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Loneliness and Sex and Pity

Translated by Zaia Alexander

The dive at Victoria Park closed at 7 p.m. Vincent asked the waitress if she had family waiting for her. The waitress said no, but in her profession she hardly had time to even watch TV at night without getting disturbed. There had to be some local pubs, at least a couple of Turkish bars where nobody cared about Christmas. Vincent didn't feel like getting drunk. Later in the evening, some customers might stop by, that wasn't too unusual at Christmas, and usually they proved to be quite generous.

The prospect of passing out at some dump for melancholy loners, of putting his loneliness on display, disgusted Vincent, he crossed the street with his coat collar turned up. Icy rain fell, the flakes looked like a swarm of tiny birds in the parking light of a car, glowing bright before they melted to the ground. The staircase smelled musty. Vincent took three steps at a time. The door to his apartment was not locked; he suffered from a phobia that made him think he'd lose his keys if he went out in the neighborhood at night. The risk of his apartment getting robbed didn't seem higher to him, on the contrary. He believed keeping the doors unlocked and leaving the hall light on would baffle thieves. Vincent hung his wet coat over the heater, took off all his clothes and filled the tub with hot water. Music droned from the radio into the hallway. *It was a very good year.* Vincent frowned, went into the bedroom and turned off the stereo even though he liked schmaltzy Sinatra songs. He dipped a finger in the half-filled tub. The water was too hot. Time for a cigarette at the kitchen table and take a look out at the snow, he could see the reflection of his muscular, well-trained torso in the gray flurry. The year wasn't so good, no it wasn't.

Vincent looked for some cigarettes, couldn't find any anywhere, not even in the pockets of both his jackets where he usually had some stashed away, he couldn't stand the thought of getting dressed again and having to get some at a machine. Why is it so difficult, he asked himself, to keep some spare cartons around? And why is the classical music station playing a Sinatra song on Christmas?

Suddenly, he felt uncomfortable standing there naked and he couldn't figure out why.

The heater was set to the highest level, all the shades were pulled down, even the one in the kitchen. He went into the bathroom and checked the water temperature again. Something kept him from stepping into the tub. It seemed as if something had stirred in the lower left corner of his field of vision, a very tiny movement, the hint of a shadow scurrying across a slightly less dark area. Vincent turned around, walked into the dim hallway, looked to the left, to the front door, looked to the right and then

something crashed into him as it tried to get past him, two fists pushed him to the ground. A reflex made him grab, he clutched a handful of hair, felt the girl kicking and swinging her arms. He held her firmly, she stumbled, and a second later he was lying on top of her. She was not very strong. A girl of around nineteen, twenty, maybe younger, wearing jeans and a baseball jacket. He held her wrists tightly, she turned her face away from him, said nothing, didn't scream, she even gave up tugging and kicking as she lay there helplessly beneath him. Stringy, probably dark blond hair. In the hallway, he couldn't see much in the dim light coming from the kitchen and bathroom. Vincent would have liked to let her go, but only now, much too late, did he get scared. What if she had a weapon? A junky maybe, cold turkey, no more inhibitions because she's going through withdrawals - or one of the beasts from a street gang with a switchblade—she started trembling, the trembling ran through her head, slender neck, and continued to her shoulders. He heard her quietly sobbing.

Despite the circumstances, Vincent felt brutish, lying on her so heavily and naked. And what if - he had to consider the possibility- she was a sly one and started screaming for help, or claimed he was raping her?

The situation pleased him less and less, he thought about letting the burglar go and slamming the door behind her. But - and that weighed in as a defense - she might have found the wallet in the bedroom closet! Hard-earned money that Vincent did not want to lose. Three, almost four minutes went by without coming to a resolution, without words. The girl was crying. He loosened his grip, but only slightly, just enough to keep control without hurting her.

"Who are you?" he asked – the question seemed silly, ridiculous. What's she supposed to say? Some fake name?

"What did you take? Give it back and I'll let you go!"

