to people he owed money to and had been either put off or turned away. No private notes, no photos. Just appointments with mysterious abbreviations. Not even birthdays.

"You had a relationship with someone like that?" looked Daniel at his sister,

almost horrified. "A catalog with underwear for old people is more exciting."

"Not so hasty, young man," Olga purred with her deepest voice, slowly tracing her figure with both hands.

Kim, who had been sitting next to her brother and reading along silently, looked at Daniel indignantly. "Do you ever listen, when people talk to you? 'A bore' I've been trying to get into your stubborn head for months, or did you drag him to Bavaria to exchange stickers with old people's underwear on them?"

He raised both hands above his head, "Okay, take it easy, sis, I fell for him too."

"Let's sleep at night like other normal people and put the emperor"; - Kim looked at the slumbering man, who laid spread on three chairs - "back on the pot where he belongs."

"The imperial comparison is limp," Olga objected. "It was not the fisherman who was the culprit, it was his fru (= *Frau* = wife). What are you up to, oh Ilsebill (= wife in *'The Fisherman and The Little Fish'*, nice fairy tale about greed and ambition by the way)?"

"Good night."

It took some time before 'the pisspot emperor', as Olga now called him, woke up; Kim used this time as usual, while the oldies got their missing pieces as grandparents inserted by means of photo albums and Daniel.

Roko's interest in the childhood and youth of his only grandchild wasn't smaller than Olga's, but at some point his storage was full. Yawning, he asked what Kim's favorite dish was, nodded delighted, and disappeared into the kitchen.

After the tomato sauce had sizzled gently for a while, Kim joined him, sniffed, and said: "Hm hm."

"I can do this," Roko assured, after realizing she was here to stay.

"Am I interrupting?" It didn't sound concerned. The old man silently thanked his son - my God, he had a son! - who had provided his children with self-confidence.

He didn't bother to answer, tasting the sauce and making smacking noises as he did so. "Hmm, besides hours of simmering, something is missing again," he took a clean spoon and dipped it into the sauce, holding it out to Kim after half a minute of puffing: "Knock knock!"

She obeyed, smacking her lips in turn, holding her head at an angle that reminded of a listening bird: she was his granddaughter and beautiful - how soon would he have another opportunity to enjoy that? "Well?"

"Cinnamon."

He slapped his forehead. "That's it! I've been trying to recreate that dish for years and just couldn't figure it out." He looked around the spice rack, found the cinnamon, seasoned and tasted. "Was my favorite dish too, my wife cooked it perfectly, mostly when I was about to keel over. So cinnamon it is, thank you."

She had surveyed him with the same unabashed attention as he had her. They smiled at each other.

"How would you have reacted as a young father, honestly now?"

He sighed, understood what she meant immediately. The question had been constantly on his mind ever since he had coped: he had a son - my God!

"The hag is not wrong. By the way, did you know I met Olga through my future wife, Elisabeth?" he seemed to change the topic.

"Elisabeth? Didn't she like nicknames?"

He smiled again: who but his own flesh and blood could ask such a question - not even Elisabeth had ever asked him that. "She gave everybody nicknames -

even our car. Don't tell me," his smile widened to a broad grin, "you too?" Without waiting for her response, he continued his circuitous answer to her question:

"When studying in Berlin, they had shared a room from the very beginning and, contrary to all expectations, got along as if they were sisters. I seldom met two such different women. Elisabeth was one of those quiet, though by no means gray girls, who were always somewhere in the background reading or sewing; actually she liked knitting best, but did not want to disturb. The exact opposite of Olga, in other words, who likes to push others around - for their own good, of course. Our marriage was a good example, although Olga was hooked to my wife as if she was a lucky charm and missed her afterwards, which of course she would never admit, Elisabeth wouldn't have given up her studies and married me without Olga's meddling in."

He had not been idle in the meantime, filling the water kettle and turning it on, pushing the smaller pot of sauce on the smallest ceramic hob. He looked at her questioningly.

"Go on," was all she said.

