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On the first of his last five days, Jensen was sitting at his desk, and outside a horse-drawn carriage stood in the rain. The coachman, wrapped in a black cape, was bent forward as he sat on his box. His hat had slipped down onto his face, he appeared to be asleep. The horses were shaking themselves, they were fretful, blowing out little puffs of steam through their nostrils.

Something's wrong, Jensen thought.

He looked at the clock on the wall. He had been watching the coachman for eight minutes, and all the while the man's torso had been angling forward more and more. Any minute, his hat would slide off his head. Jensen couldn't explain why the coachman was waiting for tourists in front of the police building, of all places. It was the ugliest building in Bruges, and the only reason tourists visited this part of town was to report their handbags stolen. Aside from that, it had been raining for three weeks, the coachman would surely have noticed. There were no tourists this August, no wasps either, for that matter. That coachman had to be an optimist, an irrational sort. A person who fell asleep on his coach box in the rain because he believed there would be a happy turn of events, an abrupt, unexpected change in the weather, that all of a sudden the sun would come out and make tourists sprout from the ground, and along with them the petty crooks who snatched their purses, so that the tourists would be forced to come here, to the police station, where he was waiting for them, soaked but well rested.

That's probably the way he envisions it, Jensen thought peevishly.

He took his eyes off the coachman and looked at the wall clock again: another seven and a half hours to kill.

The others, his colleagues, were bent over unfinished files; some of them were supporting their heads, grown heavy from the tedium, on their hands. When his colleagues shifted their weight, the office chairs creaked. You couldn't always sit in the same position, that would have amounted to yoga, and his colleagues were action people. They would have enjoyed jumping over a hedge or running for the next cover, sprinting down one of Bruges' cobbled streets in pursuit of a pick-pocket. Their physiques were far better suited for something like that than for chair farting. That's what they called it, because when they were forced to sit around for longer periods of time, they actually did suffer from increased flatulence.

Jensen looked out the window again. The coachman's hat was still on his head, but he was listing even more.

If his hat slides off his head, Jensen thought, I'll go down and see whether he's really just asleep.

One of his coworkers cleared his throat. Then it was quiet again.

Stassen, who sat at the desk in front of Jensen's, scratched his back with a pencil. With the point of the pencil, mind you, scribbling on his blue uniform shirt.

It's hard to get rid of pencil marks, Jensen thought. As a person who did his own laundry, he knew about that.

Five days more, another five days. Since time was inseparably connected with space, according to the special theory of relativity, the only thing that would shrink those five days to bearable dimensions would be movement through space at an extremely high velocity, although not for the person who was moving at such high speed, that was the sticking point. It was hopeless. Jensen would have to find some other way of coming to terms with that stretch of time, other than space flight. He decided on idle rumination. He thought of the small glass plate he had custom ordered as a barrier wall for the double-slit experiment. The experiment was his only project for the period after his early retirement. The physicist Richard Feynman

once said that the experiment encompassed the entire secret of quantum physics and therewith the structure of the world itself. Conducting it in one's own cellar, Jensen felt, was therefore a rewarding task for someone who had resigned from work at the age of fifty.

All he still had to endure was the retirement speech. Stassen was probably drafting it on a piece of paper with his pointed pencil at that very moment.

Jensen closed his eyes.

He imagined what Stassen would say when the five days had run their course, when it was time, when his colleagues gathered around Jensen in a semi-circle, each with a glass of orange juice in hand: the retirement speech.

Inspector Hannes Jensen, Stassen would say, was born and raised in Constance. As you may know, the town is located in Germany. Yes, he is a German, but in the meantime he speaks better Flemish than many of us – once you overlook his accent, and the words that sometimes elude him, which he then replaces with German words because he realizes, of course, that deep in our hearts we all speak excellent German. And maybe if the war hadn't happened, and if the Germans hadn't hanged Chief Constable Dupont's grandfather, whom we all valued, then... Maybe then I wouldn't be the only one of his coworkers with any interest in holding this speech to begin with. Now, some of you will be thinking that's not surprising, Stassen is half German himself, just take a look at his mother. And to all those I can only say, kiss my ass! It was love that brought my mother to Flanders, and it was nothing other than love that led our colleague to Bruges 15 years ago. His love for Maragrete Streuper, daughter of City Councilman Jan Streuper, whom we all still remember so well, and whose patronage enabled our colleague to rise to the rank of Inspector. I use the term "patronage" to avoid calling it double-dealing, nepotism or even corruption. And now, dear friend Hannes, I would like to ask you a question: What are you going to live off following your unusually early retirement from the force? Will it be Margarete's not inconsiderable

inheritance? Do I have that right? Isn't it about time that you come clean about what everybody here is thinking?

Jensen snapped his eyes open, a shiver ran down his spine.

I haven't touched that money in all these years, he thought. And I'm not going start now, either. Other people can think what they want.

