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The Past

In the summer of 1982 they were sure, that they would never die.

Twenty five years later one of the four would be sitting abandoned in a half-finished house, mourning the supposed love of his life, the second would be the father of twins, but no longer have a wife, the third would be lying on a bed, wearing old underpants, in a cheap dump 375 miles to the east and the fourth couldn't sleep at night any more. Apart from that they would be five, because five was the magic number to turn the world upside down and to save one's own life, but that was something they couldn't know at the time.

In 1982 there were four of them, and the sun hung very low in the sky. It was a dusty, hazy sun, that was going down beyond the two church towers at the other end of town. They were sitting on the pavement and passing a bottle round. Konni wiped the top with his sleeve and had no more than a sip, Rainer had closed his eyes, Bulle was drumming a complicated rhythm on his thighs, and Ole was taking forever to roll a cigarette.

They had met here to "warm up", so as not to turn up sober at their school leaving party. The bridge over the railway tracks wasn't exactly on the way to school, where most of the year had already gathered in the recess hall, but Konni lived near here, and they weren't in the mood yet to plunge into the crowd.

Red wine to start with, later there would be beer, harder stuff too. They would be drunk before midnight. Except maybe for Konni, who usually held back a bit. Anyway he was interested in Michaela Borgfeld and wanted to make a good impression. The party tonight was his last chance.

"Tell me," said Rainer to Ole, "do you eventually want to smoke that thing or show it in a museum?"

"A cigarette is like a good friend," responded Ole, "you should have time for each other."

"I wouldn't want to be rolled back and forward between your skinny fingers for hours," said Bulle.

“I can’t sit here any longer,” said Konni, stood up and stamped his right foot. “My leg’s gone to sleep.”

He walked up and down a couple of times, then stopped in front of the metal fence, which was supposed to stop potential suicides from throwing themselves onto the tracks just here, and looked towards the centre of town.

“Do you actually think it’s beautiful?” he asked, without turning round to the others.

Bulle got up and stood beside him. “Beautiful isn’t the right word.”

Rainer joined them and said: “Once one’s got used to it, one can find almost anything beautiful.”

Ole remained sitting and said nothing, but finally lit his carefully rolled cigarette.

After a couple of minutes of silence Konni said: “Is this not the moment we have to solemnly swear eternal friendship? When we tell each other that in twenty five years time we’re going to meet here again, to see what’s become of us.”

Twenty five years - that was longer than eternity. They had just nineteen years behind them, and they could no longer remember the first few. The future was this evening and the summer after it. Ole and Bulle would start their community service. Konni and Rainer had opted for the army.

“Let’s go,” said Ole and stood up.

Bulle, Rainer and Konni tore themselves away from the sight of their home town and followed him to the car. For this evening Ole had borrowed his uncle’s Ford Granada. Rainer and Konni sat in the back, Bulle in the passenger seat. Ole pushed the cassette into the recorder and applause burst out. Then the first notes of the wonderful organ theme. A shudder ran down the spine of all four. *Child in Time* from the unbeatable *Made in Japan*. It was always the live records that were the knock-out. The feeling that you were there, of really getting, what you heard. And the unbelievable power. Why couldn’t mothers and fathers see, that one *couldn’t* play it quietly?

Ole drove round the whole city ring road two or three times, until the twelve minutes the piece lasted were over. Then he turned into the street which led towards the school.

There was a stillness ringing in four pairs of ears of a kind one can only enjoy if the number before that has been *really* loud. Nine years, morning after morning. It was over now. They parked at the back behind the sports hall.

There were already people dancing, even if a bit stiffly. Peter Oehlke was in charge of the music, and so there was chart fodder, cheap stuff. *Hurrah, hurrah, school's on fire* was just on. Ole, Bulle, Konni and Rainer looked at one another: nursery school music. Music with German words - that wasn't on. But they had got through punk, survived disco - they would outlive German New Wave too. They were already old-fashioned, and they knew it.

They mingled with the crowd, with their class-mates. Rainer wondered if today he would once more have the pleasure of sleeping with Gisela Kaufmann, before they all lost touch with each another. Konni risked a couple of glances at Michaela Borgfeld, who was standing with three friends and didn't notice him. Bulle got himself a beer and waited. He didn't have any iron in the fire here and wasn't interested in changing that on this particular evening. He was here for the music and the alcohol and because he wouldn't see all these people again for a very long time.

