CLURICHAUN

THE GOBLIN WHO NEVER PAYS THE TAB

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Chapter 1 – The Day the Goblin Moved In

It was one of those days when the rain doesn't just fall, but acts as if it has a personal grudge against you. The light in my apartment was yellow and tired, as if it, too, had drunk too much. The wallpaper was peeling in the corners, and somewhere in the pipes, the heating system wheezed like an old asthmatic dog. I sat at the table, which was more of a collection point for empty bottles than a piece of furniture, and stared at the last half-empty bottle of cheap liquor I'd saved from my last paycheck. The street below was gray, people hurried past with hunched shoulders, and I thought, if life comes any closer to me, I'm going to have to punch it. Then there was a knock. Three times, short, nervous, as if someone was afraid the door might scream back at them.

Normally, I ignore knocks. Anyone who knows me knows better than to drop by, and anyone who doesn't know me has no business being here anyway. But this day was different. Maybe because the rain was lashing so relentlessly against the windows and the silence in the apartment was too loud. Maybe also because I was hoping it would be the landlord who would somehow give me an advance. So I got up, barefoot, in underwear that had seen better days, and trudged to the door. "Yeah, yeah," I grumbled, "I'm coming, damn it." I flung the door open, ready to fire off a snarky reply right in someone's face, and then there he was: short, red-bearded, grinning, with eyes that looked like they'd caused trouble in every bar in the world.

He was maybe a meter tall, if that. On his head, a green cap, not a kitschy top hat, more like a ragged thing that'd been lying in too many puddles. His coat was dark green and too big, the sleeves frayed, but the buttons gleamed as if they were made of real brass, or something that liked to pass for it. His boots were black and dusty, and where other people would have a friendly smile, he had a wide, crooked grin, a mixture of cheekiness, stupidity, and a hint of genius. He smelled of damp wood, stale smoke, and cheap whiskey, and at first I thought some neighborhood kid had gotten lost for Carnival. Then I saw the bottle in his hand, brown glass, no label, and the way he clutched it so naturally with two small paws, as if it were part of him.

“You look like you could use a drink,” he said in a voice too deep for his height, rough but not old, more like a pub song that’s been sung one too many times. I blinked, rubbed my eyes, looked left, then right, to see if anyone was playing a bad joke on me. The hallway was empty. Just this… guy. “Who the hell are you?” I asked. “Clurichaun,” he said, as if that explained everything, “and I moved in here.” He pushed past me without an invitation, as naturally as a cat who’d always lived in the apartment. I smelled the sloshing of the bottle, heard his small footsteps on the worn linoleum, and some part of me thought: Fine, so I’m crazy now. The rest of me thought: If he shares some of that bottle, he can stay.

I closed the door because of the draft and turned around. He'd already taken over the table. He'd simply climbed on without asking, pushed an empty beer can aside, sat down cross-legged, and slammed his bottle down in the middle. "You live here," he stated, as if he'd caught me red-handed. "If you want to call it that," I said. "It smells of frustration and cold grease," he remarked. "I like it." I sat down opposite him, the chair creaking in protest. "Clurichaun, huh? And what exactly are you?" He grinned even wider, grabbed the bottle, and took a deep swig, as if answering a question. I have no idea why I didn't knock the bottle out of his hand, maybe because he seemed so certain, as if he'd bought the house and I was the subtenant who didn't know it yet.

“I’m the one who stays when everyone else leaves,” he said finally, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “The one who drinks along when no one else wants to pay. The one who laughs when you fall and applauds when you get back up. A Clurichaun, in short.” His eyes sparkled, and suddenly the dingy room seemed to shrink a little, feel denser, as if the walls had moved closer to hear better. I’d heard of such beings, somewhere in stories old drunks tell each other when time stands still in the pub and the air is so thick you could cut it with a knife. They always talked of a leprechaun who guards the wine, loves the whiskey, and never pays the tab. A lazy spirit with a knack for bad ideas. Only I’d never believed that one of them would one day be standing in my run-down room.

“And what do you want from me?” My voice sounded tired, not suspicious enough for what was happening. “Nothing special,” he said. “I don’t need a bed, I don’t care about a refrigerator. But you seem like the kind of man who doesn’t like to raise a glass alone. And I’m a leprechaun who doesn’t like to drink alone. You could say we have common interests.” He leaned back, rested his small hands on the back of his neck, and looked around as if inspecting the property. “Besides, the pub here in the neighborhood isn’t bad. The landlord has a melancholy aura, the beer’s halfway cold, and the toilet stinks. Almost like home.”

I gave a dry laugh. It was a sound more like a cough. "You know the place?" "I know every place," he said. "If a bottle opens anywhere in this city, I know about it. If somewhere a man decides to change his life today and orders another double instead, I'm already there before the whiskey even hits the glass." He spoke with an air of entitlement that grated on my nerves, but I couldn't help myself; I listened. Maybe because for years I'd had nothing but stories like these. Stories and alcohol and a downward spiral that never really ended.

“All right,” I said. “Since you’ve already moved in, you can at least share some of your bottle with me.” He grinned, nodded, and poured it directly into my mouth without a glass, as if I were a thirsty dog kneeling at a well. It burned, it tasted of peat, smoke, and a guilty conscience aged in oak barrels. I coughed, he laughed, and the day the goblin moved in finally crept under my skin, settling somewhere between my liver and brain and making himself comfortable, as if he intended to stay for a long time.

Evening arrived in town like a tired boxer, with heavy eyelids and cracked knees, and I knew I wouldn't be staying in the apartment long. The walls were closing in, as if they were about to start asking questions. So I pulled on my old jeans, thinner at the knees than my nerves, a wrinkled shirt that smelled vaguely of deep fryer, and my battered boots. While I was getting dressed, the imp sat on the windowsill, drumming his heels against the crumbling brickwork. "You're going to the pub, aren't you?" he asked. "What else?" I mumbled. "Just wanted to be sure," he said. "It would be a shame if I picked the wrong person."

Outside, the rain had eased, leaving only a fine mist that made the streets gleam like freshly cleaned misery. The neon sign of the corner pub flickered even from here. A half-broken beer glass in a red frame, trying to look inviting but looking more like it needed a drink itself. "What's the name of that place again?" the imp asked as we went down the stairs. It felt strangely natural that he was walking beside me. He fit between the banisters as if the building had been built for him. "The Last Light," I said. "Because that's where everyone ends up who doesn't have a better plan for this street." He laughed. "A good name. Ending is my specialty."

We stepped onto the sidewalk, and I realized no one saw him. The elderly neighbor with the shopping trolley walked toward us, looked at me as if checking whether I'd paid the rent yet,

and looked right through him. Two hooded teenagers walked past us, laughing too loudly, smelling of cheap deodorant and weed, and they didn't notice him either. "You see them, but they don't see you," I said. "Now you're starting to get it," he said. "Some people see me when they've had enough. Most of them tell themselves I'm a figment of their imagination. But even a figment of their imagination can drain your glass."

He jumped from one puddle edge to the next as if this were a children's playground, talking the whole time, some kind of incessant muttering about old taverns where candles painted sooty halos on the ceiling, and about innkeepers who had long since stopped asking where the draft that rattled their glasses was coming from. I was only half listening. My gaze was fixed on the illuminated pub sign, which kept growing larger. "The Last Light" wasn't a great place, but it was my place, and sometimes that's the best thing you can say about life: It's not good, but it's mine.

The pub door opened with a sigh, like an old eye that's no longer seeing properly. Inside, it reeked of beer, stale smoke, and a faint whiff of urine that you stopped noticing after a while, just as you eventually stop smelling your own mistakes. The landlord stood behind the bar, polishing a glass that never really got clean. I knew his name, but I just called him "Boss," like everyone else. He nodded at me, a quick gesture that conveyed more routine than joy at seeing me again. "You again," he said. "Who else?" I replied. "You owe me three days," he reminded me. "You owe me three years," I said, and sat down on my usual stool.

The goblin climbed onto the barstool next to me, but of course, no one reacted. A fat guy with a beer belly, who was always glued to the slot machine, continued staring at the spinning symbols as if he could hypnotize them with his fat. The waitress with the tired eyes lugged two full trays down the narrow aisle without budging, yet she didn't touch him, simply walking right through the stool as if he were air. He grimaced. "Sometimes I wish they'd bump into me," he muttered. "You feel more alive when you're hated."

“A beer and a double,” I said to the bartender. “Put it on the list.” He didn’t flinch, automatically reaching for the glass and the bottle. “The list,” he said, “is already a whole fairytale book.” “At least you’ll have something to read when things get quiet around here,” I said. The goblin laughed, and the sound was strangely high-pitched, as if a string were snapping somewhere in the background. “He doesn’t know he’s not working for you,” he said. “What do you mean?” “Nobody here is really paying for you,” the goblin explained. “They’re paying for the illusion that tomorrow will be better. You’re just the occasion, the excuse, the character in the play, you see? The bartender sells them hope in a glass, and you’re the cautionary tale to make them buy more.”

I took the first sip of beer. It was lukewarm, a little flat, but cold enough to remind me I wasn't dead yet. The whiskey followed, burning a trail down my throat, making my shoulders slump as if they were finally back in place. "You talk too much," I said. "You don't drink enough," he replied. He leaned forward, invisibly reaching for the bottle, and I saw the level drop, even though his hands glided through the glass as if it were mist. "That's my whiskey," I growled. "Oh, really?" he asked. "Did you pay for it?" I didn't answer. We both knew the question carried its own punchline.

The place gradually filled up. Workers with oil-stained hands, still clinging to the back of their necks. A woman with too much makeup and too little patience. Two guys in suits who had wandered in here, either because the bar where they usually disappeared was too far away or too honest in the mirror. They sat down in a corner, ordered something with a Coke, and

pretended they weren't there to lose themselves. The goblin looked at them all, scrutinizing them like a hunter assessing his prey. "Lots of candidates," he said. "For what?" "For everything," he simply replied, grinning.

With each sip, he became clearer. His contours, which at first shimmered as if made of cigar smoke, became sharper. The wrinkles on his face became more defined, and the green cap took on a dark sheen, as if it had been freshly polished from a nightmare. "You can see me better, can't you?" he asked. "The more you drink, the clearer I become. That's how the game is played." I took another sip, simply to contradict him, and realized he was right. Maybe he had never moved into the apartment. Maybe he had been there all along, somewhere in the corner of my mind, between guilt and lingering vestiges of hope, and today he had simply decided to open the door.

"Why me?" I asked quietly. "Why not one of the suit-and-tie types? They have more money." He snorted. "Money's boring," he said. "I like people who have nothing left to lose. They're... malleable." He made a gesture with his fingers as if he were rubbing Play-Doh between his hands. "Besides," he added, "you called me." "Nonsense," I said. "I don't call anyone." "Oh yes, I do," he said. "Every time you thought things couldn't get any worse and you still ordered one, you were beckoning me a little closer."

I looked into my glass. The foam had long since disappeared, the remaining beer seemed tired, as if it no longer wanted to be drunk. The bartender placed a new bottle on the counter without a word. "Whose is this?" I asked. "From yesterday," he said. "You prepaid yesterday for today. Forgotten again?" I couldn't remember, but that was nothing new. Forgetting was my greatest skill. So I just nodded, unscrewed the bottle, and somewhere behind me, a little imp chuckled, quietly, contentedly, as if a contract had just been signed that no one had read.

Later that evening, when the air in the pub was so thick you could almost cut it and put it on skewers, the goblin really started to get going. He stood on the bar, right in front of me, and nobody noticed. Glasses clinked as he walked by, and I swear the level in the beer line dropped even though the tap wasn't running. He danced among ashtrays and sticky puddles of beer, his little boots leaving tiny footprints in the foam. "That's it," he shouted, his voice cutting through the noise of laughter, coughing, and the clang of slot machines, but nobody turned their head. "That's what you humans do best: slowly go down while pretending it's a party."

He leaned over to the waitress, who was balancing a tray full of glasses. She walked right through him, but his mouth was close to her ear. "Better give that fat guy over there another shot," he whispered. "He thinks he's going to win today. It would be a shame to let him go home early." She couldn't hear him, but still, barely a minute later, she placed a small glass next to his half-empty pitcher and said, "From the machine. He's treating you." The fat guy grinned as if he'd just been sold the moon on credit. "See?" the goblin said to me. "I don't need words. I just give things a little nudge in the direction they're already heading."

I don't know if it was the whiskey, or the tiredness, or just that strange kind of clarity that sometimes flashes between two glasses before everything blurs again, but in that moment I understood that the leprechaun wasn't just some hallucination. He was like a catalyst for all the shit we were doing to ourselves. He didn't have to force anyone to order another. He just had to be there, smile, tap the right mood with an invisible finger, and everything fell into place. "You're kind of... bar sick," I said. "A chronic one." He bowed mockingly. "Call me

what you will. I'm what remains when good intentions have long since stepped out of the taxi."

The landlord came over, leaning on the bar. His face was a deep ashtray of decades behind that wood. "You look worse than usual today," he said. "A personal record." "Thanks, boss," I said. "You look like someone who desperately needs a raise." He snorted. "I could just ban you." "Go ahead," I said, without looking at him. "Then you'll have to find some other idiot to drink the rest of your drinks." We were both silent, and the silence between us was old, familiar, like two chairs that always sit in the same spot. Then he grunted, "Another beer?" "Yes," I said. "And next time, don't ask. Just do it."

The goblin clapped his hands as if he'd just delivered a particularly successful punchline. "That's how it starts," he said. "Starts what?" I growled. "The contraction," he said, rubbing his hands together. "You think I'm just a guest in your life, but I've long since taken up residence. You'll notice it because you won't want to be here without me anymore. Because then you'll feel how empty it really is." I took the fresh beer the innkeeper had wordlessly placed before me and took a long drag. It didn't help. The void inside me remained; it was simply illuminated more clearly.

By midnight, most people were already half asleep. The corner with the men in suits was empty, their chairs tilted as if they'd stumbled while getting up. The woman with the overly thick lipstick had hooked a guy in a plaid shirt, and they were both staggering toward the exit as if they'd decided to pool their loneliness for the night. The fat slot machine player was completely out, his head slumped onto his forearms, a mixture of snoring and whistling coming from him, as if he were a leaky balloon. Only the innkeeper, the waitress, the gnome, and I were still truly awake, each in our own way.

“Time for a walk,” the goblin announced, leaping from the bar. He landed silently on the floor, as if made of shadow. “I’m not going out again,” I muttered. “It’s raining.” “It’s always raining,” he said. “Inside or out, it doesn’t matter. Come on.” He tugged at my sleeve, and though his hands were small, I felt drawn. I placed a few crumpled bills on the bar, not enough, never enough. The barman didn’t even look properly, shoving them under the cash register. “Tomorrow,” he said. “Maybe,” I replied. The waitress nodded, tiredly, but her eyes lingered on me for a moment, as if checking to see if I was still up. “Take care,” she murmured. “I never do,” I said, and the goblin laughed so loudly I thought she must have heard.

It was colder outside than expected. The rain had stopped, but the air was damp, clinging to our clothes. The streetlights cast murky cones onto the pavement, making everything look as if someone had washed out the paint. The goblin walked ahead of me, his silhouette small but distinct, as if he were the only clear outline in this blurred picture. "Where to?" I asked. "Home," he said. "We had a housewarming party, remember? Moving in, you don't do something like that half-heartedly." "But you've already moved in," I grumbled. "You have no idea," he said.

Climbing the stairs felt longer than usual. My knees protested, my head throbbed with every step, and my hand on the banister was sweaty. Upstairs in the hallway, it smelled of cooked cabbage and a life that had taken a wrong turn somewhere along the way. I fumbled the key out of my pocket, inserted it into the lock, and the moment the door opened, I sensed something was different. It was the same grime, the same wallpaper, the same bottles on the table, but the room felt denser, as if someone had replaced the air with something heavier.

"Welcome home," said the goblin, giving a small bow. Then he snapped his fingers. The bottles on the table clinked as if they were raising their voices. The half-full bottle from the afternoon rolled a bit, stopping right on the edge of the table without falling. A soft rustling sound came from somewhere, as if old bills were getting nervous. "What's all this about?" I asked. "Nothing special," he replied. "I'm just settling in. You might notice that you're thirstier these days. That you're sleeping worse. That the thought of a sober life feels like a bad joke. That's normal. You get used to everything."

I sat down heavily on the chair, which creaked with my weight. My head was both full and empty at the same time, a kind of overflowing abyss. The goblin climbed back onto the table, sat cross-legged, and looked at me as if I were an investment slowly paying off. "You're not the first," he said softly. "And you won't be the last. There are many like you. Some last longer, others break sooner. I'm not a monster, you see? I just hold up a mirror to them, and they decide whether to look away or jump in."

I wanted to say something clever, something like "I decide for myself" or "I can stop anytime," but the words got stuck somewhere between my tongue and the roof of my mouth. Instead, I automatically reached for the bottle. My hand trembled, just a little, just enough to be mistaken for cold. The goblin smiled knowingly. "See?" he said. "We'll manage, you and I. We'll do it our way. You act like you're in control, and I'll act like I'm just visiting." He leaned back and put his hands behind his head. "And tomorrow we'll go back to the bar. The landlord has no idea there are two of us now."

I drank straight from the bottle because the detour via a glass suddenly seemed ridiculous. The alcohol burned, but it was a familiar burning sensation, like an old scar that twinges when the weather changes. I felt something inside me relax and tighten at the same time, a strange kind of peace that only comes when you know you're about to sink even deeper into shit. The leprechaun hummed a tune I didn't recognize, something between an Irish drinking song and a sad nursery rhyme. Then I felt dizzy, the walls shook a little, and I let my head fall onto the table.

Before I drifted off, I heard his voice close to my ear, warm and cold at the same time. "Sleep, buddy," he whispered. "We'll really get started tomorrow." And in that moment, I knew, without wanting to admit it to myself: The day the goblin moved in wasn't the worst day of my life. It was just the first one who was honest.

Chapter 2 – Beer mats are not contracts

The next morning I woke with the taste on my tongue as if someone had squeezed a cigarette butt into a glass of dish soap and forced the whole thing down my throat during the night. My head throbbed to the beat of some sloppy drumming, and the sun, filtering through the crack in the curtain, was a grumpy spotlight shining directly in my face. Empty bottles lay on the table like fallen soldiers, and beer mats were piled up between them. Not just two or three, but entire towers, crooked and menacing. I vaguely remembered that I hadn't taken any beer mats with me the night before. They belong in the pub, not in my apartment. Unless, of course, someone had other plans.

The imp sat on the table, in the middle of a tower of beer mats, as if it were a throne. He'd lit a cigarette, even though I didn't have any left, and was exhaling the smoke through his nose like a small, red-bearded dragon. "Well, did you sleep well?" he asked. My voice sounded like sandpaper when I answered. "You're too loud." "I haven't even started yet," he said. "Look at this." He snapped his fingers, and a mat slid forward. In scribbled handwriting, it read: "3 beers, 2 shots of schnapps, 1 whiskey – IOU." Above it, my name, more or less legible. On another mat: "Balance: 27.40 – pay tomorrow." And again my name, this time with a line underneath, as if the landlord had promised himself he'd really be consistent this time.

“Where do these come from?” I asked, even though I already knew. “From the paradise of broken promises,” the goblin said. “The boss has a little collection of yours. I took a few from him. Souvenirs.” I picked up a coaster; the cardboard was damp with the night's lingering haze, and the numbers on it blurred before my eyes. “Beer mats aren't worth anything,” I muttered. “Just cardboard.” “Wrong,” he corrected me. “To you, they're cardboard. To the landlord, they're religion. Every mark is a prayer that you'll pay someday. And every time you don't pay, his faith grows. People believe most strongly in what is constantly disappointed.”

I stood up, swaying slightly, went to the sink, and ran the cold water. The mirror above the basin showed a man I didn't like. Dark circles under his eyes like shadows of shadows, stubble that radiated more despair than masculinity, and a skin tone somewhere between old cobblestones and faded wallpaper. "I do pay up every now and then," I said, splashing water on my face. "Yes," said the goblin. "Like someone who puts out a burning apartment with a wet handkerchief. That's the beauty of you. You believe in small gestures against great catastrophes."

I went back to the table, sat down, and reached for the half-empty bottle from the evening before. My stomach protested, but the trembling in my hands protested louder. One sip, two sips, then the world became a little quieter. "Why did you take those things?" I asked. "Because you need to understand how things work around here," he said. "You think you owe the innkeeper. He thinks so too. But in reality, you have a deal that neither of you truly understands. He sells you time, you pay with years of your life. The money is just the excuse you use to lie to each other that it's fair."

I picked up one lid after another. The numbers were random, some high, some low, some crossed out, some with a question mark next to them. Some lids had two or three dates on them. "It's all a jumble," I said. "He doesn't even know himself what I really owe anymore." The goblin nodded contentedly. "Exactly," he said. "And do you know what people do when they don't know exactly how much they're owed? They hope for more. And because they know they can never prove it precisely, they latch onto the idea. The idea that you owe them something. That's enough to keep you on the hook."

I thought about the evenings when I'd boasted, "Put it on the tab, boss, money's coming tomorrow." Tomorrow never came as I'd promised. It came in hungover bits, in odd amounts, in coins I'd scraped from the sofa cushions. Always too little. Always just enough so he wouldn't fire me. "Why doesn't he just fire me?" I asked. "Because you're his best advertisement," the imp said. "You sit at the bar like a monument. Everyone else looks at you and thinks: I won't let it come to that. And while they're thinking that, they order another beer, to calm their nerves. You're his sad billboard."

I pushed the coasters aside as if I could wipe the truth away with them. "Beer mats aren't contracts," I said defiantly. "They're just little pieces of cardboard that end up in the ashtray

eventually." "You don't understand," said the goblin. "A contract is nothing more than a story two people agree on. One writes it, the other signs it, and both pretend it's more than ink on paper. It's the same with a beer mat, only cheaper. But in his mind, you're signed. And in your mind, you're guilty. That's enough to keep you both trapped."

I thought about all the times I'd signed something somewhere. Rental agreement, cell phone contract, employment contract. Piles of paper I'd never really read. And now these beer mats, as if my life were a small-change ledger in a corner pub. "Maybe I should just pay it all at once," I said. "One big one, everything gone, clean break." The goblin laughed. "You don't even have enough cash to buy your own dignity," he said. "And even if you did: Do you think you'd be free afterward? Then he'd start the next mat. The first sip after the big payment would already be debt again. Freedom is just the brief rustling between two lines on the cardboard."

I leaned back, closed my eyes briefly. The bottle in my hand felt lighter, the room heavier. "What's the point of all this?" I asked. "Why the tally marks, the caps, the lists?" The goblin shrugged. "People can't just do anything," he said. "They always need a justification. Even for drinking. So they calculate. One beer, two beers, three beers. As if the numbers somehow imbue their systematic drinking themselves into oblivion with some moral. He flicked a cap off the table, which landed on the floor and slowly spun in the dust until it came to rest. "You're accounting with legs."

I looked at the clock, which wasn't keeping proper time anymore, and thought it was time to go back to the pub. Not because I felt like it. But because otherwise the day would be too long. Too much time is dangerous when you have nothing left to fill it with. "Are you coming?" I asked the goblin. He grinned as if I'd asked if he still needed air to breathe. "Of course," he said. "After all, I'm the only one here who knows that beer mats aren't contracts. But we pretend they are. Otherwise, none of this is any fun."

The route to the pub was the same as always, but since the goblin had joined me, everything felt a bit more crooked. The houses slumped over the street like drunks, the doors seemed more suspicious, people's faces more harried. Maybe I was imagining it. Maybe it had always looked like this and I'd just been drinking it away. The goblin walked beside me, whistling, his hands in his coat pockets as if this were his territory. Sometimes he jumped in puddles, even though there was hardly any water left. "You should get a job," he said suddenly. "More money means more beer, more beer means more fun for me." "You should start paying rent," I replied. "More rent means less beer, less beer means less fun for you," he countered. "So let's leave it at that."

Outside the door of "The Last Light" there was a pile of cigarette butts, like a small graveyard for decisions that hadn't lasted. I pressed down the handle; the door jammed as usual, then gave way. Inside, everything looked the same as yesterday, as the day before, as last week. The owner behind the bar, the waitress with the tired eyes, the fat vending machine guy, pretending again that he had a strategy. The air was heavy and familiar, like an old blanket that hadn't been washed in years. "Well, there he is," said the owner as I sat down on my stool. "Your seat could have charged admission, considering how often you sit in it."

I simply nodded and placed a single bill on the counter. "Cash today," I said. The imp chuckled. The landlord looked at the bill as if it were a rare animal, something you only see in documentaries. "It's going to be a very special day," he murmured. "A beer and a shot of schnapps?" "Beer and a shot of schnapps," I confirmed. He tapped the tap, poured, all in one

smooth motion that looked as if it had been rehearsed years ago. Meanwhile, the waitress placed a few fresh beer mats on the counter, round, white, with a pale brewery logo on them. A new life, waiting to be covered in graffiti.

The goblin jumped onto the counter, stood directly on one of the lids, and spread his arms wide. "You see," he said to me, "virgin cardboard box. No one's promised anything yet. Anything's still possible." I took the beer, drank, felt the first wave wash over me. The bartender mechanically slid a lid across to me. "No need," I said. "I'll pay right away today." He shrugged. "Habit," he said. "Besides, I'll lose track if I start making exceptions for you." The goblin laughed and rolled around on the lid as if it were a bed. "See?" he said. "He trusts a piece of cardboard more than you."

A bald guy in a plaid shirt sat down two stools away. I recognized him, one of those guys who always pretends they're just "going out for a quick drink" and then ends up staying longer than expected. He nodded at me, that silent understanding between people who engage in the same kind of time-wasting. "Still on credit?" he asked, half-jokingly. "Not today," I said, pointing pointedly at my beer. "I'm solvent today." "Solvent is a nice word," he remarked. "Sounds like you're dissolving." The goblin applauded enthusiastically. "I like him," he said. "He knows a thing or two about language."

The innkeeper arrived with a stack of beer mats, placed them next to the cash register, and began scribbling numbers on them with a ballpoint pen. He sorted, pushed, and stacked them. I watched as his thick fingers slid through the cardboard, as his brow furrowed when two mats didn't match. "What are you doing?" I asked. "Taking inventory in your misery?" He grumbled. "I'm trying to figure out exactly how much you owe me," he said. "I opened the drawer yesterday and thought, there's no way one person could have that many mats." He nodded at me. "You're ruining my overview."

“We could just burn them,” I suggested. “Then we’d both be free.” The goblin clutched his sides with laughter. The innkeeper, however, didn’t flinch. “It’s not that simple,” he said. “You can’t just erase everything because you don’t like the numbers. Then everyone would come.” “I come every day,” I said. “See?” he said. “That’s the problem.” He continued leafing through his collection of cardboard boxes. “Some of the lids are years old. There isn’t even a date on them anymore. Just dashes. Maybe I let you go too often. Maybe I thought too often that you’d somehow manage to sort yourself out.”

“So, what’s your verdict?” I asked, more out of spite than genuine curiosity. He finally laid three lids in front of me, side by side, with numbers that looked orderly, unlike the chaos in the drawer. “Let’s put it this way,” he said. “If you pay in cash every now and then over the next few weeks, I’ll turn a blind eye. Two eyes, actually. I don’t have the patience to play accountant here. But there has to be a limit, okay?” I looked at the lids, feeling like I was on trial. The imp leaned over my shoulder. “See? He doesn’t even know himself. So he invents a number that doesn’t make him feel completely ripped off.”

“Beer mats aren’t contracts,” I said aloud, more to myself than to him. The landlord looked at me. “I know,” he said. “But they’re the only thing I have. Either I believe in them, or I’ll give the place away to all of you.” He took a mat and demonstratively tore it into small pieces. “That’s easy,” he said. “I can always do that. But what no one ever gives me back is the time I spent serving you.” He brushed the cardboard pieces into the trash. “So do me a favor and pay up now and then. As a sign that you still know you’re alive.”

I said nothing. I drank. The goblin nodded approvingly. "Not so stupid, that man," he said. "He knows that money isn't the point. It's about whether you're still capable of setting things right. At least once in a while." I looked at the innkeeper. His shoulders slumped, his eyes were tired, but there was something behind them that I hadn't expected. A kind of sad pride, as if he were guarding his collection of failed existences. Maybe I was just another number to him. Maybe not.

The slot machine player suddenly roared. "Win!" he shouted. "Finally, you bastards, I did it!" Everyone turned around briefly, seeing the flashing lights and the manic triumph in his eyes. The imp was there in a flash, perched on the machine as coins rattled into the tray. "Watch out," he whispered to me. The man greedily grabbed the metal, letting the coins slide into his pockets, his eyes shining like a child's at Christmas. Then he went to the bar. "A round for everyone!" he shouted. "Cheers to my luck!" The bartender raised an eyebrow but immediately reached for the glasses. Business is business.

“You see,” said the goblin as a fresh beer was placed in front of me. “Just a moment ago he had nothing. Now he thinks he’s rich. In two hours he’ll have less than before. And what’s left? A pile of empty glasses and maybe a beer mat with his name on it.” I raised my glass to the vending machine man, who was already staggering back toward the flashing wall. “To your luck,” I muttered. “And to my credit.” The goblin shook his head, grinning. “You humans just can’t help yourselves. You make a Bible out of cardboard and a revelation out of a few coins.”

It was late evening when the bar slowly emptied. The music from the jukebox was too quiet to be truly intrusive, but loud enough to coat every conversation with a thin layer of noise. The waitress wiped the same spot on the counter for the third time, as if hoping that somewhere beneath the sticky surface, another life was hidden. The owner counted his cash register yet again, even though it was still too early to close. Perhaps he was simply doing it out of habit, the way I raised my glass even though I'd had enough.

The goblin sat on one of the beer mats right in front of me, dangling his legs and watching. "You're thinking," he observed. "Can I hear it?" I asked. "I can see it," he said. "You're staring at your beer like it's an oracle. But even an oracle gets fed up eventually if you keep asking it the same question." "What question?" I growled. He smiled indulgently. "Whether this can go on much longer." I wanted to object, but the words caught in my throat. Instead, I took a sip that felt like a half-answer.

“Maybe I really should just pay everything in one go,” I finally said. “Make an envelope, put all the crap in it, slam it on the counter, and then we’re even.” The landlord glanced over; I must have spoken louder than I thought. “I’ve been hearing that for years,” he said. “But I never see an envelope.” The goblin grinned. “And if you do?” he asked. “Then what? Do you think I’m going to find myself another idiot? I’m not crazy. We’re a good match.”

I imagined what it would be like to actually walk into a bar without any debt. Just walk in, say "Moin," pay for a beer, drink it, and leave. No checking the drawer, no tabs, no weighing up whether I could afford it. But the idea didn't feel like freedom, but rather like emptiness. What's left for a man like me when he doesn't even have debts to cling to anymore? Maybe that's the only thing that still connects us to the world: that somewhere, someone is keeping a tally of us.

The goblin leaned towards me. "Let me tell you something," he said. "You don't care about these tabs. You're not really worried about owing the landlord money. What's really getting to you is that these marks prove you once wanted more than you have now. Every mark is an evening when you thought: Tomorrow I'll do better. And tomorrow you've screwed up." He flicked the rim of my glass so hard the foam trembled. "That's why you can't let go of them. It would be too many funerals at once."

The waitress came over and cleared away a few empty glasses. Her gaze lingered on me. "Everything alright?" she asked, and there was neither mockery nor pity in her voice, just that detached interest of someone who'd seen too many variations of the same meltdown. "Everything's fine," I lied. "I'm going to do a big clean-up here soon." The scoundrel huffed, and I subtly kicked his foot, though he took it more as a caress. "A big clean-up?" she repeated. "Are you starting with the fridge or your liver?" I smiled crookedly. "With the coasters," I said. "They're the first thing to go." She looked over at the landlord. "Did you hear that?" she exclaimed. "He wants to clean up!" The landlord waved his hand dismissively. "He always says that when he's starting to get drunk," he said. "He'll be back tomorrow and start with new coasters."

An image suddenly formed in my mind: me, arriving with an envelope full of cash, seemingly conjured from thin air, and the innkeeper staring in astonishment as I burned all the old bottle caps. A small cardboard bonfire right in the middle of the bar. The rising smoke smelled of long-forgotten promises. The waitress laughed, the imp raged with fury at having his playground taken away. And I walked out into a night where I owed nothing to anyone. It was a beautiful image, but it felt like watching someone else dream.

“Do you know why I never pay?” the goblin asked quietly. “Because you’re an asshole,” I muttered. He shook his head. “No,” he said. “Because debt is human. I’m not human. What good is that crap to me? I take what I can get and disappear before anyone starts making marks. That’s the only advantage I have over you.” He nodded at the bottle caps. “You cling to them as if they give you some kind of meaning. I don’t cling to anything. I’m free.” The word echoed in my mind as if he had slammed a door.

The landlord came back over and leaned both hands on the bar. "Listen," he said. "I don't want any trouble with you. You've been here a long time, almost as long as the place. But at some point, you have to draw the line, you see?" I looked at my hands resting on the wood and wondered how many evenings they'd already spent making the same movements. Glass up, glass down, searching for coins, sliding the lid under. "Make your mark, boss," I said. "Go ahead and make two. At least then it'll look neat." He looked at me for a long time, then sighed. "I just don't want you to wake up one day and realize you can't even fit out the door because your own debts are holding you back."

The goblin grimaced. "The old man's getting sentimental," he sneered. "I don't like that. Let's drink him down." I emptied my glass as if to prove to him that I was still in control of my own decisions. It tasted of nothing anymore, just routine. The landlord went back to the till, the waitress disappeared into the back, and the place sank into that low hum that arises just before closing time, when everyone's just waiting for the last beer.

Eventually I stood up. I felt dizzy, but not so dizzy that I couldn't find my way to the door. "Put it on the tab," I said. The innkeeper nodded without looking. The gesture was so automatic that it had lost all meaning. The imp jumped from my stool onto my shoulder. "You see," he whispered in my ear as we stepped out onto the street, "you talk a lot about tidying

up, about envelopes, about contracts. In the end, you always say the same thing: Put it on the tab. That's your real signature."

Outside, the air was cool, clearer than it should have been. I put my hands in my pockets and headed towards the apartment. Every step sounded hollow, as if I were walking across a stage where the play had long since ended. The imp rocked on my shoulder, content as a cat after a meal. "Do you know what's so great about beer mats?" he asked. "They break easily." "Then my debts break easily too," I said. "Wrong," he replied. "The mats break. The debts just go into your heads. And there's no trash can in your heads."

I said nothing more. I just walked away. I paused briefly in front of my house, looked up at the dark sky, which held no stars, only the reflection of the city. "Maybe," I thought, "beer mats really aren't contracts. Maybe they're just little reminders of how often I've tried to buy myself and still ended up in debt." The goblin nodded, as if he'd heard my thoughts. "Exactly," he said. "And tomorrow we'll draw up a new one. One should uphold traditions."

I unlocked the door, the smell of my apartment wafting towards me like an old acquaintance you don't like but shake hands with anyway. Inside, everything was as it had been that morning, only darker. The bottle on the table waited as if it had finished work but stayed anyway. I sat down, and the imp jumped onto the table. "Here's to new lids," he said. I picked up the bottle. Maybe he was right. Maybe all of life was nothing more than a pile of scribbled-on cardboard that someone eventually throws away without counting. And maybe that wasn't such a bad thing after all.

Chapter 3 – Cheap Whiskey, Expensive Mistakes

The day actually started quite innocently, like most disasters do. No thunderstorm, no fanfare, just that dull throbbing in my head that reminded me I'd once again successfully traded a piece of my brain for nothing. The curtain was half-stuck to the window frame, as if it, too, had drunk too much, and somewhere in the hallway a child was screaming, probably still believing that screaming would change anything. I rolled out of bed, stood in the room like a drunk in an elevator, and waited until the floor stopped rocking. The little imp was sitting on the television, which I hadn't turned on in months, and looked at me as if I were the punchline of a joke only he understood.

“You look like you need breakfast,” he said. “Eggs, bacon, fresh rolls,” I mumbled. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.” He nodded gravely. “And a half-full glass of cheap whiskey to ruin it all.” My stomach churned at the thought, but my hands fidgeted, like dogs that have heard the word “walk.” “We’re out of whiskey,” I said. The leprechaun leaped from the television, landed lightly on the floor, and looked at the empty bottle on the table. “Right,” he said. “That’s one of humanity’s great mistakes: letting things run out.”

I still had a few euros in my jacket pocket, remnants from my last paycheck, which evaporated faster than cigarette smoke in a draft. They were meant for cigarettes, or for something sensible: rent, electricity, food, the whole shebang for people who think life is a bank statement that just has to balance out in the end. I was faced with a choice, and as always, it wasn't really a choice at all. "Kiosk?" the goblin asked. "Kiosk," I answered. The air in the stairwell was cold and smelled of cleaning fluid, which only pretended to have a chance

against the stench. Outside, the sky hung low over the houses, a gray sheet on which someone had forgotten to draw the sun.

The kiosk wasn't far, just down the street, past the bus stop where tired people stood with briefcases and oversized jackets, as if waiting for rescue. I pushed past them, feeling their glances, that quick, disgusted assessment of whether I was one of those people you have to hold onto your bag for. The imp walked ahead of me, greeting a stray dog who, of course, didn't see him, and dancing across the wet asphalt as if he were on a stage. Inside the kiosk, it smelled of coffee, old paper, and that sweet, plasticky scent of cheap candy. Behind the counter stood the owner, a short, round man with dark circles under his eyes that reached his chin. He knew me, but not really. He knew my thirst.

“Tomorrow,” he said without any conviction. “Same as usual?” His gaze flickered briefly to the corner where the small bottles stood. I watched him. The top row held brand names with strange, advertising-y slang. The bottom row was no-name swill, labels that looked like they'd been designed by a drunken intern. I reached for one of those bottles, brown glass, cheap screw cap, name something like “Gold” or “Royal,” though the only royal thing about it was the headache. “This one,” I said. He raised his eyebrows. “Nobody else drinks this,” he said. “Then there’s plenty for me,” I said. The leprechaun clapped his hands.

I laid down my last bills and watched them disappear into the till as if they'd never been there. That was the first expensive mistake of the day: good money for bad whiskey. On the way back, I unscrewed the bottle and took a quick sniff. It was like someone shoving a rag soaked in cleaning fluid under my nose. "That's not medicine," I muttered. "Yes, it is," said the leprechaun. "For sobriety. Very effective." I took the first swig, straight from the bottle, as one should when one decides to throw style to the wind. It burned with an almost impressive intensity, as if fire, vinegar, and a touch of guilt had been thrown into a blender.

Upstairs in the apartment, I sat down on the chair that was a bit shaky and continued drinking. The morning was still young, but in my mind it was already late. The goblin circled the bottle like a priest around a sacred object. "What's on the agenda today?" he asked. It took me a moment to realize that, theoretically, I had a job. Nothing special, warehouse work at a wholesaler on the outskirts of town, where boxes and pallets were worth more than the people who hauled them. Officially, I was on call. Unofficially, they got along just fine when I didn't show up. "Maybe they'll call today," I said. "Maybe not." "Just go," the goblin suggested. "With the bottle. A man who arrives at work prepared always makes an impression."

I imagined myself sitting in the locker room with the cheap whiskey in my locker, pouring myself one during the break, the boss looking at me with that mixture of horror and pity people feel when they realize you're already lower than they ever want to be. I took another sip. "If I go today, I'll probably lose my job," I said. "If I don't go, I might still have it on paper for a while." "See?" the leprechaun said. "There are smart decisions, and there are easy ones. You always take the easy ones, and I love you for it."

The whiskey crept slowly through my limbs, softening everything, even my thoughts. Time lost its meaning, like a promise too often renewed and never kept. Eventually, the cell phone rang, that old model that had seen better trouser pockets. I stared at the screen. It was the warehouse number. The leprechaun grinned, tilting his head. "Come on," he whispered. "Pick it up. Maybe a miracle is waiting." I took a deep swig before pressing the green button. The voice on the other end sounded stressed. "Can you come today? We've run out of staff." I

looked at the bottle, then the shabby room, then the future, which lay somewhere beyond the door, behaving like a dog that doesn't want to go in.

“Sure,” I heard myself say. “I’ll be right there.” I hung up. A rare moment of reason had intruded on my day like a foreign object. The goblin looked at me as if I had insulted him. “What’s this all about?” he asked. “An experiment,” I said. “Let’s see if you can still walk halfway straight on cheap whiskey.” I got dressed, somewhat neatly, as far as my clothes allowed, and stuffed the bottle in my jacket pocket, the neck sticking out like a curious bird. On my way to the door, I heard the goblin laugh. “Cheap whiskey, expensive mistakes,” he said. “I love that title.”

The walk to the warehouse dragged on endlessly. The tram jerked as if it were considering stopping with every meter. I sat by the window, the bottle in my jacket pocket, pretending to be merely tired, not under the weather. The tram was full of the usual suspects: sleepy schoolchildren, workers with thermoses, a woman with shopping bags containing rustling future plans she could never afford. The imp perched on the armrest next to me, invisibly waving his little cap and commenting on the passengers like a washed-up sports commentator. "That guy's getting off three stops early because he doesn't want to see his ex. That one up front will later tell everyone she really got things done today, even though all she did was shuffle papers from one side to the other. And you," he poked me in the forehead, "you're going to prove today that you can still haul pallets even with half a liter of ethanol in your system. A hero of our time."

I got out on the outskirts of the city; the air was thinner here, fewer smells, more concrete. The warehouse was a gray block, a palace of cardboard boxes, next to it a parking lot full of cars that were worth more than the people who parked them there that morning. I checked in at the entrance; the gatekeeper looked at me as if he'd hoped never to see me again. "You're late," he growled. "You're early with your opinions," I replied, putting on a crooked grin that probably looked worse than I thought. The little imp jumped through the turnstile frame as if it were a toy.

The changing room reeked of cold sweat, deodorant spray, and resigned plastic. I pulled on my work clothes: the light gray trousers with the stained knees, the shirt with the company logo that pretended everything was in order. I put the bottle in my locker, but not before taking a quick swig. Adjustment, I called it. The imp stood on top of the locker, watching with interest. "You want to function, but not too well," he commented. "A difficult balancing act." "I consider it my specialty," I muttered.

The warehouse was loud, metal on metal, forklifts whining, scanners beeping, men shouting at each other as if volume were currency. The foreman approached me, a potbelly-bellied guy with a clipboard, whose eyes always looked like he was simultaneously scared and trying to act macho. "Good to see you," he said. "We're stuck at the back. Pallets out, rows B to D, the deliveries have to go out today." I nodded. "We'll manage." The leprechaun gave an exaggerated bow, as if I'd just given an epic speech.

At first, it even went well. I pushed carts, stacked boxes, scanned codes like a trained monkey with a laser. Death slowly settled in my mind like a wet blanket over everything, and the movements became automatic. Every now and then, when no one was looking, I'd disappear briefly into a corner, open my locker, and take a sip. Just one. You want to keep control, you tell yourself, while you relinquish it step by step. The goblin was sitting on the forklift at

some point, dangling his legs. "You're not doing too badly," he said. "Almost like a normal person."

The hours dragged on, and with them grew that old feeling I always got when I tried to stay sober longer than necessary: a kind of restless hunger that didn't crave bread or hot food, but that brief moment when the world softens before it hardens again. My back ached, my hands were dry, the air in the hall scratched my throat. Around noon, it was break time. Everyone stood in the break room with their lunchboxes and plastic cups, a sea of sausage sandwiches, filter coffee, and tired conversations about football, gas prices, and management decisions. I sat down a little apart, the little imp perched on my knee.

“You could just drink a Coke right now,” he said. “Tell stupid jokes to the herd, go home late, and just muddle through the rest of the day. A perfectly ordinary workday.” I looked at him. “When was the last time anything about me seemed ‘perfectly ordinary’?” He grinned. “True.” I stood up, said something about the bathroom, crept into the locker room, and turned the lockbox key. The bottle looked at me as if it knew exactly who was in charge. One long gulp this time, no more hesitation. The cheap taste coated everything like a filter; the voices in the break room sounded muffled, as if they were far away.

When I returned, two colleagues were standing by the door, looking at me as if they'd just been talking about me. "So, everything alright?" one of them asked. "Everything's wonderful," I said. "I love stacking boxes while other people are climbing the career ladder." They laughed uncertainly. The imp whispered in my ear, "You smell like you talk now." I shrugged. "Well, that just fits."

The afternoon turned into a skewed stage. I slowed down driving the cart; my balance had decided to take matters into its own hands. At one point, I bumped the pallet too hard against a shelf; there was a clatter, something fell—luckily, just a cardboard box. The foreman yelled across the hall, "Watch it, damn it!" I raised my hand, a sign that I'd heard him, not that I was going to do anything about it. The imp was sitting on top of the shelf, shaking his head and grinning like a child watching fireworks.

It happened towards the end of the workday. I was supposed to take out one last pallet, something with fragile contents, it said in red letters. Fragile, I thought, that fits right in. I was tired; the whiskey had long since conspired with my motor skills. I turned too sharply, one wheel of the cart caught on a bump in the road, and the thing tipped over. The boxes slid out as if they'd been waiting for just that moment. Then a dull crash, glass shattering inside, a splash of something that smelled like cleaning fluid. The foreman was there immediately, his face a mixture of panic and "Of course."

“Are you crazy?” he yelled. “That was the delivery for the major customer!” A few colleagues stopped, pretending they had to pass by, but they couldn’t look away. The imp sat on the overturned cart and clapped. “Bravo,” he shouted. “Now that’s what I call a finale.” The foreman came closer, sniffed my breath, and that familiar, disgusting knowledge spread across his eyes. “Have you been drinking?” he asked. I could have lied. I could have said I hadn’t slept well, had a migraine, something. But the truth stood between us like a third man.

“A little,” I said. “A little is enough,” he replied. “Go to the locker room. You don’t need to come back tomorrow. We’ll be in touch.” That “we’ll be in touch” was the final nail in the coffin. I left, wordless, the leprechaun beside me, whistling as if I’d just won a good race. In the locker room, I sat down again, staring at the bottle. More than half was gone. I downed the

rest in a few gulps, thinking if I was going to fly, I might as well do it in style. The cheap whiskey had done its job: one less job, one more problem.

I stood outside the camp for a while, unsure whether to laugh or throw up. The goblin stood in front of me and tilted his head. "There you go," he said. "You didn't want to go, you went anyway, and you messed everything up. At least you have the satisfaction of having tried." I laughed bitterly. "So that was your second expensive mistake today," I said. "No," he replied. "The second one will come later. The day is still young."

I didn't go straight home. At home, only the same room, the same bottles, the same silence that settles on your shoulders like a wet coat awaited me. Instead, without giving it much thought, I boarded a train going in the opposite direction. Sometimes it's more dangerous when you start thinking. The goblin was perched on the handrail, swinging his legs. "Where are you going?" he asked. "No idea," I said. "Away from here." "There's a big country out here," he said. "But most of the time you end up back in the same hole."

The train took me to a neighborhood I used to frequent. Before everything went completely downhill. There was a different pub there, a bit cleaner, with a jukebox that played more than three songs, with potted plants that were actually still alive. I knew the way like the back of my hand. When I got off, the air smelled of frying oil and sewage. The imp flicked me on the forehead. "That smells like the past," he said. "You're getting sentimental." I wasn't sentimental. I was just tired and pissed off. It's not the same thing, but it looks similar from the outside.

The pub was called "Zum Hafen" (At the Harbor), even though there wasn't a drop of water anywhere nearby. Maybe the name was a joke, or wishful thinking. Inside, it was brighter than in "Schlusslicht" (The Last Light), but that only made the faces more honest, not more beautiful. Behind the bar stood a woman I knew. Dark hair, tied back, eyes that had once held something you could call a future. We had once shared more than just a bar. Now we only shared memories we both wished we could forget. She saw me, blinked, and I saw a brief flicker in her eyes, a mixture of anger and weariness.

“So you’re still alive,” she said, without a hello. “Surprise,” I replied. “I’m working on changing that, but it’s taking longer than expected.” The leprechaun immediately sat on the bar, right next to the tap, and rubbed his hands together. “Oh,” he said. “This is going to be good. There’s something in the air here.” She placed a glass in front of me without asking what I wanted. Whiskey, of course, but not the good stuff. She knew me well enough to know I couldn’t afford the good stuff anymore. “It’s on me,” she said. “What are we toasting to?” I asked. “To everything you’ve missed out on,” she replied.

I took a sip; the whiskey was only marginally better than the stuff from the kiosk bottle, but the surroundings made it more agreeable. "How's it going?" I asked, even though the answer would probably knock me for six. "I'm working, I'm sleeping, I'm paying the bills," she said. "The whole nine yards. And you? Still stuck in the downward spiral?" The leprechaun grinned so broadly his ears almost touched. "He quit his job today," he said, her ears, of course, completely unheard. "Or rather: the job quit him. That's something, isn't it?"

I looked at her, longer than necessary. She used to work in a different bar; even before that, we'd shared a bed for a while, cigarettes, Sundays, that whole shaky, half-hearted thing of togetherness that you call a relationship when you're young enough to believe it'll last. Back then, I drank less. Back then, cheap whiskey consisted of two or three glasses on the weekend,

not a fundamental principle of existence. The leprechaun had been there even then, lurking somewhere on the fringes. I remembered one evening when a bottle had been knocked over, her face, how it changed when she realized I wasn't the type to stop in time.

“You could have made something of yourself,” she said now, as if rehashing a thought she’d chewed over many times before. “You weren’t stupid. Just lazy. And too in love with intoxication.” I made a vague gesture. “It’s never too late,” I said, hearing myself how hollow it sounded. The goblin laughed. “It’s always too late,” he corrected. “But that’s the beauty of it. You can fail quite peacefully.” She looked at me appraisingly. “Are you drunk?” “Not enough to forget this,” I said. “But I’m working on it.”

She shook her head and poured more. "You know you can't run up a tab here," she said. "This isn't a place to collect unpaid bills." "Sure," I said. I rummaged in my pocket, knowing perfectly well there was nothing left. The last bill had been left at the kiosk, the job in the warehouse, my future somewhere among the shards of the toppled pallet. I had a few coins left, not enough for the glass in front of me. "Put them down," she said, as if she could have guessed how little it was. "You can pay the rest when you've got some money again. If not, that's fine too. I don't want to take advantage of you."

The goblin leaned toward me. "She's always been too nice for this world," he said. "That's why she's behind the counter, not in front." I looked at him, then at her. "Remember," I said, "that time you said if I kept going like this, I'd end up exactly where I am now?" She smiled crookedly. "Yes," she said. "And you told me not to be so dramatic. You only live once, blah blah. How does it feel to agree without meaning to?" I managed a smile that was more of a grimace. "Like a bad joke you've told yourself," I said.

We were silent for a while. Something soft played in the background, a song about missed opportunities, broken hearts, the same old tune. Two men at a table were playing cards, laughing too loudly; a woman at the slot machine stared at the flashing lights as if they were revealing the winning lottery numbers. The imp wandered from guest to guest, whispering little nudges in their ears that they didn't hear, but which they followed anyway. Another drink, another game, another wrong decision. He seemed happy.

“Do you know what the most expensive thing you ever sold for whiskey was?” she asked at one point. The question caught me off guard, but the answer came instantly. “You,” I said. It wasn’t even cheesy, just true. She blinked for a long time, looked into her glass as if there were an alternative in there that she hadn’t taken back then. “The most expensive thing wasn’t me,” she said quietly. “I managed to save myself. The most expensive thing was you. You sold yourself off, piece by piece, and in the end, you’re left standing helplessly at the checkout, wondering why there’s nothing left.” The leprechaun nodded in agreement. “She understands business,” he murmured.

I finished the glass, suddenly feeling more sober than I had all day. Sober in my mind, drunk in my life. "I should leave," I said. "Before I start deluding myself into thinking I can change anything." She put a hand on the counter, not mine. "You shouldn't leave," she said. "But you will. That's just how you are. You always leave when things are about to get uncomfortably honest." The goblin chuckled softly. "She knows your tricks," he said. "So do I."

I stood up, my knees a little wobbly, but steady enough. "Thanks for the drink," I said. "Thanks for nothing," she replied. "Take care. Or not. It's your life." I nodded, turned, and headed for the door. The leprechaun followed, jumped on my shoulder, and whispered, "That

was your third expensive mistake today. You could have stayed and listened. Instead, you leave, carrying only the cheap whiskey with you."

It had grown dark outside. The streetlights did what they could, which wasn't much. I set off aimlessly, just away, always away. The kiosk, the warehouse, the pubs, the faces, the bottle caps, the lines—all an endless series of small decisions that add up to a big pile of crap. The goblin hummed that sad song again, the one that sounded like a toast and a funeral. "Cheap whiskey, expensive mistakes," he said again, almost affectionately. "We're writing ourselves a whole biography right now."

I thought of the pallet in the warehouse, the broken glass, the foreman. I thought of the beer mats in the "Schlagslicht" (a local pub), piling up like lost days. I thought of the woman behind the bar in the "Hafen" (another local pub) and the life she might still have ahead of her, because at some point she had decided not to fall as far as I had. And I thought of myself, walking there with a mischievous spirit on my shoulder and a liver quietly begging for mercy. Perhaps the most expensive mistake wasn't a single decision. Perhaps it was the constant readiness to make the same wrong choice again and again, simply because one knows the taste.

When I finally stood in front of my door and put the key in the lock, I knew that tomorrow would be no different. Maybe a different hangover, a different conversation, a different excuse. But at its core, everything remained the same. Cheap whiskey, expensive mistakes. And somewhere beneath all the grime, a little imp was laughing, never paying the bill.

Chapter 4 – The Clurichaun under the regulars' table

The regulars' table stood in the back corner, where the fluorescent light never quite reached and the smoke gathered like a blanket. It was round, made of heavy wood, with notches and burn marks, as if someone had tried to write their life story on it with lighters and glasses. It was actually too big for the few guys who were glued to it every evening, but that way their ghosts had room too. I'd never officially been one of them. Officially, you don't sit at the regulars' table; you just keep moving closer until no one even notices you're there anymore. That's how it was for me, too.

The goblin had chosen this table like a new home. "This," he said at some point, "is my place." He disappeared under the tabletop, between the thick legs where the guests' feet stood like roots. Once he crouched between my boots, leaned his back against the crossbar, and sighed contentedly. "Down here you can hear what people are really like," he said. "Above the table they lie, below it they tell the truth. Look inside their shoes, and you'll know more about them than from their faces."

The usual suspects were sitting at the regulars' table: Harry, with a belly that looked like it was about to swallow his stool whole; Heiner, a former truck driver who now only hauled stories no one wanted to hear anymore; and Manni, who fancied himself an intellectual because he'd once read half a book and since then had been throwing around foreign words like bottle caps. Every now and then, the waitress would join them briefly, her back tired, her hands sticky from the beer that constantly spilled over her fingers. The landlord mostly stayed

behind the bar, but his gaze often lingered on us, as if he wanted to make sure his little freak show was still complete.

My seat was half to the side, half at the table. Not an official member, but close enough to hear the stories. The goblin sat beneath me and everyone else. Sometimes I saw him sniffing a shoe, as if smelling its soul. "That one," he whispered into my leg, "hasn't paid rent for three weeks. He lives off the bills he doesn't open." At the next foot: "He lied to his wife yesterday and said he'd been at work late. But he was sitting right here. The sweat on his socks smells of fear." And yet another: "He won something twenty years ago. Ever since, he's been trying to relive the moment. Everything he says goes in circles around that one time when he wasn't the laughingstock."

Up on the table, their voices sounded rough and loud. They talked about football, politics, some idiots on TV who had sunk even lower than us. Every sentence was an excuse not to talk about what was really going on inside them. The goblin rolled a dropped cigarette butt back and forth and grinned. "When they laugh, one of them kicks the other under the table," he said. "When they lie, their feet twitch. When they're ashamed, they pull their legs in. Your shoes say it all. You're big on words and small on your feet."

Heiner had his third shot of schnapps in front of him, next to the beer he always called "the foundation." "Back in the day," he said, "back in the day there was still collegiality. People helped each other out. Now you're just a number in the system." Harry nodded. "Back in the day," he repeated, "the boss used to sit at the table with you. Now he doesn't even know who you are." Manni raised his index finger, as if he were about to give a lecture. "That's neoliberal decadence," he said, and you could tell he was proud of the word. "The little guy is being squeezed dry like a lemon." The goblin chuckled softly. "The little guy squeezes himself dry," he said. "You don't need a boss to break you. You're doing just fine on your own."

I took a sip, listening to the dull mix of self-pity, nostalgia, and pub-talk bravado. It was like lukewarm soup, with the same ingredients reheated over and over again. "So, how are things with you?" Harry asked me. That question was always a trap. If you say "Good," you're a liar. If you say "Bad," you're a crybaby. I shrugged. "It's going," I said. "But downhill." They laughed, grateful for the joke that wasn't one. The goblin nudged my knee with his head. "You're starting to like me," he whispered. "You're starting to talk like me."

Something stirred under the table. Manni wanted to get up to go to the bathroom, but his shoe caught on a chair leg and he almost fell flat on his face. "Damn it," he cursed. The goblin grinned from under the tabletop, his little hands still on the laces of Manni's shoes. "Just a little nudge," he murmured. "A little humility now and then doesn't hurt." Manni recovered, laughed uncertainly, and pretended it had all been intentional. "Needs to loosen up my joints," he explained. We all knew he was just trying to save himself from himself.

The table had its own aura. Everything said there hung in the air. People sitting at the other tables sometimes glanced over with a mixture of envy and relief. Envy because the regulars' table looked like a small, supportive community. Relief because they knew they weren't stuck in that community. The landlord brought us rounds, often before anyone even said "Another one." He knew the rhythm of our self-destruction. Meanwhile, the imp examined the puddles of beer on the floor as if they were maps.

“This is my church,” he said at one point. “The regulars’ table is the altar, and you’re the praying idiots who think that if you spout enough nonsense, you’ll be forgiven. Every evening is a mass. You confess your day, drink your punishment, make your stupid vows for tomorrow, and then come back the same fools.” I looked down at my hands, which were clutching the glass. He wasn’t wrong. Every evening ended with the same words: “Tomorrow I’ll take it easy.” And every morning ended under this table.

One of those evenings, when the place was already half empty and the clock was trying its best to ignore us, the waitress bent down briefly to pick up a spilled beer mat. Her hair fell across her face, her apron was speckled with wetness. The goblin was sitting right under her chair, looking up as if he were about to shout the truth in her ear. "She's more tired than all of you put together," he said quietly. "But she doesn't drink. Get that through your heads. She's seen you sitting here for years, and yet she hasn't made the mistake of becoming one of you. That's the highest form of intelligence in this room."

Heiner was saying, "If I win the lottery, I'll pay off all your debts to the innkeeper." Harry raised his glass to him. "But you don't even play the lottery," he said. Heiner grinned. "All the better that I won't lose." The goblin shook his head. "Sometimes I wonder," he muttered, "if you really need me, or if I only stay for the entertainment."

I noticed my feet growing heavier the longer I sat at the regulars' table. It was as if the chair legs were slowly putting down roots in the ground, my boots along with them. They say you have "your place." But here, the place had me. The goblin reached out and placed his hand on my shoe. It felt cold, yet comforting. "Come on," he said. "Let me pin you down. There are worse places to slowly lose yourself than under a table where at least one person knows the truth."

I didn't know if he meant himself or me.

It was on a Thursday when the regulars' table finally became his territory. Thursdays are dangerous days. Too far from the previous weekend, too close to the next, exactly the point in the calendar when people start to think they've earned a quick drink. The place was more crowded than usual, some game was on TV, some team against some other, people were acting like their lives depended on it. Glasses were everywhere, voices grew louder as the drinks flowed. The regulars' table was overflowing. Two new faces had joined them, young guys, early thirties maybe, wearing T-shirts that looked too new to have been regulars there for very long.

"They barely know the place and they've already sat down at the regulars' table," Harry muttered. "That wouldn't have been possible back in the day." Back in the day, that was the magic word again. Back then there were rules, they say. Back then there was respect. Back then everything was somehow better, even the drinking. The goblin crouched under the table, or more precisely, directly under the chair of the new guy who was currently loudly recounting how he'd pranked his colleagues at the office. "A little king," said the goblin. "A papier-mâché crown, but he wears it with conviction."

The other newcomer was quieter, drank faster, and only laughed when the first one laughed. I knew that type. There's always one who supposedly calls the shots, and one who hopes some of that prestige will rub off on him. "You guys have it cozy here," said the louder one, letting his gaze sweep over us. "A real men's table, huh?" Harry nodded heavily. "This is where the

regulars sit," he said. "Here, things get straight to the point." The goblin coughed under the table. "If this is straight to the point, I don't want to hear your lies," he muttered.

The innkeeper brought another round. The TV blared, some commentator was going ballistic over a goal that no one would care about in three days. The young guys toasted us as if we were part of a club. "Here's to the old hands!" shouted the guy from Lauter. "You guys must have stories to tell." Heiner was just about to launch into his standard spiel about the motorway and the Eastern European rest stops when it happened. The imp grabbed the foot of the new guy who was really getting on his nerves. Nothing serious: a little tug, a tiny push against the table leg.

That was it. The beer glass in front of the guy tipped over, its contents spilling across the table, running towards Harry, who recoiled reflexively. Harry's own glass sloshed, some of it landing in his lap. The waitress came running, napkins, rags, an annoyed expression. "Can one of you jerks leave a glass alone for once?" she snapped. The new guy jumped. "It wasn't intentional," he grumbled. "Just watch how you put the glasses down." There was that certain intonation in the sentence that makes a waitress sound like a maid. The landlord looked over, but said nothing at first.

