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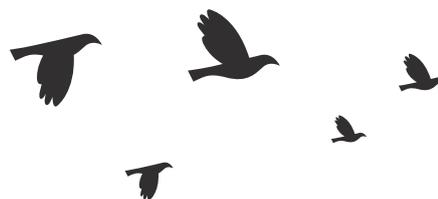
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# editorial

*To whom it may concern*

Dear reader, even though we do not mean to make a habit of featuring deceased authors of speculative fiction on our front cover, we felt that Terry Pratchett deserved to have an issue dedicated to him. However, there is also plenty of good news: I would like to welcome aboard new authors Julia Gäbelein, Henry Lyonga and Henry Viereck. The issue also features texts by returning contributors Jan Rölleke and Maike Baumgärtner as well as by two of our mainstays, Maria Messer and Denise Breidenbach, who recently joined the editorial team. Congratulations! The issue is rounded out by a collaboration in the shape of a not-so-short story by Christian Weiß and Daniel Krooß. Finally, I would like to say thank you to our wonderful illustrators Sophie Bachmann, Saguaro Duda and Maria Messer, as well as to our layout artist Rhea Eschstruth.

Furthermore, we have two announcements for you. First of all, we would like to welcome not-quite-so-new Sprachpraxis teacher Christopher Forlini, who assisted the editorial team in the final stages of proofreading. Mr. Forlini was also instrumental in founding yet another extracurricular activity for our students: the English Film Club. Speaking of extracurricular activities: This issue also features an interview with Lars Heiler, founder of the theater group *Red Brick Company*,

who have really outdone themselves this time around, as they are going to perform a musical version of the Mel Brooks' comedy *The Producers*. Performances are on June 29 and 30 as well as on July 1, 4, 7 and 8, always at 8 PM and at K19. Tickets can be reserved under [www.redbrickcompany.de](http://www.redbrickcompany.de) or purchased on site for 3 euros (student price) or 6 euros (regular price), so get yours while they're still available!

I would like to thank our returning sponsor Kasseler Sparkasse as well as our new sponsors, Fachbereich 16 and wine merchant Schluckspecht Kassel, without whom this issue would not have seen the light of day. Last but certainly not least, I would like to say thank you to IfAA for their continued support, financial and otherwise, and professors Susanne Bach and Daniel Göske in particular.

Without you, two points of special recognition which *Blank* has recently received would not have been possible. First, we were asked to provide past issues of *Blank* for the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, cementing *Blank's* place in cultural history. On top of that, the Röver Stiftung has decided to grant our ongoing project one-time financial support. The accompanying award will be presented to us on July 9, 6 PM, as part of the Science Slam at Hörsaal 2, so if you're a supporter of *Blank*, join us!

Enjoy the issue,

Murat Sezi ■

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PRESENTS

Mel Brooks'

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# a stamp-sized history of the red brick company

by Pieter Coetzee

## *A play in one act*

### *Dramatis Personae*

Lars Heiler

Pieter Coetzee

Students

*Voice of Beelzebub, Prince of Hell (Metronome 1)*

*Voice of God (Metronome 2)*

### *Prelude* (curtain)

**Pieter:** I don't think something like this has been attempted before, has it?

**Lars:** You mean an interview?

**Pieter:** Yes, with the Red Brick Company! Although you founded the RBC privately, it gained profile within the university in record time. Whenever people refer to the Institute's projects, they invariably mention the RBC. And phrases like "an ambitious project" or "a sophisticated endeavour by a talented teacher" are frequently heard.

**Lars:** Correct me if I'm wrong, but the RBC and Blank, research projects aside, are the *only* institute projects.

**Pieter:** I am referring specifically to *student* projects, involving students in participatory roles. Much interest has been generated by this prime example of a teacher interacting with his students outside the formal classroom situation.

Many colleagues perceive this interaction as an advantage for the teacher. I may add that the scale of your organization and involvement with the students is so much greater than that of the relatively small circle involved in Blank's aspirations. So Blank does not really compare well with the RBC. How much teaching time does the RBC absorb?

**Lars:** I need 100 to 150 hours per semester to pull off something worthwhile.

**Pieter:** Well, that's quite a load. You do all that plus your normal teaching? Little wonder you have a reputation for punishing hours. That really bespeaks commitment.

**Lars:** It does.

**Pieter:** And now to crown all efforts to date, you plan to stage a musical!

**Lars:** Indeed. The premiere performance of Mel Brooks' *The Producers* is scheduled for 29 June at K 19.

**Student voices** (from the wings) - chanting: Pange lingua gloriosi corporis mysterium, sanguisque pretiosi, quem in mundi pretium fructus ventris generosi, rex effudit gentium.

(Curtain falls)

~

*Act one, scene one (curtain)*

**Pieter:** We would like to show our readers a small slice of your success. How about telling us something about the history of the RBC? When did this begin, and what moved you to experiment with theatre?

**Lars:** It began with my arrival here in 2006. I always had English drama groups at the universities I taught at. I was quite surprised that there wasn't one here. So I put up posters and called a meeting. My first thought was that I should not expect too much, but 25 people turned up and half of them returned for the follow-up meeting.

**Pieter:** Excellent. Good start. But why did you do this?

**Lars:** I have a ton of experience I wish to pass on to others, experience I gained as a student and later on as a teacher. As a student I used to be rather shy and devoted to my studies. Chance had it that one day I was asked to substitute for an actor in a premiere performance ... and I never looked back!

**Pieter:** Hmm, a kick start, I divine ...

**Lars:** Yes. In due course taking part improved my spoken English. When you act, you do things you don't normally do, such as learning advanced English texts by heart. Learning your lines is a regular thing in this business, so the whole theatre experience turns out to be not just a social but also a linguistic thing.

**Pieter:** Interesting. My ears tell me you're practically a native speaker. Tell me, what's in the name *Red Brick Company* – anything interesting?

**Lars:** There's a tale in its short history. I was having a cup of coffee with Peter Carqueville – a founding member of the Company – at the *Pavillon* one sunny day. Back then I was searching for a suitable name. I was telling Peter that the drama group at my old university was not able to come up with something special – we called it, rather ponderously, *Die Anglistische Theatergruppe der Universität Mannheim*. While sitting there sipping hot coffee, I noticed that we were surrounded by red brick buildings. That's when the penny dropped, and I suggested the name to Peter straight away. It's also a tribute (*mutatis mutandis*) to the Royal Shakespeare Company. Peter liked the idea, so the name stuck.

(Enter Peter Carqueville, from left wing)

**Peter Carqueville** – chanting: Nobis datus, nobis natus ex intacta virgine et in mundo conversatus, sparso verbi semine, sui moras incolatus miro clausit ordine.

**P:** A novel idea for a name! I associated the name with the familiar sight of red brick buildings in working class suburbs in the big cities of England. And that's not too far off the mark!

(Curtain falls)

~

*Act one, scene two (curtain)*

**Pieter:** Well, that then launched your company. Did you encounter many problems?

**Lars:** At the beginning the company was very heterogeneous; people from the Engineering and not just the English Department wanted to join, which made it difficult to find common ground. Two semesters later we had a core group of about 10 very committed people on whom I could rely. From then on things stabilized. In subsequent semesters our organization ran smoothly, the one exception being the winter semester of 2008 when I had a group so large I could not accommodate all the actors in one play. I was then obliged to create alternative projects for each and every soul who did not have a substantial role to play. This made it more difficult to organize a production.

**Pieter:** I can see that. Any early successes?

**Lars:** Yes. *Goodnight Desdemona* by the Canadian playwright, Ann-Marie MacDonald, counts as such. We attracted big audiences – 80 to 90 people per night. That was our fourth production.

**Pieter:** It was a good production, then, I surmise ... Now I am wondering about the less than good ones. Yes, no?

**Lars:** Difficult to say! It has never been necessary to apply the emergency brake... I guess that's because no performance ever dramatically went downhill... I recall that I was less than happy with our *Sketch Shows* – the second play we produced – because the performances were very uneven. Then I had a mix of very good and not so good actors. We reanimated the *Sketch Shows* twice. The productions were good when viewed from the vantage point of group dynamics, yet they remained aesthetically less satisfying.

**Pieter:** Ha! Now we are approaching difficult terrain. You have just passed judgement and that assumes norms. Might we pause here for a moment?

**Lars:** Sure. The differences between good and bad productions depend on the people involved. I need actors who can not only act but also speak decent English, and here accent and accuracy count in addition to talent. It is possible to pull off something worthwhile with, say, six fluent and talented actors and two who might not be so blessed, as long as most fulfil the necessary criteria. I will never accept anyone who cannot act and speak proper English. The burden on the teacher is too great – one weak actor takes up so much time and instruction that one is bound to neglect the others!

**Student voices** (from the wings) – chanting: In supremae nocte coenae recumbens cum fratribus, observata lege plene cibus in legalibus, cibum turbae duodenae se dat suis minibus.

(Curtain falls)



*Act one, scene three (curtain)*

**Pieter:** At this point it seems appropriate to return briefly to a point raised earlier on, the one about your involvement with your students. Working as closely with students as you do must have advantages for you as a teacher.

**Lars:** Yes, it has. It makes communication with students easier. Some of my colleagues may be more reticent about spending so much time with students outside formal teaching situations. Some may also raise an eyebrow when you have a premiere performance party afterwards. I guess they fear that students may exploit the fact that they are part of a cast to obtain favours. I have never experienced such problematic situations – never once has a student come begging for extension of a project!

**Pieter:** I am in sympathy with what you are saying.

**Lars:** Thank you. Students don't earn much beyond a pizza at the end of a production. That's enough for most of them. It's obvious that my productions attract a certain kind of student, ones who do the thing for its own sake. I might say, like virtue, acting is its own reward!

**Pieter:** Your example has been exemplary! Closer to the point, I have seen you acting in one of your own productions, in *Woman in Mind* by Alan Ayckbourn. What does it feel like to be doing the kind of thing you try to teach your students?

**Lars:** The answer to that is a two-way street. I can answer that, and so can my students.

(Enter cast of 'Woman in Mind' from the wings)

**Students** – chanting: Verbum caro, panem verum verbo carnem efficit: Fitque sanguis Christi merum, et si sensus deficit, ad firmandum cor sincerum sola fides sufficit.

**Pieter:** It's a mixed blessing – my students have just confirmed that. I started off as an actor myself. The urge to go on stage and do some acting is ever present. It's difficult to

do that when you have to direct at the same time. Nowadays I prefer to keep a low profile – my students move centre stage into the limelight, I stay backstage.

**Students** – chanting: Gloria, Gloria, Gloria, Gloria. Gloria. Gloria. Gloria.

*(Curtain falls)*

~

*Act one, scene four (curtain)*

**Pieter:** So far so good. What will the future bring?

**Lars:** Our upcoming production will be a premiere in many respects. We are going to produce a musical, Mel Brooks' *The Producers*. I am not particularly fond of producing musicals, but since many people have urged me to go ahead, we're already rehearsing. Fortunately, a number of very talented actors joined the group last semester. They can sing and dance as well as act, which makes this venture possible. In addition, some of our most experienced actors are part of the production, too, so several generations of Red Bricks are collaborating on this project.

**Pieter:** Wow! I sense it's now or never. This is a breakthrough.

**Lars:** Three semesters ago we staged the famous Broadway production *The 39 Steps*. Then I thought we cannot possibly go bigger. With only very moderate means we managed a credible stage production. It worked well. Now it's getting even bigger!

*(Enter cast of "The Producers" from the wings)*

**Students** – chanting: Tantum ergo sacramentum veneremur cernui: Et antiquum documentum novo cedat ritui: Praestet fides supplementum sensuum defectui.

**Voice of Beelzebub, Prince of Hell** (from right wing): Bigger is not necessarily better! !!\*\*! &&%? §§%\$! &&%//!

\*++&%€!

**Pieter:** Did you hear that too? What cheek!

**Lars:** Never mind.

**Pieter:** One last question, please. Actually, two questions. How do you keep contact with your actors? Do you see yourself doing this thing until you retire?

**Lars:** A few years ago we moved our communications platform to Facebook. We have a Facebook group of 90 members. When I last counted I had 20 active members. That's the size I prefer. As for soldiering on, I have often asked myself that very question. When I started out, I was 10 years older than my students, and as time passes the age difference increases. Ten years hence I will be old enough to be their grandfather. Should I ever feel that my students are uncomfortable with that, I guess I would stop. But so far things have worked out just fine.

**Voice of God** (from left wing): Genitori, genitoque laus et jubilatio, salus, honor, virtus quoque sit et benedictio: Procedenti ab utroque compar sit laudatio. Amen

**Pieter:** Did you hear that too? See, everything is going to be just fine!

**Lars:** Thank heavens!

*(Curtain falls)*

FINITO ■

# there and back again: a beginner's guide to conferences

by Maria Messer

With each passing day I became more and more nervous. My mind and body began to act in restless unison. Even in my dreams my mind was haunted. In early 2014, I sent in an essay proposal for the Tolkien conference 'Worlds Made of Heroes', scheduled to take place in November 2014 in Portugal. In hindsight, this must have happened in a moment of insanity. Even though I was not sure what to expect, I was speechless when my proposal was accepted. There I was, a first semester MA student, paralysed with fear before each in-class presenta-

tion, yet I've voluntarily decided to give a talk at a conference for the first time. I am still unable to comprehend what went through my mind when I had sent in the proposal, thinking it would be a good idea to present my half-baked ideas about Tolkien's hobbits at a conference in front of renowned Tolkien experts. The truth is that I was so terrified when the day of my departure arrived, I would have rather walked into Mordor and faced all its forces of evil than give my talk. However, some would of course argue that there is hardly any difference. I knew that the lecture presented both an op-



portunity to grow as well as an occasion to fail miserably.

Was my talk on the identity formation of hobbits groundbreaking? Of course not. My research was not particularly unique, nor was it thought-provoking. It was never my intention to propose mind-blowing new theories. I will leave it to those poor souls who are braver than me yet also closer to the edge of insanity to propose new theories prior to completing their MA thesis. The truth is that the experience of giving a talk at a conference itself was what I wanted. Life at university can be both sheltered and predictable. However, if you want to grow academically, you have to step out of your comfort zone and present your ideas in front of scholars that will not give you the benefit of the doubt. Judging from the feedback I received, I would categorize my talk as mediocre and rather average. People were surprised to hear that it was my first conference and complimented me on my performance, so there must have been something that I did right. Honestly, even if I was the worst scholar at that conference, the fact that I was able to listen to and learn from renowned Tolkien scholars such as Edward F. James, Nick Groom, or Carl Phelpstead was worth it. In that case, I would rather be a pygmy among giants than a giant among pygmies. Even though I was terrified that I was among the

first to present, it was the best that could have happened to me. By having my talk so early, I was able to relax and enjoy the other presentations. Those talks that I was able to hear were highly fascinating and some introduced new research approaches to Tolkien's work.

The big question is: Would I do it again? Yes. However, I would give myself more time. In other words, I would not have given a talk that early in my - for lack of a better term - academic career. I would have allowed myself to develop and improve my ideas and maybe wait until after completing my studies. Even Frodo waited for nearly 20 years before beginning his journey. In the end, quality, not the desire to brag, should be what counts. Another thing I would do differently is that I would attend several conferences prior to giving my first talk where I would just listen. Had I done so, my fear would have been reduced ... or increased, depending on the quality of the talk. Looking back, while there are many things I would've done differently, I am glad that I took the chance. Despite the paralyzing fear, sleepless nights, and potentially ludicrous flaws in my theory, this experience taught me more than I could have hoped for. In reality, even failure is an opportunity to grow - one only has to allow it to happen. ■



# the day the magic died

*by Murat Sezi,  
illustration by Maria Messer*

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AT LAST, SIR TERRY, WE MUST WALK TOGETHER.

- Message from Terry Pratchett's Twitter account on May 12

**I**t seems that even in passing Sir Terry Pratchett did not lose his sense of humor, and even if it is unlikely that he typed those very words, I think it is safe to assume that he had a hand in selecting them should the inevitable occur. Death, or rather its personification, is one of the mainstay characters in Terry Pratchett's phenomenally successful series of humorous fantasy novels commonly referred to as the *Disc-*



---

*world* novels. The character's speech, lacking intonation, is always represented purely in capital letters.