He looked out of the window. There had been a critical change. The coachman was lying on the ground now, the horses were nervously tugging at their harness, they would have liked to escape. Two women under red umbrellas stood on the street wavering, looking down at the coachman. One of them turned around and gestured frantically to Jensen when she saw him standing behind the window. A volley of lightning bolts slashed through the clouds.

“There's a man down outside,” Jensen said loudly. “The coachman.”

His coworkers turned to look at him.

“What coachman?” Stassen asked.

“What difference does it make?” Jensen said. “Go down there and take care of him. He's lying outside, in front of the station.”

His coworkers rushed to the windows, their bodies straining. Something had happened, and those who believed in God were grateful to him. Everybody rushed out to help the coachman. Jensen was the only one to remain in the office; now the clock on the wall was ticking only for him.

That was kindhearted, Jensen thought.

He had been kindhearted. Compassionate. He could have kept it from the others, could have gone outside by himself and looked after the coachman in person. But as a commodity, work was in short supply and those who still had years before them were entitled to it, whereas he had only another five days, an eternity, but bearable. For him, at least, although maybe not for Chief Constable Dupont.

Jensen looked over at the aquarium, that glass cabin where Dupont was just talking with someone on the phone, presumably his family doctor. Dupont was forever worrying about his health, there was a small 19th century Chinese porcelain dish on his desk that was full of pills. He took his meds in style. When Dupont noticed that Jensen was watching him, he stood up and lowered the Venetian blind.

Outside, his coworkers were clustering around the coachman, there was an inner and an outer circle; the coworkers in the outer circle had to content themselves with making critical remarks about the actions of their colleagues in the inner circle. A vertical rain was falling, and the two women, who were the only ones in possession of umbrellas, stood at the edge of the outer circle. Presumably they were pleased at how well things were going for them: they weren't getting wet, and they weren't lying on the pavement.

Stassen, the senior officer, was carefully propping up the coachman, when the phone rang on Jensen's desk. It was Geldof, who, ever since his hip operation, was out of the question for work in the field and constantly stressed how satisfying he found office work.

“There’s a man here with me,” said Geldof. “A tourist. And you're the only person available. Everybody else is outside. So I'm sending the gentleman over to you. Claims he’s being threatened. Speaks only English, though, and you know how that is. Maybe he means something different. OK, so I'm sending him in to you.”

Jensen, who was amazed that things were happening in such quick succession, said, “I dunno, I wish you’d call one of my associates in on this. After all, they’re right outside.”

“He's already on his way. Just think of it as a little farewell present.”

Geldof hung up, and the man he’d mentioned came into the office, a portly type with a conductor’s hairdo, a full head of hair, but it was wet now, and he pushed it from his forehead with an expansive gesture. His shoes squeaked with every step he took, the man had ventured outside without an umbrella. It had been raining incessantly for days, and there were taxis. But this man had arrived on foot and, judging from his (albeit soaking) clothing, from one of

the expensive hotels, De Tuilerieën, De Swan, or De Orangerie. It was a good 15 minute walk from any of those hotels to the police station. So why didn't he have an umbrella?

"I've been announced," the man said in English, with a broad, nasal twang.

An American, Jensen thought. From the South.

"Yes," Jensen said. "I was informed."

He indicated the visitors' chair, and the man sat down across from him. He entirely filled the space between the two armrests. His glasses had fogged up, he was wiping them dry with the end of his tie.

"Horrible weather," the man said. For somebody who felt threatened, he seemed very relaxed. "How can anybody live in a country like this? It's summer! But there's no light here in Belgium. Not even in the hotel. I tried to read a book, it's impossible. It's already dark at eleven o'clock in the morning, and these Napoleonic lamp shades all over the place. They filter the light, you have to unscrew them before you can read a book."

So he's at De Tuilerieën, Jensen thought. The hotel's interior appointments affected the style of Napoleon I.

"But that's not why you came to see us," Jensen said.

The man said nothing for a moment, he seemed to be pondering something.

"You're right," he said. "That's not why I'm here."

He extended his hand to Jensen.

"Name's Brian Ritter."

Jensen shook his hand. It was soft and wet.

"I'm an American citizen, from Holbrook, Arizona. I'm here with my two sons, showing them the five continents. But that's something you won't understand. It's an internal matter."

Brian Ritter, Jensen thought. German ancestry, and he's showing his kids the five continents. And I'll never understand that.

“Mr. Ritter,” he said. “What brings you here?”

“I’m here for a very specific reason. You see, I was watching the birds. An . . . an Indian taught me how to do it. Before you make an important decision, you observe the flight of birds. I wasn’t sure about asking the police for help, but then three seagulls flew over this building coming from the left. By the way, if you ask me, it’s the architectural disgrace of the town. But I can see that you’re not listening to me. You think I’m a little off my rocker. That’s OK, for all I care. But don’t forget, there are more ridiculous things than watching the flight of birds before you make a decision. Ever heard of Padre Pio? You know that guy? Millions of Christians believe that he had the stigmata and performed miracles. The Vatican officially canonized him, just think of that, a man who supposedly had the gift of bilocation, who could be at two places at once! Now, if I’d told you that I’d prayed to Padre Pio and then suddenly had a feeling that going to the police was the right thing to do, would you still think I’m nuts?”

