



Lou Bihl

Y's  
Revenge

A Novel

U N K E N

Y's Revenge is an exclusively fictitious story  
and any resemblances with real events or persons are coincidental.

*As long as you live, nothing is final*

*Arnold Zweig*

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# Berlin



This time, she avoided my eyes.

“Professor Wolff will be with you in a minute.” The secretary of the Department of Urology guided me to the office of her boss.

A moment later, Wolff rushed in and lounged his big body in the leather armchair. He poured two glasses of water from a crystal carafe and handed one over the table. “Sorry,” he said. “It turns out that it is not prostatitis but prostate cancer after all.

I took the glass and put it down.

“Good match with the weather,” I heard myself say. I stared at the giant raindrops splashing at the windowpane.

“Weather will pass by,” Wolff muttered and pressed the print button of his computer.

“Thanks for the awesome comfort. Life will pass by as well.”

I kept on gazing at the window and watched the pouring rain. The laser printer ejected a sheet of paper.

“Sorry, didn’t mean that.” Wolff handed the page over to me.

I read:

*Prostate biopsy Prof. Dr. Kristian Starck, Adenocarcinoma of the Prostate cT2c, Grade 3 (ISUP). The rest was almost undecipherable, as I had no glasses on. Anyhow, I didn’t care but was amused by a handwritten note: Attention, the patient is a pathologist!*

“One more unprofessional report by the competitors,” I stated.

“Next time, I’ll refer your specimen directly to you,” Wolff mumbled.

“How do you know next time isn’t already over?”

“Your irony doesn’t help. Let’s try and be positive.”

“Yes, sir. Be my leader and guide me to the realm of positivity.” To my surprise, I enjoyed being rude to my former student buddy.

Wolff sat up straight and switched to his consolation mode. “Look, as you can see, the tumor is restricted to the prostate, indicating that we have several treatment options and a fair chance to cure the disease.”

At least something! I decided to control myself and, for the next half hour, I listened to his explanations about the different ways to treat the tumor, such as surgery or radiation therapy, including the probability of cure and potential side effects. His personal recommendation was total prostatectomy, which meant removal of the gland and surrounding lymph nodes. Proudly, Wolff emphasized, the surgical technique had dramatically improved with his brand-new robotic device called da Vinci, which permitted much better sparing of normal tissue.

I could hardly concentrate, imagining myself tiny and defenseless, belted onto an operating table, while the folding boom of a monster robot rammed a knife into my crotch.

In childhood, I had discovered the dichotomy switch and used it whenever I was overwhelmed by fear—for instance, of father’s castigation. Turning on the switch, I took a step outside my fearful self and watched the scene as if through a telescope. In the painless distance, fear dissolved, and I observed the other Starck pretending perfect coolness, like Sean Penn in *Death Sentence*. Sitting opposite, I observed the chief of urology, normally a hard-boiled macho, but now with sweat on his upper lip. He for whom dealing with a death sentence is no more than daily routine, just as

it was for the pathologist. No threat—even da Vinci looked friendly, with its big baby eyes, like ET’s.

Wolff kept on explaining the advantages of surgery, apart from urinary incontinence as an exception, and especially the chance of instant scheduling, whereas radiotherapy required three months of hormonal pretreatment.

“Great! Can I have this neoadjuvant hormone therapy before surgery as well?”

Wolff shook his head, with a flabbergasted look on his face. “Nope. One decisive plus of surgery is that no hormones are needed to improve treatment results. So, why in heaven would you go to the trouble?”

“Because I need a reprieve. You know: my sabbatical, my book, some projects I’ve really been wanting to do and have kept putting off ...” With my voice fading away, my hands sank onto the armrest.

“No need to decide today,” Wolff replied. “Take your time. Any more questions about surgery?”

A plump housefly was crawling on the naked breast of the South Sea Islander girl in Gaugin’s lost paradise. “Can you guys still perform gender-affirmative surgery after someone’s had prostatectomy?” I heard myself ask, biting on my tongue. “Just kidding,” I added.

Bewildered by my stare to his lateral background, he turned his head and also caught sight of the housefly that was now surrounding the nipple of the islander woman, whose unflinching gaze did not meet the eyes of her male companion.

When the fly took off, Wolff shook his head. “Absurd question. I have no idea if gender-reassigning surgery is doable after prostatectomy. As far as I know, the prostate is needed for lubrication.”

“Gender-affirmative surgery,” I corrected reflexively.

Drumming with his fingers on the table, Wolff said, “No matter how you call it. I guess you are a bit disoriented, my friend. Or is it your bizarre sense of humor again that makes you have such nonsensical ideas?”

“Just scientific curiosity. I recently read an article about prostate cancer in transgender women.”

Wolff shook his head and checked his watch. “Well, that’s not my area of expertise. However, prostate cancer is, and I’ll be glad to take care of yours. Call me any time when you’ve made up your mind. Maybe check with the radiation oncologist.”

Our farewell handshake failed to alleviate the emotional strain. Backslapping did, somewhat, as we embraced, while keeping distance like sweating boxers.



The rain kept on pouring. With fogged up specs, I headed for my car. The metropolitan traffic jam permitted no more than a walking pace, and it took an eternity to arrive at Spreebogen.

Unlocking the door of my apartment, I prepared for the recognition of how nothing would ever be the same, but I somehow failed to concentrate on the right sensation. In the mirror, my grey hair looked stringy from the rain; otherwise, there was no visible sign of transformation.

The empty fridge offered no comfort, and the early time of day prohibited red wine or schnapps. I peeled off my soaked clothes and slipped into my favorite jeans and a hoodie. Then, I threw on a parka and headed out again, feeling a vague desire to diverge from my habits.



