

Translated extract from

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Stay Where You Are

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Part One

A fish in water

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Even from far away, it would be hard to ignore the silver platters on the buffet table piled high with sliced and diced chunks of ham. The whole room is bathed in a blubbery yellow, the low-hung Tiffany lamps are on even though it isn't dark outside. Carved into a wooden sign above the door are the words *Große Laugenspitze*, a burgundy-colored carpet covers the floor, dark brown paneling on the walls. For a brief moment, Matthias Harms feels as though he'd stepped into a nightmare. He wished Günther would have come with him as planned; he would have made some kind of scathing comment about the whole scene and cheered him up. The train ride from Hamburg had not exactly gone well. A dizzy spell in the train station toilet caused him to miss his connection which unnecessarily prolonged the journey, later he had to wait between stations because of a personal injury, the phone constantly got disconnected, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't finish a conversation with his mother. The mountains were to blame, the tunnel, the bad weather along the way. Nonetheless, he had arrived in time for the opening event at the hotel, but he didn't have time to take a bath and wash the overnight train journey off as he had planned. On the bright side, he was able to get more work done because the trip took longer. Aside from that, the sun is shining in Merano, it is surprisingly warm. And ultimately, he had been looking forward to the weekend in the mountains.

A colleague he knew from other conferences comes up to him, Hermann Manfred or Manfred Hermann, he simply cannot remember. He greets him as if they were old friends, drags him through the room by the sleeve and Matthias is too courteous to defend himself.

Hermann Manfred finds a corner table for the two of them and Matthias slides obediently onto a wooden bench covered in cushions that immediately slip out from under him. The room gradually begins to fill.

Three other men join them, one on the bench, two on the chairs, introductions, handshakes all around. Matthias hears Hermann Manfred's name in the correct order and immediately forgets it again, nobody at the table is wearing the nametags left for them in their rooms. All of them are sitting there waiting for things to get going with legs akimbo, crossed arms, chins on chest like top dogs and Matthias is secretly glad to see that the waitress, who takes their drink

orders, is wearing a skirt with a leather dog insignia and a blouse with buttons made of horn. All of them order beer. The evening activity is called "Social Gathering".

Manfred Hermann swivels back and forth on his cushion, gazes past the others into the room and says, "There's hardly any women here."

"If you always try to agree with your patients, you've got no business being at these kinds of conferences," said Matthias. It was supposed to be a joke, but the top dogs nod in agreement. After that he keeps his mouth shut. It's too warm, he breaks into a sweat, there's a lot of noise – obviously theirs is the only table that's totally silent. The beer comes and keeps them busy. Pine trees are embossed on the glasses.

At some point, to the relief of the cheery group, some accordion players start moving around the dining room and lobby and somebody taps a glass. A man stands up, he is wearing a Loden jacket and gives a short welcome speech. Matthias knows him, they had talked on the phone, his name is Huber and he is the conference leader. He grins a lot; he fiddles with his face while he talks and keeps his hand in his pocket. By his intonation and the way he forms his consonants, it's obvious he's from the area. He asks everybody to take note of the related programs on the schedule, introduces special guests—each day he has invited somebody to speak at lunch—, and when he points towards Matthias all heads turn in his direction. After listing some changes in the schedule, he makes a joke - How many psychologists do you need to screw in a light bulb? - as soon as he finishes he orders everybody to dig into the ham, and if somebody hadn't noticed it, he points towards the buffet. He even takes a moment to explain how it was prepared: a special smoking process, air dried, mould ripened, cured ham, local swine. Some applause, then the socializing officially begins. Music drones in the background.

Matthias doesn't have much of an appetite, but the others have gotten up to stand in line at the buffet, and he feels lost sitting at the table alone. With plate in hand, he walks slowly past the platters, he has no idea what to take. Ham is not really his thing, but he dutifully takes a few coarsely sliced pieces, the salad with bits of vegetables and plenty of mayonnaise is made up of fifty percent pearl onions. The pads of butter, shaped like clover leaves, just came out of the freezer and are sweating beads of water. The fried cutlets have grown cold, the self-serve salad components are mostly pickled and smell sour (green beans, coleslaw, red beets).

