

Sample translation

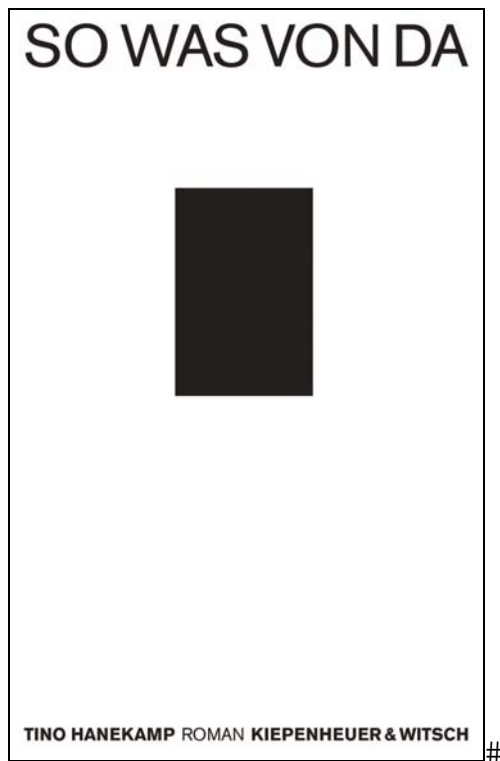
Tino Hanekamp: So was von da

Novel

(Suggested English title: “So totally there”)

Translated from the German by Steph Morris

(pp. 1 – 27 and 132 – 148)



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Synopsis

New Year's Eve and Oskar wakes up with a hangover. There is a girl in his bed. He's forgotten her name but she *isn't* Mathilda, the one he can't get out of his system. He runs a credible but debt-ridden club in Hamburg (cf Manchester – grim weather, great music) in the 'St Pauli' neighbourhood (cf. 1980s Soho – red-light district alongside hip nightlife) where he also lives. But tonight is the closing night; the building, an ex hospital, is being pulled down in the wake of gentrification, making way for an office development. Before he has come to, Oskar's flat is busted by a small time gangster 'Bordello Bob' who demands ten grand from tonight's takings or else. Oskar rushes off to prepare the club, keeping this a secret from his colleagues. His best mate Rocky picks him up, lead singer of 'Kidd Kommander' who are playing a secret gig at the club that night. Rocky can't cope with his sudden fame, not helped by the fact that his mother is a city councillor pursuing a 'zero tolerance' policy which is pushing alternative culture from the city centre – including Oskar's club. Not very rock-and-roll, the papers note. Rocky and Oskar pick up Leo the silent Russian bouncer and Nina, who Leo has a thing for. She is a dj and decorates the club. Why has she painted all her pictures black? After a hectic few hours setting up, during which Oskar receives threatening reminder calls from Bordello Bob, the hedonism begins. It is interrupted – or fuelled – by a series of revelations and crises. Oskar's business partner Pablo tells him Mathilda is coming – after a two-year absence in which he has obsessed about her. Oskar fesses up about Bordello Bob's blackmail, causing his bouncer to call in the local *antifa* ('black block' anarchists) to defend the club. Nina announces she is terminally ill, and Rocky refuses to go on stage till they have rescued his father: Rocky's dad is also ill and his mother has used this as a pretext to lock him up away from the press. He is an aging rocker himself, former member of a famous 'sixties band. Oskar and Rocky retrieve him and bring him to the club to watch his son's set, at the end of which Rocky announces the band's demise and his father has a heart attack. Rocky's dad is rushed to hospital and lives on and the whole club is now geared up to confront Bordello Bob and his cronies, but it is Rocky's mother who rocks up; a hated figure for this crowd. Oskar refuses to say if her husband is inside, but allows her to look for herself – a Dante-like descent through the dancefloors. She meets her son, there is a reconciliation of sorts, and both head to the hospital to attend to dad. Oskar is also reconciled with Mathilda – as a normal woman, rather than the ideal he has cherished. But by then end of the night nothing is clear, everyone is drunk and drugged up, the absinthe has been opened and Oskar and Mathilda finally rekindle things. Bordello Bob never arrives, having fallen asleep drunk in a bar. Leo and Nina hook up, and Oskar, who has ten thousand euro in his pocket, gets a tearful Mathilda to drop him at the airport.

[pp. 1 - 27]

Young men are ruled by their changeable feelings. They are passionate, hot tempered and impulsive. They vie for honour and crave victory, valuing both over money. They are simple and trusting, having no experience of wickedness. Their hopes are lofty as a drunkard's, their memories short. They are courageous yet follow the path most trodden and are thus easily bewildered. Not yet chastened by life, they opt for superficial glory rather than things of use to them. Their mistakes, born of exuberance, are great. They love to laugh, and feel sympathy for people, because they always see good in them. Unlike old men, they believe they know everything already.

Aristoteles

Shut it.

Oskar Wrobel

I have a nasty feeling I'm awake. I can see a beer bottle, two fag ends swimming in it, and an insect. Evil headache. The pipe under the radiator is furred with dust. Acute nausea. A sound like gunfire outside. I close my eyes. Another bang. What a crap way to begin.

Maybe there's been a shoot-out; some poor sod lying wounded on the street urgently needs my help. The windowsill looms ten thousand metres above my head. Mustering his last resources our hero drags himself to the summit. He reaches the peak – but what a disappointing view: the bin outside the racist baker's is on fire, two Turkish kids are hopping around it and now baker man has run outside, ranting and threatening them with a baseball bat. The youths run off towards the Reeperbahn laughing. I wonder what time it is. Who cares? In the mean time a very pretty firework is exploding above the roof opposite, raining sparks down onto the slimy tiles like blossom. The sky is grey as ever, much like the rubbery mucous clogging my throat. I would like to spit it out somewhere. But I don't. This is a swallowing day.

