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Excerpt from the novel *I Brought My Friends*

She should have eaten, that would have been a smart move, but Betty just filled up her cup and let the rum rush down her throat. She really never drank rum, didn't know how this bottle ended up in her kitchen, didn't think about it all too much. Another swig. Turn the music up. Make yourself a mark by the 8, the neighbor had said to her the last time he complained, that way, even when you're intoxicated, you'll know how loud your music is. For half an hour he walked back and forth between his apartment and hers, and finally established 8 as his limit of tolerance, adjusted down to 7 for bass-heavy music. Disgusting little scumbag, she thought, how he bounds up the stairs with his beefy hunchback, always happy as shit, even whistles when he goes to pick up bread, rides a bike with drop handlebars and wears a helmet, not even 25 and already clinging to life, and that hunch, good for him. The long-legged 19-year-old he kept around was dumb as a rock and loud as hell, she should try making herself a mark, she had shouted after him.

Betty pulled on a thick sweater, made cocoa, put a shot of rum into the cup, a sizable shot, brushed the splinters from the windowsill, before she sat down and looked out at the square. A taxi with its lights off cruised by at a walking pace, the playground was wet and dark, the ice cream shop's awning rolled up months ago, rotting plastic tables in front of the pizzeria, behind filthy windowpanes the hope for spring and customers, only the convenience store flourished and the video store next door. The church advertised for an organ concert, but besides the friends of the organist no one seemed to have come, and an organist had few friends here.

He had cooked, to be precise Henning had prepared five courses, you could say the plums in bacon didn't count as a course, at most a greeting from the kitchen, but the turbot, the filet of beef, the walnut parfait, the cheese selection, those were courses in any case. He had prepared everything, Champagne with the plums, a pinot grigio with the fish, a Bordeaux with the meat, the dessert wine, everything was there, only the woman didn't show up, she didn't even call. He had checked everything, her train had arrived at 6:45, Ostbahnhof, it was five minutes by taxi, ten by bus, twenty-five by foot, but now it was nearly eight and the fish was dry.

From the beginning he hadn't understood what this was all about. Warsaw, Martha had suddenly said last week, I'm going to Warsaw, why, he'd asked, what the hell, and, just to get out, she'd answered, and Poland, I've never been to Poland, you have to go there, Poland is right across the border, and: much nicer than its reputation, and, anyway, I just need to get out, you know that.

Yes, he knew that, he'd known that for years, Martha had to get out, and he clung to this sentence, now that she evidently hadn't taken the train back, having missed it was out of the question, she never missed anything, made it to everything at the last second. That meant that she was always running around, even when she was sitting. Martha never arrived anywhere, not with him at any rate, at best he was the station where she took a rest.

"You're the best wife in the world," she'd recently said to him, smiling, as if she'd just proposed to him. Only she hadn't, unfortunately, and the time for misinterpretations and misunderstandings was behind them, they'd weathered them all. Nearly ten years now, that made nine failed attempts to leave him, every year in summer, early summer to be more precise, and to be exact: the second week of June, usually on a Friday. It was a comfortable arrangement, they could both go to friends in the country, to different friends, of course. There were only a few friendships

that they didn't tend together now, but it was those they held onto the tightest. It had a little to do with the area, but more with the fact that these country friends lived in the nastiest relationships, out there in the boondocks, with two equally nasty children under the apple trees in the garden. There was absolutely nothing better in a crisis than visiting friends who had it really lousy.

Henning was already starting to sense eager anticipation for the second weekend in June. Then he looked again at the fish, the filet, the parfait, opened the Champagne, poured himself a glass, emptied it, and said quietly: "Damn it, Martha. It's March."

It was already dark when she got out of the train in Krakow. She came via Warsaw, had stayed there a night, a room with a crocheted afghan and hard terry-cloth towels, in a guesthouse on the wrong side of the train station, she'd roamed the streets, drank a glass of water in every fourth bar, a vodka with ice in the others. The sleep that followed was the best she'd had in months, twin bed and wool blanket, the pillow stiff as her neck in the morning. Black coffee, dry bread, an apple tart for the ride, the kind they're known for, and the landscape sweeping by slowly, very slowly. She could count the clean underwear hanging in the adjacent gardens, sat alone in a compartment, all the others empty, this train was moving just for her. Beyond the window fields, dilapidated farms, women in frocks, train stations in gray, doves, dove shit, dead doves, half-smoked cigarette butts lying on the platform, not a convenience store open, every light broken, glass roofs yellow to brown, from somewhere romance, maybe from expectation's corner. Tak, tak, tak meant Yes and knocked about everywhere here, only the doors didn't open. The language a crackling carpet, raw, with uncombed fringes at the ends. Martha shook her head and didn't hear anything, nothing moved there, swept barren and discarded. That was why she traveled, to places that she was increasingly indifferent to, and to herself along them. Yoga would be cheaper, Henning had once said to her, he understood little about her travels, and nothing at all about this one.

