

## THE TROJAN HORSE

When a body is fifty-odd, life tends not to throw up that many great surprises - pleasant or otherwise. I reckon surprises are more likely to be the bright packages which land in the laps of the young and inexperienced than the old and cynical.

If a great meteorite landed tomorrow on Venezuela, I would probably be upset and afraid. But not surprised. Those, however, who have never contemplated such a terrifying possibility are more likely to be in the first flush of life and therefore so self-obsessed that the very existence of Venezuela, never mind the threat of its destruction via an object from a Outer Space - of which they are also only vaguely aware, perhaps just as a backcloth to Bonfire Night - would be a very big surprise. And only later a big upset. I see little evidence to improve my view of my own species - particularly the younger exponents of it - and any faith I had in its older ones has been severely shaken by recent events.

Some days start well and deteriorate, some badly and improve. The Saturday in question was of a different order: badly, worse, better. It began badly when I sprayed my armpit with deodorant and a large blob of shaving cream splatted on the floor. Downstairs, it began to look as if the contents of the kitchen cupboards had been busy linking arms in a conspiracy against me. I am no great fan of objects; and gravity, a necessary evil if there ever was one, can drive me to the edge of insanity. As soon as I came down that morning and started about my routine, things began to drop off shelves, dragging their neighbours with them. An astonished egg sat cracked neatly open on a tile (the ones in the frying pan were broken as usual) and as I reached into a low cupboard, bending and cursing, for the tub of salt to help in its scraping-up, a bag had playfully joined in the fun, liberating about a thousand grains of that expensive, fragrant rice amidst the shell, egg and black bits beyond it, causing me to straighten up and hit my head on the sharp corner of the cupboard above, neutralising the expletive about to explode from my lips with an agonised, dizzy silence.

After a very long pause, the rational part of me took over - *of course there was no such thing as the Perversity of Objects; they only "responded" badly to our lack of care, etc. If we arranged them properly in the first place and then handled them in a calm manner, they would always be our servants and our friends.*

I took a deep breath and began to clear up. All was going well until the full dustpan, prompted by a collision between my elbow and the edge of a work-surface, took a dive from my hand and evenly spread its contents on the impatient cat who then, in his rush for his flap, trod on the edge of his milk saucer and left me the ingredients for a rice and salted-egg pudding, *au grit*.

Later on that fateful summer Saturday, whose events have since given rise to those preliminary thoughts and to the absurd events to follow, the sun had been forecast to return to a sky it had abandoned long ago to a chilly, leaden dullness. And I had been looking forward so much since the early morning to an al fresco salad of huge crab claws, a cool bottle of golden wine at my right elbow and my lovely wife at my left, and to gazing around our rose garden in speculation as to when at last those many scores of buds would respond to the sun's blessing and begin to undo their flimsy green wrappings to delight us.

Almost at the same time - around four o'clock - as the sun had finally come blazing out, and as I had begun rubbing a high-factor cream onto my ghastly skin the phone had rung. The very strange tone of my wife's voice as she responded told me that our evening was not to be.

Something was amiss.

So at around five thirty, instead of sitting down to a feast in our back garden, I found myself in

sandals, shorts and tee shirt - a mere three items away from utter nakedness - sitting opposite my wife whose apprehension of an imminent evil was as patent as my lack of suitability to be in the company of respectable people, yet nonetheless amongst them, in a strange living room. There were two people sitting there I barely knew and another I had never met. I was hungry and thirsty but was managing, I believed, to hide my discomfort (and irritation.)

The two I knew slightly, and into whose house we had crept, were a couple in their early sixties, acquaintances from chapel, and who my wife - a more conscientious attendee than I - knew better. (Hence the fateful phone call to *her* and through *her*, to appeal to *me*.) My wife called him Frederick - not Fred - and he was the man who took charge of the laptop at chapel to project hymns and announcements onto the screen at the altar. He was tall, very well-made and distinguished and I had imagined him to be rather aloof. I had often mused, as my mind would wonder away from the sermon, that maybe he went to chapel as a semi-believer (he appeared to mouth the prayers and the hymns) in the hope that he might get to heaven as a technician and be one of the back-room boys. His wife Margaret, who played the violin in the tiny chapel orchestra, was placid, slim and still attractive.

The other person sitting disconsolate between Margaret and my wife was a short, grey woman - so grey that surely not a drop of blood was in her - called Marion. Apart from her greyness and a fixed expression somewhere between a grin and a grimace, so that you could not tell whether she was about to laugh or cry out in pain, her most remarkable attribute was a barrel of a trunk, seemingly designed to support her breasts which would otherwise have sagged to somewhere near her hips. She had just been crying briefly in a most genteel manner and now sat in silent, grey despair, staring at nothing. I felt sure that the other three were, like me, hunting for words of consolation, but finding none, had no choice but to be quiet. But the silence was stifling and made worse by the case clock which got steadily noisier, not ticking but clucking as if in disapproval of our apparent callousness. I inspected the bookcase. Frederick stopped jiggling his leg. Margaret stared at Marion. Then my wife reached over to pat her arm which she, in surprise, almost in indignation, instantly withdrew to the safety of what would have been her side, except that she had neither a right nor a left side. She would definitely have had to sit out an hokey-kokey if we had all got up to do one.

That movement in our tableau broke the spell and Frederick, in the tiniest voice imaginable for a man - and such a big man at that - offered to make tea. I realised as soon as he spoke (we had only been on the barest nodding terms before) that my prejudice about him being aloof was probably wrong. He seemed shy.

All at once there came the sound of thunder on the stairs. First a young man with vivid red hair and then a beautiful slender brunette hurtled into the lounge giggling. Margaret looked at him sternly. It was her son Mark. He and his girlfriend were off to a barbecue. She spotted my wife and her brown eyes opened impossibly wide.

"Mrs Armitage!" she cried. "What are you doing here?"

Katherine had taught her and struggled to remember her name.

"It's Kirsty - Kirsty Woolman. Surely you've not forgotten me - I was really good at RE."

Katherine had forgotten her but pretended she had not.

"Ah yes," she said. "You were always the livewire in class."

"No. I used to be *really* quiet back then. Never said boo to -"

Mark tickled her ribs and made her squeal. She was astonishingly lovely. And then they were gone, leaving Margaret slowly shaking her head, eyes closed.

When Fred returned with the tea I finally broke my silence. I tapped the paper I had been handed

by Margaret with my pen.

“So...let me get this absolutely straight....before I phone. This is the number the Leicester police gave you? And you tried it?”

“Yes,” said Margaret. It looked as if this was all she would say, so my wife Katherine butted in.

“She couldn’t understand the recorded message. I *told* you!”

“Hang on. Let *Margaret* tell me.”

“Yes. I think it was saying something about press one...press two..and so on....”

“OK...and this other number here - 0049 78192 232457 is Jack’s mobile?”

“Yes. It’s been switched off since Monday.”

“No. Since Tuesday. I spoke to him on Monday,” said Marion very slowly and morosely, but still very politely. Margaret stared at her crossly. I saw immediately that they did not get on.

Frederick stopped jiggling his leg again. My wife looked at me with a kind of triumph, for here was confirmed what Margaret had told her over the phone and what she had told me on the way over, about Marion being, like Jack, her partner - younger brother of Margaret - rather vague and unforthcoming.

“Katherine told me *you* said he had gotten rather depressed, Margaret,” I ventured.

“Yes. He suffers. But in silence.” said Marion in place of Margaret, addressing herself not to me, but to Katherine, as if loath to share such a confidence with a strange man in beachwear.

“I’m sorry - I have no wish to pry of course - but the police are almost bound to ask -when I mention depression - if he has ever.....you know...threatened to.....*harm* himself...or has ever gone as far as....you know.....”

I had decided, in the absence of a resident commander-in-chief, to take charge but instantly regretting that I had, I faltered. Under any normal circumstances in which I might have found myself in proximity to Marion, our conversation would have touched on nothing more sinister than the weather and the time of year. Here, I had just asked a stranger if her man was suicidal. When she did not answer, the question flashed through my mind as to how many genteel English people would be so afraid to cause offence to such an offensive interrogator that they would respond courteously and even provide the sought-after information. Her response was now forthcoming: she grinned then sobbed softly and politely again, before immediately stopping, like an English rain shower. She shook her grey head. The distinct probability of Jack’s suicide had been the elephant in the room, and I had just pointed it out. Katherine frowned at me. This was her private sign of disapproval, giving me to understand that I should desist. I could not help but make her secret transmission public.

“Well!” I cried “They ARE bound to ask!.....Look....I think” - (instantly all calm again) -

“that when I phone I should simply ask if there is anyone at the station who can talk decent English...*then* Marion can just come to the phone and answer for herself.”

Frederick nodded vigorously, making his leg jiggle again. I leapt to my feet. Then plonked myself back down.

“The problem is - or one of the problems is - that if there is nobody there who *can* - you will have to be right next to me Margaret, so that I can be the interpreter.”

“*Marion*. That’s Margaret” she said, pointing to her neighbour. We laughed and immediately stopped, seeing how stupid it was to laugh when this situation did not warrant laughter at all.

“Drink your tea, Richard,” whispered Frederick.

I realised my mouth was very dry. I drank it in one go. It was strong and tepid.

Now Margaret handed me another sheet - a map she had printed out from her computer. “This is where his flat is - where I’ve put the cross....*Mule-ioo-strasse*?”

“Mühliustrasse.” I murmured.

“Does that sound right?” asked Margaret of Marion, who shrugged as politely as she could.

“And this balloon?” I asked.

“...Is the nearest police station I could find. It looks about a mile away. That’s the phone number at the top.”

“Then let’s forget the first number and phone this one. I think I’m far more likely to get hold of a human being at district level.”

Frederick nodded and jiggled vigorously again. He was supposed to be a computer genius. I felt glad to be earning his approval.

“So. His name is Jack Driscoll, born the third of April, 1955. He’s working for the German Stock exchange. You have heard nothing from him since Monday. He has a tendency to get depressed...”

“But bottles it up...” added Marion.

I worked out “bottles it up” in German, added it to my store of information and rehearsed again the very complicated opening speech I would have to make.

“OK - let’s give it a try. Marion, can you be with me - and Katherine can you come and write down stuff like phone numbers and contact addresses if I get given any.”

We went into the hall and I picked up the clumpy receiver from its wall mounting. I took a deep breath - like a swimmer about to dive from a very high board into a very deep pool - and dialled.

The German ring-tone is a series of dark semi-breves, redolent of a sheep bleating in distress and hence quite unsettling at the best of times. The plaint went on for ages until I was almost unnerved. Finally it stopped and a voice from a deep moon crater announced - *Schröder*. He totally ignored my question about whether anyone spoke English there and simply invited me to state my business. To my surprise and delight, the complex explanation I had prepared flowed fluently from my lips, and I translate it below.

“Well, Herr Schröder, my name is Richard Armitage and I am phoning you from England and am the representative of a lady called Marion (*I glanced at my notes*) ... Jones whose partner, Jack Driscoll - D-R-I-S-C-O-L-L is currently working on a short-term contract as a freelance computer programmer for the German Stock Exchange ... (*I paused to ask Herr Schröder if he was still there and he confirmed that he was*) .....and Mr Driscoll has been incommunicado since last Tuesday with his mobile switched off....he has a tendency to suffer from depression, and Mrs Jones would be very appreciative if the local police could pop round to his flat, number six at Mühliustrasse 18 - in your vicinity to check that he is alright.....”

As I breathed in again, Schröder asked me with characteristic German bluntness whether it was likely they would find a dead body there. This caused me to breathe out almost violently and Marion stiffened, as if to prepare herself for the worst.

“Mrs Jones is right beside me. Fortunately she doesn’t understand German - so I can confirm that suicide is her most pressing concern.”

“But what if he is just not there? Gone away? Are you a British policeman?”

This threw me for a second. “But...if the flat is empty...then we can dismiss the likelihood of suicide- or at least downgrade it - unless he has thrown himself in the River Main”.

“Since Monday Frankfurt is in the grip of a heat-wave. If a body is in a flat there since Tuesday then the other residents would surely have reported the smell!”

“But if he killed himself on Thursday or Friday then the smell would not....”

I began to sense his finger lurking somewhere near the button and I had to think quickly of a

clinging argument.

“Are you a policeman?” he almost shouted.

“No - I used to lecture in German - and am merely the interpreter and spokesman for a lady who is (*and now I had to think of a most persuasive expression to describe her dire emotional state*) absolutely ....(*fix und fertig*)...beside herself with worry, Herr Schröder, and who would be much obliged if you would kindly take the trouble to drive a mile or two to the flat to check on him...”

There was a long silence. I held my breath and kept my fingers crossed. Marion again misinterpreted my tension and whispered “Oh God.”

“No, Marion. I’m trying to persuade him to check the flat.....Hallo, Herr Schröder?”

“I am checking the record of aliens in our district. Hold the line while I bring it up.”

The phone clunked down on his table.

“He’s looking for his name on file, Marion. In Germany foreigners have to register with the authorities and let them know when they change address...”

“Mister....Ar-mage? I must tell you that there is no such person as Driscoll at the address you have given. It is a large house converted into ten flats and number 6 is occupied by an Irishman.” I felt as if the blood had frozen in an instant in my veins. How could I tell poor Marion that her partner did not live at that address?

“There is no Driscoll in another flat there?”

“Of course not! His name would be here! Please give me his date of birth!”

“Hold on....April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1955.”

“Middle name?”

“Marion - middle name?”

She shrugged.

“None!” shouted Margaret, overhearing in the lounge.

“None I understand - dear Mr Armage - from school,” said Schröder, almost jocular. “Please wait.”