The "Leaving Party Committee" - made up of the usual suspects, who always pushed their way to the front, if there were brownie points to be won - had done a good job. In the usually bare, sterile recess hall there were settees and easy chairs, the windows were draped, the lighting *dim*. It could almost be called *cosy*. Peter Oehlke had got hold of quite a decent colour organ, and it sounded as if the speakers were able to take a bit of volume. There was nothing worse than a stereo system, in which after four hours at party volume the amp or the tweeters in the speakers packed up.

Ole sat down in a corner, smoked and put his wrists on his drawn up knees. He was waiting. For Dora.

You always knew when she was there, even if you didn't see her. She changed the chemistry in a room, the composition of the air, the light. Similar talents were also ascribed to Ole. Ole was cool. The word had been invented for him. He didn't seem to care less, what was going on around him. He was never in a hurry for anything or anyone. He was the prophet and the mountain came to him, not the other way round. He was the undisputed authority in musical matters, on political issues and on matters of general behaviour. If he was asked then he said which records were good and which could be ignored; whether one should go to a demonstration or not; whether

one could wear Puma trainers with tight jeans or not. (One couldn't. It could only be *Adidas Allround*).

Ole and Dora were the inevitable couple. Even if one couldn't imagine how they would grow old together. It was impossible to imagine them growing old at all. At seventy Ole would still be wearing his Nato combat jacket, the tight jeans and the black t-shirt. He would always be as thin and hollow-cheeked as he was now. Dora would always be extraterrestrial. Long blonde hair, which was not of this world. Her nose, her eyes, her cheek bones, all the details of her outward appearance were made for eternity. She was one of those women, one has to see, whom one can't describe.

It wasn't quite clear what there was between Ole and Dora. You saw them talking together, you saw them walking down the street, or sitting in the car together. But no one had ever seen them touching. It would never have occurred to them to kiss each other when other people were watching. Ole hadn't even told Bulle, Rainer and Konni anything much.

Now Dora was there. There was no fanfare. *Tainted Love* was booming from the speakers. The other girls felt ugly, the boys felt stupid.

Time passed. It grew dark outside. It was warm in the recess hall. Even Ole was dancing. Bulle had intervened in the evening's musical programme. *Starstruck* by Rainbow was playing. From Ole's movements you could see, that he knew every single note of the piece. Dora stood at the side with a bottle of beer in her hand and watched him.

More time passed. It got later and later. Bulle and Rainer were drunk. Konni had had enough, too. Of himself mainly. There was no getting near Michaela Borgfeld. Ole had a bottle of tequila. He was drinking the stuff without salt and without lemon.

At some point, finally, Ole and Dora were sitting together on a mattress in the school cafe and drinking out of the same bottle. Then holding each other tight they danced to *Since I've Been Loving You*. Everyone was allowed to watch. Bulle drank, Konni couldn't keep his eyes open, Rainer was smooching with a girl who wasn't at their school and whose name he didn't know.

The court wasn't allowed to go to bed, as long as the royal couple was still awake.

And then they left, holding hands.

“Where are they going?” asked Bulle.

Konni opened his eyes. Rainer let go off the unknown girl and said: “No idea.” Bulle gave Konni a shove. Rainer stood up. They went outside. Ole and Dora had already reached the Ford Granada.

“He’s not going to drive, as pissed as that,” said Bulle.

Ole’s never pissed,” retorted Rainer. “Ole’s just different.”

The three of them stood at the edge of the pavement, like the common people, as the royal couple drove off into the night in their shabby coach. It was the last night of their schooldays. The last night in which they were immortal.

9

[In this chapter our heroes are meeting for their regular game of cards; the game is easily convertible into Poker for a definite translation]

What a sight! Konni shoved the cards together again and tried hard not to grin. He lit a cigarette and took a long drag. Then he fanned out the cards again and feasted his eyes: both queen of clubs, both queen of spades, a single ace of clubs, not one heart. He did have two ace of diamonds instead, but he would have to have very bad luck, not to get them through! His partner only had to have a halfway good hand, then it would be a famous victory, perhaps the turning point of the evening, if not of the whole year, which was still young.

He shook his head. Just don’t get too cocky!