Finally, the girl looked at him. No, she was a young woman, not a girl anymore. Her face, as far as he could tell in the light, was covered with dirt. It must have been weeks since she had last washed her hair. The fingernails she hadn't gnawed off had black caked under them. She smelled like old sweat and wet leather.

Repelled, he instinctively let her go. Without knowing exactly why, or what changed his assessment of the situation, he felt she wasn't a serious threat anymore.

"I didn't steal anything! Just some cigs ... "

Vincent moved away from her, sat cross-legged between her and the front door, his hands resting on the floor, ready to jump up and catch her if necessary. The girl seemed like a girl again, she wasn't crying anymore, she looked at him, undecided, a mixture of lethargy and fear. Then she stared at his semi-rigid, swinging penis, which got him flustered. He put a hand over the oncoming, unwelcome and hard to explain erection, and pointed with the other hand towards the sudsy water to the right.

"You really could use a bath."

"Huh?"

It sounded like a sleepy-uncomprehending Huh? as though she thought he was pulling her leg. Vincent sensed a pleasant, almost euphoric feeling that increased with every word he found to transform an idea into a statement, and meant he was slowly mastering a confusing situation.

"Here's the deal: You go in there and take a bath, you can lock the door, and I'll search through your things. Then you can get dressed and go."

"I didn't steal anything ..." the girl repeated exhausted, and then lowered her head as though she knew, even if reluctantly, that it was hard to trust her words.

"I'll be the judge of that."

"Are you gonna call the cops while I'm in the bathroom?"

"No. I promise."

She paused, rubbed her hands over her face as if to wipe away all the doubts and bad experiences from her skin. Vincent's eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and what he saw began to please him.

"Don't look!" She got up, undressed quickly, threw her things to the side (she was wearing three pairs of thick socks) until she stood in front of him in her underwear and bra, with her arms crossed in front of her chest. Her body—he couldn't detect any syringe marks at first sight—looked emaciated, but not diseased. Her skin even had a certain charm, it preserved something youthful, healthy beneath the dirt, a bit of a glow on the shoulders and thighs, and the rest of a tan from last summer that made her look half-mulatto.

"Okay, now what?" She asked the question casually, as though she was talking to a doctor.

Vincent nodded. The girl obeyed and went into the bathroom. He heard her turn the key in the lock. Should he really look through those filthy, dirty clothes? He suddenly grew squeamish and felt it wasn't appropriate—then again, she did break in on him! He deliberated back and forth, left the clothes untouched, ran into the bedroom, the wallet was full, so there - and if the girl took something else what could it be worth? Only the cigarettes - at least half of the cigarettes - he would insist on that.

Vincent hastily pulled on some jogging pants, took an ashtray out of the kitchen and sat against the wall opposite the bathroom door. He sat like that for a while. Smoking.

"Are you hungry?"

No answer. He repeated the question louder, thought he heard a faint no.

"Sure?"

"I raided your fridge,"

Vincent had to grin. What could his pathetic refrigerator have to offer a guest?

»Want a glass of champagne?"

It took half a minute before she answered.

"Yes."

He liked this simple, unadorned, unwavering answer very much. It almost made him happy. He could not say why.

Vincent got up, walked to the radio, and turned the schmaltzy station back on, of all things they were playing "Strangers in the Night", and he put two bottles of Aldi Nord-Champagne in the freezer which he usually saved for uptight customers. Afterward he sat down in front of the bathroom door and waited for the moment when the young woman, girl, or whatever she was would come out. It would be, he believed, a moment of aura and meaning.