“What’s up?” asked Marion in a tremble. “Are they checking the hospitals? Or morgues?”

“No, no...There’s obviously a mix-up about him registering with the authorities.”

“He wouldn’t know that he would have to...”

“But surely his employer or landlord would have to register him?” said Katherine.

“He’s not very practical...I have to deal with the gas and electricity....Jack forgets....”

“Well” I whispered to Marion “This might be a blessing in disguise!”

“Why?”

“Because if he’s not on their radar, they’ll go round now and check. The Germans are scrupulous about keeping records - especially on aliens - in this day and age...Hello?”

“Mister Armage. There is no Jack Driscoll in Frankfurt-am-Main. Are you sure he is not living in Frankfurt-an-der-Oder?”

This utterly threw me.

“Marion, there are two Frankfurts - the big one and a little mediaeval one.”

“Oh, it’s the big one. All skyscrapers. I’ve been. Definitely the big one..”

As soon as I told him, any hint of jocularly vanished. He wanted a description. Obviously. How stupid of me not to anticipate that!

“Moment, Herr Schröder....Marion. I need you to describe Jack to me and I’ll translate...”

I told him he was one metre seventy-five, very slim, brown hair thinning just a little on top, moustached and bespectacled. He also had a large bluish birthmark on his left breast. Marion had

added this detail with a grinning blush and then a sob as it dawned on her what it implied about a potential grisly process of identification.

His next question perplexed me.

“I have no idea why, Marion...but I let's not go into it. He wants to know your date of birth.”

It was the 5<sup>th</sup> September 1944.

“Was für ein Auto fährt der Mister Driscoll, Mister Armage?”

Another one I had not bargained for. “Car, Marion? His car?”

It was a black Audi but she had no idea what the number was. Schröder was exasperated at this ignorance, as officials usually are when (to them) obvious information cannot be supplied.

“And which firm does he work for at the Stock Exchange?”

I asked her and that dreaded shrug and grin made me close my eyes, almost in pain.

“Mrs Jones only knows that he works for the Stock Exchange. That's all Mr Driscoll told her.”

“Das gibt's doch nicht!” he said in an aside, no doubt to a colleague. (= *that doesn't give* = absolutely bloody unbelievable!)

I frowned. What else might he ask which Marion was clueless about? The make of his watch?

His shoe size? His eye colour? I was grateful when he told me to hold the line again.

“What's happening?” asked my wife. It was my turn to shrug. We waited. And waited.

“Mister Armage...we will go around and check. Please give me your number. We will be as prompt as we can.”

\*

That clock clucked loud in the silence we were immersed in. Off course, we had written off, without openly acknowledging we had, the first ten minutes. Our eyes were gazing into the distance at Frankfurt, picturing the police car speeding off, then parking in that peculiarly named street, the Mühliustrasse; the finger on the door bell, the failure to respond, the fetching out of the angry caretaker; the skeleton key in the door lock of number 6, the slow opening of the door pushing against.... an obstacle?

After the elapse of a half-hour the tension in the room was like a volatile gas no-one dared to spark off with a word. Marion's chest was wheezing; Frederick's knee jiggled faster and faster. If any eyes met, they immediately fell away into safe spaces. Then Frederick whispered “They should have been and gone by now....and be back....”

Marion sighed. Frederick wondered if he should mash more tea but in such a whisper and with such a lack of conviction that no-one responded.

“I keep wondering if he's just cleared off again,” said Marion at last, making Margaret's head swivel round.

“What?”

“The last time this happened he just phoned me out of the blue....to say he was in Seattle.”

“SEATTLE? In America?When?”

“In March. Or April. He said he just fancied seeing if the sky there was as blue as that song said it was. It wasn't”

“One weekend?”

“No. Well, partly. Sunday to Wednesday. Or Thursday.”

I glanced at my wife whose eyes rolled up quickly into her lids and closed. Margaret was so cross that she had shifted to the edge of the sofa to get a better angle on her neighbour.

“So...you're saying that he has done this before...just gone off....Why didn't you tell me?”

Marion grinned/grimaced a little harder and gave such an infuriating shrug that I was convinced Margaret would slap her. Instead she turned to me and gave me a look which said *I'm so sorry. I'm so embarrassed.*

"But Seattle happened *before* he got depressed." countered Marion.

"Could he just do that?" asked Frederick. "Take three or four days off work?"

"Well, he was free-lance and had his own deadline to work to....so yes."

"But you told me that he was having odd days off.....*ill*.... **before** he went.....incommunicado!" said Margaret.

"Yes he was. I think now he was probably depressed when he went to Seattle and was just keeping it quiet."

"So he might just have gone away again this time? " I suggested. It was ten past seven. We had been there nearly two hours and I was starving. "I'm not prying, but was his depression in any way linked to his work?"

(And don't you dare shrug again!)

"He did say the work he was doing was very difficult. And he would be so glad when the contract was up in July. It might have been the work." She was going to add something then stopped. There was no point in me, an IT ignoramus, asking her about the nature of the work and no use her telling me.

"And please don't ask me," she said "What he was doing at the Stock Exchange. I haven't got a clue about computers - and it was very confidential anyway."

"All he would tell me" whispered Frederick "Was that it was something to do with the intranet and firewalls. Did he not even tell you that much, Marion?"

She shook her head. I hung mine. What *did* they talk about? How could he - a fifty-five-year old and slim - fancy this drab woman of sixty-five and fat? What sort of relationship could it possible be? When can we go home? The clock answered with a quarter-chime.

"Look. It's been three-quarters of an hour almost now. If we hear nothing by half-past, I'll phone again. OK?"

Margaret was clearly too furious to speak. Frederick caught her eye and when she merely raised an eyebrow, he turned his attention to me. He said my idea sounded sound and then smiled at his clumsy English. Katherine had begun to say something comforting to Marion. Margaret watched in disgust, arms folded. Frederick turned to me.

"Armitage. That sounds Norman. Have you researched your family tree?"

I looked at him. Had he really just asked me that out of the blue? Or out of the black.

"No."

"No?"

"Toyed with the idea. Now I've retired, I might." = (*I am not in the slightest bit interested.*)

"Try the Mormon website...I've established a link to William the Conqueror."

"Really?" (*Had he said Mormon or Norman?*)

"Yes. Nobility is easy. It's all recorded, you see. Already done."

"So a pleb like me would be a bit difficult to trace back very far!"

"But you don't know that you are a pleb!"

"One grandfather was in the boot-and-shoe, the other was in hosiery. So unless one or both sides fell on very hard times....."

"My great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather was hanged for robbery!"

"Really? Perhaps he had gambling debts."

Marion made a funny noise, wept a little then stopped. The women had been listening into this

absurd conversation. Katherine leant over Marion and patted her like our cat. After a decent pause I said to Frederick that I was pretty sure my lot had been peasants and serfs before they had been levered into the factories. (I wanted him to shut up about it.)

“No shame in that. Most people were.”

“I’m not ashamed.” and the mischievous, starving imp in me could not help but add “Perhaps one of your noble ancestors was a Groom of the Stool.”

“I really have no idea” he said in all innocence. “What did -”

The clock cut him off, telling us that the deadline had arrived. Doubtless the chunky phone, thus prompted, would now ring. But no. Schröder and his team were still in the flat, waiting for the forensics team; knocking up startled then shocked neighbours; explaining, asking questions, making notes, chalking around the corpse. We had sunk to the bottom of their list of priorities, to around v,w or x. In a couple of hours from now Schröder would remember Armage and say to his colleague - we had better break the bad news.

“Well,” demanded Katherine “Are you going to ring?”

We took up our positions again, as if it was the real thing after the dress rehearsal of an hour before. Me by the green wall phone; next to me Katherine with a notepad and a trembly pen; next to her, Marion fumbling with hands she did not know where to stick; Margaret through the doorway on the sofa, at the ready for Scene 2 when she would have to play the role of chief comforter to a weeping Marion (how long would she grieve without stopping?); and off-stage, Fred the Technician, clearing his throat, ready to jump up and make a cup of tea, the essential property of all English dramas.

I dialled..... BLEAT.....BLEAT.....BLEAT..... Clunk. **Schröder!**

“Ah! S-schön guten Abend wieder aus England, Herr Schröder! Hier der Mister Armitage .....Armage.....”

Katherine dropped her pen and picked it up. Marion turned to look up the stairs.

“Do you have a pen, Mr Armage? I have a number for you to ring.”

He gave it to me too quickly.

“Please again. Slowly so that I can translate it for my wife.”

“Null....”

“Zero!”

“Neun....”

“Nine!”

And so on until we had it all. I read it back and it was correct.

“Yes, you must ring this number. It is of a....” Now for the first time he faltered and sounded odd. “...of another office which is....dealing with the Driscoll case. They have all the information....You must ask for Officer Griesskirchener...As soon as you finished speaking the first time....it was such an unusual coincidence....we had a call about Herr Driscoll!”

“But we have the Google map. Your station was easily the closest to his flat. Have you paid the flat a visit?”

“Yes, we are nearer...but this matter comes under the jurisdiction of other colleagues. Officer Griesskirchener will explain. Goodnight.”

I listened to the burr for a few seconds then hung up.

“Oh no,” gasped Marion, misinterpreting my glumness.

“No, Marion! We’re back to Square One. I’ve got to phone another....station or department...which has been dealing with Jack’s case.”

“Dealing with his *case*? Has he got himself into trouble?”

“I have no idea! Maybe he’s been picked up for not registering with the authorities. It can land you in lot of trouble and cost a lot in fines. Maybe that’s why you’ve not heard from him. He could be in detention.”

“Oh God!”

(Oh come on! Think about it! Jail is better than a morgue, isn’t it?)

“Marion. At least it sounds more positive and hopeful than.....it did. Go and sit down. If I need to ask you something, I’ll put my head round the door. ....Any chance of a cup of tea?”

Griesskirchener, in contrast to the loud and abrupt Schröder spoke very quietly and urbanely. I had been doing my spiel - with far less fluency this time - for about ten seconds, when to my amazement he said in perfect English “Are you Mr Armage?” He sounded like a certain BBC newsreader.

“No. It’s Armitage actually.”

“Is there a Mrs Jones, Marion Jones there with you? If so, be so kind as to pass the telephone to her.”

“He speaks English, Marion! Here...”

She seemed to have an aversion to the phone but in the end she steeled herself to take it. I felt so delighted to let her take over. At last, at nearly a quarter to eight there was daylight at the end of the tunnel - about two hours of it, in which I could enjoy my crab claws, wine, wife and garden. I went jiggling back to the others with my thumbs up, whispering “perfect English.”

My joy did not last long. Marion began to gasp and exclaimed “What?” then “Oh no!” We were frozen in mid-celebration. Margaret gaped. Frederick experienced a sudden paralysis of the knee. Katherine’s palms reached up for her face. I twisted round. Marion was going from grey to white. I hissed “Sweet tea” in Frederick’s direction and he leapt to his long length. But Marion’s collapse did not occur. She turned to me and mouthed “pen!” I grabbed it and went to her. I watched as she wrote yet another phone number on the pad I held for her. Now calmer, she began to nod and say “Right” and “OK” over and over again, finally ending with “I’m really sorry, I can’t help you” and a valedictory “Thank you for letting me know.” She put the phone down, sidled past me and plonked herself heavily down on the sofa. She was obviously shocked. Margaret edged round to face her and waited.

“Well?” said she at last. “Is Jack.....alright?”

“His employer contacted the police on Tuesday. He hadn’t been into work for nearly two weeks. Not since the beginning of June. No explanation. No phone call. No emails. The police were persuaded to go to his flat on Tuesday afternoon.....”

“And?”

“He wasn’t there. No sign of him. Eveything neat and tidy. The man I just spoke to - Mr Greasesomething - asked me if I knew where he’d gone.”

Margeret stiffened. “But why? Why would he want to know? Is he in some kind of trouble?”

“I don’t know....he just said his work was sensitive.....”

“Did he say if his clothes were there?”

“No. I should have asked.”

She grinned, gave a little cry and there were tears. She *hated* the phone, she managed to gasp. Katherine looked at me with pleading eyes. I took a deep breath and saw my crab claws and wine lying in the fridge. I got up.

“Shall I phone him back and ask about clothes?”

Marion grinned and the tears stopped.

“Herr Griesskirchener, it’s Mr Armitage again. Mrs Jones is a little upset. She forgot to ask if Mr Driscoll’s clothes were in the flat.”

“Mr Armitage... Yes, there were clothes...but no suitcase. I cannot tell of course whether there were fewer items than there should be...Mrs Jones would have to come and take a look for herself. His car was not outside. It looks to me as if he must intend to come back. His laptop is there...His clothes...Beer in the fridge.....Do *you* know him, Mr Armitage?”

“No. I am merely the interpreter.”

He fell silent. I dared to ask if there were any signs of anything untoward in the rooms.

“Untoward? Do you mean sinister? Nothing. As if a person had left home for a few minutes to go to the supermarket. I have asked Mrs Jones to ring me as soon as she hears from him.”

“Why?”

He fell silent again. I asked him if he had done anything wrong, as Mrs Jones had a right to know.

“Wrong? Do you mean, has he broken any laws of the Federal Republic? That is a matter I cannot discuss. He has disappeared and is not a registered alien....and that is *of concern*.”

“Will he be....in any trouble?”

“Again, I cannot answer. If that is all, Mr Armitage, may I wish you a pleasant evening.”

Click - gone. As a last favour I phoned the number which Marion had been given by Griesskirchener - Jack Driscoll’s landlady. I expected frostiness on a Saturday night, one hour ahead of our time, but she was jolly. As soon as I mentioned the name Driscoll, she laughed.