They were sitting in Bulle’s kitchen, his girls were making some noise upstairs, a thick chili con carne was bubbling on the stove. It was Rainer’s turn to drive, so Konni could safely allow himself another beer, perhaps even a daring third beer and after the meal just one little schnapps. Or even a middling large one. Life could be good. Perhaps he would even smile at his colleague Ms Gregorius next week.

Now he was getting cocky again!

“Any bids?” Rainer wanted to know.

“Marriage,” said Konni quite calmly.

“Who’s going with him?” asked Bulle.

“First non trump.”

“Rainer has to throw,” Thomas stated the obvious.

Rainer bit his lower lip for a couple of seconds and then led with the top card, the ten of hearts. What kind of manoeuvre was that? Everyone discarded their lowest trumps. Unflustered Konni permitted himself a “double risk”, since everything had to be over and done with by the fifth card. Of course no one could raise that, since it wasn’t clear yet who was with him.

Rainer threw the second ten of hearts down in the middle of the table, and Thomas exclaimed, “It’s not a hundred and twenty!” What was going on here?

The question was answered when Rainer led with a king of diamonds. Konni stared at the table and was dumbfounded. He pushed his cards together and threw them on the table.

“You’re not serious!”

Rainer didn’t say anything.

“It’s bloody well not right!”

“Why?” asked Rainer. “It’s strictly according to the rules!”

If someone had a “marriage” (both queen of clubs in one hand) then that player had to say who was to be his partner. Whoever got the first trick, whether trumps or not, or whoever took the first trick without a trump. If after the third trick there had been no decision, the player with the marriage had to play alone, which at the end would be scored as a solo: all points would be multiplied by three.

“That’s a shitty rule!” Konni burst out.

“I didn’t make it,” said Rainer coolly.

“It’s against the spirit of the game!”

“How can a rule be against the spirit of the game?”

“It’s against the spirit of the game to put your partner into a position like that!”

“Perhaps you’ll win anyway.”

“If I believed that, I would have played it as a silent marriage or queen solo!”

“Listen,” said Rainer, “I’ve got a rotten hand, not even an ace to throw, and if I play it straight, then I’m sunk. So I chose the way to get out of that which was best for me. That’s completely legitimate!”

“It’s outrageous! You don’t do something like that. To put someone you call a friend... to put a friend in a position like that.”

“Let’s just get on with the game,” said Thomas. “We don’t know how it’s going to end.”

Konni turned to him. Thomas was far and away the worst player of the four, and if he ever did well, then it was only because of a lucky hand. “And you made a bid, too! You probably didn’t even see what he’s up to!” Konni jerked his head in Rainer’s direction. “You play crap and then you stick close to him, when he does shit like that!”

“Just calm down,” Thomas retorted, “I’ve never seen you like this.”

“You’re right there, for once. You don’t know anything about me! Well, now we’re going to finish the hand. But I’m telling you it’s outrageous!” Konni looked at Rainer and hoped that no one could see his eyes reddening. In one’s mid-forties it didn’t make a good impression to suddenly burst into tears at a moment like that.

“And I’m also telling you,” he continued, “that there’s only one person sitting at this table who’s capable of it. The one who did it!”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” exclaimed Rainer.

“You know exactly what that’s supposed to mean” You always manage to look after number one! You come first, then there’s a big gap, then another big gap and then the rest of the world sitting in the seats at the very back!” Konni turned to Bulle. “What have you got to say about it?”

Bulle stretched and stuck out his stomach. “I can see that you’re pissed off.”

“But?”

“You don’t have to turn it into a matter of principle.”

So that’s how it was. Not even Bulle was sticking by him! “But you know him! What happened with Gisela Kaufmann? He knew exactly, that I was interested in her. That I was bloody well in love with her, fuck it! That’s the only reason he got off with her!” And to Rainer: “You didn’t have the least interest in her! You just wanted to show me, that you can have her and I can’t!”

“My God, Konni, that must have been in 1976!” said Bulle.

“March 1978! Horst Vorholz’s party!”

“Konni, please!” Bulle put his hand on Konni’s arm. “We surely don’t have to talk about what Gisela Kaufmann was like, do we?”

Konni knew what Bulle meant. Gisela Kaufmann had been a girl with a reputation. She was supposed to have been easy, but Konni had seen in her eyes, that there was something else there. Something vulnerable. At the time Bulle had told him that he just wanted to fuck Gisela Kaufmann like everybody else. Konni would never have used such a word when it came to her - or any other girl. It couldn’t always be only about *that*! He felt that he wasn’t going to get anywhere. But he couldn’t admit that now.

