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Hotel Advokat

First she walked to the mini-bar. When she saw the pricelist, she closed it again. On the pillow lay a fresh apple. On the night table a slim book of poetry compliments of the hotel. She had checked into a place she couldn't afford. She opened a window that had no view.

They had sex in the next room.

The apple was an (indeed dubious) invitation. Beneath its shiny surface you could see the hole where a worm had entered.

Christiane untied her laces, pulled off her shoes, and lay across the bed. She hadn't lain for days. She wasn't in love anymore. Just a little blurry in the head. As if her head were a glass of water that someone had filled to eye level.

That's how a head feels when it tries to keep pace with a transatlantic flight from barely a day earlier. Not every head, she thought, just mine.

Then the telephone rang. It rang for quite a while. She lifted her head cautiously to the door as though there were a connection between the telephone and door. The apple rolled towards her throat. When she was a kid, she used to wish she'd have turned into somebody else by the time the movie credits rolled and the lights turned on. All mixed up.

Dropped and exchanged. But this was only a hotel room.

In which a telephone ceaselessly rang. Where it was obvious nobody stood behind the door that nobody could have called, except the lady at the reception. *Not I.*

Which was ridiculous.

When the telephone rang a second time, she answered.

„Hello?“

„Haven't you heard anything?“ asked the receptionist in English. She was too young for this kind of hotel. She was trying too hard to speak correctly.

„Yeah. You called me before.“

„No, I mean Mrs. Meldorf. The old lady from Hamburg. It's her last night with us and she's making lots of noise in the lobby. She said she was having a party. But she didn't tell us beforehand.“

„That's too bad.“

„I called the police.“

„Why? Are you scared?“

„Not anymore, I called the police.“

„Oh,“ said Christiane, gazing at the hole in the apple. *„And why are you telling me this?“*

„I thought you should know, and I'm all alone here, and what would you do if you were me?“ said the strained voice.

„Join them!“ But before the receptionist went ballistic, Christiane said:

„Now that I've got you on the line, could you wake me tomorrow morning at eight?“

Christiane lay on her back. When she closed her eyes, she could still see the golden strip of sun glowing to the right of the airplane. The sun didn't stop glowing the entire flight. The sun glowed and glowed and -

She didn't close her eyes.

She got up and headed for the mini-bar in her stocking feet. She wanted to check whether the whisky was really that expensive; the carpet was incredibly plush. She closed the blinds; it was getting dark outside.

Just as it had thirty hours earlier. The same pale strip hanging over the

horizon, and yet the horizon lay on the other side of the Atlantic. Thirty hours ago a door closed and another opened, Flughafen geräusche, airport noises, and only the streets would remain the same afterward, the prickly palms too. The land tilted to a slant as the airplane began its ascent, the pristine coast, the light blue swimming pools in the Hollywood Hills, like pieces of plaster fallen from the sky. The last five years also shifted to a slant, plus minus zero, and a journalist's visa that had had a departure date stamped in it from the very beginning.

„Friday!” somebody shouted, standing tall beneath the sun, like in this or that film. Denys Finch Hatton had also shouted „Friday!” to Tanja Blixen, he called her Tanne, but before Friday arrived, his airplane had crashed somewhere in the Serengeti.

„Friday!“ she shouted, as if it were the next day, as if five thousand miles hadn't lain in-between, blond and with short hair, perhaps everybody fell in love with her at first because of her height, because of this formidable body size. A woman who measured six feet had to be praised to the skies; a stupid joke (Christiane practically dropped to her knees; she absolutely needed something to drink).

Venice Beach and bewigged palms might still make sense, but only if you were drenched in alcohol, the pier too, and the way they walked to the end of it, hand in hand, as though they were heading straight for the altar, but marry, they said shortly before in the news (it was a conservative summer) *they'll never get married*. The kiss at the end of the pier, the chill and sea spray, and Christiane laughing as the wind drove a tear into her ear which made it tickle.

She remembered perfectly the water's color under the pier's steely posts. The water looked like the shadow a wine glass sometimes casts on a

beloved bare stomach.

The memories were still clear; not yet distorted from too much use and Christiane inadvertently kept answering the phone in English.