“Ah, him! A real mystery! I hardly see him - and then last week the police call, wanting to inspect the flat - and not the ordinary police. Is Mr Driscoll a spy, I ask them?”

“Do you live in the building?”

“No. A street away. Why?”

“His partner would be really grateful if you could pop round now and then and phone her if he returns. Do you speak English?”

She broke into pretty good English and I called Marion to the phone.

Then at last, at nearly half-past-eight, having reassured Marion that there was no hint from Griesskirchener of anything suspicious in the flat - but concealing from her the implied threat to Driscoll’s liberty - we were on our way, waving away their effusive thanks. It was on the doorstep that a burst of elation caused me to make my stupid, my fateful promise to Marion.

\*

Katherine laughed. “Oh, *him*. He’s always using that chat-up line. He tried it with me! He forgot.”

“Chatting you up? What? For how’s-your-father?”

“No. He’s such a snob. Him and his line of descent from William the Conqueror!”

I blinked as the setting sun emerged from behind an oak in the field beyond our garden. Our resident blackbird began to sing as the light turned golden.

“So he *is* the arrogant arse I first suspected him to be?”

“He’s....*alright*. A large aristocrat crammed into a two-up, two-down.....What did you mean by your Groom of the chamber comment?”

“No. Groom of the Stool...He hadn’t a clue what I was on about...He was the foremost member of the privy council...the man who wiped the royal arse.”

“No! You made that up!”

“It’s true.”

“So do you think Prince Charles.....”

I laughed. “Who knows? He *does* have a flunky to put toothpaste on his brush.”

I extracted the last meat from the crab claw and drank a mouthful of the luscious wine in which the filament of low sun was shining. I felt relaxed and content. Those previous events had taken on the hazy texture of a dream. We had discussed all the probabilities of the situation and marvelled at the strangeness of other people’s lives, thanking God that ours was so straightforward. Now we had run out of things to say but the wine had put me into the mood where what popped into my head popped straight out of my mouth.

“If Marion takes me up on my offer, it might be dangerous. To step off the straight and narrow.”

“What? You think that whatshisface - Driscoll - is a crook? Did the police tell you something you kept to yourself?”

“No. I was just thinking what a perfect plot it would be for Wilhelm Raabe to develop.”

Katherine scraped her salad to one side and sighed.

“ Am I about to be educated? Wilhelm Who?”

“Raabe - Raven. He was a writer of the Biedermaier period - like your beloved Jane. It was a reaction to the Gothic Romanticism of people like Hoffman. In Northanger Abbey, of course, Austin ridicules the whole genre. She’s a perfect example of Biedermaier, writing about people going about their business in their narrow social milieu, not the grand epic stuff of someone like Walter Scott. It’s a safe, middle class world obsessed with fashion, good manners, money and making good marriages.”

“But Jane Austin sent all that up!” she replied indignantly.

“Ah! But that was *still* her milieu! She could never have written Robin Hood. She wrote about what she knew, lampooning, I admit, its most ludicrous exponents, such as Sir Walter Eliot, Lady Catherine De Burgh and upstarts like Mrs Elton.....the minor aristocracy...the squirearchy...the investing classes...And all her heroines, having come close to despair, marry happily ever after in that same milieu.”

“You mean social.....”

“Milieu!”

“Is that your *big, posh* word for the day?” she asked irritably, fanning away yet again the fly which had been reconnoitring her salad.

“Three syllables? The point I’m making is, none ever felt so oppressed by it and by its hypocrisy and tedium as to wish to escape into another world.”

I added a centimetre of wine to my glass, conscious that she was conscious of me getting tipsy. A centimeter at a time did not look too excessive. She frowned as if about to disapprove, but then her face lit up.

“Lydia!” she exclaimed. “Lydia Bennett. She wasn’t going to wait around until her elder sisters got married off! She takes matters into her own hands and elopes.....Bloo - dy FLY!...bloody THING.....Look, don’t get too pissed...I don’t want Mr Softee tonight.”

“I won’t. But *Lydia* returns to the fold of respectability! Everybody rallies round to get her wed and prevent her ruin. Austin makes sure she is saved so that Jane and Elizabeth can marry their beaux. So *there*.”

She rolled her eyes and asked what it all had to do with me and Marion - and the raven man. I told her about a character in a book by him, a doctor who out of compassion went out of his way to treat the daughter of woodlanders and returned home carrying smallpox, devastating his own

family.

“So, by leaving the milieu he knows, he invites tragedy.”

“That’s not a very edifying philosophy,” she snorted. “Keep away from the paups or the Bogeyman will get you. Hardly very Christian. I’m going inside in a minute. It’s getting cold. Anyway, Marion won’t ever take you up on it.”

“She’s perfect Biedermaier! I bet she hardly ever leaves her beloved Kenilworth.”

Katherine smiled mysteriously and I asked her what she was thinking.

“That *you* should have been a character in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Knowall. What do you think Marion’s into?”

I screwed my eyes up and stroked my chin. What might she be?

“I reckon she could have been a librarian - or the owner of a wool shop. Any shade of wool as long as it’s grey. Or she works in an Oxfam shop. Am I warm?”

“Freezing. She has a degree from Cambridge in Philosophy.”

I almost dropped my tipping glass. She was pulling my leg!

“No. Margaret told me. Appearances deceive. She is a very clever woman.”

“Well I never. When you walk down the street, who are the concert pianists and who are the dustmen.? I mean, who would guess that you are a retired RE teacher, you sexy creature?

Marion the Philosopher! If we go to Frankfurt, she can explain to me what windowless monads are.”

“Windowless nomads?.....Look, if you drink any more you’ll go to sleep in front of the film again.”

I told her to stop nagging. I would follow her in a while. I had been to purgatory and back and wanted to toast the sun going down.

\*

It was Tuesday when Marion rang. The landlady had phoned her to say that Jack had not returned. Then she asked the dreaded question and I immediately pictured a raven invading my sky. *Of course* I would go to Frankfurt with her - if she thought she had a hope of finding him.

“But if the police can’t trace him, Marion, what chance have we got? Do you have any leads?”

“No. Only the restaurant he used to eat at. He almost lived there.”

“Can’t you ring them?”

“I can’t remember the name even, only more or less where it is. I couldn’t ring anyway. I hate phoning strangers, even if I speak the language - which I hardly can.”

“If you asked the landlady for the number, if you tell her whereabouts it is -”

But now she was snivelling. I was running out of escapes. Katherine came into the kitchen. I mouthed “Marion” and she took the phone. I wandered off into the garden, cursing my big mouth.

When I went back in Katherine was making tea. There was a flight, she said, according to Marion, the next morning from Birmingham.

“I bet you’ll be back by Friday. And you *did* promise.”

“Blast. Is she buying the tickets?”

She frowned at the table. She shook her head. Marion had mislaid her credit card. She wanted me to sort it out - and a place to stay. She would take care of all the expenses when we came home.

An hour later I phoned her back. I would meet her in the departures hall at 8:30. I had booked a fairly reasonable hotel a few hundred yards from the European Central Bank. She whimpered

how grateful she was for my kindness and I was melted.

“Could...Kenilworth be on your way there?” she said. “Only my car is rather on the blink.”

“It could be. Do you have any Euros?”

“Around a hundred I think. Will that be enough? I can pay you back if not.”

\*

We queued to show our passports. We had made a little effort to converse on the plane at first, but had soon given up. I was dying to ask her about windowless monads but decided to wait for the right opportunity. We shuffled forward. As soon as the policeman examined my passport he looked at me strangely, consulted a piece of paper and abruptly left his booth. Marion was standing behind me.

“Mr Armitage? Could you please follow me?” said an official in a suit appearing from the other side. He was extremely courteous and explained there was a small matter to clear up before I could enter the Federal Republic.

I found myself in a small white room with a table and two chairs and another door. Twenty long minutes passed. Finally that door opened and a very large man with a large head and intense, dark, friendly eyes entered and sat opposite me. He extended an enormous hand and I shook it.

“We meet at last, Mr Armitage. Griesskirchener.”

He was not at all as I had pictured him. Softly spoken, he had appeared to me in my imagination as a slight, inconsequential individual. This man seemed easily capable of picking me up and whirling me round. I had an eerie feeling I had seen him before. The straight cut of his jacket - dark green and collarless - told me he was Bavarian. Had our paths crossed during my years there?

“I apologise for temporarily detaining you and Mrs Jones, but it is naturally of concern to The Ministry of the Interior when an alien is reported missing - an alien who has been doing *sensitive work*.”

His smile was so genial and infectious that I could sense myself grinning back. And foolishly I said “As in the film ET?”

He looked puzzled and then enlightened. “Ah! You English! You would find humour in even the most serious situation! But you must understand that in this matter levity is not really a response I can subscribe to.”

His English was faultless. I answered him doggedly in German. One of us would eventually have to give way, and logically, because we were sitting in an interrogation room at Frankfurt-am-Main airport, it should be him. But he was determined to assert his superiority and in the end the combat bored me. His smile widened when I finally broke into English. Perhaps I could get my own back further down the line. I could see he was wary of me. Then his deliberate smile faded a little and he trained his coals of eyes at each of my pale blue ones in turn, perhaps suspecting that he could score a quick victory. He interlocked his ridiculous sausage fingers and I saw how easily he might be underestimated as a bit of a Bavarian bumbler by a lesser, complacent intellect.

“Mr Armitage. Why have you come to Frankfurt?”

“Why have I come? As a favour to Mrs Jones. I am her interpreter. That’s all. She feels - naturally - in view of her partner’s disappearance, that she should be here...She is shy...She could not face being here alone. She speaks next to no German.”

He took out a pen and made a slow scribble, which, on the basis of what I had said, could not

possibly amount to anything. It was part of his game plan. I allowed myself a smile. He put his pen down and then, looking straight into me again, spoke very quietly.

“But if the Frankfurt police cannot find Mr Driscoll, why should she? Do you have a lead?” I was about to mention the restaurant but clapped my jaw to at the last moment. A bad mistake. I said nothing. His eyes stripped themselves of all compassion and tried to tear through my defences. Luckily, I managed to find an escape.

“We only have the landlady’s number,” I said as easily as I could. “Which you gave us. We were planning to go round and speak to her, regarding visitors and any messages he might have left.” He thought this over and then shook his head slowly. I interpreted this as sign of scorn for my lie.

“The lady has been questioned and knows nothing about Mr Driscoll’s whereabouts. She should have informed the competent authority about his tenancy, but because he was only due to stay until the end of July she did not do so....”

I felt a chill in my neck. I wondered what would happen to her.

“...and the other residents in the flats know nothing of Herr Driscoll. Nothing about his habits or visitors. So you will find out nothing there.”

“You seem to be saying that our....quest...is rather futile. Well, I agree...but as I said, I am here only as a favour to his partner. I have absolutely no other reason or motive. I hope to be flying home on Friday by the latest.”

From the inside pocket of his jacket he produced my passport. He gave me his card which described him as Andreas Griesskirchener, Oberbeamte - senior official - of the Bundesministerium des Innern - the equivalent of our Home Office.

“Please, Mr Armitage, you will inform me immediately if Mr Driscoll turns up or you have *any* knowledge of him.” He leant forward and revealed the full extent of his malign intelligence. “*Not* to do so would be to withhold information from a state official in the execution of his duties...a *very* serious offence...Have a pleasant stay. Wait here.”

He got up and left through the same door. The courteous official reappeared, like the sunny figure of a Swiss weather-cabin, and bade me follow him. In the corridor I was reunited with a perfectly at ease Marion and we were directed to the baggage reclaim.

\*

“So what happened to you?” I asked as soon as I had the hang of our tiny hire-car. She looked up from the map we had been given at the desk. Nothing had happened, she said. She had just sat in a little room for half-an-hour. A police lady had told her that there was an irregularity with my passport.

“You weren’t questioned? About Jack?” - (She shook her head.)

“Well *I* was. By that man Griesskirchener you spoke to on the phone. He’s not your common-or-garden Plod.”

I examined her as she traced our route with her finger to the red cross the receptionist had made on the map. I saw no hint of evasiveness in her profile.

“Marion. Is there anything you haven’t told me about Jack?”

“No. Such as what? - Oh! Turn left at the next big crossroads!”

“Such as his job. How important was he?”

She shrugged. She told me to keep straight on for about a mile after the lights.

“Did he ever talk about the importance of his work? Was he vetted in any way?”

“All I know is, it was the hardest contract he’d ever had at the Dax. He did have a security badge. He talked once about being like St George slaying the dragon. He mentioned Hector killing Achilles outside the walls of Troy. He’d had a few - which was unusual for him. But what he did would all be double-Dutch to me.”

We arrived. The hotel was not fifty yards from the main railway station and was decent. The public rooms were clean if functional, but unfortunately, instead of two single rooms we had been allocated a double room with two single beds. No amount of protesting to the pretty receptionist could alter the fact that the hotel was fully booked until Sunday morning when the end of a Trade Fair would bring about an exodus. I explained the situation to Marion who shrugged. We could “work around it” she said. I looked at my watch. Nearly four-thirty. Did I really fancy tramping around the city centre in thirty degrees of choking heat in search of a hotel with two single rooms?

I told myself I had been in worse situations. I decided there was no unrequited, libido smouldering beneath Marion’s grey exterior, waiting to flare up and consume me in flames of passion. I grabbed our bags and left instructions that we were to be given first refusal if another room fell vacant.

