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Handy
dreizehn geschichten in alter manier

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Ingo Schulze
Cell Phone
Thirteen Stories in the Time-Honored Mode

Translated by John Woods

They came in the night of July 20th – 21st, between midnite and twelve thirty. There couldn't have been many of them, five, six guys maybe. I just heard voices and the racket. They probably hadn't even noticed light burning in the bungalow. The sleeping area is at the back and the curtains were drawn. The first sultry night in a good while and the start of our last week of vacation. I was still reading—Stifter, *Great Grandfather's Satchel*.

Constanze had received a telegram from her newspaper in Berlin, telling her to report for work at 7:30 on Tuesday morning. Evidently her secretary had coughed up our address. The series about Fontane's favorite places was getting bogged down because commissioned articles weren't coming in on deadline. That's the problem when you don't go far away. We're both on the road all year more or less—I work for the sports section, Constanze for the feuilleton—and neither of us has any desire to spend our vacation as well sitting around in airports. We rented the bungalow for the first time last summer—twenty marks a day, for twenty by twenty feet—in Prieros, southeast of Berlin, exactly forty-six kilometers from our front door, a corner lot with pine woods all around, perfect when it's hot.

It was odd being there alone. Not that I was afraid, but I heard every falling branch, every bird hopping across the roof, every little rustle.

It sounded like gunshots when they kicked in the fence boards. And then the whooping! I turned off the light, pulled on a pair of pants, went to the front—we always keep the roll-down shutters open at night. But I still couldn't see a thing. Suddenly there was a hollow thud. Something heavy had been upended. They yowled. My first thought was to turn on the outside light, just to show that somebody was at home and the idiots wouldn't think nobody would spot them. There were a couple more loud noises—then they moved on.

I could feel sweat beading even on my legs. I washed my face. I could open the window from the bed. It had cooled off a little outside. You could just barely hear those guys now. Finally everything was quiet again.

My cell phone rang at seven on the dot. “Rang” is actually the wrong word, it was more like a “tootle-toot” that kept getting louder, but I liked its familiar sound because it meant Constanze. She was the only person who had the number.

While Constanze talked about how unbearably hot Berlin was and wanted to know why I hadn’t stopped her from driving back into the inhuman city, I took the cell phone with me out into the sunny, quiet morning and surveyed the damage. Three sections of fence were lying in the path. The concrete post between them had been broken off just above the ground and tipped over. Two twisted steel rods stuck up out of the stump. Out by the gate, the rowdies had turned the newspaper tube on its head. Just underneath it I discovered the roof and back wall of the birdhouse. I counted seven fence slats that had been kicked in, plus four ripped loose entirely. Constanze said that she hadn’t realized what a dirty trick that telegram was until now. I really shouldn’t have let her drive back.

I didn’t want to worry Constanze—she’s always quick to get the feeling that something is a bad omen—so I didn’t mention last night’s visitors. It would have been hard to interrupt her anyway. She had already laid into the people who had rented the bungalow before us for turning the power off and leaving a half-full fridge. Suddenly Constanze cried that she had to go, kiss kiss, and hung up.

I crept back into bed. The damage was nothing I needed to take personally of course, and there was a relatively simple explanation, too. The half acre of land that goes with the bungalow is only leased. That will end in 2001, or 2004 at the latest, when the transitional period will be over and our acquaintances will have to leave. That’s why they haven’t invested anything for several years now. The fence is held together by wire in places where the wood is too rotten for nails.

Last fall Constanze wrote an article about the New York police and their new philosophy. I remembered an example about a car abandoned on the street for weeks. Trash collects around it, yellowed fliers are wedged under the wipers. One morning a wheel is missing, two days later the license plates are gone, and soon the other three wheels. A rock is thrown through a window, and then there is no stopping it. The car goes up in flames. Conclusion: you don't let junk even start to collect.

At least Constanze had been spared this incident. Together we would probably have done something reckless, or Constanze would have been depressed for days because we'd turned chicken and taken cover. But now I had to do something, other wise next thing you know they'll be throwing rocks through our window.

I got up to clear the sections of fence from the path. The first slat I picked up broke apart. With its protruding nails it reminded me of a weapon from the arsenal of Thomas Müntzer. First I threw them all in a pile. Then I began dragging them to the shed. To leave them lying out where anyone could get at them seemed too dangerous. Maybe I was exaggerating. But the fact was that not even a symbolic barrier protected the bungalow now.

Given the situation, it was good to have a cell phone. I'd brought the envelope containing all the instructions—which Constanze had jealously guarded—along with me to Prieros and had finally learned how to activate the mailbox. It was my surprise for Constanze.

The "Hello!" of a man's voice startled me. Medium build, dressed in flip-flops and a pullover, he was standing at the gate and asked what damage the rowdies had done at our place.