Rain was perforating the surface of the river Spree like a shotgun. The bad weather had left the Straße der Erinnerung deserted except for a lone jogger. Unimpressed by the rain, he trotted past the statues of Edith Stein’s half-split visage to the poignant gaze of Käthe Kollwitz and the defiant Georg Elsner. Without decelerating, he stretched out his fist and knocked twice on the heads of each statue—except for the head of Ludwig Erhard, whom he apparently disdained.

*No one will ever put me on a pedestal, not even in their memories. And, above all, I want no gravestone.*

When my parka was soaked, I quit my purposeless hike and walked into the next bar. A flush of odors of alcohol, stale frying grease, and unwashed bodies overwhelmed me. The few male guests sat staring into half-empty beer glasses, their grey faces emanating exhaustion. The greenish flickering of a neon lamp provided dim light, while Helene Fischer’s voice jingled “Breathlessly through the Night.”

I ordered a pils, along with two meatballs that I saw sweating on the bar beneath cling wrap, together with a portion of potato salad covered with an incipient incrustation of mayonnaise. My new perception that cancer dispensed with concerns about hygienic matters was an amusing insight. As a precaution, I requested a schnapps, deliberately ignoring the fingerprints on the glass.

After the third beer, I went to the unisex restroom. Urine trickled tardily, as if Wolff’s diagnosis had already clamped my urethral flow. Passing the cigarette machine on my way back, I spontaneously decided to buy a pack and couldn’t help wondering about the requirement for verifying my age. When I was young,

by inserting two Mark coins, twenty cigarettes could be delivered to any sixteen-year-old boy without objection.



Back home, I found matches next to the tea light candles and greedily inhaled the smoke for the first time in twenty years. The subsequent tussive irritation did not impair my indulgence, nor was the vertigo unpleasant. What did bother me were the subsequent hiccups, combined with a regurgitation of beer, meatballs, and Marlboro. Fortunately, I remembered the emergency ration of Underberg and found a tetra pack of 2 cl bottles in the back of the wall cupboard. The bitter's pungency burned its way through my esophagus and cleared my stomach.

I opened my laptop and clicked on *PubMed*, where I found what I was looking for. As expected, the scientific literature revealed no statistically significant differences in survival between surgery compared to radiotherapy, while the rate of incontinence and impotence was lower for irradiated patients. My search for the terms *gender-affirming surgery* and *prostate cancer* revealed one article stating that patients with prior pelvic surgery or radiotherapy should be counselled on the substantial challenge for the dissection of the neovaginal canal. And that the complication rate increased with smoking. I dumped the cigarettes into the garbage can.

The blinking of my email notification distracted me.

How was it with Wolff? I've been waiting for hours! Fondly, A.

Alex, whom I had completely forgotten. I clicked on the response button.

Dear Alex,

You are the first to receive Job's news: it is prostate cancer. I kick myself for having the fucking medical routine check at the beginning of my sabbatical instead of enjoying my freedom and writing my book.

Shouldn't I have known that Saint Y would punish my ingratitude for his chromosome? Prostate cancer! I've never felt so out of place inside my body. It's as if I'm watching a surreal movie. On the pathology report, I read Kristian Starck. I guess that should be me, but this individual seemed like a complete stranger. Unfortunately, Kristina was also hiding in a waft of mist, not letting me feel her. Taking out my perplexity on Wolff, I bullied him with sarcastic comments. This time, he couldn't even strike back. I enjoyed watching him writhe and stammer as he searched for the appropriate words.

His recommended surgery: radical prostatectomy. Whether the artist manages to spare decisive nerve cords remains uncertain until after surgery. 'Decisive' refers to preservation or loss of erectile function. Another risk is urine incontinence, implying the need to wear Pampers. Therefore, surgery is more or less out of the question. Then, I almost disclosed my secret by asking him if prostatectomy was a contraindication for gender-affirmative surgery. I took it back instantly, asserting it was just a joke. Thanks to his limited phantasy, he remained clueless. Kristina called me a wimp, but I just couldn't bring myself to introduce her to Wolff just then.

By the way: one potential side effect of neoadjuvant hor-

monal treatment preceding radiotherapy is breast development. Tits by prescription!

Sorry, dear. I'll call it a day, since I'm a little bit sick from beer, Underberg, and Marlboros. Otherwise, I'm feeling better now, after dumping all this shit on you. So, everything is under control. Please save any psychobabble for your patients and spare me your pity. I'll get an overdose of compassion from my ex-wife, whom I unfortunately married instead of YOU.

Fondly, K.

Alex promptly replied:

Merde alors!!!! Awful to have cancer confirmed. I'm aware this is not about me, but as a person who loves you, I certainly am entitled to commiserate when imagining cancer inside you.

For once, the term 'psychobabble' is forgiven, considering the mitigating circumstances, as Underberg has always evoked your crudest manners. However, it is all but 'psycho' that I am concerned about YOU and not about your brilliant handling of dumb-ass Wolff. With the tiny exception of discussing gender-affirming surgery just now, and with him of all people.

For the moment, I have no objections to your boozing bitter, and the situation justifies short-term cigarette abuse, even for a militant ex-smoker. I trust this soon will pass. However, once you've recovered from your hangover, please TALK to me and unfasten your armor of sarcasm. Big hug and luv, A.

I put out my cigarette. Humming "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," I realized my cheeks were wet.



Bedazzled by merciless morning light, I felt my head throbbing. Fortunately, yesterday's booze made brain metastases unlikely. My stomach was revolting, and my tongue was sticking to the palate as if pasted with nicotine chewing gum. Even the chirping of the birds was obtrusive; they were singing as if life was just going on. It didn't help keeping my eyes closed to stretch out the merciful moment of semi-somnolence and to delay the return of recollection.

No dream. Wolff's Job's news. Cancer.