The goblin grinned and leaned against the table leg. "Now it gets interesting," he said. I felt a tension in the wood, as if all hands had suddenly tightened, as if fingers were gripping the glasses. The waitress pressed her lips together. "I've been putting the glasses like this for ten years," she said. "Most people manage not to knock them over." The guy laughed mockingly. "If all you can do is lug glasses, you're probably good at it," he said. The sentence hung over the table like a stinking rag. Underneath the table, the goblin nudged my ankle. "I bet someone will try to be decent in a minute," he whispered.

The first attempt came from Manni. "Don't get upset," he said to the waitress. "The guy's just having a bad day." That was the wrong thing to say. She looked at him as if he'd betrayed her. "You've all been having a bad day since I started working here," she snarled. "And I'm the one who ends up wiping up the piss." She grabbed the wet beer mats and squeezed them as if she were strangling someone. The guy grinned even wider. "She's sensitive," he said loudly enough for the other tables to hear. A few furtive glances, a brief silence.

The innkeeper came over, slowly, with the heaviness of a man who dreads what's about to happen. "Everything alright?" he asked. "Everything's fine," the new guy replied. "This lady just needs a break." He said "lady" as if it were an insult. The goblin bit his fist, laughing. "Come on," he whispered into the wooden frame. "Show us what kind of place you are, boss." The innkeeper looked at the waitress, saw the wet table, the shiny eyes. His fingers drummed briefly on the tabletop. Then he sighed. "Clean the table," he told her. "And bring another round. It's on me."

At that moment, I felt something sharpen under the table. Not even in her, but inside me. That familiar twitch when you suspect someone else has lost, but you still feel like you've been beaten too. The waitress pressed the cloth so hard her knuckles turned white. No arguments. She was smart enough to know it wouldn't do any good. The new guy leaned back, grinned broadly, savoring his victory. The goblin looked up at me. "Well?" he asked. "Still glad you're not officially up?"

I took a sip, tasted nothing but bitterness. "You should have kicked him a bit harder," I muttered. "Then he would have flown under the table." "And then?" the goblin asked. "Do

you think that would have changed anything? Then he would have stood up and made himself louder. People who are in the wrong shout the loudest." Maybe he was right. Maybe this was just one of a thousand scenes playing out in this city. But the idea stuck in my mind like a fishbone in my throat.

The atmosphere at the regulars' table changed after that. The jokes became more aggressive, the "everything was better in the old days" refrains louder. The two new guys suddenly felt untouchable. "She's just a waitress," the louder one said at one point. "If I had a job like that, I'd be throwing a fit too." Harry nibbled at his mustache as if considering saying something. But he didn't. Heiner stared into his glass. Manni tried again to fill the air with some half-baked knowledge about labor rights, but stumbled over his own words after two sentences. The imp had lain down flat on the floor, listening. "The table's starting to stink," he said.

When the waitress came again, she acted as if nothing had happened. She set the glasses down, quickly, routinely, without looking at anyone. I knew that yesterday she had been leaning against the bar with me, laughing about something silly. Today she was just a function. The owner did what owners do: he made sure the glasses stayed full. That was his job. Not for justice, not for respect, just for keeping things running smoothly. The place was his ship, and as long as the whole thing didn't sink, he didn't care who on board was getting drunk.

The goblin sat up and settled back down under my chair. "This is my realm," he said. "Under this table. Here lies the truth: cowardice in shoes, anger that smells of cold socks, and guilt that clings to the soles of feet. I love this place. Down here, I can hear when someone is already crying inside before they even reach for their glass." I felt my feet grow heavy. The chair suddenly felt as if it had iron legs. "Stop holding me down," I muttered. "I'm not doing anything," he said innocently. "You're holding yourself down. I'm just sitting here and applauding."

Later that evening, after the newcomers had left, dead drunk and triumphant, as if the world owed them something, the regulars' table remained like a spilled beer: sticky, smelly, unfinished. The waitress had already disappeared into the back, staying longer than usual. The landlord slowly wiped the bar, glanced over at us as if he wanted to say something, but then refrained. We sat there, men who had taken a wrong turn somewhere in life, pretending we had chosen that path intentionally.

“You could have said something,” the goblin said eventually. “All of you. One of you. Just one sentence would have sufficed.” I finished my drink. “I’m not here to save the world,” I muttered. “I can’t even save myself.” He grinned crookedly. “True,” he said. “And perhaps that’s the most honest thing you’ve said today.”

The next day my head ached, but not just from the alcohol. It was that other kind of pain that comes when you know you watched someone else go down again yesterday and did nothing but drink along. The images of the scene at the regulars' table were plastered to my skull. The spilled glass, the comment, the waitress's look, the landlord's sigh, the stupid grins of the two strangers. I knew the script: Today they'd be sitting somewhere else, pulling the same stunt. And we'd be sitting here, pretending we had no choice.

The goblin sat on the windowsill, gazing out into the gloomy courtyard. "You look like you've had a moral epiphany," he said. "It doesn't suit you. Make yourself uglier again; you'll be more honest that way." I poured the last of the drink from some bottle into a mug that had

seen far too many stories. "Why didn't you drop it down the stairs?" I asked. "You just would have had to push a little harder." He shrugged. "I'm not a justice goblin," he said. "I'm a drinking organism. I live off your weakness, not your heroic deeds. When you actually do something worthwhile, I'm just a spectator."

I thought about the table. The heavy chairs, the notches, the beer stains, the lids stuck there as if they were permanently attached. In my mind, the regulars' table was no longer just a corner of a pub, but a place that lay somewhere inside me. A circular space where the voices kept talking, even when I was at home. Heiner with his "Everything was better in the old days," Harry with his half-hearted humor, Manni with his pseudo-intellectual facade, behind which sat a frightened little boy. And me, somewhere in between, neither fish nor fowl, neither guest nor host. A guy who thinks he's just observing, when in fact he's already part of the scene.

“Why this table in particular?” I asked. “There are a thousand other shops, a thousand other tables.” The goblin grinned. “Because nobody here is young anymore,” he said. “Young people are boring. They still think they’ll drop out someday. They’re still on probation for their own demise. But you… you’ve already settled in. You’ve found your place, your joke, your excuses. You’re like old sofas: worn out, but you still think you’re comfortable. For me, that’s perfect. Nobody really leaves here anymore. You just finish work early.”

I took a sip and thought about all the evenings I hadn't been at our usual table. There weren't many. Most of the ones I could remember had something to do with me being sick, or having to work somewhere, or trying some other kind of shameful escapade in a different pub. The table at the "Late Light" had drawn me in long before I realized it. First, I stood nearby, by the bar. Then I casually pulled up a stool. Then I sat down. And eventually, no one asked me anymore if I belonged. I was simply there.

“They say you have your regular table at the pub,” I muttered. “But maybe the pub has one.” The goblin clapped enthusiastically. “Now you’re getting philosophical,” he said. “I like it when you guys briefly pretend to understand what’s happening to you. It’s like the brief flicker of a lamp before it burns out.” He jumped from the window, landed softly on the floor, and ran over to me. “Come on, let’s go down,” he said. “I want to see my seat. Maybe someone left something there overnight that I can use.”

The route to the pub was the same as always, but in my mind, last night and this morning were playing out simultaneously. When I opened the door, it was still early. The air smelled more of cleaning fluid than beer, a false promise of cleanliness. No television, no shouting, just the landlord sorting glasses and wrestling with a rag that had long since given up. He nodded when he saw me. "You're early," he said. "Or late," I replied. "Depends on how you look at it." The goblin scampered past me, slipped straight to the regulars' table, and crawled underneath as if getting into his bed.

I didn't sit down, not right away. I stayed at the bar, ordered a beer I didn't need, and watched the carbonation bubbles go in the wrong direction. "Because of yesterday," the bartender began. I raised a hand. "It's okay," I said. "It was your place, your decision." He sighed. "It was the easiest decision," he muttered. "Not the best." I looked at him. He had that look men get when they realize they've sold a little bit of their soul somewhere, but aren't quite sure to whom.

“You could have thrown him out,” I said calmly. “It might have cost you a regular, but you would have kept the waitress.” He shrugged. “Maybe I would have lost everyone then,” he

said. “They’re all here because I keep the place running. If I start being strict, they’ll find somewhere else to feel sorry for themselves.” The goblin poked his head out from under the table and pulled out a cigarette that someone had dropped. “He’s scared,” he said. “You’re all scared. You say you’re tough, but you’re afraid of every empty seat, every missing face.”

I picked up my glass and went to the regulars' table after all, sitting down in my usual spot. The chair creaked as if greeting me. Beneath me, I felt the presence of the goblin, that strange coldness that wasn't really unpleasant. More like clear. "So, what's in it for you?" I asked down. "What good is a table full of idiots feeling sorry for themselves?" He chuckled softly. "You are my bar," he said. "The more you drink, the stronger I become. Every missed opportunity, every swallowed sentence, every cowardly decision is like a sip for me. You're slowly undressing yourselves from the inside out, and I sit beneath it, catching what crumbles away."

I ran my hand over the tabletop. You could feel the grooves, the grime that never quite disappeared. I imagined how many hands had lain here, how many evenings were embedded in this wood. It was a graveyard of promises. "What happens if one of us actually gets up and doesn't come back?" I asked. "Will you miss him?" The goblin thought for a moment. "I'll miss his drinking speed at most," he said. "People are replaceable. But I like the ones who are persistent. The ones who keep coming back even though everything inside them screams at them to leave. That's a form of loyalty. The perverse kind, but still."

The first guests came in. Harry, with his belly, was the first through the door, even before me. Heiner, in his tired jacket, Manni, with some newspaper under his arm—a newspaper he never bought to be informed, but just to have something to hold onto when he was spouting off some stupid theories. They nodded to me, sat down as if nothing had happened yesterday. No one mentioned the incident with the two strangers and the waitress. As if it were just a bad dream that had to be resolutely ignored today.

"Hey," said Harry. "So, ready for the next round of life advice?" Heiner laughed. "We should charge money for the nonsense we talk about," he said. "Then we'd be rich." Manni spread out the newspaper. "Did you read it?" he said. "They're saying pub culture is dying out. Everything's going online—bars, dating, conversations. Soon we'll all just be sitting at home alone." The goblin squealed with delight. "You're already alone," he called from downstairs. "You just happen to be in the same room." No one heard him, but everyone sensed something, because for a moment it became quieter.

I drank and listened to them, as always. But this time the table felt different. Not just like a piece of furniture, but like a contract. One that no one had signed, yet was still valid. You sit down, you drink, you keep your mouth shut when it counts, and you come back tomorrow. Those were the conditions. The price was your back, your liver, your last shreds of pride. "You can leave anytime," the goblin said. "The door's right there. All you have to do is get up, put your glass down, and walk out. No god, no law, no innkeeper can stop you."

I glanced at the door. It was ajar, letting in fresh air along with a whiff of the street. It would have been easy to get up and leave. Instead, I took a sip. "See," the goblin said contentedly. "That's why I stay under the regulars' table. I'm always safe here." He leaned against my leg, like a pet snuggling up to its owner. And while the conversations upstairs continued in the same old circles, I knew I wasn't just sitting at a table. I was sitting in a trap that looked like a round place filled with cold beer.

Perhaps, I thought, Clurichaun isn't the one who never pays the bill. Perhaps it's us. We never pay what it really costs. And what we do pay is always too little and yet too much in the end.

Chapter 5 – If Glasses Could Talk

Some days I had the feeling the glasses knew more than the people holding them. They stood there, in neat rows on the counter, like an army of transparent entrails, waiting to be filled, emptied, forgotten. If you sit at the bar long enough, you realize glasses have their own kind of memory. The water stains, the film of nicotine, the fine scratches on the rim—all little notes about who used them and for what. I stared at my beer glass as if it were about to start cursing me.

“If glasses could talk,” I said, more to myself than to anyone else, “this would be over faster than you can say ‘round for everyone.’” The goblin perched on the tap like an ugly gargoyle and grinned. “The glasses talk,” he said. “You’re just not listening. You’re too busy emptying them.” He ran a small, dirty paw along the inside of an unused glass. “This one,” he said, “will only be half-filled once tonight and then left. The guy who orders it will briefly think he needs to get his life together, and then he’ll go home too early so as not to disappoint his wife any further. The glass will feel cheated.”

The innkeeper was busy polishing glasses, a ritual that accomplished nothing except the feeling of somehow using the time. The waitress carried trays, glasses clinking as if signaling to one another. The usual monologues were playing out at the regulars' table. This time, I deliberately sat not there, but a stool away at the bar, as if the half-meter distance would somehow change anything. "What does mine say?" I asked the imp, lifting my beer slightly. He tilted his head, closed his eyes as if listening to a distant melody. "Your glass," he said, "is laughing at you. It thinks you've started again with great resolve: 'Just one today, nice and easy.' It knows this lie so well that it feels like an old song."

I took a sip, not because I agreed with him, but because my hand moved automatically. The glass was slightly chipped, a small dent on the bottom that meant it never stood perfectly straight. It wobbled just enough that you had to consciously hold it. Maybe that's why I liked it so much. It reminded me of myself: never quite stable, too crooked to be trusted, but sturdy enough not to break immediately. "They used to have different glasses," I said. "Heavier ones. With handles. They had something about them." "You used to have different faces, too," said the goblin. "Fewer wrinkles, more hope. Glasses and faces become alike. The older the shop, the more weary its rims."

A guy two stools away held a slim, narrow glass, far too fancy for this place. He held it as if concocting an excuse for his presence: "It's just a beer after work, a small one." The goblin jumped over, put his ear to the glass as if it were emitting radioactive radiation. "This guy," he said, "is telling himself he's better than you. He's got a perfectly pressed shirt, a car parked outside, and a bank account that hasn't gone up in flames yet. His glass is whispering in his ear that he's just popping in. But I can already see his second, third, fourth glass waiting. They're all standing ready, rubbing the rims of their glasses."

I leaned back and watched the bar. It was a theater with only extras. No leading roles, just people briefly making an appearance and then disappearing again. And the glasses were the

only things that truly knew everyone. The waitress's tall, thin glass, into which she occasionally secretly poured herself a spritzer, looked more tired than anything else there. It wasn't the glass of a drinking career, but that of someone who worked too close to it. "What does yours say?" I asked. The goblin suddenly fell silent. He looked over, examining the glass that bore a thick lipstick mark on the side from another woman who had laughed too loudly during some round.

“Your glass says nothing,” he murmured. “It’s done talking. It’s heard everything there is to hear. Broken wedding vows, failed business plans, grand pronouncements drowned in the next shot of schnapps. It’s done with all that. It’s just doing its job now.” I watched the waitress as she routinely placed glasses on the tray, as if they were bricks in a wall separating her from us. Perhaps that was her salvation. That she carried the glasses, but didn’t live off them. I wasn’t sure how long that could last.

A regular's glass at the end of the bar, a massive pitcher, was more famous than its owner. Everyone knew he came every evening, had his seat, and needed that one glass. "That pitcher there," said the goblin, "is proud. He thinks he holds the place together. As long as it stays full, its owner will come. And as long as he comes, everyone else will too. That's what they tell themselves, those plump, fat things. But they're just containers for excuses." The regular, a man with gray hair and hands like shovels, drank slowly, steadily, without any theatrics. But in his eyes was that gleam when the pitcher was full, and that brief twitch when it was empty. A small death.

I wondered what my glasses would say if someone threw them all into a pile and forced them to talk. The ones from my youth in other bars, in other cities, the glasses from family gatherings where alcohol was "just part of it," the secret glass in the kitchen while the children's songs, long since over, played outside. Maybe they would all chorus: "We were never at fault, you idiot." Maybe they would laugh because I had always given them more meaning than they could bear.

“Do you know what the tragedy is?” the goblin asked, dangling his legs from the tap. “You always think the glasses are your enemies or your friends. But they’re just hollow pieces of furniture. You fill them with your shit, your dreams, your escape. And when they eventually shatter, you’re offended, as if they’d betrayed you. But it’s you who dropped them.” I turned the glass in my hand, watching the beer cling to the inside, little wisps of foam that looked like they were trying to find something to hold onto.

“And what does the bottle say?” I finally asked. “The one back there on the shelf, the one that’s still unopened.” The goblin looked at it, and for the first time that evening, he seemed thoughtful. “The bottle is the promise,” he said. “It whispers: ‘If you buy me, things will be better for a little while. I’m the beginning, not the end.’ Every full bottle lies. And you’re so eager for the lie that you willingly let yourselves be deceived.” I ordered another whiskey, not because I trusted the bottle, but because I knew that at least once it was open, it was honest: it didn’t make anything better. It just blurred everything.

If glasses could talk, I thought, maybe they would say nothing other than: "You were already broken before you even picked us up." Perhaps that would be the only thing that was really true.

The evening dragged on, and with each round the voices grew louder and the glasses bolder—at least in my mind. The imp had eventually broken free from the bar and gone wandering,

leaping from table to table like a diminutive bar critic. I watched him cling to the rims of the glasses as if trying to coax secrets from them. Sometimes he would place a hand on the glass, close his eyes, and nod, as if listening to someone only he could hear.

A new face had appeared at the regulars' table, a man who looked as if he'd once achieved more in life than this. He wore a shirt with cufflinks and a jacket that probably cost more than my entire wardrobe. He had a wide, short glass in front of him, half-full of some brown stuff called "single malt," ordered only by people who insisted on pronouncing the word "single malt." The imp climbed up his chair and sat on the rim of the glass, right next to his well-groomed face.

“This guy,” he called over to me, “is one of those who thinks they’ve got their drinking under control. He’s just saying the line, ‘I know when to stop.’” I looked over, and sure enough, I heard the guy say exactly that, with that smug growl in his voice. The others at the table nodded as if they’d just been served up some profound truth. His glass, on the other hand, looked as if it were ashamed to be in this group. The clear, thick material, the heavy base meant to give it dignity—all just a facade. Inside was the same rotgut we had back home, just more expensively packaged.

I wondered how many glasses one had to go through to finally arrive at something like this. You start with plastic cups, at parties where someone brings along cheap vodka from the subway and everyone can still laugh. Then come cans, bottles, eventually proper glass. With each level, you think you've grown up, but in reality, you've just learned to better disguise your crashes. "What do my old glasses say?" I asked the goblin when he came back over to me. "The ones that aren't here anymore. The ones that shattered or are lying in some dishwashing area of this city."

He sat on my forearm, light as a guilty conscience. "They say," he said, "that you never really listened to them. They clinked when you put them down too hard. They howled when you dropped them. Some even left you with a small scar as they shattered in your hand, just so you wouldn't forget them. And what did you do? Ordered another glass." I looked at my hands, searching for clues. There was a small, white line on the ball of my hand, one I could barely remember. One night, one argument, one broken glass, one missed opportunity to stop before things really got out of hand.

The waitress wordlessly placed a fresh beer in front of me, without asking. I hadn't said anything, but the empty rim of my glass had apparently communicated enough. "That one," the goblin said, "has clearly taken his own language course. He says, 'Refill me, or you'll have to deal with yourself.' You don't like pauses, do you?" I took the new glass in my hand, feeling the cold condensation on my fingers. Pauses were dangerous. Thoughts come during pauses, and thoughts are poison when you don't have answers.

A guy at one of the tables tapped his glass against the tabletop, the universal sign for "I've got something to say and I'm drunk enough to say it." He launched into some story about his ex-wife, about a court case, about alimony, about "those fucking lawyers." His glass wobbled in his hand, his knuckles white. "If the glass could talk," the leprechaun muttered, "it would say, 'Let me go before I explode in your hand.' You can't hold on so tightly to things that have already let go of you."

I watched the waitress as she placed a row of empty glasses on the tray. She did it as if she were stacking small coffins. Once, a glass fell off the tray, rolled across the floor, and landed

in front of my boots. It was still intact, with only a bit of foam clinging to the inside. I picked it up and handed it to her. For a moment, our hands touched, just briefly, but enough for her to look at me. "If glasses could talk," I said spontaneously, "you'd probably have burnout after a shift." She raised an eyebrow. "If glasses could talk," she replied dryly, "they'd tell you all that you're annoying. And all I'd have to do is listen."

The goblin squealed with delight. "That woman has a sense of humor," he cried. "You'd better watch out, or you'll start to like her." I already liked her, that was the problem. But by now I liked anything that wasn't completely jaded. That included glasses that refused to break immediately. "You know what I hate most?" I said to the goblin. "When someone says, 'Just one more glass, then I'm done.'" "Why?" he asked. "Because you know it's a lie?" "Because I know that even if he's serious, the glass doesn't take him seriously," I said. "The last glass is always just the last one for today."

“Glasses aren’t calendars,” the goblin said. “They don’t count the days you managed to drink less. They only count the seconds they slide down your throat. You make marks on beer mats, but you never measure the sips you were missing to avoid ending up here.” I thought of my ex, of days when a single glass not drunk might have changed something. An argument avoided, a word not too loud, a walk home not too late. But those were fairy tales you tell yourself when you’re too deep in it.

The slot machine player was now standing at the bar, without his machine, just with a glass. He turned it between his fingers as if it were a coin that hadn't yet landed. "If his glass could talk," said the goblin, "it would ask him why he believed there was still a win waiting for him somewhere. Whether at the slot machine or in life." I looked at him, this man with the red face and nervous eyes. He was always on the verge of starting all over again, and yet every day he began in the same place: at the bar, in front of a glass, with empty pockets.

Maybe it was all the same crap in the end: glasses reflecting our faces, empty bottles telling us we'd gone too far again, and a little goblin sitting on the sidelines watching us try to convince ourselves we still had something under control. I took another sip. The glass said nothing. It didn't need to. I already knew what it thought of me.

Later that night, as the place thinned out and conversations became fragmented, was the moment when the glasses seemed most honest—or so it appeared to me. The clinking became less frequent, but louder. Each clink sounded like a subtle warning: "One more, and you're down." The imp had claimed a barstool, sat cross-legged on the seat, an empty shot glass in front of him, staring at it with the same concentration as a fortune teller studying a crystal ball.

“This glass,” he said, bearing his hand, “has seen five different mouths today. The first was a guy who just needed to quickly send a message. ‘I’ll be late today, stress at the office,’ he wrote. The second lost his job and wanted to wash the resignation letter out of his head. The third claimed he only drank ‘for social reasons.’ The fourth was lonely. I don’t remember the fifth; he was uninteresting.” He looked up and grinned. “And you want to tell me glasses are just decoration.”

I looked at my own half-empty glass and tried to remember how many versions of "me" had drunk from it today. The one who this morning still thought he could keep his job. The one who stood in the warehouse at lunchtime and knew it was over. The one who sat in the other pub in the afternoon in front of his ex and realized that the most expensive whiskey was the

one he'd gambled away with her. And now this one here, at the bar in the evening, pretending it's all just an anecdote for later. The same hand, the same liver, but a whole bunch of different idiots in the same body.

The waitress, unusually for her, had taken her own glass, a small, clear one without any frills. She filled it with a cheap liqueur, something sweet that pretended to be harmless. She placed it briefly next to the cash register, so that no one really saw it. The innkeeper pretended not to notice, and that was his form of complicity. The goblin immediately jumped over, curious as always when someone who normally stayed sober made an exception. "The glass says," he whispered, "that today was one of those days when she swallowed too much without drinking anything. And that she's slowly getting tired of just washing everything down with water."

I watched her take the glass, take a quick swig, wince slightly, and put it down. No enjoyment, just function. "If I could," I said quietly, more to myself than anything else, "I'd give her all my glasses. Then she could at least get all that crap out once." The goblin snorted. "She doesn't need your glasses," he said. "She needs one to hold onto, not one to drop. You always confuse support with liquid."

The atmosphere at the regulars' table had quieted down. Harry was snoring almost while sitting, his hand still wrapped around the mug like a child falling asleep with a toy. Heiner hardly spoke anymore; only his lips moved, as if he were silently debating the past. Manni had thrown his head back and was staring at the ceiling, as if a solution were written there, visible only in drunkenness. The glasses in front of them were in various stages of dying: half empty, three-quarters empty, completely empty, and yet not put away. "That over there," said the goblin, pointing at the small collection, "is a graveyard of decisions no one wants to change anymore."

I suddenly remembered a completely different glass, from a time when the Clurichaun hadn't yet appeared so clearly before me. A kitchen window, morning sun, a glass of water my mother had placed in front of me after I'd come home completely drunk for the first time. That hadn't been a joke, no "Haha, we're young and stupid." That had been an escape, even back then. She hadn't said anything, just placed the glass there, water, aspirin beside it. The glass was thick, with small grooves to keep it from slipping out of my hand. I had drunk it, fallen back asleep, woken up later, and she had put the glass away without a word. If the glass could have spoken, it probably would have whispered, "Last chance, son." But I preferred to hear other glasses.

“Are you thinking about the past?” asked the goblin, who had at some point learned to read my face. “I’m thinking about a glass of water,” I said. “And about how I didn’t listen back then either.” He nodded slowly. “Water is quiet,” he murmured. “Alcohol shouts. You chose what’s louder.” I laughed, without humor. “Of course I did,” I said. “I was never good at accepting help quietly.” The goblin tipped the empty shot glass in front of him onto the floor. It rolled a little way, then came to rest. “This glass has had enough,” he said. “It’s tired. Just like yours.” I picked mine up and drank it to prove to him that it wasn’t finished. A stupid reflex.

The landlord eventually turned the music down and brightened the lights a bit, the universal sign that the evening was drawing to a close. "Last call," he called out. Three words that always sound like a threat and a promise at the same time in pubs. The glasses on the tables straightened up inwardly, as if saying, "Alright, one more round, then it's closing time." The

imp stood on the bar and gave a large, exaggerated bow. "You were a fabulous crowd," he said to the rows of glasses. "See you tomorrow."

I ordered another one, even though I knew perfectly well I didn't need it. The "last" is never really the last; it's just what you remember best when you're trying to make sense of things later. The waitress placed the glass in front of me and glanced at me briefly. "If glasses could talk," she said suddenly, "they'd tell you it was time to go." I grinned wearily. "If glasses could talk," I replied, "they'd ask you to finally let them dry in peace." A half-smile flickered across her face. "Touché," she murmured and turned away.

The goblin sat down on my full glass as if it were a stool. "You could stop now," he said. "Get up, pay, go home, drink some water, sleep. Wake up tomorrow and pretend today was just a slip-up." "I could," I said. "But you won't," he observed. I lifted the glass, and he jumped away at the last moment. "The problem with you," he said, "isn't that you couldn't. It's that you won't. And glasses only say what you tell them to say. They aren't priests. They only speak the prayer you pour into them."

I drank slowly, sip by sip. Each sip was a small yes to what I supposedly no longer wanted. Yes to the goblin, yes to the regulars at the pub, yes to the beer mats, yes to the bills, yes to the morning after. "Do you know what the glass would say right now, if it could?" the goblin asked me softly. "It would say, 'I'm not your enemy. I'm just proof that you don't like yourself.'" Maybe he was right. Maybe the glasses were never the problem. Maybe they were just mirrors made of thin, fragile material, in which we drowned ourselves because the real mirror in the bathroom wasn't enough anymore.

When I finally staggered toward the door, the glass was of no help. Glasses don't talk when you leave the shop. They stay behind, waiting for the next person to pick them up and pour their own little tragedy into them. Outside, the air was cold and clear, almost brutally honest. The goblin walked beside me, whistling a soft tune that reminded me of nothing in particular, yet somehow captured everything. "If glasses could talk," I said into the night, "I'd tell them to finally shut up." The goblin laughed. "They don't have to say anything," he said. "You're loud enough for all of you."

At home, in the quiet apartment, a glass of water sat on the kitchen table. Empty, clean, innocent. I filled it from the tap, sat down, and took a sip. It tasted of nothing, of pipes, of the city. As good as it could. "And what does that say?" I asked. The goblin sat down beside it and looked at it appraisingly. "That says," he murmured, "that you're actually listening today, for once. Let's see how long you can remember that." I drank the water. It was the first glass that day where I didn't feel like it was laughing at me.

But I also knew: tomorrow other glasses would be talking again. And I would listen again – in the worst way a person can choose.

Chapter 6 – Three nights without sleep, two without memory

The first night began innocently enough, like a joke told one too many times. I got home later than usual from the "last light" of the night; the streets were wet, but it hadn't rained. Maybe the city had just been sweating. My head was filled with that familiar buzzing, not loud enough to drown everything else out, but enough to block out any clear thought. Normally, I'd just collapse into bed, get dressed, sometimes even put my shoes on, and be out of it. Not this time. This time, there was a restlessness that burrowed into the mattress like moths into old blankets.

I lay on my back, arms at my sides as if I were already in a coffin, staring at the ceiling. The shadows danced, but not as they should. The goblin sat on the back of the only chair in the room, his legs dangling, watching me with that knowing grin. "Well?" he asked. "Doesn't sleep come when you call it?" I turned my head sideways. "Shut up," I muttered. "You're noise enough." He chuckled softly. "I'm not the noise," he said. "I'm the commentary. The noise is you."

The minutes lengthened, then stretched into hours. I got up again, went into the kitchen, drank water like I was one of those healthy idiots who think you can flush yourself out of anything. It was no use. The alcohol was still too deep in my system, my thoughts too shallow to lie down. My heart beat with a rhythm that sounded like a broken engine that just wouldn't give up. "Have another one," the little devil suggested. "Then you'll fall asleep eventually." I looked at him, the little piece of shit that was camping out in my life as if it had a permit. "I've had enough," I said. The words felt foreign in my mouth, like a language I once knew.

The night crept past the windows, the city grew quieter, only in my head did it grow louder. Sooner or later, there always came a point where the body simply shut down, no matter what the mind wanted. But this time, even the body refused to cooperate. My muscles were tense, my eyes dry, my brain like a television tuned to a dead channel. White noise. Except it wasn't white, more of a yellowish-gray. I sat down at the table, staring at the empty bottles as if they were about to start counting me. The imp made playing cards out of beer coasters, playing little solitaire games that never worked out.

“You used to have dreams, remember?” he asked suddenly. “Real ones. Not bullshit like, ‘I’ll cut down on drinking,’ but the big ones. ‘I’ll write a book,’ ‘I’ll travel,’ ‘I’ll do something with music.’ Anything that doesn’t end at a bar.” I stared at him as if he’d diagnosed me with an illness. “Dreams are for people who still look halfway decent,” I said. “For me, it’s just a way of storing my body.” He laid a beer mat across the others. “You still look good enough to hate yourself,” he said. “That’s enough.”

As the first birds outside began to whistle meaninglessly into the dawn, I was still awake. My eyes burned, but not from tiredness. More from that kind of clarity you get when you stare too long in a mirror. I went out briefly onto the balcony, if you could call it that. A concrete ledge with a rusty railing, overlooking garbage cans and the backs of buildings. That was my view. The sky grew paler, not brighter. I lit a cigarette, the last one from the pack, as if I were handing myself the gun.

“You could just stay lying down, not go to the store today,” said the goblin, perched on the railing, unafraid of falling. “Let’s see what happens when you watch yourself awake.” I gave a dry laugh. “Being awake is the problem,” I said. “When I’m sober, I panic. When I’m

drunk, my body panics. I can only choose between two kinds of fear.” He nodded, as if it were a profound insight he’d jot down if he had a notebook.

As the city finally awoke and the first cars began to inch their way through the narrow streets, I was still standing on that balcony. Three, maybe four hours without sleep. For normal people, that's a bad start to the day. For me, it was just a postponement of disaster. I went back inside, took a quick shower, cold water on tired flesh. In the mirror, I looked like someone who hadn't had a proper night's sleep in years. Maybe that was even true.

The funny thing was: I was tired, but not exhausted. There was an energy inside me that wasn't healthy. A nervous, scratchy force that said, "Come on, we always said we were tough. Let's prove it." So I got dressed, somehow, crammed myself into this shell of T-shirt, jeans, and jacket that by now smelled more of smoke and beer than of a person. The goblin jumped onto my shoulder. "Into the fray," he said. "Three nights without sleep is a challenge, not a punishment." "Shut up," I replied. But I went. Of course I went.

In the pub, the landlord looked at me and raised an eyebrow. "You look like you've been through the night and lost," he said. I sat down in my seat. "The night was just giving me a hard time," I said. "I'm still standing." The waitress placed a coffee glass in front of me before bringing me the beer. Coffee. A rare occurrence in my life. I looked at the dark stuff as if it were an experiment. "On the house," she said. "You look like this might help you more than the other thing." The goblin perched on the rim of the coffee glass, grimacing. "Poison," he said. "Different poison, but poison too."

I drank the coffee first. It tasted burnt, bitter, dishonest. But after a few sips, I felt my heart race even faster, the nerves in my fingers begin to tingle. The tiredness didn't lessen; it was simply intensified. Then came the beer, like an old friend trying to salvage the mood. And so there I sat, between two kinds of stimulants, pretending it was a strategy and not just stupidity in two glasses.

The first sleepless night is manageable if you've got enough alcohol in your system and the city is loud enough. You tell yourself you're just "out of it," staying up all night sounds like youth, like stories you could tell someone, if you still had someone. But deep down, I knew this wasn't a story for later. This was just the beginning of something that would drag me further down. The only question was, how long would the fall last?

The goblin eventually stood behind the bar, next to the innkeeper, and looked at me as if I were a documentary he'd already seen but was still watching. "The first night," he said quietly, more to himself than to me. "The first night is always the easiest. The second eats your brain, the third eats what's left. Let's see how much of you is left after that." I pretended not to hear him. But his words cut through my weariness like a thin knife blade.

The sun eventually rose high, but it was still dark in the pub. I was still sitting there, tiredness like a thick blanket under which someone was poking me with needles. And I knew: This was only the beginning.

The second night didn't arrive like a surprise guest; it had been hanging in the air all day. I dragged myself through the hours like a bad extra in a film with no lines. Eventually, I was back in my apartment, without knowing exactly how I'd gotten there. Footsteps become blurred when you walk the same paths a thousand times. The body finds its way on its own, even if the mind has long since left the scene.

I sat down in the chair, which was slowly beginning to mold to my shape. The goblin was unusually quiet. He sat on the table, next to an ashtray that looked like a mass grave for decisions, and studied me. "You should sleep," he said finally. "You get weird if you stay up too late." I laughed, a dry, barking sound. "I was weird before you showed up," I said. "You're just the icing on the stale cake." He grinned crookedly, but it wasn't his usual triumphant grin. There was a hint of curiosity in it, maybe even concern, if he was capable of such a thing.

I lay down, again in that same corpse-like arrangement on the bed. Eyes closed. The darkness behind my eyelids wasn't darkness at all. There were images, not clear, more like shadows that had forgotten what they belonged to. A few faces, voices, a hand shaking me, sometime in the past. I turned onto my side, then the other, up the covers, down the covers. Nothing. My body was tired, but my mind had locked itself in some back room and was running in circles there.

Eventually I got up again and looked at the clock. Two in the morning. Or four. The numbers blurred, like everything else. I opened the window, letting in cold air that smelled of metal and garbage. The goblin was standing next to me. "You know what's coming," he said. "You try to drink yourself tired. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't. But you can't help it, can you?" I glanced at the empty bottle on the table, the next one beside it. A reserve I'd saved for "worse days." As if today wasn't a bad day.

The first sip hurt. Not that pleasant burning sensation you eventually come to love, but a nasty cut across your throat. My stomach protested, my head applauded. The goblin watched with folded hands. "You're taking sleeping pills that aren't really sleeping pills," he commented. "You know that with every sip you're telling your body, 'We'll sleep later, let's buy a little more madness.'" I kept drinking because I had no other idea. The thoughts didn't quiet down, they just grew heavier. They settled on my shoulders, making it harder to stand up straight.

At some point, I went outside. It was one of those decisions you make without thinking. Suddenly you're standing in the doorway, jacket on, wondering why you have your keys and a cigarette in your hand. The city at night is a different animal. During the day, it pretends to be busy, to function. At night, it bares its real teeth. I wandered aimlessly, the streetlights flickering as if they were intoxicated by their own stupor. The goblin walked along the railing of a bridge spanning a stinking canal, whistling a tune that sounded like an old black-and-white film.

On a corner where I rarely lingered, there was another pub. Smaller, darker, with no windows facing outside. Just a red sign that said "Bar," as if it were a threat. I didn't know when I'd opened the door, but suddenly I was inside. The air smelled of stale smoke, cheap perfume, and that sour smell of too much alcohol in the carpet. Behind the bar was a woman, older than the other one from the "harbor," with hair that had once been blonde and was now the color of cigarette filters. She looked at me, and there was this probing in her eyes: one of the passers-by or one of the regulars?

“Late for a new guy,” she said. I sat down on a stool that didn’t look very trustworthy. “Or early,” I replied. “Depends on how you look at it.” The goblin was instantly on the counter, fascinated. New glasses, new despair, a fresh ecosystem. “What can I get you?” she asked. I thought for a moment, out of politeness. “Whiskey,” I said then. “The cheap one.” She nodded, as if she’d expected nothing less. The glass she placed in front of me was small, thick-walled, one of those brave ones that have to endure a lot.

The hours that followed are like a film in my head, with two-thirds of the reels cut out. I remember the first glass, the second, a conversation with a guy who claimed to have used to go to a boxing club. His nose actually looked like it had once been straight. I remember a song on the jukebox, something with guitars, that was too loud. I remember the goblin perched on a lamp, laughing, while someone below him tried not to swallow their own tongue. And then—nothing. A hole. Black. No dream, no images, just a scratching abyss.

When I came to, I wasn't in my bed. I was lying on a bench in some playground that had clearly seen better days. The sky was gray, but brighter, the air cold. My back ached as if I'd been sleeping on a drawer. The goblin stood over me, arms folded. "Well," he said. "Welcome to the Gap." I sat up slowly, everything inside me creaking. "What Gap?" I asked. "Between yesterday and today," he said. "Second night without sleep, first night without memory."

My hands trembled slightly, not from the cold. I felt through my pockets. No money left, cigarettes empty, my phone somehow still there—a miracle. I didn't know what time it was; I only knew that I hadn't really slept a single minute. At most, I'd drifted off, now and then, but more like a power outage than actual sleep. "You danced," the goblin said, "with people who don't have names. You told stories you wouldn't even want to remember if you were sober. You promised to come back tomorrow. As if you'll even know where you were today."

I stood up, the ground swayed briefly, then settled. My mind was quieter, but it wasn't a good kind of quiet. It was the calm before some kind of inner storm. My body was tired, my head empty, and somewhere in between was a thin thread of panic. "Maybe I'll just lie down here and stay," I said. "Until someone carries me away." The goblin shook his head. "That's not how you work," he said. "You want to see how far you can go before someone says 'Too late.'"

I dragged myself home, each step a small confession: I'd overdone it. Once home, I could theoretically have collapsed into bed. Instead, I stood in the kitchen, staring at the sink as if it had hurt me. The little imp climbed onto the faucet. "Lie down," he said, almost gently. "You can manage another night without sleep. But your heart is starting to ask questions." I could actually feel it, that irregular thumping, that fluttering. I'd never been the type to panic about doctors, but suddenly I had this image in my mind of a sterile room where some white coat was saying, "You should have..."

“You’re still young enough to die,” said the goblin, as if he’d read my mind. “Better than morphine and diapers, isn’t it?” I laughed because I had no other choice. “Three nights,” I muttered. “Three nights without sleep. I bet you’ll come up with a punchline for that.” He grinned and jumped off the tap. “The punchline will come on its own,” he said. “You just have to keep it waiting long enough.”

And so the second night passed without me truly being there. Awake, but not alive. And somewhere in between, I lost half of what had happened. The only thing that remained was the tiredness, which clung to my bones like lead – and the goblin, who looked as if he was really enjoying himself.

The third night wasn't a night anymore; it was a state of being. The day before had already been a kind of prelude to catastrophe. I dragged myself back to the "Late Light" because I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. At home, there was only silence and the furniture, which had memorized my face. On the street, there was movement, but no stability. At least the pub offered routine. The landlord nodded, the waitress looked at me as if she were slowly

counting how many more times I could come in like this. "You look awful," she said. "New trend," I replied. "It's going to be huge." The goblin laughed.

I sat down at the bar, not at my usual table. The regulars' table was too far away today, too round, too crowded with people I couldn't stand. The bartender wordlessly placed a beer in front of me, then a coffee, then another coffee. "When was the last time you really slept?" he asked at some point. I had to think about it. When you have to think, the answer is always "too long ago." "I don't know," I said. "A few days ago." The imp perched on my beer glass. "Three nights without sleep," he said. "You're starting to look like me."

The sounds in the pub became strange. The laughter at the slot machine sounded like someone dragging a bucket of nails across the floor. The glasses clinked in an off-beat rhythm. The voices were too loud and too quiet at the same time, as if someone were constantly adjusting the volume. The neon light above the bar flickered, no worse than usual, but my brain turned it into a little light show. I saw the goblin double, then single again, then somehow too big.

“Now it gets interesting,” he said. “You’re on the edge. Just a little more, and I won’t even have to explain what I am. Then you’ll see me whether you like it or not.” I drank because I couldn’t do anything else. The beer tasted like metal, the whiskey like a medicine cabinet. The waitress eventually put a glass of water in front of me. “If you collapse here, you’ll have to lie in my way,” she said. “We don’t have an ambulance service included.” I lifted the glass and took a sip. It felt like I was diluting poison.

The evening dragged on endlessly. It got later, but I lost all sense of time for hours. Images drifted past me, distorted, like in a bad dream: Harry raising his glass, Heiner laughing and suddenly losing his train of thought, Manni babbling about "poor sleep hygiene" as if he'd overheard the phrase somewhere. I heard them, but they didn't register properly. Everything was as if I were looking through a pane of glass on which someone had smeared a very thin layer of alcohol.

At some point, the floor began to breathe. Very slightly, but noticeably. The stool beneath me wobbled, even though I was sitting still. I looked at the goblin, wanting to tell him to stop shaking the room, but he had nothing to do with it. He just stared at me, almost pityingly. "You're past that point," he said. "Now your mind is getting the sleep you've been denying it. Only in its own way." I blinked, and suddenly my hand wasn't mine anymore. It moved in slow motion, the glass was heavy as concrete, the counter farther away than it should have been.

The waitress suddenly stood closer, her eyes much too large. "Are you okay?" she asked, her voice muffled as if coming through cotton wool. I tried to nod, but my head just bobbed. "Maybe you should for today..." she began, but the sentence was lost in a noise that sounded like a train passing through my skull. The goblin waved to her. "Don't bother," he said, though of course she couldn't hear him. "He's at the special performance."

Then suddenly I wasn't in the pub anymore. At least not the one everyone else saw. I was still sitting on the stool, but the bar was gone, the room longer, darker, the glasses hanging in the air. They floated, hundreds, thousands, all half-full, all trembling. The goblin stood in the middle of the room, taller than usual, almost at my height. "Welcome," he said broadly, "to your private cinema." I wanted to say something, "Are you crazy?" or "What is this place?", but my tongue was heavy, the words stuck to my teeth like old chewing gum.

The glasses began to talk. Not in words, more in sounds, but I understood them nonetheless. Each glass represented an evening, a decision, a "just one more," a missed opportunity. They clinked, lamented, laughed, and shouted. A chorus of everything I'd poured into myself over the past few years. Some I knew: the thick glass from "The Harbor," the thin one from the old office pub, the pitcher from my regular table. Others were strangers, but they acted as if they had a right to me. "You used us," they clinked. "Now we're using you."

The goblin walked between the floating glasses, nudged one, and watched the liquid inside slosh in slow motion. "You wanted three nights without sleep," he said. "This is the price you pay. Your brain has too many images, too many sounds, too many missed alarms. It needed a place to store it all. So it built a room where you're at my mercy." I tried to get up, but I couldn't move from the stool. My legs were made of stone, or perhaps fear.

"Want to know something?" the goblin asked, stopping right in front of me. His eyes weren't just cheeky anymore, they were old. Older than the pub, older than me, older than all the crap in my life. "You always thought I was just a picture in your head. A little goblin who appears when you drink too much. But it's the other way around. You're the picture. You're the character I chose to pass the time. Three nights without sleep are only special for you. For me, you're just one of many stories."

Something inside me wanted to scream, hit him, do something. Instead, I sat there frozen. The glasses came closer, hovered nearer, their clinking becoming a hum. I saw my reflection in them, distorted, a thousand versions of a face I couldn't stand. "Two nights without memory," the goblin said softly. "And tonight you'll see things you can remember tomorrow, but won't want to. That's the trick."

Suddenly, someone tugged at my shoulder. Roughly, but not maliciously. The glasses vanished, the room shrank, the bar was back, the neon light, the smell of beer and smoke. The waitress stood before me, her fingers clutching my shirt. "Hey," she said. "Stay with me. You passed out." The owner stood behind her, unsure whether to call an ambulance or simply turn off the lights. The goblin was back on the bar, small, normal, grinning. Only his eyes were still the same size as before.

“Everything’s fine,” I managed. My tongue felt like a wet rag. “Just dozed off for a second.” The waitress slowly let go of me, but her hand remained nearby, ready to grab me again. “You weren’t asleep,” the innkeeper said. “You were staring. Completely rigid. Like you saw something we didn’t.” I gave a weak laugh. “Maybe I finally looked in the mirror,” I said. No one laughed.

They gave me another water and sat me down at a table further away from the bar. "You're going straight home," the waitress said. "Otherwise, I'll really call someone." The imp sat down opposite me, legs crossed, as if this were a job interview. "So," he said. "Three nights without sleep, two with no memory. Congratulations. You've had your first real dance with the abyss. How was it?" I looked at him, and for the first time in a long time, I didn't just feel self-loathing and resignation. There was something else. A small, ugly fear.

“If I continue,” I said slowly, “I won’t survive.” The goblin nodded. “Most likely,” he said. “But we were having fun, weren’t we?” I shook my head. “Not anymore,” I muttered. “It’s not funny anymore.” He shrugged. “Humor is subjective,” he said. “I still think it’s great.”

On the way home, I stumbled more than I walked. The sky was black and empty, no stars, just that stupid, yellowish glow of the city. In my mind, the floating glasses were still there, their voices, their clinking. Three nights without sleep, two of them erased, the third seared in like a brand. The goblin walked beside me, maybe a half step too close. "You can decide now," he said. "We can go even deeper. Or you can pretend you've learned something. In the end, you'll just end up back at the bar anyway."

I didn't answer. I no longer had the strength for grand pronouncements. At home, I didn't fall into bed. I lay down slowly, as if afraid of scaring the mattress. My body trembled, my head buzzed, but somewhere deep inside, there was a point that simply switched off. No prayer, no good intentions, just a final "We'll see if I even wake up tomorrow." The goblin sat on the edge of the bed and watched as my eyes finally closed.

"Sleep," he whispered. "We'll need you again tomorrow. The next round is already waiting."

Chapter 7 – The Goblin and the Waitress with the Tired Eyes

She was already there before the goblin decided to make himself visible. The waitress with the tired eyes. I don't remember exactly when she started working at the "Late Light." She was just there one day, like a new stain on the wall that you initially ignore until you realize it's staring back at you. She wasn't old, but her gaze was. Those eyes had seen too many evenings of men clutching glasses like they were concrete life preservers. And something in her face said: I might have grabbed onto one of those rings once, but I realized in time that it was dragging me down.

The goblin took to her immediately. That should have made me suspicious. He usually prefers to hang out with the weak, with those who are already half-drunk, with people like me. But the first time she lugged a case of beer over the threshold, he stood on the bar, watched her, and grinned. "She's got something," he said. "She's not completely broken yet, but she's cracked. This is the best phase. This is when it's decided whether she comes down to you or stays upstairs and brings you the drinks."

She had dark hair, which she usually wore tied back, not for style, but for practicality. A ponytail that hung a little lower each evening. Her hands were slender, only the knuckles slightly thickened from lugging, carrying, and wiping. She moved quickly, but not frantically, more as if she'd learned that every second can feel long when you spend it in a pub. Her voice was calm, sometimes even soft, but if someone made one too many remarks, it would acquire that edge that silences men who still possess a shred of dignity.

The goblin followed her around like a stray dog. When she balanced trays, he sat on the edge, rocking along. When she opened and closed the cash register, he squatted beside it, pretending to count the money. Once, when she lit a cigarette during a quiet moment, he sat right on her shoulder, so close his small mouth was almost at her ear. "You could just sit here and have a drink with me," he whispered, more out of habit than hope. She inhaled the smoke deeply, blew it into the room, and said quietly to herself, "Not here. Not like this."

“She can’t hear you,” I said. I was sitting on my stool, which by now had seen more of my ass than any bed. The goblin turned his head toward me, his little eyes twinkling. “You’re so

arrogant," he said. "Always this idea that just because you can hear me, you're something special. She doesn't hear me with her ears, bro. She hears me where you first heard me." He tapped his chest. "In there, where peace resides before it gets drunk."

I knew what he meant, and that's precisely what I didn't like. I'd been watching her long before I admitted I was watching her. The way she smiled when she was actually tired. The way she gave names to people who never told her hers. The way she sometimes lingered by the door a moment longer at the end of her shift, as if reminding herself that there was another world out there. One without a counter in between.

"How long has she been here?" I asked the innkeeper once, when the two of us were in the shop, just before opening, the floor still damp from mopping. He wiped over a stain that never came out and shrugged. "A few years," he said. "Time feels different in here. Three years feels like six, six like ten. If you stand here long enough, people's faces become like wallpaper. And you can't tear wallpaper off so easily." The goblin stood under the table, feeling the floor as if searching for roots.

Sometimes, when things were quiet, she'd lean against the counter, just for a moment, as if testing whether her back was still there. I usually sat there, like part of the furniture, smoking. "So, life's busy?" she asked once, half mockingly, half trying to do more than just serve drinks. "I'm busy," I said. "I'm engaged in systematic self-destruction." She snorted. "Maybe you should take some unpaid leave sometime." The goblin applauded. "I like her," he said. "She's got your mouth, only with more brainpower left over."

At a certain point, I started looking out for her. Not like you look out for someone you're trying to save. More like someone who knows how quickly you can slip down the ladder. I saw guys making cheesy lines, hands lingering too long on her back, some trying to buy her off with tips. She did what smart women do in bars: friendly enough to keep the men ordering, tough enough that they didn't think they could take her home. But even the best have moments when their armor cracks.

The goblin saw these cracks. Once, after a particularly shitty night—some kind of rowdy pub birthday brawl, beer spilled all over her blouse, a guy who got too loud and left without paying—she stood in the back corner, near the toilets, took off her apron, and stared at the tiles. The goblin was already there. He was perched on the toilet tank, swinging his legs. "You could just pour yourself a drink," he said to her. "Just one. No one would say anything. On the contrary, most would applaud you. You deserve one."

She rubbed her forehead as if she could push away the tiredness. "Once, and then always," she murmured. "Once, and then always." The goblin looked over at me when I happened to glance in that direction. "Do you hear that?" he said. "She knows the formula. Once and always. You just forgot it at some point." I didn't know whether to be angry or sad about it.

There were nights when she would linger for a moment after work. Not with us, not at our usual table, but on a stool at the very edge, almost in the doorway. She drank cola or water, rarely a spritzer. I saw how her gaze softened when she looked out into the empty room. The imp would sometimes sit down next to her, right on the counter. "You see everything," he once said to her. "You see them fall, see them lie, see them disappear. Has it never occurred to you that it would be easier to just join in?"

She rested her chin in her hand and sighed. "If I start drinking," she said quietly, "who's going to make sure anyone can walk straight?" The goblin laughed, genuinely surprised. "That's sweet," he said. "She thinks she's important." I looked at her and thought: Maybe she is. Not to the world, not even to the place. But for me, who'd been surrounded by broken people for years, she was something like proof that you can be in the shit and still not wallow in it.

And that's precisely why she frightened him. I noticed it, even though he never admitted it. The goblin liked her—but he liked her the way a player likes an opponent he hasn't yet beaten.

It was one of those nights when the place was too crowded to stay quiet, and too empty to really have a good atmosphere. The kind of night where everyone's annoying because no one's really in a state of ecstasy or a coma. I was sitting on my stool as usual, the beer on the tap, and the waitress was flinging trays around the room like a poorly paid satellite. Sweat glistened on her neck, a strand of hair had come loose from her braid and was stuck to her cheek. Her eyes were heavier than usual; the tiredness wasn't just behind them anymore, it was right there in them.

A guy—mid-forties, broad, not fat, but that gym-and-beer-belly broad look—had settled himself at the other end of the bar. Shirt too tight, watch too big, cologne too strong. I knew the type: important by day, desperate by night. For the past half hour, he'd been pretending to chat with her casually while ordering the next round. Then came that moment I could smell from a hundred meters away. He leaned forward, too close, his hand lingering too long on the bar, just inches from hers. His voice softened, his gaze intensified, that cheap game: "I'm different from the others, I really see you."

The goblin grimaced with pleasure, as if a firework were about to go off. "Come on," he whispered. "Give me a reason to trip him up." He narrowed his eyes, concentrating on his feet. I knew how this would go. One little nudge at the wrong time, a toppled stool, beer in his crotch, and the evening would take a different turn. I was on the verge of just letting him do it. The idea was tempting. The guy was getting on my nerves with an intensity that was physically painful.

The waitress smiled briefly, but I could see it was a work smile, one with the handbrake on. "Another beer?" she asked. "And a shot of schnapps," he said. "But only if you have one with me." The sentence hung between them, heavy as a wet sack. I saw her close her eyes briefly, a millisecond too long to be accidental. Her shoulders slumped slightly. The leprechaun straightened, rocking on his tiptoes. "Now," he whispered. "Now, now, now."

“I’m working,” she said then, her voice calm but with a raspy edge. “If I join in the drinking, I won’t be able to manage the glasses.” The guy laughed, that exaggeratedly loud laugh men let out when they realize they’re making a fool of themselves and try to mask it with aggression. “Oh, come on,” he said. “It’s nothing. I’ll treat you. It’s just a joke.” His hand moved closer, as if searching for its reflection. The little imp was already reaching for the edge of the table, ready to knock something over.

I stood up before I even knew what I was doing. "Boss," I called to the innkeeper, "get me another one. And fill her up too." All three of them looked at me—the innkeeper, the waitress, the guy. The goblin stopped mid-movement, confused. "What do you want now?" he muttered. The innkeeper shrugged, got two shot glasses, and put them down. I grabbed mine before anyone could say anything, raised it, and looked at the waitress. "Cheers," I said.

"Cheers to those who have to work here while we're throwing up all over the place." She looked at me, surprised for a moment, then she understood. Slowly, deliberately, she took the second glass, not the one the guy had just pushed toward her.

We clinked glasses. She took a tiny sip, just enough so no one could say she hadn't. I downed mine like it was some kind of obligation before jumping off a roof. The guy's glass hung in mid-air. "So what about me?" he asked. "You're just paying," I said. "It's your business, isn't it?" A few glances drifted our way. Not many, but enough for him to realize the scene was no longer his alone. He grimaced, then grinned, that cold grin of someone who's figured out he's not the star but is too proud to admit it.

“You’re funny,” he said to me. “You should do stand-up.” “I can’t stand that long,” I said. The guy burst out laughing and fell backward onto the tap. The waitress put her glass down, glanced at me briefly, and gave a barely perceptible nod. No big thank you, no dramatic words. Just a small sign: seen, understood, dealt with. She turned around and carried on. The guy ordered another beer, but his tone was different. A little quieter.

Before I could even savor my triumph—if you could call it that—the leprechaun was upon me. He jumped onto my stool, hands on his hips. "What was that all about?" he hissed. "I almost had him. Two more snide remarks and she might actually have joined me for a drink. And you, you moral nuisance, throw yourself in the way." I lit a cigarette, my fingers trembling slightly, and not just from the alcohol. "I'm not going to watch you pick up someone new," I said. "It's enough that you're inside me."

He looked at me. For a moment there was no mockery, no grin. Just a very old look in a very small face. "You don't understand how this works," he said slowly. "I don't fish for anyone. I just sit there when you fall in my direction. She's been standing on the edge for years. Today she could have taken a step. For me, that would have been a bonus. For her, maybe a shortcut. You saved her the step. Today. Not tomorrow."

I thought about it. Had I really helped her – or just wanted to make myself feel important? Heroic in a small way, so I could continue to mess everything up on a larger scale. The waitress made her rounds, the guy at the end of the bar found another victim for his rants, the owner pretended he hadn't noticed. Life went on as if nothing had happened. But something was different. I had drawn a line, for once not with myself, but with someone else.

Later, as the shop emptied and the music just bubbled in the background, she walked past me on her way to the back. She stopped, paused for a moment. Her eyes were still tired, but there was a little twinkle in them that I rarely saw. "You know you're no knight in shining armor, right?" she said. "More like a horse that's run into a wall one too many times." I had to laugh. "Armor is too heavy for me," I said. "I've got enough to carry." She smiled. "Still," she murmured, "that just now... wasn't completely awful."

The goblin grimaced as if someone had watered down his beer. "It's starting to stink," he said. "You two are starting to get along. That's bad for business." I looked at him. "For your business, maybe," I said. "But not for mine. I need at least one person in here who isn't dying every night at the same rate as me."

He jumped off my stool and paced back and forth on the counter. "Watch this," he said. "If she falls, it'll be ugly. The longer someone holds on, the harder they fall. And you'll be watching. You'll be the first one to pour her a drink if she ever says, 'Screw it, I'll have a drink

with her today.'" I shook my head, maybe too vigorously, maybe more to convince myself. "No," I said. "You'll do it. You're better at it than that."

The goblin grinned again, his usual grin. "Oh, I know that," he said. "I'm just waiting too. I have time. You don't."

And then I understood: It wasn't just my struggle, not just my downfall. It was a silent competition between me and that little bastard. Who would lose whom first. I wanted to lose myself, he wanted to gain her. And right in the middle of it all stood the waitress with the tired eyes, filling the glasses as if none of it concerned her.

It was clear that there would come a night when she drank. No one works in a bar for years without the glass eventually getting closer than it should. You can stay away from the bar for a long time, but there are days that break the last shred of resistance. For her, it was a Monday, of course. Mondays have a knack for explaining things you don't want to know.

The place was emptier than usual. Rain lashed against the windows outside, as if trying to let in a few last illusions, but no one answered. At the regulars' table, only Heiner, half-asleep, his forehead in his hand. Harry was sick, Manni hadn't shown up. A slot machine player at the far end of the bar stared more at the flashing lights than he actually played. Me, on my stool, with a mixture of lingering hangover and that feeling that the day had been too long before it had even properly begun.

The goblin was restless. He paced back and forth like a rat in a cage that was too small. He counted the drops on the window, the glasses on the shelf, the cigarettes in the vending machine. "Today's one of those days," he said. "I can feel it. Something's going to go wrong today." I took a sip and watched the waitress count the cash, even though there was hardly anything to count. Her shoulders were lower than usual, her hair in a loose bun that looked as fed up with the day as she was.

Her phone rang at some point. She looked at it; the screen briefly blurred her face, then it reappeared, only harsher. She took a few steps to the side, just far enough away that we couldn't hear her words, but close enough that we could see her every move. I saw her back tense, then slump. One hand on her hip, the other on her phone, silent. No grand gestures, no shouting. Just a quiet "Yes," "Okay," and "I understand," which could be discerned even without sound.

When she hung up, she wasn't just tired anymore. She was empty. That kind of emptiness that's dangerous because it swallows up everything in sight. The goblin jumped onto the counter between us immediately. "Now," he whispered. "Now give her one. Now one drop is enough to swallow the rest." I pressed my lips together. "Shut up," I said. "You've got enough of me to feed on." He laughed coldly. "You're overestimating yourself," he said. "I'm a heavy drinker."

She came back, put her phone on the cash register as if it were heavy. Her eyes were shining, but she wasn't crying. Crying is a form of movement. She was beyond movement. The bartender looked up, realized something was up. "Everything okay?" he asked, sounding as helpless as it sounded. She nodded automatically. "Sure," she said. "Everything's great." The slot machine player in the back was the only one who believed it. The imp climbed up the side of the tap and sat down right next to it. "Come on," he muttered. "Tell the old man to get you one. Just one. For your nerves. He won't say no. He knows exactly how it feels."

She turned around, fetched a glass—her glass, the one she usually used for cola. She set it down, reached for the cola, and paused. Her hand hovered in the air for a moment, that one second when everything is possible. The goblin held her breath. So did I. Then she left the cola and reached instead for the bottle of cheap liqueur, the kind only people who wanted to marinate their lives in sugar and alcohol usually ordered. She poured it, slowly, deliberately, as if performing surgery. The smell of artificial vanilla and alcohol mingled with the smoke.

“There,” whispered the goblin. “See? It’s not difficult.” The innkeeper pretended not to see it, and that was precisely his mistake. “House rules,” he could have said. “Not while you work here.” Some kind of statement. Instead, he polished a glass that was already clean, a man pretending the sound of the cloth drowns out anything. The waitress took her glass, raised it briefly without clinking glasses, and took a sip. Not a flinch, not a cough. She was too seasoned for that. The first sip went down like an old friend.

I felt the goblin grinning beside my ear. "And you wanted to save her," he sneered. "As if you were in a position to save anyone from anything." I stood up and went to the bar, not quite sure what I was supposed to do there. "Write mine down too," I said to the bartender. "Which one?" he asked. "The one you're about to pour for her," I said. She looked at me. Her eyes weren't just tired anymore; they had that glassy gleam that's more than tears. The gleam that says: I don't care about anything right now, and that's more dangerous than anger.

“You don’t have to play the hero every time,” she said, quietly but sharply. “Maybe I just want a drink. Like everyone else here.” The leprechaun applauded enthusiastically. “Yes!” he shouted. “Tell him! You’re not better. You’re not holier. You’re just tired. Tired people have rights.” I looked at her, trying not to climb over the barrier of counter, glasses, and all the crap in between. “You’re not like us,” I said. “Not yet.”

“Oh, come on,” she replied. “You’ve been sitting here for years thinking you’re an expert on getting drunk. But maybe I don’t even want to know what you know. Maybe I just don’t want it to hurt so much today.” She took a second, larger sip. The liqueur didn’t seem to bother her. That scared me more than anything else. People who drink badly are harmless. Those who drink well are dangerous. To themselves.