In the end, he mostly had bread covering his plate: a slice of whole grain bread as big as a car tire, a dry piece of flat bread with a bumpy surface that tasted like crisp bread he hoped, and half of a flat, round bread with various spices on it. He vaguely remembers it from a vacation

he took there with his family as a child. He sees his father on a hike, how he drew water from a spring with his felt hat for the three children. The hike had been murderous. Otherwise, he remembers almost nothing. The whole thing happened a good forty years ago.

Everybody goes back to their seats to eat in the corner; the waitress brings them another round of beers, one of the gentlemen at the table points to Matthias's plate and says. "That's what I call a balanced diet."

Matthias grins amiably while trying to remember the man's name. He couldn't understand the name earlier because it was mumbled.

"So you're the one", says another, who at least introduced himself clearly as Geierhofer, a colleague from Austria with a remarkably clean-shaven face, shirt buttoned to the top, but without a tie. "with the compulsions. I just read your article."

"How nice," says Matthias. He has bread in his mouth.

"Is that what your talk is about tomorrow?"

"Which article do you mean?"

Geierhofer looks momentarily confused, then raises the right corner of his mouth - the left side of his face remains motionless for most of the evening- and says, "To be perfectly honest, I can't remember. There was a woman in it and a lot of abbreviations."

"I read it too," says the mumbler.

"Where is the lecture tomorrow?" asks Hermann Manfred.

Matthias considers. "In the big conference room. The name's the same as a horse, I believe."

»Haflinger" says the mumbler.

"That's a horse?" says Geierhofer. "Sounds more like a Hobbit to me."

After that the conversation starts to flow. Soon they agree to use the familiar form of you, though Geierhofer doesn't reveal his first name, it obviously embarrasses him. Matthias' resolution not to drink too much became irrelevant after the third beer. He needs the liquid, he has far too little butter and cold cuts for his mountain of bread, and none of the bread on his plate could be described as being juicy.

The Fifth one sitting with them at the table is quiet and reserved, younger than the rest of them, a wiry, tall man with a blond mustache (probably gay). His name is Thomas, but he told them they could call him Tommy; he is Swiss, but doesn't have an accent and is living in Cologne, that doesn't surprise Matthias. He does everything in conspicuous moderation: does not eat too much or too fast, hangs onto his beer longer than the others. He is in training to be a therapist, he is nearly finished. During a lull in the conversation, he turns to Matthias, "Your

specialty is compulsion, if I understand correctly."

"You understand correctly."

"Oh God, how exhausting." Thomas giggles goofily. "I had a case a while ago, at first I didn't realized it was an obsessor, it was pretty dreadful. He debated with me the entire time and I'm afraid he was simply too intelligent for me."

"I know how that is," says Hermann Manfred.

Matthias laughed out loud.

"Nonetheless - it fascinated me in a way," says Thomas.

"Compulsive obsessive patients" are the worst, says Geierhofer.

"That's for sure," says Hermann Manfred.

"I think they are fascinating," says Thomas.

"We know that," says Geierhofer.

Matthias lowers his head so the others can't see him grinning. He is starting to like this Geierhofer more and more with that immobile half of his face. Somehow, he loses track of his thoughts, while the others start talking about a concrete case, the case of the Swiss man. That usually doesn't happen to Matthias. But Manfred Hermann is sitting across from him and is eating the pearl onion mayonnaise salad with gusto, shoveling down the dreadful stuff and chewing mechanically with a grinding motion that's easily visible. Matthias cannot avert his eyes.

Suddenly he hears Geierhofer say loudly: "For the next three days, we'll discuss nothing but compulsions. If we can't find another subject here and now, I'll go to my room and shower with disinfectant."

The waitress arrives with a fresh round. Matthias is now back on track. It looks like he's had good luck with his companions, he feels he doesn't have to get up this evening and search for more pleasant company. That is, if nobody talks about politics and Hermann Manfred doesn't get a second helping of salad.

The mumbler with the sparse hair, except for the rather thick tuft on his forehead, is from Bavaria—he dabs at his mouth and sweaty scalp with his cloth napkin continuously and is proving to be a fairly good joke teller with a seemingly inexhaustible repertoire. Unfortunately, much gets lost through his mumbling, but Matthias is amused anyway, in fact he thinks the man is funny, before he even gets to the punchline.