It greatly pains me to have to say goodbye to yet another wonderful author within such a short span of time: In the last issue I wrote a tribute to Iain Banks and his science-fiction series *The Culture*. This article will not be as long as the last one, and it won't be an exploration of the *Discworld* novels. Instead, it will merely be a brief personal piece. British author and longtime friend of Terry Pratchett Neil Gaiman once noted that people tend to have discovered their favorite author not by walking into a bookstore and buying a book, but by having been *lent* a book. So it was with me and Terry Pratchett.

I can still remember my first encounter with his writings. My friend Daniel had lent me a copy of *The Last Continent*. Even though the fantasy aspect of Pratchett's writing (and the puns) may be what hooked me in the first place, they are not the reason I stayed on board and bought book after book. That reason lies elsewhere, and is connected with the way he creates layers of meaning.

People who have watched *The Simpsons* as both children and as adults will know what I mean. In the *Discworld*

novels, as in *The Simpsons*, there is always another layer of meaning to be discovered. And those layers go *deep*. Pratchett may be grouped with popular fiction, but you are well advised to have a decent understanding of theology, ancient Greek philosophy, the natural sciences, Shakespeare, canonical fiction and popular culture if you really want to delve into his texts. Or not. Because even if you don't, they are a huge amount of fun and bursting with meaning and wisdom.

Terry Pratchett may be dead, but he will never truly die. Over the past four decades, his art has become a multi-medial phenomenon beyond literature: By now, his writings have been adapted for comic books, radio, film, television and the stage, as well as for board, card and video games.

On a more personal level, he will never truly die because of all the hours of pleasure, thought and laughter he bestowed onto me for what is a laughable sum of money. And even though I am merely a tiny spoke in the wheel called literary studies, I can contribute just a little bit to making sure that he is not forgotten there either. Who knows what I'll be teaching next semester...

I'll miss you, Sir Terry. ■

# my black is valid

*by Henry Lyonga N.*

---

I am strongly convinced that my Black has been here since the beginning of time, when the world was created and even before civilization became mainstream. My Black was even there before the term black (Negro) was coined, during the 1800s. Even before the exploration of Sub-Saharan Africa in the 15th century, during the Age of Discovery, my black was there. My Black is no longer 15th century, it is in fact 21st century. My Black is progressive. My Black was never stronger than it is now and I won't break, no matter how hard they try to stamp on me, hoping that at some point, they would break me, if they relentlessly continue to oppress me. They will not succeed, indeed they shall not. My Black is God-given and me, thus my black is unapologetic. My Black is strong. My Black is multi-dimensional, complicated and many different things beyond the colour of my skin or the nature of my kinky hair. It is more than just my ethnicity or race.



My Black is human, it is compassionate.  
My Black gives me the power to step into my own peculiar trajectory and destiny.  
I do not blame them for not being able to understand my Black,  
because it took me a long time, to fully comprehend, accept and step into the power of  
my Blackness.  
Now that I do, I am unashamed and proud of who and what I am in my Blackness.  
They may try to enslave and keep me in darkness and bondage but like a phoenix from  
the ashes, my Black shall rise and prevail.  
My voice will be heard.  
They may shoot me, spite me and even dismiss me all they want.  
But still, they will never kill my Black, because even in despair, my Black comforts me.  
My Black is too strong to be broken and so is yours.  
And thus, like mine, your Black is valid too. ■

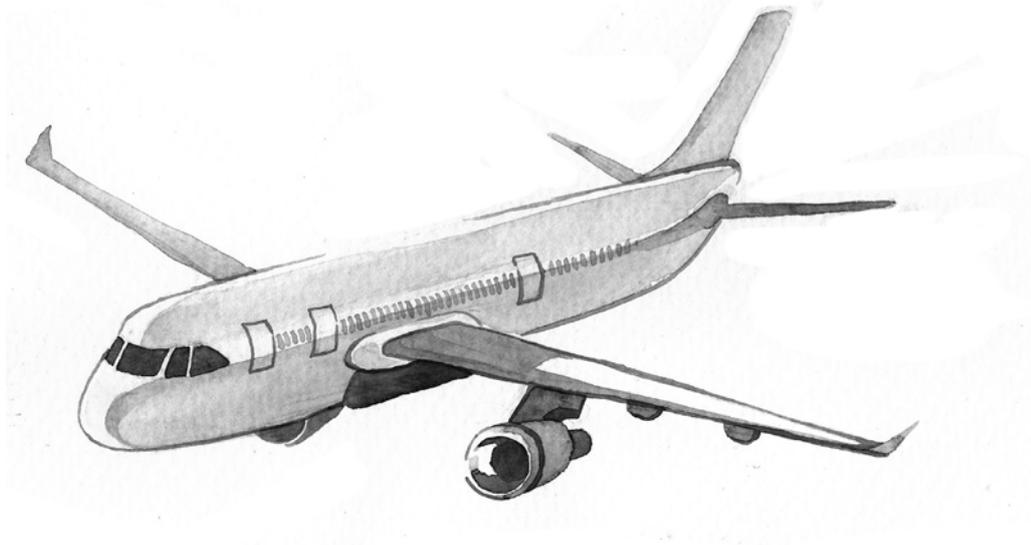
# I, III, VI & XII

*by Jan Rölleke,  
illustrations by Sophie Bachmann*

## I

### 2.3. FRA -JFK

When a great number of rivers meet,  
each one coming from various cities,  
countries and continents,  
joining courses and streams  
to share time and space for a while  
and you are one of them.  
You will discover  
a thousand tales told  
simultaneously, crowding your ears.  
You will not remember a single one  
and they won't remember yours,  
although looking back,  
for a moment,  
you were mentioned in their chapters.

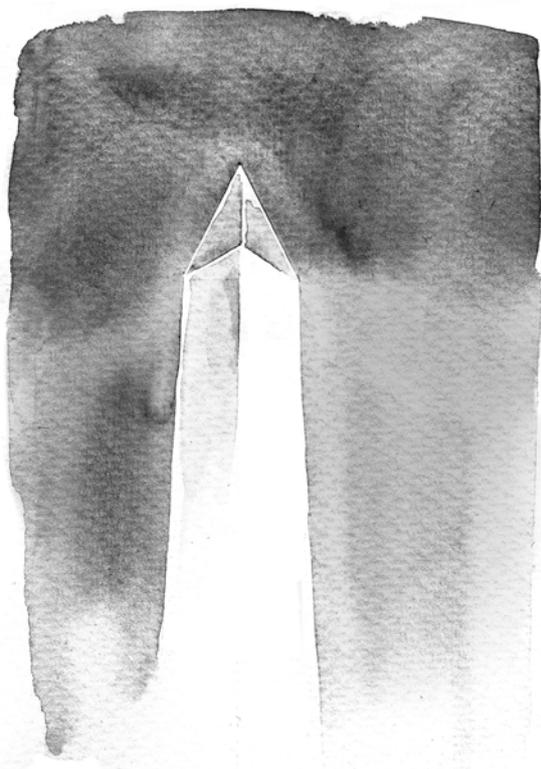


## III

### 4.3. N.Y.

Standing at the bow of the Staten Island Ferry  
I watch the city emerge from the bleak mist,  
spearheaded by the top of Freedom Tower.  
It has embraced me as a friend.  
I have traveled its underground arteries by silver vessel  
and walked its worn-out blacktop veins.  
Our souls have coalesced  
and the city will never let go of me again.  
Partaking in the endless dance  
carefully choreographed to the sound of a million horns  
by traffic lights and metro schedules,  
listening to stories told by a thousand passing voices  
I explore its canyons, parks and squares  
to learn more about my new old friend.





## VI.

### 8.3. D.C.

The youngish sun's rays  
 sweep over the window pane  
 like the tenuous flame  
 licks the bone-dry log, until finally they  
 through the half-closed blinds find their way.  
 Spring is striding across the country today,  
 a gusty wind follows in its wake.  
 The sun's growing strength at midday  
 causes the hard packed snow on the Mall to evaporate  
 and, as we stroll by, steadily create  
 burbling streams beneath our feet, crossing our trail.  
 Down from the Monument towards the river, then the bay.  
 So that someday again they may  
 bring winter to places far away.



## XII

### 10.3. Skyline Drive

Between the skies you learn to know  
 how small you really are.  
 With clouds above and clouds below  
 the world seems stunning and vast.  
 Misty cushions draw their veil  
 over outlying valleys and vivid streams.  
 Below the snow, the woods and the Trail  
 unyielding mountains still rest in dreams.  
 Down and eastwards the countryside awaits.  
 Secluded, rugged, American.  
 And across the other hillocks are placed  
 smallish houses, as if strewn by man.  
 Billows of light rain prance across the scenery.  
 Right now nothing looks more desolate, nothing so  
 beautifully free. ■

# a floral tribute

*by Julia Gäbelein,  
illustration by Sophie Bachmann*

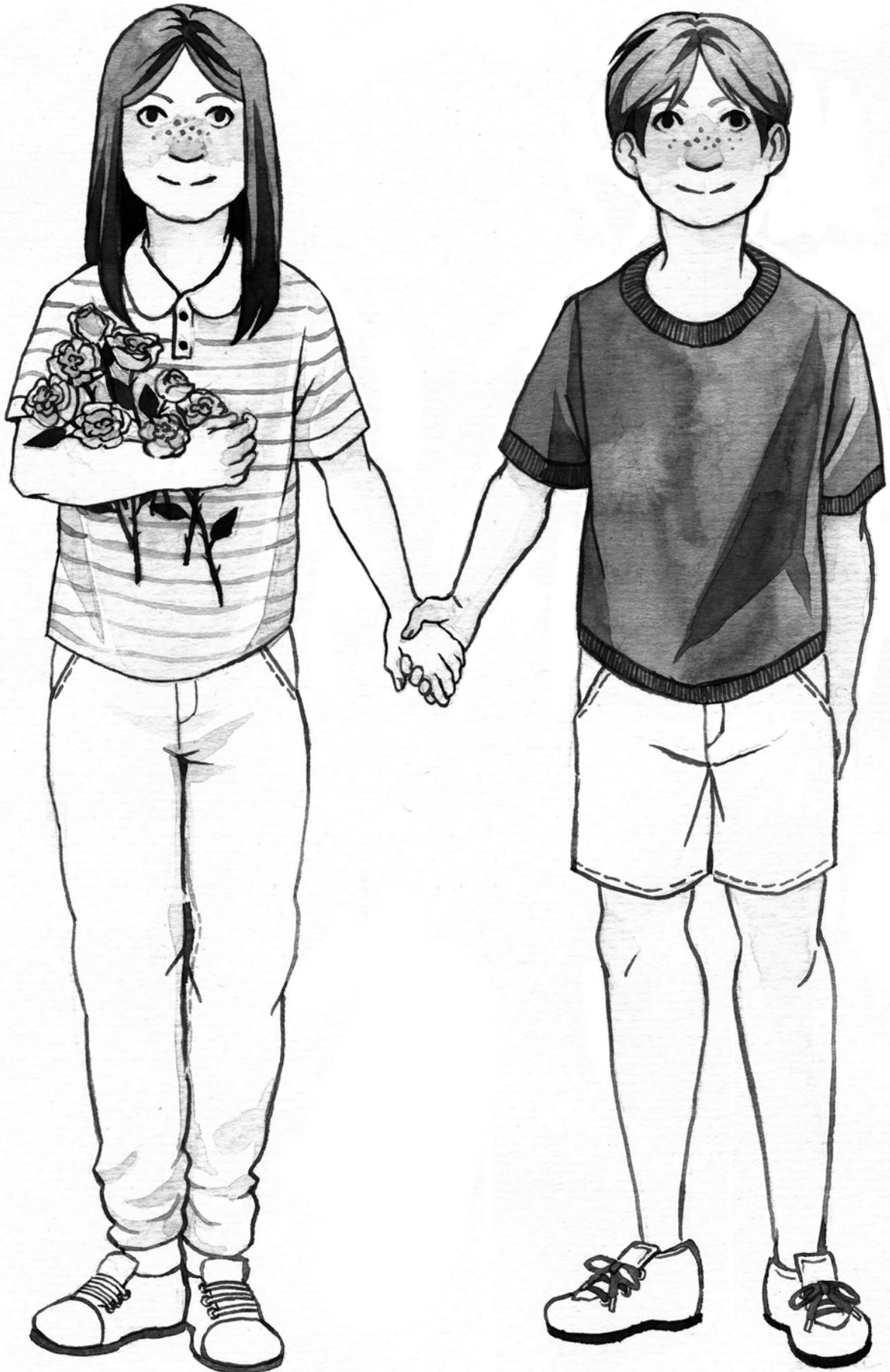
The red car had been quite expensive, but she had a well-paid job and refrained from going on holidays for a long time in order to save up for her dream, and then she had been able afford it. It was her everything. When I tell you that it looked like the most generic, red, expensive car, I don't need to describe it any further. Since the day she bought it, it took its own parking space on the side of the quiet street in front of her house. It belonged to that street and that street belonged to its wheels.

She was a popular and kind person, and so people congratulated her as if she had just given birth to her first child instead of talking badly about it behind her back out of envy. Every now and then, strangers passing by would stop to admire the car or even take a picture with it. When she happened to catch them doing so from her window, she smiled to herself, delighted that her purchase gave other people a few seconds of aesthetic pleasure and, assuming from a little girl's excited squeak once she had spotted the car, even happiness.

The day she saw the girl was also the day she saw a little boy, just a few minutes later, who looked astonishingly

similar to the girl. Had they stood next to each other, she would have assumed that they were twins. The boy stared at the car for a few seconds, before he smiled and walked away slowly, turning around once to take another look at the car. Of course, her car was very unique, but his reaction still struck her as slightly odd. From what she had been able to see from her window, his face held more emotion in it than just fascination with the car. But as soon as the telephone rang, her trail of thoughts was interrupted and she did not go back to it again. She also did not notice the boy and the girl coming back together an hour later.

From then on, things became a little peculiar: Flowers seemed to disappear from meadows only to reappear on her car. She noticed it first when she was about to go to work the next morning and found a daisy stuck beneath her windshield wiper. Not thinking much of it, she pulled it out and tossed it on the pavement. The day after, buttercup blossoms had been carefully placed on each of the car's wheels, and the daisy was back by the windshield wiper. Thinking this was some kind of joke, she threw it away like she had done the day before. Perhaps someone was finally showing their envy, although flowers on her car



could hardly be considered a sign of destructive impulses. She didn't even notice them shinning bright and yellow from the black wheels as she got into her car, started it and let the wheels flatten the blossoms. When she approached her car the next morning, she was greeted by a tulip, obviously unprofessionally ripped out of someone's front yard, placed on the engine cover. Now she refused to believe in coincidence. Angrily, she took the tulip into her hands, but before she could tear it in two, she noticed a tiny piece of paper attached to it with chewing gum. The slight sensation of disgust in her subsided and turned into confusion as she deciphered the handwriting and read the words 'We miss you xx'. Who was missing her? Everyone she had a close relationship with in the past few years was still close to her. They could easily talk to her in person. She decided to spend the next evening watching her car more closely from the window, since that must have been the time when the mysterious decorator was doing their work.

With a cup of tea by her side, she sat next to the open window, in case she needed to shout at somebody, and waited. She had just burnt her tongue for the second time when she noticed two familiar faces approaching her car.

The girl was carrying a bunch of bright red roses in one hand and holding the boy's hand with the other. Forgetting about the window, she jumped up, ran outside and almost stumbled down the stairs, but before she could ask the children about the purpose of their doings, they looked up, horrified at their exposure, and started running away without saying a word. She went back inside, not knowing what to make of what had just happened, but hoping they would come back and give her the chance to ask them for answers. Eventually, she closed the window again when the nearby sirens of an ambulance distracted her from making up possible reasons for the children's behaviour.

She still didn't know what to make of it by the time she opened the newspapers two days later to find a report on an accident involving a car and two children on the corner of her street. Burning her tongue on her tea again, she read that it had been a boy and a girl carrying flowers who had run in front of the car without looking left or right. Apparently, they were orphans from a town a few miles south who had just lost their parents in a car accident. Their Ferrari had been crushed into a pile of metal - it was a miracle



that the siblings had survived. Having no other relatives, they had then been moved to the local orphanage, the only one in the area that still had two vacant places. Much to her relief, the article ended by stating that the car had been slow enough to cause the twins only minor injuries and that they had been admitted to the city's hospital.