I looked at her snoozing on her bed as I unpacked my few things. Her fat legs in heavy black shoes were turned out apart at ten to two; she gave no sign of having had a contented life; her face was very lined, her skin was dull and dry and her hair looked coarse enough to give you a graze. She looked in poor health and doubtless had a terrible diet. I felt sorry for her. She was the victim of events she had no understanding or control over. Could I persuade her that Driscoll was - to put it in a nutshell - a callous bastard? I had met his type before - mathematicians who loved only numbers; autistic types who could not empathise with others. The quicker she realised, the better, so that we could go home.

I went to the window, opened it and looked out. The air blew in at me as if from an open fire. A Turkish travel agency was opposite and next door a fruiterer’s. An olive-skinned man came out and looked up and down the street for non-existent customers. There was a seedy looking Greek restaurant a few doors away. From one of the windows - all flung open - of the many flats on the first, second and third floors there came the sounds of a man and woman shouting at each other in a strange tongue. Then silence. I had read on the internet the previous day that there were more holders of foreign passports in Frankfurt than German ones. What ever would Hitler think if he came back?

We were in a very ordinary road barely five minutes away from the European Central Bank and from the river Main. In spite of its ten great skyscrapers - the same number as London - Frankfurt seemed a very provincial city. I watched a sleek tram trundle past and went to lie down. I closed my eyes and thought of Katherine stroking the cat in our lovely back garden. I imagined all the roses coming out in one great burst. I would phone her later.....

Marion woke me. It was going up for eight. She had unpacked and was hungry.

“I’m ready,” she said, pulling a comb through the wire of her hair.

“When my wife says she’s ready, I always add a quarter of an hour.”

She smiled, almost laughed, and revealed a surprising new image of herself, complete with two rows of perfect white teeth. I decided they could not be her own.

We went out, turned right and left and walked a little distance along the vast river. The cruise

boats were tying up. I stopped a lady and asked if there were any decent restaurants nearby - *not the Greek one*. She pointed across the bridge to what she described as the Apfelwein quarter. "Cider? In *Frankfurt*?"

"Oh yes! It is one of our chief tourist attractions. You are here for the first time?"

I nodded and turned to explain to Marion. She spanned the bridge with her eyes - the Main is very wide - and her cheeks creased with that little grin of hers which I was learning to interpret. I asked the lady if there was anywhere closer. She pondered and turned. We could eat Italian - very reasonably - not far from the Opera.

We turned left and crossed the main square on which towered up the Central Bank. As we scattered a gang of pigeons it occurred to me just how similar her gait was to theirs. If she had managed to poke her head forward with every waddle and stride, she would have been a human pigeon.

We passed the modern opera house and immediately found ourselves in very ordinary streets again. I wondered how dear "very reasonable" would turn out to be, within a stone's throw of the financial centre of Germany, and I thought of City of London prices. I had a horrible feeling I was not far from my credit card limit after these unforeseen expenses. I had six hundred Euros and thought it might be a good idea to bite into them.

The restaurant was next to a music store stuffed full of shiny instruments. We entered from the quiet street into a sudden world of chatter and clatter, of waiters almost dancing around, with Pavarotti in the background bewailing the treachery of some woman. The place was busy but not full and a waiter with an exaggerated smile showed us to a cosy corner table opposite a large aquarium swirling with exotic fish.

"I've never eaten Italian before," whispered Marion. "Do you have to pick your own?"

"Pick your own what?"

"Fish."

I examined her for a trace of an ironic smile, but seeing none, concluded that her stupid remark was artless. I told her I rather thought they were for display. She almost grabbed her menu when it came. I opened mine with trepidation expecting to see exorbitant prices.....

A revelation! There were lots of things for less than twelve Euros. I let Marion order (she admitted to me that she had gotten to the menu stage in the language course CD she had had for Christmas) and she did rather well. I chose shellfish spaghetti - which proved plentiful and delicious - and Marion, *ossu buco*, the veal stew, which she picked at for a start and then devoured. But a second glass of wine had a peculiar effect on her. She went from euphoria to despair in a matter of minutes.

"You must excuse me," she breathed, wiping away a tear with her serviette.

"It's quite understandable," I said, daring to place my palm on her hand, and winking to reassure our passing waiter whose smile had dimmed upon noticing she was upset. But he misconstrued the tears and my gesture, and clasped his hands together, looking heavenward with the mock rapture of a lover proposing. I whipped my hand away.

I told her she had had a tough time and she managed to say that I was very kind. She drank more wine as if it was the cure for her problems.

"So kind, I think I ought to tell you that there *is* something else...."

I stared at her. She raised her empty glass. The motto *in vino veritas* went through my head. I lifted the near-empty bottle from its cooler and caught the eye of the waiter who nodded and went off to get another. She gazed at the aquarium and said how wonderful it would be if people were as straightforward as fish. I looked into the glass and saw her face reflected in it. The

slippery creatures seemed to be emerging from her spectacles. I saw her look down.

"I think I might know why he disappeared," she whispered. She stopped herself. I filled her glass. I first asked her, then urged her to tell me. She looked at me and snuffled.

"He gambles. He bets in casinos. He bets on line. He bets on anything. He promised me he would stop, then last week a letter arrived for him...a sort I had seen before, so I opened it. A new load of debt. He owes thousands. He owes me thousands. I've partly remortgaged the house."

She grinned and there were more tears. I searched for words of comfort but found none. The combination of her chalky face and swollen red eyes was not a pretty sight. I saw a diner peering at us in puzzlement - we must have seemed a very strange couple. She composed herself, drank more wine and told me she had convinced herself he had done himself in over his debts and the demands of the job.

"But didn't you say at Margaret's he had probably just gone away? To take a break? That has got to be the likeliest explanation."

She nodded and seemed reassured. "I expect you're wondering why I bother with him?"

I told her that it was not really my place to say. She screwed up her eyes.

"Because...I want my bloody money back, that's why!"

The vehemence and anger of this almost shocked me.

"That's it? That's why we're here?"

She said nothing. Suddenly I felt indignant. Had I been brought here on false pretences? But it would be useless to protest and point out how unfair that was - at least while she was feeling so much self-pity. Then I felt confused.

"But if he owes lots of people money, presumably he's broke. How do you expect to get your money back? And if he's done a runner he could be miles away - in another country even.....and he might never come back."

"He earns a fortune. I have to get to him - to make him see sense and stop frittering it away. His debts could be somehow rescheduled. Making him stop, *making* him get help is the first thing....He *is* kind....and very clever. He just needs.....*help*."

*He* needed help! What had I got myself involved with? Bottling my irritation, I asked her if she had a plan. Luckily for her, she did not shrug. She mentioned that restaurant again, and the casino. She had a photograph to show people. She delved into her immense bag (why do women's bags expand as they age?) and there he was. He had a noble and earnest expression. His hair was dark, well managed and he had a dapper moustache. But in his eyes there was a hint of pain and he looked more sixty than fifty-odd. I tried to imagine his train of thought - *I hate my life - What keeps me living it? - Where am I headed? - What on earth do I see in that woman?*

Then I was aware that that woman was staring at me very oddly, as if reading my mind. She asked me what I thought. The question embarrassed me - as later I thought she had intended it to. I felt hot and looked away. I told her I thought he was very distinguished looking. She gave me a knowing look and smiled. It was obvious what I thought.

"No! I *meant*, do you think it will get us very far? Showing his photo round."

It appeared to be the futile, unanswerable question of a drunk.

"Marion...What else aren't you telling me? I want to know. Otherwise I'm flying home tomorrow. I'm beginning to think you've got me here on false pretences. I've been arrested - *very politely* -and interrogated by - God knows - the secret service. There's got to be more to it than this. What other trouble is he in?"

"OTHER trouble? Don't you think owing nearly a hundred thousand pounds is enough trouble?"

I gently pushed her glass away and signalled for the bill. We - somehow - got to the door and someone laughed. On the square there was music playing, and as we eventually got close to the opera house with me more or less carrying her, I realised it was being relayed by loudspeaker from the stage - and there was even a small screen showing the action. A man and a woman were in an embrace. As we staggered away in ours, to the strains of the aria, I wondered how absurd we looked. With her being so much shorter than me, and waddling like a pigeon, staying in step was impossible. Up and down we lurched like pistons, until I felt exhausted. Ahead I could see the bridge we had decided not to cross. That was the way - albeit the long way round - we had already walked and I should have taken it. But just to our right there was a turn into a road I surmised our hotel was on. The sun had long since disappeared behind tall buildings and it was quite murky that way. I decided to chance it.

It was still warm and the effort of shouldering Marion was making me sweat. I began to wonder if we had taken the correct turn after all, but there was no-one around to ask. Now we were lost into the bargain. We were passing the deep corridor entrance to a store which was unlit - when a tall, dark hooded figure emerged, blocking our path. There was a stale smell of booze and I could make out a bundle in the far doorway. The figure held out its hand and its intention became clear. There was now the dire face of a spectre, the texture and colour of stone, looking out at us from within the cave of the hood. I tried to go around to the left but found my path blocked. The beggar growled in dialect and it made little sense. I moved to my right and so, of course, did he. A sudden fury gripped me. I shouted, lashed out and sent him spinning. The fall took the wind out of his sails and though he struggled, he could not get to his feet. He circled on his back like an immense beetle. We lurched on and away to an accompaniment of his terrible cries and curses. Fortunately he did not or could not follow.

“What did he want?” she asked, as the curses relented.

“Money - for beer, I think. I told him to get lost.”

“Oo - that’s bad luck - not giving to the needy!”

“Marion,” I managed to gasp as we turned left “At the moment I am the needy.”

“You could have spared him a Euro. Bad luck.”

“It would be even worse luck if we ran out of cash and credit.”

“One measly Euro?”

We turned right and to my immense relief our hotel appeared like a beacon in the gloom. The pretty receptionist looked alarmed as I carried Marion past her. She asked if the gracious lady was ill. When she realised the gracious lady was drunk she looked horrified. I asked if there was another room available - anything - a broom cupboard - but she shook her head and wished me a good night. Fortunately, there was a lift - I could never have got her up the stairs.

She began to undress as if I was not there and I hurried into the bathroom. Ten minutes passed and it occurred to me that she might have passed out. A tap at the door. *Was I going to spend all night in there?* I opened up. In her white nightie she looked even fatter than normal. She waddled past, squashing me with her great bosom and closed the door. It was hot and stuffy. I opened a window and put on my pyjamas. As the toilet flush sounded I jumped into bed. She tottered out and managed to close the window. I protested. But how could she sleep, she said, with the traffic? I pointed out that there was none. There would be insects, she retorted - she couldn’t drop off with insects flying around her. I gave way. I decided I would open the window again as soon as she dropped off - which would surely not be long. She fell into bed and lay with her back to me.

“Are you going to keep your reading light on for long?” she muttered.

“I’m just having a look at the Frankfurt guide. Where the casino is.”

She turned over and gave me a very strange look.

“In case you’re wondering, Mr Armitage, you’re not my type. I like my men to have *some* hair. Good night.”

But it was far from a good night. She shouted in her sleep. She snored - and after the rich *ossu buco* worse was to follow. I opened the window but it was not much fresher outside. In the end I took my duvet and pillow and made up a bed in the bathroom where it was dark and cool and silent. It seemed I had been asleep barely ten minutes when I felt the door being rammed into my shin.

“What are you doing in there? Come on! I need the toilet. Now!”

Grey light was already at the window. She told me in passing she had not slept a wink because of *me* snoring. She slammed the door. Thankfully, while she was engaged, I slipped into a sleep which neither she nor an earthquake could disturb.

I told her over breakfast that before we did anything else that day we would drive round and find another hotel - I did not care how far out, or how dear.

“Then we can go and pay a visit to his landlady - not that it will do any good.”

“Hold on,” she said, through a mouthful of cereal. She rummaged through her great black bag and found at last a shiny key which she put onto the table. To save money, she said, we could stay in Jack’s flat.

“Why on earth didn’t you say you had a key before?” I nearly yelled.

“I forgot. He had one cut for me when I came to stay. I just forgot I had it. You could sleep on the couch.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Marion.”

There was no way to persuade the desk clerk of the justice of my demand for an immediate refund to my credit card. The pretty brunette had given way to a very assured young man with vicious red hair. Not only would there not be compensation for the error in the booking, but the three extra nights we were cancelling would be charged. He gave me an address to write to. At his end he could do nothing for me. Bookings from travel websites went to head office - the form would have to be checked to see whether the information received was accurate. The email the hotel had received had definitely requested a double room with single beds. I fumed with indignation. He smiled sympathetically but his eyes gleamed with *schadenfreude*.

“At least let me have an A-Z for free!” I groaned.

I penned in our route and asked Marion why Jack had chosen to live so far out, to the south of the city centre in Sachsenhausen. She shrugged and said it was quiet and posh, and he liked to take the tram into work. I passed her the map and we set off to find the Mühliustrasse. Marion was a surprisingly good navigator and we only went wrong three or four times. Had we not done so, it would not have dawned on me that we were being followed. I dismissed the idea for a start - I mean, how melodramatic! - but the taxi which had slowed to a halt behind us the second time, was there again when we had to do a u-turn a while later. A few streets away from our destination it turned off. I went to mention it to Marion but then decided not to alarm her. She was already in low enough spirits after getting drunk.

We found ourselves in a street of very substantial villas, doubtless the homes of the stockbroker

and mercantile classes, which had either escaped the bombing or had, more probably, been rebuilt from the old plans. They had three, even four storeys of very high rooms, turrets, balconies and grand porticos. Their renderings were washed in the palest, most subtle shades of yellow, cream and green.

“Stop! This is the one.” she exclaimed. “There’s a small car park around the back. Just drive in and bear to the left.”