Tonight is the last night; tomorrow it will all be over. I sink back onto the bed. I will just lie here. Lie here and wait. Someone will come and dump me somewhere at some point. If they manage to shovel a little earth over me, somewhere behind the compost heap near the paupers' graves, and if they can perhaps find an old gravestone, a broken paving slab would do, then could someone please carve or scratch the following epitaph:

Here lies Oskar Wrobel, 23.

He tried.

Yikes! Something is moving next to me! I pull the duvet back cautiously. An ocean of red curls, a smooth back, a naked bottom. Perhaps something can be salvaged from the day. Might I inquire who you are? Actually let's dispense with the formalities; I snuggle up to the pretty, unknown girl. It feels good. I think of Mathilda. It feels bad. I have to think of something else. As luck would have it the blood is now circulating to my loins. The lady turns round. Blue eyes, a poppy-red pout.

'Hi Oskar, you horny bastard.'

'Good morning,' I say, trying to recall something. Who? How? What?

'There's no stopping you, is there?' the unnamed girl says, grabbing my knob. In my head I see Mathilda. My knob droops. Mademoiselle smiles. She kisses me. I smell her sour breath. Close my eyes and stroke her body desperately, but nothing going. Because she isn't Mathilda. Because none of you are Mathilda.

'So tell me, what's your name then?'

She laughs. She purrs. She disappears under the duvet.

'Julia? Maria? Elena? Kathrin? Anna?'

She resurfaces. 'Is that supposed to be funny?'

'Sorry, it's never happened before – Jana?'

She flings off the duvet and jumps up. I think she's about to kick me in the face. No, she's pulling on her jeans in a fury. Dragging her sweater over her head. If only I knew...

'Clara, you arse.'

'I'm really sorry, Clara.'

'Fuck you!'

The flat door bangs shut. A bunch of firecrackers explode in my head. This is definitely not going to be a good day. In fact it stands to be the worst day of my life. Yet the world remains unmoved by my wretched predicament. No bells toll, the impenetrable cloud cover has not been rent asunder. No blond-locked angels to be seen. Not even Steve McQueen, leaning on the doorframe drawling, 'get up off your butt, kid. You ain't seen nothing yet.'

My bathroom is a former broom cupboard with a shower cubicle, a loo and a wash basin so small you couldn't drown a puppy in it. The gaps in the windows let the freezing, evil December air in, and the sound of bloody coughs: Herr Müller on the third floor. When he isn't coughing his guts up he emits incomprehensible roars into the courtyard. Today it's coughing. Everything here is filthy. I have never noticed how filthy. Even my dressing gown. You couldn't leave it at a charity shop looking like this. The state of my flat is the least of my problems, however. I park myself on the loo and reach for *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. Always have edifying literature to hand to maintain a sense of dignity when performing the debasing act of defecation. Let us see what Aurelius has to offer today:

This is the chief thing: be not perturbed, for all things are according to the nature of the universal; and in a little time thou wilt be nobody and nowhere, like Hadrianus and Augustus. In the next place, having fixed thy eyes steadily on thy business, look it in the eye, at the same time remembering that it is thy duty to be a good man, and do what man's nature demands without turning aside; and speak as it seems to thee most just, only let it be with a good disposition and with modesty and without hypocrisy.

Aha, I see. Then I will fix my eyes steadily on my business and look it in the eye: tonight is the night our club closes, the final party before we get the chop; the building is being pulled down. Not such a big deal; it's good to start afresh every couple of years anyway. The only snag is that while my partner Pablo and I were providing the world with the best club of all time, we forgot to make enough money. Our outstanding debts are around the fifty thousand mark, the situation is a little chaotic, but divided in two this leaves twenty-five thousand euro debt each. More money than I have ever laid eyes on and much more than I will ever be in a position to repay. As well as that there's the money I owe for healthcare and motor insurance, to the taxman, my landlord, and most of my relatives. The noose has been tightening for months. Red, yellow, blue and green letters from various authorities have been piling up by the bin. I'm on first-name terms with the bailiff. His name is Jürgen Kawinsky

and he lives in Poppenbüttel. He hates his job, but he's got to feed his wife and kids and pay the mortgage on his semi, you know how it is. I hide my car in the far corner of an abandoned multi-storey because I haven't paid the road tax in six months, the insurance has been cancelled and the vehicle registration people have put a search warrant out on it. They even want to take my horse off me! I have no idea what I will do from tomorrow. Am I worried? No. I'm in panic. On the brink of a breakdown in fact. As well as all that I keep thinking about Mathilda. My life is in tatters. But wait! Be not perturbed! It is my duty to be a good man, to do what man's nature demands, with a good disposition and with modesty. You ain't seen nothing, kid.

I pop five aspirin into a glass, add water and watch as they dissolve: you've got it good; you can just vanish. The digital display on my old radio says 13:16. At two I have to be in the Pupasch, where Rocky will be waiting for me – if he waits. You never know with Rocky. I decide to scald the dirt from my body and soul under the shower and begin a new life. But of course the evil, bastard, sodding water is cold again – coldcoldcold! How can people get up so early, on Saturday, on New Year's Eve? They should stay in bed as long as they can and leave the hot water for people who really need it. It's a matter of common courtesy, of consideration for others; you give some thought to things like hot water. But no, everyone just thinks of themselves. Except for me; I think about *her*. We split up three years ago; two years ago I deleted her number from my phone in the hope of finally wiping her, Mathilda, from my life. It didn't work. It is like a curse: she will be the one forever. Mathilda has ruined love.

I have no clue where she is now. Probably living somewhere in Spain by the beach with a famous surfer, one of those super-chilled men for whom life *isn't* a mystery, with several huts in his back garden for stray cats and dogs. I hope the darling animals become blood-hungry beasts and tear his todger to shreds before a tidal wave carries his Olympic body out to sea, sweeping Mathilda back to me in the process, washing her up on my doorstep, from where I shall gently lift her from the gutter. I will lay her on my musty mattress, brush the strands of damp hair from her face and forgive her. Hell, we all make mistakes.