The bladder allowed no respite. I crawled out of bed and headed toward the bathroom. The toothbrush produced instant nausea. I stumbled into the kitchen and switched the espresso machine on—and then off again. My sickness clearly required chamomile tea.

At least it was Saturday: no appointments, no need to call in sick. Sabbatical—the year off work I had been longing for to finally take the time to write my book, to go on a road trip and realize different dreams. Apparently, the tour operator had unexpectedly changed the agenda into cancer treatment. Dreams were postponed, at best—if not cut to pieces by a scalpel or atomized by an accelerator and eventually castrated by hormone ablation.

*No decisions today, my rotten brain transmitted. Things will take care of themselves.*



"Anyone else I would kick down the stairs," I mumbled, when Alex rushed in.



She threw a bag of rolls and a bunch of flowers onto the table. Then she hugged me in a fervent embrace and tousled my stringy hair. Her perfume was comforting but made me self-conscious of my own stale smell.

“Petit déjeuner!”

No objection was allowed, so I sat down obediently, without even offering help, and just enjoyed watching her lean body with its sinewy shoulders smoothly spinning around in the kitchen.

My dear Alex, the only one who knew me with all my deficiencies and loved me nonetheless—the fearful Kris as much as the distressed Kristina, who is objecting that Y’s revenge disputes her relevance. Kris, who hides behind a vitreous wall of sarcasm whenever it comes to emotional essentials, knowing that Alex will recognize his state of mind behind the glass barrier even more clearly, as if enhanced by a magnifier. And she would hold him tight when he was defenseless and vulnerable, protecting him with unsentimental kindness.

She looked pale, and the morning light revealed her lack of concern to conceal the traces of age. Her mascara wasn’t waterproof, and she hadn’t plucked her eyebrows in a while, which enhanced her androgynous appearance. The furrowed frown line between her eyebrows indicated that her last Botox treatment against migraine had been a while ago.

She cut a roll and passed the upper half to me. “Well, Kris?”

“Wow, is this the professional opening of a psychological interview?”

Alex stuck the spoon into her egg. “Well, give me another try! If you want to know my opinion: I am convinced you should have the surgery.”

“May I ask you to make your expert recommendation plausible?”

“What’s gone is gone; that reasoning needs no expertise.”

Now this was my domain. I decapitated my egg and put the top part right in front of her eyes. “Random logic—typically applied by housewives and surgeons,” I said. “If a surgeon alleges that the tumor is gone after extirpation, this may, at best, not be a lie. Disclosure of the complete truth does not occur before the pathologist examines the specimen under the microscope. If any tumor cells remain: no cure! Metastasis, instead!”

I expected one of Alex’s nasty comments about my intrinsic pathologist-style circumlocution, but she refrained from arguing.

“Alors, Kris. Talk about the medical stuff with people you take seriously. But please, talk to me about the issues that preoccupy you.”

Now she had me in unfamiliar territory. I was unable to respond.

Alex went around the table and took me in her arms. I heard her heart pounding. With every beat, a piece of my armor was breaking, until the burst of the dam was complete. Shaken by spasmodic sobbing, I clung to Alex, who stroked my head, murmuring incomprehensible words of solace. She held me tight for what seemed an eternity. Her blouse was wet.

After I had calmed down, she returned to her chair and handed me a dishtowel.

When I could speak again, I said, “It’s not only about the fucking cancer making me impotent or incontinent or that might even just kill me. I’m just devastated by the idea that my life might end before I’ve lived it the way that actually suits me.”

I leapt to my feet, fished the half-soaked pack of Marlboros from the trash can, lit a cigarette, and inhaled without coughing.

Alex didn't comment on my smoking. After a moment of silence, she looked straight into my eyes and said quietly, "Hey, mon Cher. Why don't you start that life now?" Then, she added, "But, please, without GA-surgery, for now."

"Got it," I replied.

Although Alex had always advocated my coming out as a woman, she had discouraged complete surgery, let alone penile inversion. She believed the penis was overrated as a masculine symbol, as she regarded the essence of a person as independent from the presence or absence of that male organ. Therefore, my poor pecker should be preserved, as it did not deserve a scalpel.

Mumbling, "You've got it easy. You are a woman." I felt her smile melting the teary lump in my throat.



I hesitated to take the phone call but could not stand the shrillness. *Irmgard*. I should come for dinner tonight; she had prepared *Königsberger Klopse*. I did not want to offend my ex-wife by confessing that my preference for her meatballs in sour cream sauce had not survived the early phase of our marriage, but I declined the invitation, pleading a headache. She would keep the *Klopse* in the fridge for tomorrow.

Alerted by the urgency in her voice, I asked, "Were you at the gym yesterday?"

"Why are you asking?"

"Did you meet Kimi there?"

After three seconds of silence, I heard a tentative, "Well, yes, I did."

I was all too familiar with that kind of hesitation, from many

little events in our marriage when she felt caught. For instance, after having sex with Wolff in a drunken stupor after a party.

At that time, I was envied by all the guys for my wife, with her 90-60-90 figure. One of these guys was Wolff. In those days, he was still athletic and slim. Meanwhile, the tooth of time had not spared any of us, but Irmgard kept on fighting it with her Friday workout, together with Kimi—whose full name was Kriemhild and who was Wolff's wife.

"So much for medical confidentiality," I said.

This time, the silence took longer, but then spasmodic sobbing flooded the speaker. "Actually, Kimi told me about you and made me promise not to tell you. I thought that if you came here for dinner, you would tell me and I could comfort you."

With my resistance melting, I promised to be there in time for dinner tomorrow. I also decided to bring her flowers.