Everything was okay.

They had complimentary sherry in the lounge.

The widow Meldorf sat in the lounge wearing gloves, the only white on her body which was clothed all in black. She had a boy with her whose forehead got all spotty from so much friendliness. Christiane imagined what it would be like to be the old widow, how she'd look back to the pier, to the land slanting backward, to this landscape with a woman in it, and she'd have searched for a sign (a plunging buzzard, a wrong step between the cement blocks on the sidewalk); for some clue about the turning point in her life, after which nothing came.

A beach washed clean. Sky without light. Empty bikinis (a line from the night table book).

A lot of nothing and thanks (!). Later, perhaps, a boy with sweaty hands doing civil service who you can lean on, on your way to the grave.

Christiane looked at the clock. Instead of fantasizing, she recalled the odd couple down in the lounge. They played like lovers as they checked in. It seemed cheap, like all clichéd behavior (and there was no denying that it looked exactly like her own behavior from just a few hours earlier).

„Friday!“ shouted Denys Finch Hatton from the other end of the escalator, her body got smaller as it inched away, and they waved as though they were on their way to each other, instead of saying good-bye. Instead, a final kiss, and one more affectionate Tanne. (It started as an expression of ironic distance, becoming later a nickname for both).

Christiane had drunk tomato juice in the airplane as the sun continued to

glow through the window. She couldn't sleep, but she was in love, and she had a window seat.

Everything was okay.

She had to check in again at the ticket counter in Frankfurt because the American travel agency had made some mistake. At the counter in Frankfurt, she said: "Munich". The woman in charge of luggage was tying tags onto her suitcases; they needed to be checked in again too.

Christiane said in English: „*Munich. I need to go to Munich.*”

„*But your ticket says Berlin.*”

„*Munich,*” she said, “*Didn't I make myself clear?*”

Christiane hadn't slept for 24 hours. But that didn't matter, *sleep's an empty brother, it shows us in the rearview mirror clearer than we've ever been, on some freeway, the radio turned off, the entire night on slippery ice-*(the same poem from the night table book, the author's name was Gumz; Christiane meant to remember his name).

She heard herself speaking very clearly at the ticket counter in Frankfurt, no slurring; she was more correct than ever before, at least as far as English goes.

„Okay,” said the woman at the counter. “We don't want any problems here. You booked a flight to Berlin, but now you want to go to Munich, right? Good. Just a second please. I have to get the supervisor's approval.”

And the supervisor asked suggestively, “Why would somebody who booked for Berlin suddenly want to go to Munich?”

As Christiane sat by the wing of a Boeing headed for Munich, and behind a woman who couldn't have been older than Tanne, she thought: Not somebody. Just me.

She couldn't figure it out.

She lay in the bed on her back. The sheets were stiff. It was impossible to fantasize a scent into them, the memory of a subtle perfume that was more likely a face cream, the almond scent of hair.

She thought again about the woman in front of her in the airplane, heading towards Munich, as though it were the only sensible thing she could do for the rest of the night.

And it was too, because the whisky was just as expensive as whisky is in this kind of hotel.

Next door the sex stopped.

Below the party continued. The high-pitched tones of the widow Meldorf reached all the way up to her room. Maybe the sherry was long gone.

She fished her shoes from under the bed.

Nobody was in the corridor.

The Austrian next door had hung the „DO NOT DISTURB” sign on the handle. She tiptoed past. The Austrian was the sort of person who'd neatly line up his fork with the edge of the table at breakfast.

But had she been the Austrian, she'd have flown to Berlin and not to Munich. Munich was a city for the pros. She had no reason to be there.

She shouldn't have checked into a hotel she couldn't afford. She should have gotten into contact with her station right away.

And should have called L.A. „*Arrived, everything's okay, don't worry, I miss you* (which was true and that wasn't in the book of poetry).

She wouldn't have ever followed a stranger through customs, through the airport and through the subway. She would never have followed her into a hotel that looked like a design studio and would never have spoken in English without even knowing what she wanted to say. But with this

woman in front of her, in the airplane from Frankfurt to Munich, it seemed the only sensible thing she could do.

Munich, she thought. Why not Cairo or Buenos Aires or Nowosibirsk?