“I could mention other examples!” he continued.

“Go on.” said Rainer.

“We’re going to finish this shitty hand, and that’s an end to it.”

“And then we’ll eat,” said Bulle. “And then we’ll all calm down, drink something together and make up.”

Of course, thought Konni, we knock back some schnapps and everything’s all right! It was unbelievable!

He lost the game with “less than ninety” and lost both ace of diamonds. The others had thirty points each and assumed that Konni hadn’t been able to concentrate and so had lost by more than he should have, but in fact he had deliberately played badly. If he was going to lose, then he might as well lose properly! And if Rainer had something like a bad conscience at all, then Konni hoped that it would make itself felt even more clearly after this outcome. That was dumb, silly and childish, but who said, that he should always keep a lid on things? In his mind’s eye the architect appeared. Then the building workers, then Janine Diederichs and his colleague Mr Barnstedt with his Alfa Romeo.

And Michaela.

During the meal they tried very hard to find something to talk about, but nothing made any impression on Konni’s stony expression.

Then, when Bulle passed round the grappa and Konni knocked his back like water, it was Rainer who said: “Have you all received invitations?”

“What invitations?” asked Thomas.

“Not you!” barked Konni a little too sharply and pushed his glass towards Bulle for it to be filled up again. Bulle frowned, and Konni gave him a don’t-keep-me-waiting glance.

“Class reunion,” said Rainer, “twenty five years since we left.”

For a couple of seconds they all let the figure sink in. Thomas still had a bit of time, he was three years younger. Konni downed the second grappa. Warmth spread through his stomach. His ears turned red. He knew it. It was always the same when he drank spirits. He washed it down with some beer. And caught Bulle frowning again, which he countered with a you’re-not-my-mother-look. His mood barometer was rising again.

“Oehlke’s organising it,” said Rainer.

“Of course, who else,” said Bulle. “The old swot!”

“Do you still remember?” said Rainer. “The thing with the toothpaste?”

“October 1975!” exclaimed Konni. “The class trip to Würzburg!”

The old trick: During the night they had smeared Martin Oehlke’s hands with toothpaste, and the next morning right after they got up Bulle had pulled down his pyjama pants: In his sleep Martin Oehlke had got the toothpaste all over his crotch.

“Gisela will be there, too, I assume,” said Rainer, “we could clear something up then.”

“I wouldn’t know what there is to clear up,” said Konni and poured himself yet another grappa, because Bulle didn’t want to give him any more. Gisela wasn’t the problem. Until this evening he hadn’t thought about her for years. Michaela would be there. With the orthopaedist, that bloody butcher of human beings. There were still months to go. Months in which he could make himself crazy.

“I’ve just remembered something: Ole called me!” said Rainer suddenly.

“Seriously?” it slipped out of Konni. “Why did he call you?”

“Why not me?”

“What did he say,” Bulle wanted to know.

“No idea. Brigitte said, he was on the answerphone. Two weeks ago.

“Two weeks ago?”

“She forgot to tell me.”

“Did you call him back?” asked Konni.

“I didn’t reach him. Not even the answerphone.”

“Ole doesn’t have an answerphone,” said Bulle.

“I haven’t heard anything from him for months,” muttered Konni. “And I last saw him... man, I haven’t a clue.”

There was silence. Apart from Thomas they were all thinking the same thing. Rainer said it out loud: “Do you think Ole will come to the class reunion?”

“I wouldn’t think,” said Bulle, “that Oehlke has Ole’s address.” And after a further pause he added: “And anyway that isn’t the real point.”

Konni and Rainer nodded. Yet again only Thomas didn’t know what they meant.

“Could someone tell me what you’re on about?”

Evidently no one felt a need to do so. Konni said: “I can’t imagine that Dora will come. She didn’t come to the other reunions. And this one is on the same date as the party was back then.”

Rainer nodded: “No, I don’t think she’ll put herself through that.”

Thomas shook his head and didn’t bother asking any more questions.

After the meal the game was uninteresting. It was as if the cards were subject to the general mood. Most of the rounds were narrow wins and didn’t bring in many points. After his marriage hand Konni didn’t have much to do with the evening’s result. Bulle was the overall winner, a couple of points ahead of Rainer and Thomas. Konni had allowed himself two or three more glasses of grappa and some beer. Bulle had made no further comment.