The bartender placed another beer in front of us both. No one said why. It was simply what you did when things got complicated. The goblin danced on the bar, invisible to everyone but me, a small, hysterical silhouette. "That's it," he shouted. "That's the moment. She's starting to explain herself now. 'Just today,' 'Just because things are hard right now,' 'Just because I deserve it.' You remember, don't you? You've been telling yourself that for years."

We drank in silence. I wanted to say something intelligent, or at least something honest. Instead, only half-baked nonsense came out. "Was it family?" I asked. "The ex? Money? Job? Illness?" She shook her head, took another sip. "Do you know what the worst part is?" she finally said. "Not even anything special. Nothing dramatic. Not even a big bang. Just all this little crap. Over and over again. Delayed wages, rent, a letter from the welfare office, a call from a mother asking when you're finally going to do something sensible. And then you're standing here, mopping up the floor that alcohol has ruined, wondering why you're the only one who's still halfway sober. And today I thought: Maybe I've just imagined it all. Maybe I'm just a coward."

The goblin nodded in agreement. "Finally, someone's speaking plainly," he said. "Cowardice is the most honest form of self-awareness." I squeezed the glass tighter. "You're not a

coward," I said. "You stand here every night in the mess we make. You don't leave, you don't give up on us. That's not cowardly. That's..." I searched for a word that didn't sound cheesy but was still true. "Stupid," she helped me. "It's stupid." She smiled wearily. "I don't have the energy for heroic interpretations anymore."

The second liqueur was finished. The third came from a regular who mumbled something about "chin up." She didn't refuse. She usually did. Not today. I saw her movements slow a little, her gaze soften, her shoulders relax. The alcohol embraced her tiredness, and the two of them understood each other. The imp had been lying on the bar for a while now, laughing himself silly. "Do you see her?" he called out. "She's coming over. So gently. No drama. Those are the most beautiful transitions. No crash, just a slow glide."

Eventually, late at night, there were only three of us left in the room: the innkeeper, her, and me. The slot machine player had disappeared; Heiner had somehow stumbled home. The innkeeper turned off the music, leaving only the hum of the refrigerator. "That's it for today," he said. "We'll continue tomorrow." She leaned against the bar, the cloth in her hand, but she wasn't wiping anymore. She stared at a spot on the wall, as if a hole were growing there through which she could disappear.

“Come on,” I said, “I’ll take you home.” She laughed, a short, raspy sound. “You can hardly take yourself home,” she said. “Since when are you a taxi driver?” I stood up, feeling the weariness in my bones. The previous night was still coursing through my veins, the glasses in my head still rattling softly. “Someone who knows how to walk straight in a zigzag,” I said. “That’s more than most people who leave here can do.”

The innkeeper looked back and forth between us, then nodded. "Leave him alone," he said to her. "Otherwise, you'll fall asleep on the bowling alley later." The goblin jumped onto my shoulder and wrapped his legs around my neck. "I'll come with you," he said. "I'd like to see that. Two tired figures on their way home. Maybe I can persuade one of you to just stay in bed along the way."

We went outside, into the damp air, into a city that looked like it'd already had two or three too many. She walked a little ahead of me, her step slightly unsteady, but not embarrassing. No staggering, just a slight sway. "There you go," the goblin murmured in my ear. "She's got it. She's no better than you. She just started later. That's the only difference between you."

I knew he had a point somewhere. And yet: when she put the key in the door and turned briefly to me, there was something in her eyes that I hadn't seen in my own for a long time. No gleam from alcohol, no pride, no defiance. Something else. Something like shame. "Don't tell anyone," she said. "Who?" I asked. "In here, we're just extras in the same shitty performance anyway." She nodded, unlocked the door, and disappeared into the stairwell.

The goblin chuckled. "That was the beginning," he said as we stepped back into the night. "You saw two things today: how someone comes over—and that you can't stop them. Remember that. It'll be important." I paused for a moment, looking at the dark windows behind which she now was. "Maybe she'll go back," I said. "Maybe today was just a fluke." He shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe not. But believe me, buddy: I've rarely seen anyone open the door to glass once and then politely usher it right back out."

On my way home, I thought about how he had first moved in with me. The day the little imp moved in hadn't been a bang. It was a slow movement, barely noticeable. And I wondered if I

had just witnessed that with her. The first step. The moment when you believe: Only today. Only because it hurts. Only because I deserve it.

And somewhere between the wet cobblestones and the flickering neon light, I quietly swore to myself that, stupid as I am, I would not be the one to put the next glass in front of her.

The goblin just laughed. "You'll try," he said. "And I'll stand in your way. This is our little war, friend. You against me. And in the middle of it all, a woman with tired eyes who really just wants to be left in peace."

Chapter 8 – How to Move Your Life to a Pub

Some people misplace their keys or wallet. I started misplacing entire days at some point. And then weeks. And then what some generously call "life." If you sit in the same pub long enough, your clock stops following the sun and starts following the beer tap. And if you're unlucky, you don't even notice because you think you're "just there for one beer." A beer is a unit that only exists in advertising. In reality, a beer is always a door, behind which the next one is already waiting.

The imp claims he can pinpoint exactly when it all started. When I checked my life into the "Late Light" pub like a coat at the cloakroom, without a receipt. "That was the evening you first asked if you could pick up your mail here from the landlord," he likes to say. "From then on, it was clear you weren't just a guest. You started storing parts of yourself here." I only have a vague recollection. Something about a letter from the authorities that I didn't want left in the hallway because everything was always getting stolen there. The landlord said, "Leave it here, I'll put it under the cash register." And I thought: Great, problem solved. All I'd done was drag the first box of my life down to the cellar here.

It started with little things. First, it was the mail. Then, at some point, I left my spare key with the innkeeper. "In case you lock yourself out again," he said. It was well-intentioned. Later, T-shirts were left behind. A jacket. One summer evening, I took it off, hung it on the coat rack, and in the autumn, it was still there, dustier, one sleeve slightly torn, as if it had tried to run away. "You have more stuff here than at home," the waitress said at some point. I shrugged. "Well, I'm here quite often," I replied. She rolled her eyes. Hers were tired, but not stupid.

The imp turned it into a game. "Look," he said, counting on his fingers. "Letters at the inn, clothes in the cloakroom, a few thoughts at the regulars' table, the rest in bottles. What exactly is still in your apartment? Just your body when the place is closed." It was hard to argue with him. I woke up, took a sip of water, smoked a cigarette, and was already mentally on a stool in the pub. Everything in between—the tram, the stairwell, the mailbox—was just a hallway.

One morning, I was in the shop during daylight for once, and the owner was standing behind the counter with a cardboard box. "This is all yours," he said, without any drama. "I'm starting to run out of room." He put the box on the counter. The little imp immediately jumped in and rummaged through it enthusiastically. On top were letters, unopened, bureaucratic jargon, from the health insurance company, reminders, something from the pension office, who wanted to know if I even planned on getting old. Underneath were a few photos from a time

when I didn't have such gray edges. An old cassette tape on which I'd recorded something at some point. A notebook with blank pages, except for three, which were labeled: "Ideas," "Plan," "Later." All three pages blank. Then a T-shirt that I'd once liked, before it smelled of grease and smoke.

“Since when have you been collecting my leftovers?” I asked. The innkeeper shrugged. “Since I started noticing,” he said. “At first it was funny. ‘Haha, Rainer left something behind again.’ Then it wasn’t funny anymore. Then it was just a lot.” The imp held up a photo of me standing next to some guy at a festival, plastic cup in hand, big mouth in my eyes. “Look, when you used to drink somewhere else,” he said. “It almost looks romantic. Without me, you were really boring.”

I leafed through the letters without opening them. The senders alone said everything I didn't want to know. "Why are you giving me this stuff anyway?" I asked the innkeeper. "You could just throw it away." "I wanted to," he said. "I already did. Some of it. But then I thought, maybe someday you'll need proof that you once existed outside of here. That a part of you tried to knock somewhere else." He went back to polishing glasses as if he hadn't said anything important. The goblin watched him go. "The old man is more afraid for your life than you are," he murmured. "It's almost touching."

I picked up the notebook and opened it to a blank page. The pen in my hand felt like a strange object. "What are you writing?" the goblin asked. "The drinks menu of your downfall?" I wrote, "What I still have outside the pub," and the space below remained blank for a moment. I stared at the sentence as if it were mocking me. Then I wrote, "An apartment that doesn't ask when I'm coming. A mailbox fuller than my calendar. Two grandchildren too young to notice that their grandpa smells like beer when he hugs them. A liver that wishes it had never moved to this street with me." I put the pen down. I couldn't think of anything else.

The goblin read along as if he could. "You're forgetting the most important thing," he said. "You still have time. Otherwise, you wouldn't need any of this anymore. Time is the only thing you can truly misplace. Money comes and goes, women come and go, jobs come and go. Only time goes. And you put it here on the counter every day and exchange it for foam." I could have said something clever, but I didn't. I ordered a beer. That was my form of reply.

The waitress came, set it down, and looked at the box. "Ah," she said. "The treasure trove." She reached inside and pulled out the cassette. "What's on it?" I couldn't quite remember. Something about a band I used to have. A few songs, badly recorded, big dreams in small tones. "Play it," the imp said. "Come on, I want to hear what you sounded like before I moved in." The landlord snorted. "I don't have a cassette player anymore," he said. "We're a pub here, not a museum." What a shame.

Sometimes, when I came through the door, I felt like I should ring the bell. Knock. Ask: "May I leave another piece of myself here?" But the door just opened, without resistance, like the neck I later used to press the glass against it. The floor knew my footsteps, the stool knew my ass, the innkeeper knew my order, the goblin knew my excuses. Outside, I was just some random person with a half-rusted name. Inside, I was the guy who forgets his stuff.

“You could relocate your life to a kitchen,” the goblin said once, when we were almost alone. “Or an office. Or a gym, if you were completely insane. People relocate their lives to marriages, clubs, religions. You chose the pub. Not the dumbest choice. At least there’s beer here.” I lit a cigarette and said, “You talk like this was a conscious decision.” He laughed.

“You don’t seriously think you’re important enough to have such a thing as ‘conscious decisions.’ You’re a riverbed. The water just happened to find its way here.”

I looked at the box with my leftovers. Letters, pictures, fabric, paper. All the stuff that was supposed to prove I'd once been more than just a dark silhouette in the pub window. "Take that box with you," the landlord said. "It doesn't belong here." I thought about it for a moment, then pushed it aside. "Put it in the back," I said. "If you ever throw me out, I'll take it with me." He nodded slowly. "If," he said. "Not if you leave. If I throw you out. You see the difference, don't you?" The goblin chuckled. "He knows you," he said. "Maybe better than you know yourself."

It was the day it finally dawned on me: I hadn't completely lost my life. I knew pretty much exactly where it was. In a cardboard box behind the counter, among leftover liquor and a box of ashtrays. The only question was whether I would ever want to retrieve it.

There's this invisible boundary between inside and outside. During the day, you can barely see it; at night, it's clear: the threshold, the door, the jolt when the air changes. Outside, it smells of exhaust fumes, wet concrete, dog poop, bakery, depending on the time of day. Inside, it smells of beer, smoke, disinfectant, and abandoned plans. At first, you consciously cross it, like a child crossing a curb, thinking, "Don't step on the lines!" Later, you don't even notice that you're changing sides. You're simply there. Like a piece of furniture that no one brought in, but that's suddenly standing in the corner.

The goblin claims he sits right on that border. "I live in the doorway," he says. "Here I see both sides at once. Those coming in and those going out. Most of the time it's the same people." His favorite spot is right at the top of the wooden beam above the door. From there he looks down like a grumpy, miniature bouncer. "Look," he likes to say, "here comes another one who just wants to pop in for a nightcap. If he knew how long that last drink would last, he'd stay outside."

There are some people you never see outside. Only inside. You'd think they had no apartment, no family, no job, no other purpose. They simply materialize on their stool at a certain point in the day, sit there, drink, spout their lines, and dissolve again at night. If you happen to bump into them in daylight, on the street or in the supermarket, it takes you a second to recognize them. Without glass, without a bar, without dim lighting, they look like a caricature of themselves.

I felt the same way at some point. The waitress once said, "I saw you at the bus stop the other day and had to do a double take. I only recognized you by the way you were standing there, like you were waiting for a cigarette you couldn't buy." The imp was thrilled. "You're officially part of the furniture now," he said. "You're only truly yourself in your natural environment. Outside, you're like a fish out of water." I said, "That's not how the saying goes," and he replied, "Doesn't matter. It still fits."

Over time, I started forgetting things outside because they didn't matter inside. Bills, appointments, return calls, doctor's letters. They were lying around somewhere on the kitchen table, a piece of furniture I only used to stub out cigarettes. The calendar on the wall had stopped, sometime in the spring two years ago, at an appointment I'd skipped because I'd "only" wanted to pop into the "last light" room. It was still there, with a cross next to "dentist" that was never followed. Instead, I marked days in it—not on paper, but in jars.

"How do you relocate your life to a pub?" the goblin once asked me, as if it were a theoretical question. "Step by step or in one big leap?" I said, "First you stumble in, then you get stuck on something." He nodded. "Exactly," he said. "You come in because you've had a shitty day. Or one that was too good. Or no day at all. Then you sit down. By the third time, the landlord knows you. By the tenth time, your stool knows you. By the twentieth time, nobody asks why you're there anymore. And by the fiftieth time, you leave feeling like you only popped out for cigarettes, even though three years have passed."

There were days when I not only wasted time here, but also entire decisions. I'd tell myself, "I'll talk to the boss tomorrow," and instead of talking to the boss, I talked to a glass. I'd tell myself, "I'll call my daughter," and instead, I talked to the landlord about beer prices. I'd tell myself, "I'll go out to the park again," and in the end, I was sitting in front of the jukebox again, which was playing the same playlist as every other evening. It's amazing how much you don't do when you have the option to stay.

The waitress eventually recognized the pattern. "Nothing ever happens to you outside this place anymore, does it?" she asked. "Everything important either comes in here or doesn't come out at all." I shrugged. "What could possibly happen outside?" I said. "Out there are government offices, employers, and people sober enough to remember my face when I've messed up. In here, at most, there are forgotten rounds and embarrassing stories, but those will be lost in the next round of drinks." The goblin nodded in agreement. "He's figured out how the system works," he said proudly, as if he'd just given a lesson.

One evening, a man I hadn't seen in ages came in. We used to work together. Warehouse number two, dirty jokes during breaks, cigarettes outside the gate. He stared at me for a moment, as if trying to detach my outline from the wall. "Dude," he said, "I thought you'd moved away. You're never around." I gave a dry laugh. "I moved away," I said. "Here." He looked around, half-caught, and shook his head. "Crazy," he said. "At least you weren't reachable at home before. At least you're reachable here now." The waitress put a beer in front of him, and the imp chuckled.

“You could just not come for two weeks,” she said later, after the guy had left. “Just to see if the place misses you.” “And if it doesn’t?” I asked. “At least then you’ll know where you stand,” she replied. “And if it does,” the goblin chimed in, “then you’ll have a great excuse never to change anything again.” I thought about it for a moment. Two weeks without “Late Light.” Two weeks in which I’d have to go somewhere else in the evenings. To my apartment. To a park. To another shop. It was like the thought of going abroad for someone who never leaves the city limits.

Once, when my lease was almost terminated because I hadn't opened the mailbox for a month, the landlord came to the bar with an envelope. "It was at my place," he said. "The postman was looking for you here. Said this was the most likely place to be." The imp laughed and patted me on the shoulder. "See?" he said. "Even the post office knows where you really live now." I tore open the envelope, read two sentences that included "without notice" and "eviction," and then put it under my beer. The landlord looked at me. "Sort it out," he said. "I don't have room for you on the beer garden bench in the cellar."

“You could sleep here,” the imp suggested later, when I was slumped over the stool, half-drunk. “In the back, by the crates. Between the beer and the cleaning supplies. It would be honest. No more drama with an apartment, a mailbox, neighbors. Just you and the place. A perfect relationship.” I imagined it for a moment. Waking up in the morning between plastic

chairs that reeked of spilled wheat beer, the first light filtering through the frosted glass, the landlord finding me in the way, the waitress stepping over me to reach the glasses. Something inside me cramped at the image.

“You’ve already moved in here,” the goblin insisted. “You’re just too cowardly to admit it. That’s why you keep this ridiculous apartment, the one you only go to so you don’t die right in front of the pub.” I said nothing. What was there to say? That he was wrong? He wasn’t. That he was right? He was, but that didn’t help me either. The waitress cleared away glasses and tossed a few beer mats with my name on them into the drawer. My other drawer, I thought. The one without cutlery, but with lines.

In moments like these, I knew: I hadn't lost my life. I had deliberately placed it here. Piece by piece. First the evenings, then the contacts, then the responsibilities, then what little dignity remained. It was convenient. You always knew where to find all that crap again when you needed it. The only problem was: I needed it less and less. And when I did need it, it was already damp with beer and smoke, unusable, warped, illegible.

“You could try not coming tomorrow,” the waitress said again, almost as an offer. “Not out of spite, not as a big deal. Just to see what happens.” The goblin grinned. “I bet he’ll come anyway?” he asked me. I looked into my glass, not in her direction. “I bet I’ll come anyway,” I thought. And that’s precisely why I couldn’t help myself.

In the end, you no longer measure your life in years, but in "Do you remember that evening when…". The calendar pages eventually tear themselves away; the body creates its own silent timetable. But evenings in a pub remain like little islands in the fog. Not because they're so special. On the contrary. Because they're all so similar. And that's precisely why the few where something was slightly different stand out like a cigarette burn in a carpet.

There was this one night I remember, even though I don't remember much else. It wasn't even a spectacular evening. No argument, no fight, no dramatic fallout. It was a quiet weekday, the jukebox was playing, but nobody was listening. The imp was sitting on my glass, having fashioned a little hat out of a beer mat. The waitress leaned against the bar for a moment, the landlord was sorting empty crates. And suddenly I thought: If I just don't get up now, I'm practically half dead already—and nobody will notice the difference.

“Aha,” said the goblin, who could read faces like others read newspapers. “Existential phase. Haven’t had one of those in a while. Tell me about it.” I took a sip, looked over the rim of the glass into the room. “You know what’s funny?” I began. “I used to structure my life around breaks. Work, family, obligations, and in between, these evenings when I just wanted to sit and drink. Now sitting and drinking is everyday life, and the rest is just breaks. And they’re getting shorter and shorter.” He nodded. “Normal progression,” he said. “Like with a junkie. At first, the fix is the exception, then it becomes routine.”

The waitress came over and placed a glass of water in front of me without asking. "Here," she said. "For the statistics." I looked at the glass—clear, harmless, honest. "You should drink this more often," she said. "If you ever want to know what you're really like." The goblin grimaced. "Water is an insult," he said. "It washes me away." "Maybe that's the point," I murmured. She raised an eyebrow. "Did he say that, or you?" she asked. I grinned crookedly. "We don't always see eye to eye on these things."

An idea began to take root in my mind, so loud and clumsy that I couldn't drown it in alcohol: What if I really didn't come? For a day. Two. Just not. My body twitched at the thought, as if I'd suggested it stop breathing. But somewhere deeper inside, there was a quiet voice, so quiet it was only audible amidst the noise of the pub: "You could try to get life back out of the box. Not everything, just a piece of it."

“You won’t do it anyway,” said the goblin, who never missed an opportunity to sabotage me. “You’re far too comfortable. Everyone knows you here, no one expects anything. Out there, you constantly have to pretend you have a plan. You can’t do that anymore. And quite frankly, I wouldn’t like it either. I’ve made myself comfortable here. You’re not going to take me to any of your adult education classes or walks in the park.” I actually pictured him for a moment sitting on a park bench, insulting ducks. The thought was so absurd that I had to laugh.

“Do you know what scares me?” I asked the waitress who was changing the ashtray. “When I think about the past, the first thing that comes to mind is what the pub was like back then. Not what my apartment looked like, not what the children smelled like, not what it was like to wake up somewhere different in the morning. The first thing I think about is: Back then we still had the old TV, and the landlord had different beer mats.” She paused, ash between her finger and the metal. “Maybe that’s your way of remembering,” she said. “Other people have photo albums. You have bar counters.”

“He doesn’t even have photo albums anymore,” the goblin chimed in. “They’re all in the back of the box. With beer stains on them. Perfect symbol, if you ask me.” I took a deep sip of water, then a shallower one of beer. Two worlds that don’t touch, but both end up in my stomach. “There are people,” I said, “who later tell their grandchildren about travels, jobs, houses, parties. I might tell them how the glasses here used to sound different, back when the ashtray was still made of glass.”

The thought was painful and funny at the same time. A bad joke with a real sting. "You don't have to," she said. "You could do something else. I'm not saying become a marathon runner. But maybe there's some intermediate step between the bar and the grave." The goblin snorted. "She's getting cheeky," he said. "I'm actually starting to like her." I looked at her. "You work here," I said. "You know exactly how this ends." She shrugged. "I work here," she repeated. "That doesn't mean I'm going to die here." I wasn't sure if she believed that.

Later, when most people had left and only a few lights were still on, I stood in front of the door, a half-smoked cigarette between my fingers. The street was damp, the windows opposite dark. The landlord was locking up, the waitress gave a quick wave, the imp sat on the door sign, dangling his legs. "So?" he asked. "Shall we do it again tomorrow? Same time, same stool, same movie?" I looked at him as if he were a piece of furniture I wanted to sell.

“Not tomorrow,” I said suddenly. The words came out of my mouth before I’d even thought them. “I’m not coming tomorrow.” He blinked. “Excuse me?” “You heard me,” I said. “I’m staying away tomorrow. For one day. One damn day. Just to see if I still exist when you’re not constantly nailing me to the bar.” The goblin started to laugh, slowly, then louder. “Of course you’re coming,” he panted. “You’re saying this now because you’re getting sentimental. Tomorrow you’ll wake up feeling sick, needing a drink, and you’ll come.”

“Wanna bet?” I asked. “On what?” “On nothing,” I said. “I have nothing left. Just this. And that’s exactly why I have to try.” The waitress stepped out at that moment, pulling her jacket

tighter. “What are you betting?” she asked casually. “Whether I stay away tomorrow,” I said. She looked at me, sizing me up. “You won’t make it,” she said. “But I’d like to see if you did.” Then she started walking, in a different direction than me. Her steps sounded lighter than mine, even though she was at least as tired.

At home, in the apartment that smelled more of absence than of me, I sat down at the kitchen table. The box from "Last Light" was next to the chair; I had taken it with me that day, out of some kind of reflexive sense of responsibility. I opened it, pulled out a photo of myself when I was younger, pretending I had time on my hands. Then I placed the photo next to a fresh glass of water. One that couldn't talk. The imp was perched on the back of the chair, arms crossed.

“So no shop tomorrow,” he said. “And then what? What will you do with the whole day?” I looked into the glass of water as if there were a solution floating in it. “I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe nothing at all. Maybe doing nothing outside the pub is already more than I’ve allowed myself in years.” He grinned wearily. “You’ll miss me,” he said. “Not the shop. Me.” “Maybe,” I replied. “But if I really miss you, at least I’ll know you’re really there. Not just in the glass.”

“You’ll still go,” he said more quietly. “You always go where you know each other best.” I leaned back, letting my head fall against the wall. “Maybe,” I murmured. “Maybe not.” The day had been long, the evening longer, life short and yet like chewing gum that no longer tastes of anything.

Before I closed my eyes, I thought one last, almost ridiculously simple sentence: "My life lies in this pub. But I'm not lying next to it yet." It wasn't much. No grand resolution, no salvation, no vow. Just a small, stubborn refusal to be permanently installed in the doorway.

The goblin watched me fall asleep and shook his head. "He's really trying," he whispered into the darkness. "Well, fine. Then tomorrow we'll see what a man looks like who's moved his life to a pub and, for once, actually stays outside."

Chapter 9 – Debts to the Innkeeper and to God

The next morning, I didn't know where I was at first. That often happens when you drink too much, but this time it was different. No ringing, no jackhammer in my head, just this strange emptiness, as if someone had muted the sounds in my brain. I was lying in bed, actually in bed, not half on the floor, not still in the clothes from the night before. That was the first sign that something was wrong. I must have really sat down, drunk the water, and then just... stopped. No last "Just one more." No "I'll just check in for a minute." Nothing.

The curtains were drawn crookedly, light squeezing around the edges. It was too bright for my taste, too honest. I lay there, listening to my body. It felt like an old engine groaning for too little oil, but it was still running. My head was dull, but not completely foggy. A strange feeling. Sobriety with lingering effects. The imp sat on the windowsill, legs dangling, looking out into the courtyard as if waiting for something to happen. "Well," he said finally, without turning around. "Congratulations. You actually managed to go a whole night without crawling to the bar. Do you want a medal, or is the hangover without a beer mat enough for you?"

I turned my head on the pillow, feeling my neck muscles protest. "Shut up," I muttered. "I'll watch this before I decide if I'm proud." He laughed. "Proud," he repeated. "That's cute. You're on the level where people celebrate themselves for not falling into the toilet. But okay. Let's start small." He jumped off the windowsill, landed softly on the floor, and came to the bed. "Do you at least remember what you promised me yesterday?" I closed my eyes. "I said I wasn't coming to the pub today." "Right," he said. "And I said, 'I bet you'll come anyway.'"

I sat up slowly, everything creaking and groaning. "We'll see," I said. "I have other debts to pay off." The word had slipped out. Debts. It hung in the air, heavy and sticky. The goblin immediately seized it. "Now it's getting interesting," he said. "Debts to whom? The innkeeper? To yourself? To God?" I snorted. "I don't believe in God," I said. "I believe in unpaid bills and late fees." "God doesn't believe in you either," he grinned. "Now you're even."

The box from "Last Light" sat on the kitchen table, just as I'd left it yesterday. A silent witness to my big and small resolutions. I put the kettle on, and coffee, on principle, even though my stomach was still arguing. The imp climbed onto the back of the chair and let his gaze wander over the unopened letters as if they were a museum. "This is where we start," he said. "Debts piling up. At least the landlord's honest. He draws lines on beer mats. Those guys over there draw lines on their computers and send you threatening letters with deadlines. Very poetic."

I picked up the top envelope. Thick paper, official logo. Health insurance. I tore it open, read two lines that didn't surprise me: arrears, contribution account, final notice. The total amount was listed further down, not astronomical, but large enough to make me want to lean against the wall. "You spent more on booze than on your health in 'Last Minute'," the little goblin commented. "Consistent, at least." I put the letter on the "Later" pile. The "Immediately" pile didn't exist.

The next envelope: landlord. A little friendlier in tone, but essentially the same old story. "We would like to remind you..." The goblin sang along, as if they were song lyrics. "Debts to the landlord and to God," I muttered. "The landlord will have the total at the end of the evening. With God..." I paused. "With God, you never know when he'll bring the bill," said the goblin. "He's the worst landlord of all. No slip of paper at the till, no tally marks, but in the end it's: 'You know what for.'"

I sat down and placed both letters side by side, as if they were talking to each other. There were these numbers, these stark sums that said: You're living beyond your means. And over there, in my head, was the other piece of paper, which read: Twenty beers opened, fifty cigarettes bummed, a hundred cut-off conversations with people who once wanted something from you. Debts to the bartender, to life, to people who had once taken you seriously. And somewhere in between, if such a thing exists, debts to God. Not because I believed in him, but because I knew that if he existed, he would have betrayed me long ago.

"What do you want to pay first?" asked the goblin, who loved it when I fell silent. "The bills so you can keep vegetating here? Or the rounds at the pub so you're not ashamed to show your face? Or the invisible debts to the people you've been telling for years, 'I'll call you tomorrow'?" I stared at the steaming coffee water slowly flowing into the filter. "If I had enough, I'd pay it all at once," I said. "Pub owner, landlord, health insurance, God, if he exists. Then I'd run off and see where I'd end up without all these marks." He laughed. "You'd run

into the nearest pub," he said. "Because then you really wouldn't know who you were without your debts."

The coffee was ready. I poured it into a mug that wasn't from a pub, which felt rare these days. The taste was bitter and honest. No sugar, no milk. Just as it should be when you look at yourself in the morning and don't want to lie to yourself. "So you're really not going today?" the goblin asked. "You want to sit here, drink coffee and fear, and read letters?" I nodded. "Someone has to start cleaning up sometime," I said. "And the landlord's waiting anyway. He's not going anywhere. Neither is God."

The goblin sat down on the letter from the landlord as if it were a throne. "You know you owe me money too," he said. "I've worked for you for years. Kept you company when you were lonely. Whispered jokes to you when you were on the verge of tears. Showed you where the nearest drink was when you didn't know how to get out of bed. And now you just want to take a day off?" I looked at him, this little bastard who lived rent-free in my life and still made demands.

“With you,” I said slowly, “I don’t have any credit. With you, I pay in cash, every evening, sip by sip. And if I don’t come today, you’ll just get less. A nearly starving goblin, I can handle that.” He grimaced, pretending to be offended. “You’ll find out,” he threatened. “You’ll see what it’s like when I finally shut up.” “A day of peace and quiet,” I muttered. “That would almost be like a vacation.”

But of course, it wasn't that easy. The clock ticked, the morning crawled by, I read a sentence here, another there, pretending to sort things when in reality I was just stacking them. The closer afternoon came, the more restless my hands became. It was as if they missed the shape of the beer glass, the cold, the wetness, the simple weight. My body knew there was a bar out there, where my shoulders knew exactly how to drop. The inner critic watched me like one watches a junkie say, "I'm quitting," while nervously tapping their leg.

“You have to decide today,” he said. “Where you settle your debts first. You’re still on the list with the pub owner. With the mail carriers, you’re about to be dropped. With God, you’re already at the bottom, marked with an asterisk.” I picked up the letter from the health insurance company, searched for the phone number, for the sentence that said, “Call us.” There it was. I reached for the phone, which had already gathered dust, as if it were a museum piece. My fingers trembled. Not from withdrawal, but from that other, unpleasant feeling: responsibility.

"You really want to do that?" the goblin asked. "Talk to real people, without beer?" I took a deep breath. "Maybe I'll start with that," I said. "With the debts I can't just run up a tab on." He grinned crookedly. "And what about the landlord?" he asked. "He's forgiven you more than anyone else." "He'll get me again tomorrow," I said. "If everything goes wrong, anyway."

I dialed the number. While it was ringing, I noticed I was sweating. And for the first time in a long time, it had nothing to do with alcohol.

The woman from the health insurance company had a voice that sounded as if it had been specially bred to deliver bad news in a palatable way. Calm, professional, a little tired, but not as tired as the waitress. A different kind of exhaustion, the kind that comes with an ergonomic chair and computer glasses. I gave her my insurance number, she told me my outstanding

balance. It wasn't just the numbers that made my throat tighten, but the way she recited them. As if she were telling me how many days of my life I hadn't registered in some system.

“You’re a few months behind,” she said. “We’ve sent you reminders.” “They found me,” I said. “I just didn’t open them.” The goblin was sitting on the kitchen cupboard, swinging his legs and making an imaginary tally in the air. “Honesty doesn’t score points,” he whispered. “You have to whine. They want to hear stories. Sick, unemployed, divorced. Give them something to talk about.” I ignored him as best I could.

"What's your current professional situation?" the woman asked. Professional situation. A nice way of saying: What do you actually do all day besides drink? "Occasional jobs," I said. "Nothing permanent." "So you don't currently have a regular income?" I had to laugh. It sounded so polite. "Not regular," I replied. "Not particularly irregular either." A short pause. I could picture her staring at the screen, seeing the numbers, my name, my date of birth, the gaps.

“We can arrange an installment plan,” she finally said. “Or we can see if a deferral is possible if you explain your current situation to us in writing.” Explain it in writing. I imagined myself writing a letter: “Dear Sir or Madam, I’ve moved my life to a pub, my job has vanished into thin air, and a little goblin is eating what’s left. Please defer my payment.” The goblin snorted with laughter. “Go ahead,” he cried. “I want to see how you react to that.”

“Let’s do an installment plan,” I said. “Deferring payment sounds like I’d just be fooling myself.” We agreed on some sum that was too high to let me sleep soundly at night and too low to really make a difference. A typical compromise. Still, it was more than I’d been putting off for a long time. When I hung up, I didn’t feel any better, but at least for a moment I felt like someone who hadn’t completely given up.

“One point for you,” said the goblin, as if this were a game. “But believe me: these debts are boring. Paper, numbers, bills. The real debts are the ones no one prints out.” I sat back down at the table, looked at the cardboard box and the telephone receiver, which still smelled of plastic and old sweat. “The real debts,” I repeated. “To the innkeeper. To her. To myself.” “To God,” he reminded me. “Don’t forget that guy. He holds a grudge more than any health insurance company.”

I thought of the innkeeper. Of the tally marks on my beer mats, which he never took as precisely as he could have. If he'd wanted to, he could have told me the exact amount long ago, with interest and compound interest, down to the last cent. He never did. Instead, there was this gesture: "It's fine, pay when you can." And that was precisely the problem. I almost never could. And when I did, the money went straight into the bottle. It was a special kind of debt, delivered with a friendly smile. No letters, no deadlines, but the weight still hangs around your neck.

“You could go there today, just to tell him that,” the goblin suggested. “Don’t drink. Just go in and say, ‘Look, I know I owe you a lot of money. I’m working on it.’ Then leave.” He grinned. “Of course you won’t leave, but I like the idea.” I shook my head. “Not today,” I said. “The door stays closed today. If I show up now, I’ll be back in ten minutes with a fresh glass, and my great installment-payment career will have a very short life story.”

The afternoon dragged on. Normally, this time was already part of the warm-up routine. My body knew: Soon it'll start, soon you'll go downstairs, soon you'll sit on the stool, soon you'll

see the faces you know, soon it will be loud enough to drown out the quiet misery in your head. Today I sat on a wobbly kitchen chair, heard the neighbor flushing the toilet and the garbage truck on the street. It was a different level of noise. More boring, but more honest. The inner critic was annoyed.

“Honestly,” he said after a while, “I don’t understand why you’re putting yourself through this. You’re not the repair type. You’re disposable. Always have been. At least die in a way that reflects your character.” I took the letter from the landlord and read it completely this time. I could still manage, but not for much longer. “Because at some point it becomes pointless to be unambitious even when dying,” I said. “If I’m going to be the one to take the fall, I can at least try not to make such a mess of things beforehand.”

He rolled his eyes. "Aha, now he's getting metaphysical," he sneered. "Debts to God and all that." I thought about God, that concept that had always seemed so foreign to me. I used to make fun of it. Prayer, churches, confession, all that stuff. Later, I'd simply lost interest. And now, here, with the letters and the empty glass of water and the goblin who knew my excuses better than I did, I suddenly thought: If there really is someone like that up there, surely, seeing my life story, he must have thought at some point, "Brother, seriously?" I wasn't sure if it was more guilt or more indifference.

“If there is a God,” I said, more to myself than to the goblin, “I don’t owe him anything. At most, I never used the account. I didn’t withdraw anything and I didn’t deposit anything. I never showed up. I don’t think he owes me anything, and I don’t owe him anything. We never officially met.” The goblin grinned. “That’s how someone who very much hopes there’s no account balance talks,” he said. “But you don’t mean the one they preach about in churches. You mean the other one. The one where you eventually have to ask yourself if you’ve given away everything you’ve been given.”

I hated him for sometimes being smarter than me. I thought of her face, the waitress's tired eyes when she said, "Don't tell anyone." I thought of my grandson, who had once asked me why I always looked so tired. "Because I prop up the world at night," I'd said, half-jokingly, half-drunk. In reality, I'd only been propping up the bar so it wouldn't fall over. Those are debts, too. Stories you tell that eventually cause collateral damage.

Towards evening it got worse. My body screamed for routine. My feet wanted to go into my shoes, my arm wanted to go into my jacket, something inside me wanted to get out, into that dim light, to give me the illusion of not being alone. I sat on the bed with my shoes in my hand, my phone beside me. A message from the innkeeper: "Are you okay?" Three words that resonated more than all the letters combined. No threat, no demand. Just that question, which no one had seriously asked for years.

"Don't reply to him," the goblin hissed. "If you text him you're not coming, you'll make it official. Official things always go wrong with you." I texted anyway: "Staying home today. Gotta take care of some stuff. Coming tomorrow." I stared at the message like it was a bomb and hit send. It felt like I'd just signed a contract without reading the fine print.

“You mentioned God and the innkeeper in the same sentence,” said the goblin. “Not literally, but implying it. Tomorrow will be an interesting day.” I put my phone down and took my shoes off again. “Tomorrow I owe the innkeeper again,” I said. “But today… today I’m paying myself a tiny bit.” He looked at me as if I’d just taken his toy away.

"You're going to relapse so badly," he muttered. "And I'm going to be there."

The night without a pub was louder than I'd expected. Not outside. Outside it was the same as always: cars speeding, a drunk talking louder than necessary somewhere, trash cans slamming shut when someone hits them too hard. The noise was inside. In my head. Normally, after a certain time, there's this steady hum of alcohol, voices, and cigarette smoke that drowns out everything else. Now I heard every single thought, like a badly organized record collection.

I was sitting on the sofa I rarely used, staring at the television I even more rarely turned on. An old film was playing, some black and white thing where men wore hats and women held cigarettes as if they were dangerous animals. The goblin was perched on top of the television, as if he lived in an aquarium. "Look," he said. "They're drinking on the screen, too. You could at least have social drinking sessions in front of the TV. Then you'd feel like you weren't alone in your stupidity." I drank water. It felt wrong, but not quite as wrong as nothing at all.

The thoughts came in waves. First the practical ones: How will you pay the installments? What will you do if the landlord really does shut you down? How long can your liver handle this without six beers a day? Then the others: What was the last thing you said to your daughter? When was the last time you visited your grandchildren without smelling of beer? And somewhere in between, the big question, the one I usually brushed aside with a gulp: How much time do I actually have left? Not a dramatic question, more of an accounting one. How many more days will I be able to get up in the morning, more or less functional, before some organ finally sends me on strike?

“You’re unbearably sober today,” the goblin commented. “It doesn’t suit you. You belong in the category of: better slightly tipsy.” I looked at him. “You want me to go, don’t you?” I asked. He grinned. “Of course I do. Over there it’s warm, I have company, I have people I can push over the edge without them even knowing my name. In here…” He looked around the apartment, which consisted more of absence than furniture. “It’s boring here. It’s just you.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Just me. Maybe today is the moment.” He tilted his head. “What moment?” “The moment I realize how much I actually have left before I dilute everything with beer again.” He laughed. “All right,” he said. “Let’s count. Debt list, take two. To the pub owner: a few hundred euros, maybe more, maybe less, depending on how honest he wants to be. To the health insurance company: installments now, good boy. To the landlord: barely scraping by. To yourself: wasted years, missed opportunities, relationships ruined by drinking. To God: an outstanding bill signed ‘will not be paid.’ See? It’s manageable.”

I got up, went into the kitchen, and turned on the light. The cardboard box was still there, like a dog waiting to be taken for a walk. I rummaged deeper and pulled an old photo from the middle. I hardly recognized myself. Younger, fewer wrinkles, standing in front of some high-rise building, holding a child. My daughter. Small hands clinging to my neck as if I were a safe haven. I knew exactly when it was. On a day when, for once, I wasn't hungover. A rare Sunday. We'd been to the park, ice cream, ducks, all that stuff that adults find hard to bear but kids consider the greatest thing ever.

“I owe her,” I said quietly. The goblin jumped onto the table and looked at the photo. “Oh,” he said, feigning emotion. “That was before I moved in full-time, right?” I nodded. “You were just a temp then,” I said. “Part-time demon.” He grinned. “And look how far we’ve come.” His voice trailed off. “So what do you want now? To call? ‘Hey, it’s the loser here, remember?’”

I knew he was right. A phone call wouldn't fix anything. But it would shed light on what I usually glossed over: that there were people with whom I was morally deeply indebted. Not because I had directly wronged them. But because I meant nothing to them anymore. Unreachable, vanished, married to a pub. The waitress sometimes knew more about me than my own family. And the landlord was more like my confessor than any priest ever could have been.

“Debts to the innkeeper and to God,” I said again. “Maybe the innkeeper is God in the end. Or God is an innkeeper. Both watch you ruin yourself, and both never really say stop. At most, they put a glass of water in front of you now and then.” The goblin laughed. “If God were an innkeeper, he would have said long ago, ‘You’re not getting in here again.’” “Or he would say, ‘Last call, folks,’” I said. “And no one would realize he meant it.”

The night crept on. I smoked, drank water, and flipped through channels that all showed the same thing: people who looked better and weren't any happier. The leprechaun grew quieter as the night wore on. Eventually, he just sat there, his back against the wall, staring at the floor. "Do you know what your problem is?" he asked at some point. "Only one?" I said. "Tell me." "You want to pay off debts, but you don't want to stop incurring new ones. You want to eventually pay the bartender everything, but you want to keep running up tabs. You want your daughter to forgive you, but you don't want to become the forgiven version of yourself. And by God..." He grinned. "By God, you're just hoping he's tired of reading your file."

I thought about it. It was true. I wanted everything at once: to keep drinking, screw up less, be more present, feel less. A cross you can't bear if the mere thought of a crooked step makes you waver. "What do I do then?" I asked. The sentence came out before I could stop it. It had been a long time since I'd seriously asked someone, "What do I do?" The goblin looked surprised. He was used to me insulting him, not asking for advice.

“You don’t expect me to help you get rid of me, do you?” he asked. “That would be like asking the landlord to take your beer away out of solidarity.” “I don’t expect anything,” I said. “I’m just realizing that I owe money everywhere and have no credit anywhere. Not to the cashier, not to the landlord, not to the people who once believed I could get my act together. And maybe, just maybe, not even to myself.”

He was silent for a moment, which was rare. Then he said, "You know what? Go there tomorrow. To the innkeeper. Sit down. Order a beer. But before you drink, tell him you owe him and that you know it. Not with jokes, not with platitudes. Just like that. And if you're feeling really brave, call someone beforehand who's surprised you're still alive. Not to get absolution. Just so there's someone out there who knows your bank balance."

I gave a dry laugh. "You're a pretty messed-up counselor," I said. "Better than your last one," he replied. "The landlord's been doing it for years. So has the God you don't want to call. Someone's gotta do the job." I stubbed out my cigarette in the ashtray, which really should have been in the pub long ago. The room smelled of smoke, dust, and a hint of something new I couldn't quite place. Maybe hope. Maybe just tiredness with a different label.

When I went to bed, it was late, but not pub-late. It was a civilized hour, the kind normal people call "late." I lay down, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like I'd accomplished something that wasn't just about heading to the bar. Just a few phone calls, a few decisions, a few sentences. Nothing groundbreaking. No miracle. Just a tiny payment on an account I'd been overdrawn for years.

The goblin sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at me as if checking whether he'd still recognize me tomorrow. "Don't kid yourself," he said quietly. "You're still in debt. To the innkeeper, to God, to yourself. But today, for the first time, you didn't pretend it was all a joke. That's dangerous. Especially for me." I closed my eyes. "There are always enough idiots for you," I muttered. "If I'm not your best customer tomorrow, you'll just find the next one at the bar."

He grinned, but it was a tired grin. "True," he said. "But it was fun with you."

Before I drifted off to sleep, I thought of the phrase that had been echoing throughout the day: debts to the innkeeper and to God. Perhaps I could actually pay the innkeeper someday. I didn't know about God. But maybe, at the very end, he would look at what I had done with my life and say, "Well, at least he tried to erase a few lines in the end."

And if not — then hopefully I would at least end up in a pub where they let you run up a tab.

Chapter 10 – Clurichaun laughs when you fall

The next day, I was standing in front of the pub earlier than I would have liked. It wasn't even properly dark yet, just that dirty gray that makes the city look like a hungover face. I'd survived the whole day without showing up, and now, right after, I was back at the door like a dog hoping someone will let him in. The imp was sitting on the beam above the entrance, as usual, his legs dangling, his back against the doorframe. "Well, look at that," he called out. "Last night's hero. One day off and already back in withdrawal. How does that feel, eh, Jesus of the bar?"

I stood for a moment in front of the door. Just where the sidewalk met the sticky doorway. One hand on the handle, the other in my jacket pocket. In my pocket, my cell phone, with the health insurance representative's number saved as the last number, as if she were an ex I never wanted to see again. In my head, the messages I hadn't written. To my daughter, to anyone. I'd only texted the innkeeper. "Coming tomorrow." Nothing more. As if I had a dentist appointment. He'd only replied: "OK." No smiley, no addition, no cautionary sentence. Just "OK." That was worse than any warning.

I pressed down the handle, and the goblin grinned even wider. "There he falls in again," he sang. "Like a stone into a well. As if someone had said, 'Jump,' and he'd taken off before the sentence was even finished." Inside, it was the same as always: dim lighting, cold neon above the bar, sticky floor, music from the jukebox that no one had ordered but everyone knew. The landlord stood behind the bar, polishing a glass as if it were his form of meditation. The waitress was at a table at the front, wiping away the remnants of the previous shift, that thin layer of ash, beer, and broken promises.

He saw me, just nodded. No "Where have you been?", no "Everything alright?". Just that brief chin lift that regulars use instead of hugs. I sat down on my stool, the seat feeling like a hole I was sliding back into. The leprechaun jumped off the doorframe, landed on the counter right in front of me, and clapped his hands. "New round," he said. "Yesterday regret, today back to reality."

The innkeeper placed a beer in front of me. Just one. No double shot, no "I know what you want." He left it, waited. I looked at the glass, the cold condensation, the foam slowly collapsing. It was like a test. Nothing grand, nothing theatrical, just: See what you do now. In my head, I heard the goblin's voice, the one that had been echoing through the past few days: debts to the innkeeper and to God. Installment payments. Erasing the tally marks. And then I heard my own voice, thinner, like an echo: "There's always room for one more."

“Stop staring like that,” the goblin said. “You’re warming him up. It’s torture. For both of us.” I picked up the glass. Heavy, familiar, a part of my body made of glass. I lifted it, put it to my lips, and took a sip. It was honest. Cold, bitter, no tricks. No fireworks, no angelic choir, just liquid flowing into me as if a pipe had been prepared. The first sip after a day’s rest didn’t taste better than usual, but harsher. Like a reminder that things could have been different.

"Well," said the innkeeper. "Did you have the day off from us?" I nodded. "I called the health insurance company," I said, without really thinking about it. The words just suddenly came out. The waitress glanced over, and the innkeeper put down the glass he was polishing. "So?" he asked. "They're still alive," I said. "Want money. Can you imagine?" He snorted, a dry sound. "Sounds familiar," he said. "I've got some of those types myself."

The goblin grimaced. "Could you please stop bringing sobering topics into my workplace?" he asked. "This is the place for escapism, not installment plans." I ignored him. "I've arranged an installment plan," I told the innkeeper. "Small amount, but regular. If all goes well, I'll be back to square one in a couple of years." He nodded, looking at me a moment longer than usual. "I'll even mark some of your balances off," he said. "If you want. Not all of them. But a few."

That hurt me more than I wanted to admit. "You're not supposed to be a saint," I said. "And certainly not God." He grinned crookedly. "God wouldn't let you in at all," he said. "I would. That's the difference." The goblin laughed loudly. "Clurichaun laughs when you fall," he sang. "And sometimes he laughs when you try to get up again."

It wasn't long before the usual suspects arrived. Heiner with his pale face, Harry, who pushed his belly through the door first, Manni with some free newspaper under his arm as if he had news. They took their seats as if they were in a theater rehearsal where no one needed their lines anymore. "So, have you been cheating on me?" Harry asked, nodding his chin at my glass. "It was empty here yesterday." I shrugged. "I've got a thing with my health insurance company," I said. "No competition for you. They're only interested in my body anyway."

Laughter. A little too loud, a little too relieved. The goblin squatted under the table, his favorite spot, and began inspecting the shoes. "Tell me," he said quietly. "Did you tell them that this is where your actual membership is?" I took another sip, felt the alcohol take effect. Not like a friend, more like someone who crashes on your sofa without asking, but still, it briefly clears your mind, and you're grateful for it.

The waitress set our round down, her gaze briefly glancing over me. There was no judgment in it, no "Well, look who's back." More like a check: How deep is he in today? I raised my glass slightly, without clinking it. A silent toast in her direction. She pretended not to see it, but the corners of her mouth twitched. The imp noticed everything. "You still think you can make amends in here," he whispered. "To you, to her, to the innkeeper. But you forget how it works: In here, everyone laughs when you fall. I laugh the loudest."

And of course, someone fell that evening. Someone always falls. Sometimes physically, more often internally. This time it was the guy from the vending machine, who'd wandered over to our regular table because the thing was briefly broken in the back. He couldn't handle being without flashing lights, so he looked for the next distraction. He drank fast, too fast, without breathing in between, as if someone could hear the clock ticking. After the fourth round, he started talking very loudly about luck, which had just been too lazy to find him.

"Look," the goblin whispered to me. "He's about to stumble. Not necessarily physically. But something inside is about to break." I watched as his hands trembled while he lit a cigarette. As his laughter rose too high. As his eyes glittered, but not with humor. And then there was that tiny moment, that split second, when you realize: He's about to collapse. He stood up, heading for the restroom, but his body reacted too late and went in a different direction. He half crashed into the bar, the glass fell, shards of glass, beer, a faint cry.

The waitress was there in an instant, rags, brooms, practiced movements. The innkeeper glanced over, assessing whether he needed to intervene. He didn't. The guy mumbled apologies that no one took seriously. "It's fine," she said, even though nothing was fine. "It happens to everyone." The imp lay under the stool, laughing uproariously, clutching his stomach. "See?" he gasped. "That's my favorite moment. When someone thinks he's still in charge of his limbs—and they say, 'Nah, man, we're on vacation.'"

I could have felt sorry for him. For a moment, I did. Then I realized how grateful a part of me was that someone else was playing the complete idiot today. That all eyes were on him and not on me. Clurichaun laughs when you fall. And the worst part is: you laugh along. Because you know exactly how that fall feels. And you're glad you're sitting down.

Later, when the guy from the vending machine was more or less back in his chair, the leprechaun leaned towards me. "You know you're next," he said. "Not today, maybe. Not tomorrow. But the place has a list. And you're not crossed off." I took a drink, holding the cigarette so the ash wouldn't fall before I could inhale. "I've fallen a thousand times," I muttered. "That's nothing new." He grinned. "Yes, it is," he said. "What's new is that you're starting to realize who's laughing along with you."

The real crash came a few days later, when I'd almost forgotten how heroically I'd taken a day off. Pride can fade so quickly: sleep on it, have a couple of drinks, and suddenly the small victory is just a pale stain on the wallpaper. It was a perfectly normal day, if you can call it that. I arrived at the "Schlitzlicht" early, perhaps too early. The owner was still cleaning the coffee machine, the waitress was taking deliveries, and the imp was sniffing curiously at the new crates of beer, as if they were boxes brimming with hope.

"You're light today," said the goblin. "There's too much air between your eyes and the floor. That's dangerous." I did feel strange. Not quite drunk, not quite sober, somewhere in between, that slimy in-between state where you either stop or overdo it. I was never very good at stopping.

The first few beers were fine. The first few whiskies, too. I wasn't drinking any faster than usual, but I was drinking with more purpose. Not for fun, not out of habit, but out of a kind of defiance. Defiant against the bank statements, against the letters, against this idea that I could actually "get a grip" on anything. My grip was on the glass; I couldn't manage anything more at the moment. Heiner was telling his stories, Harry was laughing at the wrong moments,

Manni was trying to explain the state of the world without actually having read the newspaper. Everything as usual.

Eventually, a stranger came in. Not the guy from the other day, but someone else. Slimmer, but with that messed-up look you recognize when you have it yourself. A denim jacket that looked too young for his face, a T-shirt from some band no one listens to anymore, teeth that hadn't seen a health insurance company in way too long. He sat down at the bar, two stools away, and ordered a double shot of schnapps and a beer. The imp was there in a flash, perched on the salt shaker next to him and grinning. "Fresh meat," he whispered to me. "New menu."

We got to talking the way people usually do: by chance, casually, with sentences that seemed to be doing nothing more than filling time. He claimed to be working "on site," something to do with construction sites, somewhere else, never here. I didn't know if that was true. But the way he drank was precise. No hesitation, no pause, as if it had been his main job for a while. Eventually, we got onto the usual topics: job gone, wife gone, child far away, old stories that all sound the same when you swap out the names.

“I’ll tell you,” he said at one point, “there are only two kinds of traps. The ones you trip over—and the ones you jump over.” I looked at him, saw the twitch in his eyelid, saw his hand fidgeting with the glass. “And you?” I asked. “Did you jump or trip?” He grinned crookedly. “I took a running start,” he said. The goblin clapped his hands enthusiastically. “I like him,” he exclaimed. “At least he doesn’t lie about his free fall.”

We drank together. Too fast, too much. The waitress grew quieter as our glasses filled. Her gaze kept wandering over, lingering on me, then on him. I noticed, but pretended not to. The bartender occasionally raised his eyebrows, that subtle signal meant to say, "Slow down." I ignored it. The imp, meanwhile, was running a marathon on the bar, leaping from my glass to his, back again, as if trying to see whose brain he could settle into more comfortably.

Around midnight, my balance was a joke. I got up to go to the bathroom, and the world didn't agree with me. The floor was uneven, the wall too close, the air too thick. I grabbed the stool, missed, and slammed my hip against the edge of the counter. Glass shattered, something fell, voices grew louder. I only half felt the pain, as if it were coming through cotton wool. The goblin burst into peals of laughter, nearly falling off the counter. "There!" he shouted. "There it is! My favorite moment. Look at you!"

The waitress was there immediately. "Everything okay?" she asked, her hands already on my arm before I could answer. The owner also approached, his face serious. "Sit down," he said. "Don't move." I wanted to say, "I've got everything under control." But the sentence caught in my throat because I felt dizzy at the same time. I sat down, more because my legs gave way than out of any real understanding. My knee throbbed, my hip too, my pride shattered somewhere between the bar and the floor.

The others laughed. Not all of them, but enough. This laughter, too loud, too liberating. They weren't just laughing because it really did look funny, the way I'd slammed into the counter. They were also laughing with relief. Because someone had fallen who usually just sat there and watched. Because I was proof that no one here is invulnerable. Clurichaun laughs when you fall. The others laugh along. Because they know: today you, tomorrow me. And yet, laughter is faster than compassion.

The waitress looked at the group, one by one. "That's enough now," she said. Not loudly, but in a tone that was sufficient. The laughter died down. One of them muttered a lame joke, then fell silent. The goblin found it all hilarious. He rolled over the counter, wiping imaginary tears from his eyes. "You should have seen your face," he gasped. "That 'I've got everything under control' attitude, right at the moment when you weren't in control anymore. Art!"

The innkeeper placed a glass of water in front of me. More water. "Drink," he said. "Slowly. And then we'll see if you come home or if you can find somewhere to stay around here." I took the glass with trembling fingers. My hip was really hurting now; the alcohol wasn't helping anymore, it was just making the pain more diffuse. I drank, put it down, drank again. The stranger next to me grinned, but less convincingly. "You see," he said, "we're all just idiots taking a running start." I would have liked to agree with him, but I felt sick.

The goblin sat on my shoulder, his breath in my ear. "You could have that big realization now," he whispered. "Like, 'Oh, I've fallen, I need to change my life.' That typical bullshit. But let's not kid ourselves: you'll be sitting here again tomorrow. Maybe with a bandage, but with a glass." I stared at my hands. They looked old. Rough, stained, a little swollen. Hands of someone who had held on too much and let go too little.

The waitress leaned closer. "Can you walk?" she asked. "Or should I call a taxi?" I shook my head. "I want to feel my leg while I still can," I muttered. "If I fall into a taxi now, I won't wake up tomorrow." "You'll wake up one way or another," said the goblin. "The only question is: with how much dignity left?"

Later, I actually got up again, supported by her and the innkeeper. The place was spinning less, but the air was heavy. I felt as if I'd slammed not only my body but also the last vestige of my pride against the bar. Heiner patted me on the shoulder. "It happens to the best of us," he said. I knew that wasn't true. It happens to those who think they're the best, even though they've been proving for years that they're, at best, mediocre at failure.

On my way to the door, I heard the goblin above me chuckling. "I told you, you're next," he said. "This place never forgets. Everyone who laughs when someone falls gets their turn eventually. And I'm always in the front row." I couldn't even be mad at him. Part of me laughed along. Not because it was funny. But because I'd realized: the only thing worse than falling is pretending you didn't.

The morning after was a mix of accident report and inventory. My knee was bruised, my hip felt like someone had tried to squeeze me through a doorway that was too narrow with a forklift. My mind was surprisingly clear, perhaps because the pain in my body was louder than the lingering effects of the alcohol. I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to remember the exact moment I'd lost control. Not just of my legs, but of everything.

This time the imp wasn't sitting on the windowsill, but on my thigh, right above the bruise. "Turned out nicely," he said, tapping it. It hurt like hell. "Stop that," I snapped. "That's art," he said. "Your body is painting memories on you. So you can't claim it was just a dream." I carefully felt my hip, my knee, counting in my head: no broken bones, no lacerations, no missing teeth. Just bruised pride and a body telling me: one more evening like this and I'm quitting.

“You did it,” said the goblin, “to sum up everything that’s wrong with your life in a single movement. You tried to get up, crashed into something, everyone laughed briefly, you were

picked up and given water. If that’s not symbolic, I don’t know what is.” I sighed. “You don’t always have to resort to analogies,” I muttered. “Sometimes a fall is just a fall.” “Not with you,” he grinned. “With you, everything is a stage.”

I dragged myself into the kitchen. Every step was a protest, my bones creaked, my muscles cursed me. The box of letters was still there, but I didn't see it today. My gaze lingered on another detail: the water glass from the day before yesterday, still half full, a limescale ring around the rim. I had left it there as if it were proof that I was capable of more than just chugging beer. Now it sat there like a mockery. I drank it down, cold, stale, honestly.

"So now what?" the goblin asked. "Are you going to go again today and let yourself be applauded? 'There he is, our fall champion!' Or are you going to pull another one of those half-baked 'I'm staying out today' moves so you feel good before you double down on drinking next week?" I grabbed a coffee and sat down at the table, which was starting to feel like a confessional. "I'm going today," I said. "But I'm drinking more slowly." He snorted. "You've been saying that for years," he said. "You even claimed once that you were cutting down on smoking. Seriously?"

I wondered what it must have looked like from the outside yesterday. There he was, this guy, always there, always at the bar, always with a glass in his hand—and then he collapsed like a sack of potatoes. Part of me felt ashamed. Another part was almost relieved. It had happened. The big, little fall I'd been imagining for weeks, months, years. Not a complete catastrophe, no hospital, no flashing blue lights, but still more than just an "oops." And the world hadn't ended. There was just one more item on the list.

“What interests me,” said the goblin, “isn’t that you fell. It’s what you did after you were put back in.” I thought back. I had stayed put. I hadn’t stumbled out, hadn’t dramatically sworn “never again,” hadn’t made a scene. I had drunk some water, then another beer. Out of spite, out of habit, out of the feeling that it would be more embarrassing to stop. As if I were admitting defeat to the pub, the landlord, the goblin. I had let it get this far, only to pretend afterward that nothing had happened.

“You laugh at yourself when you fall,” said the goblin. “Not out loud, but inside. You find yourself so ridiculous that you can’t help it. I just need to amplify that a little more.” I took a sip of coffee that was too strong. “Maybe that’s the only sense of humor left,” I muttered. “Laughing at others is fine, but at least laughing at yourself is fair.” He grinned. “Fairness, sweet. You really should watch less television.”

Around midday, the innkeeper sent a message. Not a novel. Just: "Everything okay with your leg?" I glanced at the screen. "It's fine," I wrote back. "Blue, but it's attached." He replied: "Come around later, but take it easy." That was his way of looking after me. No lectures, no prohibitions. Just a subdued "Don't overdo it." The problem was: I only knew overdoing it.

Later, when I actually hobbled to the pub—of course I went, of course—the leprechaun was on my shoulder the whole time. “You could have stayed home,” he said. “Today you would have had a real excuse. Pain, embarrassment, lesson learned, blah blah.” “I can’t spend the rest of my life dwelling on my own fall,” I said. “You will anyway,” he grinned. “Ten years from now you’ll be saying, ‘Remember that night I crashed into the bar? That was the turning point.’ And everyone will nod in agreement while you’re downing your fifth beer.”

Inside, the silence was different when I walked in. No awkward silence, no big "Whoa!" Just that brief wave of glances that passed over me. Heiner grinned, Manni held up his hand, Harry grumbled, "Well, look who's up, Stuntman?" The waitress looked at my leg, then at my face. "Sit down before you start doing some more creative furniture acrobatics," she said. The landlord placed a small beer in front of me, not a large one. "Test run," he said. "Like at the doctor's."

I sat down, the pain in my hip settling with me. The imp jumped onto the counter, dangling his legs, silent. That was the strangest thing: he shut up for a moment. As if he, too, had run out of words, even though he usually bombarded me with comments all evening. I took a cautious sip, waiting to see if the floor would shift again. It didn't. Everything stayed where it should. Outside, it was drizzling; inside, the day was slowly dripping away from us.

“You know,” the innkeeper said at some point, “I’ve seen worse.” I nodded. “I’ve done it myself,” I said. “Only I couldn’t remember it.” He grinned. “That’s the advantage of your age,” he said. “Some falls you forget, others you remember. And eventually you’re glad for every one you remember. At least those are real excuses.” The waitress placed a glass of water next to my beer. Wordlessly. Just the glass, clinking beside it.