The high walls concealed dense shrubberies to both sides of a drive which first widened out a little to afford a small parking area to the right by the great entrance, and then veered to the left, as she had said.

“Marion...don’t you think we ought to go and ask the landlady before we let ourselves in?”

“What ever for? She doesn’t own the place - she’s only a kind of *caretaker*..... The rent’s paid up...I’ve stayed there on my own before.”

“But as a courtesy...”

“We don’t need her permission....and what if she says no? Do you really want to drive round in circles? And *you* said you were skint...”

“But she knows that he’s not there, so she might object.”

“Look, if she turns up and makes a fuss, I’ll just tell her he sent me a text and he’s meeting me here. What are you worried about?”

She waddled her way up the staircase and I carried the bags. His was a second floor flat on the corner above the drive. There were three other doors on the long, dark corridor. She struggled with the key.

“Oh no! Don’t tell me the lock has been changed!” she said.

I took the key from her. It was a double lock. The door obediently clicked open onto a cool darkness. The air was free of the smells which issue from human occupation. A quick inspection confirmed he had not returned. I pulled back the heavy curtains and the heat and light of the steady sun instantly replaced the gloom. I opened the balcony doors and stepped out. Through a light haze the skyscrapers of Mainhattan rose sparkling into a clear blue sky. It was developing into another stifling day. Two young joggers crossed on the pavement below and a stocky man in jeans and teeshirt glanced up at me. I looked in vain for the spy-taxi and was about to rejoin Marion whom I could hear opening doors and banging about, when a slim brunette stepped out onto the adjacent balcony and stretched. She noticed me, but turned away without stopping to stare in the disconcerting way which Germans normally do on encountering an alien - me, for example.

“Good morning, gracious Miss. Have you by any chance seen your neighbour recently, the Mr Driscoll?”

She shook her head. I thought she was going to tell me that the police had already asked but told me in clear High German that she had hardly ever spoken to him.

“Who were you talking to?” demanded Marion, closing the fridge door on a piece of cheese she had been suspiciously sniffing. I told her.

“A *young* woman? She must be new. When I came in April there was a middle-aged couple next door. What’s she like?”

“She’s brunette. Pretty...straight, short hair. Very slim.”

She shrugged. I spotted two photo frames on the sideboard. A young man and a young woman. His son and daughter, she told me, when I picked them up. Had they been out to Frankfurt to see

him? No - they had not been getting on very well with him, particularly the daughter, since his marriage had failed.

I had an idea. "So the son has definitely not been out here?"

"Definitely not."

After telling me she had found some coffee she disappeared into the bathroom.

Inspired, I took the photo of the son out of its frame and went next door. I knocked. Our pretty neighbour came out and fixed me with her large brown eyes. She smiled very faintly, no doubt pleased to see the enchanting effect they had on me.

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to check we were talking about the same person. Not his father who came out a while back. *This* is your neighbour, Mr Driscoll."

She took the photo of the young man, looked, shrugged and passed it back. Did she seem embarrassed?

"I told you. I hardly know what he looks like. We said hello once. I have not been here long."

A chill ran up my spine. What a fibber!

"W-well," I stammered "If you happen to see him around....he's gone missing you see. I've come out here to try and pick up his scent." And then, out of the blue, to my immediate disgust and later regret, I added that I was a private detective.

I sat waiting for Marion to emerge from the toilet. The coffee machine was going through its last splutters and gasps. I decided not to tell her that there was possibly a spy next door. What *was* going on? What crime had Jack Driscoll committed? My reverie was interrupted by the sound of the flush. She waddled out, inspected the coffee and took down two mugs.

"Did you check his clobber?" I asked.

"He's taken some casual clothes. His suit's there. I found this in his sock drawer. I don't have a clue with them."

It landed in my lap. His mobile phone. I switched it on and found a long list under messages. They were mainly from his sister Margaret. "Please contact me." "Get in touch." Interspersed with them were three from a Jochen. "When are you coming into work?" "Are you ill?" "Please reply to my message."

I told Marion and asked her if I should ring Jochen back. She nodded. After many bleeps an excited voice came on.

"Jack? Are you back? Are you alright?"

I explained who I was and the voice became despondent. I asked him if he was Jack's boss.

"Not exactly. I interface between him and his employers....it's rather difficult to explain....and to be honest....rather confidential."

"Was it you who contacted the police a while back? To come around his flat?"

"Yes - last Tuesday or Wednesday."

"How long had he been absent from work?"

The line went silent while he thought this over.

"You say you are Mrs Jones'...*interpreter*? Could you please put her on?"

He did not trust me. In disgust I gave the phone to her. She said nothing but "Aha" "OK" "I see" and "Right", thanked him and passed it back to me to end the call. But he had already gone. He had told her only, she said, what she had already found out from Griesskirchener - that he had not been into work in June at all. I asked her why he might have left his mobile phone behind.

"He was always forgetting it - he hated the damn things as much as I do."

I sat and thought it over. He obviously did not want to be contacted or found, and all we could do was sit around hoping he would decide to come back.

“Look, Marion - can I suggest something? It’s Thursday today. Let’s give it till Monday. You might have to accept - I know it’s hard - that he’s just decided to abandon ship.....on his old life. He can’t face work...he can’t face his gambling debts...”

“And he can’t face *me!*”

“Well it happens. You wouldn’t be the first.”

I thought she was going to cry but she let out a long breath - almost of relief.

“Are you hungry?” she said at last. “There are five eggs and some Emmenthal cheese on its last legs. And I found some Heinz beans. And some beer. Fancy an omelette?”

I remembered there was a bakery on a nearby corner and while she got busy in the tiny kitchen I went out to buy a Roggenbrot - a rye loaf - a dense, very chewy but delicious bread. There were some sweet-looking tomatoes in a basket too. I felt almost cheerful but as I walked back I could not throw off the feeling that I was centre-stage in Griesskirchener’s little play - and poor Marion, a hapless extra. I took a look around for a spy, but apart from a limping old woman there was no-one out in the heat.

“You’re a good cook,” I said to her evident delight. She called me a flatterer and smiled. She had thought over what I had said about Monday and agreed. She would leave Jack a note and tell him she had given all there was to give - that it was up to him now to contact her.

Relief! I asked her if I could have a couple of drawers in the sideboard for my few things. I unpacked and put my wallet, passport, phone and keys on the top. Then I remembered the card Griesskirchener had given me. I took it from my wallet and stood thinking over what to do.

Should I ring him and tell him what we had decided?

“What are you looking at? Found something in the drawer?”

She put down the tea towel and came over. I told her whose card it was and she shrugged and went back to her drying-up. I decided not to phone Griesskirchener, put the card by my phone and sat down on the sofa with my beer. The combination of its strength and a sleepless night was making me light-headed. In addition, the alcohol and the prospect of a definite home-going were making me elated and something else - mischievous. She came and sat down. I had not known really how to broach the subject before, without sounding sarcastic or incredulous. Unable to find the right words then, I had let the matter roll around my mouth, but now I could not put up with it any more and spat it out - just as she was stuffing her head almost into her great handbag. “My wife Katherine told me you have a degree in Philosophy - from Cambridge.”

It sounded even worse that I had thought it might when sober - *How can a fat pudding like you have a degree from anywhere - even in Travel and Tourism?*

She looked neither surprised nor indignant. She said “Ah!” and brought out the tweezers she had been looking for. She leant across and pulled out one of my eyebrows.

“I’ve been dying to do that. That fly-away eyebrow makes you look like a mad professor.....Cambridge??” she sneered. “No! *Oxford*. I got a First.”

I really thought she had intended to put my eye out. I recalled suddenly a bizarre incident in a pub where a large woman accompanied by scrawny old man had sat next to me and she had said she was a novelist. A little under the influence, I had not questioned this and had pressed her for an email address, so that we might compare notes. She too had rummaged in a large bag - expressly for a pen - but when I supplied one, plus a beermat - instead of writing, she had turned and punched me on the nose. By the time I had recovered from my shock the couple had left.

The landlord had laughed - didn't I know that she was a transvestite? Moral: *take people at face value and do not pry further*. But ignoring that lesson, on sly impulse I said "I've always wondered about Schopenhauer's windowless monads, Marion."

Now surely she would dissolve into tears and confess what a fraud she was. Or would she fetch the tweezers back out and blind me? But she continued to stare at me without any expression on her round, pudgy, unremarkable face, then told me that if I trimmed my eyebrows I would look almost handsome. As for windowless monads, she added, what was there to wonder about?

"Nobody understands windowless monads properly. They are an illusion. And they were not Arthur Schopenhauer's. They were Leibniz's invention - souls he called them. Anyway, the Uncertainty Principle of whosit's? - *Heisenberg* - has made his monads - windowless....or double-glazed or whatever - pretty irrelevant. And *you*, Mr Armitage, are just testing me *out!*" I gulped. I had never dreamt she could speak at this level. I searched for something clever to say. "No I was not testing you *out!* Please correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't *Leibniz* saying that the....*essential* nature of an object was....er....beyond all perception? That we only experience a reflection from it?" (*Clever me!*)

"Sort of. But now you're straying onto Berkley and Hume. A substance - a thing, *a monad* if you like - is windowless. It can't see out and we can't see in. We only have a percept, a reflection of it. I am not physically in your head when you see me. Thank God. You see my shape and colour etc, etc. So a universe without sentient beings in it might as well not exist, argue some. A world just full of trees *would* exist - as the existence of coal implies - but who's around to...tick its box, as they say? Not the trees! And Berkley even argued that we bring the universe into existence by perceiving it. Though we never "see" what Arthur went on to call *das Ding-an-Sich*."

"The thing-in-itself?"

"Right. But to argue we create the world is such nonsense."

"Why?"

"Well, think about it! If tomorrow every sentient creature on the planet disappeared, would the planet vanish? Did it not exist before we walked upon it? Does the fridge *really* empty when you close the door? You had your cheese and eggs, didn't you?"

"No. I mean yes! But the *Ding-an-Sich*....thingy bothers me. We can never know what the truth is. It's a bit disturbing."

"Disturbing? Fascinating!. According to Leibniz each monad goes around amassing a unique and unshareable collection of percepts and experiences. And only God has a complete overview of the truth. Just imagine. The water in the beer you are drinking might have passed along the urinary tract of Adolf Hitler. But you'll never know - and nor will the water. We're usually too busy to think about such amazing horrors. I never think about it. Nor do you, except when you want to test me out. You have your beer and you drink it. Whether you appreciate it for what it *really* is, is irrelevant. It gets you drunk and you enjoy it. Or you *think* you do."

"Yes, b-but if we only barely scratch the surface, we're taking things on trust - or just plain guessing."

"Hmm! Most philosophy is only the recycling or critique of Plato. I wouldn't worry about it. Monads? Basically they're atoms - windowless, maybe. At CERN they're looking into them. Reality is just bits and pieces stuck together. Philosophy is just science trying to prize them apart."

"I didn't think you knew any German apart from the menu, Marion."

"I'm sorry?"

“Das Ding-an-Sich.”

“Only certain terms. I had to pick them up on my course. The Germans are great thinkers - or think they are. They thought they could beat the RAF.”

I wanted to ask her what she had “done” with her Philosophy degree. But the question could only sound absurd. (**WANTED:** Philosopher; experience preferred; salary by negotiation.)

“So...did you...lecture in philosophy?”

I felt pleased with this, but her grin became a definite wince. Had I finally managed to offend her?

“Lecture? Goodness, no. If you really must know, I was my late husband’s secretary and accountant for thirty-eight years. He was an alcoholic architect. He was totally disorganised. How on earth his buildings stand up, God only knows. I keep expecting to hear about one on the news any time soon.”

“And were they windowless?”

She winced again and then made a gruff noise akin to the bark of a dog. Was it laughter? Then she came quite close, studying me, as if deciding on another eyebrow to pluck. I felt disconcerted to have her moonface in my space. I was about to enquire about her plans for the afternoon when she said “You don’t like me, do you Mr Armitage?”

I tried to laugh but she carried on.

“You took one look at me - and you saw how that horrible woman Margaret treated me - as if she owns the rights on Marion Jones - and you went on first impressions. I’m a boring, well-past-it woman of little intelligence, who can’t keep a man. I’m just clinging on, you think. You - on the other hand - made a rash promise and you’re only here out here because you’re scared of looking small by wriggling out of it.”

She had me pinned like a wriggling insect. Windowless monads came to my rescue. How could she see all that, I said with a forced laugh, if I was a big monad?

“You’re not though! Your eyes! They show contempt for me, beneath your..... *compassion!* Anyway, what did old Leibniz know about female intuition? He was a real creep, buttering up the Queen of Prussia.....Like *you* trying to show off.....”

I was going to launch into a tirade of self-defence - *Who had used his own credit card to buy flights, etc? Who had carried her back to the hotel? Who was risking arrest - and probably worse - by being there?* - when she sprang up, went into the bedroom and slammed the door. It continued to thud in my ears for a while. There were aspects of this woman I was beginning to find very offensive. OK - she had a point - everything she had said about me was true - but did it really need to be said? I would fly home at the weekend if she had a go at me again. I put down the bottle and lay on the sofa, thinking how disappointed God must have been when his favourite being ignored his warning not to pry *into* things - windowless or not.

I thought she might apologize for her unjustifiable attack on me. But after she had woken me at six, she behaved as if she had forgotten all about it. She had been out, she said - while I slept it off - to call on Mrs Ertl, Jack’s landlady - *She did not mind a bit that we were staying there - what a fuss I had made over nothing! A very jolly, friendly fat lady.* Some of the jollity seemed to have rubbed off on her. She hummed to herself as I considered which of four shirts in my drawer I might wear that evening.