"You want to know how something like that can happen - it was actually a very drunk accident. Elisabeth had gone home for a few weeks to prepare our wedding - that sort of thing never suited me, and she was happy doing it. That was just the way she was. Her family had originally planned something else for her: she was to study and then become a civil servant like all of them - she had never said anything against this plan and let herself swim in whatever direction the waves came from. Well, her parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles - all of them were civil servants..."

"Wasn't it usual in those days to throw everything away as soon as a male came along with serious intentions?" She got a pot out of a side chamber, emptied the and filled it with water again.

Roko turned on the two hobs underneath, it was a large pot. "Yep. But not in this family. How can I explain it? She never liked being a student, couldn't get on with freethinkers or Blaustrümpfe (= *bluestockings* = *highly educated, masculine women, grin*), but would have finished school and waited for me. Olga thought it very stupid to study without passion and said as much; on Elisabeth's next trip home she simply came along and rearranged Elisabeth's life with the family. Just like that. You should have seen or heard the stones that fell from Elisabeth's soul! Since then she was completely focused on family life and children, especially during our first years of marriage she was overjoyed: our home was always a garden of Eden, no matter how small or big it was. Thanks to Olga her goal had always been Salten too - I'm aware of Olga's *schlitzohrige* (= *very sly*) double intention now. It had nothing to do with emancipation, that's just the way Elisabeth was."

"And then?"

"Three miscarriages." He had to swallow, pushing away the emotions that came up with those two words.

"I'm sorry. Adoption?"

"Adoption was out of the question for her, she thought she would lack feeling with children not her own and fail miserably: she didn't want to be only half a mother, thought children deserved a whole one. I did my best to talk her out of it - in vain.

But we talked about something else. Elisabeth was very jealous, one exception: Olga, who indeed was her only real friend. I'm not sure she would have ever forgiven Olga or even me."

"How did it happen?" she repeated patiently.

He hunched his shoulders. "Some of us had finally got their diplomas and the remarkable wish to drown their joy in alcohol. We were both drunk, I only remember scraps and for decades thought I'd merely dreamed it - Olga never said

or showed anything, not even a hint, nothing; she was our bridesmaid and had always been there, when Elisabeth needed her. She must have gotten your father during the summer vacation, when Elisabeth and I were on our honeymoon. After each miscarriage I called her behind my wife's back, because she was the only one able to calm her down."

He grinned embarrassed before admitting: "Yes, Your Honor, Olga made it easy for me, for all of us - it's true." He raised a hand, when she opened her mouth: "And again, yes, you're right, including herself. She doesn't even deny it - whew, who'd have thought I'd ever defend the old witch?"

The elder looked at his granddaughter: "You are the most beautiful thing that has happened to me for a long long time, I am infinitely sorry not to have known your father, my son. And a third yes, I think in retrospect Elisabeth would have been pleased too and buried you with love. Can you live with that?"

"He's awake!" Daniel broke into the tête-à-tête. "That's not why I'm here, though, to be honest. The whole house smells like heaven, and if something doesn't happen soon, I'm going to start singing."

His sister's reaction to this threat suggested it better to hurry up, they almost forgot to get Mike out of his den. As they ate, Kim placed her bomb on the table without emotion, like someone who had a job and announced the job was stupid, but never mind:

"One of us will not leave this cabin alive."

For a while, no one said anything. They continued to eat, as if slowly chewing what they had just heard over their palates like some exotic dish.

"I see," Olga was the first to give a sign of life.

"Hmm," Roko immediately joined in.

"And why, may I ask?" inquired Daniel, slightly bitter about having his digestion disrupted midway.

"Exactly!" pounced Mike, relieved that somebody seemed on his side. "I didn't do anything to you, that little joke in the basement was cooked up *by you* and originally intended *for me*." He took a breath, "Nice to hear, by the way, that your so-called amnesia has dissipated, but if you think..."

"What little joke?", Olga cut him off like the butcher a pig's ear.

Kim explained in a few words, face and body stiff with reluctance, but determined to get over with it.

She added, a little croaky: "My joke wasn't supposed to outlive the weekend, not even two days - and not a whole damn week!"

"So it's thanks to you," uttered Daniel, who had turned white, "that Paps died? You knew he was sick and you still took off without a word, you asshole!"