His fence was missing two slats. "A hunting fence," he said. "Do you know what kind of strength that takes?" The worst thing for him was the dent in the hood of his Fiat Punto. He'd searched for a long for whatever it was they'd thrown, but had found nothing. His crew cut looked like a fur hat set across his brow.

“It always happens during summer vacation,” he said. “All young kids. Always during vacation.”

I led him around. He took the inspection tour very seriously, squatting down a couple of times as if searching for clues. He found more pieces of birdhouse, turned the newspaper tube back to horizontal, and helped me with the rest of the fence slats. He had notified the police last night and evidently hadn’t let them off the hook until they had promised to send someone. “You need to know,” he said, “that this is small potatoes to them. Undermanned like they are, totally undermanned.”

He was interested in what I had to say about the New York police and I promised to send him Constanze’s article.

“Can you give me your cell phone number?” he suddenly asked.

“My cell phone number? I don’t even know it.”

His frown pulled his bristly hair so deep that the front row pointed straight at me.

“I’ll have to check,” I said and asked what he planned to do in case these guys came back.

“First off, get in touch,” he replied curtly.

“That can’t hurt,” I said.

Inside I sat down on the bed with the envelope in hand. All my colleagues had cell phones. I never understood why they put up with them. I’d never wanted a cell phone, until Constanze came up with the idea of a one-way phone. To make calls, yes—to be called, no, with the exception of her of course.

As I copied our number I noticed that it ended in 007.

“My name’s Neumann by the way,” he said, holding out a store receipt on which he had scribbled his own number. In the same moment the phone rang. With a hasty goodbye he headed off.

Pretty much everything had gone wrong at the office. Constanze would have to stay in Berlin, at least until the day after tomorrow. She said that the latest deportations had

also set off a row within the feuilleton staff itself. I hadn't the vaguest what deportations she was talking about. We didn't listen to the radio because the FM button was missing.

Constanze was still angry and claimed that those guys just hadn't been able to deal with losing to Croatia in the World Cup soccer match. That was why they were carrying on like this.

I told her about last night. She just said, "Well then come home."

"Yes," I replied, "I will, tomorrow." I didn't want to look like a coward. Besides, it was easier to deal with the heat here.

I tidied up. In case the police actually did show, I didn't want them to think it made no difference if something got kicked in here or not. I was also going to tell them that our landlord had only leased the lot, since it was now the property of a Westi. As a final touch I swept the terrace.

That afternoon I spoke with some of the other neighbors as well. We agreed to leave on all the lights we could at night. We parked our cars with the headlights directed at the fences, so that we could suddenly blind these guys and maybe even get a picture of them. Our motto was: People, noise, light. We bungalow dwellers developed a kind of Wild-West solidarity. No policeman ever showed his face, but we didn't waste words talking about that.

Out of a kind of gratitude I dialed Neumann's number. I had at times found it intoxicating to be connected by satellite with people anywhere in the world. That we were neighbors, not three hundred yards apart, made the idea seem even more fantastic. But instead of Neumann himself, I heard a woman say: "This is the voice mail of . . ." followed by a pause, and then out of a galactic void I heard the words: Harald Neumann. I felt goose bumps creep up my arm, clear to my shoulder. Of course even friends often sound distracted or depressed on their answering machines. But Neumann didn't just sound downhearted, but as if he were ashamed even to have a name.

A little later there was a brief thunderstorm. I saw Neumann coming out of the woods with a basket full of mushrooms. He called to me from a good distance, “Like turnips!” He probably meant that in this weather you could gather mushrooms the way you could harvest turnips, or that they were as big as turnips. He invited me to help him eat them.

In comparison to our little shack, his bungalow was a small palace, with a television and stereo, leather chairs, and two barstools. Neumann served red wine and French bread with the mushrooms. After that we played chess and smoked a whole pack of Clubs between us. There seemed to be no connection between the Neumann here before me and the man who spoke his name for his voice mail. All the same, I felt shy about asking him about his family or occupation.

Toward evening the clouds above the lake turned pink. I laid my big flashlight and Neumann’s number where they were handy. By ten o’clock the lightning was flashing with the regularity of a warning light. A cloudburst followed. By then it was clear to me that no one would be coming tonight.

The next morning I packed everything up, did a last dusting, and said goodbye to my neighbors. I didn’t find Neumann at home. Presumably he was in the woods again. I don’t think people got the idea that I was a coward. They realized that Constanze was no longer here. The telephone call with our acquaintances, our landlords, proved more difficult. I was supposed to take care of the fence. There were still some posts in the shed. But the refrigerator alone had cost us a whole morning—that was quite enough.

In late September the cell phone rang in the middle of the night. In the first moment I thought it was the peep it makes when the battery is low. But the tootle-toot got louder each time. I got up, groped in the dark for my shoulder bag, and rummaged in it. I traced

the tip of my forefinger across the keys—I needed the middle one in the second row from the top. The signal was now insufferably loud.