The goblin lay flat on the bar, looking at me with his head hanging over the edge. "What bothers you more?" he asked. "The fall or the water?" I thought for a moment. "Really?" I said. "That everyone saw it." "Aha," he nodded. "So that's it. Clurichaun laughs when you fall—but you laugh the loudest at the fact that you're not invisible. You want to fall, but nobody's supposed to notice." I couldn't argue with him. I wanted everything in this pub: the feeling of not being alone, and at the same time, to remain invisible. A guest ghost.

I stayed out a little later that evening. Not out of sheer willpower, but rather because my leg started hurting so much that even sitting became a punishment. The others noticed, but didn't make any comments when I got up early. "Be careful where you put the bar," the waitress said as I left. "Don't want him jumping on you again." I grinned. "I'm avoiding him," I said. "Today."

On my way home, I limped through the wet street, the goblin beside me, whistling. "So?" he asked. "Great insight? Lesson learned? Moving conclusion?" I paused briefly, looked at my bruise, then into the dark shop windows where my face was reflected. "Nothing moving," I said. "Just this: It's not the fall that breaks you. It's the way you so naturally go back to the same path afterward." He nodded, satisfied. "That," he said, "is almost clever."

At home, I sat on the edge of the bed, my leg stretched out. The pain was a kind of honest companion. No excuse, no drama, just a reminder: You fell yesterday. Today you went, even though you knew they'd laugh. And tomorrow you'll probably go again. Maybe a little more carefully, maybe not. Clurichaun laughs when you fall. But somewhere, deep down, something inside you laughs too, saying: At least I didn't stay down.

I lay down, my knee protesting, my mind both full and empty at the same time. The goblin sat down on my thigh again, right on the blue spot. This time he didn't tap me. He just placed a hand on it. "Nice and soft," he murmured. "Stay with us for a while."

Chapter 11 – Happy Hour in Hell

It was a Wednesday, I think. Maybe a Thursday. Days lose their names when you wash them all away with the same drink. One thing was certain: it was that time of year again when normal people were somewhere between finishing work and collapsing on the sofa, wondering what to eat. We were somewhere between finishing work and impending doom, wondering how much more our livers could hold. A handwritten note, crookedly stuck to the window in marker, read: "Happy Hour 6-8 pm." And underneath, in parentheses: "2 for 1 – are you sure you want this?"

The landlord made that sign on a whim, sometime when the tax office was breathing down his neck like a grumpy dog. "Marketing," he'd said. "You have to move with the times." The only way he'd moved with the times was to paint a beer glass on it that looked like a gravestone. The idea was clear: more people, more revenue, more noise, so at least the fear of the numbers would subside. The reality was: those who would have come anyway just came earlier and stayed longer. Happy hour in hell is ultimately just an extended spin cycle.

The goblin was delighted. "Finally, we're calling a spade a spade," he said, dancing around the note on the windowsill. "Happy Hour! As if misery had a timetable. You guys are brilliant. You're even threatening your own execution and offering a special price on top." That day, he wore a napkin like a cape—just for himself—as if he were the entertainer at a very special resort. Welcome to the all-inclusive for broken lives. Drinks included in the price of your soul.

I was sitting in my seat, of course. My knee still ached, and so did my hip, a reminder of my last outing as a human pinball. I could have stayed home. Of course. You can do a lot of things. You just don't. The bartender placed the first beer in front of me, glanced at my leg. "Still stained?" he asked. "Yes," I said. "I'm a wall in a child's bedroom." He grinned. "Then drink slowly. It's happy hour today. We need you alive, not lying down."

The first ones to trickle in were always the same. End-of-the-work faces, hoping that two glasses for the price of one might be some kind of good deal with life. A guy in a suit, who looked like he hadn't touched his tie knot since eight o'clock that morning, sat down two stools away. "Today it's two for the price of one," he said, as if he needed to explain himself. "It would be stupid not to take advantage of that." The imp immediately jumped over, sat on the rim of his glass, and looked at me. "Tell him what it really costs," he grinned. "Go ahead."

I remained silent. What could I have said? "Two for one just means you realize what's wrong with you twice as fast." Instead, I raised my glass and took a sip. The waitress brought him the second round before the first was even half empty. Professional foresight. "Happy hour, huh?" she said. "Isn't that for younger people?" He laughed, without humor. "I'm young at heart," he said. "Just broken on the outside." She shrugged. "Fits the place."

Around 6:30, the place was more crowded than usual for that time. The faces were different from those on the late shift. More people with office-worn hands, fewer with dandruff on their jackets. Faces that during the day had acted as if they had things under control: teams, projects, families. Now they only wished that the next two hours would make everything cheaper—at least the drinks, if not their lives. The leprechaun was everywhere. He jumped from chair to chair, sometimes sitting on a glass of red wine, sometimes on a gin and tonic, sometimes in the middle of an ashtray like a king on a sticky throne.

“Happy hour,” he chuckled. “I could puke with joy. It’s like a discount on self-loathing.” He leaned toward a middle-aged woman sitting alone at a table for two, two glasses of white wine in front of her, as if waiting for someone who never came. “Order another,” he whispered in her ear, even though she couldn’t hear him. “It’s cheap today. You can afford to stop feeling anything sooner.” She raised her glass and drank half of it in one go. Her eyes were awake, but not happy. Awakefulness without joy. The worst possible combination.

At the regulars' table, the mood was good at first, then better, then aggressive. Harry thought happy hour was fantastic. "Finally, my alcoholism is paying off," he said. "Two for one—I'm practically an investor." Heiner smiled crookedly. "You're investing in liver function," he said. "They only pay off on the downside." Manni held up his glass and said, "It's all marketing. Happy hour is just the time when you forget more quickly where the rest of the day went." Good points in the wrong place. The goblin clapped with enthusiasm.

I noticed the mood shifting long before it got loud. First they laughed more, then louder, then someone suddenly stopped laughing and just talked, their words sharper than the alcohol. Happy hour means: the masks don't fall off, they just slip off faster. The guy in the suit had taken off his jacket, loosened his tie, and opened his collar. A sweat stain glinted beneath his shirt. "I bombed a presentation today," he told the glass he was holding. "Months of work. And all the boss says is, 'We'll talk again on Monday.' You know what that means?"

"That you're drinking especially hard today," the goblin muttered. The man drank. I looked at him and thought: Monday will come, no matter how much you drink today. That's the real cruelty. Time isn't impressed by your drinking.

The waitress whirled between us, as always. Her eyes looked even more tired than usual, but she was faster, tougher, almost mechanical. Happy hour was hell for her too, just a different kind. More rounds, less tip, more snide remarks, less respect. "Do you get a surcharge for the two hours?" I asked as she passed me. "Yes," she said. "A surcharge for annoyed guys in ties who leave their wedding rings in their jackets." The imp chuckled to himself.

I wondered how much you can learn about a person just by observing them during happy hour. It's that in-between state: not sober enough to be in control, not drunk enough to completely let loose. You see the cracks, but not the collapse yet. A man at the far end of the bar was talking loudly on his phone, a glass in each hand. "I'll be late," he said into the receiver. "We've got this thing going on..." I didn't know who he was talking to—girlfriend, wife, kid, boss—but I knew that "this thing going on" was always just another way of saying, "I'm getting out of here."

The goblin sat down in front of me again, his napkin-cloak now askew. "You thrive in it," he said. "Admit it. You love these hours. More faces, more stories, more potential for disaster. You sit there like an accountant of misery." I snorted. "I sit there like someone who has nowhere else to go," I said. "The rest will take care of itself." He grinned. "Good address," he said. "Hell, side wing, regular haunt. Happy hour included."

There was this one moment, shortly after seven, when the air became too heavy. The smoke, the beer, the sweat, the perfumes, the nervousness—everything clung together like a damp cloth. The innkeeper looked at his watch, not to see when he could take the slip of paper down, but to calculate how much longer he had to pretend it had been a good idea. The cash register was ringing, yes. But in his eyes was that calculation no calculator can make: How much more will break today than I can afford tomorrow?

Happy hour in hell isn't a special offer. It's the state in which you suddenly realize that the rest of your day was just foreplay.

It got louder, but not more cheerful. The music from the jukebox tried to create some kind of rock vibe, but people were more focused on their own sounds. The clinking of glasses, the scraping of chair legs on the floor, that short, sharp inhalation when someone starts with, "You know what really pisses me off…" Happy hour is the time when everyone thinks they have something important to say, just because the drinks are cheaper.

The goblin was now in constant operation. He paced up and down the bar like a hyperactive bar critic trying to play both entertainer and Grim Reaper. He stopped in front of a young guy, early thirties maybe, with a haircut that was too neat, a shirt that was too clean, one of those "I'm just popping in after work" faces. In front of him were two gin and tonics in ornate glasses that didn't belong in this place. "What do you do for a living?" the goblin asked, though he didn't expect an answer. "PowerPoint slides that nobody reads? Excel spreadsheets that nobody understands? Or do you motivate people who secretly hate you?"

The guy actually spoke as if he were answering. "My boss says I should be more proactive," he told his companion, a colleague with a similar face. "Take on more responsibility. But all he really means is that I should stay late and get all the other people's crap." He drank, too fast for the size of the glass. His colleague nodded, sipped his drink, and occasionally uttered a "sure," "absolutely," "I know what you mean." Those are the words you use when you're not really interested but can't stand the silence.

The waitress squeezed in between the crowd, taking empty glasses and placing full ones on the table. Her movements had a dance-like quality, but it wasn't a graceful one. More like someone trying not to step on a shard of glass. The goblin watched her go. "They're all on happy hour, and she's working a hell of a shift," he muttered. "If anyone deserved a discount here, it was her." I saw a guy shout something after her as she walked back, some meaningless drivel about "smile." She didn't turn around. She'd learned which comments to ignore.

At our regular table, we'd by now settled on the big question of the evening: "When does someone actually become an alcoholic?" It's a classic, it always comes up eventually when the conversation lasts long enough and the glasses get deep enough. Manni said, "When you start in the morning." Harry said, "When you drink in secret." Heiner said, "When you drink alone." I sat there, took a sip, and thought, "If you're discussing this while you're drinking on sale, you've already answered the question."

“That word is too clinical for you,” the goblin interjected, audible only to me. “You’re not alcoholics. You’re regulars with an increased thirst. That sounds friendlier.” I put down my glass. “You know what annoys me?” I asked him. “All this talk about ‘I’ve got it under control’ and ‘I only drink because…’. Happy hour is just a reflection of that. Two for the price of one, and everyone acts like they’ve saved money.” He laughed. “They have saved money,” he said. “Time. They’ll get where you are faster.”

Amidst all the noise, there were moments when time seemed to stand still. The bartender closing the tap to change the keg. The waitress leaning against the wall for a second too long. The man in a suit staring at his vibrating phone, which he still didn't answer. The slot machine player pausing to press the buttons and simply gaze at the lights, as if they were a substitute for heaven. Small pauses in a room that otherwise revolves incessantly.

“Happy hour is actually an honest expression,” I said aloud, not realizing I wasn’t just talking to the goblin. “It’s those two hours when you know perfectly well you won’t be happy later—but you do it anyway because it’s easier to believe the word than the truth.” Heiner looked at me. “Stop getting philosophical,” he said. “We’re not ready for insights yet.” Harry laughed. “He was having one of his existence days yesterday,” he said. “Leave him be. It’ll pass.”

The waitress brought me the next round. "Maybe the promotion should be called something else," she said. "Not Happy Hour, but 'Two Hours Off Self-Deception.'" The leprechaun applauded. "I love her," he exclaimed. "Give her another place, damn it! One without you." I looked at her. "Why are you even doing this?" I asked. "The promotion, I mean. More stress, same pay, more idiots." She shrugged. "Because rent doesn't have happy hour," she said. "It's always full price."

Someone I hadn't seen in a while appeared at the door. A former regular who had "stopped" coming here six months ago. That's what they call it when someone suddenly stops coming. "He's made it," someone had said. "He only drinks at home now," another had said. Now he stood in the doorway, saw us, saw the happy hour sign, hesitated. His eyes slid along the row of faces, lingered briefly on me, then on the waitress, then on the bar.

"Come in," grinned the goblin. "It's like a class reunion, only more honest." He made a welcoming gesture. The man entered hesitantly, sitting far away from his old seat, as if the chair might otherwise bite him. He ordered a water. Just water. The innkeeper brought it without a word, setting it down as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The conversation at the regulars' table fell silent for a moment. Harry whispered, "Has he got some kind of illness or what?" Heiner said nothing, but his expression betrayed that he couldn't imagine voluntarily sitting there with just water.

I glanced over. He was drinking slowly, holding the glass with both hands like a trophy. The goblin perched on his shoulder, curious. "Interesting," he said. "Here's someone who dropped out—and yet he's back here again. Who's more broken, really? The one who comes back and only drinks water? Or you, who keep saying you'll one day…" He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to.

It hurt to see him. Not because he was better than anyone. But because he was proof that something still existed out there. He looked different. Not good, not radiant, but different. Clearer in his face, less puffy. His eyes more alert. The tiredness wasn't gone, but it was a different kind. Not the tiredness of people who drink themselves into oblivion, but the tiredness of people who have to relearn how to cope with their own thoughts.

The goblin returned to me. "Don't worry," he said. "He's not cured. Nobody gets cured. He's just changed hells." I looked at my glass, at the water in front of him, at the note on the glass. "Maybe," I murmured, "it's at least a hell with halfway decent fresh air." "Fresh air is overrated," the goblin said. "It just makes you realize how awful you really smell."

Time crawled toward eight o'clock. Officially, happy hour was over, but no one got up, no one ordered more slowly. The whole thing had just been an excuse to start lying to themselves earlier. Now everything was back to normal: drinking, talking, forgetting. The note remained hanging on the window. The goblin nodded at it as if it were a flag.

“You really need a different kind of clock,” he said. “One that has words on it instead of numbers: Thirst, Courage, Lie, Argument, Tears, Blackout. Put a hand on it, and you’re done.

That’s your way of telling time.” And I thought: He’s right. Happy hour isn’t from six to eight. It’s the moment you take that first sip, even though you know you don’t need it—and it only ends when you’re too sober to keep fooling yourself.

Later that evening, when the sign at the front had long since ceased to interest anyone and the cash register had rung enough to appease the innkeeper for a few hours, the whole thing took on that lingering aftertaste of a special offer. It was as if someone had turned the lights up a fraction of a second without anyone noticing the switch. Faces grew heavier, jokes stale, movements less precise. Hell had canceled the early bird discount and returned to normal prices.

The guy in the suit had stayed. His shirt had now completely slipped out of his trousers, his tie hanging like a noose no one wanted to tighten. He'd managed to move from the bar to a table, where he'd struck up a conversation with the former regular, the water drinker. A strange situation: one who'd just been talking about "the boss" and "Mondays," and the other who'd probably been trying for months to get by without a boss and then without a bar. I only caught snippets. "Back then...", "then I realized...", "you wouldn't believe it...". These sentences all start from the same rut.

The water drinker held his glass with both hands, as if it were a talisman. He listened more than he spoke. Every now and then he nodded, interjected a brief "I know that feeling," "it's not funny," "it's not getting any better." It wasn't preachy talk. No "you have to stop," no "I've got my life together" bullshit. More like someone from another part of hell shouting over: "It's hot here too, but at least you're not burning up so decoratively anymore."

The imp sat on the back of the bench, directly above them, dangling his legs. "Sweet," he said. "Anonymous misery counseling in the semi-darkness. It's touching when people try to help others out of the same hole they just crawled out of themselves. But it is nice to watch." I wondered what it must have been like to sit sober in the old pub. To know every corner, every stain story, every regular—and still say no. That's a different kind of strength. Or a different kind of exhaustion. Or both.

The waitress came by, her apron covered in tiny beer stains that wouldn't come out. "Another beer?" she asked automatically, then saw who was sitting there and corrected herself. "Or another water?" The water drinker smiled thinly. "One more," he said. "That's enough risk for today." The guy in the suit stared at his glass as if the alcohol had just presented him with a contract he hadn't yet signed. "I should really go home," he muttered. "Really," the goblin repeated, savoring the word. "The favorite adverb of people who never do what they say."

I looked at my own glass. I'd already exceeded the point where you can still convince yourself you're drinking "moderately." The pain in my knee had lessened, not disappeared, but pushed into the background. Alcohol is good at silencing things you don't want to hear. The price, however, is that it also mutes everything else. Joy, fear, responsibility. In the end, all that remains is a dull monotony. For some of us, that's the height of emotion.

“Do you know what the real happy hour is?” I asked the goblin. “Not the one where the drinks are cheaper. It’s that half hour when you still half know what you’re doing, but you don’t even care that you’re doing it. That brief window before the lights in your head finally go out. After that, it’s just administration.” He nodded thoughtfully. “You’re getting better at describing your downfall,” he said. “I’m proud of you.”

The neon light above us flickered briefly, as if it too were tired. The innkeeper looked up, sighed, and tapped the casing. "When this thing finally dies, it'll have a better atmosphere," he said to the group. "But then I'll also see how awful you all really look. I don't know if I want that." A few laughed, others remained silent. The waitress handed a customer the wrong order, realized it, corrected herself, and smiled apologetically. Small mistakes. The big mistake was standing in the room, drinking with us.

Around nine o'clock, a brief lull settled in. A few left, a few stayed, a few new faces arrived. The happy-hour crowd thinned out, and the regulars' faces took over again. The man who'd been drinking water eventually stood up and put on his jacket. When he paid, he laid down the bill and said quietly, "It was nice to be here again. But I think that's it for this year." The landlord just nodded. "Let me know if you..." he began, then trailed off. "If you want to," he finished. Nothing more.

The goblin jumped off the back of the chair and ran after him to the door. "You'll be back," he called after him, even though the man didn't hear. "You always come back. Maybe not this year. But sometime. Hell has a good recognition factor." I wasn't so sure. Maybe the man really was through it. Maybe not. Either way: It was his hell, his decision. Mine was here.

As the door closed behind him, there was a moment of silence, as if a sound had escaped with it, a sound no one could name. I finished my glass, ordered another, then—all of a sudden—a water. The waitress looked at me, slightly irritated. "Both?" she asked. "Yes," I said. "Happy hour for my organs." The goblin grimaced. "This is getting ridiculous," he said. "You're worrying me. Maybe I should find a new main tenant."

I drank the water first. It felt like pouring sand into a machine that's only used to oil. My body was confused. So was my mind. Part of me felt almost… not good, but less awful. The other part thought, "If you keep going like this, you'll become one of those guys who has to explain why they're drinking water in a pub." Not a pleasant thought. But no worse than what I already was.

The evening dragged on. Happy hour was long over, but the sign remained hanging there, like a bad joke no one buys. The imp finally sat down again on the beam above the door, from where he guarded the border. "Do you know why I love to laugh when you fall?" he asked as I finally got up to leave. "Because you always act like you're the kings in here. And then one wrong move, one step, one glass, one word—and you're down. That's pure comedy for me. Tragedy for you, stand-up for me."

I stood in the doorway, feeling the wind from outside, the smoke from inside, the draft that pulls you in both directions. "So why are you staying here?" I asked him. "There are a thousand other places, a thousand other idiots." He grinned. "Because you're here," he said. "And because it's happy hour in hell. I like places where you guys get wasted for a discount. Honestly, you guys are my favorite program."

Outside, the air was damp and cool, a lingering, unannounced downpour clinging to the streets. I walked slowly, my knee acting up again, and so did my hip. No glasses clinked in my head, but the words of the evening echoed. "Two for one," "It was nice to be back," "Rent isn't happy hour." Tiny shards from a large mirror I've only ever looked into when drunk for years.

At home, I sat briefly on the edge of the bed without turning on the light. The goblin, as always, had followed me. He climbed onto the nightstand and sat down next to the water bottle I'd gotten into the habit of putting there. "Again tomorrow?" he asked. I shrugged. "Hell doesn't take commercial breaks," I said. "It just has special offers every now and then."

"Exactly," he said, lying down. "And you're a regular customer."

Before my eyes closed, I thought: Maybe happy hour is ultimately just an attempt to give one's own downfall a cheerful time. So that one doesn't have to admit to oneself that it's actually open 24/7.

Chapter 12 – Ashtray full of good intentions

Most good intentions aren't made in the head, but in a drunken stupor. Sober people make plans, drunk people make vows. The difference is simple: plans have deadlines, vows have ashtrays. I realized at some point that the most honest promises made in pubs don't come from the mouth, but from that movement when someone stubs out their cigarette particularly hard, as if they were grinding up half their life along with it. Of course, nothing comes of it, but for a moment it looks like someone has grasped what it's all about.

It was one of those days when the rain refused to fall properly, hanging in the air like a bad feeling. The place was half full, the smoke clinging to the ceiling, as always. An ashtray on every table, two at our regulars' table, because one is never enough when too many people are too self-conscious. The things were never really clean. Even right after emptying them, there were gray rims, burnt-on stains, little carbon relics from attempts to end something.

The goblin loved the ashtrays. "They're your diaries," he once said. "Everything you don't write down, you express in them. Every butt a sentence, every half-smoked cigarette a broken thought. And in the end, you dump it all in a big sack, and the garbage truck is your publisher." He liked to sit right in the middle of them if the landlord had forgotten to empty them in time. Then he'd sit among gray columns, yellow filters, and black rims, looking like the mascot of an anti-life.

That evening, Heiner had his moral outburst. It happened every few weeks when his blood got too thin or his liver started whirring too loudly. He stared at the cigarette between his fingers as if it were a stuffed animal accusing him. "I'm quitting," he said suddenly. Just like that, without any foreplay. "With smoking. Maybe with drinking too. Enough's enough sometime." Harry laughed immediately, a barking sound too loud for his lungs. "Sure," he said. "Best right after happy hour. First, get yourself into a bad situation, then get healthy."

Heiner stubbed out the cigarette unusually slowly. He twisted it in properly until the filter buckled, as if it were breaking its neck. "No, seriously," he muttered. "My doctor said if I keep going like this for another two years, I can choose my own grave." The goblin stood on the edge of the ashtray and clapped enthusiastically. "Ha!" he cried. "An honest doctor. I should buy him a drink." He bent down and sniffed the crushed butt. "That's a premium pre-made cigarette," he said expertly. "With extra guilt."

"So?" I asked. "What are you going to do now? Are you going to quit today, tomorrow, or after the next pack?" Heiner looked at me, his eyes a little glazed over, but not completely glazed over. "Tomorrow," he said. "Today would be a waste. I still have almost half a pack. And a case of beer at home." The imp chuckled. "Classic," he whispered to me. "Tomorrow. The most famous holiday of all losers."

The rest of us weren't any better. Every one of us had sat like that before, with that look that says, "Something has to change," and the hand gesture that proves the opposite. I remember a New Year's Eve a few years ago, the same bar, different beer mats. At midnight, we'd stood outside, cold fingers around warm glasses, cheap fireworks in the sky that blinked and burned out within seconds. One after the other, we'd announced our resolutions: "More exercise," "Less drinking," "More time with family." Our cigarette butts glowed like little baptismal candles. Later, inside, they all lay in the same ashtray, the cigarettes and the resolutions.

“Your problem is,” said the goblin, “you always make your resolutions in the subjunctive mood. I could, I should, I ought to. You never say: I'll do it. At most: I'll do it tomorrow.” I stubbed out my cigarette, watching him stare greedily at the filter. “What do you actually know about resolutions?” I asked. “You just want everything to stay the same.” He grinned. “Wrong,” he said. “I love change. But only in one direction. More broken. Less whole. Everything else bores me.”

The waitress came by, collecting empty glasses. Her gaze swept over the ashtrays: ours, the one at the next table, the one in the corner where the slot machine player always half-smoked his cigarettes. "You should see what it looks like in the morning," she said. "When I empty them. It's like raking leaves in autumn, only the leaves smell like cancer." The goblin saluted. "Poet," he whispered reverently. "That woman understands the system."

"Do you have any New Year's resolutions?" I asked her, more out of reflex than interest. She shrugged. "Sure," she said. "Every year the same nonsense. Work less, sleep more, eat healthier, do something completely different someday. And then I'm sitting here, dumping your ashes in the trash and eating a cold cheese roll at 12:30." She shrugged again, this time more wearily. "Resolutions are for people who take breaks."

The landlord chimed in without leaving his spot behind the bar. "I used to," he said, "always intended to quit someday. Sell the pub, get a camper van, and move to the coast. Then I realized: I'm so rooted here that if I try to tear this place down, I'll take half the wall with me. So I resolved to at least pay my taxes on time. Guess how well that's going." He pointed to the overflowing ashtray. "There are more resolutions in there than cigarette butts."

The goblin skipped from one filter to another as if they were stones in a river. "I could make a little book out of each one," he said. "Chapter one: 'I'm drinking less.' Chapter two: 'I'll call her tomorrow.' Chapter three: 'Next month I'll start saving.' And all of it framed by this sweet, yellow border." He held up a half-burned stub like a trophy. "Look, this one almost made it. More filter than tobacco. That's a half-success. Half-success is your specialty."

I thought about my own big moments. "Tomorrow I'll start drinking less." "Next month I'll find somewhere else to do business." "Starting in the fall, I'll start exercising." It had all been said before, as sticky as old chewing gum. And every time I'd said it with a cigarette in my hand, which I then buried in the ashtray like a seal. As if the gunk I'd stubbed out could preserve any of it.

“Do you know what the tragic thing is?” the goblin asked suddenly, more thoughtful than usual. “Sometimes you even mean it. For a few minutes. Something flickers, not just the cigarette. A tiny spark of will. But then comes the next swig, the next joke, the next evening—and the spark lands exactly where the rest ends up.” He gestured dramatically at the overflowing ashtray. “The graveyard of good intentions.”

Heiner lit another one anyway. Hands that ten minutes earlier had been quoting doctors' sentences now handled the lighter with the routine of a heart surgeon making the same incision for the hundredth time. "Just today's pack," he muttered. "Then I'm going all out." Harry grinned. "Sure," he said. "I only smoke when I'm drinking." Manni raised a finger. "I haven't bought one in two weeks," he said proudly. "Just bummed some." The goblin applauded sarcastically.

I took the next cigarette, put it in my mouth, and lit it. The first drag was scratchy as always, calming as always. "And you?" Heiner asked me. "Do you have any resolutions?" I blew out the smoke, watched it swirl under the lamp. "I've been resolving for so long not to throw my life away completely," I said. "At the moment, at least I'm managing to get rid of it only in small pieces." The goblin nodded approvingly. "That's your form of optimism," he said. "Proportioned crash and burn."

The ashtray was now full. Filter upon filter, ash everywhere, small charred islands in gray dust. The waitress brought a new, empty one and placed it next to the old one. The full one went onto the serving cart, toward the kitchen, toward the trash. All the evening's good intentions, collected in a cheap glass jar, ready to be disposed of anonymously. "There," she said. "Fresh opportunity for fresh stupidity."

The goblin stood in the new, clean glass and spun around. "I love this moment," he said. "An empty ashtray. Like a new calendar on January 1st. So much room for so much shit." He looked at me. "Go on," he whispered. "Make the first entry."

It wasn't that I never seriously tried to change anything. I just had a knack for turning every attempt into a ritual. Once a year, sometimes twice if I was particularly desperate, there was this "big moment." Not New Year's Eve, not a birthday, just any evening when my body screamed loud enough for even me to hear it. Heart palpitations, shortness of breath, that awful tightening in my chest, like someone was buttoning my shirt from the inside. Then I'd sit down, put out my cigarette, and say things like, "That was the last one." Nobody in the pub reacts to that anymore. They know the next pack is already lurking somewhere in the shadows.

Once, I remember it clearly, it was early autumn, I actually went out. Out of the shop, onto the street, straight to the vending machine. The guy was raging. "What are you doing?" he shouted. "Creating a scene? Go back, sit down, squeeze out the next one, give your speech, drink your beer. Stop playing the rebel." But I kept going. I stood in front of the rusty metal, looked at the pictures of brands that all tasted the same, and didn't put the money in. I just stood there, like an idiot who'd forgotten why he'd gone out.

“Look at him,” the goblin shouted to an invisible audience. “He’s waging war on a vending machine. Next level: he’s cursing the advertising column.” I put my hands in my pockets, turned around, and went back to the pub. Without a box. Without a stash. Inside, I sat down in my seat again, and the landlord looked at me. “Everything alright?” he asked. “Vending

machine broken?" I shook my head. “I decided not to buy anything,” I said. It sounded ridiculous to my ears, as if I’d announced I’d robbed a bank.

The waitress wordlessly placed a beer in front of me, laid a beer mat next to it on which she had written "Brave" in ballpoint pen. Harry grinned. "Well then, cheers," he said, and pointedly lit one. Heiner looked at me appraisingly. "How long can you keep it up?" he asked. The goblin sat down in my empty ashtray and tapped on the glass. "Bet on me," he shouted. "I bet he won't last 24 hours."

The first hour was easy. I was still proud then. Every puff I didn't take, every cigarette I didn't light, was a small triumph. My hands were somewhere else, on my glass, my phone, my forehead. The imp, of course, commented on it the whole time. "Look how he's holding himself back," he laughed. "Like a kid trying not to pee because the toilet's too far away." The others made their comments, but they were half-hearted. They'd seen it all before. Ashtrays full of good intentions, like I said.

After three hours it got harder. Not physically, that came later. First there was this emptiness in my movements. My arm wanted to go somewhere where there was nothing. These little automatic movements, hand to breast pocket, hand to pack, hand to lighter, hand to mouth—and suddenly they were all hanging in mid-air, pointing to nothing. I drank faster to keep them occupied. The goblin just grinned even wider. "You're simply replacing one poison with another," he said. "Very modern. Multitasking while dying."

Eventually, the waitress stood before me, looking at the almost pristine ashtray. Two cigarette butts lay in it, left over from before the vending machine war. Nothing else. "Looks odd," she said. "Almost like decoration." I shrugged. "Maybe I'll make an art installation out of it," I suggested. "Title: 'Man Trying Not to Kill Himself Completely.'" She sat down for a moment on the stool next to me, something she rarely did. "Do you know what the problem is with your resolutions?" she asked.

"Well?" the goblin chimed in, intrigued. "You make them where you can least control them. At the regulars' table. In the smoking area. With a full glass. You need other places for that. The kitchen, the doctor's office, a park bench. But in here..."—she nodded her chin at the room, the glasses, the faces—"...here your resolutions are just for show. You want to prove to yourselves that you could, in principle, if you wanted to. And if it all goes wrong, at least you have an audience." I looked at her. Sometimes I hated how well she saw right through us.

After five hours, my body started to complain. Nothing dramatic, but persistent. My lungs felt both empty and full at the same time, my fingers tingled, my throat was dry even though I was drinking enough. I saw the others' smoke and felt something inside me tighten. The goblin had long since settled back down in ashes, literally. He was sitting on a half-burned stub of Harry's cigarette and waving at me. "Come on," he called. "One drag. It won't hurt you. You didn't seriously think you could just quit overnight..."

"Shut up," I said loudly. Heiner turned to me. "Who are you talking to?" he asked. I shook my head. "To what's left of my dignity," I said. "It's trying to escape." Harry laughed. "It's been gone for a long time," he said. "It started in an ashtray and ended up in the toilet." The innkeeper placed a glass of water in front of me without a word. That was his version of support. No fuss, just a glass. The goblin grimaced. "Maybe I really am leaving," he muttered. "If you keep this up, I'll feel like I'm in a rehab center."

It was around midnight when it happened. Nothing dramatic, nothing fanfare. Just one movement too many. Someone offered me a cigarette, out of politeness, out of habit. "Want one?" he asked, half-turned away, already holding the lighter. My fingers grabbed it before my brain could process it. The cigarette lay in my hand, feeling like the most familiar lie in the world. The little imp jumped for joy, danced in circles. "There he is again!" he cried. "I missed you."

I could have put it down. I could have said "no" and thanked him for the packet. Instead, I put it in my mouth, leaned towards the fire, and inhaled. The smoke burned as always, tasted as always, filled my lungs as always. Part of me groaned with relief, another part vomited inwardly. The waitress saw it from a distance, saw the first new cigarette butt in the ashtray. Her shoulders dropped a millimeter, barely perceptible, but there it was.

"There you go," said Harry. "We were starting to worry you were going to come to your senses." Heiner shook his head. "I knew it," he said. "Nobody stops here. We only stop when it stops." The goblin sat right on my filter, clinging on like a small animal. "You see," he whispered in my ear. "You were someone else for five hours, and it didn't feel good. Now you're back to being you. Broken, but consistent."

I stared at the cigarette butt, at the smoke, at the fresh stub joining the old ones. Another entry in the ashtray, in the diary of half-heartedness. "Well," I thought. "At least I know where I belong." It was a shitty realization, but it was one nonetheless. Most of the resolutions I've made in my life have ended like this: with a quiet "Oh, screw it" and a new cigarette butt in the glass.

The waitress came later and emptied the ashtray. I watched as my five hours of bravery disappeared with the rest into the gray stream. "Well," she said, as she placed the new, empty one in front of me. "At least this time it wasn't just ashes, but also a little bit of hope." The goblin grinned. "Hope is what burns best," he said. "It gives off such a nice, short light."

I picked up the next cigarette, lit it without much comment. I wasn't in the mood for any more announcements, no desire for "starting tomorrow." The ashtray was back to what it always was: a small mass grave for ideas about how to live better. And we sat around it like priests at a funeral that no one was really taking seriously.

Later, the phrase wouldn't leave my mind: an ashtray full of good intentions. It applied to everything, not just smoking. The pub itself was one giant ashtray. Every evening began with some botched plan and ended in the same gray mush. "Tonight I'll drink less." "Tonight I won't start any drama." "Tonight I'll call her afterward." And in the end: cigarettes stubbed out, glasses empty, resolutions vanished. The goblin was right: we weren't just physically addicted, we were dependent on the idea that things could theoretically be different.

I noticed it especially in those conversations after 1 a.m., when the group dwindled and the voices grew quieter. There always comes a point where someone says, "To be honest..." That's the prelude to hell. "To be honest, I never wanted to end up like this." "To be honest, I'm afraid it will never get better." "To be honest, I even envy those who are already dead because they don't have to wake up again." And as the sentences are uttered, they stub out cigarettes, as if they're immediately burying what they've just said.

The goblin particularly enjoyed listening to these sentences. He sat on the high back of a chair and let them wash over him. "Ah, there it is," he would say then. "Honesty. Right at the end.

It always comes too late, but it comes." He could distinguish between the sentences that were just casually uttered and those that crept up from some dark hole. With the genuine ones, he leaned forward a bit, as if he wanted to hear better. "These ones," he said, "don't go in the ashtray. They get stuck."

Once, on such an evening, it was just the four of us left: me, Heiner, the waitress, and the innkeeper. Harry had passed out at home, Manni had managed to catch some bus, and the water drinker hadn't been seen for weeks. Outside, rain drummed against the windows; inside, the lights were dimmed, not for romantic reasons, but because no one bothered to turn off the bright lamps anymore. There was only an ashtray on the table in front of us, but that was enough. It looked like a small volcanic landscape.

“To be honest,” said Heiner, “I never intended to get old. I always thought I’d die young, with some sort of heroic twist of fate. An accident, a heart attack, something. And now here I am, with back pain from sitting and short of breath when I climb stairs, and the most heroic thing I did today was give my seat on the train to an old lady.” He stubbed out his cigarette as if burying the sentence with it.

The waitress, making an exception, also took one, even though she rarely smoked while sitting. "To be honest," she said, "I used to imagine that one day I'd leave here and no one would see me as anything other than the one who brings the glasses. I wanted to be the one sitting at a table while someone else brought her drinks. And now..." She looked around at the empty chairs, the full ashtrays, the bar. "Now I can hardly imagine standing anywhere else."

The landlord looked into his glass, which this time actually contained water instead of beer. "To be honest," he said, "I've always treated this pub a bit like a child. I nurtured it, hoping it would one day thrive, stand on its own two feet. And at some point, I realized: the pub isn't the child. You are. And you won't grow up. You'll stay stuck here until one of you can't get in anymore." He shook his head. "Too late to realize."

I knew it was my turn. The goblin grinned, waiting. "Come on," he whispered. "Your 'If I'm being honest.' I'm all ears." I stared into the ashtray, where the smoke was slowly thinning. "If I'm being honest," I said quietly, "I don't know if I ever really wanted anything other than this. Drinking, smoking, chatting, not being alone. I've been telling myself for years that I once had some grand plans somewhere, but when I look closely..." I raised my eyes, looked at the other three. "Maybe this was always my Plan A. I just never had the courage to admit how small it was."

The sentence hung in the air for a moment. The waitress looked away, the innkeeper rubbed his forehead, Heiner scratched his throat. The goblin clapped slowly. "That," he said, "was one of those sentences that doesn't belong in the ashtray. It stays up there." He tapped his temple. "Congratulations. You're officially no longer in the phase where you believe your own lie. From now on, it'll either get better—or significantly uglier."

We were silent for a while. The place breathed heavily. From outside, the distant wail of a siren drifted in, some other accident, some other disaster, far enough away not to affect us. The waitress stubbed out her cigarette, looked at the filter, and said, "To be honest, I don't want to end up burying all of you someday or saying, 'He always sat back there, third stool from the left.' But I know that's exactly what's going to happen. Maybe not with you, maybe not with you..."—she pointed at me, at Heiner—"...but with one of you." The landlord nodded. "I've seen enough faces that just stopped coming," he muttered.

The goblin stood in the ashtray, arms outstretched. "Welcome," he said, "to the aha zone. You all see clearly and yet do nothing. For me, the best time. Insight without consequence." He turned in a circle. "Have you noticed how full the ashtray is? And how empty your hands become when you have nothing to stub out?" He was right. At that moment, none of us was holding a cigarette. It was as if we'd briefly forgotten about them. Our fingers didn't know what to do.

Then the innkeeper's phone rang. A delivery driver, something about tomorrow's order. He answered, spoke quietly, gave his figures, said "yes," "sounds good," and "see you then." The magic was gone. Honesty crept back to where it lives during the day, leaving us alone with our habits. The waitress got up, took the ashtray, and emptied it into the bin. The gray dust, the filters, the half-promises—everything slid into the trash as if it had never existed.

“So,” she said. “Back to work.” The innkeeper set out new glasses, Heiner lit another one, and I picked up my beer. The imp climbed out of the empty ashtray and sat down on my shoulder blade. “There you go,” he whispered. “Back to square one. You’re not made for change. You’re made for repetition.”

On the way home later, my clothes smelled of lingering smoke, of beer, of that mixture of sweat and cleaning products inherent in any self-respecting pub. I walked through the streets, peering into dark windows behind which people had televisions, sofas, family photos, houseplants. Perhaps they had ashtrays, too, but different ones. Not so crowded, not so centrally located. Their resolutions were probably pinned to refrigerators, on Post-it notes, in calendars, not in the trash.

At home, I took off my jacket and draped it over the chair, which smelled of a bar. On the table was a small glass ashtray, a cheap promotional item from some cigarette brand. I stared at it. Two cigarette butts from this morning, nothing else. I sat down, lit another one, without even trying to stub it out particularly hard. The goblin sat down opposite me, on the table, his legs dangling.

"Any more resolutions for today?" he asked. I blew out the smoke. "Just one," I said. "I promise myself that tonight I'll at least remember how I got to bed in the morning." He nodded. "Humility is also a virtue," he said. "Perhaps the only one you can truly afford."

I stubbed out the cigarette, watched the tiny ember die down. Another residue, another trace, another mark in an ashtray that told more about me than I would ever tell anyone. A garbage truck drove by outside. I thought about how they empty the containers in the morning, all the dirt, all the ash, all the city's good intentions in one heap.

"Maybe," I thought, just before my eyes closed, "you don't even need new resolutions anymore. Maybe it's enough to stop imagining that there's something of you in every ashtray that you can still salvage." The goblin smiled. "Don't worry," he whispered. "I'll keep your part. I'm better than any bucket."

And there the ashtray stood, half full, more honest than all the calendars in the world.

Chapter 13 – The Night the Jukebox Died

The jukebox was already there before I started regularly getting wasted here. I don't know who moved in first—the landlord, the machine, or the goblin—but the three of them belong together like the bar, the ashtray, and the bad lighting. It wasn't some pretty retro thing from a hipster shop, but a clunky box with worn buttons, a film of nicotine on the plastic, and colorful lights that pretended to be lit rather than actually being lit. Most of the pictures on the CDs behind the glass were faded. Some bands had died, some had lasted too long, some we'd left in there because nobody wanted to change anything.

The jukebox was our radio, our confessional, and our timekeeper. There were songs we knew would come on, and it was past midnight. Others were pure early-shift anthems, perfect for accompanying the first couple of beers. Then there were the ones no one could stand to hear anymore, yet everyone still turned them on when they got sentimental. The old rock ballads, all that crap that makes you think you're feeling something when all you're hearing is your own echo. Some nights it seemed to me that half the jukebox's music library consisted of songs you could only tolerate if you'd drunk just enough to believe they were written for you.

The goblin loved the thing. "This is my organ," he said. "The soundtrack to our downfall. Without music, you drink differently. More soberly, more sadly. With music, at least you feel like your suffering has a melody." He liked to sit on top of the box, legs dangling, chin in his hands, whenever someone invested another ten euros of change in the slot-loading romance. Sometimes he'd lie down right behind the glass, between the CD cases, and pretend he was part of the selection. "Press me," he'd call out. "Track 666."

The evening she died was uneventful. No football, no holiday, no party, nothing at all. It was the usual slow decline towards midweek. Outside, the sky hung low and gray, and inside, the smoke hung just as heavy. I came in; my knee still ached, but by now it was more habit than pain. The waitress nodded, the landlord set down the beer, Heiner was already in his seat, and Harry was discussing something with Manni that no one would remember later.

The jukebox was playing. Some old tune I'd heard a thousand times before without knowing the artist. Didn't matter. The first two beers went down more quietly than usual. I was tired of myself, of my little outbursts, my half-baked resolutions, and my bruises. I just wanted to sit, drink, and let the guitars wash over me. The imp was lying face down on the jukebox, drumming his feet on the lid. "Tonight's going to be a good night," he said. "I have a feeling. Something's finally going to go completely wrong tonight."

“Something new for a change,” I muttered. “Something’s always broken around here.” He grinned. “Yeah, but it’s usually you guys. Today I’m in the mood for some tech.” He stood up, balanced on the edge of the machine, and put his ear to the casing. “It’s coughing,” he said. “Do you hear that? The old thing is coughing.” I listened. Sure enough: between the songs, there was a strange clicking, a soft crackling sound. I used to think that was normal noise. Now I knew that anything older than the slot machine player starts making weird noises eventually.

"Maybe it's just the amplifier," the landlord said when I mentioned it. "That thing's older than you've been in this place. I switch it off completely after closing time. It needs a break, too." The waitress raised an eyebrow. "And then?" she asked. "The lads are stuck in their own little room, forced to listen to their own thoughts." Harry waved his hand dismissively.

"Nonsense," he said. "I can drink without music." "Yes," she said. "But the rest of us have to put up with it."

The jukebox was taking in more money than usual that evening. It was as if we all subconsciously sensed that something was off. Heiner put in a fiver and pressed his usual tunes one after the other. A few dark classics, some anthems from a time when he still believed he wouldn't one day be some sad, broken guy in a pub. Manni fumbled through the menus, looking for songs "you used to hear at the youth center." The guy in the suit from happy hour hell was there too, without a tie, his shirt stained, putting on some 80s pop, probably because back then he didn't know what a meeting was.

The imp was in heaven, if you can call it that. He ran back and forth on the jukebox to the beat, shouting song titles I already knew in my ear. "That's your song," he shouted when some ballad about losing came on. "And that's her song," he said when a song came on that made the waitress pause briefly and tap out the beat on the counter. "And that's mine," he chuckled when a song with too much drumming and too few lyrics started.

There was a time when I believed songs could change things. That with a certain song you'd suddenly realize: now or never. Get out of here. Save a life. Eventually I understood: music is just like a label on what's going to happen anyway. You drink, you fall, you stay, you leave – and the jukebox provides the perfect soundtrack so you can later say: "Remember when we were listening to that song…" It's all just a backdrop. But a good one.

That evening, the atmosphere was louder than usual. Maybe because I'd become quieter inside. Maybe because the sound system was really running at its limit. Maybe both. For a while, everything went smoothly. Songs in, songs out, glasses full, glasses empty, cigarettes on, cigarettes out. Routine. And right there, in the middle of some song that always sounds the same in the middle anyway, it happened.

The music cut out briefly. Just a second, maybe two. A hiccup in the sound. Then it started up again, stumbled, caught up with itself, and carried on. The goblin froze. "Did you hear that?" he whispered. I nodded. "It happens," I said. "It can die," he corrected. His little eyes twinkled. "That wasn't a glitch. That was a coughing fit."

The second time it cut out, it was impossible to miss. A song abruptly ended, right where the chorus should have started. Instead of "Ohhhh," there was only an embarrassed "Krrrk." The speaker made a noise as if someone had thrown a handful of gravel into a blender. Then there was silence for a few seconds. Not absolute silence—glasses clinked, voices murmured, someone coughed—but that constant background music was suddenly gone. It was as if someone had pulled back the rug, and everyone was briefly standing barefoot on cold ground.

"Hey, landlord!" Harry shouted. "Your jukebox is drunk!" Heiner laughed too loudly. "The jukebox has drunk more than we have!" Manni tried to check the display to see if anything was still playing. The numbers flickered. The display froze, two digits half-broken. "That's a familiar sight," the goblin muttered. "That's what your brains look like when you walk home."

The innkeeper emerged from behind the bar, wiping his hands on his apron as if he were about to perform surgery. "It's been acting up for a few days now," he grumbled. "A faulty connection, an amplifier, who knows. I'll have to call the guy who installed it for me." "Is he still alive?" the waitress asked dryly. He shrugged. "If not, it'll cost you more."

The song started up again, this time three seconds later. The energy snapped back, but you could tell there was a crack. Like a glass you've put down too hard – it still holds, but you know the hairline crack will stay. The goblin lay flat on the case, as if feeling the vibrations. "She's got a fever," he said. "Maybe you should hold a cold beer to her head. Works for you guys, too."

After a few more songs, it was clear: this wasn't a coincidence. Some songs played smoothly, others stuttered, skipped, or remained silent for a moment before resuming. At one point, the jukebox stopped completely, and the track number flashed like a heart monitor just before it registered a steady line. The player even turned away from his flashing machine to see what was going on. "I hope it's not about to break down," he said. "It's harder to hit the risk ladder without music."

The innkeeper sighed, went to the jukebox, and patted the side with his open hand. Not hard, more like a fatherly tap, like you'd give an old television. "Come on, girl," he murmured. "You can manage one more round." The waitress snorted. "Maybe she needs a vacation," she said. "Or retirement."

For a moment, the machine actually let itself be persuaded. The next song played through smoothly, as did the one after that. It was as if it had pulled itself together because it realized everyone was staring. The goblin stood there like a conductor who thinks he has control of the orchestra. "See?" he shouted. "The old lady's still got it. She just wants attention." He turned to me. "You and she, you're more alike than you think."

We kept drinking. It was the kind of evening you call "cozy" when you want to justify the fact that nothing much happened. The alcohol slowly crept into our minds, softening the edges, blunting the rough corners. Someone told a story he'd already told ten times, but we pretended it was new. The jukebox kept playing, as if it had calmed down. The imp danced, the waitress wiped down surfaces, the bartender poured drinks—everything was as normal as it becomes around here.

Until some idiot – was it Harry, was it the suit guy, was it one of those faces I only recognize by sight – got the idea to program a whole series of songs back-to-back. Not the usual stuff, not our old staples, but all sorts of things mixed together. New pop tracks, German drivel, a few cheap Schlager tunes, as if he wanted to test whether you could also destroy this thing emotionally.

The goblin was outraged. "This is abuse," he snarled, stamping angrily on the lid of the box. "The old woman is old. She can't handle just any crap. This is like techno for someone with heart failure." He ran across the display as if trying to change the selection, but of course, he couldn't do anything. The first song started playing, some modernly produced, plastic beat that was about as appropriate in this setting as a smoothie at a funeral.

And then came the moment. The song started, stopped, skipped, stopped again. The bass rumbled, the treble whistled, then, suddenly: silence. Not that breathless pause from before, but a clean, hard cut. The lights on the jukebox blinked for a moment, frantically searching for a beat. Then they went out. Not dimmed, not flickering, simply: off. The room darkened by a few shades.

The slot machine operator whistled softly. "She's done for," he said. "She's fed up." Heiner grinned uncertainly. "She'll be back in a minute," he said. "She was gone for a bit before."

Harry stood up, went over, and even hit the side with his hand. Nothing. Just the sound of his own skin on plastic.

The innkeeper huffed, went around the corner, pulled open the side panel, and fumbled with some cables. "Maybe a fuse," he muttered. "Or the power supply." The imp was now standing directly in front of the jukebox, facing the dark display. "It's dead," he said quietly. Not laughing. Almost reverently. "I can't hear it anymore."

It's strange how quickly we become accustomed to music. When the jukebox finally fell silent, we realized just how loud we actually are. Glasses, voices, the scraping of chairs. And beneath it all, something else: that dull thumping when your own thoughts try to grow louder and no one is playing against it anymore. The silence wasn't comfortable. It was stark.

The landlord had unscrewed half the jukebox, a screwdriver between his teeth, his brow furrowed. Inside was a chaotic mess of cables, circuit boards, old dust, and yellowed stickers that no one could read anymore. The waitress shone an old flashlight-style cell phone inside, its screen riddled with cracks. From the outside, the jukebox always looked like a stubborn, solid block. Inside, it was just as tangled up as we were.

“At least there used to be some mechanics in there,” the innkeeper grumbled. “Wheels, gears, sliders. Now it’s all electronics. If something breaks, you can only replace it.” He reached around, wiggled a plug. A light flickered briefly. The goblin held his breath. “She’s twitching,” he whispered. “Maybe she’s not quite there yet.” It was like someone in the hospital who briefly opens their eyes in their sleep, then drifts off again.

The landlord cursed under his breath, tugging at a cable that looked like it had been haphazardly soldered together by someone with a bad temper. "There's more makeshift wiring in there than in my tax file," he muttered. I stood beside him, beer in hand, thinking about how often I'd leaned against that jukebox, as if it needed to support me. How often I'd stood there, change between my fingers, drunkenly pressing the same numbers, because I wanted to be able to rely on at least one thing: that if I couldn't manage anything else, at least the jukebox would reliably play the same song.

“If you can’t save her, you’ll have to bury her,” said the goblin. “With all due respect. Perhaps she can have a little corner in the back of the warehouse, next to the empty barrels and your good intentions.” The innkeeper wasn’t quite ready for poetry. “Quiet now,” he growled, not knowing who he was talking to. “Or I’ll throw you in too.” He flipped the switch, pulled the plug, and plugged it back in. A soft hum, a tiny spark somewhere deep inside, then nothing again.

The waitress glanced around the room. The guests were getting restless. Without music, they seemed naked. Harry tapped his finger on the table, his pace quickening every second. Heiner stared into his glass as if it contained an orchestra. Manni tried to play something on his phone, but the speaker on that plastic thing was lost in the air. "This is no good," he said. "Sounds like someone farting in the next room."

I found that the absence of the jukebox affected me more than I'd thought it would. It wasn't just the music. It was the ritual. Loose change on the counter, murmuring a few numbers, fingertips on the keys, that click when the entry was registered. Then the brief wait until the machine found the song, the moment before the first note sounded. That was the only thing in here that sometimes held any semblance of excitement.

The goblin sat on the edge of the open flap, letting his legs dangle inwards. "Do you know what this means?" he asked me. "The sounds you used to project your misery onto are gone. From now on, you'll have to find new excuses. You can't say anymore, 'I'll have another drink until the song's over.' You'll just have to get up at some point. Without a drumroll." I took a sip that suddenly tasted different. Raw, somehow. As if someone had pulled the sugar out of the alcohol.

“Maybe I’ll get a new one,” the innkeeper muttered, more to himself than to us. “Or some digital crap. With internet and everything.” The waitress grimaced. “And then all you’ll hear here are playlists from some platform or other,” she said. “The same song for three hours straight, in five different versions. I don’t know if I want to keep working for that.” Heiner chimed in: “Hey, the jukebox is part of the place. Something’s missing without it.” Harry nodded. “It’s like a regulars’ table without an ashtray.”

A few people tried to fill the void with noise. They talked louder, tapped glasses on the table, told their jokes with more emphasis. But the silence behind it couldn't be completely covered. There were still moments when no one spoke—those small, naked seconds when you hear someone breathing next to you, a chair creaking, the compressor kicking on in the refrigerator. The jukebox used to muffle those moments. Now everything was out in the open.

“I once read,” said Manni, who liked to rely on half-truths, “that music stimulates the same centers in the brain as drugs. Maybe this is the methadone program.” The goblin laughed. “You’re not going through withdrawal,” he said. “You’re just realizing you don’t like yourselves when no one’s singing for you.” He jumped off the tarp, paced back and forth on the counter as if looking for a replacement. “I can try humming,” he suggested. “But I’m afraid you won’t hear me in time.”

The innkeeper finally gave up. He closed the lid again, not harshly, more wearily. "It's dead for today," he said. "I'll call the technician tomorrow. Or I'll pretend I did." The waitress briefly placed a hand on the casing, almost tenderly. "It's heard enough," she said. "Maybe it just doesn't want to anymore." I thought of all the nights we'd stood in front of it, eyes glazed over, coins in, songs out, feelings in, emptiness out. Maybe it really was enough.

"The jukebox is dying because of you," whispered the goblin. "Just like everything else here is dying because of you. Glasses, ashtrays, furniture, relationships, organs. You soak everything up until you can't anymore, and then you're surprised when the lights go out." I wanted to argue with him, but couldn't find a reason. Instead, I ordered another beer. It sounded strangely loud when the tap opened.

Later that night, as the place thinned out and only a few die-hards remained, I sat right next to the jukebox. I leaned against it, feeling the cold casing against my back. No more vibrations, no more bass, just plastic and metal. "Remember," I murmured, not knowing who I was talking to, "all those nights you used to put the soundtrack to my meltdown? We were a good team." The leprechaun was perched atop the jukebox, knees drawn up, arms wrapped around them. "She deserved better," he said. "You all deserved better. But you two found each other."

The waitress cleared the tables, the owner worked the cash register, and somewhere in the back, dishes clattered. And there it stood, the large, silent machine that had always been there and now finally seemed like nothing more than a piece of furniture. It was like an old, sick dog missing its bark. You still recognize it, but something essential is gone.

The days that followed were strange. You think you get used to everything—to pain, to debt, to faces that disappear. But the first evening without music felt like someone had removed an organ from the room. Not vital, perhaps, but one responsible for the atmosphere. Maybe the pub's spleen. You can live without it, but somehow you'll never quite be straight again.

The landlord had actually tried it. The next day at noon, he called the technician, the kind of guy who apparently spends half his life tinkering with dead machines in dark corners of dive bars. "I know him from back in the day," he said. "He talked me into buying that thing. Said it would bring me business and my soul." "Yeah, right," the waitress muttered. "Except now both are screwed."

The technician arrived two days later. I happened to be there already, too early as usual, at the bar, drinking coffee instead of beer because the day hadn't officially started yet. A small man with gray hair and a belly that looked like he'd filled himself up with spare parts. He smelled of cold metal and stale smoke. "Well, is the lady giving me trouble?" he asked when he saw the jukebox, and tapped on the casing as if greeting a horse. The little imp took a step back, as if he'd been caught in the act.

"It just switched off," the innkeeper explained. "It's not working anymore, the light's out, the display's dead." The technician nodded as if he'd heard it a thousand times before. He unscrewed it, opened the same panel as the innkeeper, plugged in some measuring devices, and mumbled something about "voltage" and "controller" and "old series." I only understood half of it. The imp didn't understand anything at all and acted like an expert. "Fixed core," he diagnosed. "There's nothing you can do. Except pray. And nobody prays in here."

After a while, the technician straightened up and wiped his hands on a rag that looked like it had seen at least three jukebox lives. "Well," he said, "I'll put it bluntly: it's not worth it anymore." The landlord grimaced as if he'd just been handed a death warrant. "What do you mean, 'not worth it'?" he asked. "Power supply broken, circuit board dead, drive finished," the man listed. "I can fix all of that, but it'll cost more than a used one. And whether it'll last is another question entirely."

The waitress leaned against the bar and folded her arms. "That means she's dead," she translated. "How long was she here?" The landlord thought for a moment. "Twelve years," he said. "Maybe thirteen." I did the math in my head. Twelve, thirteen years. That was roughly the time it had taken me to become not just a customer here, but part of the furniture. Half my pub biography was leaning against that cabinet.

“We could chip in,” Heiner suggested later, after the technician had left and the diagnosis hung from the ceiling like stale smoke. “For a repair or something.” Harry snorted. “I might chip in for a wreath,” he said. “But not for a machine that’s heard more cigarette butts than my lungs.” Manni said, “Maybe this is a sign. Maybe we don’t need a jukebox anymore. Maybe we’re old enough to drink our ruins in peace.”

The goblin was furious. "They're taking away my amplifier," he growled. "That's dereliction of duty. What am I supposed to do while you guys drink in silence? Watch you think? I quit." I had to grin. "You're not quitting any more than we are," I said. "You'll stay until the last ashtray is empty." He looked offended, but he knew I was right.

The first few evenings without music were rough. You realize how many pauses in life were drowned out by noise. Conversations became more fragmented. Before, you could simply

remain silent if you didn't know what to say. A song filled the gap, a chorus took over the talking. Now, every silence hung naked in the air. People started drinking more to pad out the silences. Others talked too much, as if trying to replace the jukebox with their own voices.

“Something’s missing,” Harry said one evening, staring at the dark corner where the cabinet stood. “I never realized how much I was missing something I hadn’t even noticed.” Heiner nodded. “I used to think the music was too loud,” he said. “Now I realize how loud my head is when there’s nothing playing.” The waitress tried to play some background music from her mobile phone using an old radio. The sound was tinny, too quiet, too clean. The songs jumped around randomly, without any system, without the old order we’d all eventually developed.

The innkeeper was doing the math. He had a piece of paper in front of him, tossing numbers around. New machine, rental equipment, subscription, percentage of revenue, electricity costs. "It's not worth it," he muttered. "I never really made any money with the old one either. It's all just nostalgia. Nostalgia doesn't pay taxes." The waitress looked at him. "But nostalgia keeps the place going longer than the cash register," she said. He didn't reply. The imp was standing on his piece of paper, dancing around on it. "At least give it a proper send-off," he demanded. "A funeral, a eulogy, a candle. Anything."

I found myself standing alone in front of the dead jukebox, a beer in my hand, my reflection in the dark glass. Without the illuminated CD covers, I suddenly saw myself in it. No Bon Jovi, no AC/DC, no one else – just my distorted face, framed by fingerprints and nicotine. "You were better than we deserved," I muttered without thinking much about it. "You put up with us, even our music requests."

The goblin sat down next to me, his reflection in the glass next to mine. Two distorted faces in a switched-off machine. "Do you know what the best thing is?" he asked. "This thing knew all your favorite songs. Every embarrassing tune you picked drunk, every schmaltzy ballad, every chest-thumping rocker. And it never judged. Just played until it couldn't anymore. You wish you were that generous."

“We never gave her anything back,” I realized. “Just money. No respect.” “Money is more than you give most people,” he said. “But yeah. You throw everything in ashtrays and vending machines, but not yourselves out of the store.” I briefly rested my forehead against the glass. It was cold, but not unpleasant. That’s what something feels like that’s long since given up, but is still sitting around because no one puts it away.

That evening, the noise level eventually became unbearable. Everyone was talking at once, the clinking of glasses was louder than it needed to be, the laughter was shriller, the silence more muffled. "You're all shouting against a silence that will win you anyway," said the goblin. I drank, I smoked, I didn't listen to anything.

The real death didn't come with a bang, but with a removal. A few weeks after the first malfunction, I was once again early at the shop. The air smelled of cleaning products and stale beer, the chairs were still stacked on the tables, the waitress was wiping down surfaces, and the owner was cursing over a bill. Then this van pulled up. White, anonymous, with company lettering that pretended to be making the world a better place with vending machines.

Two men got out. Blue overalls, strong arms, that indifference on their faces that people have who lug the same things around every day. They didn't look for long. "This one?" one asked, and the innkeeper nodded. "Yes," he said. "She's had it." The goblin jumped up. "Wait a

minute," he cried. "That's a misunderstanding. She's just in a bad mood. She doesn't need to be picked up, she needs therapy."

They pushed the jukebox away from the wall. The sound it made was shameful. Such a deep, aging scrape of metal on tile. I'd never thought about how heavy the thing was until I saw her struggling. Maybe it only seemed that way because I knew how much was tied to it. Songs, nights, faces that would never come again. It was like tearing a piece of wall away.

The waitress stopped, rag in hand. "You're really taking it," she said, sounding like someone was leading their dog away. The innkeeper shrugged. "What am I supposed to do?" he said. "I've been paying rent for a piece of furniture for months. It's not doing me any good. The guys will take it, maybe they'll strip it for parts, maybe it'll end up in the junkyard. It doesn't matter." "It does matter," she muttered, but no one answered.

I stood beside it, the first beer of the day in my hand, feeling inappropriately sober for the situation. The leprechaun ran around the jukebox, clinging to the corners as if he could stop it. Of course, he didn't touch anything. The men pushed the thing onto a metal trolley, strapping it down as if it were some unruly animal. The cable dangled behind it like a severed tail.

"Say something," the goblin whispered in my ear. "Go on, say anything. You're usually never at a loss for words. Tell a joke, give a speech, write a poem, puke—anything." I couldn't think of anything. I watched the machine being pushed toward the door. The colorful front glass was opaque, the lights were out, and my reflection faded bit by bit as it got farther away. Just before they flung the door open, the waitress placed her hand on the side of the machine. It wasn't a grand gesture, just a quick press. "Thank you," she said. I think only the goblin and I heard it.

