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Ulrich Peltzer
Part of the Solution

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Just before sunrise there was no one about on Kottbusser Damm, from time to time a car, one or two empty taxis, a road-sweeping machine with rotating brushes. A scraping sound on the asphalt, which slowly moved off southwards. Most of the shop signs had gone out, only the neon panel on the facade of the travel agency was still shining fiery red: Türk Hava Yollari, and on the other side of the street in blue the name of a 24-hour bookmaker: Megabet.de. One shop window was plastered over with layers of paper, scraped off and stuck over again, and everywhere leaflets which announced a demonstration against a Nazi march in Lichtenberg, Turkish and German, a thunder bolt smashing a swastika to pieces. Anyone who's still got some grey matter between the ears can understand that, zero scope for interpretation. She tried to stay calm, to breathe calmly, went over the action in her head for the last time. No big sensation, no headlines, but a beginning nevertheless. She stepped out of the entry next to the shop window and quickly looked round. Was there someone already on the way to work, recycling rubbish, sorting letters into mail boxes. A breath of wind rustled the pages of a newspaper at her feet, brushed coolly over her flushed face. Not a soul far and wide, not even a drunk staggering home from the Ankerklause bar. She shifted the strap of her bag a little, which had suddenly begun to pinch, then she tied the thin cotton scarf around her neck again and stuck the ends inside the collar of her old frayed denim jacket; discovered yesterday in the box of junk in the hall, when she was looking for some inconspicuous piece of clothing, one piece of denim among millions. Walking not too slow and not too fast, she kept an eye on her surroundings - but there was nothing unsettling, nowhere a newspaper delivery man, no insomniac with his insomniac dog. She looked at her watch, the date display of which had not quite moved on, two minutes to the hour, as discussed and rehearsed. The other two would be at the back of the platform, carrying out the same operation with mirror-image movements, separating again in less than one hundred timed seconds. The closer she came to the stairway down to the underground at Schinkestrasse, the more she felt her heart beating, her steps becoming heavier. Don't stop, she thought, keep on walking like normal, it's your imagination. There are obligations which one can no longer back out of, interests and aims of overriding importance. She took a deep breath and kept going until she was on the mezzanine level, whose low ceiling was supported by four pillars. Glazed brick, a dull green, which was hardly lightened by the grey walls, the dim light from square milk glass casings. Poster boards without posters, graffiti, a scrawled-over pay phone. Silence in which one thinks one can hear one's own thoughts, voices talking all at the same time, whole armies inside one's head. When someone came up the stairs to the platform, she started, before realising with relief, that it was Holger in his black nylon anorak, a rucksack in his hand, which he was

hastily unzipping as he walked. A wordless kiss, a brief embrace. She opened her bag with the adhesive and the stencil of firm cardboard.

“It’s good,” said Holger. “There’s no one down there.”

“Have you been here for a while?”

“Since the first train just now.”

He reached into the rucksack and pulled out a mobile phone, dialled, listened with his mouth half open. Then he muttered something and nodded to her. Put the phone away, as the other one was being put away on the other side of the station. Synchronous movements.

“Here goes,” she said, although it was unclear whether it was a question or an exhortation.

“You go first,” said Holger, handing her a spray can and shouldering the rucksack again. “On the last step I’ll lift you up.”

A hammering, throbbing stone in her chest, whose beats almost took her breath away. It’s only symbolic, she thought, signs on pieces of equipment. As a kind of token, a pinprick with a reason. She stretched out her left arm, until her fingertips reached the ledge where the wall turned the corner to the tracks. She gripped the ledge, as if she were going to jump, to launch herself onto the platform with a big leap.

“Ready?”