“Haven’t you got a tie?” she asked as I emerged from the bathroom. “It’s quite a posh place. Hold on. You’re about the same build as Jack. I wonder.....”

She insisted I try on Jack’s grey business suit and a white shirt. I had no wish to antagonise her

further. The trousers were a little loose around the waist, but there were tartan braces attached to them. The suit fit me rather well. She beamed with admiration.

“You know, if you made a bit more of yourself and abandoned those casual clothes you insist on wearing, you would be a desirable item, Mr Armitage! Now for a tie.”

She flung wide the wardrobe door and held up a red tie next to the jacket. She took out a pair of black shoes. Amazingly they fit my feet perfectly. She declared how well I looked. She would not feel ashamed to walk out with me. I glanced at her crumpled navy skirt and frilly white blouse. She looked like a deputy headmistress on the verge of retirement. I smiled inwardly but said nothing.

The sunshine was still very warm as we walked out to the restaurant which - she reassured me - was not far and not that expensive. The slight incline soon had her panting and it seemed natural and gentlemanly to offer her my arm. She readily accepted. Once more, I had a strong feeling that we were being tactfully observed but there was no obvious candidate amongst those few locals out for a slow stroll in the heat.

After one false turn we found ourselves at last outside a modern white building with a flat roof, lots of stainless steel and glass and potted palms on a forecourt tastefully block-paved in a geometric pattern of dark and pale stones. It was called Wallensteins. Everything about it announced that such a big investment required big prices - (which no doubt Driscoll's employers had paid). I frowned. Marion hoped that they had a table free as it got rather busy- especially on Fridays. I pointed out rather glumly that it was only Thursday. I consoled myself with the thought that we could eat cheaply the next day. Marion had found out nothing new from Frau Ertl and, unless we went to the casino - I dreaded the prospect - this would be our last chance to pick up Driscoll's scent. Perhaps we could return to Brum earlier than planned if I could make her see how futile it was to remain. My mood lightened and I led the way in through the glass door - which conspicuously and disconcertingly - did not display a menu.

It was far from full. Indeed, apart from ours, only four or five more tables were occupied. No doubt the beautiful weather was responsible. Katherine had told me on the phone that it was also gorgeous in England and that the roses were a picture. I sighed again to think of them.

In contrast to the Italian restaurant, there was here an air of quiet reserve backed by the low tinkling of piano music. The prices were outrageous. I stared at the menu and saw numbers whizzing round on my credit card bill for August when we had already booked to go away. I would have to draw on our savings.

“When I was here in April with Jack I had the venison goulash with parsley potatoes and a William's pear! De-licious!” said Marion glaring at her menu. “But I can't see it.”

“It's over the page” I muttered.

“Oh good!”

Good? It had better be - for thirty-two Euros. She encouraged me to try it but I reminded her that I only ate fish. She winced. She pressed me to make a decision - she wanted to try out her primitive German. I plumped for a trout at the outrageous price of twenty-one Euros. She hailed the waiter - a pleasant ginger young man in a tuxedo - and slowly but competently gave him the order.

“Sehr gut. Und was möchten Sie dazu trinken?”

She looked at me for help. I explained he wanted to know what we what we wanted to drink.

“How do I say I just want still water?”

“Wasser ohne Gas. - Und einen halben Liter Hausweiss, bitte.”

She repeated this to the patient waiter who smiled and read our order back to make sure of it.

“So you’re off the sauce tonight then Marion?”

“Whatever are you implying? That I was drunk last night?”

“Of course not! Do you recognise the waiter? Was he here last time?”

She shook her head. I complimented her on her German and she forgot my disgraceful insinuation.

“The trouble is, of course, that I don’t understand what’s said back to me. I’d be hopeless on the phone. Margaret thinks *she* would be marvellous, of course, if she only put her mind to it. As for her brother, he couldn’t speak a word - nor did he wish to. A true monoglot. How on earth he got his contract, God knows. There must be programmers - or whatever he is - as good as him who can speak German. Or even Germans.”

“Perhaps he’s cheaper.”

The food proved to be very good and the white wine very quaffable. I had not dared look at the price of it but it was not long, after three glasses, before I ceased to care. I caught the waiter’s eye and tapped the jug for another half-litre. I could not tempt Marion to join me. She was keeping an absolutely clear head, she told me. She suddenly declared that our waiter had not been the one who had served her and Jack. When he seemed at a loose end I called him over and asked him in German if he recognised Mr Driscoll from the photo Marion had unearthed from her handbag. He smiled and confirmed in English that he did. I asked him to speak German. He nodded and added that Herr Driscoll was a regular. I told him that he had disappeared and that my companion was very concerned to find out any information about his recent movements. He glanced at her. She was pushing her last yellow potato through the thick ruby sauce.

“Is the gracious lady the mother of our honoured guest?”

“Not at all. She’s his.....partner.” I could not find an alternative to *Partnerin*, which I wished to avoid in case Marion was able to deduce what was being said. To my relief she seemed more interested in the spud. The waiter’s blush confirmed what I had already suspected. I reassured him that she could not understand German of any complexity and urged him to be honest with me. I needed to get to the truth - even if it was embarrassing. Naturally, there would be a generous tip for useful information.

“I am employed as her private detective,” I added due to the wine, and winked. He told me he had worked there since the beginning of May and that Herr Driscoll had been eating there at least three times a week.

“Alone?”

He glanced at Marion again and faltered. She glanced back at him and shrugged. She asked me if there was a problem and I said that he was only trying to remember when Jack had last been in.

“I told you,” I said to the waiter in a cheerful tone to conceal the delicacy of the subject “Just tell me what you know. Forget her! Leave it to me what to tell her. On my head be it.”

Now he affected an air of nonchalance. He had always been in with a blonde, attractive lady - tall - in her mid thirties, he guessed.

“They seemed very....intimate. He took the lady’s hand in his very often. Oh, this is so difficult for me.”

“When was he here last?”

Another guest wanted attention and he hurried away. I told Marion he did not seem to know much. I got up and went to the Gents. On my way out he came close and said that his last visit had definitely been the Saturday before last - there had been a mix-up over the time of his booking and he had sat with the lady in the bar for a while. That was all he knew. Had Driscoll

mentioned going away at all? No, he had not. I pressed a ten Euro note into his palm and went back to Marion. I told her what he had just said. She insisted I asked him how he had seemed. I called him back over. He had been very cheerful, he said. Driscoll and the lady had laughed a lot and had drunk quite a lot of wine. The waiter made his escape.

“Well? How was he?”

“As miserable as sin.”

“Why did you speak German? His English is good.”

“Only at menu level. A bit like your German.”

What else was there to discover? Driscoll and his blonde had simply gone off on a holiday together. Pretty young German women often attached themselves to affluent older men. I would tell Marion later about the companion in private and let her draw her own conclusion. It would be painful and upsetting but an early return to England would be guaranteed. But now she pressed me to tell her every scrap of information I had found out. And stupidly - afraid of her making a scene in public - I began to lie about how low he had always seemed; how he had drunk quite a lot; how he had always been alone.

“So - the young man had no idea where he might have gone?” she said after a moment’s reflection.

“No. ....Marion, I can’t see we’re getting anywhere here. You’ve told me about his gambling and work problems. Why else might he have been depressed? You and him were getting on alright, I suppose? I hate to pry.”

“Did the waiter mention a woman?”

To look away from her gaze would have been fatal; to return it too earnestly, equally so. I shook my head. After a few seconds she looked down. Had she got her answer? She drained her glass of water and told me again how badly his work had been affecting him. She said that for the first time in his career he had felt the project was beyond him. I was very grateful to change the subject. Griesskirchener’s intense eyes flashed in my head and I asked her again to try and remember anything else Jack had said about what he was doing.

“Something to do with a new system for the intranet.”

“You mean *internet*,” I said smugly.

“No. *Intranet*. The internal system there. And security. All very clever, no doubt. Has it ever struck you, Mr Armitage, in your amateur philosophising, just how much the human race prospers due to the ingenuity of a tiny fraction of its members? Archimedes, Shakespeare, Watt...Eddison. Jack Driscoll?? How many of us truly understand the mathematics of the Big Bang? Quantum theory? The logic of computer programming? If we are *homo sapiens sapiens*, should we not be adding another “sapiens” to the title? Is another species evolving?

Technological Man? If those advanced people ever gained control, would they ultimately crush their intellectual inferiors? Like our species may have the Neanderthals? I assume you have read Golding’s *The Inheritors*? Evolution is driven by better adaptation. Technology - which I don’t understand - must be playing a part in driving brain development. It worries me a lot...a lot more than your monads.....Jack Driscoll is ten years younger than me - but we hit it off. Mainly on an intellectual level - which his stupid sister would never grasp. And, like *she* does, you’ve been wondering of course - I can see it - what on earth he sees in me. But it’s none of your business.”

Again, I was forced to lie. “Marion, I am not in the least bit interested - I just want to go home. *Please*, let’s just go to the casino tomorrow - and then -”

“We enjoy doing the book of Times crosswords together...We’re a sort of team. Me with my literary background and him with his natural gift for the cryptic. Solutions just appear to me and

he explains why they're right .....piecing the bits together, back-to-front words, anagrams, symbols, words within words. ....Give me a glass of wine, please."

Was this a prelude to a rain shower? She drank quickly and I topped her up a little.

"Did the waiter say something like *Blondine*? Does that mean blonde?"

"You must have misheard," I replied without blinking.

"I've not *always* been grey, you know. You know, all the present is usually about, Mr Philosopher, is a rehearsal of the future. My life has been a preparation. I've never actually *enjoyed* it. I sincerely hope most people's lives are as futile that because there's comfort in it. I've grown old worrying about what's around the corner and forgotten to *live*. I thought - and still think - that there might come a time when all his striving and ambition - that's what his gambling is all about - would slacken off. Then we could just sit back and relax. But I'm sixty-five. Sixty-bloody-five. I haven't always been. Do you understand?"

I nodded. I was lucky. Her vision of how life should be was exactly how mine was. We were not rich but our home was as we wanted it. We had our books, our music, our garden, our friends, our family, our outings. We ate well, loved well and slept well. Our son and daughter were settled. We were - doubtless to some *disgustingly* so - "comfortable". If an asteroid - real or metaphorical - came along and squished it all, we could at least say we had been very happy. As a young man I had taken risks with my health and my money. Now I played super-safe. Our pensions and a tidy monthly income from our savings and lump sums were very adequate. I had become the petty bourgeois which as a young firebrand I had so loathed. I felt deep shame now not only to have so badly underestimated Marion, but also to have despised her for being a member of that very class.

The bill came and without even looking at it I handed over my credit card. By ten o'clock we were back in the flat. On the way home we had spoken not one word.

"I found his whiskey," she said. "Here. Do you want a nightcap? I'm going to bed."

"You don't want to talk for a bit?"

"No. I need an early night. I need to think what's best to do. Perhaps we could leave on Saturday. Or even tomorrow."

When I woke it was dawn and she was standing over me. My mouth was glued together after all the whiskey I had drunk.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I can't get back to sleep. I'm going for a little walk. There's a park not far away where we.....used to feed the ducks. I'll be back for breakfast."

I woke again at eight to silence. Her room was empty. I put some coffee on and looked for my shorts. They were not in the corner where I had thrown them. Nor were they in the drawer.....and my trousers - where were they? Had she hung them in his wardrobe? No. The suit trousers were there but not the jacket. All Driscoll's other clothes and his shoes had gone. And the car keys....*And* my passport! But she had left the key to the flat. I hurried down to the car park. The Ford Focus was still there. What game was she playing at?

In the local Pennymarket I was being stared at. Tartan braces, formal grey trousers, canvas shoes and a pink tee shirt were obviously not the current height of fashion in Frankfurt. I bought rolls and cheese and hurried back to the flat. Why would she take his clothes - and my trousers? I pushed her bedroom door open. The suitcase I had put on the top of the wardrobe for her was gone. But her clothes were still there.

By ten I was convinced that she had had some kind of breakdown. She spoke next to no German, had next to no money and was vulnerable. I picked up Griesskirchener's card which still lay next to my wallet. Should I call? How plausible would it seem to him that the partner of a missing partner had also gone missing? The chirruping of my mobile phone on the sideboard made me start. The message read - PICK UP AT 2 SHARP - MAIN STATION BY PLATFORM 3. She had obviously at some point looked up the number of my phone. But had she not said she was clueless with mobiles? I looked for Driscoll's in the drawer where I had put it, knowing already that it would be gone. I rang the number back - but the phone was off. I texted her - **Where r u?** I poured more coffee and tried to make sense of it. Perhaps Driscoll had got in touch to tell her he was coming back to Frankfurt on the train at two. (I could go home!) But perhaps he - and she - would be in no fit state for me just to leave them to it. Perhaps this would just be episode two in my little excursion from that safe pathway of mine.

My wallet. She had taken two - no, three hundred Euros from my wallet. I had barely two hundred left. A fury seized me. She had my passport, my keys, my money! Even my bloody trousers! How dare she!

Using the skyscrapers it was easy to navigate back to the city centre. I had decided to walk rather than take the tram. After a while I ceased to feel stupid in my outfit and even began to grin back at anyone staring at me. I arrived at the station at quarter-to-two. I sank a beer in a café and, getting my speech of indignation into its final shape, walked over towards platform three. A thickset man stood there looking around like a radar. A large red paper bag with drawstrings was at his feet. I became aware of an untidy, unshaven man nearby, swearing under his breath and then out loud. Was he not that beggar I had knocked over? He threw a passport at me. And then I was falling under a torrent of blows.