„Hello, Mrs.- Sorry. I´m Ines, you remember?“ The steps to the lobby—fake marble, white and flattened out, the stranger with her thumbs hooked into her wide belt. Christiane didn´t look at her anymore in the airplane, not on the street either, or in the hotel, where she had waited at the door until this stranger, careless and fantastically young (and as of this moment called Ines) disappeared into the elevator.

Ines.

She wasn´t reason enough for her to be there. She wore low-rise pants that emphasized her bones in an unflattering way. She seemed anemic, not tall, with mousy brown hair.

„Christiane. You can speak German to me.“

„Oh. You speak German?“ Her perfume was heady, costly, and strong, an expensive perfume (with a little patience it might have been possible to make it look as if she´d followed the woman because of her perfume).

„It sounds German, doesn´t it?“

Of course, Christiane thought, it was just her head that couldn´t keep up. As if her head were a glass. And now somebody was in the process of drinking it up.

Ines smiled shrewdly.

Of course, when you´re younger you´ve got the upper hand Tanne said, *you´ve got more momentum.*

Suddenly everything started to race past Christiane at jet speed, dragging along the widow in her white plastic gloves and the complimentary sherry and the high-strung lady from the reception.

The only thing left was a woman smiling in low-rise pants, a smile that could hurt somebody. Not somebody, thought Christiane. But me.

„Hey, wait. Don't you want something to drink? It's on the old lady there.”

Ines whispered. „There's lots of cash sitting there. Though you'd never know it in that crappy outfit.”

„Do you know her?”

„Know her?!” Ines was nonchalant; she tossed her head back, which caused the widow to grab the boy. She pulled him down to her, placing her cheek next to his ear. “I spent the last six years with her and her husband Mr. Cool, at least as long as he was healthy.”

Christiane let Ines lead her to the sherry table in the corner. There were more bottles there. And peanuts and ice cubes in a bucket and carefully folded napkins.

She pretended she needed to decide. She let Ines pour her some whisky with ice cubes; Ines seemed to enjoy playing with the bottles, at least Tanne would have liked to do that (and that's how it starts-- the comparisons replacing memories).

Nearly all the guests were standing in the lounge. They had a few seats in the lounge made of white leather, but they were placed so far apart from each other that you'd either have to stand talking, or sit apart in them.

“We could see if we both fit inside” said Ines. “I told her right away it was a crummy idea to do something like that here of all places.” She threw a leg over the arm rest and dangled it until Christiane sat down. She placed her right arm on her thigh, leaning her head on her fist, and looked up to Christiane. The ice cubes knocked against her teeth when she took a drink.

“So,” she said „Why do you speak like an American when you're not

one?"

"Why do you live in a hotel for only business people or widows?"

„She’s my aunt. Even if she can’t stand looking at me. It reminds her too much,” said Ines with a disparaging I. „But you’re here too!”

„I’m a widow.” Christiane put her glass on the floor. Then she picked the glass up again, letting the ice cubes clang. It sounded good.

„Right“, said Ines. „He probably ran out on you.”

„No. – I did.“

„Wow! Really? How long did it take you?”

„Ten, eleven hours.“

„I mean until you really did it.”

„However long it takes to get from L.A. to Frankfurt non-stop.”

„Well somebody’s going to be unhappy about that.”

„Yes“, said Christiane. „Me.“

Ines patted her on the shoulder, she nodded (it was probably her most worldly nod): „Right, my aunt is unhappy too. But she keeps throwing parties. She’s trying to forget him. And I get in the way. It’s not as if I’m blaming her. She just doesn’t get it.”

Long distance relationships were always something for other people, Christiane said more than 30 hours earlier, I never wanted that. Tanne smoked. If you could even call it a long distance relationship. At how many kilometers distance of water do other rules apply? What if we’re oceanically connected? Water conducts better than air. Right? But maybe I’ll simply wait for you; you’re the fastest of us. Then wind came, or Tanne turned away, making her ashes fall uncontrollably.

Rules. – When she could barely keep the lines of her lover intact; she blurred, she was diluted by the outline of a woman with mousy brown

bangs.

All mixed up. Dropped and exchanged.