The familiar course crossing the Moabiter Brücke seemed strange somehow. The daylight was glaring, and the big old trees in the English Garden still appeared majestic, but they weren't their usual oasis of green shelter. Inside my head, the linear accelerator and the da Vinci robot were battling against each other. Jogging failed to provide the usual remedy for sorting out my brain chaos.

After the first kilometer, my muscles were sore, I was short of breath, and the palpitations of my heart had a geriatric quality—as if already devitalized by cancer or its treatment.

*This will pass. No more Marlboros!* I gave up when I reached Altonaer Straße, concluding, *No Tiergarten for me today*. Instead, I indulged in watching a new episode of a TV biker gang saga. Un-

fortunately, the *Sons of Anarchy* rumbling through the California desert on their big bikes escaped my awareness. Even Gemma, the Old Lady of the gang, failed to reach me, although the androgynous sex bomb in leather and boots used to be an inspiring object of my erotic fantasies.

Watching the bikers ride toward a blood-red sunset suddenly aroused my wanderlust—and provided a felicitous resolution: three months of hormonal treatment and then radiotherapy or prostatectomy thereafter. Three months of respite before my final decision, allowing extra time for personal projects, such as a road trip, without missing treatment.

Humming “Riding through this World,” I changed clothes, opting for the pale cashmere sweater—a birthday gift from Irmgard—and toned my hair with a dash of styling gel. The previous night had engraved wrinkly black rings around my eyes, so I treated myself to a hint of concealer.

I briefly considered taking the bouquet of flowers Alex had brought me, but, eventually, I decided to take a detour to the florist in the central station.



Irmgard’s pantsuit was dangerously tightened around her belly, and she smelled of Chanel No. 5 and pastis. She took the flowers. “Everything will be fine, and I’m always there for you.”

A sudden inspiration crossed my mind: THE chance? When, if not now, would be the moment for truth?

Before I had a chance to decide, Micky swirled by, jumped on me like a rubber ball, and slung her arms around my neck and her scratched legs around my waist.

“Slow down, Micky. Don’t overstrain Grandpa,” her mother yelled from the background.

“But Grandpa looks so healthy and not at all like he’ll be dead before long,” Micky shouted back, with a radiant smile that made her big brown eyes sparkle.

“Hi, Chocolate Crumb. I am fine.” Gently, I put her down again and looked into the sheepish faces of my ex-wife and both my daughters.

I was not prepared for a *Klopse* dinner meant as a family assembly. In no way was I inclined to elucidate my personal disease management in the presence of my endlessly quarreling daughters. However, there was no escape from Micky’s smile.

Before Maren could explain that Micky had misunderstood the issue, her sister interrupted promptly. “Incredibly sensitive of you to talk about Dad’s cancer death in front of a six-year-old girl.”

Longingly, I looked to the door.

“Let’s have a pastis,” Irmi proposed.

I surrendered, taking the pastis, which I disliked almost as much as *Klopse*, and hugged my girls.

Besides the fine facial features, Maren had inherited her mother’s former figure. However, recently, her waist size was gradually approaching her hip circumference, which did not affect her predilection for skin-tight clothing that did not match the typical outfit of a schoolteacher. Her trousers were stretching tight at her thighs.

In the opposite corner of the sofa, Carla had put her feet on the couch table, a habit that her mother detested. The asymmetric, short haircut made her green eyes appear even bigger. She was wearing tight black leather leggings that made her legs look skinny, a baggy multicolored floral Desigual shirt concealed her pe-

titeness. Carla's outfit perfectly matched her non-profession of a long-term student of Media design.

I sat down between my girls, who came closer to me and thus to each other. Once more, I was amazed by the spectrum of genetics produced by the same genotype—even more when I looked at the picture at the wall, showing my ex-wife who was barely recognizable as the mother of the two young ladies. In the group picture of the pop band *Pankower Freiheit*, Irmgard was smiling into the camera. She was dressed in a skintight sequined dress and coral-red lips, like *Madonna*.

Fortunately, our awkward silence was eventually resolved by the arrival of the *Klopse*.

During dinner, we obeyed Irmgard's law forbidding controversies at the table. The rule did not yet apply to Micky, who reported on how the elder brother of a classmate had told her she looked like blood sausage and her teeth like the white pieces of fat inside.

When asked what she had replied, she said, "And you look like rotten low-fat curd cheese."

"Brave girl," Carla commented, with a malicious smile. "You are certainly an expert on low-fat products."

Her older sister was continually fighting her weight and had the habit of storing large amounts of white cheese in the fridge, but she often missed its expiration date.

Irmgard terminated the sisterly conflict, sent Micky to play in the garden, and asked me to finally report on the disaster in detail.

I complied and related to them what I had heard from Wolff. As expected, Irmgard also recommended surgery. As I was not inclined to explain the motivation for my preference of hormo-

nal treatment, my only argument against prostatectomy was the fear of incontinence, which was not enough to convince my family physician.

Maren offered help in case I wanted to find faith again, now that I had cancer. Her affectionate shyness prevented me from a disrespectful reply. She was well aware that I was unable to acknowledge a superordinate authority—even though a little cowardice before the enemy might have been helpful in the present situation. The enemy had now invaded my life, and religious devoutness would offer a chance to evade confronting myself with the finality of death and partially release me of the responsibility for my further life. Unfortunately, once ingested, the apple of knowledge cannot be regurgitated. Still, I appreciated my daughter's loving intention to proselytize to me, despite our former controversial disputes about religion. She was concerned about how I could handle my cancer diagnosis as a nonbeliever.

"It's not that I don't believe in anything," I tried to reassure her. "I do believe in love, and that makes a person quite resilient."

Looking down at the floor, Maren took a breath but didn't speak further. Carla massaged the palm of her left hand with her right thumb. Irmgard refilled our glasses and asked about my further plans.