He’s drunk, Jensen thought. First thing in the morning, too.

Strange that he had only noticed it now. Ordinarily, he could spot a lush from a great distance. But this one was different, too corpulent, and his hair was shiny, not dull and dry like the others, and he didn’t have the drunkard’s dent on the bridge of his nose, the sign that he had taken a fall, no broken blood vessels on his nose, no vacant stare. Maybe he’d only recently taken to drink.

“Mr. Ritter,” Jensen said. “You currently find yourself in a police station. We are not authorized to handle religious affairs. When you spoke with the desk officer before, you said somebody was threatening you. That would fall under our responsibility. So, are you being threatened? And why? Who is it?”

“Yes, I’m being threatened.”

Ritter slid his chair forward, closer to Jensen’s desk. “Somebody wants to kill me. And that’s not just some notion in my head. There’s a letter, a threatening letter. Got it

this morning. It's in my hotel room, and I want you to have a look at it. I haven't changed a thing. Not supposed to tamper with the evidence, right?"

"And what does it say in the letter?"

"You should have a look for yourself. Then there might be a possibility."

"A possibility of what?"

"A possibility that I'll survive, of course. That I'll still be breathing tomorrow. That I'll live to take another warm shit. I'm warning you!" Ritter raised his index finger. "This is a very serious matter. I normally never drink this early in the day. So now maybe I'm a little bit drunk. But that doesn't change the fact that I feel it. More than anything, I want you to talk with my kids. They're scared, they're scared that something might happen to their father, which is entirely understandable. If you'd talk with them, they'd calm down. They'd know then that the police are protecting me. So please, do me that favor!"

Ritter withdrew a flask. His every move testified to great experience: the precisely measured turns he used to unscrew the cap, not to mention his nonchalant manner of drinking under the eyes of a stranger.

"I usually never drink this early in the day," he repeated when he had finished. "But when there's a chance you might be dead soon..." He focused on a point in the distance. "Then it doesn't make any difference."

The flashing blue light of an ambulance flickered across Ritter's face. Jensen looked out of the window. An emergency vehicle from St. John's Hospital. No siren. Maybe the coachman was dead, or maybe the traffic had simply been light, making the siren unnecessary.

"Right," Jensen said.

He couldn't think of anything, he didn't know what to do. If it hadn't involved children, he would have bid Ritter a cordial farewell. Go drink yourself to death someplace

where I don't have to watch. Go observe the flight of birds, and as far as Padre Pio's concerned, submit a complaint to the appropriate congregation at the Vatican.

"How old are your children?" Jensen asked.

"They're both ten. They're twins. Hunahpuh and Xbalanque."

"Those are their names?"

"No. They're called Rick and Oliver."

Two ten-year-old boys. It was a duty he had to perform, opening the iron door and descending into the vault that he normally only entered in his dreams, dreams of despair that it still wasn't over.

Let me be perfectly frank with you, he wanted to say. I don't think you're in any danger, except maybe from yourself.

But Jensen left the remark unsaid. Drinkers often suffered from paranoid delusions, and it made no sense to challenge them on it. His mind was made up. For the children's sake, he had to look into the matter, at least to assure himself that they were all right, under the circumstances.

2

"My wife's private secretary chose the hotel," Ritter said as they drove to De Tuilerieën on Dijver Canal in Jensen's staff car. "His idea of a romantic atmosphere is a guy in lingerie reciting Oscar Wilde. The entire hotel exudes that gay smell, but I'm just following orders."

"You told me that you were showing your children the five continents. What does that mean, exactly? A trip around the world?"

Ritter clasped his hands together, which wasn't easy for him because his fingers were exceptionally short and almost fat, with oddly flat nails. They were unpleasant fingers, you could easily imagine them in disgusting situations, greedy, immature fingers.

“Right, a trip around the world,” said Ritter. “Something like that. Eurasia is the first continent, next comes Africa. Care for a drink? Don't worry, I don't have anything catching. Atrophy of the brain, at the worst.”

He laughed and offered the flask to Jensen.

“No thanks.”

“How come? You have an ulcer?”

“I'm on duty,” Jensen replied.

“Hey, so am I! I'm not here for fun. And just look at how I'm drinking. I couldn't care less, on duty, off duty.”

Ritter took a drink and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

“Another couple of brain cells wiped out,” he said blithely. “My doctor won't be happy. A while back, he threatened me with atrophy of the brain, like I told you. I always thought it was just your liver that shrinks, but apparently the brain does, too. I'm curious to see what kind of effect it has.”

He's already forgotten that he thinks somebody's trying to kill him, Jensen thought. Ritter's lack of concern annoyed him, and so he said, “You should take your doctor seriously. Sooner or later, almost every alcoholic experiences reduced brain volume. They become demented.”

“Yeah, but before they do they achieve insights that teetotalers envy them for. For example, take a look at this town, Bruges.”

Ritter pointed to the buildings lining the ring road.