Without finishing her breakfast, she got up with her mind set on confirming what she assumed to be the answer to her questions. But first, she would have to make a trip to a field of flowers, and maybe even to a neighbour's front yard when nobody was watching. ■

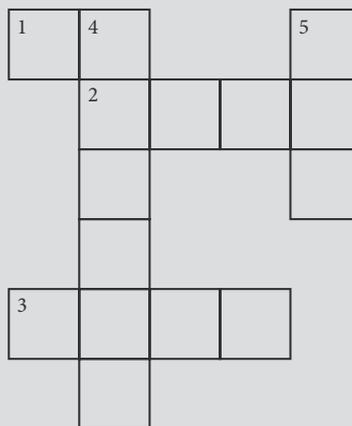


# 2 across: thinking outside the box

*by Maike Baumgärtner*

A Sunday isn't a Sunday without my favourite paper. Although I couldn't care less about the news, I would drag myself out of bed every Sunday morning at 10:30 the latest. Then I'd brush my teeth and get dressed. Most of the time, my clothes would barely conceal the pyjamas I could never convince myself to take off on a Sunday morning. Then I'd snatch my keys and purse from the sideboard and be on my way to the bakery in my neighbourhood. Typically, I'd arrive there just before closing time, buy the last copy of the paper, sometimes a couple of croissants and be on my way. Next stop: my sofa. A cup of tea in one hand, a croissant in the other, and the paper on my lap. I only pay attention to the middle section though. Politics, sports, finance and even the arts section would end up in a crumpled pile on the floor while my brows were furrowed in concentration. The cryptic crossword puzzle was a Sunday treat. At the same time, it expressed my view of life in a nutshell. You have to ask the right question before getting close to an answer is even

possible. I was pretty sure that I was the only eager crossword puzzler under forty. It amused me to no end to imagine how everyone else my age was recovering from the obligatory Sunday morning hangover while I was racking my brains to come up with an animal that kept quiet unexpectedly or why castles were built and what the allusion to the Pope meant. The following Sunday, looking especially gruff because I had decided to participate in age appropriate amusements the night before, I went to get my paper as not to miss my most cherished part of the week. When I arrived at the bakery, the neatly arranged pile contained every piece of yellow press you can imagine. The only alternatives to my paper were magazines that published the latest births in royal families or why a celebrity couple had broken up. My mood plummeted when I realised that I would be denied my Sunday pastime of doing the puzzle. I sighed and went home, annoyed. The next Sunday morning, I was on my feet half an hour earlier, confident to get to the bakery in time. When I stood there angry enough



to fantasize about swinging a baguette like a baseball bat around the shop, the saleswoman pleasantly informed me that there was only one copy available in this bakery and that it was already sold. They simply didn't order any more of them because "next to nobody bought them anyway." Thanks a bunch. I left without the paper or the croissants. They just wouldn't taste the same without the scent of print and recycled paper anyway. During the following week, burning anger built up in my stomach. Who was the person who managed to snatch away my paper? Did the whole neighbourhood compete for that one copy or was it just one newbie who thought he or she could just come here and take over my Sunday routine? Of course, I was aware that this was little more than a trifle. Nevertheless, I tried to imagine the paper thief and how next time, I'd be the one to snatch the paper away from under his or her possibly crooked nose. This Sunday morning differed from other Sunday mornings by the shrill ring of the alarm clock. I was dressed and ready to fight for my Sun-

day. I zipped up my jacket and held my purse as if to present my arms. My eyes must have flashed enough to illuminate the grey morning. I got to the bakery the moment they opened their doors. Triumphant, I strode in. My paper lay on top of the colourful magazines. I took it from the pile and was about to order croissants to celebrate my victory, when I heard an amused voice from behind me say, "So you're the paper thief. Took me weeks to figure out I had to be early to get my puzzle." I turned around and looked up until my eyes fell upon a twinkling smile and laughing eyes. I realised I was done for when he opened his mouth next. Maybe Sundays did have even more to offer than the crossword puzzle. "You know, we could always share the paper," he said, smiling cryptically. ■

# dirty little secrets

by *Henry Lyonga N.*

If you take a walk down any street in Kassel, what you are going to see are hundreds of miserable people who all have one thing in common. Secrets, they come in all shapes and sizes and they can destroy our all so perfectly cultivated lives in a variety of ways. Like my mother used to say, there are two kinds of people in the world: The ones who have secrets, but know how to keep them locked in the darkest chambers of their hearts, or behind secret cabins and webs of lies woven tight into their realities, and those who aren't expedient enough to hide theirs behind fake concealing smiles and daily laughter. For those able to keep a tight lid on theirs, life is going to be the same, for they have no actual reason to worry about their secrets being spewed in public for others to feast on. However, for the unlucky few who aren't clever at cleaning their tracks and eliminating any and every paper trail, life is going to get even more complicated. For it is a known fact, that secrets, whether big or small, innocent or filthy, almost always have a way of making their way to the surface. And when they finally do, lives will be changed forever.

I am no saint, so believe me when I say I have had my own fair share of public humiliation and embarrassment, for indeed I have. A few months before summer last year, word got out that I had embezzled a huge sum of money from our company's funds, which I actually did, but won't talk about because the story I am about to tell you has well... nothing to do with me. It is about my young psychic neighbor, who was about to become very famous for all the wrong reasons.

Even in a small student-saturated city like Kassel, where life is lived at a fast pace, we all know we have to

keep our secrets very close to our hearts. Something my neighbor Mr. Zenz and I know so well. After I had become "the neighborhood embezzler" as Mariah now calls me, it was time for someone else to take the spotlight away from me. Mr. Eric Zenz, secretly known to a certain young virgin as Mr. Darcy, was a married father of one, whose life was about to take a sour turn. The only problem, however, was that as calculating and foresighted as we all knew him to be, he didn't see the danger coming his way. When he was promoted last year to Senior Partner at Streller & Associates, he knew it was going to happen even before his boss, the doomed and sleazy Mr. Mensini, mentioned it. When his wife Julia became pregnant with their only daughter Elyse, he had found out about it even before his house doctor could tell them the delightful news. The man was practically psychic and everyone envied him for it, but not for what was about to happen to him.

Eric Zenz, who had been leading a secret life since December of last year, did not have any reason to worry about his secrets until later that day. Waking up at exactly six o'clock to prepare himself for his daily nine-to-five job at Streller & Associates, a high-end law firm in Kassel, he had no idea the day all his dirty little secrets would blow up in his face had arrived as he went about his daily business.

It was business as usual. He woke up at six, took a long warm herbal bath and ran downstairs to kiss his wife and daughter goodbye before going to work. His family was seated at the big brown dining table he had inherited from his grandmother, waiting for him to sit down to breakfast.

Julia knew he wasn't going to join them, but she pre-

pared him a plate of fried eggs and toast as she had become accustomed to doing for the past seventeen years. She had become a dull suburban housewife who was left at home to play Susie-homemaker, while her vibrant handsome husband was out making money to support the family. She was indeed a very sad woman who had become numb to her surroundings and had thus forgotten that Tuesdays were days not to mess with her husband Eric Zenz.

Don't get me wrong, he was a gentleman in every possible way. He catered to his family's financial needs, he was home during Christmas holidays to spend time with his family, he even went so far as to organize and invite the neighbors to an annual party to celebrate his wife, but things haven't been the same since last year.

Anyway, for Zenz, Tuesdays at the office were rather unusual and today wasn't going to be any different. Zenz arrived at his office by 8:20 am to prepare himself for a 10 am appointment with Mr. Schmidt, a potential client with seemingly bottomless funds that he had been chasing for the past three months. Unfortunately for him, the appointment was cancelled minutes before its scheduled time. Susan, his secretary, showed up to his office with a brown envelope containing a subpoena for a contract case they had settled out of court a trillion years ago. Something was wrong. He was being summoned to court with immediacy. He dropped everything and drove through the busy streets of Kassel to court for his clients' hearing, after which he made his way back to his office, where he stayed until approximately 7 pm to take care of some contract papers he had to file on Wednesday.

It was 7:50 pm, when he finally drove off from the of-

fice in the direction of his Kassel Nord-Stadt home. The streets leading to his humble abode are known for their flea-market-type splendor, and anyone who has ever been fortunate enough to visit this part of town knows how lively our evenings usually are. Today, however, something was different. Everything seemed off and in addition, there was a certain strange hue of solemnity in the air. Drunks weren't screaming on the top of their lungs, hookers were not standing on the left-hand side of the street in front of the post office like they usually do. Mariah's Pub, a hot spot which always stayed open on a daily basis until about three in the morning, was closed. He wondered why Mariah's Pub would be closed on a Friday evening as he drove past Am Stern. He swore he could perceive a strange smell in the air, but he couldn't really put his finger on what it was. The scenery felt bizarre and cold to him like never before. He saw hundreds of youths walking together in groups of ten. Some masked, while others were casually dressed and carrying red roses and white candle sticks. The traffic came to a standstill. He took out his phone, called his wife and told her he was on his way and that there was some sort of a procession service, to which she only answered with an "Ok, I need to run. I can't really talk now, bye." Not really giving much thought to why she sounded so vague on the phone, he drove home. He parked his car outside the gate and walked up towards the house which was hidden behind six shady palm trees. On opening the door, he saw Elyse, his daughter, lying on the floor with a picture of her best friend Jane next to her, the girl who he had been sleeping with this past year. "She is dead, Daddy," Elyse cried. "She is dead! ... He killed her,

Mr. Darcy killed her!” she said in a whisper as tears ran down her pink cheeks.

Yes, something terrible had happened, Zenz knew it in his gut and whatever it was, he knew he needed to be as far away from it as possible. Her line struck a nerve in his heart, leaving him almost breathless. He stood motionless in his living room watching his daughter unravel in sorrow for a few seconds. It then became clear to him that he had come to the end of a dark tunnel and his life as he knew it was about to come to an end. “What to do! What to do!” he murmured to himself in a rather sinister tone. “I need to go! ... I should go while I still can ...” His thoughts came to an abrupt end when Elyse chimed in with tales of the illusive Mr. Darcy, who to her was responsible for her friend’s death. “It is Mr. Darcy! ... He did it. ... He had her killed,” she offered in a faint voice. Pretending not to know what she was talking about, my poor terrified neighbor, who was schooled in the arts of persuasion being the lawyer we all know him to be, tricked her into telling him every single detail about the illusive Mr. Darcy. For at that very moment, he wasn’t quite sure if he had cleaned his tracks. In the previous week, something had happened at his house, which led him to believe that she may have caught wind of their affair. It was impossible for him to think that she had no idea about their romance, since she had been witness to the improper gazes exchanged by the two lovers during family dinners while Jane was present.

Elyse went on by telling him that Darcy, as she knew him, was a married man her friend was seeing and that she had begged her to fill her in on everything about their relationship. But Jane had been extremely tight-lipped about the guy. All she owned up to knowing was that they were screwing whenever the opportunity arose. “He certainly has a hand in her death ... you know my gut is never wrong,” she said in melancholic tone, followed by the sug-

gestion that Darcy may have killed Jane because she had threatened to tell his family about their affair. And in an attempt to keep her quiet, he had silenced her for good. In an attempt to blow her off, Zenz said “Come on dear, don’t you think your theory is a bit of a reach ... I am sure the police are working their hardest to find whoever did this terrible act.” Elyse wouldn’t let go. She went on and on about Jane’s misfortune and the unknown Mr. Darcy, who apparently was a married father of one. If only she had known the unnamed man was her father. Poor thing, I dare not think of the disappointment that was soon to be had once she catches wind of the fact that Darcy was her very own father all along. As relieving as it was to learn

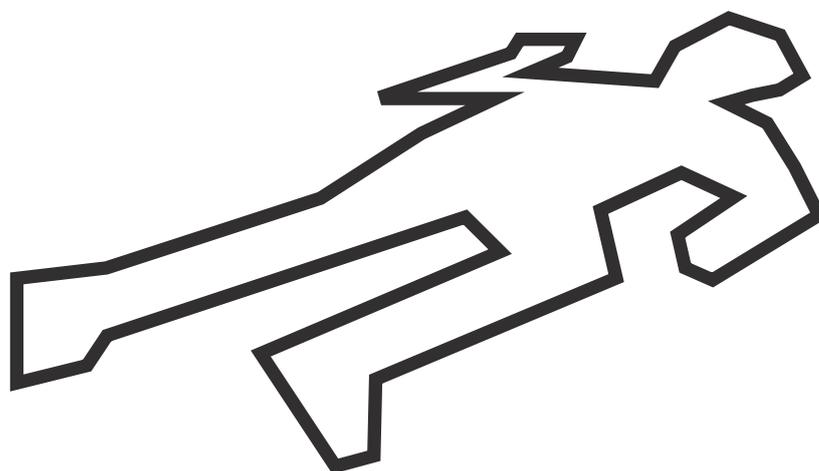


that Jane had kept their secret to herself, Zenz was worried. Things were about to get crazy really quick. Not only was he about to answer to his family, but the police were now involved and he was about to become a weird perverted old man who had taken advantage of his daughter's innocent friend. Finally, even he himself, who was ever so perceptive, knew he had been short-sighted and blinded by his infatuation for Jane. He was done. His reputation, his family, even his job, nothing was safe for him anymore. Streller & Associates would waste no time in suing him for breach of contract and they would even go so far as to take away all his shares in the company. Where was he to go from here? That is a question I am familiar with, to which an answer is almost non-existent.

A teenager was dead. Yet another opportunity had arisen for blood hungry reporters and news vans to pick on her leftovers, like vultures do to dead bodies. The city was shaken. As expected, people were looking to the police to bring to justice whoever was responsible for this vile act against a young girl. The crime scene had been swamped with police vehicles and reporters scampering to get the best angle on the story. Next to the main entrance of the university parking lot lay Jane's half-naked body. She was quickly covered up and carried away so that

a quick autopsy could be performed to help find the killer. Not long after, words of her death reached her parents, who, in shock, refused to believe their only daughter had been killed.

Two people were about to become famous. A young dead innocent virgin, who also happened to be the valedictorian at the Goethe Gymnasium, and her killer. The die had been cast; everyone in Kassel was on the lookout. Streets had become impenetrable. People were being prohibited from entering or leaving the city. Over at Zenz's, Mr. Darcy rallied his wife and daughter and told them there was an emergency business matter to be handled out of town and he needed to leave immediately. No suspicion was raised. This wasn't the first time he had taken such an out of town meeting. On many occasions, he had used this excuse as an opportunity to spend time with his young mistress. He had done this before and it had become child's play. He was nervous but calm and collected. He skipped into his bedroom through the dining room and the corridor which separated their living room from the dining room. There was no time to take a bath. He grabbed a small red traveling bag and threw in some T-shirts, a tailored jacket, two pairs of jeans and five rolls of bills containing the sum of €1000 each. Usually, he would



have sat down for dinner but he wasn't having it now. He kissed his wife and daughter as he had done in the morning so religiously, and out he went. Elyse was still crying when he closed the door behind him, only to be greeted at the front porch by sirens and policemen all ready to take him into custody. "Don't move!" was the first thing he heard. Dozens of policemen and women had already surrounded his compound. There was no way out now. One false move could only lead to a shoot out. He knew what was going on but still played the "What is going on here? ... What did I do? ... Why am I being arrested?"-card. The only answer he got was a plain "Yes," which came from a frail-looking lady who apparently was a homicide detective. Zenz knew then that the cat was out of the bag and every finger was being pointed in his direction. He killed Jane. There were just too many damn red flags for it not to be him. If he didn't, why was he on the run? Where was he heading to? He couldn't help but think about what rookie behavior he had just displayed. He remained standing in front of his porch as Officer Bernd read him the ever-so classic "You have the right to remain silent ... anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law"-lines, after which he was dragged into a police car and taken to the police station. He was terribly ashamed of the incarceration spectacle but all he could see as the police vehicle drove off was his young daughter's empty face, standing on the balcony, watching as her father was being taken away. Thoughts of them finally learning the truth of his affair from someone who isn't him lingered in his mind. "I should have told them! I should have at least said something about the mess I made," he said to himself in a disappointed manner.

The drive from his house to the station was a seven minute ride, which to him seemed like seven hellish hours. Everything around him was in commotion, with sirens

and police officers everywhere. He had been reduced to the status of a criminal. He heard them saying the meanest things about him. Some even insinuated that this may, in fact, not be his first murder after all.

The case at hand was as clear as day. A young innocent girl had been killed and everyone was expecting the police to do its due diligence and find the culprit. It was either Darcy or someone else. As a lawyer, he understood what was going to happen once they took him into an interrogation room. It was going to be the good cop/bad cop game to get him to break and plead guilty, which would mean a lesser sentence. It was either going to be statutory rape or murder for him. His thoughts were baffled when the police vehicle finally stopped in front of a big colorless building. He was quickly ushered into a greyish-blue room with a mirror in the wall. The room felt very plastic. It contained only a metal table and two chairs. He was made to take a seat at the table and a glass of water was placed before him. Not a word was said to him the whole time; he was being given the silent treatment. He called out for help numerous times, but no one was paying him any mind. He kept screaming for a lawyer, but no one answered.