Outside, the thing was loaded into the van. A ramp, a jolt, metal on metal, then the door slammed shut. The van drove off as if it were only carrying furniture. In reality, it had charged up the sound of our last ten, twelve years. The street was empty again. So was the wall in the "taillight." A bright patch where the box had stood before. Nicotine stains on the outside, a clean interior, like a silhouette.

"And now what?" Harry asked later, as we sat at our usual table, staring at the empty space. "Now you're just listening to yourselves," the waitress said. "You always wanted to be taken seriously." The landlord placed the beer in front of me and glanced briefly at the empty corner. "I could hang up a TV," he said. "Or a dartboard. Or a shelf." Manni chimed in. "Put up a mirror," he said. "At least then we'll see what's become of us."

The goblin sat against the wall, right where the jukebox had been. He had drawn his knees up and wrapped his arms around them. "That was my stage," he said. "Up there I danced when you partied, there I sat when you cried. That was my DJ booth of misery. And now..." He looked around, examining the other appliances. "Should I sit on the refrigerator? It's not the same. It just hums. It doesn't sing."

The first few evenings without the box were both louder and more boring. Instead of music, some radio program or other would sometimes play in the background when the landlord remembered to turn on the kitchen radio. News snippets, traffic jams, commercials for mattresses and ready meals. The goblin covered his ears. "This is worse than silence," he said. "If you're going down, at least go down with a decent tune. Not some jingle from a hardware store."

I caught myself still twirling the change in my pocket. Pure habit. Before, after an hour of drinking, I'd reflexively put the coins on the bar, say a few numbers, and put my hands over the buttons. Now the coins just lay there, cold, useless. "You can give them to me," the goblin said. "I'm building myself a little jukebox in the bathroom." I put them back in my pocket. "Maybe I'll keep them," I muttered. "For someday."

“Someday,” he said. “The great graveyard of words. That’s where all your resolutions and your petty romanticism lie. Someday I’ll stop. Someday I’ll leave. Someday it’ll get better. And now: Someday we’ll get a new jukebox. You never learn.” Maybe he was right. Maybe not. The fact was: That evening, for the first time, I had the feeling that something had truly come to an end, something that couldn’t be so easily replaced.

Later, when the place was almost empty and the silence lay heavy on the tables, Heiner started humming. First softly, then louder. A song we used to listen to all the time when we were drunk and pretending we were still immortal. Harry joined in, off-key, but loud. Manni tried to hit the second part somewhere, missed spectacularly. The waitress leaned against the bar and listened, her arms folded. The landlord was drying glasses, the rhythm of his movements somehow fitting the music.

It sounded awful. Wrong, choppy, way too slow. And yet, for a few seconds, it had something. Not a replacement for the box, but a kind of improvised funeral. We sang, staggered through the chorus, forgot the lyrics, started again. The goblin stood in the middle of the table and conducted us with a napkin like a baton. "See," he shouted. "You can even set your own demise to music. You don't even need electricity."

When we were finished, no one laughed. There was just that awkward clearing of the throat, a few sips, the clinking of a glass. Then the waitress said, "You're as crooked as your lives." The landlord nodded. "But loud," he added. And somewhere between those two sentences, it was clear: The jukebox was gone. And it wouldn't be replaced, just drowned out.

A few days later, I had one of those rare lucid moments. Not mentally, which was as usual gloomy, but in terms of the light. I had lingered outside in the afternoon for once, before turning off towards the "last light" of the night. The sun hung low over the houses, the street was wet from the rain, and signs, windows, and faces were reflected everywhere. As I walked past the pub, I saw my spot through the window: the bar, the empty corner without the jukebox. From the outside, it all looked smaller. Like a dollhouse where the figures had been forgotten.

I stopped, a cigarette between my fingers, one I'd lit on the way. In the reflective glass, I saw my own face, and the pub's interior mirrored. My self from outside and my life from inside, all in one image. Where the jukebox had once glowed, there was now only a bright spot, a shadow without an object. I suddenly felt old. Not because of the wrinkles, not because of the bones. Because of the things that gradually disappear while you're still here.

The goblin appeared in the reflection next to me, as if he'd crawled out of the window. "Well?" he asked. "Sentimentalizing? Grief work? Midlife crisis? It's late for that, man." I took a drag on my cigarette, watching the smoke creep up the glass. "The jukebox was my calendar," I said. "Not that cardboard crap with holidays. I kept track of what was happening in my life by knowing what was playing. 'Remember when you broke up with her? That one song was on.' 'Remember when your boss fired you? You played the same song three times.' Now the thing's gone. Like someone stole the legend to a map."

The goblin grinned, but less mockingly than usual. "Welcome to the area where your memories are no longer outsourced to devices," he said. "You have to carry them yourself. You'll see how heavy that is." I flicked my cigarette butt on the ground and stubbed it out before going inside. Inside, it smelled the same as always: beer, smoke, cleaning products, resigned hope.

The landlord had actually started filling the empty corner. No TV, no dartboard. Just an old shelf he'd brought up from the cellar. On it were a few dusty bottles, a couple of glasses, a rusty tin sign for a beer brand nobody ordered anymore. It looked sad, like set pieces from a really cheap movie. "Looks like crap," I said as I landed on my stool. He nodded. "Yeah," he said. "But cheap crap."

The waitress placed a beer in front of me and saw my gaze drift to the corner. "You're looking at it like someone's just dug a grave," she said. "They have," I replied. "Just without a headstone." She shrugged. "You guys had ten years of soundtrack," she said. "Other people have spent their whole lives without music in their local pub. Maybe it's just a way of compensating."

“You could just plug your phone into the stereo,” Manni suggested. “I have playlists. A real mix. Old, new, everything.” The innkeeper grimaced. “I don’t want anything in here being dictated by some algorithm,” he said. “It’s enough that you don’t even know what you want to listen to anymore without pressing a button.” The goblin laughed. “He’s getting sentimental,” he whispered. “That’s a good sign. Or a bad one. It’s the same with you guys.”

Heiner was telling the story for the fifth time about that one evening years ago when we were all drunk and standing around the jukebox, and someone had picked the completely wrong song. Instead of our usual battle anthem, some pop song came on, full of heartbreak and not much brainpower. First everyone laughed, then everyone sang along, then two guys were standing there sobbing in each other's arms, and in the end, nobody knew why. "That was the best night," said Heiner. "Because it was so embarrassing it was actually honest." The waitress grinned. "I remember how you tried to look cool afterward," she said. "Spoiler alert: it didn't work."

The goblin stood invisibly in the empty corner, pretending to play the invisible songs. He raised his arms as if pressing buttons, tapped his foot as if bass coursed through him. "I can still hear them all," he told me. "The songs you shouted into, the ones you laughed at, the ones you kept choosing because you thought they'd somehow save you. I've got a better jukebox than all of you. It's sitting right here." He tapped his forehead. "And yes, I can play shuffle."

I wondered what would die next. Not dramatically, just logically. First the jukebox, then eventually the landlord, then Heiner, then me. Maybe the lights will go out, maybe just the desire. "The jukebox was the first thing to leave us before we could leave it," I thought. "We're usually the first to go." It was an uncomfortable realization. Clurichaun noticed my silence and seized the opportunity.

“You underestimate yourself,” he said. “You’re tougher than you look. You’ll still be sitting here long after they’ve renovated the place. Maybe someday they’ll put up some trendy spot with craft beer and vegan snacks, and you’ll be the last fool clinging to the stool, reminiscing about how the jukebox used to sing back when men were men and livers were resilient.” I grimaced. “Then I hope I leave before then,” I muttered. “I don’t want to be the ghost in a place that isn’t mine anymore.”

The waitress was clearing away some empty glasses when I asked her, "Do you miss her?" She didn't need to ask what I meant. "Yes," she said. "Not just because of the music. When the jukebox was playing, you could sometimes just squeeze past it and catch your breath. Everyone was staring at it, no one at you." She thought for a moment. "Now they stare at each other more. Sometimes that's good. Sometimes I wish I could be invisible again."

Perhaps that was the point. The jukebox was never just a machine. It was an excuse not to look. At yourself, at others, at what you were failing to do again. Now, without it, my gaze lingered more often. On the tired waitress. On the landlord, who was aging faster than his establishment. On the regulars, whose faces fell. On myself, in the mirror, in the window, in every glass.

As I walked home later that night, with no song stuck in my head, there was only the sound of my own footsteps. No chorus, no melody, no "Do you remember?" moment. I would have liked to sing something to myself, anything that at least pretended to fit. Instead, I heard the goblin whistling. Off-key, loud, wrong. A song without a name, without lyrics, without a story.

"What's that?" I asked. "Your new anthem?" He shrugged. "Something," he said. "If there's no more jukebox, we'll have to make noise ourselves. Otherwise, people will think they're alone." I gave a short, dry laugh. "We are," I said. "Everyone for themselves, in the end." He nodded. "Sure," he said. "But at least you're alone in company. That's the most luxurious form of loneliness."

Later, in bed, without a soundtrack, without humming, without machine noises, my head was louder than any jukebox. The songs still playing inside me weren't ones with choruses. They were sentences, images, old evenings spinning like broken CDs. I thought of the bright spot on the wall in the "taillight," the waitress's hand on the casing, the technician who said, "It's not worth it anymore."

"It's not worth it anymore," I muttered into the darkness. "When will someone finally say that to me?" The goblin chuckled softly. "As long as you're still drinking, someone's always worth it," he said. "At least the innkeeper."

Then I turned onto my side, closed my eyes, and knew: Tomorrow, the corner in the "backlight" will still be empty. And we'll still be sitting there, pretending we never needed a jukebox to keep our own misery in time.

Chapter 14 – When the goblin is your last friend

There comes a point in life when you realize your phone only receives two kinds of calls: unknown numbers wanting something from you, and numbers you never call back. Everything else is dead. There used to be birthday greetings, beer dates, "Wanna come over?" messages. Eventually, those turned into reminders, spam, and silence. If you sit on the same barstool long enough, people start deleting you from their address books. Not out of malice, just for hygiene.

The imp had celebrated this milestone as if it were his birthday. "Congratulations," he said when I showed him that under "Recently Used" on my phone, only the bar owner, the health insurance company, and some stupid call center remained. "You're now in premium mode. No more outside interruptions. Just me, the bartender, and occasionally the guy from the office." He sat on my phone, rocking his legs and tapping the cracks in the screen with his toe. "At least you didn't block me," he grinned. "That's more than I can say for the others."

I don't know exactly when he went from being a bothersome companion to my last friend. At first, he was more like a guilty conscience with a sense of humor. A voice telling you you could have taken a different path while you ordered another beer. Later, he became a commentator, a drinking buddy, a mascot. Today, if I'm honest, he's the only one left when the place closes and no one else pretends to have a life anywhere else.

There was a time when I had real friends. You know, the kind you call friends when you're young and think that getting drunk together automatically creates a deeper connection. Rehearsal rooms, festivals, crappy apartments, sofas where we crashed together. We had plans, or at least something like them: starting a band, fighting reality on the streets, something about "being free" and "not becoming like everyone else." Today, the others are out there somewhere, married, divorced, dead, in therapy, or at the gym. And I'm stuck in the "backlight," and my best confidant is a goblin that no one else can see.

"Friends are overrated," he likes to say. "Friends want you to be better. I just want you to be honest. That's a difference." And he's not entirely wrong. Most of the people who used to call me "brother" were gone when I started to gradually fade away. Not dramatically, just steadily. First, they came to the pub less often, then not at all. Then their numbers were still in my phone, but without any recent photos. Then nobody called anymore. And at some point, I deleted the numbers, not out of hatred, but because I didn't have enough space in my head.

The imp has stayed put. He doesn't move, he doesn't get married, he doesn't pursue a career, he doesn't die of anything, he doesn't go jogging, he doesn't go to rehab. He's there when I search for my face in the mirror in the morning, and he's there when I scrape the last vestiges of my life off the bar in the evening. He's never too busy, never annoyed, never "just not in the mood." He's always ready to take me apart. That's more consistency than I've ever experienced from any human being.

One evening—the one with the dead jukebox hadn't been that long ago—I was sitting alone at the bar, before the real rush hour, if you could call it that in this place. The owner was polishing glasses, the waitress was sorting bottles, the TV in the corner was on silent, some news channel showing disasters far enough away not to affect us. The imp was sitting on the salt shaker, looked at me, and said, "You know I'll stay with you in the end, even if the place closes down, right?"

“You belong here,” I murmured. “You’re tied to the tap. To the beer, the smoke, the voices. If this place ever closes, you’ll just find the next one.” He shook his head. “That’s not how it works,” he said. “I’m not tied to places. I’m tied to people. I don’t sit on bars, I sit on brains. And your brain is now capable of producing all this crap without any outside help. I could be anywhere, but I’m with you because you need me. And because you let me.”

I laughed, but it sounded off-key. "Then be useful for once," I said. "Friends are there to stop you when you're screwing up. You just sit there and comment." He grinned broadly. "Wrong," he said. "Friends tell each other the truth. And the truth is: you don't want someone to stop

you. You want someone to watch you tear yourself apart and shake their head without leaving. That's me. Congratulations, you've ordered just the right person."

It's easy to hate something that sees right through you. People who know you too well eventually become unavoidable because they ruin your own story. The goblin is worse. He doesn't just know the story, he lurks in the spaces between. The moment I imagine, "It's not that bad yet," I hear him laughing. The moment I think, "Things will be different tomorrow," I hear him coughing and saying "of course." And yet, it's comforting that he's there. You have to be pretty broken to find solace in the voice of your own demise.

Sometimes I test it. I sit down at home on the kitchen chair, don't turn on the light, don't open a beer, don't light a cigarette, nothing. Just me and the chair and the refrigerator, which dares to announce itself when it kicks on. And then I wait. It's precisely in these moments that it appears, whether I want it to or not. "Well," it says, "a test run for a life without a bar? How does the air taste?" It's right that without it, it would be even emptier. There would just be this void, which doesn't even have a voice.

The last time my daughter visited me—a few years ago now—she stood in my apartment, looked around, saw the empty shelves, the few pieces of furniture that didn't look like mine, but like something from a secondhand shop. She looked at the ashtray, the half-empty bottle of water, the pile of unopened mail. She said nothing. And in that nothingness, I heard the little imp whisper loudly: "See? She's long gone. I'm not." It was a shitty consolation. But it was one.

Sometimes the question of whether it's a good or bad sign doesn't even arise anymore when your last reliable companion is an Irish leprechaun in your head. Beyond a certain level of shitty decisions, it's no longer about good or bad, only about: can you stand it? And I've gotten used to him. To his quips, his snide remarks, his unwanted moments of honesty. I know he'll outlive me, at least metaphorically. When I'm no longer sitting on this stool, he'll land on someone else who thinks he's just "a bit tipsy." Maybe he's done it a hundred times already.

"I'm old," he sometimes says. "Older than you, older than this place, older than any doctor's letter. I was around when the first farmers thought a second beer was a good idea. I was around when some guys swore they'd only drink on weekends. I was around when someone lay dead on the country lane and nobody could figure out if he fell off the truck or off himself. You're just an episode. But an entertaining one."

And yet, it feels like he belongs to me like my shadow. Only he's louder. The shadow says nothing, he just follows. The goblin talks, comments, judges, mocks, laughs, sometimes he's silent, and that's precisely when it gets dangerous. When even he has nothing more to say, I know I've crossed a line I can't even name.

On days like these, in the twilight of the "last light," when the other guests become more background noise than real people, I sit there, rest my head in my hand, and think: Maybe this is part of the punishment. Not that you're alone. But that you can't be completely alone anymore, because there's always this small, dirty creature in your head, refusing to leave you in peace. And then I realize I'm smiling, even though there's nothing to laugh about. Because I know: When one day even the goblin disappears, then it's truly over.

There was a time when the goblin and I still pretended there were other people around. Colleagues, acquaintances, "the guys," family. Back then, he was more of a sidekick than the main character. I could stand at parties, beer in hand, amidst loud laughter, music, someone grilling somewhere, someone making out somewhere else, and the goblin would be standing in the background, whispering things only I could hear. "That woman over there thinks you're funny," he said once when I was trying to impress a woman with a half-baked story. "She has no idea what you look like when the music stops." Back then, I still had the chance not to listen to him.

Over the years, the parties became less frequent, colleagues were replaced or promoted while I left. My family drifted away, first emotionally, then geographically. The pub remained. So did the goblin. And at some point, without any particular day needing to happen, he was no longer background noise in my head, but my first point of contact. Not just when I was drunk. Even in the mornings, when the coffee was too strong and my liver was too loud, I could hear him say: "Well, survived again. Respect. For what, exactly?"

One morning, I sat at the kitchen table, a lukewarm coffee in front of me, a cigarette in my left hand, the official letter in my right. The sun didn't bother to show itself; the sky hung gray like a damp cloth. I read the usual threats in a matter-of-fact tone: "Final warning," "Summons," "Deadline." The little imp climbed onto the letter, ran through the lines like a child balancing on a line. "Look," he said, "this is your other language. The language of the adult world. Numbers, deadlines, legal paragraphs. And you speak it as badly as Spanish after three beers."

I was tired. Tired of these papers, tired of myself, tired of knowing that I could decide to change something at any time—and I didn't. So I asked him, half-jokingly, half-seriously, "Tell me: If you're my last friend, what exactly is in it for me?" He sat down, dangling his legs over the bolded sum at the bottom. "I'm honest," he said. "And I don't leave when things get awkward. People disappear when things get too much. Not me. I thrive on effort. Especially yours."

I thought about the old days, when I still had something like a best friend. We used to do stupid things together, get into fights, listen to music, bum cigarettes from each other, and make big plans about all the things we wouldn't let anyone get away with. Eventually, he had kids, a real job, something secure. We saw each other for a few more years, less and less often, for shorter and shorter periods, him less drunk, me more. Then there was that one evening when he showed up at "The Last Light," sat down next to me, and said, "Hey, I can't take this anymore. Seeing you like this. Seeing me like this. I have to get out." He got up, paid, and left. I haven't seen him since.

The goblin loved that scene. "Look," he said then, as the door closed behind him. "Someone who really liked you is leaving—and that's exactly why he's leaving. Friends aren't meant to be there for the whole end. They jump ship before it happens. Not me. I'm a specialist for the rest." I hated him for that. But he was right. Humans have a limit to what they can endure. The goblin doesn't. He's not human enough to look out the window in time.

Later, on one of those many slow evenings when the place was only half full but twice as tired, the three of us sat at the bar: the owner, myself, and the invisible guest who never leaves me in peace. The waitress was in the back, clearing glasses. The TV was off, the jukebox dead, the air quiet. "Do you have any people outside?" the owner asked, as if he were looking

for something missing. "Family, friends, anyone?" I took a sip, felt the alcohol settle in my stomach like an answer that comes too late.

“Two grandchildren,” I said. “And a daughter somewhere. A few numbers I don’t dial. A few names I don’t say. The usual.” The leprechaun chuckled. “He says ‘the usual’ like it’s normal,” he whispered. The innkeeper just nodded. “I once read that you get lonelier with age,” he said. “But with you guys here, it’s a different kind of loneliness. You’re not alone—you’re just sitting next to each other, each in your own shit.” He looked at my glass. “And at least you always have someone drooling all over you,” he added, gesturing to the seat where I knew the leprechaun was sitting.

“That one doesn’t count,” I said reflexively. “He’s part of me. He’s like a birthmark. I’ve known him so long I can’t remember what it was like without him.” The goblin laughed in agreement. “He called me a birthmark,” he chuckled. “But I’m more like the tumor.” The innkeeper shook his head, unsure what exactly had made me grin. “They always say you should be glad if you still have a friend when you’re old,” he said. “It’s no one’s to blame who it ends up being.”

On my way home that evening, I consciously thought for the first time about what would happen if the inner critic disappeared. What if I woke up one day and my mind was silent. No comments. No laughter. No "Seriously?" when I poured my first beer. No voice catching me in a lie. Just me. For a while, I found the thought appealing. Peace. Quiet. No little critic on my shoulder. But the longer I thought about it, the more I realized: Without him, I'd be completely lost. As if someone had taken away the baton that gives the chaos at least a modicum of structure.

“You underestimate me,” he said later, as I lay in bed trying not to smoke while I was still awake. “I’m not just your taunt. I’m your only constant.” He bounced on the pillow as if it were a stage. “You’ve changed jobs, apartments, relationships, even doctors. But ever since you started making that second beer more important than anything else, I’ve been there. And if you stop drinking tomorrow, I’ll still be here, by the way. I’m not just the bar clown. I’m the one who tells you the truth to your face when everyone else is pretending you’re beyond saving.”

“And am I?” I asked. It was an honest question, perhaps the most honest I’d asked myself in a long time. He stopped. “It depends on what you mean by ‘save,’” he said. “You won’t become a new person. You won’t suddenly be Father of the Year, Employee of the Month, a loving ex-partner, a healthy role model. That ship has sailed. But you can decide whether you want to cover the last few kilometers more or less upright, or crawling. That’s all there is to it. And I stand by that, no matter what you decide.”

There's something perverse about the fact that the only person offering you anything resembling options is an invisible being you've probably created yourself. The doctor says, "You should drink less." The health insurance company says, "You have to pay your premiums." Your family says, "No more." The bartender says, "Another one?" And the goblin says, "You can if you want to. You just usually don't." And sometimes, very rarely, that sounds more like a friend than anything else.

They say true friends hold up a mirror to you. The ones I used to call that rarely did. We were more likely to get drunk together so no one had to look too closely at what was being reflected. The goblin is my mirror. Only one that laughs when I get scared. I've learned to live

with it. What other choice do I have? The alternative would be to go on without any mirror at all. And I could never get drunk enough to think that would be a good idea.

Perhaps this is the last, pathetic little bit of dignity I still possess: admitting to myself that my last friend is a leprechaun—and not pretending that any of this is still "normal." I'm sick of normal. Normal vanished the moment I started trading bills for drinks. What I still have are a few evenings, a few drinks, a few half-hearted attempts not to end up a complete joke. And the leprechaun who sits beside me and applauds when I don't act quite as miserable as usual.

“You see,” he said as I fell asleep, “in the end, it’s just the two of us left. You and me. The guy who messed everything up – and the one who watched him do it. Call that friendship. Someone has to be there for you when the curtain falls.”

It was a rainy Sunday when I realized how far I had withdrawn. Not just physically, into the few square meters of my apartment and the dark corners of the "last light" (a local term for a small, informal apartment), but also out of everyone else's minds. Sundays are dangerous when you have nothing left that pretends to be important. No job on Monday to prepare for. No family dinner where you can talk about trivial things. No club, no practice, nothing at all. Just the gap between two nights of drinking, smelling of cold coffee and stale smoke.

I stood at the window and looked down into the courtyard. A child was playing in the rain, wearing one of those brightly colored rain suits that parents buy when they still have hope their children won't turn out like the neighbors. The child jumped in puddles and laughed, while some adult stood beside it with an umbrella, trying not to get completely soaked. I couldn't tell which seemed more of a stranger to me: the child or the one trying to keep it somewhat dry throughout the afternoon. The gnome stood next to me on the windowsill, looking down too.

“Those people down there,” he said, “still have real friends. Sandbox, kindergarten, school, all that stuff. They don’t know yet that one day you’ll wake up and realize there are only a handful of people left who know whether you’re dead or just hungover.” He leaned against the window. “You could go down and pretend to go with them. With a coffee in your hand, sweatpants, act like you’ve just been watching a crime scene investigation.” I grimaced. “They’d call the police if I stayed standing there,” I said. “I don’t have the right jacket for that.”

There's this strange feeling when you realize: if you disappear today, only two people will notice at first. The innkeeper, if you don't show up for two or three days. And the clerk, when the mail comes back. Everyone else takes longer. Neighbors get suspicious if your door smells. Family gets restless if you stop responding to the standard Christmas texts. But that takes time. The gnome, on the other hand, knows immediately. He's right at the source. He'd witness the moment it finally clicks in my head.

"Are you lonely?" he suddenly asked me that Sunday. I shrugged. "Depends on what you're comparing it to," I said. "To what I used to be like, yes. To the others in this building, probably not. They only know each other from the garbage room." He grinned. "Loneliness is the only thing you don't have any competition for," he said. "You humans even manage to screw that up individually." I had to laugh, even though I didn't feel like it. "You're not much help either," I said. "You don't count as a person."

He took it as a compliment. "Exactly," he said. "And that's why I'm still here. People have to get out, appointments, work, obligations, their own problems. I only have you. I'm a specialist." He jumped off the windowsill, landing on the kitchen table, which was littered with the usual mix of empty cups, an ashtray, and unopened mail. "Do you know what your mistake was?" he asked. "You always got involved with people who thought they could save you. None of them wanted to just put up with you. I did."

It's a bitter truth: most friendships work as long as you don't get in the way too much. Sure, you drink together, laugh, help each other move, listen to the occasional relationship drama. But when you start constantly sinking—professionally, health-wise, emotionally—your paths diverge. Some move on, others stay on the sidelines and glance back. Eventually, you've fallen so far behind that you're just an anecdote to them. "Remember Rainer? The one who was always hanging out at the pub? No idea what happened to him." End of story.

The imp continues the story. He tells it to me, a bit each evening. "Today," he says, "you managed again to fill half the day with smoke and the rest with excuses. Respect." Or: "Today you actually called the office. You're growing up, Grandpa." He keeps a record of the tiny things that no one else notices. That I sometimes do drink water. That on that one Tuesday I only had three beers instead of six. That I no longer pretend everything is a joke at every opportunity.

“Friends see the whole picture,” he says. “Not just the guy who’s always got a quip. They also see you walking home. You waking up in the morning. You standing in the kitchen, not knowing what to do with your hands. I’m there. I’m your audience when no one else wants to pay.” It sounds awful, but he’s right. And maybe that’s why I let him get away with all his sarcasm. He’s the only one who sees the whole show.

Later, when I ended up in the "last place" as usual—a Sunday without it was out of the question—I sat in my seat, and the others who were there looked exactly the same as always. The slot machine player, sliding his money into colorful lights. Harry, complaining that there was only rubbish on TV on Sundays. Heiner, pretending he didn't care that Monday was just around the corner. The waitress, already a day ahead in her mind, because she knew that Monday would be just like Sunday, only with less tip money.

“You guys are my second family,” Harry said at one point, half-jokingly, half-in that sentimental tone alcohol brings to men’s voices. “I don’t talk to the first one anymore.” Heiner nodded. “At least here you’re accepted for who you are,” he said. “No one asks what you’ve done with your life. They can see for themselves.” Laughter. The innkeeper shook his head, but he smiled. “You call it family,” he muttered. “I call it a regulars’ list.”

The goblin stood on the table, amidst beer mats, ashtrays, and sticky rings. "See," he whispered to me. "There's your answer. You share glasses with these people. You share my head with me. Guess who's closer." I looked around. If one of them didn't show up tomorrow, we'd quickly ask, "Where's he/she?", come up with an explanation—hospital, family, job, jail—and then carry on drinking. If the goblin wasn't there tomorrow… I don't know if I'd notice. I think I would. It would be too quiet.

“Maybe you should find yourself a human,” I said to him suddenly, as the rain lashed against the window outside. “Someone who doesn’t have a score to settle with you. Some leftover human being who doesn’t just put up with you for a tip.” The goblin tilted his head. “And where am I supposed to conjure that up from?” he asked. “From your past? They’re finished.

From the pub? They’re just as screwed as you are. From your family? They already decided they couldn’t handle you. So I’ll just stay.”

It's a strange kind of peace when you eventually stop fighting it. When you accept that your inner imp is what others call a best friend. Someone who sticks around when things get ugly. Someone who doesn't make you better, but more honest. Someone who doesn't promise you everything will be alright, but laughs at you for even thinking about "alright." Lappenbusch would probably have said that's pretty decent.

When the pub closed that Sunday, I was one of the last to leave. The waitress was wiping down the floor, the landlord was moving chairs, and outside the blinds were being half-lowered. I stood up, put on my jacket, and grabbed my cigarettes and lighter. The imp jumped onto my shoulder. "Come on," he said. "Go home. See you tomorrow. You and me, old friend." For the first time in my memory, I called him out loud: "Come on, mate," I murmured. The waitress turned to me briefly. "Who are you talking to?" she asked. I shook my head. "To what's left of my sanity," I said. "It needs company."

The street was cold; the rain had stopped, but the puddles still glistened in the lamplight. I walked through my neighborhood, past closed shops, windows where televisions flickered, and front doors where people probably thought they weren't lonely because someone else was sitting next to them on the couch. The imp was whistling some tune I didn't recognize. Maybe it was his kind of lullaby.

Just before I unlocked the front door, I paused and thought: If I don't wake up tomorrow, he'll find someone new. Someone else who thinks his best friend is beer. And yet, today, on this shitty Sunday, I was glad he was with me. That's all I can say about it. Maybe this is the smallest form of love I'm still capable of: for a self-important imp who laughs when I fall, and still stays by my side until I'm back on my feet.

Whether that's sad or simply consistent, others can decide. If there are any left.

Chapter 15 – Stories that no one believes anymore

In every pub, there's a point where the stories fall apart. At first, they're fresh, everyone listens. You sit there with your beer, smoking, telling the story of how you almost died, how you broke a woman's heart (or she broke yours), how you told your boss what you really thought and then left "on principle," even though you were actually fired. People nod, laugh, pat you on the back, and buy you another round. By the second time, only half the people are still listening. By the third time, someone says, "I've heard it before." By the fourth time, the jukebox is playing. And eventually, when you've reheated the same story for the hundredth time, they don't even believe what actually happened back then.

I have a repertoire like that. Everyone in here has one. A few short stories, a few long epics, a few emergency tales for nights when you've already exhausted everything else. Some of them really happened. Others half-happened. The rest happened after you'd told them five times and they eventually became true because you no longer had the strength to separate the lie from the memory. And then there are the stories no one believes anymore, even though they

happened exactly as described. Those are the worst. Because at some point, you start to doubt yourself, wondering if you didn't just make it all up.

The goblin knows every single one. He could tell them better than I ever have. He was there when I stood at the bar, recounting that one night in Poland when the four of us crammed into a rusty car to cross the border for cheap vodka and almost didn't make it back. He knows how many times I've repainted them. At first, it was just a drive with a bad ending. Then came a near-accident, a fight with a border guard, a red-haired woman who never existed, and eventually two cops who abused their power because it made them better. "You're worse than a screenwriter," he says then. "You take one lousy anecdote and turn it into a three-act play."

The evening it really struck me, it was quiet. Monday, drizzling outside, three regulars inside and a guy who looked like he'd stumbled in by accident. Younger than us, but not young anymore, that age when you still think you have options, but the first doors are already slamming shut in your face. He had this look in his eyes, both hungry and tired. The kind that still listens when old men at the bar start with "Back in the day..." Fresh meat for stories.

Harry started with his standard line: how he'd once been banned from half a neighborhood because he'd supposedly peed in a cloakroom while drunk. Nobody was laughing anymore. We knew the drill. The first time, I'd had tears in my eyes. By the tenth time, I was just counting the blanks. The new guy grinned, raised his eyebrows, and commented enthusiastically. "Wow, dude," he said. "You've got to hand it to him." The imp rolled his eyes. "That's a load of rubbish," he muttered. "He just threw up once outside a club and made up the rest."

Then it was my turn. No idea why. Maybe because the new guy looked at me like I was one of those old warhorses with legendary material. Maybe because I was scared my voice would disappear completely if I stopped delivering. So I pulled out one of my old routines. An old classic. The story about the night I supposedly lived in a squat, with punks, dogs, spray cans, police, the whole nine yards. Part of it's even true. I did sleep on a mattress on the floor there for a few weeks because I had nowhere else to go. But in my version, it turned into a battlefield.

The new guy hung on my every word, like I was a storyteller around a campfire. The others sipped their drinks, slightly annoyed, but they let me talk. I listened to myself and noticed how I routinely paused, how I laughed at the parts I always laughed at, how I knew my hand gestures. The goblin stood on my beer and folded his arms. "You tell this story like you're proud," he said. "But you were just homeless and too cowardly to call it that."

In the middle of the story, something happened that had never happened to me before: I lost my train of thought. Not because I was too drunk—I'm often drunk and still manage to get through it—but because I suddenly realized I couldn't see the scene anymore. Before, I could visualize every sentence in my mind. The cold wall where my mattress stood. The smell of wet dog. The shouting in the yard whenever a siren was nearby. Suddenly, there was only a blurry memory of a memory. Like a copy of a copy, traced over so many times that everything was washed out.

“And then… well,” I said, waving my hand dismissively. “Then everything went wrong, as it usually does.” The new guy stared at me. “So?” he asked. “What about the cop raid? And the fire? And the guy who fell off the roof?” It took me a second to realize that these were things I’d once included in one of the embellished versions. They’d taken on a life of their own.

They were already part of the legend for him before I'd even told them. "Oh, that," I said. "That was a different night." The imp gave a dirty laugh. "You just outdid yourself," he whispered. "Your myth has run away with you."

That's when I understood what it means when stories fall apart. When they've been told so often that you can't take them back to what really happened. When you realize that a version of yourself is haunting the room, a version that never existed, but which others prefer to believe. And then there's the other, real version, hidden somewhere in a yellowed photograph, in a government bill, in a doctor's letter, in a day that no one but you remembers.

"You know what the best thing is?" the goblin asked afterwards, as the new guy went to the bathroom and Harry fiddled with the machine. "None of them believe you anymore if you tell them something truly real. If you say, 'I'm scared.' If you say, 'I don't know who I am anymore.' If you say, 'I disappointed someone and I can't get the image out of my head.' Those are the stories nobody wants to hear anymore. They can't fit on a beer mat. You can't end them with a laugh."

I thought about all the evenings I'd spent trying to explain something to someone outside. Why I turned out the way I did. Why it couldn't be any other way. What it was like back then, with my childhood, my first time getting drunk, my first real fallout. Most of the time, I crashed and burned somewhere in the middle. People didn't believe me. Not because it was so spectacular. But because it was too banal. Who wants to hear that someone simply walked down the slope step by step and didn't fall like a hero in a movie?

The new guy came back and clapped me on the shoulder. "Good story, man," he said. "Did it all really happen like that?" I looked into his face, into that lingering sparkle there, and heard the little imp in my ear: "Say yes. He needs that." I nodded. "Sure," I said. "All exactly as you described." And in that moment, I officially abandoned my own story.

There are these other stories, the ones that aren't the main focus, the ones that aren't big news at the pub. They just come out casually, when someone feels the need to quickly share something from "back then" before the next round of drinks. And these asides are usually the real ones. "I used to have a dog," someone says, and you know that's not going to be a funny anecdote, but something about guilt. "I was engaged once," says another, staring into his glass as if the ring were still in it. "I was almost sober once," Heiner sometimes says, quietly, like a confession no one's supposed to hear.

The goblin collects this rubbish. He's not just my personal archivist; he hoards everything that falls short of truth in the "backwaters." "The big stories are for the tourists," he says. "The small ones are for the archives." He likes to point at Manni when he tells his endless story about the lottery ticket he supposedly lost just before the numbers were drawn. "Lies," says the goblin. "He probably only got three numbers right. But when he later mutters, 'I could only give my daughter ten euros for her birthday and I was so ashamed'—that's the one no one believes. Because everyone hopes he's fibbing."

One of the few who still tries to tell his story honestly is the slot machine player. He rarely talks when he's at the machine. But sometimes, when he's had enough—of flashing lights that are burning his brain—he sits down on our corner for a cigarette. That's what happened on a Tuesday when the air was heavier than usual. He came over, rested his elbows on the table, and looked at us as if we were a poorly paid therapy group.

“I was once in jail with a guy,” he began, “who claimed his innocence every other day. The others whined to him about how they’d been framed, how they’d been in the wrong place at the wrong time. The only one I believed was the one who said, ‘I just made too many wrong decisions. That’s it.’ He never told a big story. He just said, ‘That’s just how I was.’” The slot machine player took a drag on his cigarette and blew the smoke toward the ceiling. “Listening to you all…” He grinned crookedly. “You’re all innocent.”

The goblin clapped enthusiastically. "I like him," he said. "He's figured out that the best stories are the ones where you don't play the hero." I asked the gambler, "And you? Are you guilty, or just screwed over by the machine?" He gave a short laugh, that hollow, thin laugh of someone who's sold his dignity to coin slots. "I'm guilty, sure," he said. "But I don't have a good story. I wasn't even desperate enough for TV. I just blew everything away in little bits. Family, money, time. Nobody gives a damn."

“Me too,” I said, without giving it much thought. Maybe it was genuine, maybe it was just a reflex. The goblin laughed. “You’re interested in anything that makes your own downfall more beautiful,” he said. “You collect stories from people who are even lower, so you can say at night, ‘I’m not that bad yet.’” I wanted to punch him, but he was out of reach. So I drank.

I have a story too, one that no one believes, even though it's true. No big bang, no dramatic twist. Just a perfectly ordinary afternoon at a government office. I was sitting there, number taken, counter, fluorescent lights, walls painted a gray specifically designed to sedate people. I'd forgotten some documents, filled out some form incorrectly, missed some deadline. It was about money, as always. The woman behind the desk looked at my file, shook her head almost imperceptibly. "You really have bad luck," she said. "Again and again."

I heard myself answering, "It's not bad luck. It's just me." And that was the most honest sentence I'd uttered in years while working in an official capacity. No "system," no "misfortune," no "nothing can be done about it." Just me. I didn't tell anyone, not even at the "last-minute office." Because I knew they'd laugh. "Sure, mate," Harry would have said. "You, being honest at the office, that's a good one." Heiner would have waved it off. "It's not your fault," he would have said. "They've got something against people like us." Maybe they do. But that doesn't change anything.

The goblin loves this scene. "That's you," he says. "Not the hero from your stories. Not the guy who supposedly puked on a cop. That's you: someone sitting in a waiting room saying to a bored clerk, 'I'm the problem.' And not even thinking it's a big deal." He's right. And that's exactly why I almost never tell it. It's not a good story, not one that'll get you a beer. It's just a small, ugly truth.

In the "backwater" of society, nobody wants to hear ugly truths unpackaged. You have to embellish them with fights, women, broken bones, police, drama. Otherwise, nobody believes you that it hurt. If you say, "I once messed up three jobs in a row because I was hungover too often," they'll yawn. If you say, "I once told a boss what I thought of him in the bathroom and then walked out without looking back," you've got an audience. Nobody asks that you were on welfare for two years afterward and felt ashamed whenever you ran into old colleagues on the train.

The goblin is merciless when I try to make glitter out of trash. "You're no Lappenbusch," he says. "At least he wrote something. You just sit here and use his name as an excuse to think you're cool for your own squalor." I hate him for it, but I know he's right. And I also know

that this is a story no one really wants to hear: that at some point I stopped trying to do anything that went further than a bar counter.

Later that evening, when the air in the "Late Light" was heavy and conversations consisted of only fragments, I realized how often we all said the same thing: "You're not going to believe me anyway." Manni tells him when he's bragging about someone from his past. Harry tells him when he's promised some woman something he'll never keep. I tell him when I'm about to admit something truly embarrassing. It's like a shield. If you say beforehand that no one will believe it, it hurts less when they actually laugh.

The slot machine player stood up again and went back to his machine. "Do you know what the problem is with you all here?" he said before inserting the next coin. "You all have stories, but you don't do anything with them. You're like people with old photos in a drawer that no one ever sees anymore. And when you take them out, everyone thinks they're from a magazine." The goblin bowed to him. "Respect," he murmured. "The man understands my business model."

I sat there, looked into my glass, and thought: Maybe this is the last thing I can salvage—not my stories, but the ability to tell when no one is listening anymore. And to keep talking anyway. Just more quietly. Maybe that's all that remains: that at the end of your career as a bar philosopher, you admit that the best story is the one you tell only yourself. And the goblin, whether you like it or not.

The hardest stories are the ones no one outside believes anymore. Not in the pub, where exaggeration is part of the decor; everyone knows half of it's just for show. I mean the ones you tell your family when you're trying to explain something that has nothing to do with the drinks menu. There you are, standing more or less upright, more or less sober—or at least trying hard to look that way—saying things like, "I don't drink that much anymore," or "I've got it under control," or "I'm working on changing my life." And you can see it in their faces: they're staring at you like you're watching a TV with no signal.

Once, a few years ago, I was sitting across from my daughter in a café that was far too brightly lit. Not a pub, no ashtrays, just lattes, strollers, people in clean jackets. She'd treated me. At that age, being treated means: "I'll pay, you try to behave." She looked fine, a little tired in the way parents who get up in the middle of the night to chase away some monsters under the bed that aren't from the bottle. I looked like someone who'd spent the night arguing with an ashtray.

“You look bad,” she said, bluntly. It was an observation, not an attack. I nodded. “I know,” I said. “I’m working on it.” The little imp sat on the sugar dispenser, tapping his feet and grinning. “Now he’s going to give the big speech,” he whispered. “Watch out, here comes the ‘I’ve been thinking’ part.” I talked anyway. I told her I was drinking less, that I’d been to the employment office, that I had plans, that I wanted to start doing something worthwhile again. The more I talked, the less faith she had in me.

“You’ve said all this before,” she finally said quietly. “Five years ago. Ten years ago. Before…” She trailed off, looking out the window. “I believe you when you say you believe it. But I don’t believe it will happen anymore.” The goblin applauded. “She’s good,” he murmured. “She knows how to pull the plug.” I sat there, with my tasteless coffee, and felt something inside me collapse. Not dramatically, no thunder, no lightning. More like a cheap camping chair that’s been used too often.

“I don’t want the boys to only remember you as the broken grandpa,” she said. “You understand? I don’t want them having to justify themselves later when they say you didn’t show up for something important.” I nodded, said “sure,” and “I understand,” and “I’ll try my best”—the whole range of standard answers. And in my head, I simultaneously heard the goblin: “This is all a story no one believes anymore. One of the very few that you don’t even believe yourself.”

Later, I told the story at the "last place." Not so directly, of course. I gave a toned-down version, with less shame and more humor. "My daughter gave me a piece of her mind," I said to the group. "Told me I need to pull myself together. I told her I'm going to do everything differently now." Laughter, jokes, pats on the back. Harry said, "Sure, starting tomorrow." Heiner said, "Kids don't understand that kind of thing anyway." And somewhere in between, the waitress looked at me, a touch too long, and I knew she'd figured out exactly which parts I'd left out.

The goblin sat on the rim of my glass. "Even in here, you don't dare tell the whole story," he said. "I don't want anyone thinking you still have feelings." I drank to drown him out. But he stayed. "Your family doesn't believe your stories anymore," he continued. "The pub only believes the ones where you look good. So I'll just stay. I believe the ugly ones. Not because I'm nice, but because I know those are the ones that are true."

It's strange: you spend your life lying to yourself about some tolerable version of yourself, and in the end, only one person is left who's heard all that nonsense uncensored—and it's a goblin watching you get drunk. I fought against it for a long time, internally. I got drunk to try and make it quieter. I tried to distract myself with the jukebox, with stories, with women, with vending machines, with cigarettes. But no matter how loud it was outside, there came a moment when his voice became clearer again.

"You know what's ironic about that?" he asked the other day, when we were almost alone in the bar and the owner was already dimming the lights. "If you ever did something really big—quit drinking, move, get a job, go to therapy, any kind of ridiculous shit—you wouldn't believe it yourself. You'd have to ask three times if it was really you." I laughed. "No worries," I said. "I'm too lazy for that." He nodded. "Good thing we cleared that up."

Sometimes I think about what it would be like to simply write down my stories. Not as art, not as a book, but as a kind of ledger of the last few decades. A notebook that says: "Here I lied. Here I exaggerated. Here I hurt someone and pretended it was a joke. Here I screwed up and didn't tell anyone." I imagine myself handing the notebook to my daughter someday. "Here," I would say. "This is the version without the punchline." And I can already see her face: that "too late" look.

The goblin thinks the idea is brilliant. "Go for it," he says. "Write everything down. I'll read along. But don't be surprised if, while writing, you realize that most of the chapters consist of only three sentences: 'He had a chance. He didn't take it. He made something up to make it seem more bearable.'" Perhaps he's right. Perhaps the pages would get thinner the closer I get to today. At least back then there was something like a new beginning. Today it's just "business as usual" with different dishes each day.

There are also stories I've consciously never told. Like the time I promised my grandson I'd come to his football match—his first real tournament—and then ended up in last place. Not even because it was particularly good. It was just an ordinary afternoon; I simply didn't have

the energy to stand sober on a sports field, surrounded by parents with thermos flasks and those voices shouting, "Great job, Leon!" I just stayed put. Later, I made up some nonsense about "getting sick," "having diarrhea," "having a stomach problem." That's one of those stories I hate myself. And that's precisely why I don't dare say it out loud.

“I was there,” the imp says every time the memory resurfaces. “I saw you staring at your phone when the message came: ‘Grandpa, are you here yet?’ I saw you not reply. And I saw you order another beer so you wouldn’t have to hear the voice.” He doesn’t say it accusingly. More like someone taking notes for their archives. And I sit there, glass in hand, knowing: This is a story no one wants to believe anymore. Least of all me.

Perhaps that's the point in the end: the stories no one believes anymore are the ones that are most true. The ones that don't belong on the bar, but in those quiet minutes just before falling asleep, when the smoke hangs by the window and the day has completely slipped through your fingers. In those moments, when I'm lying on my back staring at the ceiling, the imp is often surprisingly quiet. Then he says just one sentence: "You could have told that differently." And I know he doesn't mean the anecdotes told at the bar.

I doubt anyone will ever be interested in the real version. Maybe someone, long after I'm gone, will read some tattered scrap of paper, find a name, a date, an official note, and think, "He must have been a complete idiot." Maybe one day the waitress will tell a new customer, "There used to be this guy who always sat back there. He talked a lot." And the newcomer will ask, "Did that really happen?" And she'll shrug. "Who knows," she'll say. "Everything in here is half true."

The goblin will be sitting somewhere else then, on another bar, by another head. But a small part of him will remain here, with my stories that no one believes anymore. And I, as long as I'm still stuck to this stool, will keep telling them. Not because I think anyone will believe me. But because otherwise I wouldn't even know that I ever experienced anything at all.

Perhaps that's the only thing separating me from disappearing completely: that there's someone out there who remembers the stories, even if he drags them through the mud. "Don't worry," the goblin says when I stare into my glass for too long. "I won't forget you. You were too entertaining for that." And I laugh. Not because it's funny, but because I can't think of anything better to say.

Chapter 16 – Cigarette Butts, Hangovers, and Lamentations

There are two kinds of mornings: those where you wake up too late, and those where you never really wake up at all. Mine are usually the second kind. No real start, just a slow creep up to a level just above unconsciousness. Your body is already tired of the ordeal, your mind wants to quit, but something inside you still pushes you to keep going.

I woke up with that typical taste in my mouth you get after spending the night chewing on cheap filters and even cheaper alcohol. A mixture of ashtray, metal, and bad breath that not even chewing gum can mask. My head throbbed in the back, like someone had soldered a bass drum into it that was always just slightly off-beat. My stomach was offended, my liver was silent, which is never a good sign. When organs are silent, they're plotting.

The goblin sat on my chest like a particularly ugly cat. Legs crossed, arms too, head tilted. "Ah," he said. "The living ashtray is back on air." He tapped his foot against my sternum. "How does irresponsibility feel in the morning sun?" I narrowed my eyes. "What sun?" I muttered. It was more of a pale gray seeping through the curtains. The goblin grinned. "Doesn't matter. Every kind of light is foreign to you now."

I turned my head to the side, half asleep, searching for the box on the nightstand. It lay there as always, faithfully, dented, right next to the glass of water I placed there every evening as proof that I was "caring." The glass was still half full, of course. I reached for the box first. My fingers were stiff, slightly shaky. "Look at them," the goblin sneered. "Claws of an animal that dug its own hole."

The first cigarette of the morning is a ritual only understood by those addicted enough to voluntarily fill their lungs with antifreeze. It's not a reward, more of an affirmation: You're still here. You're still functioning. You can hurt yourself again. I lit it, took a deep drag, too deep. The smoke scratched my throat, my head felt lighter for a moment, my stomach heavier. The hangover announced itself with an offended burp. "Good morning," the little devil said. "Welcome to the daily program 'Cigarettes, Hangovers, and Lamentations.' Today: everything as yesterday."

I dragged myself into the kitchen, barefoot across the cold floor, which smelled of spilled coffee and regret. Last week's mail lay unopened on the table, along with a few beer mats on which I'd scribbled something while drunk, and cigarette ash in a cut-open jam jar because the real ashtray was, once again, in the living room. The imp jumped onto an envelope marked "Important – Deadline!" "Spoiler," he said. "You missed it."

I put the kettle on to boil, that thin brew that still dares to call itself "aroma." The kettle shook more than my hand. I watched it boil, as if I had to keep an eye on it so the water wouldn't run over. The goblin looked at me. "Same every morning," he said. "You wake up, swear to yourself that you'll smoke less today, drink less, eat better, something. And then you start the day with a cigarette. It's like taking a running jump down an open shaft and saying halfway down, 'This time I'll be more careful.'"

I said nothing. I wasn't yet able to argue with someone who officially didn't exist. I sat down at the kitchen table, the first cup of coffee in front of me, the second cigarette dangling from the corner of my mouth. My head hammered in time with my heartbeat. Every sip of coffee felt like pouring oil on a fire that was already out of control. The hangover sat on my neck like a walking guilty conscience.

Hangovers aren't just physical, at least not for me. Sure, my head aches, my stomach rebels, my hands are shaky, my blood pressure is all over the place. But there's also that other thing that kicks in as the alcohol slowly leaves my system. A mixture of shame, emptiness, and that vague feeling that I messed something up again last night, without knowing exactly what. Then the lamentations begin. Not sung out loud, but lamented internally.

“You’re too old for this crap,” it begins. “You’re making a fool of yourself. You stink. You’ll end up lying in the stairwell one day, and no one will know if you fell or lay down by choice. Your grandchildren will say later, ‘Grandpa was… well… difficult.’” The goblin listens to all of this, sometimes even putting his hand to his ear as if he were at a concert. “I love your hangover monologues,” he says. “They’re your only honest ballads.”

Sometimes I wish I were the type of guy who, after a morning like this, puts out his last cigarette, throws away the pack, empties the beer from the fridge, goes for a run, and then says to himself in the mirror: "That's it. Never again." But I'm not in a movie, and my body isn't built for heroic tales. By the third cup of coffee and the fourth cigarette, at the latest, the hangover has faded into a dull, background state. The self-recrimination fades, the habit grows louder. And somewhere between the ashtray and the washing-up area, the decision is made: Tonight, you're going back to "The Last Light."

The goblin knows this before I even admit it to myself. "Don't pretend you're weighing things up," he says. "You've never really weighed things up. You're just procrastinating. Call it pride if you like: you don't want to admit how much you need this place." He runs across the table, jumps onto the back of the chair, and watches me drink my coffee as if I were a test subject in a very long experiment.

The lamentations continue all morning. Not loud, not melodic, but like broken audio tracks in the back of my mind. "Shouldn't you have drunk that?" "Shouldn't you have said that?" "Should you have gone home earlier yesterday?" "Should you have texted your daughter?" The "Should you" is the quietest and yet most insistent sound in my life. And every "Should you" is accompanied by a new cigarette.

The goblin, the little bastard, makes sure that the guilt never completely disappears, but also never grows strong enough to actually change anything. "If you're too ashamed, you'll become boring," he says. "If you're not ashamed at all, you'll become a complete asshole. I'm keeping you right in between. Where you can still argue with yourself while you're already opening the next pack." It's a kind of balance that feels unhealthy, but something inside me has gotten used to it.

Around midday, my head is clear enough that I could theoretically do something productive. Open letters. Call the authorities. Go shopping without thinking only about beer and cigarettes. Something along those lines. Instead, I sit there, staring into my now lukewarm coffee cup, waiting for time to push me into the pub like a lost deposit bottle back to the recycling center. The hangover has morphed into a background ache, the laments have faded, but they're still there. They're singing in the subconscious while I put on my shoes.

"So," the goblin says as I head for the door, "To sum up this morning: You've regretted everything again, changed nothing, and are now going back to the place where you'll wake up exactly the same tomorrow. Classic routine." I close the door, light another cigarette on the landing, and think: Yes. Classic routine. Cigarettes, hangovers, and lamentations. Repeat until the very last note.

In the late afternoon, the hangover takes on its second form. The first is physical, the second social. You're sitting in the "backlight" and can see on the faces of the others what they thought of your performance yesterday—if there even was one they remember. There are crashes that only you remember. And then there are those where, as soon as you walk in today, you realize: Aha, you were entertaining.

That day, the air in the "Late Light" was as heavy as the smoke over the ashtrays. The jukebox was still dead, the white hole in the corner we were slowly growing accustomed to. No soundscape to mask your embarrassments. Just voices, glasses, chairs scraping on the floor. I came in, a little later than usual, as if it made a difference whether I started this slow death at five or seven.

The innkeeper looked up and nodded. No particular twinkle in his eyes, no raised eyebrow—a good sign. The waitress placed the beer in front of me, as always. "Everything alright?" she asked, which in this place is akin to, "Are you still in one piece?" I shrugged. "Sort of," I said. "The rest is still hanging somewhere between the kitchen and the bed." The imp jumped from my shoulder onto the bar, scampering across the rim of the glass like an acrobat. "He's alive," he grinned. "So we can continue."

Heiner was already there, looking like a poorly drawn survivor. His eyes were red, his skin gray, his hands trembling slightly as he reached for his glass. In front of him was an ashtray, already half full, even though the evening had barely begun. "How was your morning?" I asked. He gave a dry laugh. "I tried not to breathe," he said. "My own taste was insulting." Harry came in shortly after, with that kind of shuffling gait that says, "My back's fucked, but I'm drinking it away." The slot machine player stood at the back by his altar of lights, already in the zone.

The laments in the pub are different from those in the kitchen. Here, they're sung aloud, in the form of complaints everyone recognizes. "Beer used to be cheaper." "I used to be tougher." "At least someone missed me when I didn't show up." Everyone has their verse, and we dutifully join in. The imp wanders from one person to another, holding out imaginary microphones and demanding encores.

“I’m telling you,” Harry whined, halfway through his first beer, “my doctor told me last week my blood work was ‘not good.’ What kind of statement is that? ‘Not good’? Should he say I’m a goner or not?” Heiner chuckled. “‘Not good’ means he’s already mentally preparing for your funeral,” he said. “But he hasn’t dared to print the invitations yet.” The goblin leaned toward me. “Lament number one,” he said. “The old classic: ‘The world is unfair to my body.’ Meanwhile, my body has been trying to get my attention for years.”

I listened, half interested, half annoyed. Because I knew the drill. Each of us had our complaints: racing heart, back pain, insomnia, panic attacks, numbness in our fingers, shortness of breath climbing stairs. Our bodies were screaming, and we translated it into jokes. Cigarettes, hangovers, laments. Groundhog Day with lung shadows.

The waitress set out a fresh round of drinks, glancing briefly at our faces. "You look like a waiting room without appointments," she said. "Perhaps I should start taking numbers and treating you one at a time." The landlord chuckled, then turned serious again. "If I had to treat you," he said, "I'd put you all on water and turn this place into a tea room." Harry pretended to leave immediately. "Then I'd rather drink at home," he grumbled. "I need my medicine here."

The goblin chuckled. "Medicine," he echoed. "The best placebo in the world: beer for sorrow, liquor for fear, cigarettes for thoughts. Side effects: see CV." He sat on the edge of my ashtray and looked up. "How's your knee?" he asked. "And your hip? And your conscience?" I took a drag on the cigarette, feeling a sharp pain somewhere under my ribs. "All good," I muttered. "The supporting act for a shitty headliner."

It wasn't long before the complaints spread from the body to the world. Manni joined them, slightly out of breath, even though the walk from his apartment couldn't have been far. "Rents are going up," he shouted before he'd even sat down properly. "Food prices too. The politicians do whatever they want. And here I am, sitting at the government office, and they look at me like I'm personally responsible for inflation." The slot machine player turned

around briefly. "So are you," he said. "Because you're too stupid not to be in the red every month." Laughter, half serious, half a release.

The pub is full of such anthems. About ex-wives who "see the money, but not the person." About children who "only think about their phones." About bosses who "have no idea how hard we'd work if we were allowed to." About doctors who "only ever forbid things." About neighbors who are "too nosy" or "too loud" or "too normal." Everyone has their own requiem for a life they never really lived. We sing all at once, without a choirmaster.

The goblin enjoys this. "You're your own funeral dirge," he says. "No church needed. You preach to each other every night about why everything sucks and why it's not your fault. That's better than any mass." He's not wrong. Sometimes I notice myself falling into that rhythm. "If I hadn't had so much bad luck." "If my childhood had been different." "If that one job back then had worked out." "If I hadn't started drinking so young." They're simple, comfortable melodies. They're catchy, but not heartfelt.

The cigarettes burn down like metronomes. Drag – complaint – sip – laughter – ash – next drag. Sometimes, when I catch myself in this rhythm, I could puke. Then I see from the outside what we're doing: a self-pity party without a DJ, but with constant drinking. And at the same time, it feels like the only thing we have left: the chance to sing to each other about how left behind we've been. Whether it's true or not eventually doesn't matter.

There are moments when someone strikes a deeper note. Like when Heiner suddenly says, "I'm afraid of the day I don't wake up anymore." Or when Harry murmurs, "I'd like to see my grandchildren start school, but I don't know if I'll live that long." Then there's a brief silence. Then the laments are no longer just background noise, but something that hurts. The goblin keeps quiet in such moments. He knows when the punchline would be too much.

But these seconds are rare, and they don't last long. Most of the time they're quickly filled with jokes, cigarettes, and orders. "Come on, we're still alive," says one. "Others have it worse," says another. And just like that, the songs are superficial again. "My boss is an asshole." "My ex is crazy." "My body can't take it anymore, but I'm pulling through." A pathetic chorus, with beer for a microphone.

The goblin then leans down to me and whispers, "You realize you're one of them, don't you? You're not the observer. You're the soloist who thinks he's in the audience." I know he's right. I can tell by the way I hold my glass, by the way I construct my sentences. In this place, there's only a drink's worth of space between "me" and "the others."

As the evening progresses, faces soften, voices grow louder, I notice my own hangover subsiding. Not because I feel better, but because the lamentations of others drown out my own inner chorus. The cigarette tastes like routine again, not punishment. The beer tastes like numbing, not slow-motion suicide. And at some point, when there's enough noise around me, I think: "It's not so bad after all." That's the most dangerous thought of all.

The goblin nods contentedly. "There you go," he says. "The program is running smoothly. In the morning you regret everything, in the afternoon you complain with the others, in the evening you pretend to be satisfied. That's more structure than most people have." I take another drag, another sip, join in the next lament wafting through the pub, and think: Maybe this is our way of not being completely silent. Even when no one is listening anymore.

There are nights when the lament becomes a chorus that even the goblin wouldn't find funny. These are the evenings when the alcohol isn't enough to patch up the cracks, and the cigarettes don't burn fast enough to mask the nervousness. Then you sit there, your voice already hoarse from whining, and realize that sometime between the third and fourth beer, the whining has turned into real fear.

One of these evenings began innocently enough. "Just two or three tonight," I'd told myself. My body was tired, my head too, the hangover from the night before still lingering. "Let's keep it short," I said to my partner as I entered the "Last Light" pub. He chuckled in my ear. "You've been saying that for years," he said. "Whenever you're tired. And you're always tired." The landlord placed the first beer in front of me, the waitress nodded—all routine.

But there was something in the air. Perhaps it was the weather, that oppressive pressure creeping in through the window from outside. Perhaps it was the news, showing images of floods, wars, and bankruptcies on the silent television. Perhaps it was simply our own inner selves, which decided that evening not to remain quietly in the background. In any case, it wasn't long before the usual platitudes began to fade.

Heiner held his cigarette as if he were about to break it. "I calculated the other day," he said, "how many years I've been smoking. Over thirty. Imagine if I'd just smoked two fewer cigarettes every day. Then I would have…" He broke off, gave a short, humorless laugh. "Screw it. Someone else would have spent it anyway." Harry clutched his heart. "Mine told me to quit immediately," he muttered. "The cardiologist. Said I was a ticking time bomb. But what can I do? I don't know myself without a cigarette."

The slot machine player moved away from the machine, heavily, as if someone were pulling him by the back. "I got that letter from the debt counseling service last week," he said to the group, unprompted. "They want me to make a plan. A plan." He gave a dry laugh. "I can't even remember how much I gambled away yesterday. They want me to write down what I'm going to do for the next five years." The waitress placed a beer in front of him, even though he hadn't ordered one. "Plan A," she said. "We'll start with you drinking and not gambling. It can't get any worse than that."

That was the moment the mood shifted. The usual laments turned into a jumble of genuine confessions. One man spoke of the sleep lab he refused to visit, afraid they'd give him a mask that would make him look like a broken diver. Another told of an acquaintance who had suffered a stroke and now spoke as if someone had half-tucked his tongue out. The waitress briefly mentioned her father, who had simply collapsed in his mid-fifties. "Heart," she said. "He always used to say, 'Oh, it's not that bad.'"

The goblin paced restlessly on the counter. "You guys are on fire today," he said. "That's almost realistic. Watch out, or I might start feeling sorry for you, and I'm not insured for that." He tried to crack a few jokes, but even his voice was lost in the chorus. It was as if everyone had decided to take the filters off today—and not just on their cigarettes.

I felt it stirring within me. The morning's hangover had transformed into a deep weariness that was no longer confined to my body. I listened to them talk about their fears—of illness, of poverty, of being alone—and thought, "That's all me. Just in other bodies, with different names." The goblin saw my face and placed a hand on my forehead for a moment. "Well, now it's your turn," he whispered. "Your big lament. Don't make it boring."