At some point, while the others are lining up for dessert, the waitress's behind suddenly catches his eye as she stoops to pick something up, and then Boxli popped into his head, he

had not thought about him for years. When the mustachioed Thomas plopped back onto the bench and indecisively stared at a lonely slice of fruitcake on a small plate, Matthias suddenly felt the urge to tell him about him. "I once had a dog and he was Swiss too. A boxer," he says. "Oh?" asks Thomas. "And why was he Swiss?"

"He was a stray and came to us, while we were on vacation. We had to smuggle him across the border."

"We always used to have a dog, one after the other, all of them mixed breed," says Thomas. "My favorite dog's name was Bello. At the time, I thought it was a very original name."

"Ours was called Max, he was named after Max Schmeling. But because he was Swiss, my wife always called him Boxli. "

"And is he dead now?"

Yes, for a long while. After that we didn't get another one. We had to put him to sleep."

"Why?"

Matthias found some crumbs at the bottom of his beer glass, he swished them back and forth to see if they would dissolve. "I can't remember. He was sick, I guess."

Thomas says: "One of ours got run over."

"Anyway, it had to be, says Matthias and finishes the beer in one gulp, crumbs and all.

"It was not even a busy street. And a hit and run to boot. I heard a dull thud, I was in the kitchen, I remember it exactly, and when I went out to see what was going on ... "

"Sooner or later dogs always have something," says Matthias.

The Austrian Geierhofer returns to the table also with a slice of fruitcake, then a little later Hermann Manfred, who proudly shows off his plate with a creamy dessert and announces he snatched the last piece of tiramisu. The mumbling Bavarian is still missing, the waitress collects the empty glasses, they order another round and Matthias displaces the thought of Boxli's wagging behind to the area of his brain responsible for archiving sentimental memories. He looks around, looks at the Tiffany lamps and decides, before he goes to bed, he'll take the bath he missed out on earlier. He drinks the fresh beer quickly.

Hermann Manfred taps him with the dessert spoon on the back of his hand. "What's up with your friend Günther what's-his-face? He had also registered, right? And the two of you usually come together."

Matthias pulls his hand away and wipes it inconspicuously on the tablecloth. "He couldn't make it, his little girlfriend kept him for herself, she's pregnant, pukes every night."

"At night? Asks Geierhofer.

"Well, I'd rather puke alone", says Hermann Manfred.

Right at that moment, the mumbling Bavarian hurries by, his face is covered with red spots, he has a crazed look in his eyes. He leans down to Matt and whispers, not too quietly, in his ear: "See that woman over there? I think she wants to hook up with me. I know her from Borderline and New Media. She always reserves a double room, if you know what I mean."

"I know her, too," says Geierhofer. "And I know what you mean." But the Bavarian has gone. Matthias laughs. He's starting to feel really good and is glad he accepted the invitation to this conference. He hears "Anton aus Tirol" at least three times that evening blaring from an invisible amplifier. He hums along automatically, but stops immediately, because Thomas starts singing next to him, Geierhofer joins him and the two bellow louder, finally getting up from their seats, putting their arms around each other's shoulders and leaning their heads together and sing: "Our sexy slender legs are what all the girls crave...". Afterwards, they take a bow, Geierhofer sits down, but Thomas keeps standing and gives the next song a try. Obviously, he doesn't know it, he improvises the lyrics and melody. For the finale, he decides to passionately sing an opera aria, with arms wide and chest thrust forward, Matthias and the other two burst out laughing, Geierhofer's chair is rocking dangerously and Hermann Manfred beats the table in delight with the palm of his hand.

Later they order grappa. The waitress is sweating and smells like fabric softener, Matthias looks at the dog sewn on her skirt and wonders whether Anke would like something like that. He remembers he forgot to call her after he arrived, but that's OK. It's not important. They have an understanding. And even though she was a little strange yesterday and had hardly spoken to him, he's certainly not going to let that spoil his mood, tomorrow is soon enough to talk to her and clear things up, and besides, he's in no shape to talk to her, he stopped counting the beers.

The hotel room is plain and nondescript which is fine with him. It's enough that the ceiling in the lobby has a carved wooden beam and the staircase a lathed railing. Most likely he'll lie awake part of the night, which is why he prefers to look at a neutral ceiling. A double bed, an armchair, desk and chair, a television, and then the night table with a bible and hotel brochure, and chocolate coins placed on the pillow at bedtime.

The conference leader Huber has left a greeting card by the water bottle on the side table:

Welcome to Merano. I am delighted you have accepted my invitation to be a guest speaker. Please consider the breaks in the program activities as a vacation and enjoy the fresh air, beautiful surroundings and our wonderful ham.