When I told them about my idea of a road trip. Carla jumped up and announced she was going to have a cigarette outside.

Losing the brief battle against myself, I said, "I'll come too. Will you treat me to a cigarette?"

Irmgard, who had shared the torture of tobacco detox with me twenty years previously, protested heavily.

I mumbled something about absolute exception and joined Carla on the terrace.



The air was mild. I enjoyed the quiet and the company of my little one who, like her sister, had been fathered unintentionally when our marital communication had been more or less reduced to sex. Maren had been my reason for getting married; Carla had been the reason to stay. At the moment of her birth, when I first held the tiny creature in my suddenly oversized hands, Carla had become the most precious being to me. Catapulted into the world two months early, she seemed to protest with a blood-curdling scream and clenched fists, looking me directly in the eyes. That love at first sight had remained unbreakable.

Nervously twitching with her foot, Carla twisted the cigarette between her thumb and index finger.

“Don’t you worry so much—” I started, but she shook her head fiercely.

Avoiding my eyes, she kept on looking down at her feet, with the pink sandals revealing toenails painted alternately with blue and metallic green enamel. Then she abruptly lifted her head. “Please, Dad. I do have to ask you this question. Are you going on your trip to commit suicide?”

“Are you crazy?” I snarled, first perplexed, and then appalled when I noticed her tears. Suddenly, I remembered the family discussion on Christmas concerning Herrndorf’s suicide. The author, whose glioblastoma I had personally microscoped, had been found dead by the river Landwehr Kanal. Not dead from disease but killed by a gunshot to his head. His suicide had provoked controversial discussions in the family. While I had expressed comprehension, Maren still disapproved of the violation of the Lord’s competences by the use of a gun.

Carla grabbed my arm. “You said you understood that he had killed himself, but you would never have done it in such a disgusting way, like shooting yourself in the head and, above all, so close to home. That’s why I thought you might go on your trip to keep us from witnessing—”

I extinguished my cigarette and embraced my younger daughter. “Bullshit, baby. There is no reason at all to even think that.”

Her relieved smile lasted several seconds. “But I want you to promise that you will *never* kill yourself.”

I let her go and took her face in my hands. “Nope! *Never* is a thing you should never promise, Carla. At some point in time, the option of an exit is what helps you to carry on. An option does not mean you do it.”

Blinking back a tear, she said, “Like sleeping pills in the desk drawer?”

“That’s about it,” I confirmed. “And now, let’s get inside before we get in trouble.”

“Wouldn’t be your first time to trouble Mom,” Carla replied with a malicious grin. “And by the way, did you know that your ex-wife is regularly hanging around on an online dating portal called Premium Singles 45+?”

“Not really? How do you know that?”

“She told Maren, who is doing the same on *Parship*.”

“Tattletale,” I rebuked, nudging Carla, who squeaked in delight.

When we returned, trouble was in the air.

Irmgard sat upright on the couch. Her voice was icy when she said, “How lovely that you finally decided to come back. And what a sensible idea to start smoking again just now.”

Ironically, it was Maren who stabbed her in the back. “It

shouldn't matter if smoking is shit," my daughter said. "Cancer patients shouldn't be forbidden their bad habits."

"If at all, that only applies to incurable cancer," my family doctor objected.

Carla threw the pack onto the table. "No matter how things go, the disease presents an opportunity for Dad to finally do all the things he's always wanted to do."

I held my breath and again asked myself whether this might be the moment. Then, I heard Maren say, "All vices permitted, as long as Dad isn't gay or a child molester."

Which was a decisive signal to say goodbye. On my way home, I wrote an SMS to Alex.

While, or because, everything was the same as always, I felt so alienated. I do believe they want to be there for me all the time, but I doubt whether it will help.

She answered immediately.

To be honest, you are a bit ungrateful and premature. Having someone who is there for you at any time is much more than most people can count on.

The word "ungrateful" made me grin. By contrast, the term "premature" made me shiver.



The next morning, the long-awaited free time ahead already felt like a black hole—sucking me in and transforming the quiet I had

longed for into oppressive silence. I made an espresso macchiato but poured it down the sink as the milk was sour. Finally, I found a cereal bar and a Coke.

Message from Alex:

Dear, as I am not a Wolff follower, I looked into the guidelines for treatment of prostate cancer to get my own impression of the current recommendations. I did not fully understand the issue of hormonal treatment. Did I get it right that you poor guys formerly used to get your balls cut off but something similar is now performed using drugs?

Can you explain how it works—and why, for heaven's sake you, would be happy to endure that treatment?? Luv, Alex.

Out of the clinical routine for years, Alex had taken the trouble to work herself through the guidelines for me!

I responded:

Beloved pain in the neck, Testosterone not only renders males aggressive but prostate cancer cells as well. Instead of removing the balls, a kind of chemical castration is used now to prevent testicular androgen production. My preference is a drug called bicalutamide, which does not suppress the androgen level. The side effects are milder, except for gynecomastia, which is what I mentioned as "tits on prescription!" I guess you now understand my preference. Thank for your concern. Luv, Kris

With this text, my energy was spent. I left the rest of the emails unanswered. In exhausted restlessness, I wandered around the flat.

According to the principle of curing something with something alike, I treated myself to Leonard Cohen's "You Want It Darker" and reached for one of the remaining cigarettes. Remembering Frank Zappa's statement: *Tobacco is food*, I clicked on YouTube and looked for his last interview, recorded several days before he died. At the age of fifty-two, his former exuberant vitality had given way to a grand fragility, but even close to death he radiated an unbreakable intensity. When asked if there was anything in his life he regretted, his answer was: *I am totally unrepentant*. His reply to being asked what he would like people to remember about him had been: *I don't care. It's not important to be remembered*.