Luckily tomorrow was Saturday. No teaching. No Mr Barnstedt, no Magnus Eberbach, no Janine Diederichs.

But also no Ms Gregorius.

Hm.

When they finished around half past twelve, had put on their jackets and coats and were standing at the door to say goodbye to Bulle, it was he who said: “What about it, have you made up?”

Konni couldn't stop himself giggling. "Make up, make up! What does that mean? That we've got to paint our faces?"

"He's completely pissed!" said Thomas.

Konni took a deep breath. "Children and drunks tell the truth. And I happen to be both. Childish and pissed."

He spread his arms. "Come here all of you!"

The others stood there. Konni put one arm around Bulle and one arm around Thomas, pulled them towards him and laid his head on Rainer's chest. It was lucky that the hallway was so cramped.

"My good friend Bulle here said, that the bass isn't so difficult at all. So if you think, that the thing with the band won't work, just because dumb Beckmann can't play an instrument, then I've got something to say: I'm a teacher, I've got lots of time to practise! At least that's what everyone thinks. I don't have a private life any more, and I no longer care whether the extension ever gets finished or not. Our friend Grigolet has a wonderful big garage, it's even heated, we can play there. We're not getting any younger, gentlemen, and if we had a band we could argue like today every day, and it wouldn't be a problem, because that's part of being in a band. We'll get a couple of old TV's other people are getting rid off and throw them out of the window! That's the way it's done, isn't it? So, what's the decision, are you with me or not?"

The other three didn't say a word. Konni, still with his head on Rainer's chest, seemed to drop off again. But then he said: "We're sleeping away our lives. At least the sad remainder of it. The next thirty years won't be as much fun as the first thirty. Admit it, you've all been thinking about it recently! You haven't stopped thinking about it!"

He looked at one after the other.

"OK," he said, as no one replied, "let's sleep one more night on it. Or two or three or four or five or six years or what do I know, or we'll all die thinking about it and that's OK too!"

He dragged himself to Rainer's car and lay down on the back seat. Plenty damn space in an E-class Mercedes. Rainer sat down behind the driving wheel, Thomas in the passenger seat.

"I've never seen him as drunk as that," said Thomas, after they'd driven a few yards.

"I have," said Rainer.

Konni couldn't help thinking about the evening in Berlin a couple of years before, when he, Rainer and Bulle had gone to see Ole in Berlin. They had ended up in a pub in Kreuzberg, which interestingly enough had cropped up in Thomas' first novel. Fat bikers in sunglasses and tight t-shirts had been sitting around them and at some point Konni had fallen asleep and only woken up again as he was standing at the urinal and peeing on his fingers. He had sung that night, and the others had said, he had a good singing voice. Apart from that there had been something about a smashed bottle in a gateway and about a woman, who at first seemed really interested in Konni, but then confronted him with the prices she had in mind. Luckily Rainer didn't tell that story. Anyway he and Bulle had had to stop Konni from going off with the woman. He couldn't imagine it, but the next morning Bulle and Rainer had sounded very convincing and even years later had stuck to their story.

Ole.

Why had he phoned? Why was he in Berlin anyway? To find happiness? Ole wasn't very good at being happy, not even at being content, and one could just as well be desperate here.

After Thomas had got out, Konni pretended to sleep.

Then he was standing in front of the house with Rainer. Rainer looked at the extension and said: "There's a light on."

"The electric moon," said Konni.

It was cold and their breath stood between them in small clouds.

"Listen," said Rainer, "if I had known, that you would be so... I mean, that you would be so upset, then I wouldn't have played the way I did."

“It’s OK,” muttered Konni. “It’s just about who wins.”

Rainer sighed. “Don’t make it such a matter of principle. Don’t act as if the whole world was just waiting to get you.”

For a couple of seconds neither of them said anything.

“You always intimidated me,” said Konni then.

“Now what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You always had everything under control. School, the teachers, Gisela.”

“*She* threw herself at *me*, not the other way round!”

“Sure, that’s the way it always was. You didn’t have to do anything, just be there and wait. And the rest of us sweated away like idiots.”

“Don’t exaggerate.”

Konni gestured with his index and his middle finger. Rainer gave him a cigarette and also lit one for himself.