I rub myself down with the dressing gown. In the courtyard Herr Müller's coughing builds to a raging hurricane. Who needs thundering waves when Müller's larynx is in earshot? He is the last person over thirty living in the house. The landlord has been waiting years for him to pop his clogs so he can convert his four-room flat into bedsits and rent them for an arm and a leg to students, music bizz lackeys, club promoters and arty types. But Herr Müller has held out. He just coughs very loudly – a St Pauli symphony. In order not to call an ambulance out of sheer, humiliating concern, I go into my living room and put Scott Walker's first album on, hoping his songs of survival will drown out Herr Müller's rasps.

Mama, do you see what I see?

On your knees and pray for me

Mathilda's come back to me.

Across mountains of books and dirty washing to the clothes rail. The shirt is still presentable, the suit fits perfectly; it was cut to fit my skeleton. I look in the mirror, like arm wrestling with my self-hatred. I pull some faces then sit down at the kitchen table with Aurelius; there isn't anything to eat here.

When thou wishest to delight thyself, think of the virtues of those who live around thee; the activity of one, for instance, and the modesty of another, and the liberality of a third, and some other good quality of a fourth. For nothing delights so much as the examples of the virtues, exhibited in the morals of those who live with us. Wherefore we must keep them before us.

Makes sense. So I consider the virtues of Rocky (activity), of Nina (modesty), Leo (liberality) and unfortunately of Mathilda (all these and more) and feel a bit better already, except for the tightness in my chest thinking about Mathilda. But I can cope. Human beings can cope with a lot. My problems are like mosquito bites compared to the blows fate sometimes deals. What's thirty thousand euro? Not even a metre of motorway. I'm very lucky really. May my life be like a sunbeam!

BRRRRIIIIIIIIINNNNG!

The doorbell. Interesting. On a Saturday afternoon, on New Year's Eve. Do the kids of today still play the doorbell trick? How quaint! Thought they just lurked around in darkened rooms psyching themselves up for the next machine-gun massacre.

BRRRRIIIIIIIIINNNNG! BRRRRIIIIIIIIINNNNG! BRRRRIIIIIIIIINNNNG! BRRRRIIIIIIIIINNNNG!
BRRRRIIIIIIIIINNNNG! BRRRRIIIIIIIIINNNNG! BRRRRIIIIIIIIINNNNG!

Ok perhaps this isn't kids. Some other mistaken individual. Does Jürgen have to work New Year's Eve? Is it one of his Gestapo colleagues?

THUD! THUD! THUD!

'Open up, will you! It's me, Robert!'

There must be some mistake. I don't know anyone called Robert.

'Come on Oskar. I just want a quick word with you.'

But apparently he knows me... Luckily I'm not in.

'I know you're in.'

Shit, the music. I tiptoe to the door and look through the spyhole. Bordello Bob is standing

there. He smiles. He waves. What does *he* want? I paid him back years ago.

Early December two years ago: I'm hunched, drunk and despondent at the bar in 'Karin's Rendezvous', next to me some bloke drenched in aftershave.

'What's up with you, son?'

'Who cares?'

'Two pints with whisky chasers, Karin.'

I tell him everything. All our plans, that we had this great idea, but three weeks before the club was due to open the money ran out, that the first month's programme was ready, but nothing else. That our adventure was about to end before it had even begun.

'Today's your lucky day, son.' He laid out the conditions on a beer mat: ten grand, plus two grand interest, to be paid back within three months. I thought he was taking the piss. Why would a complete stranger lend me such an unbelievably large sum of money? I laughed.

He said, 'tomorrow at five in the Red Light'.

The next day he handed me ten thousand euro in neatly ironed hundreds, examined my identity card and took down my mobile number. I took the money and left. Three months later I handed him an Aldi bag full of crumpled notes and a bottle of immorally expensive scotch. It was like something out of a film. He counted the cash, shook my hand and promised to come by some time. But he never did. It was only later that I found out our backer, our saviour, who had introduced himself as Herr Schneider, was otherwise known simply as Bordello Bob, an ex pimp who had done time and was now trying to establish himself as a music manager, threatening to sue anyone who called him Bordello Bob. Later I began seeing his photo in the tabloids, his grinning face alongside various one-hit-wonder eurodance chicks. When we saw each other on the street we nodded at each other like old acquaintances who shared a dark secret. I love St Pauli!

'Now let's be reasonable, don't make things difficult for me,' says Robert Schneider aka Bordello Bob aka alarming surprise guest, his face bulbous and grotesque in the fish-eye. I feel sick. He doesn't just want to be put on the guest list. Of course I'm not going to open the door. I will stay here without moving till he's toddled off. There we go, he's already getting smaller, walking away. But two other men have appeared next to him who weren't there a minute ago. One of them is old and is wearing a hat; the other is young and looks like a fascist. Schneider nods and the Nazi runs at m-----

'Is he dead?'

'Don't be an idiot. He's just unconscious.'

'No but, once I...'

'Shut up Fritz. Heinz, put the boy on the sofa there. Fritz, pick the door up. Then get something cold out of the kitchen. Ice or something.'

My death is like a swinging door

A patient girl who knows the score.

Thank you Heinz. Now turn that wailing off. I thought they all listened to techno or rave or whatever. Our Oskar is going soft in his old age.'

'But it's Scott Walker from the Walker Brothers. They played in the Star Club back in the—'

'Turn it off, Heinz.'

CRRRATTSSCHH!

'You could have just pulled the plug out.'

'We could have just drilled through the lock.'

'Boss, there's nothing in here, innit. Just a load of mould and a bottle of vodka in the freezing compartment.'

'Is it cold?'

'Yeah, 'course; it's in the freezing compartment.'

'That was a rhetorical question, Fritz. I realise it will be cold.'

'Robert the twat's opening his eyes.'

This isn't really happening of course. Bordello Bob is not sitting in front of me. I am not lying on the sofa. They have not just kicked my door in. My head is not...