Ekki was sitting at Nachtmar and did not want to go home. He had no living relatives left, and even though he tried to ignore Christmas this year, as he did every year, he was less and less successful at it. He had never married nor had he knowingly sired a child, his only sister died a few months ago of skin cancer at the age of fifty-three. He was three years younger and in good health. He reminded himself of that all the time. At least he's healthy. Ekki, the early retirement Latin teacher, would love to have fallen into a deep sleep for three days, at least until Christmas was finally over. The loneliness burrowed into his body, it manifested as an almost physical pain, as if tiny fish with sharp teeth were eating away at his muscles and drinking the red from his blood. It felt something like that, but he was in almost perfect health, without a doubt. At least a thousand times a day he thought about how he ought to have protested the compulsory retirement. On the other hand, his students had gotten on his nerves, and ultimately he had to consider himself lucky that he got out of that thing or situation or shit—or whatever you want to call it—relatively unscathed. He could not even tell anybody about the thing/situation/shit, which was the worst part, because nobody knew him well enough to know whether Ekki was telling the truth, that he was innocent, that he had never done any harm to any creature on earth, at least not knowingly. Bob Marley was blaring out of the jukebox: *I shot the sheriff, but I did not shoot no deputy*. Ekkehard Nölten had neither shot a sheriff nor a deputy. Nothing and no one. But in life, he thought, there is no such thing as a *Mouth of Truth* that bites liars' hands off like they used to have in ancient Rome.

A nasty little brat, scarcely thirteen years old, had spread certain rumors out of revenge because he'd given her a fully justified, even mild F.

Disgusting, a totally disgusting affair. No evidence of any misconduct, not even a credible lead. But the brat knew she was a juvenile and they wouldn't hold her accountable. She could calmly claim anything she pleased without being worried about the consequences, but Ekki, a totally blameless teacher, suffered from—and that had absolutely nothing to do with any of it—a small, insignificant drinking problem. His fellow teaching colleagues, those assholes, distanced themselves from him- and their brutal, outrageous act of collective disloyalty hit him hard. He had thought, at least until that point, that he'd had friends, even if he could not specify anybody by name. An absurd comedy followed. The school principal in a diplomatic coup de main swept the whole thing under the carpet, and as a gesture to the parents, the brat got a merciful D instead of an F on her report card, she laughed up her sleeve, while Ekki

was told to get lost in a more or less flowery manner. The fallout from what happened would incriminate him for any future pedagogical work. Oh, shit.

Purely out of rage, rage at this act of treachery, at all the nastiness in the world, he agreed to the terms without protest. Almost without protest. The only viable alternative would have been a disciplinary transfer, which would have made him feel like an even worse loser. He was even kind of happily looking forward to his life as a retiree. It has been two years since it happened. Since that time, he had often thought about taking revenge on the rotten little liar and her shitty parents, in fact, on the whole goddamned family, but he couldn't think of a way to do it that wouldn't cause him even more harm in the end.

The last guest, a young, maddeningly good-looking man just left, and Ekki sat alone at the bar.

He asked the waitress—a black woman, around his age, maybe a couple of years younger, it was hard to tell with dark-skinned, fat people—for a last beer. She shook her head and said this time it really was the last one, and he had to drink quickly, and hopefully he didn't mind if she put the stools on the tables, she wanted to take off from work at some point.

"Do you have a family?" On a whim Ekki decided to use the familiar "du" form with her, but lots of other people did that too here. It didn't seem to bother the waitress. Strangely enough she had just been asked the same question. This time she replied in some detail.

"Not here. Over in the States. Two brothers, a few cousins, lots of nephews and nieces."

"How long has it been since you were in the States?"

"Forever."

"What's your name?"

"Minnie."

"And your proper name?"

"Minnie."

"Short for what?"

"Nah. You don't think it's enough? "

Minnie handed Ekki the beer, a bottle, because the tap had been turned off.

"Thanks."

"And you? You don't have a family?"

"No. Yes. A sister. She's right next door at St. Matthew's Cemetery.

She liked getting tanned all year round. It was her downfall. Skin cancer. "

"Shit."

"Never go to the solarium whatever you do!"

Minnie was silent and grimaced as though it were a bad joke, even though the joke wasn't all that bad, rather harmlessly banal, at least it wasn't meant in a racist way, no. She heaved one chair after the other onto the tables and only mopped the floor where it was needed.

"My name is Ekkehard."

"Short for what?"

"Ekki. Only my sister used to call me that. And my skat brothers. You can call me that too."

"Then I will."

"What's on your schedule tonight? Roast a turkey?"