“Those guys are back again. They’re really raising a racket!” And then after a brief pause: “Hello! This is Neumann! What a racket! Do you hear it?”

“But I’m not there anymore,” I finally said.

“They’re really raising a racket!”

The light on Constanze’s side went on. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, shaking her head.

With my free hand I covered the speaker. “A neighbor from Prieros.” I could feel myself breaking into a sweat. I had never mentioned exchanging phone numbers—we wouldn’t be going to Prieros again anyway.

“Are you alone?”

“Somebody has to hold down the fort,” Neumann cried.

“Are you alone?”

“They’re breaking down my fence, the bastards.”

“Have you called the police?”

Neumann gave a laugh, then had to cough. “That’s funny . . .” It sounded as if he were drinking. I had never sent him Constanze’s article about New York.

“What is it you want?” I asked.

“Just listen to that racket!”

I pressed the phone tight to my ear, but it made no difference.

“Now they’re at the mailbox,” he shouted. “They’ll have to sweat and strain at that. Not even two of those lunkheads can manage that. They’ve gone too far . . . Enough is enough . . .”

“Stay where you are!” I shouted.

Constanze was standing in the door, tapping a finger at her forehead. She said something from the hallway that I didn’t understand.

“Hello?” Neumann called out.

“Yes,” I said. Or did he mean those guys at the fence. “Stay inside!” I shouted. “Don’t try to be a hero.”

“They’re gone,” he said and laughed. “Nobody in sight, they’ve taken off, scared shitless . . .” I distinctly heard Neumann take a drink and set the bottle back down. “These lunkheads,” he gasped.

“You shouldn’t be there all by yourself.”

“So how are you doing?” he interrupted me in an almost hoarse voice.

“Stay in the house,” I said. “You shouldn’t even be out at the lake, or just on weekends maybe, but not during the week.”

“When are you coming back? We still have a game we haven’t finished. Or would you like to play by mail? You want to give me your address? I’ve got some dried mushrooms, a whole sack full.”

“Herr Neumann,” I said, and didn’t know what else to say.

“The garbage can,” he suddenly bellowed. “My garbage can!”

“Forget about the garbage can,” I said. “It’s not important.” I called out “Hello?” and “Herr Neumann,” a few more times. Then there was only a dial tone, and the display read: “Call ended.”

Constanze came back into the room, laid down on her side, facing the wall and pulling the blanket up over her shoulders. I tired to explain the whole thing to her—how I’d hesitated at first, but that in the end I’d been glad I could call a neighbor for help in an emergency. Constanze didn’t stir. I said I was worried about Neumann.

“Maybe he’ll call back,” she replied. “This will be happening fairly often now. But of course you never give the number to anybody.”

I think at moments like this we’re both so disappointed with ourselves that we hate each other. I went to my study to fetch the recharger for the cell phone.

“And what if he passes your number on?” Constanze turned over and propped herself up.

“Why would he do that?”

“But just imagine if he does!”

“Constanze,” I said. “That’s silly.”

“You need to think about it!” The strap of her nightgown had slipped off her shoulder, and she pulled it back up. But it didn’t stay. “Think of all those people who could call now,” she said. “All those neighbors.”

“Our number’s in the book, a perfectly normal number. Anybody can call us.”

“That’s not what I mean. If a building is on fire or gets bombed and somebody runs out with nothing but his cell phone, because it happens to be in his pocket. You’ll be able to talk with him now.”

I plugged the recharger into the extension socket beside the bed.

“It can very well happen,” Constanze said. Her voice now had that “governess” tone of hers. “Somebody calls you up from Kosovo or Chechenia or from wherever that tsunami was. Or one of those guys that froze up on Mount Everest. Now you can talk with him to the bitter end, until it’s all over.”

Braced on her elbow, one shoulder still bare, she went on talking while she stared at the tip of her pillow, which was propped up a little. “Just imagine who all you’ll be dealing with now. Nobody has to be alone anymore.”

It was pointless to call information, because it was pointless to call Neumann. I don’t know which would have been more unpleasant, to have him answer or to have to listen to the way he pronounced his name on his mailbox.

The display showed the symbol for recharging: the outline of a little battery, with a slanted bar marching across three positions. It was the last thing I saw before I turned out the light. In the dark Constanze said, “I think I’m going file for divorce.”

I listened to her breathing, her moving, and waited for the tootle-toot.

The shutters on the newspaper kiosk had already rattled when our hands accidentally touched. It took another eternity before we risked moving closer to one another. Then we started to devour each other in a way we hadn’t done for ages, as if lack of sleep had made us crazy.

At some point the tootle-toot began. It came from somewhere faraway, like the signal of a spaceship maybe, soft and indistinct at first, gradually pressing closer, growing louder and louder, and finally drowning out everything else, until it seemed as if Constanze and I were moving without making any sound at all. The only thing we could hear was that tootle-toot—until it suddenly stopped, left us in peace, and was as silent as we were.

Translated by John E. Woods