\*

I am being shaken - but very, very gently. I hear my name pronounced in beautiful English. I open my eyes and see Griesskirchener's great eyes looking into mine. His are a blend of concern and impatience. Mine are stinging. A forehead and a nose are throbbing. I realise they belong to me too. I am seated on a chair looking out alternately at miles of blue sky through a wide window and then the grey walls of an office. The spinning window and wall slow down and my eyes try to concentrate on a table on which there sits a laptop. On the screen there is a frozen crowd scene and a red-faced clown in a tee shirt and tartan braces. A hand lifts up and a finger - my finger! - points.

"That's me!"

"Correct, Mr Armitage."

A paper cup appears in front of my face and I am commanded to drink. And then to watch. I see myself stride towards the thickset man. I see a derelict approach, throw something at me and then see myself dropping under a series of blows. The thickset man leaps forward to wrestle my assailant to the floor. Passengers retreat from the eye of the storm in which I am prostrate. I am leant over by my rescuer and out of nowhere a posse of police officers appear, to usher the onlookers back. Griesskirchener reaches forward and pauses the action. He points to the place where the nervous man had been standing and asks me if I can spot the difference. I burst out laughing.

“Please do not attempt a silly British joke, Mr Armitage! I am not in the mood. Who is your accomplice?”

Accomplice? I cannot help but laugh, and his face looms large in mine, like a dangerous planet. He smells of bad gas. I recoil. He turns and jabs the keyboard and the video rewinds. The action freezes at the point where my rescuer springs forward. It plays forward by degrees until a new point is reached where he turns to look back to the spot where he had been waiting, which had till then been obscured by the crowd. I see his hands raise themselves frame by frame until they are both clutching his head in a gesture of shock and horror.

“Well? Are you now in the picture?”

Still not with it, I make the mistake of shrugging, and he slams a great fist down on the table.

“The bag, Mr Armitage! Where is the fucking BAG?”

“Bag?? What bag? How should I know about a bag? Look! I’m out cold.”

He reverses the film, one frame at a time.

“You will please point out the man who takes it. Is it Driscoll?”

It runs backwards until my entrance, at which point he pauses it again.

“I guarantee you, Mr Armitage, you will sit and watch this marvellous short film - in which you act so consummately - until you point out which passenger takes the bag.”

“What was in it?”

I am scared he is about to lose his temper again but instead he controls himself and sneers. “You are indeed a good actor. But logic should tell you that I am bound to be in the possession of most of the truth. I know *of course* how the rendez-vous was arranged and why. Come!”

I look at him afraid to pull a face or say a word which might infuriate him.

“Herr Griesskirchener - what can I say which might convince you that I have not the faintest idea what you are talking about? I want to see someone from the British Consulate.”

“Watch again,” he whispers. Frame by frame I see myself appear, the red bag, the tramp, the attack, the melee, running legs, the crowd thinning, the thickset man in despair - and then a few frames further still he pauses the film again and waits for me to respond. It is then that I notice it about twenty metres from where I lie.

“There it is! The red bag! Between that man’s legs!”

“Very good, Mr Armitage. Your powers of observation certainly do you credit. The accomplice of you and Mr Driscoll - or Driscoll himself - must quickly have tipped out the contents of the red bag into a suitcase and thrown it down. You suspected the presence of a tracking device and you were correct - below the tape securing the cord handles. Your accomplice catches the subway - or goes now outside for a tram or a cab. Which?”

I am bewildered and speechless of course. He lets the film play on. Then I see her - waddling behind an advertising board, pulling a suitcase. The waddle is unmistakable. She is wearing a long auburn wig and looks almost tall in a long skirt. I realise she must be wearing platform shoes. So this is how my three hundred Euros had been spent.

Griesskirchener stops the film and grins like someone with piles.

“Your face, Mr Armitage! You have the wrong kind of face to be a successful criminal! Point the man out!”

“It isn’t a man. It’s Marion Jones. Her there.”

He gives me full beam, guffaws and asks me if I think him entirely stupid.

“Are you saying that such a tiny old lady has disguised herself to look so tall? Absurd! Point out the real culprit!”

I am tempted to remark that the refusal of the Germans to believe the obvious had been their

downfall in Normandy, but I just put my hurting head in my hands. He springs up, opens a door and says very quietly “Steiner - bringen Sie den Bettler rein!”

Bleary-eyed, battered and bruised, he is ushered in by an officer and made to sit down opposite me. I recognise him. The beggar I had knocked to the ground. Griesskirchener tells him I speak German and urges him to tell me his story.

A tall blonde lady had approached him, he says, outside his doorway and had shown him a passport; had said that the man in the photo had threatened her for wanting to go back and give him some money; that he had cheated her and been cruel to her.

“She gave me fifty Euros to go to the station at two and rough you up - and promised fifty more after I did. You would be dressed like a clown - I couldn’t fail to spot you - you *bastard*.”

The officer is summoned. He is escorted out shouting for his other fifty.

A tall blonde lady. I think immediately of Driscoll’s companion in the restaurant and feel relief. This all proves I am an innocent victim of a conspiracy. I tell this to Griesskirchener. He snorts in contempt.

“I have been used as a decoy,” I insist. “Why would I want to be beaten up by a smelly old tramp?”

“For a share of a million Euros?”

“But I’m under arrest! What sense does that make?”

“I would have agreed - if you had turned out to be what you said you were. But you lied to me. You are not Mrs Jones interpreter at all. Look at these messages.”

He takes out my phone and reads aloud “10:13 Pick up at two sharp, main station by platform 3.” Pick up *what*, Mr Armitage?”

“Pick up *her*!”

“In the car? Why then did you walk in?”

“She stole my keys! And my passport. And three hundred Euros.”

“What about this message? 14:25 “*Hope it didn’t hurt too much. Meet you as planned. Trojan Horse.*” Explain that one.”

“But don’t you see? I’m being set up - and so are you!”

“You told your neighbour - and a waiter - you are a private detective.”

“I made it up - to impress them. I was stupid.”

“The Trojan Horse is code for Jack Driscoll. As soon as he vanished, I had a feeling that something like this was afoot. Those stupid bastards at the Stock Exchange - employing an alien because he was cheaper! With a gambling problem!”

“This is just absurd! I offer to help a distressed old lady in Frankfurt - I find myself suspected of...of...of.....*What* am I suspected of? What’s going on?”

He brings out his own mobile phone. “I received this message at 07:34 today. The number of the sender is Jack Driscoll’s. We checked. It came from the Sachsenhausen area of Frankfurt where he lives. Are you saying you know nothing about this? Here!”

I read.

***I am going to activate my Trojan horse at three pm today - Friday - unless you hand over to my colleague Armitage the sum of one million Euros in used five hundred notes at 2 p.m. at platform 3 Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof. Any attempt to contaminate or compromise the notes will lead to my special email being sent which someone there is bound to open. Out will pour a million Greek warriors. Good night Frankfurt. - Driscoll.***

Bewildered, I pass the phone back to him.

“Of course, the other question is - what have you all done with poor Mrs Jones? We have been to the Mühlustrasse. I say *all of you* because a waiter has confirmed that Driscoll had a tall blonde lady friend.- the same lady, no doubt, who recruited our smelly friend to “attack” you.”

The word *Blondine* flashes into my aching head and at once I see it all. But the blonde had spoken German to the tramp. She could not surely also be Marion. Could she?

She had been wearing an auburn wig at the station. Had she bought *two* with my money?

“Ask the tramp to describe the woman. How old was she? Was she fat? Big-breasted?”

“Mr Armitage, believe me, it was quite an achievement for Julius to remember *one* thing about her. It is a very daring plan you have hatched between you. And now you expect me to have you cleaned up and allowed to leave, I suppose!”

I feel my anger rise. Surely he cannot believe in such an absurd conspiracy!

“Herr Griesskirchener, how can I persuade you that I have been as big a dupe as you have? A million euros is not so much money - divided by the *three* you suspect.”

“We expect further demands.”

“Is it my fault if your operation fouled up?”

He clenches his fist and a hint of a blush comes into his cheeks.

“Don’t tell me the money really was above board - and *spendable*, Herr Griesskirchener!”

His frown confirms this.

“God. No wonder you’re so mad with me. You’ve lost your treasury a million Euros!”

“You were to lead us to Driscoll. We would have put him naked in a padded cell and forgotten him. His horse would have remained outside the gates of Troy.”

“You have a big problem.”

“So do you.” He lowers his voice to a whisper. “You are my only lead to Driscoll. I have to placate my superiors with *something*. You will be free but you will not be free. You will have no passport to fly home. You will have no credit card or money. Provisions will be delivered to your flat. You will have no phone. If you try to go to an organ of the media or your consulate we will be there to arrest you. You will have a car filled with petrol but it will be bugged, so that when you meet Driscoll “*as planned*” we will be there to arrest him. That is your only option - and you will be only too pleased, I believe, in the end to take it. This will continue until we are sure the Trojan horse is dead.”

“But my wife! She will report me missing!”

“When she does we will of course investigate, but then regret to inform her there is no trace of you.”

“This is monstrous! I am a citizen of the EU.”

“Then please behave like one,” he says, raising his voice to a normal level. “Tell me where Driscoll is and where you have arranged to meet!”

He begins to whisper again. “If you tell me, you will be home with your wife tomorrow. I will inform my superiors that you were, after all, an innocent bystander. With Driscoll locked away and the money returned, they will not quibble.”

“*Quibble*..... You know deep down I have no idea where Driscoll is. I came to Frankfurt out of altruism, have been shamefully used...and now you are using me just as shamefully as a pawn in your failing game.”

“Not at all. I have to keep an open mind - when the game you refer to is for very high stakes - the very integrity of Germany’s financial system.”

I was dusted down and driven back to the Mühliustrasse by a silent driver. He pulled up and spoke. "Your flat key. And your car key. A new Audi. Round the back. The tank is full. Good evening."

I found the fridge full of beer and got pretty drunk. No doubt they thought I could be forced into an indiscretion - because of course the flat had to be bugged. I found some paper and wrote a letter to my wife, explaining my predicament.

On the Saturday morning I sat for ages on the balcony until the young woman next door emerged. I had convinced myself that she had been telling the truth about the photograph of Driscoll's son. I told her I would be really grateful if I could scrounge an envelope and two normal postage stamps. She went in and came back out with them. Would she be kind enough to post it for me, as I had sprained my ankle and could hardly walk? She nodded. Inwardly I rejoiced. So much for my paranoia! So much for the competence of Griesskirchener and his acolytes!

Two hours later a car sounded its hooter and I looked down. My silent driver was standing on the pavement. I watched as my pretty neighbour went out to him, turned, waved my letter at me and gave it to him. I slumped down on the balcony chair. She came out and smiled ruefully. She told me in faultless American English that she was my contact. I was to let her know if I wanted anything...pizza, DVDs, beer, wine....I shook my head and wept quietly at her strange kindness in this cruel trap. She left me alone.

I lived out of the freezer for days and refused her offers of shopping. I decided to make my point by going absolutely nowhere. Of course, I had already worked out that if, in tartan braces, suit trousers and a tee shirt, I tried to explain my predicament to a passer-by, then they would either ignore me as a lunatic or call the police - who, on discovery of my lack of ID, would refer me to Griesskirchener's department.

The television news told of no catastrophe at the Stock Exchange. Driscoll was either bluffing or happy with his ransom - at least so far. It was a perfect Trojan horse - invisible, unpredictable, impossible to discount, unslaughterable. How long before he and Marion thought of a new plan to lighten the German Treasury further?

The days passed. I imagined Griesskirchener's growing impatience with my failure to make a move. I tried to think of a chink in his invisible prison. What if I just started walking in the middle of the night while my neighbour slept? Perhaps I could cadge a lift? Get onto the motorway. Get into France. I decided that this would be my last crazy resort. I had been sitting for hours on end pondering, when at last an idea came to me. I lived in a house with eight or nine neighbours. They had a telephone. I wrote out the same note to all of them in German.

*I am an Englishman. I need your help. I am being held incommunicado by the police in flat number 6. Please phone my wife on 0044 1455 637119 to tell her of my predicament, that I am well, that I need the help of the British consul. This is not a prank. I am not mad. Please help!*

When the house was dark and totally silent I crept out and slipped my notes under all the doors - except my treacherous neighbour's of course - and prayed. Surely there would be one resident intrigued enough to phone the number for me - the alien trapped in a free country.

In the morning - was it my sixth or seventh day? - there was a tap at the door.

My heart leapt. Outside was a box of groceries I had not asked for. My heart sank. There was milk, beer, wine, potato salad, smoked salmon, tomatoes and bread. I lay drinking on the sofa imagining the chain of events which was surely taking place. My wife had indeed been phoned by a concerned neighbour and had had alerted the police. The consulate was being informed and enquiries made. But by evening, when nothing had materialised, and my alcohol-fuelled euphoria had vanished I began to despair again. The notes must have been screwed up and thrown away after all.

That night I lay awake picturing a journey across to Bavaria to my old friend Manni in Ramlersreuth. I could steal out at night and hide in the forest during the day. Then travel in the dark along lonely country lanes ...but they could track the car by device. Or was it a bluff? Of course not. Griesskirchener needed to follow me, even though he knew I was not involved. The Ford Focus was still out there. There was a map book on the shelf. If only I could find where Marion had hidden the keys! I got up and began a search. To my delight and amazement I found them almost straight away - stuffed inside a sock at the back of the top drawer.