Matthias needs quite a while to decipher the words; they keep bouncing up and down. He is clearly drunk, but he can handle a lot, he's always been that way, and a bath is just the right thing to do in his state. When he went upstairs, the people at his table were the last to leave the dining room. In the bathroom, he turns on the bathtub and while the water is running he goes into the room and rummages through his luggage.

He finds an apple between his fresh set of clothes. Anke must have put it into his suitcase, something she does occasionally, so to speak, in passing, a little greeting meant to remind him to watch his health. He places it on the desk, catches it as it is about to roll over the edge, finds a safe place for it in the ashtray, then he takes his clothes out of the suitcase and hangs them over the chair so they won't get wrinkled. They slip off and crumple to the floor in a heap. He throws his briefcase with the laptop, lecture notes and the folders he needs for the next few days onto the table and opens them. The papers on top slide out and scatter everywhere. As he tries to sort them out, he notices the numbers at the bottom of the page all look the same and the captions won't hold still. He sweeps everything together with the palm of his hand and leaves the jinxed suitcase alone. He puts his shoes next to the door, the next time he goes to the bathroom; he stumbles over them and holds onto his jacket. He can't ignore the sound of the hanger tearing, nonetheless the jacket stays put, while the shoes get kicked across the carpet and one disappears under the bed. He'll never get anywhere that way. He'll just have to clean up tomorrow, and hopefully the maid will take care of the rest. At home Anke keeps things tidy. And they have a cleaning lady who comes once a week. The bathroom is steaming, Matthias chews a few of the cubes from the health food store that he always takes with him, then he undresses completely and sits on the toilet. While watching the bathwater flow into the tub, he concentrates on his abdomen. When he finishes, he is filled

with a lethargic sense of well-being. He got the health food cube tip from Anke's colleague at the shelter for young girls, they know about stuff like that. He invests a considerable amount of money every month to stock up on the stuff, but it's worth every cent, he has no problems anymore. He can even take a shit whenever he wants. Anke cracks up every time he uses that word, but in all the years he has struggled with his digestion and its whims, he hasn't found a better word for it. There's no point in beating around the bush, either you take a shit, or you don't, and if his wife still thinks it's funny, all the better.

The water is too hot. He stands in it up to his calves and steps on one foot and then the other as he lets more cold water into the tub. He's glad nobody can see him with one foot in the air and an expression on his face that just has to look ridiculous, even if he can't actually see it (the mirror is fogged up). At some point it's okay, he slips into the bath water inch by inch, distributes the fresh cold water with broad hand movements, lies down on his back and finally exhales audibly.

He imagines he is bathing in a natural rock pool, a waterfall softly splashing, birds chirping, leaves rustling, he's somewhere in Mesopotamia or Africa, or better yet: in Iceland, in a hot spring (without the sulfur smell), and he feels good, good and relaxed, naked and drunk, exactly in the right place at the right time. His knees protrude from the water and get cold. When he stretches his legs, his feet stick out. Then he gets the hiccups. Sighing, he opens his eyes, then he gets up heavily so he can reach the shampoo container, which is attached far too high up on the wall.

He sits in the water upright, lathers his hair, forms a cockscomb and hums a song his father often sings and that he's had in his ear since he was on the train: "It happens once in a lifetime, for everybody every time." The natural rock pool vanishes, Matthias is sitting quite satisfied with himself in a nice hotel bathtub, master of the times and of himself, he is taking a bath and singing and he has not called his wife, because that's what he feels like doing and he likes that he's allowed to sing, that he can take a bath in the middle of the night and isn't accountable to anybody but himself. He found out only yesterday that Günther is going to be a father, but suddenly he can see it before his eyes, how he is tossing in bed next to his girlfriend after he helps her vomit all night. With wet hands, he looks for his cell phone in his pants lying on the ground and writes Günther a text message: *taking a bath drunk in Merano. And you?* But the phone falls into the water before he can send it, it turns off after that and he prefers to leave it alone.

When his skin has become all wrinkled and he realizes he is about to fall asleep, he pulls the

plug and listens as the water gurgles and gurgles. As the water level slowly drops, he feels as if he has weights on top of his body, as if something is sinking down on him. Before he goes to sleep, he eats both of the complimentary candies.