After about forty-five minutes of solitude in a cold and colorless room, Officer Bernd stepped in, looking stoic and emotionless. It was obvious that he was playing the bad cop. He took a seat and slapped a green file on the table. He opened it and pictures of the once amazingly beautiful Jane flew out. One after the other, he placed each of the eight pictures in front of Zenz and asked him to tell the truth. "I am inclined to think that you are Mr. Darcy ... tell me I am wrong," Bernd said with a straight face. Eric Zenz felt a sharp pain in his gut but still managed to keep an innocent face. "I know you are Mr. Darcy," Bernd said. Jane had not been so secretive after all. She kept every detail about their affair in her diary. Zenz remained un-



moved. His focus was directed towards Jane's pictures. It was a terrible sight to behold. He looked at each of the pictures with terror, not knowing what to think about who could have done such a beastly thing to a girl as pretty as Jane. She had been strangled and shot in the face. Even though he was merely a corporate lawyer, he knew of cases like the one at hand. Her death was personal. Someone wanted revenge for something Jane had done. Her beauty had been robbed. Her body was desecrated, leading everyone to think that the deed was the handiwork of a male, for women usually do not go for the face and bodily desecration. Thus, everyone thought that Darcy must have done it. However, he vehemently refused to be held accountable for such a vile crime, for as he put it, "I couldn't have done this ... I loved her," forgetting he had just admitted to having an affair with his teenage daughter's best friend. However, he didn't forget to assure them of the fact that the poor dead innocent girl wasn't as innocent as she had seemed after all. Oh boy and did she know things! Things that would make even a sex worker cringe! Officer Bernd wasn't having whatever he had to say. He suggested that Darcy might have killed her because she had threatened to tell his family of the year-long affair. "No. I did not kill her," he offered in a mellow tone. But Officer Bernd told him that he was not buying whatever Zenz was trying to make him believe. Bernd left the room with an awkward smile. Zenz began to feel alone like never before in his life.

Things were becoming just too damn stressful for him to even understand what he had gotten himself into.

At this point, it was obvious that the interrogation was clearly just a fishing expedition. The interrogating officers were literally just throwing shit at the wall, hoping to make it stick. Even he found it bizarre, watching Officer Bernd and his colleagues throw theories at him, one after the other, hoping he would acquiesce and implicate himself, which he managed not to do. For he knew that to charge him with murder without his attorney present was unlawful, but he knew things had to be done quickly. Someone from high up the food chain was putting pressure on the officers. He even heard some officers mumbling to each other, saying that an autopsy on Jane's body was going to be completed in thirty-six hours. But they have been asked to pin the crime on someone before all thirty-six hours elapsed. And on failure to do so, well... they stood the risk of losing their jobs. He was sure that this was going to be the end of him. But then, Officer Bernd entered the room again with news that would calm him, but at the same time raise new questions. He had been exonerated. He did not kill the young virgin. However, he knew who did. From that very moment, he began to understand the enormity of what he had done and the effects it had caused in the lives of his loved ones. Nothing was going to be the same ever again. ■

# redemption

*by Henry Viereck*



## redemption

rɪˈdɛm(p)ʃ(ə)n/

noun

1. *the action of regaining or gaining possession of something in exchange for payment, or clearing a debt.*

**I**ronically, a straight road is not always the easiest. It does things to you, things you don't see coming. He had been driving for six hours when he entered an eighty mile long stretch on the freeway that was as straight as a line. Nothing but a line straight to the horizon; filling everything around it was the mountainous desert landscape of southern Idaho. Up above towered the moon, a beautiful harvest moon glowing like an orange ball of autumn fire.

The monotony of the stretch was excruciating. Hands, still; feet, still; cruise control. This must still be one of the warmer days for this time of year, he thought. Not that he would know for sure, but the warm winds that were dancing along his forearm, still whispering sweet promises of summer, convinced him of the accuracy of his judgement. He stared into the cone of the headlights illuminating the road in front of him. There was nothing else, no other car in the distance or anything else that would distract him from feeling completely on his own, caged in a car with nothing but his thoughts.

Since the drive hardly demanded any conscious action, his brain, bored by such monotony, started to lose the battle against his inner universe that began to surface.

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The conditions that day were pristine, not a cloud in the sky and still a little chilly from the cold mountain night. We had just brewed a cup of coffee on our camping stove and were now looking up the wall, debating our course of action and recapping our preparation. As we had spent the last two years climbing it and planning

every single cam we were gonna stick into that wall on our way to the top, we both knew to line to perfection. The line we were going to climb started explosively with a radically overhanging cliff of about 90 feet in length which we would have to master before entering the main wall. The core of the line was a crack in the rock that ran up almost the entire wall for about a hundred yards and was just perfect for putting in cams. The bolts on the vertical part of the climb were spaced about 30 feet apart in order to keep the falling height as small as possible. Towards the end of the climb, however, camming became increasingly difficult because of a massive overhanging slope. Our previous efforts all failed at that exact same point, since we struggled to put our gear into and cling to the wall at the same time. The result was a gap of about 30 feet between the two uppermost cams that we would have to bridge on our way to the top. Climbing a gap like this, knowing that one slip of your hand could mean a 30 foot fall and possibly a life threatening injury, makes the moment when you clip your rope into the last regularly spaced bolt a truly intense experience. Nothing but your mental strength and the utter desire to triumph over your doubts and fears counts. It means complete control of every muscle in your body, not allowing even the smallest of twitches and spasms to occur. The air was filled with excitement, as today was going to be the day we would hunt down our white whale at last.

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He woke up to a thunderous roaring noise that came from right underneath his car. He barely managed to pull the car back from the sideline ditch in the last second. A bottle of pills which he had placed on the passenger seat

just a minute ago had now spilled its contents onto the foot mat, where a couple of more or less empty beer cans had already found their resting place. He cursed and wildly shook his head in anger, as if ridding himself of a fly that had just landed on his face, but soon calmed down and decided that he could use a rest. After pulling over his car to the side of the freeway he got out, went around it and started cleaning up the passenger side of the car. He threw the beer cans into the ditch and neatly cleaned every pill with a burst of air from his mouth before putting them back into the bottle. Content, he put the last one in his mouth and washed it down with the rest of his beer.

He lit a cigarette and leaned against the hood of his car. Sunrise was approaching fast over the southern Idaho plains. The sky wore its typical dawn colours; the dark blue of the night faded smoothly into a glooming violet before falling down into a sun-induced orange.

He inhaled the smoke deeply as he jealously admired the innocence of the scenery. Soon he would head north, towards the rolling hills that quite soon turned into mountain ranges. He would then drive through Sun Valley where Hemingway liked to spend his autumns hunting, writing and drinking. The sun had risen considerably in the last twenty minutes and awoke in him a desire for breakfast. He remembered a cozy little diner just out of town, shortly before the little dirt road began that led up to the mountains and the trail head. The log cabin style diner was situated on the side of a curvy road just out of town, and he could still see Main Street with its neat little shops and bars in the rear-view mirror. After parking his car, he scaled the stairs that led up to the front entrance of the diner. There were some tables on the patio in front of the house which he immediately found perfectly suited

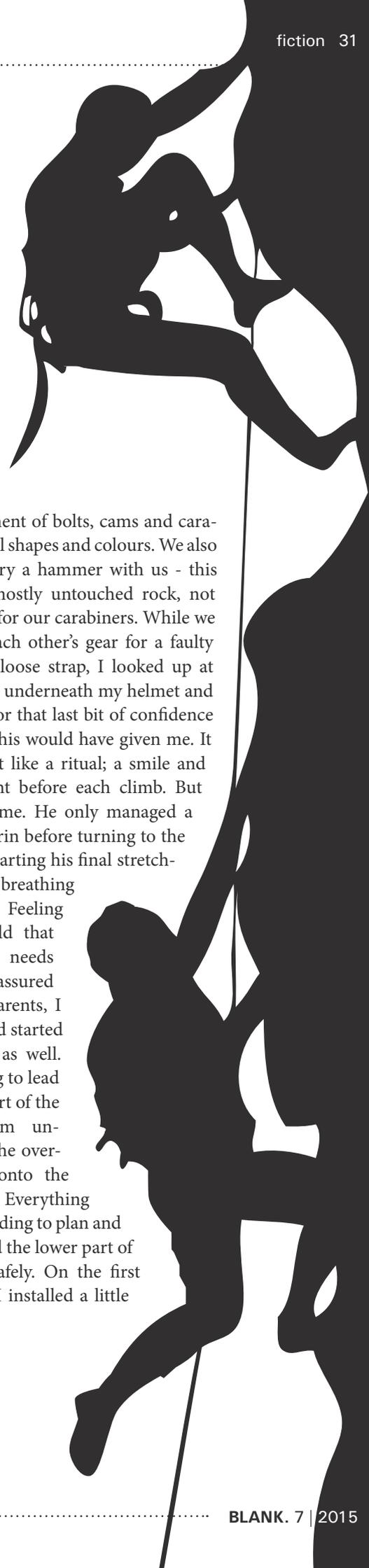
for him. He really had no aspiration to go inside, so he quickly sat down and began to study the menu. He made a quick decision about his meal and looked around nervously, searching for a waitress. He spotted her through the window, prancing about in the diner serving the patrons. After a couple of failed attempts, he finally managed to establish eye contact and signaled to her to come over with a waving gesture. She waved back at him with a warm smile and nodded. Another couple of minutes passed until she swiftly opened the front door with her backside and entered the patio whilst still writing something in her notepad. What followed was a very heartily performed but also seemingly superficial welcome. He only caught a glance of her before looking back at the menu. He chose the hash browns with bacon and eggs and a cup of coffee. The waitress looked at him with a big smile and thanked him politely for his order. Soon, he was alone on the patio again. His coffee came quickly, but the waitress let him know that the food would still take a while. He fetched his cigarettes and lighter out of his pocket and started to smoke. The town was still covered in a little fog cloud. The air still smelled like morning dew, although the sun was already slightly above the horizon, illuminating the valley in a fair morning light.

After a while he switched to the opposite side of the table and sat down with his eyes closed. When he reopened them, he saw the mountain which he had once sworn to never lay eyes on again.

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After we had finished our coffee, we slipped into our climbing harnesses and started attaching our gear. It was

an assortment of bolts, cams and carabiners in all shapes and colours. We also had to carry a hammer with us - this was still mostly untouched rock, not yet bolted for our carabiners. While we checked each other's gear for a faulty knot or a loose strap, I looked up at Mike from underneath my helmet and searched for that last bit of confidence a smile of his would have given me. It was almost like a ritual; a smile and a nod right before each climb. But not this time. He only managed a subdued grin before turning to the wall and starting his final stretching and breathing routines. Feeling like a child that constantly needs to be reassured by their parents, I let it go and started stretching as well. I was going to lead the first part of the climb from underneath the overhang up onto the big wall. Everything went according to plan and we reached the lower part of the wall safely. On the first two bolts I installed a little



ledge tent for me to stand on, as I was going to belay Mike from here on out. When everything was in place for the second phase of the ascent, we looked across the valley, taking in the beauty and peacefulness of the land. Inspired, I grabbed a hold of Mike's rope and touched his shoulders. "We are gonna do this today, bud," I told him confidently. He nodded and said: "Damn straight we're gonna do it! That's what life's all about, facing it head on; no excuses! Let's live, God Dammit!" he yelled so loudly that his echo could be heard at least half a dozen times across the valley. I laughed, he smiled; we were ready to go. The first stretch was smooth sailing. Mike was in good shape and had no problems with the often tiny holds along the crack. After about 30 minutes, he managed to clip his rope into the last carabiner that we had previously installed.

I could see him up there, already quite small, as he gave me the thumbs up.

After resting for a bit, Mike recommenced his climb up the wall, securing two cams in the crack on his way. Then, as he was just about to confront the most serious problem in the route, fate decided to strike. After a failed attempt to reach the next hold, Mike leaned back and I could see that he was poised to try a big move. Although immediately feeling uneasy, I chose to not share my thoughts with Mike as I didn't want to interrupt his concentration. I saw him jump. Then, everything happened at lightning speed. He did not quite make the jump and immediately slipped off the rock. I instantly ducked and tried to lodge myself against the rock in order to not get uncontrollably pulled up and stop his fall. It was too late, he dropped too fast for me to find a good enough position and so I got lifted off my feet and flung upwards. After hearing his short and fearful scream, I noticed another sound I knew all too

well. It was the distinct and violent sound of metal being yanked out of rock; apparently the last cam Mike had planted in the wall did not resist the force that his fall had created so that it roughly doubled the height of his fall. To my despair, I heard that same sound repeat itself and I knew straightaway what it meant.

A jarring jolt went through the rope as the third bolt in line finally decided to resist the force of gravity. The slight overhanging nature of the cliff made matters even worse, as it created a sling effect that caused Mike to slam violently against the wall.

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The smell of bacon rising in his nostrils yanked him out of his trance. He had not even realized that the waitress had brought out his food which now stood right in front of him, still steaming. He did not notice her either when she touched his shoulder and asked if he was alright, and an air of warm empathy that was on her face when she saw his watery eyes fixed on a mountain in the distance. Instinctively, he wiped his eyes dry with the sleeve of his fleece jacket.

His stomach, teased by the smell of his food, sent a tremor through his body that quickly diverted all attention onto the fully loaded breakfast plate, or rather platter, in front of him. It was only a matter of minutes until he leaned back with the satisfying feeling of a full belly and a lit cigarette in his hand. Feeling refreshed and energized, he jammed a twenty dollar bill underneath the platter and left the patio. He had no idea that the waitress was watching him the whole time through the half-opened door with a puzzled look on her face as he suddenly seemed so fo-

cused and determined. With a spring in his step, he seemingly jumped around the edges of the car, got in and drove off. After a little while he turned onto the dirt road leading to the trailhead. It seemed the sight of the mountain had lifted a shadow that had laid heavily on his soul for a very long time. He felt a well-known determination that he had not felt since Mike was gone. Two years had passed; two years of self-hatred and isolation. As the memories kept flashing before his eyes over and over again as soon as he closed his eyes, falling asleep was a huge problem for him. The memories sent his heart racing and in an instant he would be sitting upright again, already breaking out in sweat. Often, he cried for hours while blaming

himself for being responsible for what had happened over and over again without a sliver of mercy. Going to therapy had eased the pain a lot, but what had happened still left him deeply wounded and unsatisfied. Just last week, while holding an old picture of his old friend in his hands, it finally dawned on him that there was, after all, only one way to go. Facing your shit head on; no excuses! He parked his car at the trailhead parking lot and opened the trunk of his car. He had taken the picture off of the dashboard and put it into the top pocket of his climbing backpack. He inhaled the cool morning air, the fog had lifted and there was not a cloud in the sky. "I'm going to do it, Mike. For both of us," he thought as he started hiking into the mountains. ■



# archie's revenge

by Denise Breidenbach

*"It's getting late and while I wait  
My poor heart aches on  
Why keep the brakes on?  
Let's misbehave!"  
(Cole Porter)*

It was on the 6th of December 2002, at 15:37 PM precisely that Archibald Ian Myers decided to put an end to his horrid existence. However, dear reader, let me warn you against any kind of premature judgement, for this is not going to be a story about the suicide of just another depressed old lad, but a story of a depressed old lad indeed. It was his fourth year in St. Mary's old age home in Birmingham, and it was just on that 6th of December that our dear embittered Archie, right after his recent encounter with the usual fake St. Nicholas in the common living room, decided that he had to put an end to his life as it was.

When asked to describe his life, or rather, what had become of it, a considerable amount of additional wrinkles would appear on his grim, waxy face, and he would open his 86-year-old mouth and say something like "stuepietshjittiness". And of course, you would have trouble understanding what this seemingly random combination of letters means. Well, this is because over the years, Archie has lost control of his speech due to a mild form of dementia. This condition was nothing life-threatening, but reason enough for his children – for which he would probably find even more exotic insults – to put him in the old age home that was far from anything like home. Every day began with a nightmare, impersonated by Nurse Regina.