It was half past four and growing light when I stole out and drove away out through the southern suburbs. Soon I was in villages with the Odenwald looming dark green on the horizon. There was nobody following me. Should I get onto the nearby motorway and make a dash for it? A police car with its light flashing rushed past in the opposite direction and I panicked. I saw a signpost indicating by way of its two enthusiastic hikers a carpark in the woods. I pulled in as far as I could go and waited. Fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. I laughed to think of Griesskirchener being woken to be told I had disappeared. I would lie low till the rush hour began to build and then get on the motorway. Or should I stick to my forest plan? I began to wonder if the Focus had also been bugged out of Germanic efficiency. It was a beautiful morning. I conceived a fantastic plan to *walk* through the forests to Bavaria. Then laughed and dismissed it. The stress of my predicament was driving me mad!

But I felt increasingly vulnerable just sitting there. A distant siren decided me. I could not resist the urge to get out and plunge into the forest and its dark secrets - to become one of them! If I could come across a hamlet or an inn I could surely bluff my way into making that precious phone call! I only craved what the millions around me were at that moment taking for granted - privacy and anonymity. I was soon climbing a stairway of tree roots between bracken and feeling with delight my heart race. Pillars of sunlight towering through the canopy created golden pools in which butterflies and midges danced. Computers and stocks and shares were so fully exposed as futile that I broke out in a mixture of laughter and sobbing. I could soon hear the low roar of a waterfall or a stream and felt sure that the crooked path would lead to a bridge where I could stare for a while at a water-mosaic of russet and golden stones. The roar grew louder and I felt a homeless wind now stalking me though the bending trees. I entered a clearing and looked up instead of down. A helicopter. I heard a tannoyed voice shouting "Halt" above me. I turned to see my "rescuer" from the station labouring along the path. He looked at me and gestured almost sorrowfully. I followed.

Griesskirchener beamed at me, "So, Mr Armitage. Out for a drive? A nice morning for it." I answered him in German. I told him I would think of a way out. I would not let him beat me. This was 2009 not 1939. When it came out what he had done he would lose his job, his pension, his freedom, everything. The two officers - one was my silent driver - who stood beside him on the forest car park looked far less impressed by my tirade than I hoped. He smiled so genially that I almost forgot I hated him.

“In fact, I’ve already thought of a way!” I told him.

“Really?”

He reached into his jacket inside pocket and produced one of my notes.

“Unfortunately all your neighbours have had to be rehoused until the central heating boiler can be replaced. It is unsafe. Oh, and in case you remembered where you had hidden your keys, we placed a little gadget on your hire-car too.”

“Du....Bastard!”

I sat down on the bonnet of my car and wept.

“Eckert,” he ordered. “Fahren Sie bitte das Auto.”

My “rescuer” - Eckert - got behind the wheel. Griesskirchener squeezed himself into the passenger side. I sat still on the bonnet. He leant out and told me it was a long way back on foot and I was welcome to have a lift. I got in the back with the two other officers. The sheer hopelessness of my position could not be clearer. Back on the road, police cars occasionally sped past in an ostentatious search for a non-existent Driscoll. The pantomime disgusted me. I tried to explain to his three colleagues what a cover-up all this was for their boss’s incompetence; that his actions were criminal and counter to all human rights legislation; that it was their duty to report him to a superior. He laughed and said languidly in English that *he* was their superior. He told me that they had already been briefed about my skills as a confidence-trickster. I was wasting my breath! I ignored him and told the man next to me - who was looking out of the window as if I did not exist - that their boss was a liar.

“If I know where Jack Driscoll is, why would I be walking in the middle of nowhere? At five in the morning? Huh? This man is the fraud, not I.”

“There is no point Richard speaking to them,” he said in English.

“Don’t you dare address me as if you own me!”

“Richard. But I *do*. Please. They have been told that you and your colleague are a threat to the economy of the fatherland. They have been hand-picked for this mission - the mediocrity of their English being their key asset.”

“Now he’s saying that you are too stupid to understand what he’s saying to me.” I said in German, grabbing the arm of my neighbour and shaking it. Calmly, without looking round, he unpicked my fingers and pushed my hand gently away. Suddenly I thought of my beautiful neighbour who spoke beautiful English. She was intelligent. Could I persuade her to listen?

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After supper I knocked on her door and asked her if she wanted to share a bottle of wine with me. I needed to tell her something. Her great eyes lit up and she followed me into the flat. I poured out some wine.

“Your boss Griesskirchener is a criminal. He messed up the operation at the station. He knows I have nothing to do with the extortion. I am his hostage. His smokescreen. You saw the old lady I was here with? Well, she was crying in an English lounge just over two weeks ago - because her partner - him in this flat - had gone missing. I had never seen or heard of her until then - a friend of a friend of my wife’s. I spoke German. The old lady didn’t. Or so I thought. I offered to help. I have been completely taken in and now I’m trapped by Griesskirchener. I will be here for ever. You will be here for ever. I am going nowhere, nor you. I hope Driscoll’s Trojan horse gets opened - then your boss will have to go.”

I poured more wine and saw to my horror how my hand had begun to shake. I had already drunk

two bottles of strong Pilsener. I asked her if she believed me and she said no. As the wind fell from my sails she reached into her bag, took out a pen and paper and wrote on it *Ask me if I want some music on.*

“Would you like to listen to a CD?”

“Er - if you wish - but not too loud.” She wrote *quite loud* and I sprang up to search through Driscoll’s collection. She tapped my arm and pointed to the light fitting. I found a Glenn Miller CD and put it on.

“You *do* believe me?” I whispered as soon as the Miller’s cornets began to wail.

She nodded and I felt tears prick my eyes. The sentimental music, the booze and the relief made me feel very emotional. Whispering, I implored her to phone my wife and tell her I was alive. I scrawled out the number. She folded the paper and put it in her bag. I told her that she would be bound to fly over sooner or later if she heard nothing.

“It would make no difference,” she said. “She would not get past the border police. Some irregularity would be found in her passport.”

“This can’t be happening.”

She spoke more softly. “I feel sorry for you. Griesskirchener is a bastard. We are all afraid of him because he is such a powerful bastard. It is unheard of him to blunder. He is now obsessed and determined to prevail. You are in a terrible mess. I will find a public phone to contact your wife.”

She pointed to her ear with one finger and pointed in all directions with the other.

“If you turn the music up a little more, we could have sex,” she whispered.

I stared at her slim figure and her full bosom crammed into a red top, and her earnest, dark eyes.

“You are very kind. But no...I could...but I couldn’t. I’m sorry. I’m not making sense.”

We finished the bottle and she left.

The next morning I walked out onto the balcony and waited. Her door opened. Out strode my station rescuer. I asked him where the young lady was.

“What young lady? There was never a young lady here.”

I was hearing his voice for the first time. He had a deep base voice such as I had only heard in German men, a voice forged by years of schnapps and smokes.

“You...you...bastard. You would have manned a watchtower at Dachau...”

“I only do my duty. Go and write down what you wish to have to eat today.”

Like a cur I went back into the cool of the lounge to do as I had been told. But after three items I stopped and rushed back out. I screwed up the list and threw it at him, but it fell pathetically a long way short. I told him to tell Griesskirchener that I was going on hunger strike. I strode back in and shouted at the light “Did you hear that, you bastard?”

I went out for a walk. It was the kind of summer day when the least sound carried a mile. I kept looking for a shadow but the residential streets were quite deserted. No doubt they had put a bug in my shoe while I had been unconscious. Should I strip off and make a run for it? Instead, I walked into a supermarket, got stared at in my (by now) quite scruffy outfit, realised there was no point being there without money and came out again.

I turned on the TV and watched an absurd, dubbed American soap opera for a while, then sat in silence and contemplated the light. Had a tiny camera been put in there too, as well as a microphone? Perhaps my pretty neighbour had been unaware of it. I pulled faces. I told some filthy English jokes and amused myself by translating them into German. I remembered I had a

couple of beers in the fridge. I toasted my observer and practised belching.

“Hello there, I’ve changed my mind about a hunger strike. Have you got a pen handy? I want six Bitburger Pils, a bottle of red Zweigelt, a bottle of Grauburgunder - the best - you getting this? - Some frozen king prawns - the biggest - spaghetti, tomato puree, garlic and Parmesan.”

At five there was a knock and there, neatly packed, were all my wishes. I started on the beer, fried the garlic gently, added the puree then the prawns, boiled the spaghetti and settled down to a feast. I drank the white wine then started on the red, gnawing at what was left of the cheese.

The forest would be full of wild raspberries and strawberries in July. I could live off them and walk to Bavaria after all. I studied the map. Apart from one insignificant gap there was forest all the way. Manni had boasted that it was virtually possible to walk from the French border to the Czech border - a few miles from his home village - through the great forests. I could make it! I thought of the lanky man in the Great Escape who had cycled to freedom in Spain. I staggered to the cupboard, took out some peanuts and fell over. No doubt my face would appear on news bulletins as a suspect linked to a robbery or a rape. My thickening beard would disguise me. I could wash in streams and sleep in bird hides. I got to my feet with a struggle and turned out the light. By the dim light of the fridge I filled my travel bag with as many things of use as I could find. I looked at my watch. Twelve twenty. I would give it an hour until the streets were quiet. Then I would set out again on foot for the Odenwald. My former life seemed to be a receding dream to which access, except by more dreams, was impossible.

I woke to find myself lying on the carpet. What was that grinding noise? A key turning in the door? Marion? I opened an eye and looked at my watch. It was seven something. The door was slowly opening. It was a shock to see a face animated which till then had only been a still.

“Who the bloody hell are you? In my flat? On the floor in my bloody trousers and braces? Look at the bloody state of them!”

“Mr Driscoll?”

The listeners would now be alerting Griesskirchener. I had only a few minutes.

“My name’s Armitage. I came with Marion to look for you. I speak German, you see.”

“To look for me? She bloody knew I was thinking of going away.”

“You didn’t phone her.”

“Why the bloody hell should I? She knew deep down we were finished. What’s been going on? It bloody well pongs in here. God. Get your stuff, get my clothes off and clear out! Before I call the police.”

He threw open the balcony doors. He told me I looked like shit. He would make me a coffee - then I could leave. I watched him fill a filter paper with Jakob’s Kaffee. What could I say to the light fitting to make my innocence absolutely clear?

“I thought you and Marion would be in Geneva now depositing your million Euros.”

“What?” He looked around at all the empties. “You’re still pissed.”

“But it looks as if you have been conned as much as I have and the police. She pretended to be you blackmailing the authorities with the threat of a Trojan horse at the Stock Exchange. She set me up to collect the money, paid a tramp to beat me up and cause a diversion, then snook off in disguise with the money. She found out you had another woman.”

The coffee machine began to glug as if it was him swallowing hard in astonishment.

“Are you completely bloody mad?” he gasped at last. “She knew bugger-all about ICT. And this tramp - was he an imported English-speaking tramp? Her German was almost bloody non-

existent. She could just about order from a menu.”

“Apparently not. She must have understood about your blonde friend too at Wallenstein’s restaurant. Drink your coffee. The police will be here in a minute. There’s a bug in that light fitting.”

He looked up and scoffed. “You ARE a bloody nutter,” he declared.

“Just pour me a coffee. I’m gagging.”

I told him I knew about his gambling debts and how much he owed Marion.

“She obviously decided it was pay-back time, Mr Driscoll.”

“She knew I’d pay her back when my contract was up.....How dare she tell you our private business!”

There came a sharp rap at the door. In walked Griesskirchener, grinning. He invited Driscoll to follow his colleague and in a second it was if he had never been there.

“Can I go home now?”

He continued to grin. “Apparently, Mr Armitage, there has been an unexpected development in this case. New evidence appears to confirm your version of events. I am very happy for you. Good morning. Oh - by the way - we found your clothes locked in the boot of the Ford. Here they are. Have a nice flight.”

I was driven to the airport by the silent officer and handed the bag into which Griesskirchener had sealed my possessions. These included one hundred and thirty-two Euros thirty-seven cents. That was it. I would even have to buy my own ticket.

I phoned Katherine.

“Richard? Where the hell -? I’m been going mad! Where the hell have you been? Why didn’t you phone? You BASTARD!”

“I’m in Frankfurt. It’s boiling. Listen. Go and buy a bottle of good champagne and get the big crab out of the freezer. We’ll celebrate!”

“What’s been going on?”

“I’ve been to hell and back. I’ll tell you all about it later.”

\*

Even as I flew home those events began to take on the quality of a jerky dream. They would have credibly remained a fantasy, but for a letter waiting for me with a Greek stamp on it.

*Dear Mr Armitage,*

*I must first apologize for the way I treated you. I assume by now that you have found your way home, having convinced the German police that you were entirely innocent. You must believe me when I say that I did not hatch my plan until after our visit to Wallenstein’s. I sort of knew that Jack had other women but your conversation with the waiter - the odd word between you and his discomfort confirmed it. Jack was my second mistake with men. I deluded myself that his depression - about his debts and his work - was to blame for him ending our relationship and thought he could be persuaded to change his mind. And I did want my money back.*

*I am having a little Indian summer after so many overcast years. With any luck I can keep one step ahead of the police for a while longer yet.*

*I'm sorry I interfered with your belongings. I found your debit card and copied down your account number. If you look in a few days you will see I have transferred to you a very tidy sum in recompense for your kindness, and for any unpleasantness you experienced.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*The Trojan Horse.*

I awoke thinking that it was Griesskirchener shaking me. But it was Katherine's soft eyes staring into mine, not his. I shivered. Apart from the palest glow of the vanished sun in the west the sky was dark and full of stars. The table was littered with the remains of the crab and salad. My wine glass was half full.

"We've had a trying time." she said. "Come on. It's cold out here. Come to bed."