"Did he know you were allergic to red wine?" the medic wanted to know tight-lipped.

"Yes, he did," Mike hastened to forestall further accusations. "But how was I supposed to know there was no water in the basement?" He looked from one to the other with a mixture of eagerness and arrogance, as if selling a new product nobody could possibly resist.

"I suppose you think I didn't find the bugs you placed all over the basement?" Kim shot back. "Not one step, not a breath could I take without you knowing, ever since you moved in."

"Prove it!" jumped Mike to his feet despite his shackles, triumphantly looking down at her.

"Sit down!" barked Olga, giving him a shove to support it. "What my granddaughter says is enough for me. People who keep mere initials and no birthdays in their address book are not trustworthy!"

"Right!" seconded Roko.

"Exactly!" came from Daniel at the same time.

"What?" Mike's laugh had a false pinch in it. "So you guys found my phone and cracked it. This is going to cost you money money money - what are you going to do: push me into a glacier, Oetzi (*= ancient mummy found on the border between Austria and Italy*) the Second or what?" He laughed again, longer this time, as if to show he could.

"Covid 19," was all Kim said.

Olga, Roko, and Daniel stared at her, at each other, and then at Mike.

He seemed to take that as a prompt. "Covid 19?" he repeated with a sneer. "So you want me to be judged by a virus? You're out of your mind! I demand that you hand over my smartphone on the spot, and then you guys can get ready for the greatest rumble ever!"

Roko slowly stood up. "Tie that sucker up a little tighter, but please go back to using old unlined nylons, their mark disappears better and faster, and tie them flat over his clothes," he gave his instructions politely and precisely. "I started in the pathology and had to stay there several years - nice it's good for something at last."

Mike was sitting tight as if in a cocoon when Roko came back and put the aluminum suitcase on the table. The professor seemed to have plenty of time and finally held up a gray, sealed ampoule. "Here you are. This one should do the job: high virus level, meaning it's quick and thorough."

"What? For my son's killer," Olga's voice sounded strangely brittle, it was the first time she had passed her son off as her son, "if I had the choice between fast and thorough and slow and thorough, I'd choose the latter."

Roko's eyes moved from Olga to his granddaughter, both of them radiating determination. Shrugging, he bent over the case again and silently swapped two ampoules. "So. We need a plan, or does anyone want to get in touch with this" -

he shook the ampoule lightly - "stuff? Suggestions?"

Mike, who had been looking from one to the other, like someone who thinks he's in a nightmare but doesn't want to believe it, said a little more cautiously: "How are you guys going to explain the missing ampoule? Do you really think you can get away with it? That would be murder if it worked - after all, I can survive, I'm young." If he had grasped the seriousness of his situation, he might have chosen a different tone.

Kim: "Wouldn't count on it if I were you. Good health and fitness are advantageous, a big trap rather not. On the contrary."

"Oh, how lovely," Olga had both brows up, "the object is worried about us."

Roko seemed to be in no mood for jokes: "A swab in here" - he lifted the vial - "and then up your nose, pretty high up by the way, but don't worry," he reassured Mike, "I'm experienced and careful - nobody will notice anything."

"Every kid knows that each mutation has it's own stamp," Mike insisted. "Can easily be traced to Salten."

"Let me worry about that," Roko grew impatient. "Could you shut up for a while, or would His Majesty prefer getting back on his pot? We have some things to arrange."

Quietly, the group discussed who had to do what, while Mike sat there as if he had crossed his arms, a posture that was impossible thanks to the nylons. Then he slumped away.

"Oh really, Olga!" Roko had his brows up again, waving a reproachful index finger in Olga's direction. "Did you give him something again? Not that this sort of thing becomes a habit."

"Only a little," she admitted, getting to her feet. "So we can pack in peace, cover our tracks and such things - that's what they do in detective stories," she

insisted, nodding her Alf up and down.

Roko seemed to be thinking. "You mean infect the fool and just leave him here?"