Unfortunately, she was just the type of nurse everyone is afraid of, but nobody believes exists in reality. She was the matron of matrons, about six feet tall, and had miraculously managed to grow broader than taller. On his first encounter with her, Archie had been overwhelmed by both the desire to laugh and to cringe, for she truly was one of a kind: The noise her sweaty feet made in her white slippers unfailingly announced her before she came into sight, and various layers of chin wobbled over the collar of her starched uniform (needless to say that it was way too tight to accommodate the masses of flesh around her voluminous midsection). Every move she made was accompanied by a slight groan, and, worst of all, endless muttering. It was exactly this endless muttering that had slowly begun to drive Archie mad – even madder than the doctors at St. Mary's already believed him to be. His everyday began with Nurse Regina pushing open his door with the ferocity of an angry wrestler, and with the face of one, because she was generally believed to be not too fond of her work in the old age home. She would then proceed to the window and open it violently to "let in some fresh air for my dear Harry" – after all these years, she did not even manage to get Archie's name right. And as if thrusting open windows and doors, no matter how cold or hot it was outside, was not worse enough, she would inevitably collide with



Archie's dearest possession, his old Starr phonograph. It originally came from a flea market under a shabby bridge on the outskirts of New York, when the marvelous Cole Porter was still walking this earth. He had asked Archie to stage his latest musical, *Can-Can*. The phonograph was his anchor, one of the few things that allowed him to dwell on his memories in peace: He remembered everything as if it had been just yesterday. The stuffy spring air of 1953 on Broadway, his shabby flat located at a cross street near Central Park that was named Columbus Circle. And upon being pulled into the whirlwind of applause, swinging skirts, feathers, glitter and the alluring perfumes of wine and women alike, Archie had indeed felt like some sort of modern Christopher Columbus. Back then, every day started with the promise of the pale morning sun rising shyly over the massive grey buildings, and almost every day ended with some well-deserved drinks after another tiresome, yet exciting succession of rehearsals. Everything seemed possible, and much had been possible indeed. But like most of the good times he had seen during his life, this one ended abruptly when one evening Archie had dared to contradict a fellow director. He should have known better, he had ironically thought when the guy sent him flying down the stairs at Betsy's Bar. Next to a fascinatingly complicated fracture in his right arm, the result was his immediate, disgraceful return to the Birmingham Repertoire Theatre. But well, that was another story. For now, the esteemed reader may kindly allow me to return to the above-mentioned 6th of December and describe the

events that let Archie to reconsider the status quo.

St. Nicholas' Day had been predestined to end in fury and rage for Archie. Nurse Regina, who came to wake him up as brusquely as ever, chose this morning to torture him with a series of exercises to "keep his legs agile and strong" and her regular morning report on the traffic situation on the M6. "I don't see why every Tom, Dick and Harry needs a car these days," she said with a grim expression on her face as she was bending Archie's knee in a way that sent a shiver down his spine. "Three accidents this morning, and everyone slowing down to gape! Dreadful I say, Dreadful!" Archie wondered how a woman of Nurse Regina's size was able to fit into the driver's seat of a regular car at all, but of course, he never asked her. She was frightening enough as it was, and he had the fearful suspicion that upon being provoked, she would roast him alive with hot flames darting out of her mighty nostrils. Thus, apart from a grumpy "Hullo" or "G'morning" and a few occasional, reluctant words of thanks, he did not speak to her at all. When she was finally done with his legs, she let out an extravagant sigh and walked over to the window to close it. As she turned to leave the room, her monstrous thighs brushed against the phonograph, nearly sending it to the floor. Archie's heart skipped a beat as he observed the scene, and a terrible feeling of anger came over him. This had happened at least a hundred times before, but Nurse Regina never seemed to care how it pained him to see her being so mindless of his sacred phonograph, and every time she touched it, it felt like an immense abuse of all the memo-

ries, all the good parts of his life he held dear.

He spent the rest of the morning and much of the afternoon in silence. The food he was served for lunch that day was extraordinarily disgusting. A bulky piece of flesh – he could not tell whether it was chicken or pork or edible at all – was dumped onto a sea of clumpy white sauce and came with a sad pile of shrunken peas. Archie knew he would get in trouble if he complained about the food. Nurse Regina would hover over him like the dragon she was, scolding him for his rudeness and eventually reporting his dreadful behavior to Dr. Wesley, who would no doubt consider supplementing Archie's diet with a few more colorful pills. He could not risk that at all. Yet Archie was not aware that he was going to hit rock bottom around three o'clock that same day.

It was around three o'clock in the afternoon. Archie and the other residents were gathering in what the nurses called the "Salon", a more than sarcastic name for a more than bleak room. Everything in there, from the wallpaper to the few books scattered on the shelves, seemed to be washable, and for a good reason: A few of the residents could not be trusted with their various bodily fluids. Old Mr. McLaharne, for example, liked to chew on the books, and even older Miss Peeves had a queer weakness for painting everything in her reach with whatever she found up in her nose. Archie eyed them suspiciously. The two of them disgusted him beyond means, yet they often managed to drive Nurse Regina mad, which in turn made him feel grateful toward them. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew that there was a special day, a holiday or something, but he did not realize what it was until a big man, bearded and clad in a red coat trimmed with white fur, entered through a side door. Whether it was supposed to be St. Nicholas or Santa Claus no one ever knew, because St. Mary's used the same man and the same coat for both holidays in order to save costs. "Better not make an

effort to make us feel comfortable for once in our poor old lives," Archie muttered to himself. He wished he had known about this earlier, and cursed his own unreliable memory. There was no escape now. The fake St. Nicholas approached them and began to talk in a strange high voice, as if he was speaking to very young children. He went along the table and put a sickly orange in front of everyone before moving on. Well, Archie thought, the brains of most of the people in St. Mary's had already turned to jelly, but not mine. He watched with horror as the man in the red coat approached him and smiled at him through his beard. "Is that Arrrrchieeee I see heeere? Well, dear, I hope you have been goooood this year, no?" Archie was mortified. He was unable to speak. All he wanted to do was run, but he could not move. All eyes were on him. And then, the fake St. Nicholas actually pulled Archie's ear in a way that must have been meant to be playful. Within nanoseconds, Archie's right hand grabbed the fake beard and pulled and pulled at it until it was clear that the beard at least was not fake, that the man in the red coat was actually screaming in pain, the pale color of his face turning a handsomely dark red. Archie's immense feeling of surprise did not last long, for Nurse Regina gave him a nasty slap on his hands which were still clutching the wiry beard. Very soon, too soon for his taste, he was brought back to his bed, well away from the Salon, and fed a small white pill.

Later, when he was alone in his bed, Archie could still hear Nurse Regina's shrill voice ringing in his ear, commanding him to let go, but what he also heard was the laughter of a few of the other residents. The events of that afternoon reminded him of the decades he had spent working in theatres. What a nice scene that was, an old, unimpressive imp pulling St. Nicholas' beard! Before sleep took over, Archie's imagination was unleashed. He imagined the scene on stage, complete with props, intricate

lighting, and appealing music underlining the plot. It was all so real, so perfect, so neatly arranged, until Nurse Regina, snorting loudly, appeared on stage from a far corner and disturbed the scene. And suddenly, Archie was not sure whether it was just a dream or if his mind had started to play tricks on him, he heard applause rising from somewhere. He was in a theatre indeed, but he could not see the faces of the spectators – all he could see was a vast orchestra pit stretching out in front of the stage – he had never seen such a long black pit, not in all the theatres he had seen in his life. He saw it from one of the special loges that were very high up and usually reserved for the rich and important. The velvet of his seat, or was it the rough cotton of his pillow, felt pleasant as it brushed over the side of his face. He sat quite still and watched eagerly. Meanwhile, Nurse Regina was ravaging the stage. She knocked over the table with a single touch of her shovel-like hands, and then, with a horrible look on her face, she took to the old man and sent him flying right into the orchestra pit, the way the producer had sent Archie flying down the stairs in that bar in New York so many years ago. The music from the pit stopped, and suddenly, a row of angry trumpet players from the pit took to the stage. Archie held his breath: What were they going to do? They looked furious enough, yet Nurse Regina stood there calmly, in the center of the stage, and looked even bigger and more dreadful than ever. He heard a strange sound from somewhere, as if a horn was being blown by a mighty general to call his soldiers to attack. Everything went black, and his eyes failed him, yet he was so desperate to see what the trumpet players would do to Nurse Regina. He awoke with a start, looking around his dark room, searching for the trumpet players, the velvet, the big stage lights. It took him a few seconds to realize what had happened – a dream, nothing more than a dream. Yet it was clear to Archie that it held a message that he was not yet able to grasp, and he was

determined to find out what. Sweat-soaked, but smiling, he leaned back into the cushions and closed his eyes, this time drifting off into a dreamless blackness.

The next day, Archie woke up more than an hour before Nurse Regina would arrive and spoil what remained of his life as she always did and would always do. He spent a few minutes thinking about what he had seen last night, and with a sudden clarity that surprised him, it all came to him. He knew exactly what to do. The dream had indeed been a message, a sign from God knows what or whom, the proverbial finger pointing to the solution of his problems. He did not have much time, however. He swung his creaking legs out of the bed and waited a moment before he finally put his weight on them. Rummaging in a drawer of the white plastic cabinet, his weary hands finally found the record he had been looking for. It had rarely been used, but he was sure it was the perfect choice for the occasion, and his hands trembled in anticipation as he carried it to the phonograph and removed the paper cover. He worked for an hour to prepare his big moment, moving things around in the room, careful not to make too much noise. When he was finished, Archie was tired, but content. A strange feeling had taken hold of him. The morning sun rose and cast a beautiful light on the phonograph, a light almost as promising as the one he had seen back in New York. His eyes saw everything clearer than the day before, and every cell in his bone seemed to be alert. He knew that his big moment had come when he heard someone outside the door. Nurse Regina was struggling to open the door, and she was no doubt confused that the door handle looked different than it did the night before. By the time she had managed to open the door, she was all sweaty, and nasty red spots had appeared on her cheeks. Before she set about her usual routine, Archie gathered all his strength and spoke to her in the friendliest tone he could fake: “I think it is such a wonderful morning, and I wondered if



you might turn on the phonograph? Just to make everything more enjoyable?” Nurse Regina looked at him, baffled. Archie had never said more than two words to her, let alone asked a question. And to him, it was one of the most disagreeable questions he had ever asked, for he loathed her and worshiped his phonograph, but it had to be, it was part of the plan. It was crucial that she turned on the phonograph, for his plan depended on it. Nurse Regina hesitated for a second, but obviously decided to do as he asked. Oh, how beautiful it is to see the moment someone walks right into a trap, Archie thought to himself as he watched her with a malicious smile on his face. The first sounds of Händel's Hallelujah Chorus flowed through the room. It would not be long now until his grand finale. Nurse Regina, still unsuspecting, started her usual litany of trivial anecdotes from the M6. She only paused to remark that she knew the piece from somewhere, she had called her health insurance recently and they had made her wait on the line, and she could swear it was the same melody that now came from the phonograph. Archie only smiled at her, too content with himself for a reply. When she turned around to get his clothes from the bathroom, Archie's body was almost stinging with anticipation, and to his immense satisfaction, everything went as planned. Nurse Regina slipped on the liquid soap he had generously smeared on the tiles, and her scream would have woken the dead. But what Archie enjoyed most was the huge



*thump* her body made as it met the floor; for some malicious reason, it gave him a huge pleasure. The music was still playing, the cracked voices on the old record singing Hallelujah over and over again, adding something indescribably divine and ethereal to the scenery. Archie drew a deep breath and enjoyed the moment he had been looking forward to, and the feelings of hopelessness and loneliness subsided for a short time. He felt a strange tickling down his throat, and suddenly, he burst into laughter, a laughter he had not known for a very long time, a liberating laughter that caused the nurses who were just arriving to look at each other, confused and disbelieving. His crime was discovered as soon as they helped Nurse Regina get up from the floor, and the flushed grimace her face had become was the last thing Archie saw. Originating in his left arm and leaving a burning feeling in his chest, an unexpected pain seized him. With a disbelieving half-smile, Archie wondered if he was dying. And he was right. Archie had been allowed one last triumph, and amid splendid dreams of theatres and lights and perfect timing, he had humiliated his worst enemy, but in the end, inevitably, life's very own dramatic irony returned. Yes, he had planned to put an end to his life as it was, but he had not half expected the absoluteness of this ending. All that was left of the music now was strange white noise. As he drew his last breath, Archie thought that there could have been no better ending to the curious drama his life had been. ■

# days of retribution

“...and they shook their fists at the punishing rain”

by Daniel Krooß & Christian Weiß

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## Foreword:

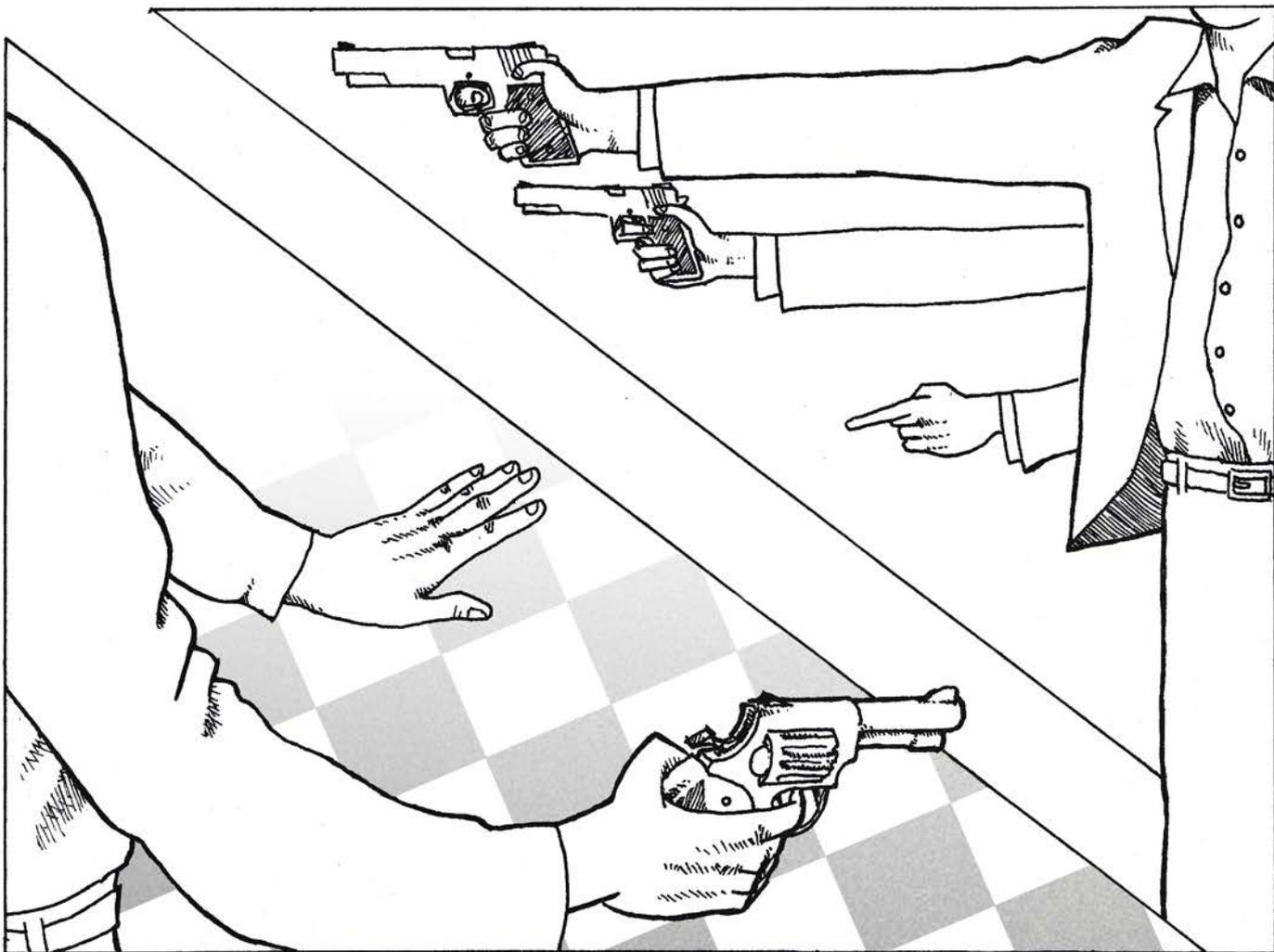
Some stories start with a pint.