Lacking a handkerchief, I reached for a dishtowel instead. Searching for my own regrets, I found that omissions rather than done deeds deserved ruefulness. Not much worthy of memory, either. Assuming that it is, indeed, futile to be remembered by others, shouldn't the account of one's own memories at least be stockpiled, as a kind of virtual investment in one's remaining life? For example, a road trip.

Whenever I fail to sort out my pending tasks or to find a sensible way to get started, I draft a to-do list. Writing down one's tasks creates the illusion of getting things done, even if nothing is actually accomplished.

### **Preparation for the trip**

- Radiation oncologist—Second opinion
- According to the result—second consultation with Wolff
- Farewell party at the department
- Petra finissage

### **Road Trip**

- Stuttgart: class reunion. Test outing #1?
- Manfred—(health care proxy for mother)
- Heidelberg: Mathias—(support for the statistics in the book; test outing #2!)
- Köln: Otto—lecture, guided church tour, test outing #3
- Hamburg: Mother—health care proxy, test outing #4?
- Hallig Hoge—Contemplation. Experiment: How will Kristina get along in the countryside?
- Lisbon via France, Spain → BOOK

Starting with the easiest task, I made an appointment with the radiation oncologist. Then I called my brother, who had virtually no time to see me during the weekend of my class reunion as his wife had planned an extended wellness weekend and he had to take care of the children, but finally he agreed to meet me. Once again, he was lamenting, and once again, I kept my mouth shut.

I remembered his irritation at Mother when she had remarked, some years ago, that this was how life went when a man fathered children who could be his grandchildren with a woman who could easily be his daughter. A second spring had occurred in his forties, with a blond bachelor aspirant for business administration doing an internship in his company. After her bachelor's degree, she had abstained from a further qualification for the master's and instead gave birth to two hyperactive children.

Mathias had time for me on the proposed date and promised to support me in my book with his expertise in statistics. However, I detected little enthusiasm from my old student buddy about our first reunion after ten years. Moreover, I was concerned about his cryptic remark that his physical shape was only fit for scrap.



At least, Conchita and Otto expressed their happiness to see me. And I felt the pleasure of finally getting some tasks underway.



“Professor Schön is expecting you. May I offer espresso, green tea, or an iced soft drink?”

The nametag of the lanky young man with the neatly combed dreadlocks read: J. F. Lemontin. The Black secretary guided me into the light-flooded office of the radiation oncologist, who looked even more athletic without his white coat. His handshake was warm, and his smile conveyed empathy without commiseration when he greeted me and said he would have preferred a bar for our first meeting—a statement I fully agreed with.

Above his desk was one of Josef Alber’s thousand homages to the square, in yellow.

“Is Alber’s yellow study supposed to acquaint the spectator with your rays?” I asked.

A surprised smile curled the laugh lines around his eyes. “The title of the picture is *Joy*, but I’m thrilled you associate it with rays.”

After a moment of unperturbed silence, Schön grabbed my medical record. “I guess you want me to give you some basic information about radiotherapy. Wolff most probably recommended prostatectomy?”

He seemed surprised at my preference for primary definitive radiotherapy and did not comment on my reservations against surgery. I was pleased at his emphatic nod when I mentioned that preservation of potency was an issue. He then put some water in that wine by stating that, at my age of only 55, he would rather tend to recommend primary surgery. If the cancer recurred after

surgery, salvage radiotherapy was no real challenge, but prostatectomy for recurrence after a radiation treatment would be a significant problem for the surgeon. Moreover, maintaining erectile function was in no way guaranteed with radiotherapy either, even though my relatively young age was a favorable precondition. He then explained the potential adverse effects of radiotherapy, such as mucosal irritation of the bladder and bowel, all of which sounded less frightening than Pampers-peeing. Finally, he showed me a typical treatment plan for prostate radiation on his computer screen. Circular areas and oscillating lines were rendered in radiant, smoothly blended colors indicating the prostate, bladder, and rectum. Schön’s contagious joy about his work tempted me to almost ask about gender-affirmative surgery after radiation, but the fear prevailed and, once again, I kept silent and the moment went by.

“Let me know when you’ve made a final decision,” he said.

On my way through the tiled corridor, I surrendered to the temptation of buying cigarettes at the kiosk.

My congenial colleague had blurred the alleged clarity, rather than confirming my treatment preference, and had forced me to rethink about the da Vinci option. Again, the song “You Want It Darker” crossed my mind. *If you are the dealer, I’m out of the game, if you are the healer, means I’m broken and lame?*



Half an hour later, the sky had brightened again. The late afternoon sun was shining through the skylights, flooding my flat with light. Discontented, I put the cigarettes back in my pocket as Mrs. Jablonski was still there. The earthy smell of the agent she



used to polish the maple parquet floor mingled with the aroma of her physical self; she tended to deodorize her massive perspiration with the Old Spice aftershave used by her spouse Horst.

Mrs. Jablonski had proven her skills in Irmgard's practice, since my ex-wife was a merciless master of tidiness. She had soon recognized how badly I needed her and responded with the continuous expansion of her responsibilities, which included occasionally stuffing my fridge with healthy homemade foods. She felt that "the Professor" ate too much junk food deprived of vitamins.

I politely thanked Mrs. Jablonski for the white cabbage casserole with meatballs and, pleading a severe headache, asked her to kindly call it a day.



The quiet did not last. I found a message from Petra on the answering machine. "I thought, during your sabbatical, you would finally spend more time with me. I think we need to talk."

My first impulse was to ignore her call, but the checklist made me restless, and since Wolf's diagnosis, I had felt the nagging necessity to sort out the priorities in my life.