Tilting his head, he stared questioningly from Olga to Kim, "Not a bad idea, is it? We could get rid of everything edible and drinkable and turn off the water so he can't turn it back on. Compensatory justice, I believe they call it. Supposing he has enough brain cells to untie himself and stay in the hut instead of wandering disoriented through Mother Nature, who can be very cruel to city people - but that's up to him. Can you do the part with the water, Mrs. Handyman?"

She could.

He cast another sidelong glance at his granddaughter, "Whether you want to leave him some wine is up to you."

Daniel had jumped over his lazy shadow and pulled Olga's car as close to the cabin as he could and cleared the way a bit; within an hour everything was stowed away.

"Great!" Olga expressed her relief of leaving the rustic place. "Get in everybody - shall I drive?"

"No!" came unison from Kim and Roko.

"Tz," she went around the car and moved her seat all the way forward so the young people had more room. "Wer nicht will, hat schon!" (*German idiom = it's your own fault, stupid, don't blame it on me if something goes wrong!*)

"Kim?" Roko kept her from getting into the car, where the others already were seated.

"Yes?"

"Are you sure?"

"Do you want me to do it? I understand completely, I'm sure your Hippocratic Oath must be in the way." She seemed to have expected the question, pursing her mouth a bit before adding: "I studied a few semesters medicine before I decided I prefer wood."

He shook his head: "A little more education and especially practice is not bad sometimes, if nobody's to know what you do or did later, but that's not what I meant. Get in the car and rest, I'll be with you in ten minutes," he added in a firm voice and went back to the house.

The decision to take Olga's car was not really a decision; Daniel's car had slid down the slope a few meters further and could not be moved from the spot - it didn't even start. The young man had stumbled up and down earlier despite fatigue, thinking of the different tasks laying ahead of him: calling garages, comparing prices, haggling, and driving leased or borrowed cars back and forth to check things.

And all of that during a pandemic.

Almost on his own, he had voluntarily got rid of everything edible and drinkable - either into the car or into Mother nature. He had obsessively maneuvered Olga's car via flattened cardboard boxes as close to the hut as possible, mentally pushing the monster task around his car away at the same time. This unaccustomed double burden: mental and physical - made his jaws crack uncontrollably every few minutes.

"The brat's thinking of moving," Paps used to grouse when he heard Daniel's yawning noises. "We'd better get out of the way."

On the road, Daniel's mind swam in almost lustful self-destruction, pondering over ads like:

"For rent: hybrid sports car, circumstantially located on a picturesque hillside in Bavaria, inclusive vacation in rustic surroundings. Enjoy not having to keep distance for a change with a cabin right next to the car. Please pick up and repair the slightly damaged car on your own, thank you."

His sister wouldn't help him, was currently in no condition to do anything in the first place, and had always told Paps not to constantly spoil the boy and let him do things by himself. Yes, Paps... Until now, he had not been aware the man who had always been there would not come back anymore. It hit him hard: Never again.

With half an ear he listened to Olga trying to persuade Kim - God, yes, she was a girl, you have to help girls, sure - to stay in her house: the bad memories, the cellar, the police who would surely show up there all the time.

"No worries," his brave sister somewhat cockily rebuffed. "Paps has left us an old cottage on the outskirts of Salten - so I'll do fine, thank you very much."

That was too much for Daniel: "Nothing like that, dear sister. Nothing Paps," it spilled out of him, "Olga got us all those beautiful things: hut, cottage, carpentry. Pretty logical if you come to think of it, you ought to know what a carpenter can and can't afford financially. So you might as well move in with her, it's all the same and hers anyway!"

Silence.

Then, in a pressed voice: "How do you slacker know that?"

Slacker? He was not sensitive and used to the teasing of his older sister, but something like that just now, after all the work he had done and when he was in such an absolute state of alarm - and then in front of witnesses - that was too much. Damn.

"It's all in Pop's will, just you imagine that," he snapped. "In it he asks us to forgive him for being silent so long - he had missed the right moment. Also mentions a large sum he got from your often scolded grandmother, when it turned out his precious daughter's biological mother was determined to abort you."

"Wait a minute," Olga interrupted him. "At the time, he didn't know the money came from me; my cousin didn't tell him until very late - just before she died, if I'm correctly informed."