"Turkey? Where did you get that idea? "

"Oh, right, that's for Thanksgiving, that's when you guys eat turkey. Sorry! The New World isn't my thing."

Minnie thought the portly, old-fashioned looking, but always clean-shaven man was very nice. She believed, for she had often observed him, that he had to be careful about his expenses, but he always gave her a tip and said thank you whenever she gave him a drink.

"I have a Black Forest cake at my house. Ice cold with hot tea. Then maybe a couple of Royal Cauldron chips."

"What are Royal Cauldron chips?"

"They're good. A little expensive. For holidays. "

"Uh huh."

There was a pause. Minnie stopped and watched as her last guest gulped down half the beer, it looked as if he was doing it out of consideration, to leave quickly so he wouldn't be a bother to anybody.

"So, what do you do for a living?"

"I used to be a Latin teacher."

"Not anymore?"

"No."

"You could give private lessons."

Ekki found the suggestion somehow strange. He had never thought of doing that before. He shook his head slowly, with aplomb, as though to reinforce his decision.

"No, you know, Minnie, the students didn't like me. The students couldn't stand Latin and they took it out on me. I'm sick of that. Latin is such a wonderful subject. You can learn so much, and I always felt like a refrigerator salesman in Greenland. You know what I mean?"

Minnie propped herself on one of the tables, leaned the mop against the wall and looked Ekki straight in the eye.

"No. You know, we desperately need refrigerators in Greenland. As early as March it sometimes reaches 15 plus degrees, and if there are no refrigerators, all the food will spoil. And there isn't a supermarket at every corner where you can quickly buy more. That was a bad comparison!"

Ekki looked surprised and had to smile. He drank his beer and put five on the table.

"Keep the change!"

"No, Ekki, three beers, that's seven twenty."

"Oh! I'm sorry." He added a few coins.

"That's okay. So what kinds of fabulous things can you find out about in Latin class?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"You can tell me as much as you like while I mop the floor. If you feel like it."

At first, Ekki waved dismissively, then he felt as if he was being arrogant. "Well, the Roman Empire, you know, you can learn a tremendous amount from it, first they had kings, then a republic, then dicators, then an emperor, dynastic emperors and soldier emperors...and puppet emperors...it is a symbol of ...Power and decadence. You can see how everything starts out powerfully and great and ends in hubris and ... oh, well. "

"Uh huh."

"They had everything. It makes you feel like everything around you has already happened in the Roman Empire. And that language! But I'd better be going now ... "

"If you feel like it, Ekki. Or do you think I'm too stupid to understand what you have you to say about Latin..."

"Pardon?" Ekki looked slightly bewildered. "No, that's not what I wanted to express, I thought I was talking too much and you wanted to get home and celebrate the holiday with your cake..."

"I've never had Latin. I suppose you could figure that one out."

"Yes?" Ekki did not quite know how to process that information.

"Then tell me about it," Minnie's tone seemed convincing enough that he decided to take her up on her offer.

Ekki thought it over. Finally, given what day it was, he told her a long-drawn-out Christmas story. How the Emperor Tiberius had all the people in the realm guess about the long Pax Augusta, a term he had to explain, which got them talking, actually Ekki, did all the talking and Minnie intermittently asked questions.

Emperor Tiberius was a nasty despot, who threw Astrologers who didn't get it right off a bridge and entertained himself in his swimming pool with young boys he called his minnows, and did she know why he did that?

That bastard, said Minnie, when Ekki told her why. And Ekki got to drink two more beers for free while she closed the bar. Minnie almost asked him if he wanted to come home with her, but she had nothing more to offer, except for the one thing she believed he wouldn't want from her, tea and Black Forest cake. The thing she assumed he wanted, she wasn't ready give.

As they were saying good-bye on the Monumentenstraße, some icy rain made its way into her collar and reminded her to bid him a quick farewell, both of them found the evening surprisingly entertaining. And Minnie said she wanted to hear all about how Caligula had sex with his sister and his horse and how at night, during his sumptuous feasts, he would have people decapitated, and out of a sporting curiosity wanted to see who could do the most in the shortest amount of time. It was pretty awesome, actually too hardcore for her taste, but it interested her nonetheless. She was from Louisiana, people didn't know stories like that there.