I lifted the glass, put it down again. I took a drag on the cigarette, put it out. "I had a dream the other day," I said, without thinking too much about it, "that I didn't wake up in the morning, but nobody noticed." The others looked over. "How's that supposed to work?" Harry asked. "The landlord would notice after a week at the most that you were hurting business." A few chuckles. I shook my head. "Not like that," I said. "I mean, life goes on in the real world. The grandkids grow up, my daughter does her own thing, you're sitting here, someone else takes my seat. And nobody misses a thing."

The slot machine player nodded slowly. "That's not even a nightmare," he said. "That's likely." The waitress looked at me, long, seriously. "I'd notice," she said. "If only because I'd need fewer ashtrays." The landlord added, "And I'd have to find a new one who pretends he'll pay his debts someday." It was her attempt to make it easier. But the words didn't quite hold up.

The goblin perched on my forearm and looked at me. "You're always whining that no one misses you," he said quietly. "But you're the one who pushes people away before they can get close. You sink deeper into the cigarette, deeper into the glass, instead of listening to a real answer." I wanted to argue with him, but I knew that was just the reflex I always have when someone speaks the truth.

The laments grew more frequent. It got later, the glasses fuller, the words more loose. One complained about his pension, which he'd never see. Another about therapy he'd quit because the psychologist was "too young." Another about not being able to find a woman anymore because apparently his face showed he spent too much time at the bar. Everyone sang their line. The imp conducted into the void.

There was an odd silence. The music was gone, the TV was off, no one was talking. Only the click of the vending machine in the back, the soft hiss of a cigarette, the distant street noise. In that lull, I suddenly heard something I usually drown out: my own breathing. Shallow, uneven, slightly whistling. I'd always thought I was ruining my future with bottles and cigarettes. In that moment, I realized I was already well on my way to destroying my present, too.

“So,” said the goblin, “now would be the point where the protagonist, in a better life, decides to change things.” He grinned at me. “But you’re not in a better life. You’re in yours.” I took a sip that felt like I was swallowing the decision back down before it even reached my mouth. “Cheers,” I said. “To our miserable operetta.”

The waitress cleared away glasses at some point, looked around the room, and shook her head. "You're like a skipped record," she said. "Always the same part. Cigarettes, hangovers, complaints. And if the needle could go any further, you'd push it back again." The innkeeper sighed. "As long as you pay, your complaints are welcome to play here," he said. "That's the basis of the business."

On the way home, the hangover had already moved into its next phase—a mixture of physical misery and mental exhaustion. I couldn't stand my own words anymore. The imp walked beside me, hands in his pockets, as if he were drunk too. "You know what the worst thing is?" he finally asked. "Not that you smoke, drink, and whine. It's that you've long since realized how ridiculous it all is—and you still do it. Complete idiots stumble cluelessly. You stumble with warning."

Inside the apartment, I took off my jacket and let it fall onto the chair, which had already borne far too much weight. The ashtray was still half full of cigarette butts from the morning. I lit another one, an expression of something that could no longer be called reason. The imp sat down opposite me, on the table. "So," he said. "Cigarette butts, hangover, lamentations. Another one done." I nodded. "Same tomorrow," I muttered.

Just before I fell asleep, I thought: Maybe there won't be a big bang, no final crash, no dramatic scene with flashing blue lights and screaming relatives. Maybe it's exactly this: an endless repetition of the same three chords until the needle finally breaks. Flipping over. Hangover. Lamentations. And a goblin who refuses to turn off the radio.

"Don't kid yourself," he whispered as my eyes closed. "It won't get better. But I'll stay with you until the last song fades away." And that, absurd as it sounds, was the most comforting lament of all.

Chapter 17 – The Goblin in the Mirror Behind the Bar

The mirror behind the bar had always been there. At least, it felt that way. It stretched the entire length of the counter, a single, slightly wavy strip of glass, with corners that caught and lingered the light. Not a clear, clean mirror like in furniture stores, but one that had seen too much. Decades of smoke, fingerprints, cleaning products, bartenders' hands, glasses clanging against it had dulled it. It didn't show you as you were, but as you had become after sitting in front of it long enough.

I never particularly liked it. The mirror was the passive-aggressive bartender of everything. You could ignore it, but it was still there. If you lifted your head, you saw yourself: slightly from below, sometimes distorted, always unvarnished. If you were hanging deep enough in the glass, you no longer saw your face, but only shapes, movements, shadows. But it was there. At some point, I started staring more at the glasses in front of me than at the mirror behind them. At least there you could see something that filled up and then emptied up. In the mirror, it just emptied up.

The goblin loved the mirror. "This is my stage," he said. "Here I am twice over. Once on the bar, once in there. Two for the price of one, just your concept." He liked to climb up from the beer tap, stand right in the middle of my reflection, and pull faces. Sometimes it looked to me as if my own features were momentarily changing, as if the mirror were showing me a version I hadn't ordered. "The truth is always distorted," he said. "The only thing you can get straight is a lie."

There were evenings when I found myself staring at that mirror, unintentionally. Not staring at it, not consciously, but out of the corner of my eye. You're sitting there, talking to someone, staring into your beer, lighting a cigarette – and somewhere behind the movement, you're dragging your own face along with it. You see your mouth move, the wrinkles around your eyes deepen, your shoulders slump. You see yourself watching yourself age, while you pretend it's all one long, somewhat amusing episode.

On one of those evenings, the place was packed with the usual half-dead crowd. It was Friday, the kind of day when people who still have jobs pretend they deserve a reward. The place

hummed with voices, glasses, and shrill laughter. The TV was muted, the jukebox was long gone, and the radio in the kitchen was playing something that didn't reach the front. I sat in my seat and felt even more tired than usual. The week's hangover had become a general feeling of unease.

The imp, as so often, stood on the counter, turned to the mirror, and struck a pose as if he were some kind of prince. "Look," he said. "Back there, that's you if you keep going like this for another ten years." I followed his finger, saw my reflection—and was startled, even though it was ridiculous, of course. The same face as always, only caught in the moment when I wasn't looking: mouth slightly open, eyes glazed, skin a touch too pale. Someone more at odds with himself than he'd care to admit.

“You look,” the goblin commented, “like you pressed pause and forgot to ever press play again.” I took a sip to do something with my mouth and looked away. But the mirror was like a magnet. The more you try to ignore it, the more often you find yourself looking back at it. The glass never lies to you. It might exaggerate, but it doesn't lie.

"Do you know why they have mirrors like that behind bars?" asked the goblin. "Not so you can admire yourselves. It's so the owner can keep an eye on you both—front and back. And so that if you sit here long enough, you'll eventually realize that you're not just customers, but part of the furniture." He pointed to a stain somewhere above the bottles of cheap liquor. "You leaned your head there years ago, remember? The mark's still there. They just haven't cleaned it as well as the rest."

I actually remembered. One evening, far too late, far too much, me half on the stool, half off it. The waitress had brought me another glass of water, the innkeeper had already cleared up, and my forehead had slid against the mirror, such a wet, heavy contact. It was cold, then as now. And it caught me no more than anyone else.

If you stare at your mirror in a pub long enough, you start seeing things you can't categorize. Not ghosts, not dead bodies, just possibilities. Versions of yourself that might have existed if you'd taken a different turn at some point. A face that looks a bit more awake, one with less gray, one with a shirt that didn't come from yesterday's pub. The goblin sees all this too, but for him it's entertainment. For me, it's a mixture of pain and resignation.

Something strange settled over the evening that Friday. The mirror seemed denser than usual. The lights behind the bar refracted in such a way that my face appeared brighter than everyone else's. I saw myself watching the bartender pouring drinks, watching the waitress walk by, trying to listen to the others talking but unable to fully engage. And beside me, in the mirror, stood the goblin. Not as small as he appeared on the bar. In the mirror, he was… different.

He was about my height. Or I was his. The image had shifted. I saw a man next to me, thinner, with sharp features, eyes too alert for this hour, a grin that understood too much. It wasn't my face, but it wasn't completely unfamiliar. More like someone had drawn my features from a different angle, with a different hand. I blinked, looked at the counter—there stood the imp as always, small, with a dirty laugh. In the mirror: the other version.

"Well?" asked the goblin. "Does it click?" I stared into the mirror again. The figure next to me in the glass imaginarily lifted the glass, bumping it against my own mirror. The mouth moved.

I couldn't hear what it said, but I could read it: "That's you. No excuses." I felt dizzy. I had to look away.

The innkeeper noticed I was getting paler. "Everything alright?" he asked, wringing out the rag. "Or is another one of your numbers coming up?" I shook my head. "Everything's fine," I lied. "Just having a weird day." The waitress glanced at me. "He doesn't like mirrors," the goblin muttered. "Too much reality all at once."

It's a different story seeing yourself in the bathroom in the morning. There you can adjust your hair, ignore the wrinkles, chalk up the dark circles to "bad sleep." The mirror behind the bar shows you in your natural habitat: with a glass, a cigarette, with everything you want to know about yourself but can't stand at the same time. And if a little imp appears in there, looking like a caricature of yourself, things get awkward.

I drank faster than I wanted, just to mask the images with something. The conversations at the regulars' table grew louder, the slot machine player cursed in the back, someone tripped over a chair somewhere. All familiar sounds, familiar distractions. But every time I looked away for just a moment, my mirror self intruded into the picture again. And next to it, the other person, the one who wasn't me, but who knew everything better.

The next day, I tried to avoid the mirror. Which is pretty ridiculous when you're drinking in a pub where the thing is practically the backbone behind the bar. I sat somewhere else, at one of the tables against the wall, from where you only had to look at it at an angle. The landlord smirked when he brought me my beer. "Well," he said, "moving house?" I shrugged. "Just a different perspective," I muttered.

The goblin thought it was delightful. "Look, he's running away from glass," he said. "As if the mirror were the villain. Not what's in it." He jumped onto the table, ran in a circle around my glass, and sang something that was supposed to rhyme with "mirror" and failed spectacularly. I ignored him as best I could. I stared out the window, saw the street, the bustling life outside, people with bags, shopping bags, children, dogs. People with appointments. I saw their reflections too, in shop windows, car windshields, but they passed by. Mine lingered.

After the second beer, the spot became uncomfortable. The chairs along the wall were never meant for sitting in for more than half an hour. The cushions were thinner, the backs harder, everything designed so that if you stay long, you'll eventually move back to the bar where you belong. My back started to complain, and so did my knee. The leprechaun grinned. "The body knows where it belongs," he said. "It wants to be on the wood."

In the end, I landed back on my stool at the bar. Routine wins. The mirror grinned silently over the bottles. I sat down, but turned my head slightly to the side, so I could only see half of myself. Half face, half shoulder, the rest vaguely defined. "Coward," the goblin muttered. "You're looking away like someone who knows he's done something wrong."

The waitress placed the next beer in front of me and leaned briefly against the bar. "You look like you've had a falling out with the furniture," she said. "What did the mirror do to you?" I hesitated. "It shows me too much," I finally said. "It shows you exactly what everyone else sees," she replied. "You just don't see it all at once." Then she went on collecting empty glasses. The goblin nodded enthusiastically. "She likes you," he said. "Otherwise, she wouldn't be so brutally honest."

I forced myself to look again. Slowly, cautiously, as if the mirror were an animal that bites at sudden movements. There I was. The man with the washed-out face, the yellow fingers, the shirt that no longer fit well at the shoulders. My neck slightly bent forward, my eyes beneath half-closed lids, my mouth that rarely smiled fully, but only briefly lifted the corner. I didn't look the way I did in my head. In my head, I was still closer to the version I'd had before, with a more defined chin, less of a belly, fewer shadows.

“In there,” the goblin said, pointing at my reflection, “you are as you are here. Not as you tell yourself you are. No filter, no ‘I used to be,’ no ‘I really am.’ Just: you, now. And me.” He appeared in the glass next to my head, larger than usual, clearer. He had something of a grimace about him, but not only that. There was also something sad about him that I didn’t like to see. “Why do you look bigger in there than on the counter?” I asked. He laughed. “Because there you finally perceive me at my true size.”

I thought about it. Maybe he was right. Maybe he wasn't the minor character in my life I liked to think of him as. Maybe he occupied far more space than I wanted to admit. The mirror didn't just show my weathered face; it showed the relationship between me and my own abyss. And that abyss was bigger than I was comfortable with.

Other things were happening between us in the glass. I saw the innkeeper move, how his shoulders now seemed broader with fatigue. I saw the waitress stretching briefly every now and then, stretching away back pain she shouldn't have in her mid-thirties. I saw Heiner covering his mouth with his hand when he laughed, out of habit, to hide his bad teeth. I saw Harry's head becoming too heavy for his neck when he bent over. I saw all of this from the front, too, but in the mirror it all formed a picture. A series of failed special effects.

“This is your family, whether you like it or not,” the goblin commented. “This is your ensemble. If someone is missing, it shows. If you’re missing, it shows too—a hole will remain in your place in the mirror.” I didn’t know whether the thought should comfort me or devastate me. A hole is also a kind of trace.

Later that evening, I stood all alone at the bar; the others were in the back by the toilet, outside smoking, or already gone. The owner had disappeared into the kitchen, the waitress somewhere between the bottles and the cash register. For a few minutes, it was just me, the mirror, the glasses. The goblin stood directly behind my head in the mirror and, in the reflection, placed a hand on my shoulder. I felt nothing, but I saw it.

“Do you see us?” he asked. “You and me. That’s how we go through life: you in front, me in back. To everyone else, you’re just the guy at the bar. I’m the one standing next to you, making sure you’re not fooling yourself. In the glass, we’re partners.” I thought of all the years I’d spent trying to find a friend who would tell me the truth without abandoning me. And there he was. Behind me. In the mirror. Uninvited, but persistent.

There was this brief, sick moment when I raised my hand as if I wanted to touch the reflective surface. As if I could reach through it and grab something I'd lost. Of course, I didn't. I'm not stupid enough to grope the mirror in the middle of a pub like a kid at the zoo. But the urge was there. The goblin grinned. "Go on," he said. "Hold out your hand. Maybe you'll grab yourself."

I drank instead. That's how you solve everything in this place: look down, glass up, problem postponed. The mirror remained. It has time.

It took me a few weeks to understand what this mirror was doing to me. At first it was just discomfort, then disgust, then a perverse kind of fascination. I started observing myself the way other people look at cars: not out of love, but because they want to know when the thing will finally fall apart.

There were evenings when I used the mirror almost like a measuring instrument. I saw how many beers it took before my eyes lost their last shred of sharpness. I paid attention to the point at which my hands no longer held the lighter steady. I counted the wrinkles that deepened when I said certain phrases. "When you say 'I'm fine,' you raise your forehead," the goblin commented. "When you say 'Everything's okay,' you purse your lips. You're an open book, just a bad edition."

Sometimes someone I didn't know would sit next to me, one of those travelers who stumble into a place like this when they're in a strange city looking for real pubs. They'd see us all in the mirror: the landlord, the waitress, the regulars, the broken faces glued to their own bar. And I saw them. Fresher skin, clearer eyes, clean jackets. Men who hadn't yet learned to look down when they saw themselves.

The goblin used these contrasts to hurt me. "Do you see him there?" he asked once, pointing at a guy in a shirt and laptop bag who was taking his first beer with a slight hesitation. "That's what you used to be. Not in looks, but in spirit. Someone who still thinks he only drinks to unwind, not to stay." I saw the man in the mirror, scrutinizing us all, lingering with me for a moment longer, then looking away, embarrassed. "He's wondering if he'll end up like that too," the goblin chuckled. "And you're the answer."

It's a special kind of torture when your future stares you down so openly – and your present looks like a warning sign. At the same time, you always had the choice to turn your head away. To not look. To hide in the glass. But the glass lies differently. It only shows you the part you can bear. The mirror shows you the whole bar.

Once, later, when the place was almost empty, the waitress sat down on the stool next to me, just for a cigarette. She looked in the mirror, just like me. "Funny, isn't it?" she said. "I see you guys here every day. Always the same backs, the same lines, the same orders. But in the mirror, it all looks more serious." I nodded. "In the mirror, you see that we're not just guys with beer, but men with an expiration date," I muttered. She took a drag on her cigarette, blew the smoke to the side. "And you see that I'm right here in the middle of it all, hoping I don't end up the same way."

The goblin grimaced. "She's afraid of her own reflection," he whispered. "And you're her living cautionary tale." That hurt. Not because I didn't know, but because it was so clearly stated. I turned the glass in my hand, watching my reflection drink. The gesture looked older than it felt. I felt like a copy of a copy.

"Do you know what I sometimes do when you're all gone?" the waitress asked suddenly. "I stand here, alone, and look in the mirror. And then I pretend it's someone else, in another shop. Someone who goes home early, doesn't smoke, doesn't drink, goes to bed on time. And then I see my eyes and think: no, that's me. No matter where I am." She smiled crookedly. "The mirror is honest. Maybe too honest. But better than the photos on your phone."

I asked her if she could imagine not being here someday. "Of course," she said. "But I also imagine myself being rich someday and living by the sea. I have many ideas. The mirror only

knows one." The goblin nodded. "The mirror is your most brutal friend," he said. "I'm just the commentator."

There was an evening when I decided to test how much truth I could bear. I drank more slowly than usual, smoked less, and consciously held my head upright. I wanted to know if I could look at myself in the mirror without looking away, without a witty remark, without using the glass as a shield. I stared at my reflection until the noise in the shop subsided.

There I was. An old man who didn't want to look so old. Someone who seemed both defiant and tired. Someone who had been trying to forget himself for years. And there, beside me, was the goblin, larger in the mirror than in the room. He no longer looked like just a mischievous gnome. He looked like the sum total of everything I carry around: shame, cynicism, a sliver of humor, a sliver of melancholy. "Look at us," he said. "We make a good team. One of us dissects his life, the other comments. And the mirror films it all."

I don't know how long I sat like that. At some point, the innkeeper put his hand on my shoulder, not firmly, just enough to make me briefly come back. "Are you alright?" he asked. I nodded. "Just checking if I'm still here," I said. He looked in the mirror, saw me in it, saw me in front of it. "You are," he said. "For now."

On my way home, I thought about all the mirrors in which I've seen myself in life. Bathroom mirrors, shop windows, car windows, hotel mirrors, the small glass pane in the pub toilet. None of them told me as much about myself as that smudged glass behind the bar, with its fingerprints and water stains. Maybe because I spent most of my adult life in front of it. Maybe because I'm never sober there for long.

At home, in the bathroom, I glanced briefly in the mirror above the sink. The light was brighter, the image sharper, the truth harsher. But it didn't affect me as much. It was just a face. A head on a body. In the "backlight" mirror, I saw more: the stool, the glass, the cigarette butt, the imp, the innkeeper, the others. The context.

“When you’re no longer here,” the goblin said later, as I lay in bed, “the mirror will have known you longer than any human being. It will have seen your face, on good days and bad, drunk, hungover, on the verge of tears, on the verge of collapse. And yet it won’t be missed. They’ll wipe it off and carry on.” I turned onto my side. “And you?” I asked. “Do you miss me?” He chuckled softly. “I’m going to look in the next mirror.”

Perhaps that's the most honest insight to come from that glass back there: that we're all interchangeable. Guests who come and go. Faces that appear and disappear. The mirror remains. The goblin, too, in some form or other. Only I, stuck in between, imagine myself to be something special.

The next evening, I sat down in my seat again, looked in the mirror, and raised my glass. Not as a heroic gesture, more as a weary acknowledgment. "Well," I thought. "Then we'll just keep watching each other." The goblin grinned beside me in the glass and toasted back. And behind us, in the depths of the bottles, the lights, the fingerprints, the mirror waited for us to start fooling ourselves again.

Chapter 18 – How Much Life Can Fit in a Bottle

There are people who count their lives in years, in relationships, in moves, in employment contracts. I realized at some point that I count my life in bottles. Not consciously, not with a tally sheet on the wall, but when I think of certain times, the first thing that comes to mind is what I drank. The cheap swill from the Tetra Pak aisle in the supermarket at sixteen, the first evenings spent mixing some kind of sweet crap, later schnapps with cola from plastic cups, eventually cheap beer from cans in playgrounds, and then finally glass. That was important. Glass had style. Glass was grown-up. Glass was the beginning of the end.

The goblin says a bottle is the most honest calendar. "You can tell me all sorts of things about the old days," he says, "but I only need to see what you were drinking to know what was going on." He likes to sit on the bottles on the shelf behind the bar, balancing on their necks, reading the labels, and quoting them like gravestones. "Here rests your twenty-pound grain spirit," he might say. "A good death." Or: "Here rests your attempt at having taste: some single malt you don't pay for but happily order when a stranger is listening."

There's that moment before you open a bottle. The brief resistance in the cap, the first "click" when you twist it or pry it open with a lighter. The little hiss as carbonation or air escapes. I've often thought that this moment was the only thing that truly interested me anymore. Not even the first sip, but this opening, this "Now it begins." It's like a mini version of a new beginning, only without the consequences. A fresh bottle promises you, for a few seconds, that you could do everything differently—and you gulp it down to prevent exactly that.

That evening, as I recall, a bottle I usually avoid was prominently displayed: clear liquor, cheap, Irish or Polish name, it didn't matter. The landlord had gotten some kind of deal, a case full for a price that reeked of bankruptcy. The bottles stood on the counter like soldiers no one would willingly send to the front. "Special price today," he said. "For warming up or forgetting." I didn't know which I needed more.

The goblin was delighted. "Ah, the plain truth!" he cried, running along the necks of the bottles. "Beer is foreplay, wine is a lie, but this is an X-ray. Clear liquor strips you of all the decorations." I looked at him. "I'm cold," I said. "I'll have warming up." He laughed. "You always take forgetting, you just call it something more polite."

I ordered a glass. Not just a shot, but a full one, because I wanted to convince myself I was drinking it like a gentleman, slowly, in sips, not in gulps. The bartender poured, the clear liquid shimmering under the yellow lamp like cleaning fluid. I raised the glass against the mirror behind the bar, saw myself holding it, like someone about to toast, and wondered what exactly I was holding up: my life, my last shred of pride, or just a cheap tranquilizer.

“How much of you fits into a glass like this?” the goblin asked. “An evening? A year? A marriage?” I took the first sip. It burned, but not the way it used to burn, when my body still protested. It was more of a tired burning, like running your finger over an old scar. “Depends,” I said. “There used to be more life in it. Now it’s just…extension.”

I sometimes think back to the first bottle that called itself "mine." Not the secret one from Dad's cupboard, not the one I shared in the park, but the one I bought myself, with my own money, in a shop, half proud, half caught out. I felt like I'd bought a ticket. Not to a party, but to a new kind of identity. "Now you're officially one of them," the goblin said when I carried

it into that small room where I later spent more time hungover than sleeping. "A guy with a bottle. That's all it takes."

The funny thing is: in the beginning, a lot of life actually fits into a bottle like that. It's full of stories, nights gone wrong, conversations you would never have had otherwise, kisses you would never have received otherwise. Courage you could never have afforded without what was inside. Bad decisions, sure, but also a kind of freedom, a "screw it" attitude. I don't want to romanticize it, it's just that in the beginning, the deal isn't so bad. You give up some clarity, and in return, you get excitement.

Later, it tips over. At some point, there's no room left for a life, only substitutes. The bottle is no longer a starting point, but a spare part. You unscrew it to adjust the day. Not to experience anything, but to be able to bear the fact that nothing is happening. "You don't drink to celebrate that you're alive," says the goblin. "You drink to forget that you no longer know what to do with your life." He's an asshole. But he's usually right.

Some evenings at "Schlusslicht" (the last one), we sit there unconsciously counting how much life has flowed into the bottles gathering dust around us. On the shelf behind the bar are a few old, almost empty bottles that no one orders anymore. Specialty liqueurs for long-gone tastes, bottles with labels from brands that no longer exist, a whisky that some customer once started and never returned to. "That one," the waitress sometimes says, pointing at it, "was waiting for the old man who always drank three of them and then started singing. He never turned up again. But the bottle still sits there like a missing pet."

"Bottles are more loyal than people," the goblin comments. "They stay until you empty them or throw them away." I look at my glass and wonder if that applies to me too. If I'm only needed as long as there's something left in it. And what exactly that is. Alcohol, sure. Memories, maybe. Excuses, definitely.

I have no idea how many bottles have passed through my hands. Beer, liquor, wine, you name it. Some people say, "If you poured together everything you've ever drunk in your life, you could bathe in it." The goblin thinks I could drown in it. And he'd probably even enjoy watching me go down.

There's one particular type of bottle I hate more than any other: the one that sits half-empty in the fridge. Not in the pub, where bottles are tools. I mean the kind you open at home "just for a sip" and then put back because you want to convince yourself you're someone who drinks "a little." I've lied to that type of bottle more than to any person in my life.

For a while, I always had one or two beer bottles lying crookedly on the shelf in my fridge. Never a whole case, that would have looked too honest. Just a few, as if I were the type who cracks open "one" while watching crime dramas in the evening and otherwise drinks water. The imp laughed his head off about it. "You're decorating your fridge," he said. "That's not a stash, that's an excuse in glass form."

I remember one evening when I'd decided "not to go out." Saving money, pretending to be healthy, being irresponsible, being responsible—all that stuff. I was sitting in the kitchen, it wasn't quite dark outside yet, and the fridge was humming like it was staring at me. I knew perfectly well there were two bottles in there. I also knew that if I didn't open them, I'd spend the whole evening thinking about it. So I opened them. Of course.

The first sip alone in the kitchen is even sadder than the first at the bar. There's no bartender, no waitress, no noise to distract you. It's just you, your cheap furniture, and the bottle. In that moment, I realized how much life couldn't fit into that kitchen. No conversation, no story, just the sound of the bottle cap hitting the table and the first drag that burns down your throat.

“You see,” said the goblin sitting on the refrigerator, his legs dangling, “that’s the absolute truth. A pub is theater, this is backstage. Here you see what’s really going on.” He was right. In a pub, drinking was still embedded in something: music, laughter, other broken lives. At home, it was raw. Suddenly, there was no longer room for life in the bottle, only emptiness.

Even today, I sometimes sit in the kitchen and feel the imprint of those evenings. Whether there's a bottle in the fridge or not, the air is different. As if the walls are saturated with everything I poured down my throat alone. The imp calls it "ghosts of old alcohol." Sometimes he claps his hands and says, "Wake up! Showtime!" even when there's nothing there. Then I light one up, as if I have to prove to the room that I can do something other than drink. Smoke, for example.

In a pub, bottles tell stories. That sounds more romantic than it is, but it's true. A particular bottle of whisky reminds the landlord of the guy who used to come in every Friday, order three, and then disappear with some woman who wasn't his. A cheaper bottle of rum is linked to a regular customer who simply stopped showing up one day. The waitress says, "When I clean this bottle, I think of him for a moment. Then I put it back. That's all the memory there is."

The goblin recounts the bottles' biographies with satisfaction. "That one," he points to a sticky liqueur, "is for those evenings when someone thinks they can get drunk on sweets without really playing along. That one," he indicates an expensive bottle that's almost empty, "is for guys who want to show off. One swig, lots of talk, then back on the shelf. And this one here..." He taps an almost empty schnapps bottle. "...this one's for you. Honest, clear, without labels trying to sell some image. This is you, distilled."

“How much life can fit in there?” I sometimes ask him. “As much as you’re willing to sacrifice,” he says. “But you’re confusing that with ‘how much life comes out of it.’ That’s something else entirely. You pour your life in, and what comes out is just time. Time you don’t experience.” That’s a calculation I don’t like to hear aloud. I’m bad at math anyway, with money, and even worse with time.

There's one bottle I remember particularly well. Not because it was more expensive or tasted better, but because it marked a boundary. A birthday that had nothing left to celebrate. I received it as a gift back then—something with gold lettering, "for special occasions." I didn't open it because I thought I should wait until something "really special" happened. The goblin rolled his eyes. "You're waiting for a special occasion?" he asked. "In your life? Good luck."

The bottle sat on a shelf for almost a year, slowly gathering dust, becoming part of the apartment. I was constantly handling cheaper stuff, but this one remained sacred. Until one evening when nothing special had happened. No New Year's Eve, no visitors, no success, no disaster. Just a day when everything was too heavy: my body, my mind, the mail. I came home, too empty for a pub, too restless for bed. And there it was. Clean, clear, full. "Now?" the imp asked. "Is this your big moment?"

I opened it. Not with any celebratory flair, more defiantly. The cork didn't even pop properly; it just came out with a weary sigh. I poured it, alone, into a glass that didn't suit it. Not crystal, just an old scratched IKEA thing. I sat down at the kitchen table and took a sip. It was better than the cheap stuff, sure. Smoother, deeper, more premium, as they say. But it did the same thing as everything else: it pushed something aside that still remained.

"Well?" asked the goblin. "Does it feel like a special occasion now?" I shook my head. "It feels like any other," I said. "Only more expensive." I kept drinking anyway. Not because it made sense, but because the bottle was now open. And in my life, open things always have to be finished quickly. Otherwise, they go bad or become unpleasant. Conversations. Relationships. Bottles.

By the end of the night, the "special" bottle was half empty. I wasn't drunk enough to justify it, and not sober enough to forget. I went to bed, and the leprechaun sat on the nightstand. "You used up your luxury ammo on a day that wasn't worth it," he said. "Or to put it another way: you upgraded your shitty day." The next morning, the half-empty bottle was there as proof. There was no room left for anything special. Just the next regular hangover.

Since then, I no longer believe in special occasions. A bottle is a bottle. Whether it says "Premium," "Reserve," or "House Brand" on it makes no difference to the result. Life doesn't fit better just because the glass is thicker. The goblin says it's even worse: "The more expensive the bottle, the more you convince yourself you're treating yourself. But you're just treating yourself to a smoother descent."

At the pub, they eventually stopped asking me if I wanted "something better." In the beginning, there were still those moments when someone would say, "Come on, let's treat ourselves today," and some name would come up that I couldn't pronounce. Now they know: I just want it to have an effect. Not for it to glitter. How much life fits in the bottle has long been established. What's missing is the answer to the other question: How much life stays outside when you empty it?

Sometimes I sit in the back and imagine each guest is a bottle. Not in a literal sense, but in principle: different varieties, different vintages, all with some label they once had. One was "Promising," another "Too Loud," one "Family Man," one "Up-and-Comer," one "Musical," one "Too Sensitive for This World." And here they sit, open, half-empty, some almost finished, some long past their best-before date.

The innkeeper stands behind it like the greatest collector of empty bottles still lying around. He knows the stories connected to the labels, but he doesn't write any new ones. He simply preserves them. "That one back there used to be a cook," he sometimes says, indicating a customer with a sideways chin gesture. "He had his own place before he drove it into the ground." Or: "That one used to be a nurse. Saved other people's lives before she slowly drank her own away." He doesn't tell them maliciously, more like someone scanning barcodes.

The goblin loves such lists. "You're all vintage," he chuckles. "You mature differently inside than what the label says." He likes to sit on my glass when the innkeeper tells stories from the past. "And you," he says to me then, "were once 'loud, rebellious, untamable.' Today you're 'easy to drink, few surprises, a slight bitter note in the finish.'"

"How much life can I still hold?" I sometimes ask him, half jokingly, half desperately. He pulls a face, pretends to shake me like a bottle and hold it to his ear. "There's still something

sloshing around," he says. "But it's not much original stuff left. More like leftovers." And I sense he's right. For years, I've been more of a vessel than its contents. A body that still functions, just barely, and that needs to be filled with something to keep it from collapsing.

There are evenings when this picture shifts and becomes clearer than I'd like. Once, a young guy sat down next to me, early twenties at the most. Cap on backwards, hands fidgeting, eyes too bright. He ordered a beer, looked around, was obviously in a place for the first time where the people were older than him and the decor older than his parents. The goblin immediately jumped over to him. "Fresh stuff!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "Look at the label. It still says 'future' on it."

The boy looked at me in the mirror, briefly, appraisingly. Perhaps he thought I was some kind of future model he didn't want to become. Or he simply found it appalling how little effort we made here to pretend we had everything under control. He asked the innkeeper if it was "always this quiet here." The innkeeper laughed. "That's not quiet," he said. "That's resignation. It's similarly quiet, but lasts longer." The boy laughed along, uncertainly, took a sip of his drink, and looked in the mirror again.

I could have said something to him. "Be careful, or you'll end up here." Or: "Go while you still can." Or something like, "I used to be just like you." But I said nothing. I knew: First, he wasn't listening. And second, it wasn't true. I was never as nervous as he was, never as insecure, never half in, half out. I went straight in. The bottle was never just decoration for me, but always a tool. I knew the way before I walked it.

The goblin sat back down on the rim of my glass. "You want to warn him?" he asked. "How? With your face? That's enough." I watched the boy drink his beer too quickly, his hands trembling slightly, not from withdrawal, but from something inside him that didn't know where to go. "He'll find his own goblin," I said. "Maybe a nicer one." Clurichaun grinned. "We're all the same," he said. "Just with different jokes."

Later, after the boy had left—he only lasted two beers, then the "crowd" was apparently too old for him—we were sitting by ourselves again. The usual bottles, the usual faces. The bartender wiped the counter, the waitress washed dishes, the slot machine player stared into his lights. I took a sip, looked through my glass into the mirror, and thought: Maybe that's the trick. Not to ask how much life can fit into a bottle, but how much of the bottle can fit into your life before there's no room left for anything else.

“You built your life around the bottle at some point,” the goblin said, as if he’d read my mind. “Not the other way around. At first, it was an accessory, then it became the center of attention, then everything else became decoration. Job, family, apartment, even your health—everything planned around it. And now you’re surprised that you don’t know who you are when you put the thing away.” I remained silent. Sometimes silence is the only way to avoid making a complete fool of yourself.

There are little tests I do now and then, more out of playfulness than hope. One evening, just beer, no hard liquor. One day, just water, but twice as many cigarettes. A weekend where I try to convince myself that I'm "just going to the pub to chat." The inner critic keeps track, as if it were my accountant. "Today: three beers, two shots, seven cigarettes, zero genuine conversations," it writes in its invisible notebook. "Result: status quo."

"What if you just stopped right now?" I asked him the other night, as we sat alone in my kitchen late one night, the bottle on the table, half empty. "If I never touched another bottle from today onward, how much of my life would come back?" He considered it, scratching his chin. "A few years of increased chances, a few percentage points more lung capacity, a few clearer mornings," he listed. "Maybe two or three opportunities not to completely fail when someone wants something from you. And a whole lot of naked hours spent watching yourself think without any numbing."

“Doesn’t sound like a bargain,” I said. He shrugged. “You asked, not me,” he said. “Ultimately, it’s simple: you decide how you fill your time. Bottles are just a form. You could fill them with work, with sports, with spirituality, with Netflix—it’s all the same principle. Except the bottle is honest. It doesn’t pretend to be good for you.”

Perhaps that's the only fair thing about this whole place: that the bottle doesn't lie. It doesn't claim to be anything else. No happiness, no meaning, no way out. It simply says, "If you empty me, things will be a little easier." Everything else comes from us. We're the ones who write "courage," "companionship," "comforter," "reward" on it. The goblin laughs at this. "You're artists," he says. "You paint labels on your addictions."

Some nights, as I stagger home and the streetlights flicker, I imagine myself as a bottle on the shelf of another pub. A guy who, from the outside, clearly knows what he's capable of: too much past, too little future, a high level of shame, completely distilled excuses. Would I order myself? Probably not. Too dangerous, too bitter, not sparkling enough. Something that gathers dust on the shelf until the cleaning lady dumps it.

But I'm not on the shelf. I'm sitting at the bar. I'm drinking the bottle instead of being one. And as long as that's the case, all I can do is read the label and carry on. "How much more life can fit in?" I ask the goblin before I drift off to sleep. "Enough for tomorrow," he says. "And sometimes that's enough."

Chapter 19 – The Art of Not Getting Anything Right

Some people write to-do lists. Things they want to accomplish, neatly organized, with boxes to check off. I have one of those lists too. It's called Life. And everything on it has remained undone for years. Sort bills. Call the doctor. Visit my grandchildren. Get my teeth fixed. Drink less. Sleep more. Stop nagging myself. When I read the items, I could almost convince myself I once aspired to be someone. Instead, I'm stuck at the bottom of the list, clinging to a single discipline for decades: the art of accomplishing nothing.

The goblin thinks that's talent. "Others have to work hard to mess up their lives," he says. "You do it effortlessly. You're a natural at creating chaos." He's sitting on my crumpled letter from the authorities, which I've been carrying around in my jacket pocket for three weeks. "Look," he says, "it tells you everything you're supposed to do: submit documents, meet deadlines, show up somewhere. And you still can't manage it. It's practically an art performance." I could strangle him if he didn't already live only in my head.

It starts with little things. The trash that's been sitting in the corner for days because I'll take it out "tomorrow." In my life, "tomorrow" is code for "never." A phone call I keep putting off

because I don't feel like telling someone in a call center why I messed up again. A doctor's appointment I postpone because I don't want to hear bad news I already know. The bank statements I don't open because I know there won't be any pleasant surprises waiting for me. All little things, until they pile up and trigger a landslide.

The funny thing is: I'm not too stupid to understand this. I know exactly what happens when you ignore reminders, miss deadlines, and neglect relationships. I haven't just gone through this once; I've booked the repeat loop. It's like I have an internal brake that slams on whenever anything smacks of structure. The imp calls it an "allergy to responsibility." "Your mind starts itching as soon as someone says 'plan,'" he says. "You react to order like other people react to peanuts."

I used to romanticize it. "I'm just not the office type," I'd say. "I'm free, I do my own thing." My "thing" mostly consisted of doing nothing, until others had to do it for me. Friends called for me when I was too hungover. Women filled out forms for me when I didn't understand a thing. Employers called me back if I didn't show up. My mother excused me at the employment office as if I were still twelve. Everyone picked up the slack, until eventually they decided their own lists were more important.

The goblin was always honest. "You're not free," he said. "You're incompetent. There's a difference." Back then, I ignored him, like you ignore a bad radio station by drinking louder. Today I know he's right. I'm not a rebel against the system. I'm the type who forgets his bank PIN, loses his planner in the ashtray, and then complains about the system for not understanding him.

It's an art form in itself to start things just enough to exist as unfinished tasks, but never to get them far enough to be completed. I once tried to organize my papers—properly, with folders, registers, and all that bureaucratic nonsense. I came home with a stack of plastic sleeves, put them on the table, sorted the first three letters, and then had a cigarette. After the third cigarette, I was so annoyed with myself that I went to the pub. The stack sat there for two months until I stuffed it into a bag and put it in the cupboard. Project "Organization" successfully postponed.

The innkeeper knows my number. "You're the king of the unfinished," he sometimes says when I announce yet another set of plans. "You want to quit smoking, drink less, see your grandkids more often, maybe get a small side job. And at the end of the day, you're sitting there with a cigarette in your mouth, a beer in your hand, a picture of your grandkids on your phone, and an empty calendar." He doesn't say it maliciously. More like, you know, like someone who realizes water is wet.

Once, the waitress tried to draw me out. "Why don't you make a list for a week?" she suggested. "One thing you do each day. Just one. Not ten. Not your whole life. Just stuff like: 'Open a letter,' 'Make a phone call,' 'Take out the trash.' And then you check it off." The little imp jumped for joy. "Oh, self-improvement at the bottom of the rankings!" he exclaimed. "This will be great."

I actually tried it. Monday: Open the letter. I put it on the table, looked for my reading glasses, took the cigarette out of my mouth, tore open the envelope, read two sentences – and then there was that familiar stab of pain in my chest again. A mixture of guilt and tiredness. I folded the letter, lit the cigarette again, and asked myself why on earth I absolutely had to

know what was in it when it was all just the same thing anyway: money, deadline, impending consequences. Put the list away. Ordered a beer. End of the weekly challenge, day one.

The goblin wasn't even disappointed. "I didn't expect anything different," he said. "You're not the man for ticks. You're the man for half-finished attempts." And that's perhaps the worst part: I've gotten used to not finishing things. I'm so deeply ingrained in the "he can't do anything right anyway" role that it almost suits me. It's easier to consider yourself incapable than to admit that you might be able to—and simply don't want to.

Sometimes I wonder when it all started. Was I like this as a child, or did I become this way later? My mother always said I was "dreamy." Teachers called it "unstructured." Later, bosses called it "unreliable." The words got harsher as I got older, but they all meant the same thing: You're not there when you're needed. You disappear when things get serious. You rely on others to untangle the knots you create. And when no one's there anymore, you're surprised when everything falls apart.

There's something comfortable about it, too. "The art of not getting anything right" is like a style in itself. You can hide behind it. If someone says, "Why didn't you do that?", you can shrug and reply, "You know me." And they do know me. The innkeeper just rolls his eyes now when I say, "Tomorrow I'll come earlier and help unload." The waitress laughs when I swear, "That was really the last time I'm going to crash and burn like that." My daughter stays silent when I promise, "Next time I'll be on time."

The goblin then pats me on the shoulder. "You're reliable in your unreliability," he says. "That's also a form of consistency." I laugh at it, even though there's nothing to laugh about. And somewhere deep down, I know: This isn't art. It's just practice. Years of consistent practice in letting things go until they let you go.

If I'm honest—and the inner critic is forcing me to be more often lately—my daily life largely consists of perfecting evasive maneuvers. I avoid letters by not opening them. I avoid conversations by using "no signal" as an excuse, even though my phone is constantly vibrating. I avoid decisions by saying, "I'll sleep on it," even though I know perfectly well I'll wake up just as tired as the day before. And I avoid myself by going to the pub before I spend too much time alone with my thoughts.

The goblin calls it "advanced course in doing nothing." "You don't just do it by chance," he says. "You have a method. You sense exactly when something could become dangerous—dangerous in the sense of change—and then you distract yourself. You're like a demolition expert who douses every possible explosion with beer before it goes off." We then sit in the "backlight" and watch as I, once again, postpone everything that isn't nailed down.

Once I stood in front of the office, the papers I'd been lugging around for weeks, tucked into my jacket. The letter had been unambiguous: "Personal appearance required." Even I had grasped that "required" didn't mean "if you feel like it." I'd left early, telling myself on the way: "Today you're going to pull yourself together. Today you're going to be an adult." So there I stood in front of the gray building, watching people go in and out, each with their own mixture of resignation and a sense of duty.

The goblin sat on the banister beside the stairs. "Come on," he said. "Now go upstairs, take a number, sit down, wait, lie, admit it, agree, leave again. You know the drill. You've played this level a hundred times." I stared at the glass door behind which a machine was spitting out

numbers. My hand went into my jacket pocket, felt the papers, felt the cold, greasy envelope. My stomach clenched. And then I did what I do best: I took a step back.

“I’ll have one first,” I said. The goblin grinned. “Of course,” he said. “The famous grown-up cigarette before taking responsibility.” I lit one, leaned against the wall, and pretended to be thinking about something important. In truth, I was only thinking about one thing: How do I get out of here without feeling like a complete failure? After the cigarette, the pressure wasn’t any less. It was just different: now I had an excuse. “I’ll come another time when it’s less crowded.” As if the queue was the problem, not my head.

I left. I didn't even turn around. The goblin jumped onto my shoulder, laughing. "Congratulations," he said. "You've done it again, doing absolutely nothing. And you even made up a story about it: 'Today wasn't the right day.'" Later, I sat in the "Late Light" pub and, half proudly, half self-deprecatingly, recounted how I had "snapped the office." The others laughed, cracked jokes, the landlord shook his head. The only one who knew that I had just dug myself in a little deeper was the goblin.

It's astonishing how many opportunities life gives you to prove you're up to the task—and how reliably I miss them all. There was this call from an old acquaintance who now works in some warehouse and asked if I wanted to do "one or two shifts a week." Nothing big, nothing complicated. Hauling boxes, sorting things out, exhausted in the evenings, but with a few extra euros in my pocket. "Get in touch in a few days," he'd said. I replied "sure," and even meant it, at first.

The goblin was skeptical. "You and shift work," he said. "You and getting up in the morning. You and fixed hours. I'll get the popcorn ready." The days passed. On the first, I thought, "I'll call tomorrow, otherwise it'll seem too rushed; I don't want to seem needy." On the second, I thought, "They're probably stressed right now; I'll wait until the week is calmer." On the third, I wasn't thinking anything at all; I simply turned my phone down. A week later, the number had disappeared from my caller ID screen. Not because it had deleted itself, but because I had pretended it had never been there.

At some point in the pub, I said, "I could have gotten something there, but I realized it wasn't for me." As if, after careful consideration, I'd decided I was "too old for that sort of thing." In reality, I'd simply done nothing again. No "no," no "yes," just silence. You always think making decisions is the difficult part. But not deciding is a whole discipline in itself. The art of not getting anything done relies heavily on silence.

The imp in my head keeps a list. "Missed opportunities" is written at the top. Then points: Job in the warehouse. Conversation with my daughter when she was still open to explanations. Invitation from an old friend to come to the countryside, away from the neighborhood, for a weekend. Registration for rehab, which I postponed three times until the spot was gone. Every time the same pattern: hope, possibility, fear, avoidance, pub. It's almost elegant when viewed abstractly. In practice, it's just sad.

Sometimes someone at the bottom of the ladder says, "If I'd wanted to, I would have..." And then comes a story about football careers, missed concerts, business ideas that were "guaranteed" to work. I listen and think: The "wanting" is a lie. It was never really there. If you truly want something, you at least try. I know the difference. I've missed it too many times. I didn't want to. I wanted it to feel like I did want to. That's enough to keep me from

completely collapsing at night, but not enough to see anything different in the morning than the same old crap.

Once, when the waitress had had enough of my complaining, she asked me point-blank: "Tell me, do you really want to change this, or do you just want to talk about it?" I was so taken aback by her directness that I simply told the truth: "I don't know." The goblin applauded inwardly. "That's it," he said. "The most honest answer. You don't know. You're swimming between 'I can't' and 'I don't want to,' and then you call that 'bad luck.'"

There are days when I almost wish I'd really mess something up, spectacularly, with consequences, with "that's it, it's over." A missed surgery, after which someone says, "Too late." A court appointment I miss, whereupon someone in uniform rings the doorbell. Something that forces me to stop doing things the way I do. But of course, at the same time, I hope that's exactly what won't happen. So I keep going. Small, subtle transgressions. Never so big that they cause a major uproar, always big enough that nothing gets better.

“You’re a chain smoker of missed opportunities,” the goblin says. “Always one, another, another. And then you wonder why the air is getting thin.” I take a drag on my cigarette, sip, postpone the next conversation until “tomorrow,” and think: Maybe that really is an art. One for which I’ll never be famous. But at least someone saw it. The goblin. And he’s a mercilessly good critic.

There are those moments when everything just passes you by in slow motion. Not drunk, not high, just tired enough to recognize the pattern. Recently, there was one of those moments, a Sunday midday, gray, quiet, me half-asleep. I was sitting at the kitchen table, the coffee cold, the cigarette burnt out in the ashtray, the clock ticking somewhere in the room. On the table was a stack of papers: reminders, doctor's letters, letters from the authorities, a flyer from some rehab center "reminding" me that I could "get in touch again." Next to it, my cell phone, two missed calls from my daughter, unanswered.

The imp sat in the middle of this paper graveyard, his legs bent, his arms resting on his knees. He looked at me without grinning. That was rare. "Well," he said, "welcome to the Museum of Half-Finished Lives. Here we see all the exhibits from your last few years: the unfilled form, the aborted therapy, the missed call, the missed visit. A collection of almosts."

I stared at the papers. Each one had a number, a date, a "please by," a "final deadline," or "urgent" written on it. They were like little bombs I didn't want to defuse. I could perfectly imagine how one would handle this if one were one of those efficient people. You sort things out, make calls, schedule appointments, accept, decline, and make decisions. Instead, I sat there listening to the refrigerator humming.

“You have talent,” said the goblin, this time without mockery. “Most people have to try hard to screw up. With you, doing nothing is enough.” I chuckled briefly, but there was nothing funny about it. “I’m afraid of every move,” I said. “Every letter I open, every phone call I make, every step I take out the door could set something in motion that I can’t control.” He nodded. “So you’d rather not set anything in motion at all. That’s called controlled surrender.”

I thought of all the people who once wanted something from me. Teachers who told me, "You're not stupid, you're just lazy." They were half right. Bosses who summoned me to their office after my third sick call in two months. "You seem unreliable," they said. I didn't just seem unreliable, I was. Women who eventually packed their bags. "I can't keep pushing you,"

they said. And left. My daughter, who eventually stopped reminding me. "If you want to come, you come," she'd said. "I'm not chasing after you anymore."

The imp was there for all of it. He commented on every missed step, every unwritten message, every canceled offer of help. And he was the only one who stayed when I had once again done nothing. "So," he said now, hopping from one piece of paper to another, "what do we do with this exhibition? Burn it? File it away? Wallpaper it?" I shook my head. "Nothing," I said. "We do nothing, as usual."

We went to the pub. What else? The route to "The Last Light" is the only one I can reliably manage. My body knows it better than any bus timetable. When we walked in, it smelled of old grease, beer, and that particular Sunday afternoon sweat that comes from people who haven't quite digested their week yet. Heiner was already there, Harry too, and the slot machine player was hooked up to his machine again. The landlord nodded, the waitress took my jacket, everything as usual.

"Well, didn't manage to win again?" the innkeeper asked, half-jokingly, half-seriously. I picked up the beer he placed in front of me. "I'm on an impressive winning streak," I said. "Undefeated." The leprechaun laughed. "That's right," he said. "You haven't really won a single day in years." The waitress snorted. "You're acting like there are points involved here," she said. "This isn't a game. This is a waiting room without a door."

We talked about trivial things: football, neighbors, politics, people who had died. I made my usual jokes, laughed at the right moments, ordered at the right intervals. And yet, another film was playing in the background. I saw us all from the outside, sitting there, each with their own list of unfinished business. One had missed a doctor's appointment, another the rent, yet another the chance to apologize to his ex before she completely shut him out.

“That’s the art,” whispered the goblin. “You’re masters at perceiving everything and changing nothing. You can analyze yourselves like psychologists, but as soon as it comes to getting up, you’re suddenly made of glass.” I wanted to tell him to shut up, but I knew he was right. And I also knew that by the end of the evening, I wouldn’t have changed anything again, except for my blood alcohol level.

A moment later, when the blinds were half-drawn and the air thick, I was leaning against the wall, glass in hand, when the waitress stood beside me. "Do you know what bothers me most about you all?" she asked, without looking at me. "Not that you drink so much. Not even that you make so little of yourselves. But that you all know exactly what you're doing—and yet you keep doing it. If you were at least stupid, I could forgive you."

I took a sip that felt like confirmation. "Would you rather have stupid ones or drunk ones?" I asked. She grinned wearily. "Both are exhausting," she said. "But with the stupid ones, you still have the illusion that they don't know any better." The goblin chuckled. "You're in the 'knows better and does it anyway' category," he said. "That's the Champions League."

Later that night, lying in bed with the hangover already creeping back in, I thought of that word: art. I used to tell myself I'd wasted some talent. Writing, music, anything creative. Now I think maybe my true talent was exactly that from the beginning: to live life elegantly on the sidelines, without ever really stepping into the spotlight. An extra in my own play. A man who held all the props and yet chose to stay in the back row.

"You're not artistically bad," the goblin said at the end of the day. "You're just consistently half-baked. In everything. Half there, half gone, half honest, half screwed up. The art would be to be whole for once. Completely broken, completely brave, completely gone, completely present. But you're too lazy for that." I turned onto my side, pulled up the blanket, and muttered, "Shut up."

He was silent. For once, exceptionally. Perhaps he was tired of me. I certainly was. And I knew: tomorrow, another pile of things would be waiting for me, things that could be done. And I would do nothing again. Not because I'm proud of it. But because I've practiced it for so long that I no longer know how to stop.

The art of not getting anything right is like a tattoo you get when you're seventeen and still have with you at almost fifty. It doesn't suit you anymore, it's badly drawn, the ink has run, but it's there. And every time you roll up your sleeve, you see it and think, "Yes. That's me."

Chapter 20 – Clurichaun and the Missing Tip Jar

The tip jar always sat in the same spot. To the right of the cash register, right next to the pen the landlord used to write down who had paid how much on beer mats. A perfectly ordinary jar, nothing fancy, no "Thanks, you're the best" on it, no heart, no ribbon. It wasn't an Instagram-worthy accessory, just a simple, transparent tip jar. And yet, it was the only place in the "Latzlicht" (the pub) where something resembling hope was still being collected. Small change that no one missed, but that everyone felt was safe in the hands of the waitress and the landlord.

I had a complicated relationship with that glass. On the one hand, I was one of those people who rarely put anything in it because I was always short of cash and liked to mask my guilt with platitudes. "I'm tipping personified," I'd often say when I didn't have enough coins in my pocket. On the other hand, I knew that by the end of the evening, that glass contained more honesty than all the conversations around it. It held what people really thought about the work behind the bar. No empty talk, just metal and the occasional bill.

The goblin didn't like the glass. "That's the anti-goblin place," he said. "There, they pay voluntarily. No unpaid bills, no lame excuses. Just someone who gets something without having to beg. Makes my stomach churn." He sometimes sat on the rim, dangled his legs in the change, and pulled the coins to the bottom of the glass with his feet. "They're safer down there," he said. "Further away from your naughty fingers."

One evening—it was a typical Tuesday, half empty, half noisy—I noticed that where the glass usually stood, there was only a circular imprint on the counter. A light circle in the wood, next to it a few scattered coins, like survivors of a failed escape. I almost missed it if the waitress hadn't reached out so strangely for nothing when she took the change. "Where is...?" she started, then stopped, looking at the owner.

The innkeeper came over from the beer taps, looked at the empty space, and frowned. "Great," he muttered. "Who cleaned up here?" No one said anything. Harry stared at his beer, Heiner at his cigarette, the slot machine player at his blinking god. I pretended to watch my

glass sweat. The goblin stood at the till, grinning like a child planning a prank or having already pulled one.

"Did the glass break?" the waitress asked. "Or...?" The landlord shook his head. "I emptied it a little while ago," he said. "There was still something in it, not much, but still. Then I put it back. I don't just throw things away." He looked around the room. I noticed the atmosphere change. The smoke and the usual chatter gave way to a whiff of suspicion. Not strong, not dramatic, but there. In a pub where everyone owes everyone else something, a missing tip glass is still a whole different ballgame.

“Maybe someone knocked it over,” suggested Manni, who was sitting at the other end of the bar. “It fell, shattered, then you cleared it away and forgot about it.” The waitress shook her head. “I would have noticed,” she said. “I’m standing here all the time. And I don’t drink so much that I’d miss a broken glass.” Harry grinned crookedly. “Maybe our leprechaun has finally been productive,” he said. “Clurichaun, the wage-cutter.”

The goblin bowed mockingly. "Interesting theory," he whispered in my ear. "But I don't take tips. I only take what you don't pay for. Besides—what good is small change? I can't buy anything with it except bad karma." Even so, he looked pleased. He liked the absence of something that signified order. In his universe, a missing tip jar was a step in the right direction.

The atmosphere became unsettled. Not loud, more tense. The waitress wiped the empty space as if the glass had somehow become invisible and she could uncover it again. The owner walked along the bar, bent down, looked under the counter, in the shelves, under the cash register. Nothing. "I think someone stole our glass," he finally said, a mixture of anger and exhaustion in his voice.

I never would have thought at the time that a little glass of change could have such an effect. But suddenly everything looked different. Everyone who came in that evening was potentially the type to pocket a tip jar. No big heist, no Hollywood robbery. Just a small, sticky gesture. Someone who so completely missed the point that this is the part of the money no one demands, no one sues for, simply there as a thank you.

The goblin sat down directly on the light-colored spot on the counter. "There," he said. "Now we've got a hole in the system. A place where money was that no one checked. That's my language." I took a sip, looked past him, and couldn't stop the thought: If you hang around somewhere long enough, in a shop, in a life where no one really knows what they're doing anymore, things start to disappear. First people. Then respect. Then tip jars.

Heiner snorted, blowing smoke toward the ceiling. "What are you all getting so worked up about?" he growled. "Every night someone stays behind and doesn't pay the bill. Is it any wonder someone else takes the glass?" The waitress glared at him. "There's a difference between an unpaid bill and a stolen tip," she said. "One is too stupid or too drunk to pay, the other has already decided to take what isn't theirs." The innkeeper nodded slowly. "I can maybe play along with the first one," he muttered. "The second one puts me in a bad mood."

I sat there, listening, and noticed the goblin looking at me sideways. "You're wondering if they might be referring to you," he said calmly. "Not because you took the glass, but because you know that deep down you're exactly the same. Someone who takes what wasn't really

meant for him: time, patience, loans, nerves. Only without the glass." I felt the beer growing heavier in my stomach.

“I didn’t take it,” I muttered, more to myself than to him. “I know,” said the goblin. “You’re too lazy for such an organized theft. But the kind of person who does things like that is closer to you than you’d like to admit.” I was offended, yet I knew at the same time that he had once again hit a nerve that wouldn’t go away, no matter how much I drank.

The missing tip jar sat like an invisible hole in the middle of the evening. No one spoke about it directly anymore, but everyone kept glancing at it. It was as if the bar had become incongruous at that point. A room without a lamp, a face without eyebrows. Something was gone that had previously been taken for granted. And I suspected it wasn't just about coins and bills.

In the days that followed, the "last place" developed a new paranoia. The big world outside continued with its catastrophes, but inside, everything suddenly revolved around a glass that had perhaps seen ten euros worth of tips per evening, if things went well. It wasn't the amount that was missing. It was the gesture. When, in a place where nobody has much anyway, the tip jar also disappears, then you know you're officially on a moral bargain.

The innkeeper tried to downplay the matter. "It'll turn up again," he said on the second evening. "Maybe someone just put it away, thinking they were helping with the cleaning." The waitress looked at him as if he'd advised her to believe in the good in people. "Nobody helps with the cleaning here," she said dryly. "At most, more dirt is made." The goblin nodded enthusiastically. "She understands me," he said.

Nothing turned up. Neither the glass nor the thief. Instead, suspicions surfaced. First quietly, then in the form of half-serious remarks. "That guy yesterday in the leather jacket, he looked like the type to do something like that," Manni said. "Or that guy who's always at the slot machines. He's always in debt. Maybe he thought this was fair payback." The slot machine player overheard this when he returned to his machine. "If I steal something," he shouted toward the counter, "I steal something substantial. Not a glass with loose change. I'm a gambling addict, not an idiot."

I held back. I didn't have the energy to join a committee searching for tiny amounts of money. But the issue still wouldn't let me go. Perhaps because that glass symbolized something I'd lost somewhere along the way: the ability to thank someone directly, without hiding behind a label. I'd become one of those people who preferred to make a wisecrack rather than drop a euro into a jar. "Next time, I promise," I'd been saying for years. "Next time" was my strongest belief—and simultaneously my biggest lie.

The goblin made a show of it. He stood in the empty space on the counter and gave imaginary speeches. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "once upon a time, a glass stood here, into which landed what you considered decency. Someone has taken it. Whoever it was understands how things work around here: you take your consolation before someone else gets it." I watched him gesticulating in the air and thought: If any of the others could see him, they would assume he was the thief without hesitation.

On the third evening, the waitress brought in a new glass. Not a tip jar from a home decor shop, just a discarded pickle jar. The label was half-scraped off, the glass still slightly cloudy from the vinegar. She placed it exactly where the old one had been and pointedly put in a few

coins she took from the cash register. "So we have something to steal again," she said. The innkeeper shook his head but couldn't help grinning. "The old one was nicer," he muttered. "It earned its charm over the years."

“Glasses have biographies,” the goblin commented. “The old one was a veteran, this one’s a recruit.” He sat on the rim of the new glass, looked down at the few coins that clinked as Harry pointedly tossed in a euro. “For peace of mind,” he said. “You guys have increased security requirements now.” Heiner followed suit, adding a few cents—probably all he had. “So you know I’m not stealing from you,” he muttered.

I stood there with my beer and felt a pang of guilt stirring within me, that old, persistent feeling that often came with a hangover in the morning, but rarely in the evening with everyone else. I knew perfectly well that in the last few months I'd put more cigarettes in the machine than coins in that glass. I also knew I wasn't the only one. We all acted as if we were too poor to tip, but not too poor for cigarettes, booze, and lost money down the blinking maw.

"Come on," whispered the goblin. "Show me if you've still got anything." I rummaged in my pocket, pulled out two euros, and put them in the new glass. It clinked louder than I'd expected. The waitress glanced up briefly, said nothing, but her eyes softened. The innkeeper nodded almost imperceptibly. Harry tried to make a joke out of it. "Well, look at that," he said, "the old man's investing. What's wrong, a guilty conscience?" I shrugged. "Maybe I'm growing up," I muttered.

The goblin laughed, almost touched. "Grown up? You?" he sneered. "You're just popping in to buy something so you don't look like a thief. Fine, I'll put it in your account. A rare positive entry." In truth, that's probably exactly what it was: self-cleansing. I didn't want to be part of the "taking at the back instead of giving" category, even though I already was. I just took differently. Air, time, patience, stories, attention. The glass was just the visible part of a deal in which I was usually on the receiving end without contributing much.

Nevertheless, that hole remained in the story. The old glass was gone. No farewell, no "broken glass, shit, get the broom," no "I accidentally knocked it over." Simply gone. Like how people eventually just disappear. First, they're less present, then gone altogether. At first, you ask, "Where did he go?" Then, at some point, you say, "He used to be around here more often." Later, they become footnotes. "There was this guy who always..." That's all that remains.

I thought about myself, how I might one day simply disappear. No big bang, no dramatic exit. One day my stool will be empty. And at first everyone will say, "That's strange, he's not here." Then they'll say, "Maybe he's sick." Later, "Maybe he's dead." And eventually, "Wasn't there someone here, a guy with a goblin in his head?" The landlord will keep the tally marks on my beer mat for a while, then throw them away. Just like the old tip jar vanished.