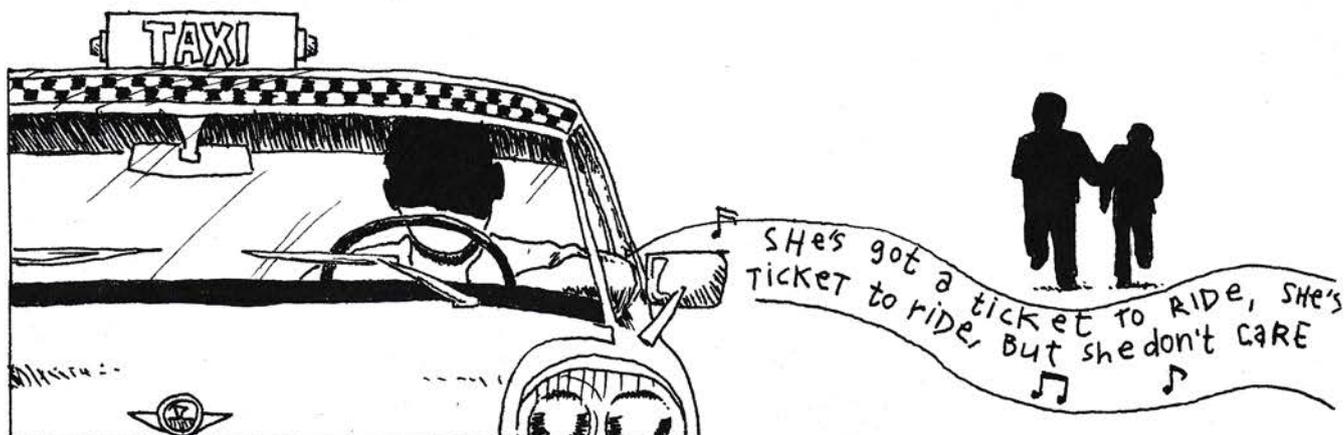
On a mild summer night almost a year ago we sat at a bar to celebrate another successful issue of *Blank*, showing admiration and respect for each other's work over a couple of pints. As our wallets grew slimmer, our conversations grew louder and we finally exclaimed what we'd been meaning to say all along – it's time for us to collaborate! And as fate happens, some stories start with a pint.

Leaning over our thick brown ales looking for inspiration at the bottom of our glasses, we were startled by a rough challenging voice: “I have just the right story for you!” There he rose, a tall imposing man in his seventies, stepping out of the shady end of the bar, smiling and raising his glass. We looked at each other, nodded, and bought the man a beer.

He leaned toward us, recounting the details of his life in New York in the 1960s, the place of his childhood and the scenery of a tale that would challenge not only our notion of history, but also our very own experience of reality. And as the evening proceeded and the number of pints became uncountable, he became more and more confiding and his account began to draw us in. Every now and then, he interrupted himself, looking cautiously over his shoulder, to continue in a low and almost conspiratorial tone. As he talked about the people he must have held dear, the experience became more surreal. For he began to speak in several voices, giving life to those who had obviously found a less fortunate end than he had.

Seasons changed, and as our beards grew thicker, our notebooks grew wiser. We had always been keen on a good story, but never had it occurred to us how immersing into one can reshape the world you used to believe in. And when the man had finally finished his story, we raised our glasses one last time: “Hail to the fighter who changed his name!”





**Part 1:**  
**The Fighter Who Changed His Name**

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He was forty-one and he was still doing the night shift. Things were definitely not going his way. Matthew Jordan let his gaze wander through the office: heavy desks and chairs, typewriters, loose sheets, folders, ashtrays, empty coffee mugs. This place had not changed at all in the past twenty years. Time was not a variable here, in here ruled another order, and another law.

He had changed though, the years of service had imprinted themselves in the lines of his face, the incessant doubting, questioning, and deduction had carved deep wrinkles into his forehead, the uncertainty and agitation had led to premature grey in the short black hair.

Reflecting upon his lot, Jordan scanned the office. A few solemn faces behind the desks shared a similar fate this early evening. They hacked away at their typewriters and looked out of the window into the dark of the Brooklyn evening with an expression on their faces somewhat between boredom and conscientiousness. And though they would not admit it openly, it was their opponent who set the standards in here. They were not a force for morality and justice. Fighting crime and, if possible, preventing it were the ultimate end of their motivation and even their faintest maneuvers. It was crime that dictated their actions, crime that dictated their reactions. If there were no violence, no fraud, no robbery, and fighting, Jordan thought, there would be no place like this, there would be no police.

"It's a dangerous time to start thinking," Jordan mumbled to himself.

"What was that?" asked Brown from behind, walking past him and on down the corridor with his coffee toward his desk.

"Nothing, nothing." And he said to himself: We are waiting, all the time we are waiting for it, waiting for the shot to be fired, for the knife to go in, for the bullet-

A telephone rang at the other end of the room. Brown picked up the receiver. He nodded and spoke a few words, taking down notes at the same time. Then he waved to Jordan:

Corner Halsey Street and Ralph Avenue, armed robbery, possibly homicide. Pistols slid into holsters, jackets concealed the pistols. Jordan and Brown rushed down a corridor. The siren howled through the night.

As the shot of adrenalin rushed through his blood stream, Ryan hit the gas.

"Where to?" he asked, his voice trembling in shock.

"No hospital," the man holding his companion said in a calm but commanding voice.

"Nostrand Avenue, little place called Ai Fiori."

"Toni..." the man in his arms tried to speak.

"Look, Domenico, you've got to stay calm. It's going to be alright, don't worry, Celio is going to fix you up good, you hear me?"

Domenico nodded, breathing heavily.

"Toni?" he gasped weakly.

"Yes?"

"What if he can't?"

"Look," he said giving his companion a few gentle slaps in the face. "You'll be fine! We going to get home, Celio is going to take good care of you, and then you'll get some of Aunt Marie's famous fucking meatballs! You can almost smell them, can't you?" Toni chuckled. "Every fucking Sicilian housewife has to be famous for some shit they cook," he mumbled, shaking his head.

"But Toni, what if I won't?"

"What then? Then you'll be dead, what the fuck do you want me to say, man?"

Domenico started to cry.

"I wanted to do so good," he said sobbing.

"Come on, don't say that. No need to cry, you did well."

He squeezed his companion's hand.

"Hey kid, turn right here," he said and tapped Ryan's shoulder.

Ryan did as he was told.

"But we're not good people, Toni. We've done so many bad things. So many." He closed his eyes.

"Don't you dare fall asleep," Toni said and hit Domenico again, harder this time.

"Listen to me. We never did a bad thing unless we really had to. We've always looked out for one another and that is about the most important thing there is of all: family! We're not the bad guys, you hear me?"

"But..."

"No! You've been a good Christian, you go to church on every goddamn Sunday and never did a thing to piss the old man off. We always did what we had to do."

“But it's all so... construed.”

“What set of morals isn't? Just because we've never agreed to a corrupt government doesn't mean we don't play by the rules. We've been just been playing a different game on the same battlefield.”

He lit himself a cigarette.

“Look Domenico, we all hold good and evil inside and it is for you to decide which side you're going to listen to. Truth is, one cannot live without the other. And even God knows that, you hear me? And what did the guy do to the ones that didn't play by the rules, hm? Fucking killed them off! Like flies! We've always done good and we'll continue to do so.”

He took a deep drag of his cigarette and blew a few smoke rings.

“Next intersection,” he said, nodding to Ryan.

Ryan turned left and brought the cab to a halt in front of the unimpressive-looking restaurant.

“Honk. Three short, three long, three short.” Again, he did as he was told. A few minutes later, three men stepped out of the restaurant and stormed to the cab. The men pulled Domenico out of the car, who gasped in pain.

“What the fuck happened?” one of the men asked.

“Ah don't worry, it just grazed him. He'll be fine.”

The men carried the boy away. Toni wrote a check and handed it to Ryan.

“But this is too much,” Ryan said as he saw the three digit number.

“That was your first job. Tomorrow is your second. Midnight, park here.” He got out. “And clean your fucking cab.”

\*\*\*

When they reached the place the spectators had already assembled in front of the small grocery store, poking their noses into the slightly open door. The siren ceased, Jordan and Brown got out of the car, lifting their pistols before their bodies, and the loose crowd cleared the entrance to the store. The press had not arrived, yet.

“There's a dead man in there,” said a tall man in a black coat.

“How would you know?” Brown snapped at him.

“Ain't too hard to tell by the blood from his head.” He motioned to the figure of a man lying on the floor inside the store.

Brown nodded. “Is anybody else inside?”

“Dunno,” the tall man replied. “I heard the shots and came downstairs. My wife called you. I didn't see a soul

around here.”

“You live nearby?” Jordan asked.

“Sure do. In the apartment above.”

Brown looked at him skeptically. “Did you touch anything?”

“What do you mean?” he said angrily. “Can't a man have a glass after work?” The bystanders chuckled

“Did you move anything inside?” Brown explained.

“In there? Oh no, officer. I wouldn't even so much as enter. What do you take me for? You can have a good look at him from the doorway. See for yourself.”

“Let's end this,” Jordan told his partner. “You stay outside and get their names and addresses. Don't let anyone get away, don't let anybody in after me.”

Brown did as he was told. Jordan entered the store.

The first thing he noticed as he closed the door behind him was the silence, the silence of recent death, the silence of imminent death also. He had gone twenty years now without having to use his pistol, and he was proud of it. This is only homicide, he told himself. The thugs will be long gone. He had made sure of that by driving as slow as he could, taking every broad street that could possibly be taken. It's no use dragging themselves into danger unnecessarily. One man down is enough. No need to get themselves mixed up in such affairs. It's enough if they have to clean up afterwards. The traces would lead them to the killer. They always left a few traces, their very own signature, and that silence afterwards, Jordan thought. That silence of people trying hard to hold their breath. He did not like that silence.

The lights in the store were still on. There he lay in a pool of blood on the ground, a man of about sixty, dark and small and motionless, resembling his own shadow. If it was not for the circumstances, one could describe him as calm and reposed.

“Is there anybody here?” Jordan broke the silence.

There was no answer, save the silence. It hung in the cupboards and on the shelves, radiating from the immobile body on the ground.

He's dead all right, Jordan told himself. Poor old fellow. What did you get mixed up in? He pocketed his pistol and carefully stepped over the man on the floor. Then he went to the cash register and scrutinized it for any external damage.

The shots, he recalled. There had been several shots, the tall guy mentioned. Jordan took a baseball bat from behind the counter and went back to the body. He lifted the arms of the dead man carefully with the bat and then rolled him

flat on his back. In the thick brown substance on the floor he found what he was looking for: a small pistol.

You tried to show him who's boss, didn't you? Tried to make him pay for it, he thought. But he drew faster.

A quick search of the body produced a wallet with a valid driver's license and thirty-nine dollars in cash. The name of that man was Alphonso Buffugno. Now that Alphonso was on his back, Jordan noted another smaller stain of blood on his left leg.

He stepped behind the dead man, laid the baseball bat aside and looked in the direction of the door. He estimated the size of the shop owner and motioned with a hand in the direction of the door.

"Bang," he said.

Jordan went over to the door. There were drops of blood on the ground. He knelt down. The people outside were watching him curiously. He waved at Brown to move them out of sight.

"So, at least you hit him," Jordan said to himself.

In the shop window next to the door there was a pyramid of corn cans. One of them was missing. It lay in the shop window, staining the little blanket in the window with a sticky fluid. He lifted it up. The bullet had gone right through. It stuck in the wood of the shop window.

Jordan took a handkerchief from his pocket and pulled it out carefully. It came easily.

That'll be of no use, he thought. He slipped it in his coat pocket and stood up. A rustling sound came from the counter in the back of the store. He rushed behind a shelf. The rustling stopped.

Jordan could hear his heart beating in his chest and in his head. A cold sweat soaked his neck.

"Who is there?" he shouted. "Come out with your hands over your head!"

He waited in silence, his hands closing around his pistol again, but the silence only grew longer.

"The place is surrounded. You won't get out of here alive if you don't come out now!" He bent his head a little around the shelf.

"Come out, now, you fool! There's officers all over the place. Put your hands over your head and come out! I know you didn't do it."

Two little hands appeared behind the counter.

"Put them up further," Jordan demanded. But the hands would not go any further up. He thought of the dead man on the floor. He aimed his pistol at the counter, calculating the power of the bullet against the massive oak wood of the counter, thinking You get out now, you damned fool.

Get out and show your face so I can get you better. There's no one gonna take me out, no one gonna bring Matt Jordan down, not on a nice night like this.

"Raise your goddamn head over the counter!"

The hands did not move. Jordan felt his breath inside his chest. The sweat soaked his shirt collar. The hands behind the counter began to double in his vision.

A noise to the left: the shop door flew open. It was Brown.

"Get down. There's one behind the counter!" Jordan shouted.

The hands behind the counter went down again.

But Brown did not do as he was told. Instead he walked down the corridor. "It's alright, Matt. This one isn't going to hurt you," he said. He went up to the counter and reached behind it. Jordan gasped. He waited for the shot to go off. In his head he could already hear it, see Brown sink down on his knees in front of the massive counter.

"You see," Brown said. "It's a kid, a little boy." He lifted the child up onto the counter, his face white as snow, shaking like a leaf in the ruthless autumnal wind.

Jordan sank down on his feet, one hand on his heart, panting. A sob of relief rushed through his throat. The last he heard as his eyes went black was the shrill voice of a woman entering the shop, Bobby, you little devil, What on earth are you doing to your mother?

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Ryan's eyes stared in wonder at the amount of money lying on the table. Never had he seen this much, let alone have anything remotely close to spend for himself. He had bought himself a steak, something he had never tasted before, as well as some tobacco and a couple of beers, things he sure couldn't live without. Ryan's body trembled as he opened his beer. He wasn't sure what to make of the events of the night, nor the ones of the day before. The silence of the empty apartment comforted him. Empty, not only just because he was the only person inhabiting it, but also because there was not much in it. A worn out bed, a rusty kitchen table with two chairs. There were some books stacked beside the bed, most of which he had purchased at a flea market. He also possessed an old fridge, but it rattled in a way that seemed to announce that it would soon pass, and he had pulled the plug months ago. He didn't really need it. He practically lived in his cab, he was a loner and he always liked it that way.

He avoided talking to customers and hated the small talk

– it never suited him. Mountains of meaningless words just passing through him, he never saw a need to reply. Ryan decorated his life in a way that could be described as pragmatically minimalistic. A trajectory of a wallflower, doing only what he had to, because that was the way his mother had taught him. His father, a sailor of unknown heritage and name, had set off for different shores long before Ryan's birth. His mother, the daughter of an Italian immigrant, had raised him all by herself. Frowned upon by her conservatively Catholic parents for carrying a bastard child, his mother left her parents' house at the age of seventeen. She'd stopped working as a nurse and gave birth to him in a one bedroom apartment in Brooklyn with the assistance of a seventy year old midwife that went by the name of Olga, a neighbor. Ryan never knew where the money came from. His mother worked nights. Sometimes he could hear her sobbing when she came home, but he never had the guts to ask her why. Whenever she wasn't around, Olga would take care of him. She was a strict but loving woman who always had a good bedtime story to tell, and Ryan always loved her very much. He never got to spend much time with the other kids. His mother had always been a bitter person for as long as Ryan could remember. She didn't trust many people. The stepfathers came and went. No one was ever good enough. She always loved him and Ryan had felt unsure of how to return that love since he was a little kid. When he started going to school at the age of seven, his mother always made sure that he came straight home afterwards. She made sure that he did not keep company with the other Italian kids, because, as she told him, these kids were nothing but trouble. Truth be told, it never mattered what he did, they always thought he was a criminal. He didn't do well in school and never overcame the feeling of being an uninvited guest. His grades were poor and the other kids cast him out for being weird. Soon Ryan would need to learn how to defend himself – which meant trouble to say the least. During his first year in school, he had broken two noses, an arm, and he'd smashed a head with an empty beer bottle, which led to his first expulsion and a beating by his mother that he would never forget. He became very quiet after that. The ethics of his mother were something to be followed and he did not dare question her. He never made a single friend and fell in love with every girl that showed even the slightest bit of interest in him, not daring to ever ask one out, though.

He never finished high school and began driving a cab at the age of sixteen, earning about 10\$ a week when busi-

ness was going well, which was all he could ask for. He felt content. But one day, only a couple of weeks into his new job, his mother came home with a diagnosis that would change his life forever. While his mother was never a very pleasant woman to begin with, she became completely unbearable to everyone around her when she got sick. But Ryan, loving her with all of his heart and hating her at the same time, would devote most of his spare time to taking care of her. He was all she held on to and he'd never managed to say no to her in her lifetime. His earnings hardly paid for rent and food, they couldn't afford pain killers, let alone the medicine. For two years, Ryan slept through nights with a cacophonous symphony of his mother screaming in pain, followed by exhausted sobbing, mouthing idiot prayers to a God that had abandoned her so long ago. On the day of his eighteenth birthday, his mother gave up the ghost. Ovarian cancer, she was thirty-five.