We had met at a training course for Pilates. At the age of forty-seven, mostly misjudged as being in her late thirties, Petra was in the dangerous phase when menopause is anticipated and libido becomes voracious and fearless. I appreciated her well-trained body of a sports teacher and her insatiable appetite for sex. However, recently, my illusion of sex as a medium of creating closeness without exposing myself too much had dissipated—even more so, as I was sure she would not get along with Kristina. So, I had never introduced them, and now this would no longer be a relevant issue.

I took my cell phone and sent an SMS asking her to meet me. She replied right away.

I am totally excited and starving.

Today, I would let her starve. Regrettably. Breaking up because of cancer is nothing personal; nobody gets mad at a cancer patient.



Petra let me help her out of her raincoat. Before I could even offer her a drink, she had flipped open the snap fasteners of her blouse with a single move. Her striped push-up bra left half of the nipples free. She lifted her short leather skirt without bothering with the garter belt. As usual, she had already taken off her slip in the elevator and stuffed it into her handbag.

I grabbed her hands. "No, please. Wait a moment!"

Rather than taking me seriously, she mistook the deferral as part of the foreplay. With her muscular arms, she towed me toward the seat cushion, threw me into its smooth depths, and dropped herself on top of me.

Smelling her apple shampoo and vanilla perfume and a whiff of her freshly washed pussy made my willful intent to resist simply evaporate. If God provides males with only one blood supply for the cock and brain, this clearly was a moment of distal rather than cerebral perfusion. Petra verified my flesh's readiness with a proficient grip and put herself on top of me straightforwardly.

Catching our breath afterward, I offered champagne. Then I broke the news in plain language—separation because of cancer. Nothing personal ... appreciation of the time together.

For a moment, she was misty-eyed and excused herself to the bathroom. When she got back, she looked extremely pale. I added that an aging cancer patient, potentially disposed to disintegration, was in no way a reasonable partner for a lady of her league.

She refilled her glass with champagne and, with the color returned to her cheeks, replied, “Of course, I would have been there for you, even with cancer, but if you prefer to go through this on your own, I’ll regretfully respect your decision.”

She fished the slip out of her handbag, closed the snap fasteners, wished me good luck, and headed for the door.

Taking a long sip, I waited for relief, which turned out to again be more elusive than a vague and unexpected disappointment—along with a feeling of shame for overestimating my importance. I had expected pity and had feared overprotection. What I had witnessed was the impulse to get straight away from me and my cancer. In any case, one more task on my list was taken care of.



I was in a shoe shop, searching for sneakers for my road trip, when Micky’s call reached me.

“Grandpa, can we please have cemetery cake today?”

Micky’s voice on the phone sounded excited. Her mother took over. Rumors had spread at school about Micky’s grandfather’s cancer. Tina, a twelve-year-old girl from the neighborhood, was even asserting that Micky’s grandpa would soon be gone. Could I explain the whole subject to Micky and reassure her?

I was happy for the distraction from my anxiety and the tedious shopping in preparation for the trip. Micky, Maren, and I always enjoyed having cake in the vicinity of the Dorotheenstädtischen

Friedhof and afterward we would visit the grave of Maren’s grandmother. While Maren took care of the flowers, Micky and I would walk around the gallery of former celebrities. She loved to listen to me tell stories about the deceased, either by heart or sometimes with the assistance of my smartphone. Maren was not always happy with our tours; for instance, she had found it inappropriate when I tried to explain the basics of life in a commune at the grave of Fritz Teufel.



The cake was almost gone when I arrived at the cafe twenty minutes late, except for a few crumbs of bitter chocolate Micky had scratched off her tart. She held the emptied plate under my nose.

“This is all you get, Grandpa. You’re late again.”

Shaking her softly, I lifted her tiny figure and snarled, “Ok, my dear Chocolate Crumb, then I will feed myself on you.”

“You are not supposed to call Micky ‘Chocolate Crumb,’” Maren reprimanded. She found that a racist term and had once confessed she did not like to be reminded that Micky had resulted from an ecclesiological ecstasy during her encounter with a member of the Tewahedo Ethiopian Orthodox Church—a man she had met seven years ago at a protestant church congress, which was an event she attended regularly since falling in love with a boy from the YMCA.

“Why don’t you leave Grandpa alone,” Micky pleaded. She loved the grandfatherly pet name and secretly enjoyed her mother’s resentment. Micky grabbed my hand and only let go while I was paying the bill.

Unfailingly, and irrespective of season, this cemetery enchanted

me as a magical place—its old trees allowing an escape from the noise of the capital and immersion of oneself in their shadowy tranquility. I particularly appreciated the contrast between the grandiose decadence of several mausoleums and the plain baldness of other graves, either mocking the glory of their eponym or enhancing it.

As soon as her mother was out of earshot, Micky came to an abrupt stop and asked me in a frail voice, “Tina said that if you get cancer, you will soon kick the bucket. Is that true?”

“Tina is a dumb chick and has no idea what cancer is,” I replied. “Look, there is no such thing as *the cancer*. That is just a term ignorant people use because they think entirely different diseases are all the same. It’s like saying ‘automobile,’ when it could be a sports car or a big truck.”

Micky nodded, and her expression regained hopefulness.

I went on. “Cancer can be a big lobster, like the one we had at Grandma’s birthday, or a little shrimp or small crab.”

She didn’t yet seem fully convinced. “So, why are you sick if you have cancer, when you look so healthy?”

I showed her a grave with abundant vegetation, which evidently had not been tended to for some time. “Look at this grave, with its many lovely flowers but a lot of weeds as well. If the weeds get too dominant, the flowers will be outgrown and die. Something similar can happen in a human body, meaning that something can start to grow that does not belong there. Then the person has to see a doctor, and the doctor will either eradicate the weed or at least take care that it doesn’t grow any further. If it works, the cancer patient is cured.”

Nodding again, she asked, “What kind of cancer do you have? I hope it’s just a small North Sea shrimp.”