“It's a charming city,” he said, “if you're looking for the leisurely pace of bygone days, when people sat behind these pretty brick facades and coughed up blood onto the

crocheting they had to produce at starvation wages. My father was a butcher's assistant in a slaughter house; I know what I'm talking about. I can smell poverty even where it's been turned into a tourist attraction. This is a disgusting city, Bruges, because it's full of lies, and I bet that its citizens are particularly ornery and unfriendly. Isn't that right?"

"Somewhat," Jensen replied.

"They're ornery because year in and year out they have to share their home with foreigners, who gape at church spires with rapture in their eyes and take a picture of every goddamn duck that eats a piece of trash in some idyllic canal. Over the long term, it's unbearable to be surrounded by people who are seeing all the beauty for the first time, while you yourself are wishing you were someplace far away."

That's not entirely wrong, Jensen thought.

"But what's it to me?" Ritter said, and took another drink from his flask that wouldn't run dry.

Jensen opened both front windows, he urgently needed fresh air. This made the rain splash inside now, but the smell of liquor in the car was just too strong.

"I'm getting wet," Ritter complained. "And shouldn't we have been there a long time ago?"

"In just a minute."

"Wherever you look, you see church spires!" Ritter said in disgust. "You can only hope that your God doesn't sit down. He'd really get pricked in the ass. You're a Catholic, aren't you? Or am I wrong?"

"On paper," Jensen replied.

"Lots of times my father would bring home a pig's heart, wrapped in paper. So paper can be very close to the heart. You're Catholic. That'll make my kids happy. They're Catholic, too, both of them. Turned Catholic, I'd have to say. That's because we're so close to Mexico. We've got a lot of wetbacks, I mean Mexicans, in Holbrook. We let them into our

homes so they can clean our windows and scrape the urine cake out of the toilet bowl. And in the end there are Virgin Mary candles burning in the children's room, and you find a rosary under the Playstation, where the kids hid it. My little guys secretly pray to their God in the clouds, and let me tell you, if that God really did exist, I would have been dead long ago."

Ritter laughed out loud and clapped his hands in delight.

"That was only a joke," he added.

Who knows, Jensen thought.

The iron door already stood wide open. He could smell his mother, her bath robe, a kind of diary of her daily life. The puke had been written into the material, the spilled gin, the cloying perfume she used as an attempt to deceive herself.

They finally arrived at De Tuilerieën. Jensen drove down a narrow street around to the back, the parking lot was secured with a wrought iron gate.

Jensen got out, pushed the button on the intercom and simply said, "Police."

The gate opened immediately.

I'm going to miss that, he thought.

He parked the car. Ritter got out, quickly slammed the car door and caught his jacket, he tugged at it, the material ripped. Ritter took off the jacket and threw it on the hood of the car. Without waiting for Jensen, he tramped in his rain-drenched, sleeveless shirt through the puddles into the conservatory which led into the hotel.

In the elevator Ritter said, "They're going to be surprised."

"Who? Your children?"

"Who else? Are you carrying a gun? You've got to show it to them."

I'd like to show it to you, Jensen thought.

Ritter opened the door to the room, ushering Jensen in with an affected gesture.

Jensen accepted only reluctantly, because he recognized the room immediately. It was a

replica of his mother's bedroom, the stench attacked him like dogs in a nightmare. Even though it was broad daylight, the after-dark ambience that had always surrounded his mother pervaded the room: the curtains drawn, while birds were chirping outside, the rumpled bed that was in use at all hours, even on Christmas Eve when Father, with tears in his eyes, piled crooked slices of carved meat onto his children's plates. The meat was still raw in the center, I don't know how to cook, Father said, just can't do it. Then you'll have to learn how, the children said, please.

Help us.

Empty bottles of stomach bitters littered the children's night table. Jensen closed his eyes. He simply couldn't be seeing right. He opened his eyes again: the bottles were real.

Ritter made some remark, but Jensen wasn't listening. It took all the concentration he could muster to ward off the memories. Even the two boys sitting on the bed stood for memories of himself and his two sisters. He considered it completely normal that they didn't greet him, didn't register him in any way.

"Are you deaf?" Ritter said and slammed his fist against a bureau. A pirate ship built of Lego pieces stood on it; the masts now collapsed under the impact of the blow. "I'm talking to you!"

Jensen rushed to the window, it couldn't happen fast enough for him. He broke out in a sweat, it was hot, he pulled back the drapes and let fresh air into the room. Outside in the parking lot, a woman was smoking a cigarette, the smoke was billowing out from underneath her umbrella, and in the distance the ungainly, fortified tower of St. Salvator's Cathedral jutted into the gray sky. He was in Bruges, a ten-minute walk from his house in Timmermansstraat, he could leave this room at any time, he was an adult, he was free to go.

"All right, that's fine, too," Ritter said. He tore open one of the bureau drawers and removed a bottle. "But now you'll have a little sip with me, hospitality requires it. Oliver, go and get two glasses for the Inspector and me."