“You underestimate the symbolism,” the goblin said later, as I stood on the toilet looking in the fogged-up mirror above the sink. “The missing tip jar is a small testament to what it’s like when something that seemed perfectly normal suddenly disappears. And no one can say exactly when it tipped over.” I washed my hands, even though they weren’t any dirtier than usual. “What am I supposed to do with that?” I asked. He shrugged. “Maybe nothing. Maybe you’ll just remember that things don’t always disappear with a bang. Often they go quietly.”

When I returned to the bar, the new glass wasn't quite so unfamiliar anymore. A few crumpled bills were tucked inside, nestled among the coins. The waitress ran her fingers briefly over the rim as she passed, like other people pat their pets. The owner arranged the bottles around it like a frame. The old imprint was still there, lighter than the wood. A ghost mark. But the place carried on. As always. One person is missing, another takes their place. Only the goblin kept the old glass in his archive. "I don't forget anything," he said. "That's my job."

Weeks later, hardly anyone talked about the missing jar anymore. Like how you eventually stop talking about the neighbor who moved out. You still remember that someone was there, you still vaguely recall what they looked like, maybe even what they smelled like, but everyday life has eroded them. The jar of pickles had found its place; we'd gotten used to throwing in a little more or a little less, depending on the day, our mood, and our sense of guilt.

Only the imp couldn't quite let go of the subject. "That's how it goes," he liked to say whenever someone suddenly disappeared from the "back row." "One person vanishes, and the system quietly pushes something else into their place. New guest, new glass, new regular, new excuse. The only constants are me. And the bar." He was proud of being irreplaceable. I didn't know whether to envy him or find it sad.

One evening, as the shop was almost closing, an old acquaintance I hadn't seen in ages suddenly appeared. A guy we called "Doc," even though he'd never studied medicine. He was one of those guys who always had advice to offer, whether it was about heartbreak, liver function tests, or lottery numbers. He looked more disheveled than before, which is saying something in that kind of place. His jacket was greasy, his eyes deeper-set, his teeth fewer.

He sat down at the bar, ordered a beer, and looked around. His gaze lingered briefly on the new tip glass. "Do you have a new one?" he asked the bartender. "The old one was one of those thick-walled things with the scratch on the side." The bartender nodded. "The old one took off," he said. "It just ran away." Doc laughed, but it was a different kind of laugh, too high-pitched, too short. "Well," he said. "Glasses go, people stay." The waitress gave him a look that didn't quite fit with a casual remark. There was something between the lines.

The goblin jumped onto Doc's shoulder and perched like a parrot. "There he is," he whispered to me. "The long-fingered man." I grimaced. "What are you talking about?" I muttered. "You can't just call anyone a thief." He grinned. "I'm not explaining anything. I know. I was there."

Later, when most people had left and the landlord had already started stacking chairs, Doc remained seated. He sipped his third or fourth beer, his shoulders slumped, his head heavy. The waitress wiped nearby, more slowly than necessary, like someone waiting for a certain line to be spoken. The landlord polished a glass, even though it was already clean. I smoked, looked in the mirror, watched us like in a bad, low-budget crime drama.

"You're upset about the glass, aren't you?" Doc said suddenly, without looking up. It wasn't a loud sentence, more of a weary one, uttered between the beer and the bar. The bartender put the glass down. "Not upset," he said. "I'm just wondering what the point is of taking a tip glass." The waitress stopped wiping. There was silence. Even the refrigerator seemed to pause for a moment.

Doc pulled a face that was somewhere between defiance and shame. "I didn't sell it, if that's what you were thinking," he muttered. "I'm not that stupid. Who buys a used tip jar?" The

goblin chuckled. "Well, this case just keeps getting better," he whispered. "He's got a moral hierarchy for stealing." I took a deep drag on my cigarette because I felt the air in the room had become thinner.

"What did you do with that?" the waitress asked, her voice suddenly harsher than usual. Doc looked into his beer. "Took it home," he said. "It was a bad moment. I was close, really close. I saw you finish it, boss, and then you put it back. And I thought, screw it, nobody will notice, and if they do, everyone will think it was some stranger. I didn't take much, just what was in it." He snorted. "As if that makes it any better."

The innkeeper didn't say anything for a while. The waitress stared at him as if she were seeing for the first time who was sitting before her. I looked in the mirror and saw a man in the process of dismantling himself, coin by coin. The goblin drummed on Doc's shoulder. "So?" he whispered. "Was it worth it? Did it save the evening? Was your life any different afterward?" Doc shook his head as if he'd heard the question.

“I lived off that for two days,” he said quietly. “Cigarettes, a little something to eat, a ticket. And the whole time I was standing at the machine or in the kiosk, I thought to myself: You're exactly the person you used to despise. Someone who steals tips.” He finished the rest of his beer, as if trying to wash the words down. “After that, I didn't dare come back here. Not until today.”

It was strange to hear. Such a small theft, such great shame. The innkeeper leaned on the bar with both hands. "Do you know why this bothers me?" he asked calmly. "Not because I'm short on cash. I don't make much here anyway. But because that glass was the only thing that was just for us. Not for the landlord, not for the tax office, not for the supplier. Just for her"—he gestured to the waitress—"and a little bit for me. That was a small measure of respect. And you took it." Doc nodded, as if he'd been waiting for just that.

The waitress took a deep breath. "I don't have much," she said. "No car, no savings, no fancy holidays. But I had the glass. If someone had a good night, they'd put something in it. It was like a pat on the back, only with coins. And you stole my thunder." There was no shouting, no drama, just a matter-of-fact statement. And that hurt more than any tirade.

The goblin leaned forward, looked Doc in the mirror, and met his gaze. "That's what you don't understand," he murmured. "You're not just stealing money. You're stealing the last shred of decency from yourselves. And then you're surprised when you can't find anyone who takes you seriously anymore."

“Why did you even come back?” I asked without thinking much about it. Doc looked at me as if he were surprised I was still there. “Because I don’t have any other place,” he said. “And because I was hoping this was still the place where even an asshole could get a beer.” The landlord hesitated, then nodded. “It is,” he said. “But you’re not getting a tip just yet. Not in your glass, not in words.”

A strange peace settled in afterward. No one clapped, no one said "everything's fine." Doc stayed for another beer, paid down to the cent, not a euro too much, not a euro too little. The waitress took the money without a word. The imp climbed down from the bar and sat on my stool. "You see," he said, "that's the difference between you and him. You don't steal anything, but you hardly give anything either. He took once and has been carrying it around ever since. You take a little bit every day and call it life."

On the way home, I thought about that damn glass. And about everything we let go of over the years. Trust, patience, time. The love of people who eventually stop contacting us. The waitress's youth, which she trades for tired legs. The nerves of the landlord, who stacks his chairs every night and hopes that tomorrow one more person will come who pays than the one who doesn't. And in the middle of it all, us, the regulars, who think that ordering a beer gives us the right to take everything else for free.

At home, in my kitchen, there was no tip jar. Just an ashtray, a stack of bills, a half-empty pack of cigarettes. I sat down, opened the window, and let the cold air in. The goblin was perched on the table. "If you had a tip jar," he said, "it would be empty. You never give yourself anything extra. No praise, no mercy, no bonus. Just accusations. Maybe you should start putting something in it for yourself every now and then."

“And what for?” I asked. “For what?” He shrugged. “For every day you don’t steal anything from someone that you can’t replace,” he said. “For every evening you’re at least honest with yourself. For every thought in which you briefly consider that you’re not the only one in the world.” I gave a weak laugh. “Then I need a small glass,” I said. “It won’t be filled very often.”

He grinned. "That old glass in the taillight was never really full either," he said. "And yet it was important." I looked at him, then at the cigarette, then at my hands. Maybe he was right. Maybe there's more decency in a glass like that than you'd think. And maybe it never truly disappears as long as someone still remembers it was there.

The next evening I was back at the "Last Light." I sat down on my stool, saw the jar of pickles, which now looked less unfamiliar. I rummaged in my pocket, found a crumpled bill, and slipped it in. The waitress said nothing, nor did the owner. The imp, however, bowed mockingly. "Look at that," he said. "The man who never pays the bill voluntarily puts something in the jar. The world is falling apart in a slightly different way than I thought."

I drank my beer, smoked my cigarette, and looked in the mirror behind the bar. For a moment, I saw not only my face and the goblin, but also a simple glass with a few coins and bills. And I thought: Maybe it's not much. But it's more than nothing.

Chapter 21 – Between throat clearing, belching, and regret

There's a certain soundscape you only find in pubs that are too old to be renovated. The music plays somewhere in the background, the TV silently murmurs disasters, but what really matters are the sounds in between. Clearing throats, belches, the clinking of glasses, the sharp hiss of a bottle being opened, that dry cough from lungs that have long since given up but keep working because no one told them it's closing time. And in between, the sentences no one finishes, and the regret no one properly articulates.

I'm sitting right in the middle of it, as always, and could probably tell who's speaking just by the sound, without even looking. Harry has this deep throat clearing before he says anything, as if he has to push his voice through a layer of tar. Heiner belches softly, almost politely, and always gives a brief, apologetic look afterward, even though nobody cares anymore. The slot

machine player sometimes groans to himself when he loses again, a dry, short gasp that says more about his life than anything he ever says.

The goblin loves this soundscape. "This is your symphony," he says. "Not the music from the speaker, but the sounds you produce yourselves, without thinking. A clearing of the throat before someone lies. A burp after someone has drunk too fast. A sigh when the truth briefly slips out." He sits on the edge of my ashtray, conducting with an imaginary cigarette. "And in between: regret. Quiet. Unclean. Like a wrong note."

That evening the air was particularly heavy. It was one of those days when you know as soon as you wake up that you've messed up again, without remembering the details. I had that typical gap between "sometime after the third shot" and "waking up with my shoes on," and entire wars can fit into that gap. I arrived at the "back of the line," and even as I took my first step across the threshold, I had the feeling that I'd been too loud yesterday.

The innkeeper glanced up briefly, then down again. No extra smile, no "Hey there, you hero," but there was that slight hesitation before he placed the beer in front of me. The waitress was still setting up, putting out glasses, opening the cash register, distributing ashtrays. She looked at me, just a fraction longer than usual. No reproach, no head shake. But there was something there. A kind of internal clearing of her throat.

“So,” I said, “what happened yesterday?” The goblin laughed maliciously. “Why don’t you just ask: ‘Who did I offend?’” he whispered. The innkeeper shrugged. “You were in a good mood,” he said. “Maybe too good.” That’s innkeeper slang for “you were embarrassing.” I took a sip and tried to remember, through the first sip, exactly what had happened. Fragments came. A loud laugh that wasn’t mine. My own arm, gesturing exaggeratedly. A glass tipping over. A voice saying, “Let’s just drop it, mate.”

Heiner was already sitting there, looking like a badly extinguished fire. He cleared his throat before looking at me. "You were at it again yesterday, giving everyone a big dose of life advice," he said. "Unsolicited." Harry, who was just coming in, let out a deep burp, sat down next to me, and patted me on the shoulder. "You called me a coward," he grinned. "Because I'm going to the doctor instead of waiting it out. That was a good show."

The goblin applauded. "Yes, yes," he said, "the philosopher in his drunken stupor. You're at your best when you know the least about what you're babbling about." I felt something inside me tense up. I know that when I'm drunk I tend to become a missionary. Where, sober, I can only muster a weary shrug, when drunk I suddenly come up with ideas about how everyone should change their lives. Always, of course, in a way that has nothing to do with me.

“Did I apologize?” I asked. Heiner gave a dry laugh. “Did you?” He took a drag on his cigarette, then cleared his throat. “At one point, you ordered everyone a shot and said we were your family. That’s your deluxe apology.” Harry nodded. “It was touching,” he said. “But you started all over again twice after that.”

It's strange when others have to tell you about your regrets because you missed them. You sit there, listening to how you tried to make amends yesterday, and today you feel none of it. Just shame. A dull, sticky shame that settles behind your eyes. The goblin notices. "Now comes the regret phase," he comments. "In a minute you'll start with 'That's just how I am' and 'I didn't mean it that way.'"

I remained silent. Perhaps for the first time at this bar since I've known it, I was silent, even though everyone was waiting for me to say something. I looked into my glass, then in the mirror, then at the spot where something might have broken yesterday, something I didn't remember. The waitress came over, wiped up next to my beer, without looking at me. "You were loud," she said. "Not bad. Just loud. And you told Heiner to finally stop whining and do something. But you never said that to yourself."

There it was, the regret. Not just because of Heiner or Harry or the spilled glass. But because she was right. I've always been great at telling others how to get their lives together. I could launch into entire tirades about how someone should drink less, work more, sleep better, treat their family better. And then, the next morning, I wouldn't even take out the trash myself.

The goblin nodded approvingly. "That's the point," he said. "There's more regret between your throat clearings and your burps than you can handle. That's why you talk so much in between. So you don't hear it." I took another sip, more out of reflex than thirst. It was early, the evening had only just begun, and I was already tired of everything.

The sounds in the "taillight" continued. Clearing throats, belching, coughing, laughing, clinking glasses. But suddenly I heard something else, quieter, somewhere beneath the surface: that silent aftertaste that arises when we say something we shouldn't have said, or leave something we should have done. A very slight inner "shit." Nothing dramatic, just a small, serious note.

"Regret is like heartburn," whispered the goblin. "You only notice it after you've swallowed something that doesn't agree with you. And then you think a shot of schnapps will help." He grinned. "Spoiler alert: it doesn't." I looked at him, wanting to say something clever in return, but all I heard was my own stomach growling and somewhere inside that quiet voice saying, "You're too old to still be thinking you're a great prophet."

I slowly pushed the first beer away before it was empty. No heroic act, no "everything's different from today on," just a small, silent "not quite so fast." Maybe it was just a reflex. Maybe a little regret. Hard to say with all the noise.

In the "back of the tunnel," it's rare to hear a clear "I'm sorry." That sounds too much like a courtroom scene or a relationship drama. Here, remorse takes a different form. It comes in half-baked gestures, clumsy remarks, and renewed arguments that are like band-aids on old wounds. A "I didn't mean it like that" disappears behind a "Come on, I'll buy you a drink." A "I screwed up" is translated into "Yesterday wasn't my day." And sometimes the only apology is a cough before someone changes the subject.

The goblin knows the dictionary of these half-baked insights. "When he says, 'It was just a joke,'" he whispers to me, "he means, 'I know I hurt you, but I don't want to talk about feelings right now.' When he says, 'I've had worse,' he means, 'I don't want to admit that this is really getting to me.' And when you say, 'Oh, it's fine,' you mean, 'I can't handle the idea of someone getting naked in front of me anyway.'" He's a lousy translator. But most of the time he's right.

On one of those evenings when the air was thicker than the conversation, we were sitting at the bar, and regret hung heavy in the air, though no one had uttered the word. The night before, Harry had drunkenly called his ex-wife, at 1:30 in the morning, of course. He'd yelled something about "alienating the children," "I have rights too," and "you destroyed me." She'd

hung up. Today, he had his phone lying on the bar as if it were a piece of evidence, staring at it like a weapon that might go off by itself.

“She blocked me,” he said. “Completely. No more pictures, no status updates, nothing at all. My daughter too.” He cleared his throat, deeply, as if fighting back tears he didn’t want to show. “It’s not like I didn’t know what would happen if I called again drunk. I’ve done it ten times already.” The slot machine player grinned crookedly. “Then you know what you did wrong,” he said. “You should have waited an eleventh time.”

The waitress shook her head. "Sometimes I admire you," she said. "You manage to tear yourselves to pieces and then make jokes about it before all the blood is flowing." The innkeeper wiped the bar in slow motion. "What do you want him to do?" he asked. "Stand here and cry? Then you'll be laughing again." She looked at the tip jar. "Maybe that would be honest for once," she murmured.

Regret usually sits way back in our throats. Right where we clear our throats. When someone's already swallowed their mistake, but it's still bothering them. Then it starts to scratch, press, and burn. And the mouth doesn't know whether to say "sorry" or spit out "screw it." Most of the time it ends up being something in between. Something like: "I was just drunk." As if the alcohol were a separate person who takes over your body at night and is unreachable during the day.

The goblin takes pleasure in documenting these moments. "Regret monologue, Harry version," he whispers, while Harry explains once again that he's "actually not a bad father." "Regret monologue, Heiner version," when he recounts how he hasn't visited his brother in years. "Regret monologue, you version," when I start again with, "I should have..." and then look into my glass as if I could turn back time.

Once, on a Wednesday, a man I'd never seen before, but who clearly resembled someone I knew, appeared at the "Schlusslicht" (Last Light). Same nose, same forehead, only his eyes were more alert. He sat down next to me, two stools away, and ordered water. Water. At the "Schlusslicht." There was almost something aggressive about that. The waitress glanced at him briefly, as did the owner. "I'm looking for my father," the man said before anyone could ask anything.

Silence fell. You realize how quiet a pub truly is when suddenly no one is fidgeting in their chair, no one is twirling their glass, no one is coughing. The man took an old photograph from his jacket. It showed a face, faded, a younger version of a face I vaguely recognized. He held it out to the landlord. "He used to come here often," he said. "At least, that's what my mother said. She said if I ever wanted to find him, I should ask here."

The innkeeper took the photo and looked at it for a long time. Then he shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know him. Maybe he was here before I took over. Maybe he was in another pub. But I don't remember him." The waitress leaned forward, looked, and also shook her head. "Sorry," she murmured.

The man simply nodded, as if he'd expected that answer. "Never mind," he said. "It was just an idea." He took his water, drank a sip, and stood up. "I'll check a few other shops. Maybe he left a trace somewhere." Then he left. No scene, no drama, just a door closing. And a photograph that lingered in the room for a moment.

The goblin looked me straight in the eye. "Remember this," he said quietly. "This is your future in reverse. Someone comes in here and asks for you—and no one remembers you. Or worse: they remember you and say nothing." I felt a rush of heat, from my stomach up to my head. The innkeeper briefly placed the photo on the counter before he'd gone to hand it back to the man. I saw it in the mirror. The guy didn't look particularly special. Just like we all used to.

"He had remorse all over his face," said the waitress after the man had left. "Not for himself, for his old man." Harry cleared his throat. "I hope my son never comes in here," he muttered. "Otherwise, I'll have to explain to him why I looked for him at the bar rather than in the playground." It was one of those sentences after which no one wanted to say anything because anything they said would be too little. So Heiner let out a soft burp, and someone laughed too quickly.

The goblin grinned sadly. "That's your problem," he said. "Regret always comes too late or is directed at the wrong person. You sit here regretting things in front of people who have nothing to do with it, and those who should be hearing it are busy elsewhere wondering why they aren't enough for you." I wanted to disagree with him, but at that same moment I heard my phone vibrate in my jacket pocket. I let it vibrate. Then I stopped. Then I started it again. Eventually, it went silent.

Later, when the place had emptied and the owner was already glancing wearily at his watch, I stayed. The waitress wiped the counter one last time, cleared her throat as if she wanted to say something. "You could call her back," she said then. I pretended not to know who she meant. "Who?" I asked. She looked at me as if I were transparent. "Who else?" she said. "The one your regrets really belong with."

I nodded, said "I will," and knew in the same instant that I wouldn't do it again. The goblin shook his head. "Between clearing your throat and belching, there's not much room left for action," he said. "Only for good intentions and lame excuses." I took the last sip, tasted more bitterness than beer, and thought: Maybe regret is just a sound. And with us, it gets lost in the rest of the noise.

There are nights when you come home and the noise of the pub is still hanging in your head like smoke on your jacket. Every voice, every comment, every clearing of the throat clings to you. And amidst all that noise, regret sits like a small, stubborn knot in your stomach that refuses to budge. You put your shoes in the hallway, sit down at the kitchen table, light one last cigarette, and realize you want to open your mouth without knowing who you're actually talking to.

One evening, I sat there, the ashtray full, my head full too, and the imp perched on the edge of the table opposite me. No laughter, no jokes. Just this strange silence between us. "Well?" he finally said. "No grand theory today? No 'everyone's to blame but me'? No 'everything was better in the old days because I didn't think as much'?" I inhaled the smoke deeply, felt the burn, and thought: Shit, maybe he'd just talked himself tired out by talking to me.

“I feel like I’ve been talking around the same thing my whole life,” I said. “Around the same point, which I never get to. I don’t apologize properly, I don’t change anything, I just go around in circles.” The goblin nodded. “That’s what’s so fascinating,” he said. “You’re not dull. You see everything quite clearly. You could write a complete analysis of your failure. But as soon as you finish a paragraph, you go to the bar instead of working.”

I gave a short, genuine laugh. "Do you think remorse actually accomplishes anything?" I asked. "Or is it just some kind of internal program that runs so you don't feel like a complete sociopath?" The goblin thought for a moment, which was rare for him. "Remorse is like an alarm," he said then. "It tells you, 'Something's not right.' What you do with it is another matter. You usually let the alarm go off until you stop hearing it."

I thought of Harry's blocked number, the guy who'd been looking for his father, my daughter whose calls I'd rather ignored than swallow my pride. I thought of all the half-baked apologies I'd offered when I was too drunk to mean them and too sober to let them pass as an excuse. "Sometimes I really do feel guilty," I said quietly. "And then I think: If I really did, I'd do something. And because I don't do anything, I guess it wasn't so bad after all."

The goblin wrinkled his nose. "You're confusing remorse with action," he said. "You think only what you do afterward counts. But there's another level to it: at least you're no longer pretending everything's alright. It's not a happy ending, but it's better than willful blindness." He leaned back. "You're not proud of what you messed up. That's more than some people can say."

“Great,” I said. “Then I can have ‘not proud’ written on my gravestone.” I stood up, got a glass of water I didn’t intend to drink, and set it down, just for the sake of it. “What am I supposed to do?” I asked. “Call people? Write letters? Go to the pub and apologize to everyone I’ve ever wronged?” The goblin grinned. “You’re asking the wrong person,” he said. “I make my living off your mistakes. If you suddenly started fixing everything, I’d be out of a job.”

Despite everything, I had to laugh. "You know you don't exist without me," I said. "If I stay sober tomorrow, you'll just be a memory." He shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "But I'm not worried about that. You're very consistent in your inconsistency." He looked at me, seriously. "Regret, by the way, isn't something you can archive. You have to consume it fresh. Old regret is useless; it's like stale coffee."

I thought about all the nights I'd resolved to "call tomorrow," or "not drink tomorrow," or "go to the doctor tomorrow," or "start writing something other than a beer mat tomorrow." And how quickly that morning was devoured by the next evening. How often I'd promised myself something and broken it, without a witness, without a pact. Just me, my cigarette, and the imp keeping count.

“Maybe my biggest mistake isn’t that I’ve messed up so much,” I said at one point. “Maybe it’s that I’ve so rarely truly said, ‘I’m sorry.’ No joke, no quip, no after-dinner drink.” The goblin nodded slowly. “That could be,” he said. “And you know what the irony is? You can still say that. You can’t fix everything, you can’t heal everything, you can’t undo everything. But you could at least start not sugarcoating things anymore.”

I looked at him, then at the phone on the table, lying silently like an animal asleep but ready to bite at any moment. "Start," I murmured. "I say that all the time." He grinned. "True," he said. "But most of the time you mean, 'Start drinking.'" I picked up the phone, just to feel its weight. The number of missed calls was small, but heavy. Two missed calls, three unopened messages. Each one a little letter from reality.

I didn't choose. I didn't write. I sat there, staring at the screen until it went black. The goblin sighed. "Very well," he said. "Not today then." He jumped off the table, climbed onto the

windowsill, and looked out into the night. "Do you know what's so wonderful about regret?" he asked. "It comes back. Tomorrow. The day after. Next week. Until you either feel nothing anymore or you finally decide not to take the easy way out."

“And what if she stops coming someday?” I asked. He turned around. “Then you’re finished,” he said. “Completely finished. Not physically, but internally. Then you’re one of those people who sit here at the bar and just laugh at others. Without ever feeling even slightly nauseous.” I thought of a few faces I knew who were actually like that. There was nothing between a throat clearing and a burp. No remorse, just habit.

I put my phone back on the table, stubbed out my cigarette in the ashtray, and drank half the water. No great victory, just a few millimeters away from what I would have otherwise done. "That's not enough for you," the goblin said. "It is for me," I replied. "For today."

Later, in bed, I could still hear the neighbors upstairs walking, a car in the street, a door clicking shut. Small sounds from other lives. My own regret hummed softly in the background, not loud enough to keep me awake, not quiet enough to disappear. I turned onto my side, closed my eyes, and the goblin settled somewhere in my head like a grumpy night watchman.

“Between a throat clearing and a burp,” I heard him say, just before I fell asleep, “there’s a narrow strip where you could walk upright. You stumble over it every night. Maybe one day you’ll stop.” I said nothing more. Perhaps out of spite. Perhaps out of tiredness. Perhaps because I knew that tomorrow the same sounds would be waiting for me again: a throat clearing, a burp—and the regret that pushes its way in between, hoping not to be completely swallowed up this time.

Chapter 22 – The Regulars' Table of Failures

The table in the back left corner of the "taillight" was never officially designated as a regulars' table. No carved sign, no brass plaque saying "Reserved," no pennant from any club. It was simply the table no one else wanted. Too close to the toilet passage, too far from the door, too little light. A blind spot in the place. That's precisely why it became our spot. If you want to remain unseen long enough, you'll eventually end up back there. And if you sit back there long enough, you'll become a regular, whether you like it or not.

The landlord eventually started calling it "our round table," even though it was square. Maybe because "round" better suited what went on there: the same faces, the same sentences, always in a circle. Heiner, Harry, the slot machine player, Manni, sometimes a few travelers passing through who accidentally join us and realize after two evenings that this isn't just about beer, but a subscription to swan songs. And me. I sit there as if I'm just an observer, but the imp laughs himself silly every time I try to convince myself of that.

“Welcome to the regulars’ table of failures,” he often says when I sit down. “An exclusive club with no dues and no hope. The only requirement for membership: you must have consistently steered your life in the wrong direction at some point. The rest will take care of itself.” He paces back and forth on the tabletop, jumps over beer mats, balances on cigarette

packs as if they were trophies. For him, we are a kind of permanent exhibition: failed plans, shattered dreams, disillusioned ideals.

The evening I remember most vividly, the table was fuller than usual. It was the beginning of the month, the day when money briefly pretends to be plentiful. Then everyone arrives. Heiner was already sitting there, elbows propped up as if he had to hold his head up to keep it from falling off. Harry was in a talkative mood, that dangerous stretch between "funny" and "unbearable." The slot machine player had managed the rare feat of winning twice in a row and, once again, believed it was some kind of sign. Manni was more tired than usual, which meant he looked like he'd been run over by a tired truck.

"All right, gentlemen," Harry began, half-finished with his first beer. "Today we're going to talk about successes." Heiner belched softly, almost mockingly. "Wrong table," he said. "They're up front where the younger guys sit, thinking they've got their life in the bag." The slot machine player chuckled. "Our successes," he said, "count backwards. We're proud of anything we haven't completely screwed up."

The imp sat down right in the middle of our group, directly on the grimy beer mat that hadn't been replaced in weeks. "Let's start with introductions," he suggested. "Name, age, what your ambitions were and what became of them." I rolled my eyes. "We're not in therapy," I muttered. "Yes, we are," he grinned. "Just without a therapist. And without therapy."

Heiner took a deep drag and put his hand to it. "I'll start," he said. "I'm Heiner, I'm too old for this crap, I used to be a baker. I almost had my master's certificate. Then I decided I didn't feel like getting up at four every morning, drank myself into oblivion on holidays, and at some point thought: The world doesn't need bread rolls if I'm not well-rested." He laughed briefly, but there was nothing cheerful left in it. "These days, I'm just baking excuses."

Harry clapped slowly. "I'm Harry, former manual laborer, failed family man, hobby coward," he explained. "I once thought I'd be different from my old man. He'd rather drink than take care of us. I swore I'd do better. Now I tell my kids the same things he told me. Only with different swear words." He raised his glass. "To the genetic transmission of shit."

The slot machine player rocked his chair back on its two legs. "I'm the idiot who thought math was his superpower," he said. "I was always good at math. Thought I could cheat luck with it. Now I can calculate exactly how much I've lost. In numbers, in years, in relationships. Rough estimate: too much." He grinned crookedly. "But hey, my brain still works, at least I didn't lose everything there."

Manni initially said he wouldn't participate. Then he drank half his beer and resigned himself to the situation. "I'm Manni," he growled. "I once wanted a quiet life, a small garden, some peace and quiet. Instead, I have noise in my head, debts in my bank account, and I live in an apartment where the neighbors hate me because I'm constantly staggering drunkenly through the stairwell. If that was a plan, I didn't write it."

Everyone laughed, the way you laugh when someone tells a joke that's a little too close to the truth. The goblin looked at me. "Come on," he said. "Your row." I shrugged, taking my time, as if I had to Google my own biography first. "I'm the kind of guy who spent his whole life thinking he was destined for something better, without ever figuring out exactly what. And the longer I waited, the smaller what I could have done became. These days, I can't even manage the paperwork. But I'm good at sitting still."

“And drink,” Harry added. “And tell others what they’re doing wrong.” I nodded. “Yeah,” I said. “That’s probably my main talent.” We clinked glasses, each with our own, and for a moment we had something like a manifesto: We, the regulars at the pub for failures, raise our glasses to all the things we never finished.

The thing is, none of us are really surprised where we've ended up. If you're honest, you see the curve coming as soon as it starts. You realize you're not as conscientious as others, not as resilient, not as ambitious. You realize you prefer to leave work before it's even begun. You realize you avoid conflict by simply not showing up. We've all received these warning signs. We've all ignored them.

The goblin pointed at our group. "You're like a collection of abandoned experiments," he said. "Relationships, jobs, therapies, rehab, projects—all started, never followed through. But you're consistent in your abandonment. That takes some doing." Heiner threw a beer mat at him, unsuccessfully of course. "Shut your goblin mouth," he growled. "You're not paying here, you're just commenting."

I thought about the other tables. Sometimes there were people who only came once a week, treated themselves to two beers, talked a bit about work, the weekend, the kids. They were stressed, sure, but they had some sort of routine. We sat in the back and only had routines, but no substance anymore. Get up, smoke, drink, complain, go home, regret it, carry on. If our lives were on TV, everyone would change the channel after two episodes because nothing happens.

“We could also play chess or cards,” Manni suggested at some point. “Something to keep our brains occupied before they finally give up the ghost.” Harry grinned. “And you want to lose?” he asked. “We’re already losing all day. Let’s at least not break any records at the table.” The slot machine player shrugged. “We’re already playing,” he said. “Just not games anyone can win.”

The goblin nodded. "This is your competition: Who has the best fall without hitting rock bottom? Who has gambled away the most without ending up on the street? Who has lost the most without admitting it's gone?" He looked at each of us in turn. "And the funny thing is: None of you want the trophy. But none of you are getting up and leaving."

There was a moment when I briefly wondered what this table looked like from the outside. Imagine someone walking in, fresh, curious, and glancing back. They'd see five guys who looked like they'd been assembled from different decades and placed in the same room. All of them with stories they no longer want to tell because they've told them too often. All of them with faces that, even at the greeting, say, "Miss us. Give us a wide berth." And yet, people keep joining them. Briefly. Then never again.

The landlord sometimes says, "You're my barometer. As long as you're still laughing, the place isn't completely dead." I don't know if that's a compliment or a diagnosis. The imp laughs at it. "You're the dregs," he says, "but also the flavor. Without you, the bottom of the barrel would just be another pub with people who think they've got it all figured out." Maybe that's true. Maybe we're the ones who show how far things can go if you keep saying "morning" for too long.

That evening, at any rate, we were hanging around our table as usual. The smoke hung above us, the beer was in front of us, and regret sat between us. We didn't call each other "failures"

when someone told us about their latest flop. We simply said, "Come on, sit down. Tell me." And the goblin sat down and took notes, invisibly but thoroughly.

The regulars at the pub had their own rules, even though we never wrote them down. The first: You can complain as much as you want, as long as you let others complain too. No one has a monopoly on misery. The second: You can be honest, but not for too long at a time. Honesty in here is like hard liquor—one or two shots maybe, then pour some beer over it, otherwise someone will pass out. The third: You make fun of yourself before the others do. That way you save what little dignity you have left.

“Rule four,” the goblin once added, “you have to say at least one sentence each evening that shows you understand how screwed up you are. Otherwise, you don’t really belong.” I told him to shove his rules where the sun don’t shine, but I knew he was right. There’s no room here for “actually, everything’s alright.” Anyone who says that won’t last long with us.

One evening, a new guy joined us. He'd been to "The Last Light" a few times before, always sitting at the bar, dutifully drinking his beer, nodding politely, paying, and leaving. Too young for us, I thought. Somewhere in his early thirties, maybe mid-thirties. Too good teeth, too few wrinkles, a jacket without a burn hole. But tonight he was drawn to the back. Maybe there wasn't any more room up front. Maybe he was just tired of always watching from afar.

"Is this seat free?" he asked, gesturing to the last chair at the table. Heiner shrugged. "Depends," he said. "We're kind of an exclusive club for people who've screwed up." The newcomer grinned. "Then I'm in the right place," he said. "I've already passed the initiation." The imp was immediately enthusiastic. "Aha," he whispered. "Fresh meat for the misery buffet."

The new guy ordered a beer, placed it in front of him without taking a swig. That's a sign here that someone wants to say something before they numb themselves. "I'm Timo," he introduced himself. "I'm an alcoholic, a gambling addict, unemployed, recently separated, and found out three weeks ago that I'm going to be a father. Is that enough for your group?" There was a brief silence, then Harry said, "You're overqualified."

We laughed, but there was respect in his laughter. Not for his "achievements," but for the way he laid it on the table. No beating around the bush, no pretense of humor. The imp nodded approvingly. "He skips stages one and two," he commented. "He goes straight to remorse." Heiner raised his glass to him. "Welcome to the club," he said. "Sit down, tell us about it. We've got time, we're not leaving anyway."

Timo began to talk. Not about everything—nobody brings up all their baggage on the first night—but about enough. That he'd lost his job because he called in sick more often than he showed up. That he'd believed his odds were a plan. That he'd lied to his girlfriend for so long that she'd finally had enough and left. That she'd texted him: "I'm pregnant, but I want to go through with this without you." And that since then, he hadn't known whether to grieve for her, for the baby, or for himself.

“I come here,” he said, “because I feel like at least you understand what it means to mess everything up and still keep going.” The slot machine player nodded. “You’ve come to the right place,” he said. “We’re experts at going on with broken shoes.” Harry scratched his beard. “So what do you want now?” he asked. “To drink until you can’t feel anything anymore? Or to hope that you’ll eventually be sober enough to save something?”

Timo gave a short, bitter laugh. "I don't know," he said. "I just don't want to be alone today." That was honest. We understood. The pub for the down-and-out isn't a place where anyone hands out solutions. At best, you might get a better way of putting your problem into words. Sometimes that's enough, because you realize that your problems rhyme with the problems of others.

The goblin jumped onto Timo's glass. "You're young," he said—only to him, only in his head, I suspect. "You still have a chance to do things differently. You could make it big now, rehab, therapy, a new city, something. Or you can stay here until you look like them." He pointed at us, one after the other. "These are your future options."

I watched Timo. How he processed our laughter, how he sank into his chair, how he simultaneously hoped to belong and not become like us. That's the irony: many come here because they want to feel worse than they are, so they can then convince themselves that it's not that bad yet. "I'm not as broken as they are," they tell themselves. That gives them a strange kind of comfort. Until they realize they've headed down the same path.

“You know,” Heiner said to him at some point, “there aren’t only losers sitting at this table. There are also people here who at least tried. We didn’t just fall straight from our mothers’ wombs onto barstools. We went through a few phases along the way. We had jobs, loved women, fathered children, got into trouble, squandered our luck. We’re not nothing. We’re just not what we could have been.” Timo nodded, slowly.

Harry added, "The problem isn't that we failed. The problem is that we've gotten used to the role. You're not there yet. You still think you can film something. We back here..." He looked around. "...we've settled in by the window with the view. All we do is comment." The goblin laughed. "Finally, one of you has said it yourselves," he said. "I feel relieved."

The waitress came by, placed a fresh round of drinks on the table, and glanced briefly at Timo. "He's new," she said. "I hope you're not trying to adopt him." Heiner grinned. "He's of age," he replied. "He's here voluntarily. We just made it clear there's no guarantee of him being returned." She snorted. "Sometimes I think I should set up an application table here: 'Lovers' Table – Admission by Interview Only.'" The innkeeper called from the bar: "Then you'd have to turn away the ones who still have a chance, too."

Timo listened to all of this, was silent for a while, then said: “You know what the worst part is? I know exactly what I should do. Go to rehab, get debt counseling, find a job, at least try not to completely fall apart. I know all that. But when I wake up in the morning, everything inside me feels so heavy that I'm just glad if I can brush my teeth.” He shrugged. “And then I'm sitting here.”

A strange sense of solidarity settled over the table. Not the "we can do it" platitudes of self-help group posters. But this quiet "Yeah, we know that feeling." Regret isn't about grand gestures for us. It's in the sentences that come after a cough and end before a sip. The imp looked around the room, then said, almost gently: "There are two kinds of failures. Those who pretend they have everything under control and wonder why no one believes them. And those who admit they can't go on and still don't abandon life. You're the second kind."

“Is that a compliment?” I asked. He grinned. “Call it what you will,” he said. “But you’re still here. And you know you’ve lost. That’s more than many can claim.” Heiner raised his glass.

“To us,” he said. “To the table of failures. May we at least be allowed to fail in peace.” We drank. Not out of pride. Out of habit.

Over time, I began to realize that the pub wasn't just a place where we managed our defeats, but also a kind of university gone wrong. Everyone had their specialty in failure, and if you paid attention, you learned a lot about how to thoroughly mess things up. It was like a crash course in life avoidance.

Heiner was the expert on "missed opportunities in the working world." He could tell you in detail how to do one job after another half-heartedly, so that no one would immediately fire you, but also so that no one would even think of giving you responsibility. "You always have to do just enough so that they don't want to replace you," he once explained. "But never so much that they depend on you. Then they can't disappoint you if they let you go." The goblin commented: "Masterclass in prophylactic disappointment."

Harry was an expert on family dramas. He knew all the stages: the initial enthusiasm, the "we can do this," the first cracks, the unspoken accusations, the broken promises, the wine-fueled outbursts, the shouting matches, the late-night phone calls, the slammed doors. He could tell you at every stage exactly when he should have slowed down—and how he instead accelerated. "I know exactly when I've gone too far," he once said. "Always about two sentences later than I could think."

The slot machine player was our mathematician of doom. He liked to calculate how a single mistake accumulates over the years. "If I'd stopped putting money into slot machines when I was twenty," he said, "I might have a car today, an apartment with a balcony, a different liver. As it is, I have a customer account at every arcade and the looks I get from cashiers thinking, 'Not him again.'" The imp wrote invisible formulas in the air. "Sum of hope, stupidity, and bad timing," he explained. "Result: you."

Manni was the go-to guy for general life exhaustion. He could explain to you how to "just rest" for so long that life passed you by. "I never consciously decided, 'I'm not doing anything anymore,'" he'd say. "I just always thought, 'I'll do it tomorrow.' And at some point, so many mornings had passed that I didn't know where to begin. So I didn't begin at all." He was the personification of the snooze button. When he spoke, it always sounded like he'd just pressed the button on an opportunity.

And me? I was the one who could easily explain why everything had happened the way it did, without anything actually changing. I had the words for it. I could see connections, patterns, repetitions. I could have made a book out of our stories if I'd ever held a pen longer than a bottle. The goblin called me "the voice of uselessness." "You can name everything," he said, "but you can't change anything."

One evening, as we were going through our usual topics again—unemployment, failed relationships, debt, ruined health—Timo suddenly asked, "Is there anything here you're proud of?" Silence fell. The innkeeper was just ordering us a round when he stopped. The waitress leaned briefly against the doorframe. Even the slot machine player stopped staring at the lights in the back. This wasn't your typical pub question. It was too direct, too out of this world.

Heiner cleared his throat. "I helped my nephew with his homework once," he said after a while. "Math. He got it. He wrote better papers afterward." He shrugged. "I don't tell that

story often. It doesn't fit my image." Harry thought for a moment. "I was sober once, when my son had to go to the hospital," he muttered. "I drove him there, kept an eye on things at the doctor's office, picked up the medication from the pharmacy. It wasn't exactly heroic. But I didn't screw up. I'm glad about that."

The slot machine player stared into his glass. "I told my mother at some point that I didn't want to move in with her when she was alone," he said quietly. "Not because I didn't want to. But because I knew I'd be stealing everything she still had of trust in people. I helped her find another solution. Care, a neighbor, that sort of thing. It was the most sensible thing I've done in the last ten years." He looked at us, almost defiantly. "Proud is perhaps too strong a word. But I'm glad I didn't ruin that too."

Manni thought for a long time. "I never mistreated an animal," he finally said. "Sounds ridiculous, but it's true. I disappointed women, lied to people, shot myself in the foot. But when I was drunk and there was a dog or a cat around, I was always careful. I never kicked them, never yelled, never did anything mean. They couldn't help it. That was important to me." The goblin smiled crookedly. "The man of animals," he murmured. "Noah without an ark."

Everyone looked at me. I stared at my hands at first, ashamed to even think about it. Pride was a word that felt like a suit that didn't fit me. "I don't know," I said. "Maybe it's that I'm still here. That I haven't completely withdrawn. That I'm still wondering whether I'm allowed to be proud or not. Many in here are already a step ahead. They don't even ask questions anymore."

The goblin nodded slowly. "That's your mini-fame," he said. "You haven't completely numbed yourself yet. You still feel enough to get upset with yourself. That's unpleasant, but it's also the only reason I'm bothering to stay with you." He jumped onto the table, walked around our circle once, and patted each of us on the imaginary shoulder. "A regular meeting place for failures, yes. But not for corpses. Not yet."

The innkeeper put down the last glass and paused briefly. "If you only knew how many sat here before you," he said. "People who laughed just like you, complained just like you, made just as many bold pronouncements. Some moved away, some really made it, some simply disappeared. I later heard that some of them were dead. You're not the first failures here. But you're the ones who still turn up."

The waitress glanced sideways at us. "You haven't just failed," she said. "You're also loyal. You'll be back. There are plenty of people out there who do everything right, but nobody remembers them. You will be remembered. Even if it's sometimes annoying." She raised her glass of water in our direction. "To you," she said. "To those who messed up and still tip."

We laughed, we toasted, we drank. And somewhere between the next throat clearing, the next burp, and the next bad joke, I felt a brief, absurd pride. Not in what I'd made of my life. But in the fact that I sat down at the same table with this bunch, night after night, and didn't pretend we were anything other than who we were.

The goblin sat on my shoulder and whispered, "Do you know what this really is? Not a hangout for losers. It's an emergency exit without a door. You're sitting in front of it, smoking. Maybe someone will go through eventually, maybe no one. But you're not sitting alone in the hallway." I nodded. For the first time, I had the feeling that this table wasn't just an endpoint. Perhaps also a final crossroads.

It was late when we left. One after the other, back to our small apartments, our overflowing ashtrays, our unopened letters. We said goodbye with the same old lines. "See you tomorrow." "Don't do anything stupid." "Take care." No one really believed it. But we said it anyway. And I knew: tomorrow we'd be sitting back there again, in the blind spot of the "last place." The regulars' table for the losers. And somehow, as twisted as it sounds, that was better than no table at all.

Chapter 23 – When Morning Catches You Standing

There are nights that never end, they just get brighter. No real ending, no "that's it," no final round where someone taps their glass and reality peeks through the window. You drink, you smoke, you talk, you're silent, and at some point you realize that morning isn't waiting for you to go to sleep. It catches you where you are. Standing. Cigarette in hand, glass half empty, and a body that's been screaming "Stop" for hours while your mind is still muttering "Onward."

It was one of those nights where none of us managed to leave. At first, it was just a normal evening at "The Last Light," half full, half loud, half awful. Then it got later, half went home, the other half stayed on principle. As always, we belonged to the latter group. The music from the kitchen was too quiet to recognize, but loud enough to make us feel like something was still going on. The owner had long since slipped into that mode where he doesn't say anything that isn't absolutely necessary. The waitress moved automatically, fetching glasses, bringing glasses, occasionally uttering a remark that sounded like a worn coin.

I'd missed the point where I could have gotten up and paid without feeling ridiculous. There's always a window of time where you can still say, "That was nice, I'll be off then." Once you're past it, you automatically stay until the place closes. After that, nothing matters. You're way beyond any semblance of reason anyway. The leprechaun knew that. "You've crossed the invisible line," he said as I downed my third shot after midnight. "From here on out, it's bonus material. And bonus material is always the most embarrassing."

We weren't talking about anything anymore. The conversations had reached that stage where sentences were repeated as if someone had put on an old cassette tape. Harry was telling the story for the fifth time about how his boss had "completely underestimated" him back then. Heiner philosophized about how breakfast was overrated because you only eat something to bind the alcohol anyway. The slot machine player was already broke again, but stayed put because at least in last place he was only losing money and not his self-respect too. Manni dozed off intermittently and woke up again as soon as a new glass was placed on the table.

At some point, the clock became irrelevant. We'd all ignored our phones; the clock on the wall had stopped after some drunk had flicked a cigarette against it months ago. Time was now only: before the next beer, after the last shot, just before passing out, definitely over it. I only noticed that the air had changed. No longer that heavy night air, but a thin, early morning air that crept through the crack in the door when someone went out for a smoke and didn't close it properly.

The goblin was in a great mood. "A night without brakes," he cheered. "You know what that means: Morning has to come looking for you. And I love it when it finds you like an abandoned trash can in the driveway." He jumped onto the back of my chair, dangled his legs,

and watched my hands become less steady. I dropped my lighter twice, the cigarette burned right down to the filter before I stubbed it out, and the glass no longer found its way to my mouth as gracefully as at the beginning of the evening.

The waitress started tidying up without calling it "closing time." She stacked chairs where no one was sitting anymore and emptied ashtrays where only cold cigarette butts remained. "Last round," the owner said at some point, more out of politeness than conviction. We nodded, but ordered another round anyway. For us, "last round" is just a signal that we're starting to drink more slowly, not that we're stopping altogether.

Outside, it was getting brighter. First a diffuse gray, reflected in the windowpanes, then a pale blue that held no romance whatsoever. The street in front of the pub took on contours, shadows became objects: cars, garbage cans, a bicycle half-lying on the sidewalk. I got up for a smoke, staggered to the door, stepped out, and blinked. No birdsong, no kitschy morning scene. Just a cold breath hitting my face, and the thought: You should have been in bed long ago.

Morning caught me on the sidewalk, a cigarette dangling from my mouth, feeling as if someone had been slowly sawing away at the ground beneath my feet for decades, finally removing the last piece last night. I saw the first people heading to work. Jackets zipped up tight, bags slung over their shoulders, eyes fixed straight ahead. Clean faces, efficient movements, coffee in hand instead of beer. They glanced over, saw me standing in the doorway of the "last light" (a local bar/restaurant), my eyes red, my skin gray, and I could read in their eyes what I would have thought myself in the past: "I don't want to end up like this."

The goblin sat on my shoulder and looked out at the street with me. "There you have it," he said. "The parallel world. They go to work, pay rent, take care of children, build something that might last. You stand here, reeking of smoke and alcohol, and yet you think you've figured out something they don't. What exactly is it?" I didn't answer. Because I didn't have an answer that didn't sound ridiculous.

I stubbed out my cigarette, glanced up at the sky. City morning, no sun, just brightness. I suddenly felt out of place. Not in the pub—that was mine, I knew it, it smelled like me. But out here, on the sidewalk before 7:30, among fresh faces and tired workers who at least knew where they were going, I looked like a mistake in the picture. Someone who'd forgotten to leave the stage before the next act began.

“Come in, Grandpa,” the waitress called from the doorway. “You’re getting sunburned.” She grinned, but her eyes were soft. I turned and went back inside, back into the dimness of the pub. Inside, it was still night as long as no shutter rattled. The landlord pulled the blind down a little further, as if he wanted to shut out the outside world. “Another one?” he asked. I hesitated. The goblin whispered, “Now’s the point. If you have another one, the morning officially isn’t yours anymore.”

I took him. Of course.

There's a difference between "going to bed too late" and "just letting the morning drift by." One is human nature, the other is a concept. If you stay up until people are leaving for work, you've crossed a line that has nothing to do with tiredness anymore. You've officially opted

out of the shift that takes the day seriously. You've become a citizen of the residual zone, where time doesn't matter, only the distance to your next drink.

After I'd taken the "last one," I was sitting half on my stool, half off it. The others were in that same state where no one was really sitting up straight anymore, but no one was quite ready to say, "I can't go on." Heiner had his eyes half-closed, but he heard with astonishing accuracy whenever someone mentioned his name. Harry had slipped into that melancholic mode where he talked about his past as if it were a film he'd only partially acted in himself. The slot machine player had suddenly fallen silent. With him, that's always more dangerous than his quips. Manni stared at the table as if he could ward off the hangover that was already knocking at the door with sheer willpower.

The goblin was walking in circles on the back of my chair. "You are works of art," he said. "An installation called 'Men Who Forgot How Bed Works.' There could be an entrance fee for people from outside. 'Here you see the species Homo Kneipius, observable in its natural habitat, just before disaster.'" I wanted to push him off, but my hand couldn't find the right movement.

The waitress poured coffee into a cup without asking who had ordered it and placed it in front of me. "Drink it," she said. "Not because it will help, but because otherwise you'll collapse." The coffee tasted of filter coffee, of stale water, and of a desperate attempt to trick my body into thinking there was a plan. I drank it anyway. With every swallow, my stomach protested. Alcohol and coffee mixed in my empty stomach like two colleagues who hate each other but have to sit in the same office.

"Does any of you guys have anything to do today?" Heiner asked suddenly, his voice hoarse from too many cigarettes and too little sleep. It was a serious question. Not in the sense of "do you have any appointments," but in the sense of "is there anyone or anything who'll miss you if you collapse right now?" Harry laughed without humor. "I should go to the doctor later," he said. "Get my blood work done. If I show up like this, they'll send me straight to rehab. Maybe even rightly so." The slot machine player muttered, "I should go to the welfare office. Fill out a form. If I don't go, they'll cut my benefits. If I do go, they'll look at me and think, 'There he is again.'"

I thought for a moment. What was on the agenda today? A phone call I'd been putting off for weeks. A doctor's letter lying open on the kitchen table. A grandson who was at school at some point, probably not giving a thought to where his grandfather was. "I have nothing," I said. "I don't have to do anything. I should do a thousand things, but I don't have to do anything at all." It sounded like a kind of freedom. In reality, it was just another word for emptiness.

The goblin laughed. "You're free as an outlaw," he said. "No appointments, no obligations, no dates. You can do whatever you want all day long. And you want to: keep running away." He was right. Morning had caught us standing up – and instead of being startled, we pretended it was a lifestyle.

The innkeeper looked at the clock on his phone, because the one on the wall was dead. "I'm closing up soon," he said. "Not because I don't like you, but because I need to sleep before the delivery arrives. You can't stay here." That was the moment reality began to tentatively knock. We would soon have to go out onto the street. Into a world that was just waking up, while we were falling apart.

We paid as best we could. One forgot, one overpaid, one couldn't remember how much he'd already racked up yesterday. The beer mat with the tally marks looked like a little pencil resume. The landlord nodded, said nothing, just a "That's fine," which could mean anything from "I'll sort it out later" to "You'll all kill me one day."

Outside it was almost light by now. Not a beautiful morning, not a postcard scene. A gray, ordinary city day, pretending everyone had the same starting point. The four of us stood in front of the door like poorly conceived extras. Heiner lit another cigarette right away, even though his lungs were already wheezing with every movement. Harry looked up and down the street, as if deciding whether to go one way to the doctor's office or stagger home the other. The slot machine player stared at his shoes as if they had hurt him. Manni rubbed his face, leaving red marks.

"Now comes the ultimate challenge," said the goblin. "To show up upright somewhere, where people function in daylight, with so little sleep and so much residual alcohol. And to act as if you belong." He sat on my head as if I were a discarded helmet.

Heiner muttered, "I'll just go straight to the shop across the street and get some rolls. Then I'll look like someone who's having breakfast and not like someone who's just lost what little dignity they had left." Harry spontaneously decided to go to the doctor. "If I go home now, I'll just lie down and not wake up until tomorrow," he said. "And then I'll have to listen to the same crap again next week. Better to go today." The slot machine player wanted to "just pop home," which for him usually meant: falling down, staying down, and eventually waking up with a headache and a forgotten obligation.

I stood there, not knowing what to do with myself. My apartment meant silence, mirrors, unopened letters. Walking outside meant watching others get their lives in order while I remained offbeat. "Go for a walk," whispered the goblin. "Act normal. Walk past the bakery, the supermarket, pretend you're one of those people planning their day. It's almost like acting."

So I left. Not home, not to another pub—that would have been too crass even for me. I just started walking. Feet outside, in a direction that felt like "farther away from the back of the pack." The city at that hour was a different place. Cars with people inside who looked like they'd been asleep. Women with ponytails, men in shirts, workers with thermoses. Nobody smelled of booze. I, on the other hand, stank like an old bar counter.

There was a queue at the bakery. People in work clothes, a mother with a child in pajamas under her jacket, a pensioner in a hat who had probably been up since five. I joined the back of the line, without knowing why. Probably because I thought if I had a bread roll in my hand, I would stand out less. The conversations around me sounded foreign: "Meeting," "Daycare," "Missed the bus," "Going shopping later." Words from a world where you catch the morning sitting at a table, not standing outside a pub.

The goblin commented on every sentence. "That person up front has more planned today than you will in a week," he whispered. "That guy in the suit will complain about his colleagues later, but he'll make money. And you're buying yourself a roll now to pretend you're participating in something." I wanted to beat him out of my head, but he wasn't wrong.

When it was my turn, I didn't even know what I wanted to order. "Uh... two rolls," I managed. The saleswoman looked at me, a fraction longer than was polite. Her nose twitched slightly.

She recognized the pub smell, the mix of smoke, beer, and stale sweat. She said nothing, packed the rolls, took my money, and wished me "a nice day," without believing I would have one.

Outside, I held the bag in my hand and felt even more out of place than before. I had no kitchen that smelled of coffee, no family sitting around the table. Just an apartment with an ashtray and stacks of papers. "You look like an extra in someone else's morning show," the goblin said. "Props type: man with a bread bag, empty inside." I kept walking. Away from the bakeries, away from the people whose mouths smelled of toothpaste.

Morning had definitely caught up with me. Not all at once, but with that slow, merciless light that leaves no room for excuses. It wasn't dramatic. No breakdown, no howling in the street. Just this very clear feeling: You don't belong here anymore. Not at this hour, not in this state. And yet, there I was, awake, standing.

I wandered aimlessly for a while, holding the bread bag like an alibi no one was asking for. The streets filled up, buses arrived, disgorging people who looked like they had a reason to be going somewhere. People were watering flowerpots on balconies, a vacuum cleaner was running somewhere, a dog was being walked, a child was crying because they had to go to daycare. Just normal life, this banal horror.

The goblin continued commenting, but more quietly. "That's the shift you've missed," he muttered. "For years. While you were sitting in the back at night, they were learning not to collapse in the morning. You're like someone who sits in a pub next to a train station for years, wondering why everyone eventually leaves except him."

I stopped at a bus stop and sat down on the bench, even though my legs hadn't quite grasped that they were now getting a break. The rolls rustled in the bag, and my stomach half-heartedly rumbled. Hunger is a tricky thing when you've been drinking all night. Your body doesn't know if it wants something or just rest. I bit into one anyway. It tasted of flour, air, and guilt. Better than nothing, but not good.

A few people at the bus stop gave me those quick, cautious glances you give alcoholics in the morning. Not openly hostile, more a mixture of pity and distancing. "There, but not me." I knew that look; I used to give it myself whenever I saw someone on the train who smelled of alcohol. "He's screwed up," I thought back then. "Not me." Today, I was the one who'd screwed up. And they were probably thinking, "I hope never."

The goblin sat down next to me, watching the bus numbers go by. "You could just get on," he said. "Any direction, any final stop. See if there's anything there that doesn't look like your life." I snorted. "And then?" I asked. "Get off at the other end, just as tired, just as empty, only with a different view?" He smiled crookedly. "Sometimes a view is something, too."

I thought about it briefly. Getting on a bus, going far away, arriving somewhere where no one knows the last car, no one knows me, no one counts the marks on my beer mat. But I knew that wasn't me. I'm not the type who gets on a bus and changes his life. I'm the one who sits at the bus stop until he gets cold, and then goes back to the apartment he knows. Escape in his mind, retreat in reality.

So at some point I got up and walked home. The walk seemed longer than usual. Every step was a small confession: Yes, I stayed up all night. Yes, I look it. Yes, I know how it looks.

The goblin walked beside me, hands in his pockets, as if it were too early for him too. "Do you know what the problem is when morning catches you standing up?" he asked. "You notice everything. You see others starting while you're still at the end. If you were asleep, you'd miss all of that. Sleep protects you."

“Sleep is the only thing I’ve really gotten bad at,” I said. “I’m better at drinking. And at looking away.” He nodded. “You’re a pro at avoidance,” he confirmed. “That’s why morning is dangerous. It’s unavoidable. It comes no matter how much you ignore it. And one day you’ll be standing there, old, with empty bottles in your mind, wondering how many mornings you missed standing up, awake in bed.”

Upstairs in the apartment, the air was stale, even though I'd left the window ajar. The ashtray on the table looked just like it had the night before, the letters beside it like they had last week, the cup of stale coffee like it had been through a lifetime. I put down the bag of rolls, took off my jacket, and sat down. Suddenly, the tiredness wasn't just in my head anymore, but all over my body. A heavy, dull tug, as if someone were pulling at my bones and saying, "Sit down, lie down, do anything that doesn't involve standing."

I ate the second roll, tasteless, just to pass the time. Then I picked up my phone, checked the missed calls, the messages I'd ignored. The names listed all had their own mornings. Work, kids, appointments, life. And here I was, sitting with breadcrumbs on the table and a liver that was probably already writing petitions to the universe.

The goblin had climbed onto the window frame and was looking out. "Do you see them down there?" he asked. "The woman with the child, the man with the tool bag, the old woman with the shopping trolley? They have problems too. They're not all happy. But they have routine. They might have fewer falls, but they have more direction. You only have falls." I didn't look. I'd seen enough real pictures from that morning.

“What do you actually want from me?” I finally asked. “That I go to bed at ten from today onward, stay sober from tomorrow, get my life in order from next week? You know perfectly well that’s not me.” He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t want anything,” he said. “I’m not your therapist. I’m your witness. I’m just here to remind you, when morning catches you standing up, that you can’t pretend this is normal.”

I lay down without undressing. My shoes stayed in the corner, my trousers on, my shirt open. My body was grateful for every inch of horizontal space. My mind was still upright. Images from the last few hours flashed through my mind: the bar, the smoke, the faces, the gray morning outside the pub, the bakery, the bus stop. And somewhere in between, the feeling that I was standing on the edge of something I could no longer control.

"You know," I heard the goblin say just before I drifted off, "that this wasn't your last morning standing. You'll do it again. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not next week. But at some point, you'll be back at the back, missing your chance to get off, standing out there again while others go to work. It's not about whether you avoid it. It's only about whether you eventually realize your legs are getting tired."

I mumbled something, maybe a "Yes," maybe a "Leave me alone," I don't remember. Sleep eventually came, heavy and restless, full of little twitches, as if my body couldn't believe it was finally allowed to wind down. Outside, the day grew louder; inside, quieter. Morning had

caught me standing up. Luckily, I had eventually managed to lie down. That, too, is a form of survival: not always in time, but at least in time enough.

When I woke up hours later, it was afternoon. My head was throbbing, my mouth was dry, my stomach upset. Just a normal day after a sleepless night. I sat up slowly and looked at the table. The bread bag was empty, the letters were still unopened, and my cell phone lay there, silent. The imp was sitting on the back of the chair, grinning. "Well?" he asked. "Ready for tomorrow night?"

I sighed. "Not yet," I said. "But ask me again in a few hours." He nodded. "I will," he said. "The evening is patient. The morning is not."

Chapter 24 – The Goblin Who Laughs at My Liver

I've never seen my liver, but I know its sounds. Not literally, of course; it doesn't exactly jingle like a cash register when another beer flows through it. But I know that dull ache on my right side, that burning sensation somewhere under my ribs, that pops up when I've once again thought that the sixth beer "doesn't matter anymore." The liver is like an overworked waiter inside your own body: it runs, it filters, it cleans up after you, and you only notice it when it starts dropping the plates.

The goblin loves her. Not in the sense of "protecting" her, more like someone who's chosen a favorite target. "Your liver is my workplace," he likes to say. "That's where I clock in every morning, that's where I get my fun. As long as it's still twitching, I'm in business here." Sometimes, when I have that sharp pain, he taps me right on the spot. "Can you hear it moaning?" he asks. "It's shouting, 'Colleagues, I'm understaffed!'—and you answer with a shot of schnapps."

I know my liver looks like a crime scene if you cut it open. Doctors call it "fatty," "damaged," "overburdened." I call it: well-deserved. You can't chug beer for three decades like your body's a bottomless pit and then expect everything inside to look like it's straight out of a health brochure. My body's like an old building that hasn't been renovated. My liver's the boiler that's been running since the eighties, making a different sound every year.

There was a time when I tried to act sensible. Stupid idea, but it got me to a waiting room. My family doctor—the kind with glasses, clean hands, and that look that says, "I've seen too many of you"—advised me, after a blood test, to "think about my alcohol consumption." When a doctor says "think about it," he means, "If you keep going like this, you'll soon be a regular in the ward where nobody goes to the toilet alone anymore."

So there I was, sitting in his office, the smell of disinfectant in my nostrils, my liver function test results in an envelope. The imp was perched on the chair next to me, swinging his legs and whistling softly. "Well, excited?" he grinned. "Soon you'll find out how much residual function you have left." I pretended to be flipping through a magazine where people were writing about "work-life balance." I was the complete opposite. For me, it was "Work: hardly any," "Life: pub," "Balance: hanging onto the bar."