“Well, let’s say a small prawn.”

I saw the radiant smile return to Micky’s eyes, and she embraced me rapturously. She dragged me on, and we stopped at the grave of Bertold Brecht. I told her about the poet and his wife, a famous actress.

“This grave is boring,” she commented.

I knew what she was referring to and explained that the tomb revealed the poet’s last wish to have a gravestone inviting any dog to pee on it. Accordingly, he had been buried beneath a crude lump of rock with the shape of an uprising mountain peak, whereas his wife Helene rested under a stone of identical consistency but crouched in appearance and, at most, only half the height of her spouse’s.

Frowning, Micky stated, “So the poet is getting all the beautiful Alsations and his poor wife is left with the Pekingeses.”

We returned to the grave of my ex-mother in law, and Micky rushed into the open arms of her mother.

“Mami, Grandpa is not going to die! He doesn’t have cancer, only a small prawn! And Tina is a dumb chick.”

Maren stared at me, uncomprehending first, but then grateful, and she included me in her embrace.



I gave a clandestine look around when I passed by a grave where pheasant’s eye roses already bore blossoms, before cutting one of them.

Wolfgang Herrndorf’s grave featured no more than an un-garnished concrete block with a minimalistic inscription. It was jammed between a socialistic economist and an eastern opera director who had reached the age of 102 years. I added my little

flower to the other devotional objects, placing it between a drift bottle and a pencil.

*Hi, buddy. You had no chance against your glioblastoma. Keep your fingers crossed that I survive my prostate cancer. You managed to transform the predictable brevity of survival into an artwork. When do you start to live each day as if it were the last one, when you are unable to predict the duration of your remaining life span as I am? I would love to know what you would had done if you were in my place. Well, at least I know a smoother exit than a shot in the head. But not yet.*

Cemeteries make a zest for life.



The copper-blond wig made me look too pale, so I opted for the ash-blond one. I slipped into the patent leather boots without taking the trouble of putting a pantyhose on. I got into the robe from the latest Diane von Furstenberg collection. The wrap-around conveniently permitted a grip inside while remaining perfectly dressed, which was one of the reasons it had continued to be my favorite ritual cloth throughout most of my life. In the seventies, mother had excited Stuttgart's high society with the night-blue silk dress from the first line of the legendary series. Some years later, she'd had to discard it after her husband had spilled some Negroamarone, and I had clandestinely saved it from the waste container. Wrapping myself into the soft silk for the first time had overwhelmed me with such anticipatory excitement that further handwork became superfluous. Mother's dress governed my ritual until I started university. Then, I exchanged it for a new one that took me ten hospital night shifts

to finance. Later on, I went shopping with Alex every few years when a new series appeared, until direct delivery via the internet became available.

Looking into the full-length mirror made me content. The delicate fabric flowing down on both sides of the center of action compensated for the minimal makeup—just a bit of Kajal for the lower lid; no mascara today. Since I wasn't up to shaving again, powder was pointless, as it looked chalky on beard stubbles. I put a dash of *Femme* on my left wrist and red enamel on just one fingernail of my working hand.

When I looked into the mirror, she was nowhere in sight. There was no chance of chasing "Y" away, and Kristina refused to appear. All I saw was the aging body of Kris—no way of overcoming the force of gravity tonight. Neither soft nor stronger stroking, not even sniffing the scent of *Femme* or the view of the red-enamelled nail on its forefront, could bring my pecker even close to its target size, let alone to the desired stamina.

Searching for an internal movie, I imagined sitting behind Gemma on a Harley she has snatched from her murderous Old Man. She just wears a helmet and leather boots, her voluptuous ass is nestling to the rigid saddle and the bumpy highway makes her tits swing. However, my manhood remained unimpressed.

So, I tried another film, trying to visualize the Katheoy twins: Sunya with her girl's pussy, Suna with the magnificently upright dick.

Whereas mine remained on strike. So much for Freud's theory of *eros* being a force of life. Deeply frustrated, I undressed and removed the makeup and nail polish.

Switching back into my Kris-mode was not the usual painful self-eviction from paradise; instead, I felt desolate emptiness,

with just a cemetery occupying the space between me and the intrinsic life I would fail to live.

When I closed the drawer, the key was trembling in my hand. My heart was racing, as if the ritual had been excitingly successful. Cold sweat trickled down, finding its way through my eyebrows. A claustrophobic oppression gripped my chest. As the palpitations of my heart continued, I thought of calling the emergency ward but then decided for Noah's Mill instead.

The old bourbon succeeded in bringing the regular heartbeat back, but the chaos in my head remained.

Later that night, sleeplessness sucked me into black swirls of sickness, frailty, and old age, followed by the merciless question of whether old age should be cherished as a gift, a present that I could, by no means, be certain of. Later, in my unrestful sleep, I got lost in icy dream deserts whose vastness had no horizon, and I was wandering aimlessly in panic and desperation. The cold made the blood in my vessels freeze and my lungs burn.

Only by dawn did I regain orientation. At half past seven, I called Alex.

She sounded empathic but not concerned. "Typical panic attack. Happens mainly to those who play it cool. It will happen again, but it will pass the same way. Like nightmares. At night, you are defenseless against the anxiety you've drowned in sarcasm during the day. Whiskey can fight the panic in the short term, but it doesn't help with anxiety."

"In that case, I prefer panic."

"Sure you do. Attacks can be parried, and panic is transient. And, as we have all learned, anxiety is the basic mental state of humans."

"In my mental state, I can't bear Heidegger citations, much less

in the morning before eight o'clock! Besides, a pathologist is not supposed to be afraid of death."

"*Mais non!* Just as a priest is not supposed to attend a whorehouse."

We made an appointment for dinner.