Everything she'd wished for.

Ines on the arm rest, slightly above her, bent over, an expensive smooth face that got closer without becoming more beautiful, and you couldn't even say it was her fault, that duchess face, an aristocratic doll, Christiane had constantly interviewed people like her before: the way she raised her hand with the index finger extended. How the head participated, because all the concepts were right. The way you are, thought Christiane, before you realize there's nothing to get.

Look at yourself! (That's Tanne. As long as she's still got something to say here) *Ultimately, there's a virus in the whole system, a mechanical mistake, pure psycho-slop.*

„It's too bad she doesn't get it. I really do like her,” said Ines. “Even though she doesn't want me here. So I just try to surprise her with little things. But who pays attention to that. To the little things. You spoke English before and now you speak German. Everyone would notice it. But, look at what you're doing with the glass. You don't even notice it.”

„I'm not doing anything -“

„No?“ she paused. „You're biting it all up.”

That was ridiculous.

The receptionist was just signing the complaint. The way she did it looked final, but that couldn't be the reason. Ultimately nothing was final. Everything was somehow designed to be rescinded. Even a signature could be undone. The receptionist could take back her complaint. She could pretend she'd been forced to sign it.

It was ridiculous. The hotel wasn't in Nowosibirsk; every hour a plane took

off for Berlin, it was the summer of the century for cell phones.

Unbelievably ridiculous, thought Christiane. And burst into tears, which was even more ridiculous.

„God, what’s wrong with you?”

Ines sat there with huge eyes, looking at her askance.

„Nothing“, said Christiane. „Really. We’re just too dumb. Just like your aunt. We don’t see anything. We don’t even know if we’re paying some debt from the past. If we weren’t so dumb we’d know it.”

„From what past? You mean like during the dinosaur age?” Ines grinned, the body taut as a bow, as if she’d thoroughly amused herself; her aunt continued to ignore her, it was unclear whether the two of them had even said hello to each other.

„Maybe we did something way back, but we can’t remember anymore,” said Christiane, “we repeat ourselves constantly.”

„Oh man“, said Ines. „That esoteric stuff really rubbed off on you. – You want another drink?”

„To the widow!” said Ines when she returned with new glasses.

„To Munich“, said Christiane. The whisky tasted like apple.

It wasn’t whisky. It was Calvados. But it didn’t matter. The Calvados was complimentary too.

Ines thrust her lower lip forward. Her eyes narrowed, and there was a kind of admiration in them that Christiane would have liked to imagine was reserved for her. But it didn’t work and so the admiration remained naïve. She leaned back and closed her eyes. It was dark behind them. Nothing glowed, nothing had ever glowed.

Just Tanne.

She stood there. In light blue, in a half open shirt (and filled to the

brim with Calvados, evoking a kitschy sky association that will not be surrendered to here).

I like living here, Tanne had said, the palms threw long afternoon shadows, *you understand, I can't just leave like that.*

And Denys Finch Hatton who had found an answer this time too: You ruined it for me, you know, being alone. Before he didn't return that Friday, and everyone said, it was an airplane that crashed, somewhere in the Serengeti.

Then it was dark. A long evening in the Steppe, sunset, the credits rolling over an afternoon in a Hollywood movie theater, two people holding hands.

„... if you don't know anybody here,” said Ines in the dark. She spoke softly, the widow's voice echoed from the other end of the lounge. „I mean, we could – I'd like to see you again.” Somewhere close there was a body; a knee under some low-rise pants and in a half hour at the latest an anemic breast snuggling carelessly; a gesture that came from alcohol or maybe not. “Please.”

There were gaps in the system and cracks and at any moment there was the possibility (warning!) of a crash.

A dissolved pier. A naked beach.

„Yeah,” Christiane heard, *sleep's an empty brother; it shows us in the rearview mirror clearer than we've ever been*, „why not.” It came from far away. „Maybe Friday.”

It only takes a moment for somebody to be deceived by their self.

Not somebody, thought Christiane. *I.*

But I was made up of language; language came before the head; and the head was not a glass, rather it was the ice cubes that blurred before your

eyes.

As she slipped from the chair she noticed how the widow's laughter hit its highest tone.