The two boys looked at Jensen. At one time, they had probably been very similar in appearance, but then their different styles of coping with suffering had changed their outward appearance. The one, Oliver, made a fearful impression, he flinched at his father's words and wanted to get off the bed and follow the order. But the other one, Rick, held him back, as Jensen recalled. He looked tired and worn out, although the redness in his eyes wasn't from crying, as it was in his brother, but from the strain of resisting. One had capitulated, the other was still fighting.

"Get them yourself," Rick said. "We don't know where they are."

"No need to do that," Jensen said. "I don't want a drink." The daylight and fresh air had chased away his mother's ghost, it was cowering in a corner now, Jensen could rise above it.

"I'd like to speak with your children now. Alone."

Oliver shot him a surprised look. Was it possible that someone had come to help them?

Don't get your hopes up, Jensen thought and smiled at him.

"Please wait in the other room until I'm finished," Jensen said. "You do have a room of your own, correct?"

"Of course," said Ritter. "I always rent two rooms. Just take a look around! What a mess! You really think I'd sleep in the same room as these pigs?"

A bath robe, a number of men's shoes, underwear, a tie, and empty bottles were strewn on the floor; none of it belonged to the children.

"But I won't let you kick me out," Ritter added. "You want to talk with the kids, go right ahead. I won't butt in. And do you guys actually know why the Inspector wants to talk with you?"

Ritter sat down on the bed next to the boys. Rick pulled away. Oliver lowered his head.

“He’s here to protect me,” Ritter said. “OK, he doesn’t want to drink with me, but he’ll protect me. If anybody hurts me, he’ll arrest him and lock him up. Isn’t that right, Inspector? Show them your gun. Just go ahead, I give you my express permission. In the sense that it’s an educational measure.”

Ritter reached for Rick, pressed the boy to himself, and took a drink from the bottle. Rick freed himself from the embrace and jumped off the bed as agile as a cat.

“You can’t run away from the consequences,” Ritter called after him. “Every deed has its consequences. Secret deeds, too. Even the ones you only mumble when you think nobody’s listening. Murder is murder, and anybody who hurts me is going to land in jail. Oliver, you’re smarter than your brother. You understand, I’m sure of it. Come on, show me that you understand. Show the Inspector that you know what I’m talking about.”

Oliver nodded. He was clutching his one little hand in the other, he nodded and began to rock back and forth. Rick had turned away and was defiantly rebuilding the masts of the pirate ship with trembling fingers.

“And now would you finally show them your goddamn gun!” Ritter screamed. He stood up from the bed, threw his head back and drank from the bottle, which he then brought down forcefully next to the pirate ship. One side of the ship collapsed. Ritter raised the bottle and smashed it down on the bureau again. The ship now collapsed completely. Rick swept the pieces off the bureau, ran into the bathroom and slammed the door.

It affects everybody, Jensen thought.

Everything that was going on in the room was hideously familiar to him. He should have done something about it, but the ghost had regained its strength and was wrapping itself around his neck. Just look, it whispered, it’s Mrs. Jensen, she’s drunk.

That’s not my mother, Jensen said.

The laughter of his classmates rang in his ears.

That is not my mother! he screamed, and they laughed even more. She staggered into the classroom on visiting day, the teacher fell silent and then asked her, You're not feeling well, Mrs. Jensen? Everyone in Constance talked about it, the whole world knew. Your mother is sick, the teacher told him. It was the era when people began referring to Negroes as Black Africans, and, in the same breath, speaking of drunks in terms of being sick, as if the two were related.

"You are not sick," Jensen heard himself say.

"Me?" Ritter asked. "You're absolutely right. I'm in good health, for the moment at least. Oliver understands now. But the other one, that little Rosary mumblor in the bathroom over there, I'm not so sure about him. So why the hell don't you finally show them your service weapon? I know what I'm talking about. I know him. He only understands something once he's seen it."

"You only count as sick once you've reached a decision," Jensen said. "In favor of the bottle and against everything else. Your children are ashamed of you, it's all the same to them. When you came into the room before, your children were trying to gauge how drunk you were already. You're not only trapping yourself in that bottle, but your kids, too. But what do you care? That's the way it is."

Jensen heard his mother saying, I swear to you, I swear by the Body of Christ, that was my last glass! The Body of Christ had been patient, he looked down from the cross upon Jensen's mother who lay on the stairs with blood on her brow, clutching the last glass of her life.

"Oh, so you're one of those," Ritter said. "A burned child. I had a hunch you were. So who was it that drank himself to death, your father, your mother? Both? And now you think the world revolves only around your rotten childhood. But that's a mistake. You're confusing me with somebody else. The truth is that you have no idea, not even the slightest. And you know what? Your moral claptrap is making me even drunker than this stuff!"

He took a long drink from the bottle, which engaged his entire body. Jensen felt drained and exhausted. As he watched Ritter drink, it was as if some behavior had reactivated itself in Jensen, the behavior of a child watching silently as she drank, covering her tracks afterward, removing the empty bottles, wrapping the pieces of broken glass in newspaper and putting them into the trash. While other children were outside playing hopscotch, he and his sisters were cleaning up the apartment; a drunk is very messy.