“Ready,” she said quietly, Holger gripped her hips, she pulled the top off the can. Then she was in the air, pressing the nozzle firmly down, pointing it at the camera in the tunnel entrance. Which from up there recorded everyone who touched the screen of the ticket machine. With a hiss she fogged up the lens, until it was coated by a dripping layer of impenetrable paint. There would be nothing recognisable on the video tape. She jumped to the ground and handed Holger the stencil from her bag, unscrewed the tube of superglue. At a stroke her nervousness had fallen away from her. At the ticket machine she shoved the tip of the tube into the coin slot and squeezed out half, the rest went into the compartment for notes, she flattened the tube back into her bag. While her companion held the stencil against the metal with outspread fingers, she sprayed the empty spaces in the card, a sequence of letters cleanly cut with a sharp blade: *Still on the train or are you walking? Free travel on BTA!*, finally two thick red lines diagonally across the monitor.

They must have managed it at the other end too, there was nothing to be seen, just the long, bare platform between the tracks. No one coming down from the street.

“And see you later,” said Holger.

On the stairs she stuffed stencil and spray can into her shoulder bag, drew it tightly closed, grinned at him. To judge by her elation absolutely perfect, like clockwork. Second trick, coming soon. On the mezzanine level he pointed to the two exits left and right, as if they still had a choice. As if they hadn't carefully planned every detail, he that way and she the other, she on her bicycle along Schinkestrasse to the canal, he on his scooter in the other direction, Hasenheide and Südstern.

"This evening," she said. "Drinks."

"Lots of drinks. At eight" - and he was already gone.

As she ran up the steps leading outside, the smell of solvent rose to her nose, there was paint on her hands, red splashes on her jacket. She was going to throw it away anyway, at home remove all traces with thinner and cotton wool. Have a long shower, go to work at midday. In spite of the cobble stones she didn't cycle along the pavement but stayed in the road, before you know it there's a pair in a squad car bored out of their skulls. She would have liked to hear music now, *Song for the deaf* by Queens of the Stone Age or something loud by Skunk Anansie. On the Ohlau Bridge one could see in the east above the treetops a fraying pink band across the sky, the sun was just below the horizon now, it should be there any moment. The heat and dazzling light she loved. The sea, the lakes at home.

The espresso tin was empty and of course there wasn't any milk in the fridge either. Christian had already had a premonition yesterday, that it was going to turn out like this today, the shopping list lay untouched on the kitchen table. Espresso, eggs, milk, salami and white wholemeal loaf - ridiculous to write it all down, just to forget it. He went into the bathroom and looked at the wound above his eyebrow, a small cut which would have healed in three or four days. Who would believe that he could walk into an open door in his own flat stone cold sober? About as much as if he said to people that he had told a gang of skins in the railway station at Fürstenwalde where to get off. He showered, shaved, stuck the plaster back on the wound. Then for a while he went from room to room, smoking, as if he was looking for something, until finally he picked up all his things, notebook, mobile phone, stuck his clean white shirt into his suit trousers and left, jacket over his arm, his hair still wet.

In the morning the district seemed almost empty, no trace of the pandemonium that reigned late into the night here. As if there was no other place in town, where the longing to be famous, for the fleeting fifteen minutes, could be satisfied. Christian pushed his bike across Eberswalder Strasse, before swinging onto it after the intersection, manoeuvring, no

hands, between tram rails and parking cars down Kastanienallee. Outside the cafes the tables were being wiped, rubbish was being swept up, the shop assistant at Blume 2000 was arranging flowers in the window. Keep your eye on the road, said a voice inside, at least if you're going to ride without holding the handlebars. Simone had broken off a front tooth when a tyre had got stuck in a rail at Hackescher Markt, had called him in tears, and he hadn't come. He hadn't been able to get away, because he was in the middle of an appointment with a client, who was just making him an offer he couldn't refuse, 2500 euros for a tourist brochure about the Uckermark. Christian had driven out with Jakob and Severine a couple of times to look at the area, snap a couple of pictures, and eat in a village inn, writing it he had relied on travel guides and old material from the Berlin city library, carefully rewritten, until something was ready, which the head of the tourist association called a good job. Probably he didn't recognise his bit of country himself anymore, *Wellness paradise at the gates of the Berlin*.