"Stop the car, please!" hissed Kim. "Now!"

Sure enough, they were on the freeway: go ahead and stop, sis. They drove in a clammy silence, louder than any conversation can be. When the next exit showed up Roko put on the blinker.

"Don't!" protested Olga. "Damn it, Roko, she's nowhere near to health yet!"

Roko left the freeway, looking at some invisible point on the window pane in front of him.

"Please!" added Olga wearily. She sat there, one hand clutched in the car door as if looking for missing coins.

"Sorry." Roko frowned at the sound of somebody trying to open the door in vain from behind. "Olga," he said softly. "As you said when it was plain Elisabeth would not survive the day: 'let go, let go!'"

"Very funny!" she snorted. "My whole life is one single let-go!" Angrily, she unlocked the child locks in the back with a double "tock, tock."

One hundred and sixty three years sat in the front, without words, without moving, while Kim got out, threw her backpack over and went.

"Don't worry!" came ruefully from the other side as soon as her figure was out of sight. "I'll keep an eye on her, I promise. What a shitty day," he added apologetically, also shouldering his backpack.

"Your car is a problem?" hissed Olga, who had been talking to the young man during Kim and Roko's interlude in the kitchen. "Leave papers and keys here, mail me a blank power of attorney and I'll take care of it. And keep in touch - you have my number."

Still too upset to even turn around, the odd couple heard something being deposited on the back seat: couldn't that lout have waited with the stupid will,

damn it?!

"Thank you, Olga!" it seemed to come straight from the lout's heart. "Bis die Tage!" (*old German greeting = see you these days*).

"Did you teach him that silly old sentence?" the old man wanted to know, after driving along for quite a while as if they were sitting in two cars.

"What?"

"Bis die Tage!" he quoted, affectively imitating her croaky voice.

Without looking, she heaved her heavy purse at his chest. "I'll tell Elisabeth."

VII. sink it in the pond

Salten is a beautiful town. Like thousands of others - maybe quieter because they had thrown out all of the cars slowly, but steadily. And had so much more room. What made it special were the people of Salten. Which town can claim that - and if so, does it speak more against the town or for its inhabitants? (*I always thought cars really stink, and I have the sensitive nose Olga never had: decades of writing stories about a world, people are now trying to create.*)

Not that Salten had nothing to offer except human beings. A harmonious mishmash of Lubeck and Utrecht, which a little San Francisco (*why not mention my three favorite cities, eh?*) would do no harm: those tramways would fit in well here. The city was old and knew and appreciated it - for a good reason. Most of us know this crossroad, the conscious decision between two very contrary paths is not reserved for human beings only - in Salten's crossroad was the story of the hoof:

Before the last world war still a magnificent castle with turrets and drawbridges and quirky castle inhabitants, the fire of a small bomb originally

intended for Hamburg seemed to signal for more, until only the servant's part was left, which they called "Huf (= Hoof) Salten's" thanks to its shape, and imposing and ancient enough to glue historic preservationists to the spot. It belonged to the city, a gift from the last childless lord, who had not dreamed of causing so much confusion. His intention was to provide Salten's cultural assets, at that time rotting away in an old, dilapidated museum, more sophisticated surroundings and even enlarge it all by means of the castle inventory. He had not planned to die before his three significantly older and suddenly "disinherited" aunts, who were angry enough to swear they'd prefer sinking all of their stuff into the damned pond or even selling it to the Hamburgers, but by no means would it ever come into that godless castle. Period. Since the lord's will demanded at least seventy percent of the castle to be culturally occupied, this was a tough nut (*which was cracked in Saltener Bits*). Without the aunt's heritage, Salten's culture could not possibly fill even a fraction of the Hoof, nasty when the calculation was that all cultural assets together would have easily made the smaller town to the attraction in northern Germany and beyond.