He'd called in the early evening and Betty couldn't take it any more: if it weren't for the kids, if they hadn't just made the down payment on the condo, his mother-in-law wasn't on her deathbed, the vacation wasn't already booked and next week wasn't his wife's fortieth on top of that, if they hadn't just baked the cake, put the fish stock on, put the roast in the oven, if the Zeit subscription hadn't been extended and they hadn't signed up for the flat-rate, then everything could be totally different and positively beautiful too, then they could take on the whole world, they could be so very happy, with all the bells and whistles, live it up, not a dry eye in the house, that's for sure. Mr. M. had talked and talked and Betty had thrown her cellphone through the window, paper-thin glass, in winter the wind swept through the frame, everything porous, everything defective, Historical Building with Charm is what it had said in the ad.

She would have to call a repair man, first thing tomorrow, this whole affair was costing her dearly. Two weeks ago after a call with him, in an unprecedented fit of rage, she'd slashed her mattress, and since then she'd slept on the old camping mat, which, at her age, her spine immediately took note of. He hadn't promised her anything, she must have misunderstood, she was constantly hearing sentences that nobody said, that she just wanted someone to finally say, and if she had anything to do with it, that someone could have been Mr. M. now.

Hardly hurts, she thought, not worth the trouble, after thirty why bother, never believed in it anyway, just projection, all in my head, knees were the only thing that really hurt, by forty you'll walk with a cane, the occupational therapist had said and: Like I care, she'd answered, at forty I'll only want to sit anyway. And there's trendy walkers nowadays, it's so cute how you can hang your Aldi bags off them.

It was starting to bore her, this endless repetition, even the names repeated themselves, Thomas, Christoph, Stefan, Tom, Christian, Thomas. She could try a different ethnic group, fail

someplace else for once, maybe it'd be nicer there. Still, she rarely wished everything had happened differently for her, something along the lines of first love, married, kids, house, garden, all-pro in chocolate cakes, houseplants, barbecues, perfectly controlled happiness. She'd never wanted to commit herself, she always thought everything would get better, always only better, higher, faster, even farther, and it had all started off well, stellar career, if you will, she could pick and choose her jobs, her fees rose. She couldn't have known that she had reached the oft-invoked zenith, that from now on it would only go downhill, no one believed that. And what was she supposed to do, other than keep going.

Martha buttoned up her coat, pulled up her socks, and went out, past the old city limits, through the city gate, straight to the marketplace. There were few rituals in her life, but this was one of them: the first drink, always at the market. One reason why she was only drawn to old European cities. The clip-clop of horses' hooves, digital cameras, trams throwing sparks on their way to the station, the beer six zloty, exchange rate 1:3.85 — made a euro and 56 cents. A high in Krakow is among the cheapest in Europe, the market there among the most beautiful. Reached for the beer glass, saw taste in her mouth, five zloty for a pack of cigarettes that dried out her gums, tasted of socialism and decline. But the churches, they said, be sure to see the churches. Queues in front of the confessionals, like at home on the first of the month at the ATMs. Please wait behind the line.

What would she find to whisper, week after week. She thought about it and didn't come up with much. Made out with the weather-and-traffic guy once or maybe twice, the bottle of wine that walked out of the shop with her, because the most expensive wine is never worth its price, the stupid speed limits, the red lights that were nothing more to her than a suggestion, the case of beer she stole from Betty's neighbors, the cat she ran over on vacation, maybe she'd lied, she'd definitely lied, and kept quiet about a lot more. The sins, the same old sins, for years now, shopworn, beyond their statute of limitations, no longer guilty. She should change something, proclaim a time for new sins, profane, sprawling, gutsy ones. If she was allowed to confess in German here was the question. What was someone supposed to do with a confession they couldn't understand.

On the wait-staff's recommendation, Martha ordered a fresh apple tart with raspberry sauce, which, after an initial skepticism, she declared to be the paragon of happiness. At least on happy nights, apple tart with raspberry sauce has to be the living end, unrivaled, the pinnacle of a happy night in a particular sense. On unhappy nights on the other hand, this kind of tart could dramatically enlarge the distance to a possible but nevertheless unreachable happiness.

That's how it came to be that tiny quantities of salt dripped onto her tart and she ordered a second piece. Every few minutes a tear crept over her cheek, only over the left one, she could only cry with one eye, that had started with her first heartaches, since then she was a lefty as far as crying went. Her right eye, in contrast, was a dry eye, as Martha said: a dried-out eye, that she had to put drops in multiple times a day to see halfway clearly. But now she couldn't see anything clearly, she hardly knew where she was, and even less what it was she wanted here. It wasn't anything more than an inkling, a strange feeling within her, as if there were something there that couldn't be shaken off, that came with her the whole way here and that she neither wanted to talk about nor could. Human beings need secrets, and women especially.

Her body became heavy with silence. A pronounced, deep silence could have a substantial weight, although that, like so many things, depended on the weather: a winter silence had the weight of around three casks of Bordeaux, while a summer silence weighed about as much as a gin fizz in a plastic cup.

Twelve, thirteen, fourteen, the volume for the bedlam in her head, she didn't want to hear herself anymore, the eternal should've-would've-could've, opened the broken window, looked out at the pizza place, where Heinz was walking inside to turn up the soul music. Betty at her stereo, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, he at his, and she knew that she would lose this game, played anyway, until finally he was standing under her balcony holding up a bottle of whiskey.