His mother's passing had left Ryan fundamentally confused. All of his life he had spent under the assumption that he lived to take care of his mother the way she'd taken care of him. But now that she was gone, there was no one to take care of but himself. A life that seemed to serve no real purpose. He simply lived.

As Ryan looked at the cigarette in his shaking hand that was still covered in blood, he heard the shrill voice of his mother ringing throughout the room, capturing him in a cell of guilt. Ryan had just killed a man. And while the image of his disappointed mother left him crying alone in his empty apartment at 3 a.m., what really bothered him was not this, but the realization that he had never felt so alive in his entire life.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

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Jordan turned uneasily on the sheets, his mind was wandering, roaming without purpose through the streets until he reached Times Square and his eyes fell upon the huge advertising boards, which exerted a sinister and penetrating impression on his senses, creating a feeling of loneliness beyond comprehension and the colorful signs and boards attracting his eyes with a flicker of the myriad of light bulbs, calling his mind to their shallow deliverance.

They spoke to him through the lenses of the glasses on his nose, arresting his gaze magnetically as if by force, the glasses showing and magnifying the blinking boards like binoculars, and a voice speaking forth from them in a friendly, warm, female tone: "There's a new show on to-

night at the Maxwell Theater, Matthew, a lot of action and plenty of unexpected turns, a dynasty of deceitful well-todos, all driven by the same impulse to get their share of the gigantic family business.” He tore his eyes from the sign and the voice fell silent.

Ten steps ahead another colorful sign sprung to his attention. The tender voice began anew: “Or how would you like to spend an evening with a group of 17th century Musketeers, Matthew? Revenge and chivalry, castles, sword fights and the eternal quest for justice in times of upheaval. Great Escape Cinema presents you with the past comradery of Dumas.”

He brought his hands to his head, attempting to take the glasses off. He did not need them, he wanted them off. It couldn't be done. They stuck to his nose and ears as if they were glued to his head. Again he tore violently at the glasses and managed to rip them off. Pieces of skin and hair came off with them, his vision faded.

Through the tears in his eyes he suddenly noticed the other pedestrians around him, all with their own set of glasses, gesturing senselessly to themselves, and gazing upward open-mouthed at the advertising boards, which, now that he saw them through his own eyes, appeared monochrome and unappealing and not as colorful as before. He went on, trying in vain to find a by-street to leave the square and the others. They did not take any notice of him and passed him as if he were invisible, all of them with a childish and satisfied grin upon their faces. Then he saw her.

She was walking toward him, her hands in the pockets of her white nursing coat, absorbed in the world those glasses showed her. He thrust himself in front of her and arrested her with his arms. The woman shrugged and turned away. Jordan followed her through the crowded walkway. He would not let her go, not this time. There was too much he wanted to say to her. He wanted to tell her that he was sorry, to begin with.

But she did not notice him, passing him like a lamppost. He tore her glasses off her head. She screamed. A violent siren echoed in his head, blending with the far-off wailing of a child in his ears. He clutched his head with his hands and breathed heavily into the pillow.

His blanket lay on the ground. “Thank God,” he moaned.

He reached for the alarm clock on the nightstand and turned it off, pulling down a book with it.

The room was plain and peaceful. The morning sun came in yellow and bright through a window to the east.

He picked up the book and read the back cover. “An

alarming book about the future where babies are bred in bottles and everyone belongs to everyone else – literally!”

Certainly no book for the night, Jordan thought.

The following day he came into the office and hung his dark blue overcoat over his chair. He poured himself a cup of coffee in the corner of the room and returned to his desk. Brown was waiting for him.

“There you are. Did you enjoy your day off?” he said handing him the report.

“Guess so,” Jordan responded reading. “It was a hell of a night.”

“That might be so. But we made it out all in one piece, Matt, and what's more, the boy did, too.”

Jordan mumbled something under his breath. “Yes, funny little fellow. Did he see anything?”

“I wouldn't know. His mother was furious about me asking questions to a five year old. She sent him home in no time.”

“Oh, Dennis. You're too soft on women. She shouldn't let her brat play hide and seek at a crime scene. He's been in there all evening. He was probably in there when it happened. He's a witness after all.”

“That might be so, Matt. And if you had not fainted, we could have found out about it.”

Jordan said nothing and drank some coffee. “You got her address?”

“Sure.”

“Good work,” Jordan said.

“Assuming,” Brown began, “he was there when it happened. Why didn't the killer shoot him, too?”

“Because, *they* didn't see him, they didn't even touch the register.”

“Yes, that's right. The forensics say that all the day's revenue was still there,” Brown said absentmindedly. “You think it was more than one?”

“I don't know yet. It's more of a feeling.” He drank some more coffee and began to scribble down some notes. “Why on earth would a crook leave without the money?”

“He was wounded, wasn't he?”

“Yes, yes.”

“And he wanted to escape. After the shots went off – something must have gone wrong – he had to clear out.”

“Possible,” Jordan admitted. “Quite possibly so. But why did he not walk up to the register before he drew his gun and provoked the shootout?”

Brown hesitated.

Jordan slurped from his coffee cup. “Because the owner,

that Buffugno, he knew that guy. He recognized him as soon as he entered the store. And he knew very well what was coming to him. And that's the point!" Jordan painted a large exclamation mark on the paper.

"Yes?" Brown said impatiently.

"Whoever hit him, hit him twice. Once in the knee, and once in the head. Is that correct?"

"That's what the forensics say, yes."

"And where did he, Buff, shoot at?"

"At the one pointing a pistol at him?" Brown guessed.

"You're near the truth, my friend. Tell me, what did he hit?"

"The guy and some cans in the shop window."

"So?"

"So? The killer jumped to the side to avoid the bullet." Brown explained.

Jordan's eyes bulged in wonder. "You read too many of those comic books, Dennis. At a five-foot distance you don't jump around no more. You grab your gun and try to squeeze as good a shot out of it as you possibly can. And another, if you're lucky."

"He wasn't that lucky," Brown said.

"No, he wasn't. And do you know why? Because Albuffo here had to serve two customers at once."

"That's a guess!"

"It sure is. But after twenty years of service you learn to live with your guesses and you learn to trust them. Otherwise you should quit and take up gardening."

Neither of the men said anything for a while.

"Anything else?" Jordan asked looking at the report. "Or do I have to read my way through all this?"

"The bullet you found matches the owner's pistol. The other two are both thirty-eight caliber."

"Of course," Jordan exclaimed.

"One in his left leg, and the other in his head," Brown continued.

"We know this. You wanna hear another guess, Dennis?"

"Can't wait."

"All that hassle was about more than only money."

"And what would that be?" Brown asked.

Jordan looked up at him, a mixture of anger and doubt in his eyes. "We won't find out by sitting on our backs."

"You mean to call her in?"

"No, that won't do. You got her address. Let's pay her a visit."

"You mean, at home?"

"Sure. She should be back from work soon. And let's get some flowers on the way there," Jordan said.

Brown looked surprised. "I didn't take you for a lady's man, Matt."

"Well," Jordan replied. "You never now. If you keep your eyes open, you might even learn something."

The name of the mother was Michelle Farrey. Bobby, or Robert, was her only child. The father had abandoned her when he found out that their romance had resulted in more than mere excitement and passion. For ten years now she had been working as a secretary in a construction company in Brooklyn. At sixteen she packed her case and visited an aunt in the big city. There's always work in the cities, she told her parents. She did not mind the work, but actually she came to New York for the freedom: freedom of choice, freedom of speech and some space to breathe. No one to tell her what to do with her life, whom to find interesting, and where to go. The father of her son had been an engineer in the same company. He left the company with her and never sent a word, let alone any money. The only thing he did leave her was the color of little Bobby's eyes, that arresting brown dreaminess.

Those eyes, Jordan thought as they focused on him with a gaze beyond wonder and comprehension in the small apartment, they certainly do something to you. He handed the child a sugar cane and felt relieved when he took it and began to suck on it with relish.

Ms. Farrey told them that she left the child with Mr. Buffugno because she could not bring him to work. Besides, the old man was happy to have someone to talk to. Not that Bobby was a great talker. He did not say a word about the events of the previous evening. And his mother seemed glad that he did not. Bobby had been in the back room of the store, she told them, where he usually spends his afternoons drawing pictures. It was quite possible that he did not notice anything apart from the pistol shots. Several times during their visit he asked the adults about Mr. Buffo and what had happened to him. Each time they answered something about a holiday, a long long holiday in a faraway country, far away. Bobby nodded, thinking perhaps, that he would see him again soon.

Apart from the encounter with the boy the visit was unsatisfactory. There was no indication that the young mother and her son could be of any help. They left the tiny apartment with the promise to return in a few days. Ms. Farrey agreed.

"Do you think it's worth it?" Brown asked back at the police station.

"It's too early to tell. Honestly, I am glad that he took it

so well.”

Brown said nothing.

“It’s too bad about her having to leave her kid at a place like this.”

“And no one to look after little Bobby, now.”

“That’s not the greatest of her problems. She’ll find another solution, never mind that.”

“She sure will,” Brown grinned. “She wasn’t too put off by the prospect of seeing you again.”

Jordan ignored that. “That is also part of the investigation, Dennis. How are we to make any sense of this story, if we don’t hold on to the few loose threads we got?”

“Loose thread, indeed,” Brown smiled.

“For goodness’ sake, give it a rest and go through the files to see whether our Buffo here got mixed up in any spaghetti business.”

“I would be delighted, Detective,” he answered in a high fake voice and went from Jordan’s desk.

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“Sit,” Toni ordered. A cozy bistro. Toni sat at a small table in the back, sipping wine. Only a few other tables were taken. The gloomy light created an almost dream-like scenery. When he did as he was told and took the chair opposite to Toni, Ryan was overcome by the strange sensation of being an actor cast in a play that had yet to be written.

“Wine?” Ryan nodded. Toni held out a hand and immediately a waitress came by and filled Ryan’s glass. He smiled at her, but she gave no notice. ‘Here’s someone who’s known her role all her life,’ Ryan thought.

“Look kid,” Toni started. “I reckon you’re not stupid so I guess you’ve figured out by now what we are and what it is that we do. It’s time we talk.”

*La Cosa Nostra.* About two years ago the term was all over the press, when a former Consigliere had first talked openly about the Families in New York. Ryan shivered. Of course he’d known what to expect but still, it felt like he had just stumbled into an urban myth, leaving him with a feeling of unease. And little did Ryan know just how experienced the man he was sitting with at this very moment really was.

Toni was a born Colombo, one of the Five Families controlling New York. He had started his training at the age of five and it had never really occurred to him to question the path that was laid out for him. His father was a tyrant who had a reputation for drowning most of his moral quarrels in heavy liquor. Toni’s childhood was shaped at the hands

of his father’s ambiguous moods, the beatings and the regretful sobbing afterwards. As bad as he was as a father, he was as good a teacher. Toni did his first killing at the age of ten, he understood early on that this was a game of survival of the fittest. And thus, it had always been clear to him that one day his father would have to go to make room for someone new. When he fell in love with a niece of the Lucchese Family at the age of nineteen, his father became unbearable. Suddenly the good relationship with the Bonanno Family was at stake and Toni had to play by the rules. They kept on seeing each other in secret as long as they could. When the love of his life became pregnant, they decided to run away. But she never appeared to the appointed place. When Toni sneaked back into his family home that very night, heartbroken, he was greeted by his father’s manic laughter, followed by the worst beating he had ever received, leaving him with two broken legs and a fractured ribcage. He spent four weeks in a hospital, plagued by one thought, and one thought only: the man had to disappear. But when Toni was released from the hospital on that chilly October day in 1931, he learned that his father was already dead. Pointless to ask who had actually given the order. The Castellammarese War was in its prime. People of importance died on an everyday basis. Toni felt nothing but relief.

When two years later Prohibition was abolished, the Families came to their senses. With the birth of the National Crime Syndicate they tried to ensure that such unnecessary killings would be avoided in the future. The Families needed to reinvent themselves, as their major source of income no longer existed. And Toni saw the opportunity to do so much better than his father had. He fought for his place. He was respected and everyone valued his opinion. At the age of twenty, he was made the youngest capo the Colombo family ever had. He was expected to rise from there, but Toni refused every offer they made him. He felt that teaching was his calling, because that way he could actually play a significant role in shaping the family’s future.

“Actually it’s time for me to talk and for you to listen, you understand that, kid?” he finally said. Ryan nodded.

“I asked you here today because I could use a kid like you on my team. It’s your choice really. Right now you’re merely an accomplice, you can still get out of here and never hear another word from us. You killed a guy but we made that disappear. We’ve never met and we will never meet again, as long as you promise to keep your mouth shut. You don’t want to break that promise but I figure

you already know that. You just go back to driving your cab for the rest of your life. If you're lucky you'll find a wife, have kids. You won't have much to offer them, but you might be able to find some peace in there. You never know. You'll die young, because you can't afford health insurance. You'll leave your wife and kids with nothing, but you'll have had a couple of decent years, hell perhaps you were even happy during some of them. If that's the life you want, you can leave now." Ryan hesitated for a moment. He took a sip of his wine, nodding, and began rolling a cigarette. He lit it and took a deep drag.

"Go on," Ryan said. Toni smiled.

"Light me up," he said and leaned forward. Ryan lit Toni's cigar and the room filled with a pleasant, comforting smell. Toni nodded.

"Thanks." He chuckled. "I figured you were a hungry kid." He blew a few smoke rings into the air and scratched his chin. He loved these encounters and he'd developed a beautiful routine of them. Lesson 1, the basic set of rules.

"Right now you're a soldier. My soldier, to be precise. I'm your capo. You disobey me and you're done for, capice?"

Ryan nodded.

"There are people above me, but those don't matter right now, because all we'll do for today is establish a basic set of rules. You need to swear to obey those rules and you need to understand what swearing to obey them means, you get that?"

He made a dramatic pause and signaled the waitress to refill his glass, his eyes never leaving Ryan's. When Ryan finally nodded, he continued.

"Good," he said nodding. "Rule number one: *omerta*. You swear to absolute silence and secrecy. You don't talk to anyone about what we do here. Do you swear?"

Ryan nodded.

"I swear," he said.

"Rule number two: collectiveness. You're part of a family now. You need to honor your family, because they are the only people that you can really count on. Do you swear to honor your family?"

Again, Ryan nodded.

"I swear."

"Excellent. Which brings me to the last and most important rule: unquestioned commitment and dedication. You do what you are told and you don't question. So let me ask you one last time, do you swear?"

Ryan smiled.

"I do," he said.

Satisfied, Toni got up from his chair and put an arm

around Ryan. "Welcome to the family, kid," he said smiling. "You're a Colombo know!" He sat back down again and drank from his wine.

"Do you have any further questions?"

Ryan thought about it for a moment, frightened to disappoint his new teacher.

"Well, what exactly is it that we do?" he asked. Toni's eyes widened in anger.

"What do we do? Fucking waste management! Didn't you pay attention at all?"

Ryan felt his head heat up in embarrassment.

"We don't talk about what we do."

"We don't fucking talk about what we do!" Toni repeated angrily. He shook his head and finished his wine with one large sip, the room captivated in awkward silence.

Trying to break it, Ryan finally dared to ask the question he'd been meaning to ask all night.

"Whatever happened to your friend? The guy from the robbery?"

Toni shrugged.

"The kid died." He sighed and looked deeply into his glass. "This stuff happens. Best not to talk about it." Toni grabbed his pocket, put some money on the table and stood up.

"Take your coat," he said.

"Where are we heading?"

"Visiting an old friend of mine, a man called Sonny Liston."

\*

"You wait here," Toni ordered. Ryan nodded and took an empty seat at the bar. As far as he understood, for now, not asking questions was what was expected of him, something that he'd been trained to do all his life. He watched Toni disappear into a back room and ordered a beer. As he looked around the small club, he made a mental note to himself that if he wanted to continue in this field of work, he would soon have to get himself some new clothes. He felt terribly underdressed, and while no one even seemed to take notice at the pale figure at the bar, he felt like this was exactly the way he stood out.

He nodded to the barman and took a sip of his beer. As he turned towards the stage, he couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for the man playing the piano. No one seemed to pay any attention to what he was playing, but the man just kept going, as if the world around him meant nothing.