“Now get out!” Jensen said. “Wait for me in your own room. I’m not going to ask you again.”

“Is that a threat?” Ritter asked. He peered into the bottle with one eye. “Because if it is, then it’s as empty as this bottle here. But OK, I will defer to your past, your horrid childhood. Think about that. And you,” he said to Oliver, “you say another Our Father for the Inspector. He’s a Catholic, he’ll like that. Go ahead, start praying!”

Oliver was sitting on the bed, he folded his hands, tears were falling onto his fingers, he began quietly, “Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come...”

He has to get out of here, Jensen thought.

“I’ll escort you to your room,” Jensen said. He grabbed Ritter’s arm and twisted it behind his back. He would have liked to hear the bones crack, but he held himself back.

“This is illegal,” Ritter gasped. “And it’s a sin against Christian love. But maybe I’m even enjoying it.”

Jensen shoved Ritter into the adjoining room. The key was on the outside, Jensen locked the door.

“I’m sorry,” he said to Oliver. “But I had to do it.”

Oliver didn't react, he finished his prayer: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen." He crossed himself and then buried his face in the pillow.

Jensen went into the bathroom. Rick was sitting underneath the sink with his legs pulled up.

"Come out," Jensen said to him. "Sit on the bed with your brother. I want to talk to you about something."

Rick stood up, walked to the bed and stroked his brother's hair.

"You shouldn't cry all the time," he said gently. "That's all he's waiting for."

Jensen pulled a chair up to the bed and sat down next to the boys. Both of them were thin and pale, either they weren't eating enough, or they were just eating out of paper bags. The first thing to happen was always the dinner table collapsing under the weight of Father or Mother, when she pushed away her food and then only drank her wine. The dining room was abandoned, everyone ate by himself during lulls in the battle, when she happened to be sleeping it off or was incapable of raising herself out of her TV chair anymore.

"Do you know why I'm here?" Jensen asked.

Rick shook his head. Oliver straightened up and wiped his eyes dry with both hands.

"Because we pray?" he asked.

Jensen smiled.

"No," he said. "Not because you pray. It's because your dad thinks somebody's trying to hurt him. He says that somebody wrote him a letter, a threatening letter. Didn't he tell you anything about it?"

"No," said Rick.

The chimes at St. Salvator Cathedral were playing a well-known melody from an operetta, it was twelve o'clock. It was a pretty sound, and for a moment the carillon's healing magic touched them all, maybe even Ritter locked in his room over there.

“Well, I don’t think it’s anything serious,” Jensen said. “What do you think? Can you imagine somebody wanting to hurt your dad?”

They both shook their heads.

“Does your dad know anybody in Bruges?”

They kept on shaking their heads.

“And he’s taking you on a trip around the world? Do I have that right?”

“He wants to show us the five continents,” said Rick. “Is that what you call a trip around the world?”

“You could call it that, sure. So you’re taking a trip around the world. And what about Mom? Did she stay at home?”

“She works,” Rick said.

“I see. So then she didn’t have time to come along on your trip?”

“She doesn’t have time,” said Rick.

“Can I ask you something?”

They both nodded.

“Your Mom,” Jensen asked. “Does she drink, too?”

“No,” said Oliver. “She’s never drunk. How come you’re asking us all this stuff?”

“I’m a policeman. Policemen have to ask questions, that’s how I earn my living. I get ten Euros a question. That’s about fifteen dollars. I think that’s worth it, don’t you?”

He winked at both of them. They were serious as they looked at him, serious and disappointed. A cop who cracked jokes was the last thing they needed.

“I was just kidding,” Jensen said. “I’m asking you these questions because I want to know what’s going on here. I’ll be perfectly honest with you: I’m worried about your dad. But there’s nothing I can do. Unfortunately, he’s not prohibited from drinking as much as he does. Even a father is allowed to do that. Understand? He’s not breaking the law. But if he hits you,

or does anything else to you that you know he shouldn't be doing, and you tell me now, then there is something I can do about it. Then I can help you out. That's why I'm here."

Both of them were looking down at their hands, counting their fingers.

"You can whisper it in my ear," Jensen said, "if you don't want to say it out loud. But it's important that you tell me, if there's anything you need to say."

Rick leaned forward and whispered in Jensen's ear. "We don't need any help. God helps us."

"What did you tell him?" Oliver whispered.

"That God helps us," Rick said quietly.

Oliver nodded.

"Yeah," he whispered. "When we need help, we pray to God and he sends us his angel. The one with the sword.

"Show off," Rick said. "We don't even know how to do that yet. Only Esperanza can. She'll pray to God for us until we can do it ourselves. Then we'll pray that he leaves us alone. For ever. And God will answer our prayers."

Jensen felt really miserable. The ghost had closed in on him again, he could feel its cold breath on his neck.

"Who is Esperanza?" he inquired, to shake off his uneasiness.

"Somebody," Rick said quickly. "It's a secret. We're not supposed to talk about it."