'Alright, son? Don't worry, it's just a little bump. Why didn't you open the door? Don't you know me anymore?'

'Phew, he's with us again! Here's the bottle, boss.'

'Take a sip of this. Then hold it against your forehead.'

Schneider presses a bottle into my hand. But I don't want anything he has to offer me. It stinks here.

'Fine, have it your own way. Listen. Can you hear me? Right. Now Oskar, my old mate, I must apologise – the door, the record player...!'

'Should have fucking opened it, you hippy cunt. Don't say we didn't warn you. Should have listened to Herr Schneider, then—'

'Shut up Fritz,' Schneider growls. 'Stay by the door and keep watch.'

The fascist bonehead stomps off. A Nazi! In my flat!

'Take it easy. Lie where you are, son. It's alright, don't worry.' The same tone as in the bar that time. Schneider pushes me back into the cushions. His ridiculous crew cut, the gold chain, the

stuffy stench of his aftershave. The older man is standing behind him, looking at me like I was a zoo animal.

'I do beg your pardon,' say Robert Schneider aka Bordello Bob aka deranged breaker-and-enterer, pointing to the hall. 'Fritz is from the former East. He's still a little behind brainswise, for sure. But he's getting there. The East is still catching up, if you know what I mean. These things take time.'

'You fucking bastards,' I croak. 'That's ABH, breaking and entering. I'll erm... I'll shout for help!

'Oskar mate, I've been shouting for twenty years. No-one cares.'

I run through my options in my head and conclude: I have none. But: be not perturbed. What does he want from me? Is there a hidden TV camera here from one of those piss-take programmes?

'Here. Take two hundred for the door.' He waves some banknotes at me and puts them on the table. He clears his throat. 'To cut a long story short: I need money.'

I don't get it. Is that supposed to be funny?

'I'm in a tricky situation. Things aren't what they used to be. There's no recognition, no respect. All my old boys are either in the nick or dead or become priests, and now I have the bloody Albanians on my case. But you don't need to know all that; I'll spare you the details for your own safety.'

What safety? My flat has just been stormed by three criminals. I've been concussed. I...

'So, my son, the reason I'm here is, I need ten thousand euro,' Schneider says, 'and you are my last hope.'

I breathe out. Laugh. My head is killing me.

'You should have called me first,' I said. 'We're completely broke. They're pulling the building down. Don't you read the papers?'

'Of course. "Trendy Club Celebrates Closing Night" was the headline. With a photo of you and your strange mate. Is he a poofter? Well, whatever.' Schneider looks thoughtfully out of the window. 'I ran the odd bar, back in the day. I know what you can bring in on a night like that. And on New Year's Eve. The till's going to rattle like an Uzi in a kibbutz. If only I'd stayed in that line of business...'

'We're about fifty thousand euro in debt! Even if we sell every beer for a tenner...'

'That's peanuts; it's nothing. I used to make that in a week. And you'll get the dosh back, obviously.'

I shake my head. Cerebral matter leaks into my ears. No way.

Schneider sighs. 'Listen son, I'm not some joker. I'm the man who got you on your feet. Don't forget that. I got the whole area on it's feet, you little squit. And don't give me this debt bullshit. I know how well the joint is doing. Always in the paper, posters everywhere, always a queue outside. Your hippy hovel is a fucking goldmine, and—'

'No it isn't! That's nonsense!'

'DON'T INTERRUPT ME!' Schneider is fuming. And the old man with the hat is staring at me. Or into me and out the other side. He has this look... I close my eyes.

'Anyone else would have milked you for every penny you had. I could have taken over your little dump and made it my playground, done whatever I wanted. But I'm such a twat I left you alone, because I thought, he's a good lad, that Oskar. He's of another ilk, more the arty type and all that. And what did I get out of it? What thanks do I get?'

'But we have—'

'Let Herr Schneider speak, you cunt,' the old man says in a soft voice.

'Thank you Heinz.' Schneider is breathing hard; he runs his hand over his face, wet with sweat, grips his chest. 'Whatever, Oskar. I helped you back then; now you're going to help me. Those are the rules. And now open you little cock-sucker ears. At four in the morning I want to see ten thousand euro on the bar in the Red Light, got it? If not we'll bust your student-knocking-shop and take the cash, have I made myself clear?'

So now the burning question: what to do when surrounded by three neighbourhood criminals making completely insane demands which you will never in your life be able to meet because you cannot, will not, and anyway...?

You nod.

'This isn't a joke,' the old man says.

I nod.

'You know Oskar,' Schneider fondles my hand, 'in the old days I would have broken your finger, so you knew I meant business. But somehow I like you, maybe I'm going soft in my old age. Have you still got the same mobile number?'

I nod.

'Are you sure?'

I nod the rest of my cerebral matter out of my head.

'Ok. I'll call you every so often to see how it's going. If your gadget's switched off, or you don't answer you'll have my fist in your face before you can say operating table. You know the stories about me. They're all true. Deal with this like a man, got it?'

I've got it.

The old man in the hat clicks his knuckles.

I nod.

'Good, very good,' Schneider says. 'And don't forget: you're my last hope, so good luck, my son.'

Robert Schneider aka Bordello Bob aka chief-monkey-total-psycho gets up, runs his paw over his head and leaves the room. The old man gives me an ashen glance, shoves the remains of my record player aside with his foot and follows his boss to the door. Now the fascist comes and grabs the banknotes from the table. 'Fucking hippy. I'm going to knife you.' He stuffs the money in his ugly Nazi drainpipe jeans and kicks my stack of records like an idiot then buggers off. Sudden

silence.