"You mind?" a man in his mid-twenties asked and

pointed at the bar stool beside him.

"Go ahead," Ryan replied. The man nodded.

"Francis," he said and offered him a hand.

"Ryan." They shook hands.

Francis ordered himself a glass of wine.

"Well, you seem kind of lost." Ryan blushed. He'd never been much for small talk. It confused him as it seemed to be of no real purpose. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Sorry, I did not mean to be impolite. It's just that people fascinate me and you seem to stand out like a dead horse on a race track if you pardon the morbid imagery."

"Look, I really don't know what to say."

"You don't have to. I figured you were the quiet type. You see the man at the piano? That's my father. I noticed you noticing him. Hardly anyone ever does. That's why I chose to sit with you."

Ryan nodded.

"You I see, I come here to work and it's gents like you that show potential for a good conversation, not those assholes in their suits chasing after the waitresses." He shook his head in disgust.

"And what is it that you do, exactly?" Ryan asked.

"Everything and nothing, really. I'm an artist." Ryan finished his beer.

"You want another one?" Francis asked. He nodded.

"You're a musician like your old man?"

"No, not me. And please don't call him an old man, I mean not just him, all parents, it's disrespectful. Makes them sound like they're practically dead and gone, you know?"

"Never thought about it that way," Ryan said and took a sip of his new beer.

"Thanks," he said.

"Don't mention it. Smoke?" Ryan nodded, took a cigarette and lit it.

"So what does your father do?" Ryan shook his head.

"I don't know. Never met him. He used to be a sailor or so I've heard."

"Well, what can you do," Francis said shrugging his shoulders.

"So what kind of art do you do?"

"I'm into movies. Did some smaller projects to get started. I'm working on a bigger one right now. May take me a couple of years, though."

"Sounds great."

"No. It's a pain really. Being creative is not so much a blessing but a curse. Nothing else in life seems worthwhile when you are constantly living with the feeling that you

need to create, you know? Your life becomes the art!"

"I guess."

"Right, no one really does. Once you choose a life doing what you know you have to do, everything else just becomes so painful. All these little tasks, they just seem so meaningless."

Ryan awkwardly took another sip from his beer, uncertain of what to say next. This man was clearly not sane and Ryan wondered why the hell it was always this type of guy that seemed to see a friend or, at the very least, a need to confide in him.

"So what is the project?" Francis looked at him in surprise as if pulled out of a daydream.

"What?" he asked.

"What is the project you're working on?"

"Oh. The project. Yes." He drank from his wine.

"Well it's about..." he looked around to see if anyone was listening and leaned closer to Ryan. "...the mafia," he said. Ryan couldn't help but laugh.

"You believe in this shit?"

"Of course I do. Just look around. They're everywhere."

"Well good luck with that."

"What do you mean luck? This is going to be huge. It's what the people want to see. You know I've got this guy writing a novel about this. I think the two of us are going to be working together."

"Well, like I said, good luck," Ryan said and noticed with relief that Toni came out of the back room with the impressively large black man whose face would be all over the press in the days to come.

"I told you, I don't need luck. I know what I'm doing." Ryan smiled.

"Sorry, I've got to go." He nodded and left, still feeling Francis' eyes on his back.

Toni shook Mr. Liston's hand. The man chuckled.

"Every time I think I'm out, they pull me back in!"

Toni laughed.

"Come on, kid," Toni said. "Let's get out of here."

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"What do you have for me, detective?"

"It's all in there," Jordan said pointing to the report in front of the heavy bald man opposite him. "It's all in there. Brown did a good job putting it together."

The bald man gave him an unreadable look. He slid back into his office chair and breathed audibly through his nose. "You don't mean to tell me that there isn't anything

else to it? I know what's in there, I've read it. I read every single report in this unit, Jordan."

You don't, he thought. "I know, sir," he replied carefully.

"And it so happened that I came across a valuable piece of information concerning your case." He interrupted himself with obvious intent. "Would you happen to know what exactly that is, Jordan?"

"Are you referring to the Italian corpse behind the take-away, sir?"

"Excellent guess! That is exactly what I was thinking of." The heavy man smiled up at Jordan. "That young fellow with Italian roots who happened to carry a .38 caliber pistol with him, who died of a belly shot the night of the murder. Have a cigar!" he held a box of cheap cigars out to Jordan.

"Thank you, sir, but I don't smoke. Besides, I can't really share your enthusiasm at this stage."

"What stage?" the bald man thrust forward. "The case is closed, Jordan. You solved it!" He took a cigar from the box and put it between his lips. "Can't you see?" he began to gesture with his hands: "Murder - murderer! Victim, culprit, scene - solved!"

He clapped his hands together in a loud smacking noise. "The end. What more do you want?"

Jordan moved back in his chair. "How about a motive, sir?"

"Yes," the bald man chortled. "How about one?"

"Well, what's the point of an armed robbery without money being taken?"

"You got a point there, Jordan. But there are more conditions to a situation than we can imagine. It's not our job to provide every amateur criminal with an intelligent motive. You wrote that the victim might have known the culprit and met him at the door. That solves it for me."

Jordan scratched his chin. "We also wrote that there might have been two killers."

"Yes, I read that. Can you prove it?"

"You can tell by the number of bullet wounds and the angle of entrance, sir."

"That's highly speculative, Jordan. Recent history has taught us that bullets and angles can't be trusted."

"I know what you are referring to, sir. But this scene is a little different." He let his hands glide down the back of his chair. "There is also another source confirming this theory."

"I'm all ears," the bald man said lighting his cigar.

"I went back to the boy who was at the scene."

"You mean the boy you mistook for a gunman?"

Jordan ignored the question. "He was at the store when it happened. He told me that he heard three people shouting in Italian before the shots went off."

Lieutenant Pound blew a cloud of smoke above Jordan's head. "How old's that boy?"

"He is five, sir."

"A five-year-old, huh? Hardly a witness for a murder trial."

"I know. There is another thing, however." Jordan paused. His boss took the cigar out of his mouth and licked his lips.

"Are you going to tell me?" Lieutenant Pound said.

"It's a notebook we found in Buffugno's apartment. He was a betting man. And he kept a detailed record of his bets."

Pound's eyes watched him attentively. "What was his game?"

"Boxing," Jordan said. "The day before he died he placed five grand on a certain heavyweight fight up in Maine tomorrow."

"That's a lot of dough for a store owner," Pound admitted.

"It is, sir, all the more so if you know what he was betting on."

"And you know it?"

"It's in his notebook, sir."

Pound nodded silently. "Did you also find the betting slip?"

"No, sir."

"Then what are you getting at?"

Jordan hesitated.

"Are you telling me, all this has got to do with betting? I thought we were discussing a murder case here. So far, I see no connection between that one incident in our fair Brooklyn and some boxers' business up in Maine. Besides, I am more of a baseball guy, myself."

"Please, excuse the digression, sir. Nevertheless, there is a name in Buffugno's record that keeps popping up. Some Antonio Valente."

"Uh," Pound exclaimed through a cloud of cigar smoke. "Another wop!"

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Now I see what you're getting at. Ha-ha-ha."

Jordan tried to dodge the heavy cigar smoke that was closing in on him from every direction. The office was heating up, the air became thick and oppressive. "Excuse me, sir?"

"The Italians! You think it was the Italians." Pound

chuckled in his chair. Jordan remained silent. "You want another killer and there you go. They don't take the money and you think it's something else. Oh my. Let me tell you something straight. We have a safe grip on these fellows ever since the FBI made up their minds to join forces. I can assure you that none of these small-time thugs are part of, you know, the band."

"The band."

"The band, Jordan, the organization, call them what you like. Besides, there's something you might have missed."

Jordan frowned.

"You know, when *they* do business, they leave their guns at the scene. It is much safer this way. They wouldn't get caught with the weapon on them. And guns are not a rarity for them."

"I didn't know that," Jordan said. He felt a little foolish.

"Good shot, Matthew," and now Lieutenant Pound came around his desk and patted him on the shoulder. "But leave the boxing game to the fighters. We are not interested in sport results here. Do you follow me?"

Jordan nodded cautiously.

"Good. I gotta tell you right away, I like a man who can think for himself. Mind you, there are not many here who can. But you got a murderer for your case. And that is more than most of us can claim." Pound nudged him with his elbow.

Jordan attempted a smile and stood up.

"Children are full of imagination, Matthew. Don't let that cloud your judgment." He put on a serious tone. "And that other matter really is none of your business. It's well taken care of," he said congenially as he patted Jordan out of his office into the bullpen, "by experts," with the solid office door closing behind him.

"I'll be damned," Jordan said to himself, "if I haven't been told to shut up like a little girl."

\*\*\*

A boxing arena in Maine. A man called Cassius Clay...

Ryan stared uneasily around the crowded place. The fight had been moved at the last minute, due to some unfortunate controversy ahead of the match. But even now, the small venue in the middle of nowhere was filled to three-quarters. People paid good money to see the man that had just made a huge fuzz of renaming himself fight. Mohammed Ali, a Muslim. An exotic treat to the lusty rich men. An outsider. Something people felt they could relate to. And yet none of the spectators even remotely re-

sembled an outsider. They were wealthy, and like spoiled Romans sat in the arena waiting for a fight. But Ryan understood. As he sat there in his custom-made Italian suit, though he couldn't have told the difference if someone had held a gun to his head, he felt like a black sheep in disguise. A man that did not belong and was to be exposed any minute now, except no one really seemed to care. It was not him that people had come to watch. People never take notice of a wallflower.

Ryan's life had taken a drastic turn over the last couple of days. Thus he sat, at the round table, Toni beside him and a black fellow with the most ridiculous hairstyle he had ever seen, a man that went by the name of Don King, in a packed stadium in Maine among all the young and beautiful people, to see a fight. As he took a large sip of his beer, King put a hand on his shoulder, and shook Ryan back into reality.

"Wondering about all these fucking idiots in here?" he asked with a bright smile on his face.

Toni chuckled.

"Come on, let the kid be," he said.

Ryan shrugged.

"To be honest, I don't really get it."

"Of course you don't. You would have to be completely insane! You know what makes us different from all these fools? They, they think the show takes place in that ring, but that is not what we came to watch." He leaned forward and waved his hand through the arena.

"Look at all these folk', they are the show!"

Ryan took a look around the arena. The excited bankers, the mad men, the women in cocktail dresses.

"Yes, so many nice fabrics, so many nice pairs of tits. These are the men that shape our perverted and unjust society, and they brought their fucking mistresses! They know nothing! Listen to me kid, at this time, right now there is still so much for you to learn, but some day you will see all of it."

Ryan shot Toni a look of confusion. Toni burst out laughing.

"Stop it, Don, you're scaring the kid away!"

"There's nothing wrong with being scared, Toni. Everyone should be." Toni sighed.

"Are you alright, kid?" he asked, facing Ryan.

Ryan nodded.

"Of course." Toni smiled and tousled Ryan's hair.

"You're a good kid." He refilled Ryan's glass. As he handed it back to him, he leaned in closely.

"Look, what Don here is trying to say is this. Whatever

it is that you've thought of this world, it's merely a poorly reshaped image of a world hidden underneath. Open your eyes, because you're about to see so much more."

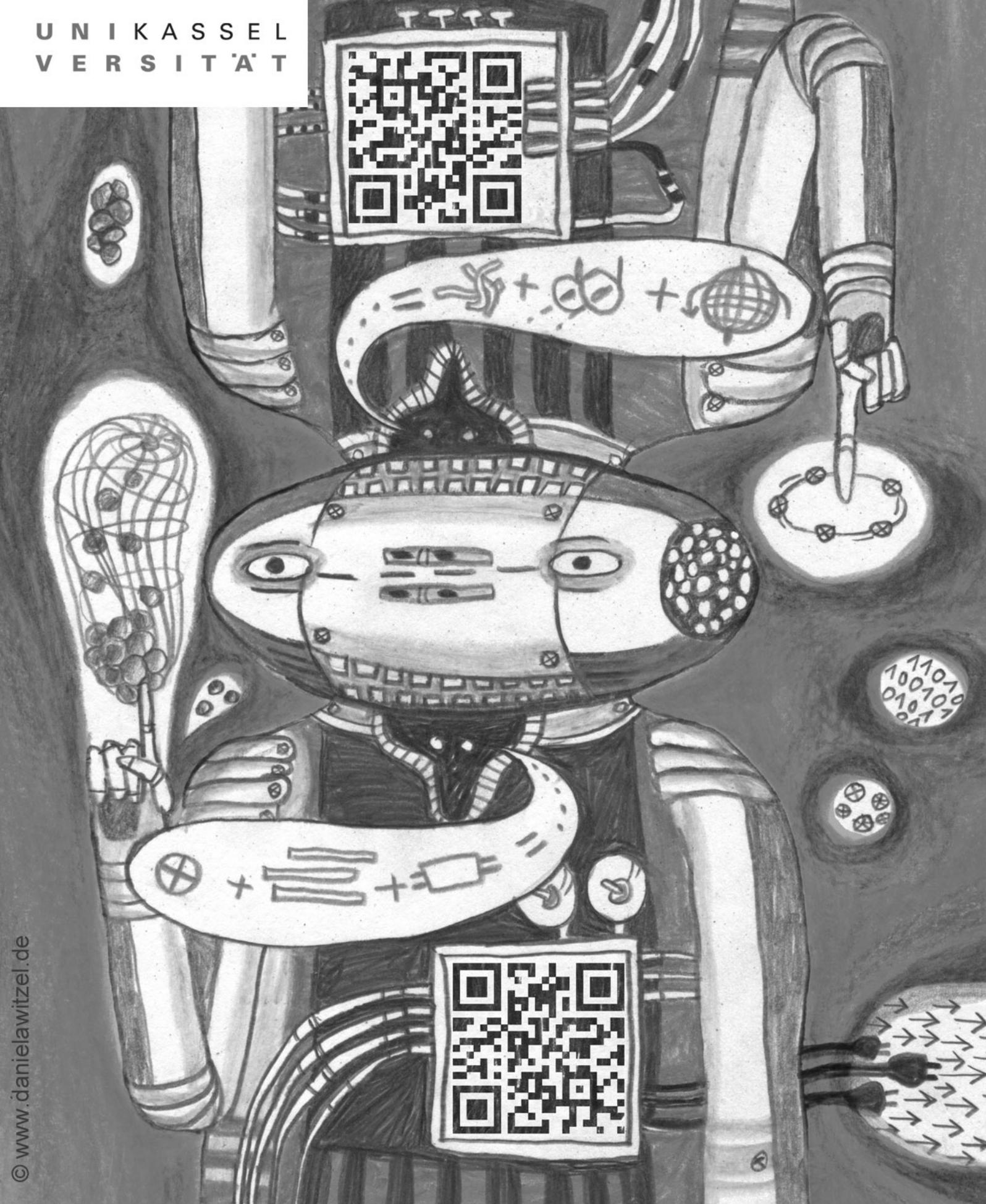
They shared a long look, Ryan biting his tongue as he felt every single one of his heartbeats. The lights went out, and the music started. With a lot of boeing the first fighter entered the ring, the second following to a round house

applause. An introduction, the national anthem. Two minutes later the fight was over. And as the hysteric audience shouted the most primal insults towards the ring, Toni and Don stood up, laughing and shaking hands.

"Time to collect some money," Toni said, winking.

To be continued. ■





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**Coordinators:** Pieter Coetzee, Christopher Forlini

**Editors:** Denise Breidenbach, Daniel Krooß, Maria  
Messer, Murat Sezi, Christian Weiß, Kristina Weissbecker

**Contributors:** Maike Baumgärtner, Denise Breidenbach,  
Pieter Coetzee, Julia Gäbelein, Daniel Krooß, Henry  
Lyonga N., Jan Rölleke, Murat Sezi, Henry Viereck,  
Christian Weiß

**Illustration:** Sophie Bachmann, Saguario Duda,  
Maria Messer

**Layout:** Rhea Eschstruth

Special thanks to IFAA.

**E-Mail:** [Blank.student.np@gmail.com](mailto:Blank.student.np@gmail.com)

**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/BLNkStudentNewspaper](http://www.facebook.com/BLNkStudentNewspaper)





Kalina Milcheva,  
Studentin der Informatik und  
Kundin der Kasseler Sparkasse

Johannes Jacop,  
Geschäftsführer der Yatta Solutions GmbH  
(Auszeichnung: IKT-Gründung des Jahres 2011)  
und Kunde der Kasseler Sparkasse

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