"OK," Jensen said. "I want to tell you a story now." It had to be put into words, at this moment, for the first time ever. For his entire life, he had never told a soul, not even his sisters. But now it seemed to him that the whole situation had only come about so that he would have an opportunity to finally entrust it to someone – to these two boys, as a warning.

"When I was eleven," he began, "I was lying in bed one night, and I heard my mother screaming in the living room. She was screaming at my father, she was drunk, as always. She was screaming, 'You pig! You pig!' She repeated it so many times that I thought she'd gone

crazy, that she'd lost her mind. It'll never end, I thought. It's never going to stop, she'll always be drunk, and she'll never stop screaming at my father, 'You pig! You pig!.' And at that moment I sat up in bed, and I folded my hands and prayed to God. 'Dear God, please make my mother die.' I prayed like I'd never prayed before, I begged God to please make my mother die. 'Please finally make it stop, so that nobody has to be afraid anymore, so that I can invite friends over.'"

Suddenly Jensen wasn't so sure anymore whether telling the boys everything had been the right thing to do, the boys or anybody at all. But Rick urged him on.

"And then?" he asked. "Did the prayer help?" His eyes were shining with curiosity, and it was also perfectly obvious that he actually hoped the prayer had worked.

I went too far, Jensen thought.

"No," he said. "Of course not. Prayers can be comforting for a person who believes in them. But they don't work at all."

"That's not so!" said Rick. "You don't know anything at all. You don't know how to pray, otherwise your mother would have died. God would have punished her!"

"I'm sorry," Jensen said. He stood up, his hands were trembling. "I shouldn't have told you about it. It was stupid of me. So now I'm going to give each of you my card. It has my phone number on it. If you need help, you can call me anytime, even at night, for as long as you stay in Bruges. I'll come, I promise you that.

He awkwardly produced two business cards from his wallet.

"You have your own cell phones yet?" he asked.

"No," said Rick. He folded his arms and refused Jensen's card. "We don't need your phone number."

"Then you take one," Jensen said to Oliver. But apparently he had lost his credibility in Oliver's eyes as well.

“Well, OK,” Jensen said. “I’ll put it over here on the bureau. And now I’ll have a talk with your father.”

“Is your Mom still alive?” Oliver asked. Something was lurking in his question.

Jensen hesitated before he answered, “No. She’s dead.”

“Did she die when you were eleven years old?” asked Rick.

Yes, thought Jensen. The next day, on the day following the night I prayed, she fell down the stairs and broke her neck. Christ, suffering on the cross, looked down at her body, and I was aghast with horror, I thought I saw a smile on His face. It was meant for me, it said: the two of us, we know more than the others. I screamed, ‘It wasn’t me,’ ran down into the garden and looked for a place to hide. It was supposed to be a permanent hiding place, I never wanted to show my face to another human being again. I crawled into the tool shed with the spiders and the sow bugs, and it wasn’t long before my father found me. ‘It’s a shock for all of us,’ he said. His voice was toneless as he spoke; he was lying. He covered his face with his hands to hide his relief. At dinner, he and my sisters didn’t speak at all, but it was as though light were flooding into our home again for the first time in years, as if they all had just recovered from a grave illness but were still too weak for chitchat and laughter. They recuperated quickly, even right after the funeral their movements were different, freer, my sisters hopped into the car that was taking us home. My father put on a record, something by Bach, he sat in his chair with his eyes closed. Bach was his way of thanking God. He once said, “If God loves mankind, then it’s because of the prelude to the cantata ‘Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring.’” But for me, only for me, the horror wasn’t over, it had just taken a different form. It had turned into something corrosive that felt like it was eating away at my insides. The sight of the smiling Christ figure was unbearable, I tore the crucifix off the wall that night and dug a hole in the garden with my hands, in the herb bed. I buried Christ next to the guinea pig that died a few months before, and I enjoyed thinking that the Son of God now rested in an unworthy grave, that the cross bar of the crucifix was touching the guinea pig’s yellow

gnawing teeth. In religion class, when the parish priest blathered about the justice of the Lord, I laughed bitterly to myself. I was convinced that when the angels blew their trumpets, and the dead crawled out of their graves, God would cast me into hell for a deed he'd committed himself. I had only prayed, but he had answered the prayer. The decision had been his. When I was confirmed, I secretly urinated on the wall of the church, but later I understood that God's greatest enemy was rationality. A God who kills a person because someone implores him to do so, thereby loses all claim to morality. Thou shalt not kill, the fifth commandment says, and since God had transgressed against his own commandment, he had become a contradiction of himself. He had cancelled himself out, and therefore no longer existed. Only one thing remained of him: coincidence. That was the thought, four years after my mother's death, that finally set me free. The concurrence of my prayer and her death had been a chance event, an accidental congruence of two events in time, which additionally were only related to one another through the significance a human being attributed to them. Rationality and its science, physics, informed me beyond any doubt that it was so. But over the years my sense of deliverance gave way to the realization that the rational mind, too, has an archenemy, namely, dreams. Nothing has changed in my dreams, Jensen thought. I pray, my mother dies, and I wake up with a sense of guilt that's just as fresh as when it first arose years ago.