This would be the moment for a hyperactive TV presenter to leap from behind the sofa and shout 'gotcha!' But silence. It stinks of aftershave. My heart is beating like the clappers, my head exploding to the beat. I can't think clearly. Do I call the police? Call Pablo? Rocky? Leo? None of them will believe a word of it; I can't grasp it myself. Perhaps it was a hallucination brought on by sleep deprivation and the accumulated intoxicants of previous nights. I drag myself over to the window and fling it open. Light a cigarette and stare into the blank, grey sky. Concentration. Be not perturbed. There is an ambulance in front of our building. The cigarette falls, five storeys down, past strangers' lives and warm flats, and hits the pavement without a sound. That's one option. What would Steve McQueen do?

The door is a write-off. It is leaning against wall just inside my flat. The hinges have been wrenched out of the frame and where the lock once was a gash has been rent, fringed by finger-sized splinters. I walk into my bedroom, pull my big sports bag out from under the clothes rail and stuff shirts, jumpers, pants, socks, two suits and a towel into it as if I were off to the laundrette. I put my laptop on top, plus the mains lead, my leather jacket over it. In the living room, in the bottom drawer of my desk, I keep my ID card and passport, along with certificates and the Mathilda photos. She is naked. She is incredibly beautiful. I put the whole lot in the bag, even the photos; I have to. I gaze at the painting hanging above the remains of my record player. It's by Nina and shows a face, painted with broad strokes, somehow looking alarmed. I slice the canvas from the stretcher with my penknife, roll it up and push it carefully into the bag, do the zip up, ram my feet into my boots and throw my coat over my shoulders, shoving Marcus Aurelius and my mobile into the pockets. I am suddenly very calm; disturbingly so. Shock I guess. Car crash. Driver crawls out of the burning wreck, walks down the street and only notices he has lost his legs after a hundred metres. The stairwell stinks of cooking and piss and I walk down the creaking steps in the dingy light seeping through the windows. No fucker has shown the slightest interest that someone has had their door kicked in; I mean you must have been able to hear it in Hanover. But it's the same as with the hot water. People are mean, it's a cold world, and you have to ask: where will it end? We're heading for rock bottom I reckon, but right now we're in a log-jam. Two ambulance men trudge out of Herr Müller's flat. They hold a stretcher, a body on it, covered by a blanket. They trip down the stairs, swear; the stretcher tips; the blanket slides: a face. The face is entirely blue, the mouth curiously contorted, the eyes closed. Looks like a wax figure, like the shell of something which could potentially once have been Herr Müller. I have never seen a dead body before. Someone in the house must have called the ambulance; perhaps Müller himself, afraid he was dying. Too late. I clutch the banisters, stumble after the ambulance men, who don't take any notice of me, because I'm not there anyway, because none of this is really happening.

It smells of rain. Bangers are going off somewhere. The ambulance men slide the stretcher into the ambulance. The doors slam. It drives off, heads slowly up Simon von Utrecht Strasse without its emergency lights on. I collapse against a lamppost and press my cheek against the cold steel.

'One too many last night, eh?' the racist baker shouts over. I've been feeding myself on his insipid rolls far too long. And so on. On. Of course it's not my fault Herr Müller is now lying dead in an ambulance. The ambulance was there anyway. So there would have been two ambulances if I had rung one. And the ambulance men wouldn't have had to work so hard, but Herr Müller would still have been... Either way. Obviously.

One step, another step, keep going forwards. Have to get to the harbour, past Heribert Becher's specialist spirits shop, the fishmongers, the Artisten-Atelier, the porn cinema, the stinking dog-food shop, the laundrette, the pizzeria, the bank and then: the pedestrian crossing on the Reeperbahn. The lights are red, and I wait, although there are no cars coming, because I'm glad the lights are red. I'm glad I still have a long walk till I get to the Pupasch, through my neighbourhood,

with cameras revolving and cranes swinging above it. A lot of people around already. Tourists, staring. A few locals lugging Lidl bags home. The punks and their dogs by the Litfaßsäule as usual, sitting and lying on the ground, totally hardened. A few metres on, in front of the *bureau de change* a man hops up and down, thrashing at the strings of a guitar and singing. He isn't singing, he's shouting.

It's cold. The wind is painful.

'Got any spare change?' One of the punks asks.

I rummage through my pockets. Nothing small, so I give him a note.

'Wow thanks geezer!' the punk says and beams. Not that it helps. Green. Clinking crates of bottles lifted into the pubs and strip clubs by temporary workers. Screaming seagulls. Exploding fireworks from somewhere or other. On. Lugging the bag towards the harbour, behind me my flat, which I will never return to. Because I have to leave the city after this night. Hunted by hell hounds. Because of course Schneider won't get his money. None of the others will get their money either. Because I'm going to get the fuck out of here, forget everything, especially Mathilda, and start again from scratch somewhere else.

[...]

'Please tell me that's not the guest list.' Pablo holds up the guest list and looks at me like a wounded deer.

'That's not the guest list.'

'What is it then?'

'Whatever you'd like it to be.'

'There's at least a hundred names on it.'

'Then the place won't look so empty.'

'And we'll stay in debt.'

'That's just the most important people. Did you seriously think we'd break even?'

'As you know, I was even under the impression we would make money with this establishment, unaware that my esteemed business partner intended to keep booking bands no-one actually wanted to see.'

... and would be blackmailed retrospectively by a small time crook for ten thousand euro, which we will have to pay out of tonight's takings, I am about to say. But don't. I say, 'then you'll go bankrupt. That will take you down a peg or two, you ponce.'

A bust of Lenin the size of a baby's head flies towards me, crashes into the filing cabinet and lands on the safe, which makes a sound like a broken bell or an empty oil drum, or some other wholly useless object.

Tobi enters, dumps his bag on the floor and claps his hands. 'How's it going, you slackers?'

'Badly,' I say.

'To the dogs,' Pablo says, 'all of it.'

Tobi rips his jacket off, rummages in the bag, pulls his stab-proof waistcoat out, stretches it over his brick-shithouse torso, fixes pepper spray and a telescopic truncheon to his belt and adjusts the laces on his DMs. This might seem a shade pugnacious to those waiting outside, a commando outfit just to do the door of a club, but Tobi's main occupations are hunting down fascists and fighting in mixed martial arts matches; with a real life like that, it's ok to overreact at the weekend.