The Letscho was on the upper ground floor, a tiny cafe-bar with a terrace the size of a balcony, on whose moss green balustrade someone had sprayed LOVE GANG in white. Christian appeared to be one of the first customers, the newspapers were still unopened, not a crumb on the two high tables outside. Double espresso, sesame croissant and a quick look at the day's stories. A population without any motivation, the heads of industry already saw the riders of the apocalypse on the horizon. So as not to spoil his breakfast, he turned to the sport section and abandoned himself to the straight facts of the tables, to the blessing of match results, goals scored, team selections.

“Hey...”

Who was substituted in what minute and who had to leave the pitch, who scored and who not. The drama of a contest in naked figures, numerical being. Superiority on field of play expressed in corners taken.

“Hey, you,” he again heard the voice of a woman, in faded black clothes, standing on the pavement below, holding a plastic bag with rectangular objects. “Do you need books?”

Christian shook his head. Where had she nicked those?

“All unread,” she continued in the whining voice of an acute drug dependency and made an effort, she was swaying back and forward, to pull one out of the bag.

“It's ok, I don't need anything at the moment.”

As if his words only reached her with a time delay, she bent right down, before slowly straightening up again. Looked at him with expressionless eyes, he raised his shoulders.

“I'm sorry.”

“And something to eat?”

How is one supposed to respond to that, hand the rest of the croissant over the balustrade?

“Or a couple of pfennigs, that would be a mega-big help.”

“Pfennigs, did she say pfennigs? Probably she was stuck in a time loop she couldn’t find her way out of any more. After he had given the woman a euro, she thanked him with an absent-minded gesture and shuffled away towards Oderberger Strasse.

Looked like it was going to be a hot day, not a cloud in the sky.

Griebnitzsee, thought Christian, a secluded inlet, reeds, cold drinks, the smell of sun lotion and sweat and skin and water. Something of the kind. He tried to remember when he had last been at the seaside, it could even have been with Caroline, a half rained-out week on Hiddensee in the Baltic which had only accelerated the end of their relationship. A miscalculation from the start, even in ideal weather like today. Life plans incompatible, friendship possible, that’s what it comes to down in the end at best. He shoved the rest of the croissant into his mouth and drank the remainder of the coffee after he had rotated the contents of the cup to loosen the little lumps of sugar from the bottom. Light a cigarette, go to work.

[...]

He had called her immediately after returning from Kassel (train there, train back), but Nele had been very reserved. Hadn’t given him the impression on the phone that she was bursting with joy. To be hearing from him, to be talking to him, to be told what he had been up to. Although Christian hadn’t pressed her, hadn’t said, he wanted to see her, or asked, what about cinema, theatre, cafe, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, Monday. As if she was lost in thought, in regions difficult to access, which preoccupied her far more than anything to do with him. Was she making progress with her work - yes, sure, did she find it out of turn, an intrusion, if he asked about it - no, no, not at all, should he try calling again later - yes, maybe, it was maybe better.

He swallowed his disappointment (one can try) and sat down at his trestle table. The novel, chapter nine. How to write with pictures crowding in, which have nothing to do with the plot, with the plan on the wall, the last lines on the computer screen? (Junkie at Kottbusser Tor cleans his teeth with a screwdriver. Overheard scraps of conversation, random observations.) He looked through the pile of CD’s, unable to decide on one. Read out what

was on screen, Page up, Page down, finally he started to play cards. Pointless, her face, her mouth, her eyes, he couldn't get rid off them, the evening by the canal, the night in the park. As Christian changed to Minesweeper, his mobile rang, he looked at the display without any expectation, and it brought him up out of his chair, a big N, her N, N for Nele, for hoarseness, N for suddenly having a problem with one's voice and only being able to whisper, hello.

"It's, it's me," she said, hesitantly.

"Yes."