Rick was still waiting for an answer.

"No," Jensen said. "I wasn't eleven when she died."

I'm fifty, he thought, and she died again only two nights ago.

"And don't forget to call me if you need help. You don't have anybody else here in Bruges to help you if it becomes necessary. Of course, you can pray if you want. But I have a phone number, as opposed to God. And I don't get as many calls as he gets prayers. So I might get here faster than He would."

"You can't be here faster than the angel," said Rick. "He can get here from heaven with one beat of his wing."

“That’s right,” said Oliver.

There was nothing he could do. Jensen ran his hand over their heads and then unlocked the door to Ritter’s room.

“He shows up late, but at least he shows up,” Ritter said, slurring his words. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, bottle in hand, picking a tablet out of a fold in the bedspread.

“That’s a dangerous combination,” Jensen said.

“What?”

“Pills and alcohol.”

“Yes, Lord Inquisitor. I confess my guilt. Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.”

He thumped the bottle on his chest.

“So? What did those two sweethearts tell you? That I beat them? Let me tell you something here. Beating a donkey will never turn it into a horse, every good father knows that. Are you somebody’s papa, too?”

As always when that question was asked, Jensen didn’t respond. There wasn’t any answer that lined up with the truth. Yes, he had had a child. No, it had never been born.

“Where’s the letter?” he asked.

Ritter snickered.

“Papa poppycock. The letter,” he said. He tried to stand up from the bed, but didn’t succeed. “The letter’s immaterial. But that’s just between you and me. They know about it now.”

“Who knows what?”

“The people over there. They know that you were here. That’ll warn them off, I can give you that in writing, if I have to.”

His eyes were half closed as he spoke, he was swaying even as he sat. It really didn’t make sense now to bother with him anymore. In two hours, he had completely inebriated

himself, the pills gave his stupor a narcotic quality, soon he'd just be muttering to himself under his breath like a morphine addict. Still, Jensen's sense of duty made him demand to see the letter again.

"The Moor has done his duty," Ritter said, "done his goddamn duty. And now the Moor can go. I've read Schiller."

Jensen found the letter without any help, it was lying on the writing desk. It contained only one sentence: BRIAN RITTER, WE'RE GOING TO KILL YOU.

It was ridiculous. WE'RE GOING TO KILL YOU: the use of the plural was unusual, particularly since there was no signature. When two or more people threaten someone, they attach importance to being perceived as a group, and they sign the letter with some flowery or high-sounding fantasy name, like Guardians of the White Race, Commando Che Guevara, or The Flanders Faction. This letter was bogus and was, incidentally, written on the hotel's own stationery, as Jensen now realized. The letterhead with the hotel's emblem had been cut off, but the conspicuously ribbed paper was the same as the sheets in the writing case on the desk.

The kids, Jensen thought.

"This is no murder threat," he said. "It's just a bad joke."

Ritter muttered something unintelligible with his heavy, uncooperative tongue.

Or he wrote it himself, Jensen thought. That seemed more likely to him now.

"Did you write this letter?"

"Me?" said Ritter. "I'm just a wheel. And if you..." he belched. "The spokes. If you take a wheel off a car, another two are still attached. Exactly two, you remember that. Two. Yeah, go ahead and laugh!" he suddenly shouted. "Go ahead and laugh!"

Ritter crawled under the sheets with his clothes on, and a moment later sleep had overtaken him. His mouth gaped open, saliva drooled onto the pillow.

On the night table stood an over-sized, elaborately framed photo of an attractive woman with strikingly large blue eyes, as blue as ice and just as cold. Presumably, it was Ritter's wife, the children's mother, who had stayed home because her work was so very demanding. More likely, she understandably hadn't had much desire to accompany her husband on an extended trip. She was probably enjoying every minute he was gone. Although it was odd that she had expected the children to put up with him. At any rate, a call from Jensen would hardly have motivated her to fly to Bruges and make sure everything was under control. 'My husband's drunk, he's blathering incomprehensibly, he's forging threat letters, and the children are alone with him, which is all truly horrible. But what do you expect from me, Inspector?' An alcoholic's most reliable accomplices are always their spouses, and so Jensen discarded any idea of calling her. The emergency psychiatrist wasn't an option, either. There was no hard evidence that Ritter was likely to become violent. He was behaving strangely, showing signs of delusion, but in the end it was just the usual paranoia of a terminal alcoholic. Jensen's hands were tied, there was nothing more for him to do there, other than impressing on the children again that they absolutely had to call him if their father became dangerous.

He went back to their room, but now they were asleep, too, lying head-to-head on the bed at 12:30, in the early afternoon, their father's two little captives who placed all their hope in an angel. In addition to the business card on the bureau, Jensen laid another two on the night table, and he dropped one into the toothbrush glass in the bathroom. They would remind Rick and Oliver of his promise.

Linus Reichlin, The Desire of Atoms

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