Ekki said that didn't matter, and said something about Louisiana and Napoleon, whereupon Minnie nodded and grinned, almost laughed out of a vaguely felt pressure to have understood something funny.

Not everything, but still there was something nice in this moment.

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During their nearly six year marriage, Julia and Uwe König had worked out a kind of ritual to be done with Christmas Eve as quickly as possible because they both agreed it was too quiet and dark and lifeless. Both of them almost never cooked, and when they did, they always made very simple dishes, actually they preferred to eat out at a restaurant, or had something delivered to their house. Julia König, almost forty, was a manager at a well-known business consultancy and was on the verge of being promoted to partner. Her husband Uwe, ten years younger than her, only managed to make it to store manager at Karstadt, but together the childless couple pulled in a gross income of about nine thousand Euros per month. The Königs lived an affluent life in Charlottenburg, which they regarded as modest. Every Christmas Day, they went to a health spa at the Baltic Sea, indulged themselves in a sauna, steam bath, mud pack, manicure, pedicure, massage, and minor cosmetic skin treatments.

The night before, they made the only dinner of the whole year together. Sushi. They cooked the rice, took the sheets of seaweed, spread the cooled rice on it, divided the raw fish and blanched vegetables into bite-sized pieces, and rolled them into half-meter long cylinders, which they then cut into exact portions with an unbelievably expensive and terrifyingly sharp Japanese knife. This took time, the result should be visually satisfying. A job that was always fun and usually tasted good in the end. That night something was different. Uwe noticed it first without being able to say exactly what it was. Julia stood at the kitchen table with her terrifyingly sharp Japanese knife, and instead of nimbly cutting fish and other marine animals into an aesthetic form, she stared into space, and tasted one of those cucumber slices that Uwe had previously brought into an aesthetic form.

"Are you thinking about something?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"I want a divorce."

"What?"

"Divorce. We. Us. "

Julia said these words without visible emotion. Uwe thought it was a joke, or one of those monthly hysterical episodes, but it wasn't that time yet, and Julia seemed anything but hysterical.

"Why are you saying that?"

Julia gave him a quick glance, then looked at the ceiling and shrugged her shoulders. "I just asked myself how I could feel better than I do. And the answer was that I'd feel better if you weren't here."

"It's Christmas Eve, sweetheart, you shouldn't say something like that."

"Uwe was offended, he secretly hoped the matter would take care of itself if he simply remained silent and continued to spread rice on the sheets of seaweed.

"You'd do me a big favor if you'd go now."

"What?"

"If you'd go. Take a hotel room, go to a brothel for all I care, I'm sure they've got brothels open on Christmas Eve in Berlin, right? Have a ball."

"What are you accusing me of?"

"I'm not accusing you of anything. We can stay nice to each other in the future if you leave now. "

"And if I don't go?" Uwe König looked at his wife and with every second it became clearer that Julia was serious. He wanted to know why, of all evenings, she would choose this one to start in with him.

"What evening would be better suited for it?" Julia stood staring at the dead fish with an odd smile frozen on her face, she held the knife in her hand, and perhaps it really was the countless times that the steel had been folded over which made her decide to start cutting. And the dead fish- Julia could not have said what it was that came together in that moment, but at last she was able to get off her chest what had been on her mind for weeks, she felt good and light, her skin seemed to tingle, something was new and different. Better. She could have summarized her state of mind with a vague odd emotion, the kind people sometimes have in church or at the opera.

Uwe took his coat and scarf and stomped to the door without further comment, as if to punish his wife for her insolence. As he stood on the street, dazed, he thought long and earnestly about following Julia's advice, and having the next taxi drive him to one of the known addresses. Instead, he wandered aimlessly through the night in the icy rain, rented a room in a hotel on the Kurfürstendamm, drank the mini bar empty, and stared for hours at his cell phone, hoping he'd get a text message that would turn the whole situation around. At about five o' clock in the morning he fell asleep drunk.