“When you got married, the first one, so soon after leaving school, I thought, now something’s over. Now he won’t have anything to do with us any more. With Bulle and Ole and with me.”

“Don’t forget Thomas.”

“Thomas, yeah. Our little brother. He didn’t join us until later. He never snatched a woman away from me. He doesn’t know anything about March 1978. Or January 1979!”

“Don’t remind me!”

Laughing they blew out smoke.

“When you got married, I thought, that’s the first step. Soon Bulle will do the same. And Ole? Well, Ole was always in another world. But then we started the card school.”

“It was Bulle’s idea.”

“His best since August 1980.”

“Just don’t tell him that!”

Again they had to laugh. They thought a bit about the quarrelsome weeks in Greece that summer.”

“If we didn’t have this game, we might not even know each other any more. I can’t even imagine being friends only with people who don’t know what I mean when I say the 1979 Easter Party!”

They smoked the cigarettes down to the filter, dropped them on the ground and stood on them. The unbroken grey clouds in the sky glowed a little, as if the real moon behind them was making an effort to send a little light down to earth. Perhaps it would snow tomorrow.

“But I sometimes think,” Konni continued, “that we’re not producing any new memories any more, we’re just living off the old ones. What will we be thinking about in twenty years time, when we remember this February? That we argued about a silly card game? I know, it’s sounds funny coming from me, because I’m the boring idiot you fall asleep beside instead of feeling of secure, but maybe we should just go out and produce a few memories before it’s too late. What do you think?”

Rainer pushed his hands into his coat pockets and looked down to the river, as if there was more to see there than fog.

“Let’s talk on the phone tomorrow,” he said.

Then they embraced, and Konni remained standing in front of the house until Rainer’s car had turned the corner.

10

Fear of heights. The Greek word for that. Ten letters. *Acrophobia*. How did he know that? Stefan was always surprising himself. With a sigh he asked himself a) why he had such a good memory for that kind of thing and b) he was vegetating in “Werner’s Musicstore” nevertheless. OK, it could have something to do with the fact, that a) he had given up university after thirty three semesters (he liked to say thirty three and a third, because that was the speed of classic long-playing records) and b) he was not suited to a regular job with the corresponding prospects for promotion. Drummer in *Dirty Backyard*, that had been the best! But then when the others had decided that they preferred the security of steady jobs to the freedom of the rock ’n’ roll life, he hadn’t been able to get a steady gig anywhere. For a couple of years he had freelanced as a roadie, as an “events technician”, but instead of organising the technical side of things for young, ambitious, passionate, rocking young bands and providing them with tips about the business, he had shlepped equipment for third-class entertainment outfits with names like *Dance Express*, *Good Time Band* or *Party Time*. Third class? As far as he knew there was nothing first class in that field. So he had started working in music shops. “Werner’s Musicstore” was his fourth stop and the way things looked he would be here till he collected his pension. If the shop didn’t go bust first.

He had been sitting here for three hours now, and apart from a mother who wanted to buy sheet music for her five year-old son’s recorder lessons, no one had come in who had looked remotely like a customer. Except Werner had briefly dropped by and asked him, Stefan, of all people, why nothing was happening here. Stefan had merely shrugged and wondered for the umpteenth time, why Werner insisted on calling him by his proper name. For almost thirty years everyone had only called him Stoney. He liked the nickname. He thought it was silly, that at latest after their fortieth birthday other men didn’t want to know about them any more.

Anyway, people got into such a panic about their fortieth! It was just embarrassing. Stoney had spent his fortieth completely relaxed with a couple of people in the south of France, on a deserted bay, under a blue sky, with two guitars, a few beers, two bottles of calvados and little grass. The others always said, one couldn’t do something like that, once one reached a certain age. That was nonsense. As long as one wasn’t tied down by children, it was no problem at all. And one had to have a woman who wasn’t on one’s back all the time, to go out into the big, bad world, to go hunting and collecting.

Man, how lucky he was, that Ulrike wasn't like that. After four abortions she had made up her mind only to sleep with guys who were sterilised, and Stoney had already got that over and done with when he turned thirty. He had nothing against children, but it was just too risky. He would a) have been a bad father and b) it was a bad, greedy world and children deserved better than that.

Except I should somehow manage to stop chewing my fingernails, he thought and took his ring finger out of his mouth. It looked terrible.