'You stir, I'll pour the fruit & veg in.' Pablo shoves a bowl towards me, more a baby bath, for the punch.

On the other hand working the door Saturdays at a top club in this district is hardly a recreational activity, more like military action.

'So where is the dish with the orange slices?'

Astonishingly people do actually sometimes want to come into the club, and the bouncer has to keep them out. Then he has to encourage the guests deemed worthy of admittance to enter in an orderly fashion, has to prevent conflicts, safeguard the till, assist people out into the fresh air to throw up and cope with the unseemly rage of people whose names are not on the guest list.

'I reckon a bottle of vodka would improve the punch.'

While everyone up here is having the time of their lives, the bouncer down below has to deal with pure insanity, because at night all is forgotten.

‘Looks pretty tasty. But MDMA punch without the MDMA isn’t quite the real deal.’

Yet instead of sympathy, the bouncer is treated with circumspection – for good reasons. He has power; caution is advisable. And so he has to be all the more polite and patient, like a lenient uncle, so that people realise he has a brain and a heart and not, like so many of his colleagues, just a lump of hatred between his ears.

‘And if we just say there’s MDMA in the punch?’

We are lucky, and so are our guests, that we have Leo and Tobi on the door, top notch staff as it were; no need to be scared by a commando outfit.

‘Are you listening to a word I’m saying?’ Pablo punches my arm. ‘What do you think of my idea?’

‘I think, “great”,’ I say. ‘Main thing is MDMA punch.’

‘You really are a pair of tossers,’ Tobi says. He flings his bag on top of the filing cabinet. ‘As if everyone won’t already be off their tits. It’s full moon too. Saturday, New Year’s Eve, closing night, and full moon. And you’re serving MDMA punch. Cheers guys.’

‘But there’s nothing actually in it,’ I try to reassure him. ‘Anyway Jacques and Annie are taking the money.’

‘Well that’ll make all the difference. If we just had stable barriers. What’s going on with the backstage?’

‘That’s the snogging room. And check out the studio; it’s become the darkroom disco. When they start dancing there later it will be forever, because black is a non-colour and—’

‘What do you mean “start dancing?”’ Tobi asks. ‘Who’s dancing where?’

‘The people, the guests, like. We’re using backstage and studio tonight as... What you looking like that for?’

‘No!’ Tobi says. ‘No way! There’s only two of us, a huge crowd, full moon. And you’re opening up new spaces.’

‘Did Pablo not...’

Pablo made a face as if he had chomped on a lemon. It’s better if I leave. Fifteen minutes left.

Fifteen minutes left, but Hansen is packing his tools away. Fifteen minutes left, but Benny is tying a tie round his neck. Fifteen minutes left, but Sunny is standing at the mixing desk chatting to Jeans Team, as if it were all over already. Normally it’s frantic, mass panic before the door downstairs opens. But everything’s running like clockwork tonight, as if we had planned and executed everything professionally, which I don’t recall us doing. The club has never looked so good. It’s impossible to imagine how lively and loud it will be later, but that is how it is; it will all go up in flames. I leave the guest list by the door – for the last time – and fetch three empty beer crates from the storeroom, then

put them in the lift. I wave at Benny as the door rattles shut and the lift starts moving – for the last time. For the last time this tight feeling in my stomach, like before every important event, but stronger tonight.

Adapt thyself to the things with which thy lot has been cast; and the men among whom thou hast received thy portion, love them, but do it sincerely.

Pity. No further use for Aurelius either. I don't want to adapt, I want to escape my lot, break the chain. And before I can love them sincerely, I have to work through my hate list.

Mathilda's last text message

Sweetheart your silence is making me ill. But maybe you are right. All or nothing. I think about you every day. I know one day everything will be alright.

With love. M.

Two years ago this message came. I deleted it straight away, but I can't forget the words, and usually I forget everything. I can't even remember what I did last Tuesday, or Wednesday, or yesterday. I don't know a single telephone number off by heart, only hers. Sometimes it seems like I've not been living all this time at all, because I can't remember a thing, except her. Everything to do with her is stored to my hard disk, impossible to erase. Every time my system crashes another back-up copy is automatically generated. My IQ probably comes out at thirty-four, her dress size.

Leo is standing in front of the door staring at the sky. He is completely alone, no-one else around, no-one on the street, no-one on the pavement, not even the two or three fans who always loiter round the club half an hour before the doors open to secure a place in the front row, even though often there is only one row, because they are the only people there anyway. A medium-sized rabble would not be much to ask for, simply for the bands we've actually announced. And most of those in the know must have heard Kidd Kommander are playing. But no fucker wants to come in. Did we print the wrong time on the flyers? Get the day wrong? Or are they all sitting in their Ikea shit-holes drafting their New Year's resolutions drinking bubbly, checking their Facebook messages and watching *Dinner for One* for the fiftieth time?

'I said this would go tits up,' I said.

'Thirty-three. People. Asked about tickets,' Leo said.

'Ok, better than nothing.'

Leo places his huge hand on my shoulder, it's almost calming, but I am already imperturbability in person. Maybe it's tiredness, or hunger, or the first signs of madness, but I feel rooted in my inner self, almost Buddhist. Nothing can touch me anymore.

'It'll be alright,' Leo says.

'Let's hope so,' I say.

The Volvo is parked on the pavement between the posts holding up the porch; on the street it's raining snow.

'What are you going to do when the club closes?' I ask Leo. 'Have you got some way of making money?'

'We'll see,' Leo says. Aha. That's one approach. Although Leo sees things which escape the rest of us.

'You could go travelling, with Nina.'

Leo is silent.

'I reckon she'd be delighted. She could certainly do with a change of scenery. It's so grey here. Black in fact.'

Leo is silent.

'I never know what's going on between you two anyway. I mean, the way you look at each other and all that. What's the problem then?'