"Get down here already!" he shouted. "I'm drunk's a skunk and you don't stand a chance!"

Heinz hadn't been in a good way since his baker, who without a doubt had made the best pizza dough in the city, had thrown in his dish towel, drawn his knife, and taken the freeway back to that shithole Naples along with his recipe and Heinz's wife.

Betty changed from Mr. M's sweater into a Thomas-Stefan-Tom shirt, business-blue and white buttons, free of all memory, and pulled her jacket on over it.

Heinz put a table outside for her, without table cloth, but with a candle, and the glass was filled up to the brim. "So," he said, and then nothing else. Neither of them was a big talker, and appreciated that. He sat down with her, the clinking of glasses, offering of cigarettes, and: "Real shit music you listen to," said Heinz, and both nodded. She said: "Only on bad days." And him: "Well, shit."

Heinz wasn't a rocket scientist, Heinz was a waiter. One of the best. During this nearly wordless night, in which not a single one of his soul albums went unheard, he charged for every glass. "It's all at cost," he added, "everything at cost, just for you. Customers like you," she just nodded and helped him roll down the shutters.

Tired, John lit his pipe, drank a glass of tea, and looked out at the square. Silence, black sky, neither cars nor people, only on the other side, coming from the pizza place, a little lurching or limping thing, he couldn't see it that well without his contacts in. He rubbed his eyes, he'd practiced all day yesterday, went jogging along the canal, had convinced himself he should really do it more often, patted himself on the back, someone had to do that eventually, and said out loud to himself: "It'll work out, Jon, it's going to be big. It's going to be really big." He'd acted out his audition, had fashioned critical bodies out of blankets and pillows and seated them on the sofa.

Jon wasn't nervous, Jon was professional. He was so professional that he had been in bed by eleven, where he ended up spending the hours in half-sleep, plagued by nightmares and constantly fleeing from something. He only had two days left, and his last casting was months, if not years ago. He was definitely a C-actor, that meant 300 to 500 euros per day, and also meant: rarely more than two to three days of shooting per month, and that only in summer. He mostly played the corpse, and avoided thinking about it too much. Besides, the corpse was not a simple role, not a single move, not a twitch of the eyelids, no breathing, nothing. Also the stage direction: Please die now! wasn't to be underestimated. Although: Jon didn't know a single actor who had made it as the corpse, not a single one. Some made it as a ghost, as the undead, but no one made it as the corpse.

For a minute he considered calling his mother, as he'd considered pretty damn often in the last months, and yet never got beyond the first three digits. Ultimately he decided not to get anybody's hopes up, including his own.

He ran himself a bath and drank a warm beer, what kind of time was a quarter to five, so much day was an imposition.

A residue of eggs and flour hung from Henning's hands, little crusty pieces fell in his glass as he stood there in front of the oven watching the cake come into being. He'd baked it to pacify himself, sleep had been out of the question tonight, although that surprised him now, after all, he thought of sleep daily, at regular increments, he'd been tired for two years, to be honest.

With a slightly unsteady gait, he entered his workroom, which he'd hardly used in the past weeks and in which chaos had spread itself across three desks by now. Everywhere pictures, sketches, books, collectible action figures in their original packaging that earned him the reputation among his colleagues of being a closeted homo, since only gays and girls were supposed to be into that crap.

His hands trembled as he picked up the electric eraser, pressed the button several times, and refused to accept that the battery was empty. He couldn't remember the last time he'd used it. Since he'd started going to his studio every day to draw the inbetweens on his storyboard at breakneck pace, all he saw anymore were shouting mouths, peering eyes, running legs, Werner's legs on a motorcycle, getting on, getting off, getting on. The whole night in his dreams he heard the revving of the engine.

He propped himself up on the desk, lowered his head until he could see himself in the round magnifying mirror standing next to his last pencil drawings. He tried to smile, he wanted to know what it looked like when he smiled, where the smile began exactly, what happened with his eyes, he hadn't seen that for a long while, it wasn't the right time for smiling, it was a time of great bellowing laughter, mouths wide open, and beer rushing down throats. When Henning smiled, he got wrinkles on his forehead.

He folded the mirror shut and looked around the room, it didn't follow any system, there wasn't any order to it. He'd often toyed with the thought of shelves, had drawn up several diagrams, built a cardboard model, invited a carpenter friend over, but his desires developed inversely to his bank balance, and of late Martha had even put the whole project in question by nominating his workroom to be an if-and-when baby room, of course, what other room? She'd mentioned her biological clock. The clock was ticking, he'd started hearing that everywhere since then, the world was full of ticking clocks. Why not, Henning had thought, that's characteristic of clocks. He'd never understood how people could use that to convey a sense of exceptional drama.

A week later, when he swapped all of the analog clocks in the house, including Martha's wristwatch, for digital ones, Martha couldn't see why it was funny at all. That's not funny, she'd said, and maybe she was right, maybe he wasn't even funny anymore.

*Translated from the German by Amanda DeMarco*