"I... that was stupid of me earlier."

"Ach. Nonsense."

"No, it was stupid of me. I was so..."

"I interrupted you while you were working."

"You... no, still."

"Didn't mean to."

"What are you doing?"

"Just now? I'm not doing anything, I..."

"Honestly?"

"Really honestly."

"I mean, can you... will you come to my place?"

"I... I could, which number are you?"

"Forty six."

"On the underground."

"Back house left."

"Half an hour."

"The second floor."

"At the outside."

"Yes."

"I'm..."

"Just come."

The door of the flat had been ajar, as Christian closed it Nele came out of the room in the background (from which music was coming) and immediately put her arms around him, kissed him, and Christian kissed Nele, pressing her to him (as she pressed him to her), Nele at some point on one leg, because she had brought the other up at an angle to his hips, he grasped her backside, which she thrust against him, her hair in his face, her taste on his lips,

in his mouth, sweetspit, a three-legged swaying, which was checked by the hallway wall, gravity and desire tugging and pulling, at trousers and shirts, straps and waistbands, which remained behind as a tangle of clothes on the way to the room, over scratchy carpeting, books, scattered papers, pillows, sheets, into a dizzy spinning world with the weight of her body on his chest, his arm pinned, and his body on top of her, one of her legs, the other splayed out, fingertips, finger nails, stomachs, dilations of the skin, wet tongues, mucous membranes.

Time without time, his hand on her neck over the side of the bed, her fists on his shoulders, seated entwined L's, which toppled to the side, came together again, then separated a little later, sighing, to slip a rubber over him, which Nele took out of a little wooden box on the ground; continued, but not for long, because right in the middle of it all, they stopped moving, and looked at one another, looked at one another (as if it was an order) motionlessly through veils of sweat, in astonishment and dismay, panic and lust - not turning their eyes away from one another any more in what they were doing now, Christian with Nele and Nele with Christian, until neither of them could take any more, not him and not her, and their excitement became a succession of meaningless syllables, Nele's name, Christian's name, a stammering, which gradually turned to words of endearment, as if they couldn't tell each other often enough, how beautiful she was, my darling - two people lying trembling on soaked bed linen, bodies embracing with arms and legs. Suddenly they both had to grin; when he wanted to say something, she took his lips between her teeth. So he silently reached down and closed his fist around the rubber. Which still fitted quite firmly, nothing had run out yet.

“Good boy,” she said, giggling.

“That's what I think.”

“Leave it inside.”

“As long as I can.”

“Will it stay?”

“Not much longer.”

“I'm hungry.”

She brushed hair out of her forehead with the palm of her hand. She had half turned on top of him, her breasts squashed soft against his ribs.

“Ow...”

Christian pulled out his arm and threw the condom beside the bed.

“What are you offering?”

As if she was thinking, with pouting lips.

“Frozen Pizza.”

“My favourite food.”

“I guessed right first time.”

“The real question is, who gets to put it in the oven.”

“You.”

“Then I’ll get up off this mattress. Is it a mattress or is it a plank?”

“First of all lying on something hard is good for the back, and second we’re going together. To cook.”

“Yes, let’s go and cook a pizza,” said Christian.

Nele kissed his collar bone. Stood up and stretched out a hand to him. “Come on.”

A bit of wall in the back part of the room demarcated a narrow space for sleeping, enough for a bed and an IKEA wardrobe, on the floor a newspaper that had been read, a couple of books, a tray with a plate with crumbs on it, jam jar and coffee jug. The room was not very big and furnished only with the essentials, under the windows looking out into the courtyard an old wooden desk, on which piles of paper lay around a laptop, open books, a pair of headphones, opposite it two sixties club chairs and a low coffee table (here too a coffee jug and empty plate), on the left a set of shelves stuffed full of books and other things, on the right a series of photos, which she had pinned to the white wall.