He thought about sitting down behind one of the drum kits again, to pass the time, but then he heard a vehicle drive into the courtyard. He went to the back and looked through the barred window next to the steel door. A white van from a hire company was standing there and four guys were getting out. What did they want? One of them came to the window, put his hands on the pane of glass and shouted whether someone could open the door. Stoney made a circling motion with his right arm to indicate, that they had to come round to the front.

On his way back to the front of the shop he took the rubber band out of the pocket of his corduroy trousers and tied his hair into a pony tail again. It was simply better that way when he was trying to sell something. A minute later the four figures were standing in the shop. They rubbed their hands and sniffed, because it was damned cold outside.

“Morning,” said the one who had looked through the window. “We need some instruments.”

“Well, we have some,” said Stoney.

“We'll take a look round first!”

“If you need help, just tell me.”

“We'll do that, Mr...”

“Stoney.”

The guy grinned. “We'll do that, Mr Stoney.”

With his long dark coat, his leather gloves and the suit, the guy didn't look like someone who wanted to rock out. And his short, dark hair had far too neat a parting.

They looked round. Names flew through the air. The one who had spoken to Stoney, was evidently called Rainer. He looked as if he just been in court, either as a lawyer or a white collar fraudster. Probably someone else, who only wanted to buy an electric organ for his frustrated wife or for his dear son who had gone off the tracks. But then what did the other three want?

One was pretty big and pretty broad. The others called him Bulle. He inspired a little more confidence in Stoney, after all he was wearing a worn leather jacket, jeans and biker boots. Middling blond hair, no: dirty blond or even better: street mongrel blond hair, growing over his ears. The guy was probably something like a carpenter or an electrician.

And the one beside him had to be a teacher! Five foot nine at the outside. An imitation tweed jacket and elephant cord trousers baggy at the knees. Stoney had sworn by needlecord since 1975. They called him Konni. That didn't fit him at all. Someone like that should always be addressed as "Mr".

The fourth was evidently called Thomas. At least they didn't call him Tommy. He looked the best of the lot, thought Stoney. With his big dark eyes he was probably quite a hit with the women. If he was lucky they hadn't chained him down with children yet. Thick dark hair, sticking up a bit chaotically on his head. Under a lined denim jacket he was wearing a dark blue pullover with a zip. Stoney could easily imagine him as a journalist.

Smart Rainer looked in Stoney's direction. Evidently his professional advice was required now.

"Well, Mr Stoney, could you tell us something about this bass guitar here. My friend has quite fallen in love with it." He put a hand on the shoulder of the teacher type with the inappropriate nickname.

"I would say the man's got taste," said Stoney. "That's the Fame Baphonet 4, handmade, part of the Fame Edel series. It's got class. It has a) a finely shaped Bobinga body and b) a screwed together seven part neck with a Wenge fingerboard and 24 frets. But you can also have it fretless."

“Ah?” The teacher lowered his head for a moment and pulled a face as if Stoney had mortally offended him.

“Fretless,” said Smart Rainer, “without frets it’s really only for experts. Sting plays something like that.”

At the mention of the name Sting, they all pulled the same utterly offended face, as if they had been practising it.

“How long have you been playing?” Stoney asked.

“Not at all yet.”

“Oh, I see, well, at any rate, this is a super instrument, equipped with a) two single coil PU pickups and b) active MEC 2-Bad electronics. Came out top in a test in *Guitar and Bass*.”

“In *Guitar and Bass*?”

This teacher guy evidently didn’t have a clue about anything. “It’s a specialist magazine,” Stoney patiently gave him a helping hand.

“And what was the name again?”

“Stoney.”

The teacher guy closed his eyes, as if was dealing with a particularly dense pupil. “Not your name!” he said. “The name of this thing here.”

“This thing here is a Fame Baphonet 4.”

“Baphonet. I like that. Sounds Celtic somehow.”

Somehow Celtic. The teacher guy seemed to like that. He probably taught English.

“The price is surprisingly low,” said Smart Rainer.

“We’re well known for our genuine special offers. Why don’t you hold it?”

“Can I?” asked the teacher guy.

“Of course you can!” Stoney encouraged him. “There’s a strap on it. Put it on.”
The strap was a bit loose, so the bass hung right in front of the teacher guy’s crotch.

“Come here, we’ll plug it in.”