The problem is that Leo is silent.

'You're a fool man. A great girl like Nina, but you just stand around counting bollocks and say nothing.'

Leo looks at the sky. What's up there then? Nothing is there. Not even blackness. He's driving me mad; Buddha has done one.

'For fuck's sake say something!'

'Love is a disease,' Leo says. 'It weakens and kills you.'

'Ok so you're scared. Is that all? You're just scared?'

A vibration at my chest. Why can't they all just...

Incoming call

Number unknown

Hello?

Alright you streak of piss. How's business?

Not so good. Looks like no-one is coming.

Then I've got some good news for you.

You're sending a coachload of brothel customers?

Don't get cocky sunshine, or you'll be using your teeth to do up your trousers!

Yeah, but—

Shut it. Now listen here, mister night-club-owner, I'll be round shortly with a few of the lads. Nothing out of hand, we're just going to get a few drinks inside us and see what you kids are up to. Put a few bottles of fizz in the fridge for us, put me plus ten on the guest list and play the host for a bit. We'll sort the business out later in the Red Light as discussed, got it?

Certainly not! No way! You can't just rock up here. It's not your scene at all. It's all arty shit, students and that. Anyway we said—

Shut the fuck up, you toerag! Why are you cunts so fucking disrespectful anyway? Is it because your parents were hippies?

My parents—

Tell your part-time doormen to behave themselves, otherwise they'll be breathing through their cheeks. And not to start any of their antifa la-di-da with Fritz! I'll call later.

For fuck's sake Schneider, you can't do that. Schneider? Shit!

'Who was that then,' Pablo asks. He is standing next to me in front of the building.

'That was Bordello Bob, he—'

'Do my eyes deceive me or are there really no guests at all waiting in front of our establishment?'

'Er...'

'I knew it.' He looks at me triumphantly. 'Ten o'clock is far too early. You never listen to me and every time it gets us into difficulties. And this error of judgement will cost us money, just like all the rest. And the punch will get warm.'

'How ghastly. Listen, I need to talk to you.' In a few minutes Pablo will want to drown himself in his stupid punch. Because Schneider is coming. I need to spit it out.

'I too have something to impart to you,' Pablo says. 'An important piece of information I have been holding from you far too long.'

A DJ has probably dropped out, or the champagne fountain is broken. I am already inconsolable. 'Come with me,' I say.

'Where do you want me to come?'

'Just come.' I will quickly explain the thing with Schneider, then somehow find calming words to dampen his panic. He needs to stick by me. I won't get through it on my own. 'Sit down.'

'Why should I sit on your rusty old motor?'

'Because otherwise you will fall over.'

Pablo pulls a white silk handkerchief from the top pocket of his jacket and wipes the bonnet with it. If only he knew how ridiculous that is compared to what I have to say to him. I offer him a cigarette.

'I don't want to smoke.'

'You will in a minute.'

'You too,' Pablo says.

I light him a cigarette. It will be the first of many.

'So,' he says, 'what I wanted to tell you was—'

'No,' I say, 'what *I* wanted to tell *you*—'

'... no longer matters. Believe me, Oskar,' Pablo says. 'I should have told you a long time ago, but I didn't want you to get more upset than necessary. Erm, I'm sorry but—'

'Yes,' I say, 'I'm sorry too, but this afternoon—'

'Mathilda is coming.'

'... my doorbell rang and then...'

Pablo nods.

'That's not funny.'

Pablo shakes his head. Why is he shaking his head now?

'It's not a joke,' Pablo says.

Notajoke. Notajoke. Notajoke.

THE BALLAD OF OSKAR AND MATHILDA

Power Cut

In the southern foothills of the Harz Mountains, where the peaks subside into hills and the valleys descend into plains, lies a forgotten land. Villages and towns are strewn like dice between woods and fields, surrounded by grey slagheaps looming like pyramids against the sky. For centuries the men of this region crawled through mineshafts, brought dark rock up to the surface, lugged it to roaring furnaces and stacked the smelted residues as if building their own tombs. Generations were killed by hunger, soot and exhaustion all for a few tons of copper, the least valuable of all metals. At some point socialism was called into existence and hunger abolished. Then socialism was abolished and the last pit was closed, the last plant, the last factory. Since then the men have been waiting for work which no longer exists. Anyone who can, leaves. Anyone who stays is left with the sight of the slagheaps, living in a land submerged in the past.

This is where Oskar and Mathilda were born. They were conceived on the same night. It was New Year's Eve and the electricity pylons had collapsed under the weight of the snow, which had fallen in quantities hitherto unseen. The following September saw a correspondingly large number of births. Mathilda came into the world two days after Oskar, in the same hospital, in the 'Good Luck' maternity ward.

Sixteen Years Later

Oskar and the other members of the 'Red Socks' antifa group were sitting in the hall of a disused rolling mill round a fire in an oil drum discussing the situation. The situation was not good. For months, membership had stagnated at a static nine. It seemed no-one was interested in being beaten to a pulp by neo-Nazis for attempting to organise concerts, readings and demonstrations. Then the door opened. First they saw only a shadow, thrown right across the hall by the light from the lamps in the mill yard. In constant fear their hideout might be discovered by the enemy, they reached for their sticks and axes. Then Mathilda approached, lit by the glow of the fire, and they breathed out again in relief – only to catch their breath again: she wore a trench coat, jeans, cowboy boots and a white scarf, her long hair free. She looked like a film star. She said, 'hi, I'm Mathilda.' The Red Socks looked at each other in disbelief.

Several of them knew her by sight. The town was small and Mathilda was going out with Martin Kretschmar, known as Gretsche, singer of the local rock band Deaths Schmidt. Gretsche was in his mid twenties, drove a brown Mercedes and looked like Steven Tyler. They had been together for two years. Mathilda's visit to the HQ of the region's sole antifa group had been preceded by the following conversation:

Gretsch: 'If it gets to you that much, you should do something about it.'