The permanent dispute over this mischievous 70% went through all classes and even families; at some point Salten was splitted (*reminds me a bit of the fight against the 'unvaccinated' going on just now: what a waste!*) and overthrown to such an extent that nothing worked. It took a rather nasty incident to make the Saltener realize that they had frozen relationships, denied friendships and ignored relatives for decades for nothing and nothing whatsoever, the realization that not just some, but everyone was right and wrong at the same time and neither the lord nor his aunts could do anything about it. No one. It was like the moon had suddenly fallen on everyone's toes. This was the time the monthly citizen meetings started, the inclination to settle their affairs by themselves, the reluctance, almost disgust for shouters and elbow mentality. They had experienced firsthand how not to quarrel. If one of them forgot, he was reminded and brought to his senses with one simple sentence:

"Jöh (= yeah and omg at the same time, but very snotty and cool), let's drop that into the pond!")

Although already living in Salten almost fifteen years, this had not yet sank into Olga's conscience. Therefore, she couldn't help but put a question mark on her face, when she heard Roko say it.

"Excuse me?"

Patently, Roko told her the story of the castle lord and his aunts.

"Oh, I see," was her comment, as if he had made her an indecent proposal. "Damn, so that's why I can't get any lawyers here?!"

"We Salteners think we can and should settle our affairs by ourselves - if things don't work out, we have arbitration boards: normally heads of families and over eighty years old. If you come to think of it: in most cases, lawyers (*it's probably a mere coincidence that most governments have so many 'law people' , just sayin'*) are only after the money and righteousness often depends on how much money you have."

They were sitting on Olga's front balcony outside, separated by a table with decaf coffee, lemonade and cake for the young people, "You want me to leave serious legal matters to goths drooling away? Have you got your brains open, dear?"

The door bell saved the professor from answering something spicy. Olga grabbed the railing, pulled herself up, waved, and called out as if they were on the highest tree in the Hambacherforst (*one of the forests in Germany they cut down to make money, at the same time roaring indignity about what's happening in the #Rainforests – with great admiration and respect for all of the activists sitting up there for weeks*):

"It's open! Come in and walk up, disinfectant and masks are downstairs!" She settled down with a groan and reached for an apparently full pot under her chair. "Tea," she explained redundantly. "Kim doesn't drink coffee."

Olga had rounded up "the family," as she delightedly called it. They were supposed to discuss the charges that had been brought against Roko for attempted murder, assault, false imprisonment, breach of medical duty of care, abuse of

authority. Among others.

After his Bavarian adventure Mike had fled from Salten to Hamburg and had taken a lawyer there after finding out the Saltener lawyers didn't feel like it. The indictment covered almost five DIN-A1 pages and described, among other things, shortness of breath, fatigue, joint pain and a number of other complaints that had not disappeared to this day and were of a chronic nature: the young man was allegedly incapacitated for work and looking forward to a handsome lifetime pension.

Olga had been weighed by the Hamburg lawyer and found to be too heavy, and Mike had his reasons for not suing the two siblings. A professor had more to lose anyway: hadn't he wielded the "murder weapon" with full consciousness and knowledge?

Naturally, Olga was standing by to launch a counter-suit, which met with reluctant approval from Kim, while Daniel didn't want to have anything to do with it.

"Let's dump the whole thing in the pond," Roko offered the Salten motto for the second time, eliciting an immediate response from the young Salteners.

"But that looks like a confession, like guilt!" argued Olga indignantly. "Do we really need that?"

"We?" repeated Roko, amused. "You guys realize that the fool is only after the money, he's not only broke, he's got some creditors tailing him I wouldn't even say hello to in a Zoom Room. Everyone involved was registered in Salten at the time, so Hamburg has absolutely nothing to do with it - as soon as his lawyer realizes there's nothing to get, he'll drop him like a hot potato. - Kim?" he looked directly at his granddaughter. "What do you think? We'll do whatever you want" - Roko looked around and added: "If you prefer, we can discuss this elsewhere?"

Olga opened her mouth as if to protest, and shut it again.

Her granddaughter saw it and pursed her mouth, waiting for something.

"Okay, okay, I'm gone," Olga rose gracefully. "Will make us some excellent fresh tea in the meantime."

Kim's mouth twitched, "Sit down, please, Olga."

"Oh!" the elder one obeyed at once, grinning from ear to ear. "On the other hand, I'm also excellent at keeping my mouth shut."