Stoney guided the teacher guy to the demonstration Marshall speaker and connected the instrument. The teacher guy plucked at a couple of strings and said, it didn’t sound bad.

“OK, then we’ll take it,” said Smart Rainer. “We’ll also need a small amplifier, so he can practice at home. Doesn’t have to be anything great.”

“Well, if you want something a bit more reasonable, then we have the Megatone SL30B, 30 watts, I can let you have it for 90 euros.”

“Hm, thirty watts isn’t much.”

“Then perhaps the Megatone PL60B, for just under a hundred and fifty.”

“We’ll take it. And now can you us show what guitars you have. Just don’t bother about the special offers for twelve year-olds.”

These guys were evidently prepared to spend a decent amount of money.

“Sure, man, well, if you’re looking for something really out of the ordinary then I’ve got the Epiphone Les Paul Standard here, dream of a piece, and again the price is very reasonable.”

Good-looking Thomas with the thick black hair came forward, glanced at the instrument and shook his head. “Na, we’re not playing any wanky jazz crap.”

“You’ve got a band?” asked Stoney.

“About to,” said Smart Rainer.

The teacher guy had stayed with his Baphonet and was still plucking at it.

“OK, then I’ve got the Fender Rory Gallagher Relic Strat here. It costs rather more, but a) it’s an Original Fender b) it looks pretty impressive.”

“But it looks as if it’s second-hand,” said Thomas.

“With the difference,” said Smart Rainer, “that Rory Gallagher’s looked like that, because he had been playing it for years. That’s just stupid, to make a new guitar look old! Like crappy designer jeans with holes in them.”

Approving, monkish-sounding muttering supported Rainer’s statement. OK, thought Stoney, these customers are serious.

“And apart from that,” added Thomas, “maybe that is a bit much to pay.”

“That’s right,” said the big one, “that price is pretty steep.”

“OK, then can I ask you, a) what price range you’re thinking of and b) what kind of music you play.”

The big one looked at Stoney: “Do the names *Deep Purple*, *Rainbow*, or *Led Zeppelin* mean anything to you?”

Stoney nodded. “Music from the time before everything went down the drain.”

“Now we’re on the same wavelength,” said Smart Rainer.

“OK, then I won’t bother you with any heavy models, which look like flying arrows or have a leopard-skin pattern on them. Ritchie Blackmore usually played Fender and there I can offer a) a Standard Strat from the Fender subsidiary company Squier, e.g. in Black Metallic, but also in Candy Apple Red or b) a Standard Stratocaster MN.”

“What is a) the difference and b) what would you recommend, Stoney?”

Stoney registered Smart Rainer’s friendlier tone with satisfaction.

“Well, the Squier is pretty close to the original, and the other *is* the original.”

Smart Rainer glanced at Good-Looking Thomas and said: “We’ll take the original. And a practice amplifier with it as well.”

“Doesn’t he want to play the thing first?” asked Stoney.

“Sure,” said Thomas. Stoney brought him a strap and a cable and plugged the Strat into a Fender amp. Birds of a feather... thought Stoney, and he had to grin, because he couldn’t remember when he had last been in such a good mood. Good-looking Thomas struck an F major and began plucking the guitar like some singer-songwriter. Well, the others would knock that out of him.

“Good, and now that leaves us with the subject of the drum kit”,” said Smart Rainer. “We can talk about a PA after that.”

They’re completely mad, thought Stoney. But magnificently mad. Man, it used to be that you had to save and save to get the money for the instruments. Now you just walked into a shop and said: I want that and I want that and I want that!

“I can make it easy for you,” said the big one. It has to be a) black and b) by Pearl. And if it’s possible there’s a c): two bass drums are compulsory.”

“Two bass drums? Of course you want a nice fat sound around the bottom, don’t you? OK, we’ve got everything to set you up. Over there at the back there’s a complete kit with Paiste cymbals, I would have to order the second bass drum, but sit down behind it and see how you get on with it.”

The big guy went to the back, where the booths were set up, sat down behind the Pearl kit and started to lay into it. The guy knew what he was doing. This job could be fun, if you happened to meet the right people.

The big guy played around a bit with the hi-hat and played a neat roll on the snare. Smart Rainer nodded in time.

Stoney came up beside him and said: “You don’t happen to need a sound man as well?”

Frank Goosen, *So much Time*

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