Mathilda: 'I know. But what? Do I have to chain myself to the asylum seekers' hostel?'

Gretsch: 'Why not give those antifa lads a go?'

Mathilda: 'I can't face all the cake stalls and info tables.'

Gretsch: 'Now you're being unfair. Are you scared to go? Shall I come and hold your hand?'

Mathilda gave him a sarcastic look, got dressed and mounted her moped. Twenty minutes later she was there to save the Red Socks' day. With the prettiest girl in the area among their ranks, suddenly everything seemed possible, and not just politically. Each member of the entirely male group represented his activities – but above all himself – in the most flattering light possible. Oskar was the only one to remain silent. As always when he couldn't cope with a situation, he hid his insecurity behind a facade of disinterest. The appearance of Mathilda, unknown to him till this moment, had made him question everything, including his first big love, for Katja. Mathilda, however, was so immersed in her conversation with the others she didn't notice Oskar at all. Till he inadvertently set himself alight. Not wanting to ask anyone for a light, he had leant over the fire, a cigarette in his mouth, at which point his shoulder-length hair caught fire. There was a huge commotion, the fire was extinguished with beer, then everyone burst into laughter – everyone except Oskar and Mathilda.

'Alright now?' Mathilda asked, and gave him another cigarette.

'This happens to him all the time,' Gregor laughed. 'So where exactly did you say you lived?'

Flattened and silenced, Oskar now focussed solely on drinking beer, unable to leave the mill building. As the grey morning dawned and Mathilda said goodbye, the meeting came to a close. On the way home he threw up and crashed his bike against a lamppost. He already hated himself for thinking constantly about this girl, even while lying semi-conscious on the pavement.

Mathilda never came to the Red Socks again.

The Soundpit, Two Years Later

Mathilda was standing in front of the mirror, putting on eye shadow and plucking idly at her eyebrows, mildly surprised by herself, because she was thinking, for whatever reason, about that Oskar guy. She dabbed perfume round her neck, pressed her breasts together to see how they looked and thought of Oskar. She put her dead grandmother's earrings on, took them off again, and thought of Oskar. He would be there of course; all the sixth-formers, from both schools would be at the Soundpit tonight, as they had been on the last two Saturdays, but this didn't explain why she was thinking about him. She gave her dad a kiss on the forehead. He nodded, without taking his eyes off the TV and she knew he would be sitting in exactly the same position when she got home again. Then he would go to bed. She hugged her mum, who sneaked some money into her jacket pocket, then she went downstairs to the car, started the motor, turned the radio on, turned it off again and drove off. She wound the window down, let her hand drift on the waves of the airstream and thought of the flat

in Kreuzberg, Berlin, which she would move into with Gretsche in five weeks. 'It's where the music scene is, where everyone is,' he had said. Something tightened inside her.

'You know what? I don't hate you anymore; I'm just sorry for you!' Oskar slammed the door behind him. The welcome sign with the wreath of plastic flowers fell on the doormat. He kicked it down the stairs and walked, five storeys down, away from his drunken father and crying mother to the basement where his bike was kept which he still needed because he had twice failed his driving test. But where was he supposed to go? Not to the Soundpit, where all the others were, partying, not to Katja, who was reading textbooks on bulimia so she could cure herself, certainly not to the mill, that was all over; everything was over. He simply rode off, kept going downhill. The air was fresh from the rain which had fallen that afternoon. Why had he gone and applied for a placement at the old peoples' home in this miserable backwater as his alternative to military service? Because of his mother and Katja, for their sakes of course. In eight weeks he would start nine months' voluntary work there: the next prison. He raced across the square, where the fascists under the lime tree shouted insults after him, cycled up the hill, as fast as he could, past the cinema, where films were no longer shown, past the police station, the rifle association and the swimming baths, no longer used. And then he was at the Soundpit.

Mathilda couldn't see him anywhere. Everyone was there, even the swots, everyone except him. The fire was huge, they had thrown whole trunks into it, the flames danced above the neighbouring field. Franz Ferdinand's 'Take me out' was blasting from the boot of an estate car, mixed with the jumbled voices of the people standing around. Mathilda took a toke on the joint Ronny was holding under her nose. It's not about him, she thought; it's because everything is going to be different now. Then she saw him.

He saw her approach, and turned away, embarrassed.

'Hey, wait a minute! Wait!' Mathilda said.

Oskar gazed at her.

'How are you doing then?'

How I'm doing? Oskar thought. Oh God! 'So-so.'

'Not exactly a wild party is it?'

'No.'

'Everyone is talking the whole time about all the great things they're going to do next.'

'I know, I can't stand it,' Oskar said. 'And what are you going to do?'

'No idea,' Mathilda lied.

'Could be worse.'

'Worse than what?'

'Already having the next five years planned and accounted for.'

'All I want is to get away.'

'Sure,' Oskar said. 'Anywhere has to be better than here.'

New Places

They met four times over the following weeks. They took Mathilda's Golf to places where no-one knew them, talked about Natalie Portman in *V for Vendetta*, the latest Coen brothers film, the guilty pleasure they both felt listening to embarrassing 80s metal bands, and were amazed to discover that they shared the same favourite book, *Betty Blue* by Philippe Djian. They talked about their families, about Katja and Gretsche, and sometimes they fell silent, which they also enjoyed.

Each time they met, Mathilda became more nervous, but she was good at hiding this. Oskar, on the other hand, became more and more relaxed. Having always felt alienated, incomplete and confused, her company was having a therapeutic effect on him. Her kindness, bubbly nature and the certainty that their relationship was wholly platonic both invigorated and calmed him. When he was with her he stopped thinking everything he wanted was impossible and started seeing the possibilities open to him. Everything about her seemed right and good. He walked, whistling buoyantly, through a world suddenly full of colour. Till one evening Mathilda dropped her bombshell: 'I think I've fallen in love.'

'Really?' Oskar asked. 'Who with?'

- end of sample -

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