"If you come to think of it," came Kim's brittle voice after a while, so quiet that the others involuntarily leaned forward, "only one plain word from me would have been enough and Paps still alive. No matter how unpleasant for both of us, a sincere: 'get the hell out of here, you asshole!' would have done the job. But no, I had to take revenge, I'm such an idiot!"

"No, Kim," Roko calmly objected.

She raised her brows and simply looked at him: skepticism with the willingness to be persuaded.

"I looked through all of the medical files and talked to the attending colleagues: his lungs were unalterably lost. Looking for you distracted him, yes; and anyone who has ever run out of air knows how unpleasant only the constant fear of it is. He saved himself weeks of agony - advanced lung cancer is incurable, Kim, especially since there must have been metastases everywhere already at that time; it would have been over after two months at the latest. At the very latest. Under the best possible conditions. You knew him better: would he have had some of his organs cut out because of a few more days or perhaps weeks of very poor life? Honestly: I wouldn't!"

Roko took a breath, when he saw that Kim's brows had lowered a little, but her doubts had not. "He was my son and I'm a scientist in the end, so I wanted to know all facts and was especially interested in his last days and even hours, so I didn't only squeeze Daniel like a lemon. Do you want to hear it?"

Now he had her: she nodded.

"As you know, your Paps dismissed it as a cold, bronchitis at the most, but he didn't go out in the pouring rain, nor had he overexerted himself. He was worried about you, true, but he didn't drive himself crazy. Bed rest wouldn't have cured him, you know, and wasn't even necessary."

He raised a hand as if she wanted to interrupt him, which wasn't the case: "I know you both tried to talk him into getting a proper check-up, but I'm pretty sure he knew or suspected it was useless and wanted the 'short cut' as a certain lady would put it" - he threw a sly sideways glance at Olga, who had not only kept her mouth shut, but was sitting there as if trying hard to be invisible: for once in his life he had the stage and wasn't willing to let the opportunity pass: "That woman is driving me crazy with her damn anglicisms, my god," he declared, before turning back to his granddaughter:

"I don't know your attitude, mine is that love without respect is not love. I think..."

Kim raised a hand and finished the sentence, "...that he would have preferred to spend his last days with his two children, but you're right: he would have chosen the short cut."

Roko looked into a pair of eyes, just as red as his own, "All right?"

"All right..." This time it was her turn to dither, then she asked, "You didn't really give Mike the virus, did you?" The question mark was vague.

"What do you think?"

"No," it came firm. She added: "It's okay, I wouldn't have done it either if I were you - and a murderer for a grandpa? Nay, not really."

""Du Weichei (DeepL mad a 'candy-ass' out of it, never heard this word before, but I'm looking forward to using it)!" it was impossible for Olga to hold herself back any longer. "I would have preferred an honest murder!" Suddenly she threw back her head and laughed long and heartily, with tears in her eyes she confessed:

"I read his medical records, he actually thought he was dying and felt tremendously sick for weeks, but didn't dare go to the hospital! Unfortunately, one of the policemen came back a few days after we left, wanted an autograph for the record and was surprised to find only this dung beetle. How ever sick he thought he was, the egomaniac had wisely concealed, in order to be chauffeured home as the alleged grandson of the important Corona professor. Imagine that: he actually risked the health of those officers - only that's reason enough to sue the man. Well, you can do it with us tax payers!"

Roko had listened disapprovingly, "Where did you get that from this time...?"

That was as far as he got. "But Kim!" Olga turned enthusiastically to her granddaughter, "So the other side has nothing at all in their hands! Gosh, we could litigate this young man to death!"

The young woman smiled, wryly, but she smiled. "No."

It sounded final.

"Zur Hölle! (*Hell!*)" escaped the cantankerous old lady smoothly. "Warum pißt ihr nicht alle in euren verfluchten kleinen Teich, sapperlot?! (*Why don't you guys piss in your fuckin' lil pond, damn it!*)"

"Olga!" came out of three throats like a staccatissimo from Mozart.

THE END

Luebeck, 2020 – take care of yourself, love ya'll!!