Hand in hand they stepped over a heap of clothes on the threshold, shirts, her bra, and went into the hall, where, in a niche for the gas and electricity meters, they found their glasses again and put them on. Naked with glasses. It would never have happened with glasses, thought Christian, but he couldn’t remember where the quote came from. Is that something people used to say? And what wouldn’t have happened? Nele (naked with glasses) freed a pizza from its packaging and almost threw it into the oven, before setting the temperature. And without turning round squatted down on Christian, who was sitting on one of the two black folding chairs. He put his arms around her from behind, her breasts compressed a little on his forearms. A smell of sweat and of secretion, of effort and abandonment, indescribably good, how she smelt.

Metallic clicking sounds, that was the oven. Clicked and groaned, as if it was about to give up the ghost, the last pizza and then it’s all over.

“Did you see that?”

“I’d hardly have put it up otherwise,” said Nele.

A production at the Volksbühne, the black and white picture of a lit up bungalow,

shadowy figures inside, *The Idiot*. Next to the poster, above a work surface, were postcards, views of cities, the mountains, ocean and beach. Who's writing to her? And what are they writing to her? Dear Nele, I'm missing you here in Rome, dear Nele, do you know you're driving me crazy, dear Nele, warmest greetings from the beautiful Engadine from your Robert(a). He kissed her on the back of the neck, she lowered her head. Sex with you is a blast, I can't wait to be with you again. Wherever you want. Dumb thoughts, which one shouldn't think, just as one should never read other people's letters or cards; a principle which Christian had always kept to, he didn't have many.

"I think it's ready," said Nele.

"Will we go back to bed?"

"But with the pizza?"

"Of course."

She leant her head on his shoulder, and they began to kiss, cautiously, as if unintentionally - two seconds, no more, and they were overcome, Nele just managed to switch off the stove.

Did he perhaps think she wasn't telling the truth, was his expression trying to say, that he didn't believe her, that she was fibbing, as far as sailing was concerned, out with it. I believe *everything* you say, Christian had replied, but Nele had jumped out of bed and had taken some photographs out of a tin box in the wardrobe, there, that was her, in the boat with the life jacket, regatta, presentation ceremony, and on that picture, look, with the cup in front of the dinghy.

"The thing's bigger than you are."

A blonde girl in jeans and deck shoes, looking proudly into the camera and holding a silver-plated monstrosity.

"I was twelve. Or thirteen, District Runner-up."

"And why not champion?"

"Ahh... because it was impossible to beat her on the turns."

There were a thousand lakes, and so one went sailing, in the children's and youth class. What Nele didn't say was, that she had stopped because it could no longer be combined with playing the cello, an unfinished story. Anyway he hadn't asked her.

How had they got around to that? Impossible to trace it back, meandering conversation, after one had made love, made love twice, eaten a stodgy pizza, drunk mineral water, while music drifted out of the room to the bed, sounding oddly flat, turned down so low - Limp Bizkit, tattooed musclemen. She just liked it, did he have a problem with that. He

didn't, was there a ban on asking. No, there wasn't, there wasn't a ban on anything.

The alarm clock next to the coiled rubbers said half past two.

Nele had her arms behind her head and was looking up at the ceiling.

Christian stroked her armpits. Dark blonde fuzz growing in.

"Shall I go?"

Nele's eyelids flickered.

"I'm going away for a couple of days."

Without looking at him.

"For long?"

"For a couple of days, I said. I'm visiting a girl-friend."

She seemed weighed down, but her tone of voice blocked any attempt at further inquiry; he had grasped that by now.

She turned to him and smiled (as if her thoughts and feelings were on a roller coaster, one loop after another).

"I'm throwing you out now."

She said it very tenderly.

"Will you call me when you're back again?"

"You can call me too."

"A couple of days."

"That's right."

Christian knelt on the hard mattress. (Good for the back.)

"Will you kiss me farewell?"

The word startled him, one didn't use words like that.

"For today."

Very gently.

"For today," he said, heart beating, and bent over her.