The doctor sat down opposite me and laid down the sheet of paper with my test results. "So," he said, "we need to talk." I hate that phrase. There's no context in which it heralds anything good. He talked about Gamma-GT, GOT, GPT—numbers that sound like license plate numbers but are really just codes for, "Your liver is screaming." I watched as his finger ran over the numbers. Everything that should have been high was low, everything that should have been low was high. I was the opposite of a stock market darling.

"You drink, don't you?" he asked at some point, as if that weren't already obvious. I nodded. "Occasionally," I lied reflexively. The doctor snorted. "Occasionally," he repeated slowly. "What does that mean for you?" I could have said, "Every day." Instead, I listed the days I drank "nothing." There weren't many, and the longer I talked, the worse it sounded. He looked at me, with that mixture of professional detachment and human exasperation. "Your liver is at its limit," he said. "It's not completely broken yet, but it's struggling. If you don't slow down now, it'll eventually give out."

The goblin nodded enthusiastically. "Did you hear?" he whispered. "She's not driving anymore. Then I'll be standing here alone in front of the counter and won't have a counter to stand in." I felt my stomach clench. Not from fear of death, I was too hardened for that. More from the dull realization: I'd ignored it for so long that it was embarrassing to act surprised now.

“What does ‘brake’ mean?” I asked, even though the answer was obvious. Doctors like that word because it sounds less alarming than “stop.” He sighed. “Less,” he said. “Significantly less. Ideally, not at all. At least not for a while. Your levels are no longer in the fun zone. This is serious now.” I nodded, looked down at the floor, at my hands. They looked like the hands of someone who carries a lot. I mostly carry bottles.

I left the doctor's office with a slip of paper in my hand, telling me to come back in three months. Check-up. Liver function tests. "To see if there's any improvement." The imp rummaged through my brain as if it were filled with appointments. "Three months," he said. "Drink less for three months, at least. Can we manage that?" I gave a short, unfunny laugh. "We?" I asked. "You're the one who drags me to the pub." He tilted his head. "I'm not forcing you. I'm just offering advice."

In the first few days afterward, I pretended to take my liver seriously. I bought water, ostentatiously placed it in the fridge as if it were a new roommate. I said things like, "Only two beers today," while sitting at the back of the bar. The landlord raised an eyebrow, the waitress grinned, the others laughed. "The doctor gave him the yellow card," Harry commented. I drank two beers, went home early, and almost felt like I'd won a small victory.

The goblin sat on my shoulder, clapping sarcastically. "Good boy," he said. "Two beers are like a diet with two fewer pizzas. Your liver is silently applauding with emotion." I lay down in bed, couldn't sleep, stared at the ceiling. My body was confused. It didn't know this feeling: going to bed half-sober, waking up half-sober. My head was clearer than I wanted it to be. There was no more soft veil, only the harsh gaze upon my own thoughts. Perhaps that was the moment I understood why I drank so much. Not because of my liver. Because of the emptiness beyond it.

On the third day, the pub was packed again. Midmonth, someone had a birthday, someone was in trouble, someone had money. I stood at the bar as usual, saw the glasses, heard the laughter, the music we'd heard a thousand times before. I told myself, "Just two today." The

imp grinned. "Liver cleanse light," he said. The landlord set down the first beer; it was cold, golden, familiar. I took a sip, and all my good intentions suddenly tasted thinner than the foam.

My liver sent a faint signal from somewhere in the back, that tingling sensation that says, "You know what you're doing." I did know. I drank anyway.

It's astonishing how well the liver can defend itself without saying a single word. It doesn't go on strike loudly; it simply sends you signals. Fatigue that just won't go away. Morning sickness that doesn't disappear after a couple of sips of water. That awful feeling like someone is pressing a blunt fork against your ribs from the inside. The liver isn't a dramatic organ like the heart, which immediately resorts to death threats. The liver is a silent accountant. It keeps going and going until the numbers no longer add up.

The imp reads these numbers without a lab. "Yellowish today," he says, looking at me in the mirror. "Skin tone: dishwater with nicotine." He taps my eyes. "It's not white anymore. It's such a lovely office-hall beige." I look in the mirror, trying to convince myself that the light is to blame, the fluorescent tube in the bathroom, the tired morning. But somewhere deep down I know: your body shows you what you're doing to it. You just have to look, instead of looking away.

The three months the doctor gave me were a kind of bad gamble. I told myself, "I'll drink less, then the test results will be better." The inner voice said, "You'll drink differently, then the results might be different, but you'll stay the same." We were both half right. I managed to drink less a few days a week, skip a few shots, and cut a few nights short. My liver responded with less sharp pain, more of a dull ache. Slow progress.

My health had its own section in the back row. "So, how's her liver?" the landlord would sometimes ask as he placed my beer in front of me. "Has she quit yet?" Harry was worse. "You should tip her," he'd say. "She works the hardest here." The waitress would occasionally look at me as if I were a bet that was already half lost. "Work less for us," she'd say. "You're the only customer who wins by not coming."

The slot machine player, who usually preferred staring at his own numbers, also had a theory. "The liver is like a slot machine," he explained. "You can keep hammering away, but eventually it'll run out of money. The difference is: with a slot machine, you can walk away. With your liver, you're stuck." I nodded. "At least the slot machine puts on colorful lights when it gives up," I said. "My liver just goes dark."

The goblin laughed himself silly. "You talk about the thing as if it weren't there," he said. "But it's sitting in there, trying to translate your stupidity into enzymes." Sometimes I actually imagined my liver had a face. A small, tired thing, dark circles under its eyes, yellow skin, trembling hands. An overworked secretary, tearing open the mail I don't want to read every day, and then filing away my incoming beers.

When the three months were up, I was back in the waiting room. Same magazines, same smells, same anxiety—which I didn't want to call anxiety. The idiot was nervously excited, like a child before receiving their report card. "I gave it my all," he announced. "If he says everything's okay now, then that's proof that the system is broken." I was hoping for some kind of miracle that would tell me: "You may be an idiot, but you're a tough one."

The doctor looked at the new results, then at the old ones, then back at me. "It's a little better," he said. "Not good. But better." He pointed to numbers that had moved down slightly. Gamma-GT, something like that. "You've apparently reduced it somewhat," he noted. I nodded. "I've tried," I said. I left it open how many times I'd failed. "But you're far from out of the woods," he continued. "This isn't a phase. This is a fundamental change that's needed."

The goblin rolled his eyes. "A fundamental change," he sniffed. "That's what they all say. As if it were just a new T-shirt. For you, it means living differently. And you've seen what you're like when you're even remotely sober. You couldn't handle that mentally." He was right. It wasn't just the addiction. It was also the question: Who am I if I'm not the one hanging out at the back of the bar? Who am I without a beer glass in my hand and smoke in my face? What's left besides freckles and bills?

The doctor asked if I wanted to get some support. Addiction counseling, detox, a self-help group. He gave me addresses, printed out slips of paper, and handed them to me. I took them like flyers someone handing out in the pedestrian zone. The imp chuckled. "Look," he said, "invitations to a world where you sit in a circle with people who talk about their feelings and drink water. Doesn't that sound tempting?" I looked at the slips of paper, put them away, knowing full well they would end up in the kitchen next to the unopened letters.

Outside the doctor's office, I stopped and lit a cigarette, even though the doctor had told me, "Smoking isn't helping your liver." I almost laughed at him back then. "It has so much else to do," I'd said. "It's not going to be arguing about one more cigarette." But I knew: Every drag was another mark on a list someone was keeping about me. Doctor, liver, fate, whoever.

The goblin perched on the railing, looking at me. "You have a choice," he said. "Not today, not tomorrow, but in general. You can keep drinking until your liver gives out. Then people will talk about you in the past tense. Or you can eventually bust your ass so hard that you see the place at least a little less often. Both have their drawbacks. With the second option, I'll have to find another complete idiot." I took a drag on my cigarette, blew out the smoke, and watched it disappear into the air.

“You know what annoys me most?” I asked him. “It’s not that I could die. That’s bound to happen eventually anyway. What annoys me is that I have no guarantee how long this will go on. It would almost be easier if someone said, ‘You have two years, do what you want with them.’ Then I could plan. But as it is… I’m just stuck between having to and carrying on.” He grinned. “You want a deadline from life. Nice. But that’s not how it works. The only thing you get are warnings. And your liver is slowly laughing at them.”

In the back of the group, everyone was politely curious. "So, what did the doc say?" the innkeeper asked. I shrugged. "He says I'm tough," I mumbled. "But not indestructible." Harry raised his glass to me. "Tough is good," he said. "Indestructible is a lie." The waitress placed the beer in front of me, this time with water next to it. "I'm not just going to put this in front of you without saying anything anymore," she said. "If you're going to break yourself, at least I want to be able to say I put a glass of water in front of you now and then." I actually drank it. Not all of it, but more than usual.

Over the next few weeks, my liver continued to make itself known, sometimes loudly, sometimes softly. The goblin laughed at every movement. "See?" he said. "It's still alive. Otherwise, you wouldn't feel anything anymore." I didn't know whether that was meant to be comforting or threatening. Perhaps both.

It's easier to get used to being sick than to getting well. Being healthy is for people who realized early enough when they needed to stop. Being sick is for us, who missed our chance and are now making do with leftovers. My liver is no longer just an organ; it's a topic of conversation. In my mind, at the bar, in the waiting room. It's what we talk about when we're not discussing missed opportunities or missing tip jars.

The goblin has started treating her like a separate person. “Your liver and I are business partners,” he says. “I bring the raw material, she does the processing. And you’re the fool who signs for the delivery.” Sometimes, when I’m lying in bed after a long night and feel that dull thumping, he leans over me and whispers, “She’s knocking. She’s asking if you’re even aware of what you’re doing to her.” I don’t answer. I push her away like everyone who knows too much.

There was one evening at the pub that's etched in my memory. Not because it was more spectacular than others, but because it so casually revealed how far I've come. The pub was only half full, a perfectly ordinary weekday. Heiner wasn't there, Harry had to get up early, the slot machine player was taking a "break" from gambling, which meant he was sitting with his arms crossed, staring at his beer. I was standing at the bar, drinking more slowly than usual because my body was still tired from the previous weekend.

In the corner sat a guy I barely knew. I knew he'd driven a truck once, that was all. He looked worse than usual today. Grayer, thinner, with that yellow tint that wasn't from the light. The waitress put a water in front of him without him asking. "He doesn't drink anymore," the owner whispered when he noticed me looking over. "He was a regular here before you even lost your first ID. His liver's shot. He was in the hospital, rehab, the whole shebang. They told him one more fall and he's out."

The goblin jumped onto the counter, his gaze flickering back and forth between us. "Future self," he said. "Attention, demonstration object." The man in the corner held his hands around the water glass as if it were fragile. He didn't look up, didn't speak to anyone, and drank in small sips. No beer, no liquor, no cigarette. Just water. I stared at him as if I were studying a warning on a cigarette pack.

Eventually he stood up, shuffled slowly to the bar, and laid down a banknote. "For the water and old times," he said to the bartender. "And if I ever get the idea to order anything else here again, punch me." The bartender nodded, took the money, and put his hand on his shoulder. "Take care," he said. It sounded different than when we say that to each other. Less of a platitude, more of a command.

The man left. The door closed. The last light was just an ordinary pub again. The old man turned to me. "He's one of those guys who quit," he said. "Not out of willpower, but because his body said stop. He doesn't have many options left." I nodded, feeling that unpleasant twinge that had nothing to do with my liver. A kind of envious respect. Not for his illness, but for the fact that he'd at least managed to pull himself out before someone had to carry him out of the place in an ambulance.

“Do you think I could manage that too?” I asked, more quietly than I’d intended. The goblin looked at me, seriously. “Physically, maybe,” he said. “Mentally, you’re more difficult. You’re not just addicted to the stuff. You’re addicted to the life around it. To the role you play here. To the bar, the people, the noise. Quitting isn’t just about relieving your liver. Quitting is

about rebuilding yourself. You’re wired so that everything here is geared towards drinking. Without that, you’re just standing in an empty apartment with yourself.”

That was the point where I realized that the fear of my liver isn't just the fear of dying. It's the fear of what comes before: the time when I might no longer be able to drink, but still have to live. When I wake up in the morning and my liver no longer burns, but my head does, because it's no longer numb. When I'm sitting at the back, drinking water, while the others are chugging the last of their courage. When I have to watch Clurichaun laugh at some other person's liver because he's grown bored with mine.

“I won’t be here forever,” the goblin said suddenly. That was new. He usually spoke as if he were immortal. “Eventually, your show will be over. Either because you pull yourself together and I have to find someone who’s less of a brake. Or because you kick the bucket. I’m bound to you, but not to your body. If it can’t go on anymore, I’ll move on. You stay here. Or maybe not.” He smiled thinly. “You have more to lose than I do.”

I thought of my grandchildren, still young enough to see me only as "Grandpa," who sometimes tells funny stories and always wants to go outside to smoke. I thought of my daughter, who had long since stopped lecturing me because she knew it was pointless. I thought of my liver, doing its job in there while I ignored its toll. And I thought of what it would be like if I suddenly woke up in a hospital, tubes, machines, a doctor saying, "You were lucky. Or unlucky, depending on how you look at it."

The goblin looked me in the eye. "You think it'll all come crashing down eventually," he said. "But most of the time it's not a crash. It's a slow death. One less beer, one more day of pain, another red blood cell count. And you're sitting there in the middle, cracking jokes." I wanted to tell him to shut up, but all I could manage was, "I know." And that was worse than if I hadn't said anything at all.

Later, on my way home, each step felt like pushing an old machine up a mountain. The air was cold, the streetlights cast that harsh light that accentuates every wrinkle. I placed my hand on the side where I sometimes felt a twinge. Not real pain, more like a reminder. "I'm still here," it seemed to say. "I'm still working. But I'm tired of working overtime."

At home, I sat down at the kitchen table, a glass of water in front of me, which for once I drank consciously, not absentmindedly. The goblin perched on the back of the chair, looked at me without a word. That was almost worse than his sayings. "Well?" I asked after a while. "What do you say?" He smiled wearily. "Nothing today," he said. "Your liver has talked enough today. I'll come back later, when you've forgotten what it said."

I drank the water, lay down, my hand on my stomach, as if I could somehow soothe something with it. Maybe it was just my imagination, but it hurt less that night. Or maybe I was too exhausted to notice. In the morning I woke up, my head heavy, my mouth dry, my liver sluggish. The imp was already sitting on the edge of the bed again. "All right," he said. "One night of mercy. Don't overdo it. The siren will be up again tonight."

I sighed and knew: He was right. My liver wasn't suddenly healthy just because I'd drunk one less night. But it wasn't completely ruined either. And somewhere in between, in that shitty in-between state, a little goblin was laughing, knowing exactly how far he could push me before everything snapped.

Chapter 25 – A bar is not a home, but it's warmer than outside

There are people who go to a bar to "get out." I go to a bar to avoid going home. That's a difference. Someone who wants to get out has a place to return to later. I have four walls, a mattress, a kitchen table, an ashtray, a stack of letters—but that's not home. Home is a feeling, and for me, it smells of warm air, old wood, and spilled beer. In other words, it smells like "the bottom of the barrel."

The goblin says the bar is my living room with a liquor license. "You do everything here that normal people do at home," he says. "You eat, you drink, you talk, you argue, you get bored, you stare at something flickering. Except here you have to pay and others can overhear if you collapse." He's right. In my apartment, I don't talk to anyone. In the back room, I talk to everyone and pretend I like it here. The truth lies somewhere in between, at this sticky bar.

On one of those evenings when the cold seeps through the cracks like a reminder notice, I ended up at the pub way too early. I could have easily sat in my apartment for another hour, made some tea, or done some pointless household chores. Instead, I arrived almost as soon as the doors opened. The waitress was still putting away chairs, the owner hadn't even descaled the coffee machine, and the light was brighter than usual, that stark neon that makes everything look more honest than it should be.

“You’re early,” the bartender remarked, not accusingly, more as a matter-of-fact observation. I shrugged. “My apartment’s freezing,” I said. “The heating’s old, and so was the previous tenant.” The waitress glanced at me, then at the door, where the chill still lingered. “A bar isn’t a living room,” she murmured. “But I understand.” She placed a coffee in front of me without my asking. Beer at 4:30 in the morning makes even the most clueless person look bad.

The imp was already perched on the tap, as if he'd been sitting there since last night. "You're like a cat sitting in front of the door before anyone unlocks it," he grinned. "Except at least cats groom themselves." I grimaced. "Home's cold," I repeated. "And loud." Loud in my head, loud in the silence, loud in the hum of the refrigerator, which works harder than I do. The apartment isn't a sanctuary. It's a hall of mirrors, and there's only one person in it—and he's drunk.

The others trickled in slowly. Heiner arrived with hunched shoulders, as if afraid the cold would drive the last nerve out of his neck. Harry looked like someone who'd decided to "leave early today"—you could tell it was just a theoretical consideration. The slot machine player had his hands deep in his pockets, his eyes ready to flee. They all said things like, "It's no better at home," "My wife's gone crazy," or "My neighbors are driving me nuts." Basically, they were saying: The bar isn't home, but it's warmer than what's officially called home.

“What’s the difference, anyway?” I asked at one point, as the four of us stood at the bar, pretending it was our natural habitat. “Between a home and a bar?” Heiner gave a dry laugh. “At home, they ask you why you are the way you are,” he said. “Here, they just ask what you want to drink.” Harry nodded. “At home, you have to explain what the money’s gone on,” he added. “Here, everyone knows what it’s for.”

The goblin tapped me on the head. "Home is where there would be people who would be disappointed if you perished," he said. "Here, you're just a regular customer they miss because

you brought in revenue and were good for a joke." I took a sip and felt the sentence sink in. In the backwater, they know my name, my stories, my quirks. But no one has ever said, "Please get home safe." They say, "Have a good trip."

There's this guy who's been sleeping outside for months. He sometimes sits in front of the last light when it's still closed, with his plastic bag, his life shriveled up inside. We call him "Roll" because he's always sitting on an old sleeping mat. He rarely comes in, only if someone pays for his beer or the owner brings him a coffee. "He's got nothing," the waitress sometimes says when she brings him the paper cup. "No home, no mail, no landlord. He picks up his letters from the ground."

I see Rolle and think: I'm not far from him, just better dressed. I still have a door I can lock, a doorbell with my name on it, a shower that does more than just drip. But the inner distance isn't great. Rolle says, "Outside is tough, but at least I know where I stand." I say, "Inside is tough because I never know if I'll still fit in." We meet somewhere in between, at the edge of the bar, where it's warm as long as the door isn't open too long.

One evening, when winter briefly decided to make a real comeback, Rolle stayed inside longer than usual. It had snowed, the snow had already turned into brown slush, and the innkeeper didn't fancy a frozen bum outside. "Sit in the back," he said. "As long as you don't cause any trouble, you can stay until we close." Rolle accepted the offer like a dog accepts a dry roll: without dignity, but gratefully.

We watched him sit at the table, his hands around his beer glass, his shoulders slightly slumped, as if for the first time in days he felt his body held together by more than one jacket. "For him, the bar is home right now," the waitress said quietly. "Not just warmer than outside. Simply the only place where no one will kick him out." The leprechaun nodded. "You're all just a bill or two away from sitting right there," he commented. "Except he's not pretending it's by choice."

I thought of my apartment with the cold hallway. Of the neighbors who half-greet me, half-eyes me, when I show up in the stairwell at midnight and the elevator is out of order again. Of the mailbox, which contains more threats than greetings. I know the difference between a roof over my head and home. The last light fills the gap. It's the waiting room for people who are neither quite in nor quite out.

"What would you do if the bar closed tomorrow?" the goblin suddenly asked. "Imagine the owner puts up a sign: 'Closed for good.' No more beer, no bar, no chairs, no waitress. Just you and your apartment." I almost panicked at the thought. The idea of the place simply disappearing felt like losing a body part you thought you didn't need until it was gone.

“Then,” I said slowly, “I’d probably go to a different bar.” The goblin shook his head. “Not the same,” he said. “You can’t just move like a potted plant. You’re grown into this place. Into the bar, into the air, into the faces. In another bar, you’re just the stranger. Here, you’re the loser with a regular spot. That’s a difference.” And as sad as it sounded, he was right. The Last Light isn’t just a bar. It’s the only home where I don’t have to explain my failures.

You only realize how much you've been using a bar as your living room when it briefly pretends to be a place with rules. It was on one of those evenings when half the city suddenly felt important because some football match was on. One team against another, both in colors that looked like badly laundered work clothes. The place was more crowded than usual; at the

front of the bar stood the casual customers, the ones who normally just grab a can of beer at the corner store. At the back, around the regulars' table, it was more cramped, louder, and the air was thicker than the foam on the head of the beer.

The bartender had turned up the TV because everyone wanted "atmosphere." All we wanted was our miserable peace and quiet, but when the bar is full, the place belongs to the loudest. Heiner cursed the "event drinkers," Harry commented on every missed scoring opportunity as if he'd blown a Bundesliga goal himself, the slot machine player ignored everything and still stared at the screen as if the numbers there meant anything. I sat where I always sat, with my back to the wall, my face to the bar, the imp on my shoulder.

“Your living room is rented out today,” he said. “You’re just a subtenant now. Those people up front have taken over the house, with all the fanfare and shouting.” He was right. The last room felt like an apartment suddenly invaded by relatives you never wanted to see. Everyone was waving their arms, shouting, clapping, getting in the way. The beer flowed faster, and so did the money. But the warmth that usually kept us together was now just stress.

The waitress occasionally cast annoyed glances around the room. She had no time for jokes, only for full trays. The owner shouted out orders as if he were conducting an orchestra of complete idiots. "Two pilsners, three wheat beers, four shots, one on credit, one on the house," – the whole shebang. We regulars were just bystanders today. Our quips were lost in the roar of the football match, our jokes bounced off the wall of jeers.

Rolle sat outside today. No room for him inside, and the innkeeper didn't have the patience to deal with a freezing bum. I caught a glimpse of him through the window as I walked by, curled up, a plastic bag in his lap. "You're packed today," the old man said. "But your seat's still free, even if only for beer and not for peace and quiet." It sounded cynical, but it was true: the bar was overflowing, and yet there was this empty space inside me, usually filled by the dull hum of normalcy.

Midway through the second half, one of the partygoers got carried away. The kind of guy with a fresh jacket, a fresh haircut, but still spouting old jokes. He'd had enough beer to think he was funny. He was half-dancing, half-shouting, bumping into the wrong people. Suddenly, he was standing at our table, patting Heiner on the shoulder like they'd been best friends for years. "Well, you pensioners," he called out, "out for a night out again?"

Heiner looked at him like he'd been bitten by an insect. "Sit somewhere else, kid," he growled. "This isn't game night." The guy laughed, grabbed Heiner's beer, and took a swig. "You're all already drunk," he said. "You won't even notice the theft." Harry half stood up, Manni muttered something about "respect," and the slot machine player blinked as if calculating when the fight would start. The goblin rubbed his hands together with glee. "Oh, now it's getting interesting," he chuckled.

The bartender was quicker. "Leave the regulars alone," he shouted from the bar. "They've spent more here than you have in a year." The guy made a dismissive gesture, threw the rest of Heiner's beer on the floor, and turned back towards the television. It wasn't a big scandal, not even a fight. Just a small, unpleasant moment that made it clear: for some people, we're just part of the scenery. Old guys at the table are part of the scene, sure, but they're a nuisance if they don't fit the atmosphere.

The waitress came over to us later, when the noise had briefly subsided. "Everything okay?" she asked. Heiner was still staring at the puddle of beer drying under his chair. "I used to be the one who spilled beer on other people," he muttered. "Now my glass is considered decoration." She sighed and mopped the floor as best she could. "Today is an exception," she said. "Tomorrow the place is yours again."

"And then nobody again," whispered the goblin. "Bars are orphanages for adults. Most don't stay long. Only a few get stuck." I looked around. The loud guys at the front, who would eventually be taken away in a taxi. Us in the back, who would eventually stagger home, reeling in the dark. The bar, which would then stand still again. It was like a stage where the same play is always performed, only with different extras.

When the game was over—I forgot who won, probably none of us—the place emptied. The partygoers left, leaving behind empty glasses and full volume. The air was thicker than before, the ashtrays fuller, the waitress paler. The owner turned the TV down, then off. It was as if someone were returning the living room after strangers had used it for a party.

“Right,” said the innkeeper, “now let’s take a breath.” He placed a round of drinks on the table for us, this time without asking. “House round,” he said. “For those who always stay after everyone else has left.” The waitress sat down on a stool near us and pushed her hair back from her face. “You guys are a handful,” she said to us. “But at least you know where the ashtray is.”

I thought: That's the difference between a bar and home. At home, you have to clean up your own mess. In a bar, someone else does it for you – for money and your sanity. You're not just buying alcohol, you're also buying the illusion that someone else is taking care of your mess while you pretend everything's still somehow manageable.

The goblin leaned back. “You’re confusing service with intimacy,” he said. “Just because someone empties your pile of cigarette butts doesn’t mean they’re carrying your life burden.” I watched the waitress empty the next ashtray. She didn’t look at me. She looked at the cigarette butts, the glasses, the clock. She had her own home, her own mess to deal with after she’d cleaned up ours.

Late that night, when the place was as empty as it had been at the beginning, the Last Light actually felt like home for a moment. Not because it was beautiful. Because it was familiar. The stains on the bar, the broken clock, the same song that always came on the jukebox whenever someone forgot to change the playlist. The owner drying tired glasses, the waitress rubbing her back. Us at the table, half drunk, half awake.

“You know,” said the goblin, “a bar is always a temporary home. For some nights, for some years. But eventually, someone closes the door, either the landlord or life itself. And then you’re left outside. And it’s cold outside.” I looked at the door, behind which the remnants of the night still lingered. And I knew: As long as the place was open, I would sit here. Not because it was my home. But because it was the only place that would still let me in without asking questions.

There's a moment, just before the bartender turns up the lights, when the bar is at its most honest. The music is quieter, the conversations slower, the faces sharper. The alcohol has done its work, but sleep hasn't quite taken over yet. Everyone's teetering between "just one

more beer" and "if I don't leave now, I'll never get up." It's the hour when you realize how little you actually want to go home—and how little the bar can compensate for that.

One night it hit me particularly hard. No specific reason, no argument, no devastating news. Just this creeping thought, stuck fast like chewing gum to a shoe: If I go home now, there's nothing waiting for me. No light in the window, no "Where have you been?", no plate on the table, no laughter from another room. Just the cold kitchen, the silent walls, and the look in the mirror that says: "You're the reason no one's waiting here anymore."

The goblin realized this time it was deeper. He was unusually calm, sitting on the rim of my glass, looking at me without grinning. "You've been pretending for too long that this doesn't bother you," he said. "This 'I don't need anyone, I can manage on my own' thing. Sounds cool at the bar, but it's less impressive in the hallway of your apartment." I shrugged, drank the rest, and felt it sink heavily into my mouth.

Heiner said his goodbyes, earlier than usual. "I have an appointment at the office tomorrow," he mumbled. "If I oversleep, I'm in trouble." Harry was already gone, with two last pills in his stomach and the vague hope that he'd remember the way to the doctor tomorrow. The slot machine player stayed behind, staring at his water as if it were his final punishment. The waitress cleared glasses, her movements slower, the momentum gone. The innkeeper stood with his hands on the bar, as if he needed to support himself.

"Well, Grandpa," the waitress said as she passed me, "are you going back to your luxury apartment today?" I grinned thinly. "Take a look at my place," I gestured to the counter. "Here I have company; at home I have electricity." She laughed briefly and put down an ashtray. "Electricity is something too," she said. "Believe me, there are people who would like to have it."

The goblin clapped softly. "You're just too lazy for real loneliness," he said. "You need people in the background so you can convince yourself you're not alone, even though you never make yourself available by phone." I thought of my daughter, who had long since stopped even announcing spontaneous visits. Of my grandchildren, who know me more as "the one who smells funny" than as a trusted figure. Of the women who eventually packed their bags because they were tired of living with a man whose real address was the local pub.

“A bar isn’t a home,” I muttered, more to myself than to anyone. The owner heard it anyway. “It’s not supposed to be,” he said calmly. “If you live here, you’re screwed. A bar is like a train station. You come, you go. If you stay, something’s wrong.” The waitress nodded. “A train station without trains,” she added. “You’re all stranded here, acting like this was the plan.”

I looked around. The slot machine player, who never sits anywhere but on his stool. Rolle, who comes in now and then when it hurts too much outside. Manni, who laughs so rarely these days that you almost want to clap when he manages a brief grin. And me, who every evening pretends to be "just dropping by" and then happens to be sitting in the last round. We were no longer guests. We were pieces of furniture with breathing.

The goblin stretched and yawned. "You could try it," he said. "Don't come here one evening. Stay home. Yell at the TV, open and close the fridge, look out the window without hoping someone will call for you." I grimaced. "Why?" I asked. "So I can realize it feels just as

pointless, only with less beer?" He looked at me seriously. "So you can realize it's your pointless life. Not ours. Not the innkeeper's, not the waitress's, not Heiner's. Yours."

The innkeeper turned off the music, raised the lights a notch. "That's it for today," he said. "It's been long enough." We paid, put on our jackets, searched for hats that had suddenly vanished, as if they'd decided to belong to someone with a better sense of humor. The waitress wiped the last rims off glasses, emptied ashtrays, stacked chairs. Routine. The end of a workday, the midpoint of a life's twilight.

It was cold outside, but dry. No rain, no snow, just that crisp cold that says, "Go home or freeze." I stood for a moment in front of the door, looking at the "Final Light" sign, half broken. The neon tube flickered as if it couldn't decide whether to stay lit. "A bar isn't a home," I said again, this time louder. The goblin nodded. "But it's warmer than outside," he added. "And you're not ready to stand in the cold yet."

The way to my apartment was the same as always, but it felt stranger. Each streetlamp illuminated a part of me I usually keep in the dark. My hands, which trembled. My shoulders, which slumped. My legs, which knew where they were going without my mind having to think. The stairs smelled of cabbage, laundry detergent, and far too much life in far too small apartments. Behind doors, I heard voices, televisions, water running somewhere. At my place, it would be quiet until I turned the key.

I unlocked the door, stepped inside, and automatically switched on the kitchen light. The table was there just as I'd left it. Ashtray, letters, an old cup with something dried up inside. No "welcome back." Just the sounds of the house: the radiator creaking, neighbors walking around upstairs, a car outside, much too loud. I didn't take off my jacket, just sat down, just as I was.

The goblin sat down opposite me, on the table, and swung his legs. "Well," he said, "here you are. Your home. No beer, no landlord, no waitress, no regulars' table. Just you, your liver, and me." I took a breath, heard myself. It sounded unusually loud, this breathing. "Why do I feel more like a stranger here than in the bar?" I asked. He smiled gently. "Because this is the place where you see everything you haven't become," he said. "And in the bar, you're just who you are. A drunk with stories."

I got up, went to the window, and looked out. Down on the street, there was nothing spectacular. A few cars, a lamppost, a cat disappearing among some garbage cans. Nothing worthy of a film. But there was this strange feeling that my life was stuck somewhere between the pub and this kitchen. Too tired for major changes, too proud for open surrender.

“You know,” said the goblin, “maybe this is the most honest thought you’ve had in a long time: A bar isn’t home. But you’ve drunk yours away for so long that you’re glad when there’s a space somewhere that pretends you’re welcome. The trick would be to make your home feel less foreign than the bar.” I laughed bitterly. “Sounds like work,” I said. “And I’m allergic to work.”

He nodded. "I know," he said. "That's why I'm still here." I cracked the window open, letting in the cold air, as if I had to prove I wasn't completely lost out there. Then I sat down again and, out of sheer habit, lit a cigarette, even though I'd had enough for today.

Smoke drifted to the ceiling, the clock ticked, water ran somewhere. I was alone, but not dead. The bar was closed, but it hadn't disappeared. My home wasn't really a home, but at least it was a space where I could sit without being thrown out. Maybe that was enough for today.

“Tomorrow,” the goblin said, “you’ll be standing in front of the bar again before it opens.” I nodded. “Probably,” I said. “But today I’m sitting here.” He grinned. “There you go,” he said. “One small step for you, one tiny step for the liver.” I ashed my cigarette, leaned back, and let the silence do for a while what the music in “The Last Light” usually protects me from: leaving me alone with myself.

It wasn't pretty, but it was honest. And that, I thought, is more than can be said for many evenings.

Chapter 26 – The Night We Drank the Moon

It was one of those rare evenings when the sky over the city looked as if someone had forgotten to put on the air freshener. No low-hanging clouds, no smog, no rain, just a clear, almost brazen sky, right in the middle of buildings that looked as if they didn't deserve it. And on top of it all, a moon, so big and round, as if it had gotten lost. I stood in front of the last light, cigarette in one hand, beer in the other, and thought: If there is a God, he must have a strange sense of humor, hanging a moon like that over our street.

The goblin sat on the neon sign flickering above the door. "Look at this," he said. "They're spouting romance up there, and you're standing here with your cigarette like an extra in a movie you never read the script for." I squinted at the light, that pale plate that made everything brighter somehow, but not friendlier. "If he keeps staring like that," I muttered, "I'm going to have another one just on principle."

Inside the pub, the place was more crowded than usual. "A full moon is like a special offer to idiots," the landlord once said. Heiner sat at his regular table, his head tilted slightly back as if searching for answers in the ceiling. Harry was already in the storytelling phase, where he considered everything that had ever happened to him an epic tale that urgently needed to be retold. The slot machine player had, for once, torn himself away from the blinking screen and sat with us. "The machine is temperamental during a full moon," he explained. "I don't want it calculating anything personal for me."

"So, have you seen the moon yet?" the waitress asked as I sat down on my stool. "It's acting like it has something to say to us." I nodded. "Yes," I said. "It's saying, 'From up here, you all look like little mistakes that no one bothers to correct.'" She grimaced. "Then it suits you," she said, placing a beer in front of me that took on a faint halo of light in the mirror behind the bar, as if it were holy water for people without religion.

The goblin slid down from the sign, through the door, over the bottles, until he landed on the rim of my glass. "Something might happen today," he whispered. "It's too clear. Too bright. Too much moon for so much misery. Life loves contrasts." I took a deep swig, feeling the cold thing pass through me like a cheap salvation. "What's going to happen?" I asked. "We'll sit here like always, talk shit like always, and wake up tomorrow like always, only hungrier."

Heiner stared out again, through the smoke-filled windows. "Back then," he said, "a full moon was something special. We'd go out into the fields, get drunk, lie on our backs, and gaze up at the sky as if we were part of something grand. Now I stand between a parking space and a traffic light and look up so I don't have to look ahead." Harry grunted. "Booze was cheaper back then, too," he said. "And our livers were younger."

There was this moment when one of us—I don't remember who said it first—said, "We should go outside. Really outside. Not just to the front door, but away from the street. Somewhere you can see the moon without a delivery van parked in the way." The inner imp immediately sprang to life. "Excursion!" it shouted in my head. "The 'Alcoholics in the Moonlight' expedition. This will be great."

Normally, our plans end at the bar. "We'll go to the seaside sometime." "We'll go to a concert together." "We'll have a barbecue sometime." All sentences that end in a glass. But something was different that evening. Maybe the air, maybe the moon, maybe just the fact that the bartender had had enough of us after eleven. "If you're just going to stand outside by the ashtray anyway," he said, "you might as well leave. I'm closing at one, period."

"Well then," said Harry, standing up unsteadily. "Let's drink the moon dry." It was such a stupid sentence that it was actually good. Heiner laughed briefly, that hollow laugh he usually reserved for particularly sad stories. "Us and the moon," he murmured. "I wonder who'll run out first." The slot machine player nodded. "I know a scaffold by the old railway bridge," he said. "You can see the sky better from there than from here. And nobody says anything if we get too loud. There are only pigeons there."

The goblin danced on the rim of my glass, delighted. "Yes!" he cried. "Go up high. All the way up. The closer to the moon, the better the schnapps tastes." In any other state, I would have waved him off. Too old for nighttime climbing expeditions, too tired for romantic notions. But the evening had this strange slant where you think doing nothing would be worse than doing something stupid. So I nodded. "Let's go then," I said. "Before we change our minds."

We took our glasses with us as if the innkeeper would fillet us alive if we didn't bring them back. "Be back here by tomorrow morning at the latest," he called after us. "And if you drop them, bring me the lids first." The waitress watched us go, a rag in her hand, her brow furrowed. "You're too old for this kind of nonsense," she said. "And too young to stop."

The moon hung over the road like a giant, silent witness as we stumbled off. And the goblin ran ahead, invisible to everyone but me, laughing as if he'd just sent us into the greatest folly of our lives.

The path to the old railway bridge wasn't far, but in our state it felt like a pilgrimage. The four of us marched through the night, each with a glass in hand, as if it were a religious symbol. The slot machine player led the way, because he knew the route, Harry beside him, over-enthusiastic as always when he considered something an "action." Heiner and I trailed behind, our steps heavy, our thoughts somewhere between "What if we actually fall?" and "What if nothing happens and we just have an even bigger hangover tomorrow?"

The goblin leaped from lamppost to lamppost, from the mailbox to a traffic sign, always a little ahead of us. "Faster!" he shouted. "The moon won't wait for you. It goes round and

round without regard for your drunken revelry." I raised my glass to him. "The moon is like the innkeeper," I murmured. "If we leave, he'll just keep going."

We passed the underpass where the walls were covered in graffiti slogans that no one took seriously anymore. "Freedom," "Revolution," "Love." Words as worn out as our excuses. Harry paused briefly, lit a cigarette, and looked at the word "Freedom," scrawled crookedly above a penis graffiti. "Remember," he asked, "when we thought freedom meant no one telling us what to do? Now it means no one gives a fuck what we do." Heiner patted him on the shoulder. "Freedom means climbing railway scaffolds drunk at night, even though your back hurts," he said. "Everything else is just theory."

The bridge was old, rusty, half-ruined, like us. Officially, access was blocked, which in our world simply meant: interesting. The slot machine player knew a spot in the fence that had been "accidentally" bent open so many times that it looked like a second entrance. "Here," he whispered, as if someone were eavesdropping, even though there was nobody around for miles, except the moon and a few sleepless pigeons.

We squeezed through the gap, one after the other. My stomach almost got stuck, and my jacket ripped in a spot that was already thin. "We're really not getting any younger," I gasped when I made it across. The goblin was standing on an old pillar, applauding. "Congratulations," he said. "You've left the safety zone. Welcome to the area where no insurance pays out."

The stairs leading up to the scaffolding were narrow and filthy. Each step creaked as if it didn't trust us. I gripped the railing tightly, which felt cold and damp, like a dead man's hand. With every meter, the moon grew larger. The sky pretended to be getting closer. I could feel my pulse in my ears, my liver in my side, the beer in my head. "If we fall from here," Heiner panted behind me, "the newspaper will say: Drunken idiots fall from structure. No one will write that we at least wanted to see the moon."

Reaching the top, we stood on a kind of platform, a piece of metal meant to carry men with tools, not old drunks clinging to their pride. Below us lay the city, in front of us the railway tracks, above us the moon. It really was closer, as close as things can be when you've already had two or three beers and haven't slept enough. White, large, with a slight gray tinge at the edges. A flat disc in the sky, as if someone had punched a hole in the darkness.

We sat down, more for safety reasons than comfort. None of us really trusted our legs anymore. The slot machine player downed the rest of his beer and held the empty glass up to the sky. "Cheers to you, you old siren!" he shouted. "You see everything and say nothing. You'd make a good landlord." Harry gave a wry laugh. "But he wouldn't let us run up a tab," he said. "He'd draw a line every night."

The goblin walked along the edge of the platform as if he had no fear of heights. "You look like the last apostles," he said. "Only without the hope of resurrection. Four guys on a bridge who think they can drink the moon out by extinguishing themselves." He sat on my shoulder and rested his head against my temple. "Go on," he whispered. "Drink. Imagine every sip makes it smaller."

I raised my glass, looked into the beer, then up at the sky. The moon was faintly reflected on its surface, blurred by my trembling hands. For a moment, it looked as if I were actually holding it in the glass. Just a tiny, yellow speck, like a coin at the very bottom of a tip jar that

no one ever fishes out. I took a sip. The moon stayed where it was. But something shifted in my mind.

Heiner pulled a small bottle of cheap liquor from his jacket. "Thought we needed something stronger," he said. "We didn't want to be standing here half-hearted." He unscrewed the cap and passed it around. We drank straight from the bottle, each taking a swig that hit our chests like a rusty screw. The taste was harsh, sweet, cheap. The moon didn't become any friendlier, but the distance between us and reason grew.

“You know what I sometimes imagine?” Harry said after a while. “That someone up there is sitting counting how many times we get drunk instead of doing anything about it. And that they’re thinking, ‘Well, fine, so be it.’” The slot machine operator snorted. “If someone’s counting, they’ve got better things to do than keep an eye on us,” he said. “We’re footnotes, not main characters.” Heiner nodded toward the heavens. “Anyone who’s been up there that long has seen it all,” he said. “We’re just a repetition at best.”

The goblin chuckled. "You underestimate your entertainment value," he said. "You're like that subplot in a bad novel that's better than the main story, but nobody ever reads it to the end." I lit another cigarette up top—probably the dumbest thing you can do on a metal scaffold above rails—and watched the smoke rise as if it were trying to negotiate with the moon.

“The night we drank the moon dry,” I muttered to myself. “Imagine we wake up tomorrow, look up at the sky—and there’s nothing there. Just black.” Heiner laughed hoarsely. “We wouldn’t even notice,” he said. “We don’t look up anyway once we’re back down. We just stare at the glass, the floor, the TV. The moon is only important today because, for once, we can actually see it.”

We kept drinking, not knowing why. Not for anything, not against anything. Simply because it was what we could do. The moon hung above us, unimpressed. It looked as if it had witnessed all of this a thousand times before: men on bridges, women on balconies, children unable to sleep, drunks who believed that light would change anything.

Eventually, the cold began to creep in. Through the jackets, into the bones, into the fingers that could no longer grip the glasses so tightly. The schnapps only warmed him for the first second; after that, it made the internal cold even more palpable. The slot machine player slid a little closer to the center of the platform. "I don't fancy ending up as a feature in the local section today," he muttered. "'Four idiots drink themselves into a frenzy to fall off.'"

The goblin yawned. "You're cowards," he said. "You can't even crash properly." I shook my head. "For a goblin the size of a gram, you've got enough mouth for three lifetimes," I said. "We're not here to prove anything. We're here because we don't know what to do with ourselves." He nodded. "Exactly," he said. "And that's the saddest part of the whole thing."

The moon was still hanging there when we decided to go back down. It hadn't gotten any smaller. Only we had.

The descent was worse than the ascent. Sober, going down is easier than going up. Drunk, it's the other way around. Every step looked like it could be my last mistake. My hand stuck to the railing as if it had suddenly become glue, when it was just sweat from fear. The slot machine player went ahead, slowly, intently. Heiner muttered something about "always three

points, two feet, one hand," as if he were giving a safety briefing. Harry laughed occasionally, that thin laugh that says, "I'm scared, but I'm not letting it show."

The goblin sat on the railing like a nasty little guardian angel, swinging his legs. "If someone falls," he said, "I'm out, by the way. I can't save everything. I'm not some holy appendage, just a commentator." I growled. "If someone falls, it was your idea," I hissed. "Then at least you can put flowers on the tracks." He shrugged. "You're always happy when I give you a push. It's only when the landing hurts that it's my fault."

We all made it back down, which surprised me almost more than anything else that evening. Down below, the world looked small again. The houses were no longer models, but blocks of solid ground. The moon was still hanging high, but it seemed to be a little farther away, or perhaps it just appeared that way. Maybe I'd grown accustomed to it. Maybe it had grown accustomed to me. We stood beneath the bridge, breathing heavily, laughing too loudly to calm ourselves down.

“We’re still alive,” said Heiner, as if he had to say it aloud, otherwise it wouldn’t be true. Harry patted him on the back. “Not so fast,” he said. “Wait until morning.” The slot machine player looked at his hands, as if he could read in them how close it had been. “I’ve realized,” he said, “that I’d be even more afraid of falling if I were sober. Maybe I’m only brave when I’m already half dead.”

The goblin yawned and looked at the moon. "You tried," he said. "You drank, you went up there, you looked at it. That's all there is to it. The moon isn't yours. You don't even own yourselves." I wanted to argue with him, but the words wouldn't come. Perhaps because I knew he was right. Perhaps because my brain needed all its resources to persuade my legs to walk.

The walk back to the back of the pack was quieter. We'd said most of what needed to be said. The full moon hung behind us like a headlight at a police checkpoint. "If someone stops us now and asks where we're from," Harry muttered, "what do we say? From the moon? From church? From sports?" Heiner snorted. "We don't say anything. We just stare and hope they think, 'Too old for stress.'"

Rolle stood in front of the pub, wrapped in his jackets, a plastic bag clutched to his chest. He looked at us as if we'd just returned from another world. Maybe we did look like it. Sweat, smoke, booze in our eyes. The moon hung over the "Last Light" sign, as if it had decided to spend the rest of the night with us. Rolle grinned toothlessly. "Well, you astronauts," he said, "found anything up there?"

I paused briefly, looked at him. "Nothing worth it," I replied. "Just more of this." I made a vague gesture toward the houses, the street, the sky, us. "And you?" I asked. "Did you find anything?" He shrugged. "Coverage," he said. "And a cigarette that was still half-smoked. That's all I need for today." The goblin nodded respectfully. "That man understands what minimalism is," he said.

The pub was already closed. The landlord had the shutters half-closed, the lights dimmed. He opened the door again when he saw us. "You're not quite right in the head," he said, without aggression. "But at least you're still alive." The waitress looked at us and shook her head. "You reek of metal and fear," she said. "And we're out of beer." I looked at the clock, which,

for once, was working—or perhaps I was simply too drunk to notice it had stopped. Late. Or early. Depending on your perspective.

“We wanted to drink the moon dry,” Harry explained, as if that were a legitimate reason for ordering. The innkeeper looked at him, then at me, then at the vending machine man, then at Heiner. “Did you like it?” he asked. Heiner laughed roughly. “Like every other excuse,” he said. “Nice at first, bitter at the end.” The innkeeper nodded. “Then it fits in here,” he said.

We didn't stay much longer. The tiredness wasn't just in my head anymore; it had taken over my body. That kind of exhaustion where every movement is too much, even bringing a glass to your mouth. I drank the last of it, not knowing if it was beer or water. The imp sat on the edge of the ashtray and looked at me. "You know the moral of the story, don't you?" he asked.

“That we’re too old for bridge climbing?” I tried. He shook his head. “That you can’t drink the moon dry,” he said. “You can only imagine that you are. You can gaze at the sky, feel big, believe for a moment that you’re part of something—and in the end, you’re right back here, in last place, with the same problems, the same liver, the same unpaid bills.”

I frowned. "So it was all for nothing?" I asked. He thought for a moment. "Not quite," he said. "For a brief moment, you weren't just sitting at the bar. You moved around. You showed yourselves that you could still pull yourselves up if you had to. Up there, you were small, but awake. That's more than happens on most nights."

On the way home later – along the same familiar route, the same streetlights, the same shadows – the moon had already moved on. It hung lower, paler, smaller. Or perhaps I imagined it. I stopped once more, in the middle of the sidewalk, looked up, and raised my hand as if waving to it.

“See you,” I murmured. “Next full moon. If we can still climb then.” The goblin chuckled softly. “You might not be able to climb then,” he said. “But you’ll claim you could again. That’s how you are. You drink to opportunities you’ll never seize.”

I unlocked the door to my apartment, stepping into the silence, which after the night was even louder than usual. Everything in the kitchen was as it always was: ashtray, letters, table. No moon, only the dim light of the ceiling lamp. I sat down without taking off my jacket and let my head fall into my hands.

“We didn’t drink the moon dry,” I said. “But it emptied us a little more.” The goblin sat down opposite me, grinning crookedly. “That’s called a tie,” he said. “Or a draw. You against the sky. One to one, for now.”

I lay down, my eyes heavy, my body tired, my head full of images of rails, metal, light. And somewhere behind it all, the thought that tonight, as absurd as it all was, I had crawled a little further out of my hole than usual. Not far. But further.

Before I collapsed, I heard the goblin whisper, "Next time we'll drink something closer—your future, for example." Then there was silence. And the moon, which I hadn't finished drinking, continued to shine somewhere out there, over a city full of people who thought it was just decoration.

Chapter 27 – Clurichaun's Invisible Mine

Nothing gets forgotten in the back row. The landlord pretends to be a little spaced out, because it seems friendlier, but he knows exactly how many marks are on each beer mat. He knows who always pays on time, who makes excuses, and who quietly slips away. For each of us, there's a box somewhere filled with old mats, scribbles in pencil and pen, smudged numbers, crossed-out amounts, question marks. That's our visible tab. The one that can still be expressed in money.

The invisible imp runs the show. He doesn't need beer mats, pens, or ledgers. He has me. And my mind. And my life. "Your debts to me," he sometimes says, "can't be measured in euros. And they won't be settled in cash." Then he laughs, so softly that only I can hear it. And I know he means everything I've squandered at some point, because he whispered in my ear that it didn't matter: time, opportunities, people, trust, health. Things that don't have price tags, but eventually stand before you like a final bill.

One evening, when the place was back in that half-full, half-dead state where nothing much happens and yet everything hurts, the owner stood in front of the till, a stack of beer-soaked coasters in his hand. He leafed through them, sighed, copied some things down, threw some away, and stuffed others into a cigar box. "Inventory in a catastrophe," I muttered. The waitress gave a short laugh. "This is nothing," she said. "You should see what you're all writing down emotionally here."

The imp jumped onto the edge of the crate, balancing on the beer mats like an acrobat. "There are the amateurs," he whispered. "The ones with their few open beers, a couple of shots, a few days' grace period. My file is bigger." He pointed at my head. "Everything you drank yourself into thinking it was okay. Everything where you said, 'Screw it, tomorrow.' Every night you'd rather be here than with someone who actually wanted something from you. That's my tab."

I ordered a beer, even though I already had one. "Write it down," I said to the bartender. He nodded and made a mark. "How many do I owe?" I asked, not really wanting to know. He looked at the tab, then at me. "More than I'd like," he muttered. "But less than you think." That was probably meant to be comforting, but it wasn't. Because I knew: He was talking about money. The imp grinned at me in the mirror. "It's the other way around for me," he said. "You owe me more than you'd like, and less than you think. The joke is: You don't know which is more expensive."

Heiner lingered at the bar longer than he intended to pay that evening. "Hey boss," he said, "forget about those three shots from last week. I just can't manage them right now." The landlord looked at him, considered the matter, weighed his options, and rubbed his chin. Then he nodded. "Fair enough," he said. "But then you won't pull the same stunt again next month." Heiner held up his hand. "I promise." We all knew that promise was worth about as much as a soggy beer mat.

“Look,” whispered the goblin, “this is how it works with you guys: Someone will cut your tab if you look at them nicely enough. Or if they’ve known you long enough. Paying the tab is always a matter of negotiation.” He pulled an imaginary list out of my chest with both hands. “Nothing gets cut from me. I work with memories. They don’t diminish just because you’re being nice.” I tried to ignore him. I couldn’t.

I started thinking about when the invisible toll had begun. Maybe the night I first went to the nightclub instead of home, thinking, "Oh well, there's always tomorrow." Maybe the time I stood up my daughter because Harry "just wanted a quick drink," and "quick" turned into a long one. Maybe the first time I lied to the doctor. "I drink occasionally." Sounds harmless. Costs extra.

"You never pay on time," the goblin explained as we stood together in the bathroom again, and I looked in the grimy mirror. "You always order things for tomorrow. Every decision on credit. Fun today, consequences tomorrow. Pub today, hangover tomorrow. Open your mouth today, guilt tomorrow. And you wonder why the pile keeps growing." He tapped me on the forehead. "Your entire ledger is in here."

I imagined what it would look like if the invisible bill were visible. If the bartender didn't just have beer mats, but folders with my name on them, full of all the things I keep putting off. A folder for "Family," one for "Health," one for "Work," one for "Broken Promises." And every time I get to the bottom of the list, someone silently makes a new mark. Not in euros, but in lost hours, missed calls, postponed appointments, mornings wasted smoking.

The waitress leaned over the counter and looked at my tab. "You're not as bad as some others," she said. "At least you usually pay eventually." I shrugged. "Sometimes," I replied. "And only for what you see." The imp grinned wider. "If they only knew," he whispered. "If they could see everything you've already put under 'I'll pay later,' they probably wouldn't even let you buy a bottle of water on your tab."

It was one of those evenings where I didn't feel so drunk on alcohol, but on everything that accompanied it: the waitress's look when I said "just one more" for the third time; the innkeeper's strained sigh when someone else begged for "another week's grace period"; the clinking of coins in the new tip jar. All small entries in the invisible account.

Later, on my way home, the imp walked beside me, like an accountant who'd just finished checking his numbers. "You always think I'm the one who never pays," he said. "But in reality, I'm the one who never collects. I don't need your money. I just need you to keep adding to my account. The fuller the account, the more interesting you are to me." I stopped, somewhere between two lampposts, and looked at him. "And when will your bill arrive?" I asked. He smiled. "It won't come like a bill at the end of the month," he said. "It'll come like a blow. Sometime. When you think you've almost made it."

The visible bill, I thought, I might be able to manage somehow with luck and a good mood. A few fifty-euro notes here, a joke there, an evening without having to rush out. The invisible bill is a different story. No tip, no joke, no "put it in my name" will help. That one will be paid elsewhere. And that's exactly what started to scare me, even though I was officially too old to be scared.

It's easy to point the finger at others when it comes to unpaid bills. The one who left again yesterday without paying. The one who keeps running up tabs and then disappears for months. The one who always says "next time" and never carries a wallet. We at the pub are pros at listing these people, with names, dates, and stories. It feels good. As long as we're talking about them, we're not the ones who have to deal with it.

One evening, "Doc" came in again—the one with the stolen tip jar, the one who shrank back when it came out that he'd helped himself to the only honest money in the place. He looked a

little better than last time, not healthy, but less gray. He sat down at the bar, ordered a water, then a small beer, paid for both immediately, and even added something to the new glass. "There," he said. "So you know I can be different."

The innkeeper nodded, took the money, and said nothing much about it. The waitress smiled briefly, that fleeting smile that simultaneously says, "I saw it" and "I don't forget so easily." The goblin squatted down next to Doc on the wooden bench and looked at him appraisingly. "He takes his invisible tab seriously," he said to me. "He wakes up in the middle of the night knowing he's stolen not just coins, but respect. That's more expensive."

Doc later sat down at our regular table, cautiously, as if the chair were undergoing a stress test. "I owe money everywhere," he said at one point. "To the authorities, the bank, my ex, the landlord, myself. But interestingly, the worst debts are the ones no one ever collects. The looks you get. The things you can't undo." He took a sip of his second beer—paid for in cash. "The bill here," he gestured toward us, "is cheaper. The ones out there, with people who once thought highly of me… I can't even begin to put a number on them."

The goblin nodded. "See?" he whispered to me. "He gets it. The most expensive bill is the invisible one. The one you rack up with people who still believe you'll eventually show up and do your bit." He looked directly at me then. "The one you have with your daughter. Your granddaughter. Your own health. The waitress who's already shown you more understanding than you deserve. Look at that, old man."

I did what I always do when things get uncomfortable: I spoke. "We all have our skeletons in the closet," I said to the group. "Our unpaid bills. I've let people down, too. Quit jobs without saying anything, ignored women who wanted more than I could give, made promises I set on fire the moment I uttered them." I laughed briefly, but it caught in my throat. "I think I have more invisible debts than visible ones."

Heiner took a swig of his beer and wiped his mouth with his hand. "You can negotiate visible debts," he said. "Installment plans, settlements, bankruptcy, that sort of thing. Invisible debts remain. At best, you can only cover them up with new situations, new people, new excuses. But if you're unlucky, something will catch up with you." Harry nodded. "Sometimes all it takes is a phone call," he muttered. "A voice you haven't heard in years. And suddenly all the old bills are back in the hallway."

I thought about my phone, all the messages I hadn't replied to. "Get in touch," "How are you?", "Grandpa, are you coming next week?" These aren't threatening letters. They're reminders in another language. Every unanswered message is a small open line on Clurichaun's invisible list. I glanced at my hands and wondered how many unpaid evenings they represented.

“Do you remember,” the waitress interjected as she passed our table, “when you said you’d come by on my day off and help me move? And then you didn’t show up without even saying anything?” She didn’t say it angrily, more curiously, as if probing a prepared tooth. I flinched. I’d blocked it out. For me, it was one of those typical “forgotten, was drunk, sorry” moments. For her, it was one of those invisible lines.

“I had…” I started, then trailed off. What had I done? Had I drunk too much? Was I too afraid of cardboard boxes? Was I just too unwilling to help someone who only knew me from behind the bar? “It was a long time ago,” I mumbled. She nodded. “Yes,” she said. “But my

back still remembered.” The imp applauded softly. “Remember: even little things add up. Not just the big dramas.”

Doc nodded slowly. "At some point, I realized," he said, "that I was running my life like a badly run business. Income: barely any. Expenses: everything. And I was falsifying the books. For myself. I always pretended it was a temporary setback, a phase, bad luck. And then one day I stood there, took stock—and realized: I'm bankrupt in dignity." He looked at his half-empty glass. "Since then, I pay for everything in cash. And I say no more often."

The slot machine player, who had mostly remained silent, spoke up. "I promised my brother some money once," he said, "when he was starting his company. Not much, but important to him at the time. I gambled it away before I even gave it to him. I told him the account had been frozen. He believed me. His company still went under. I never asked him how he was doing again." He gave a short, bitter laugh. "That's right at the top of my list of unearned debts."

The goblin pointed his fingers around the room as if drawing lots. "You're all completely wasted," he said. "Not just with alcohol. But with stories that were never properly resolved. Every apology left unsaid, every missed visit, every retreat – it's all on my list. I don't collect in cash. I collect in sleepless nights and in those moments when you're sitting on the bus and suddenly think: Shit, I should have…"

“I sometimes have these images,” I admitted, “of the things I didn’t do. Birthdays I missed. Conversations I ran away from. Opportunities I put off for so long that someone else took them. And every time I say, ‘Yeah, sure, but everything was difficult back then.’” I took a sip. “It’s a kind of cheating, too. Just without a lawyer.”

The waitress leaned against the doorframe and watched us for a while. "You're always talking about the bar," she said. "About the bill in here. But life will deliver the worst reckoning when you wake up far too soon in the hospital or die alone, and no one cleans up your apartment because there's no one left to remember your name." She shrugged. "I see many people come and go. Those who take care of their invisible bills in time are less alone later."

I did what I do best: I nodded and pretended to remember it. The goblin snorted. "You will remember it," he said. "But not the way you think. You'll file it away under 'Insights,' pull it out when you're drunk, talk about it, get a bit of sympathy and understanding—and the next day you'll carry on as before." He grinned. "That's what's so great about you. You're consistently inconsistent."

On the way home, the road was empty, but my mind was full. I thought about how easily debts can be paid off in installments when both sides are generous. And how difficult it is to settle invisible bills. You can't belatedly hug your grandchildren when they're grown. You can't undo your liver's health with alcohol. You can't bring back days you've slept through. The invisible bill at Clurichaun is one you don't pay with banknotes. You pay it with the parts of yourself you wish you'd still had someday.

Eventually, the evening came when the landlord decided to take a proper inventory. Not just of the beer, the liquor, the chips behind the bar, but of the open beer mats. "I want to know who's actually my place and who's just my fridge," he said. The waitress rolled her eyes but helped him. They stacked the beer mats, sorting them by name, by height, by age. It looked like a cross between a paper graveyard and a museum.

We sat at our usual table and watched as our own tabs landed in different piles. "You're in the middle," Heiner said to me. "Not a top offender, but no innocent either." Harry laughed. "I've been on the high-risk list for years," he said. "They only let me keep racking up the tab because I'm practically part of the furniture. Who's going to sell the table they put their glasses on?" The slot machine player muttered that he'd rather not know how much he'd let the landlord get away with in total.

The goblin sat on the crate with the oldest lids, looking like a king on his throne. "Oh, children," he sighed, "you have no idea how harmless this still is. These are all amounts you could theoretically make up in two good months. Maybe three, in your condition. The really interesting inventory is taking place elsewhere." He tapped me in the chest. "In there. And there's no waitress there to forgive you every now and then."

The innkeeper eventually came over to us with a list. "Let me tell you this," he said. "Not because I want to throw you out, but because I want to know if you still take yourselves seriously." He read out numbers. Sums that had accumulated over years. A few euros here, a beer there, an extra shot, a "I'll pay you next week," a "Write it down." In total, they amounted to something that could no longer be dismissed as "small change."

When he quoted my amount, it was lower than I'd feared, but higher than I wanted to admit. I nodded, pretending to do a quick mental calculation. "That sounds about right," I said. "If I have any left over next month, I'll bring it." He looked at me, long, tiredly. "You've been saying that for three years," he said. "But fine. I've let you run up accounts with worse people who then disappeared."

The phrase hit me harder, strangely enough, than the number. "Disappeared" didn't just sound like "other pubs." It sounded like a cemetery, a clinic, another city, a retreat. People who simply stopped coming at some point. No goodbye, no "see you later," just an empty seat at the bar. The waitress had once said, "If someone doesn't show up for a long enough time, I assume they've either sobered up or they're dead." Both possibilities were about equally rare at the bottom of the list.

The goblin chuckled. "Imagine doing the same inventory at my place," he said. "Stacks of lids with things like: 'Didn't make the call,' 'Didn't apologize,' 'Postponed doctor's appointment,' 'Drank away a job opportunity,' 'Scared off my last love with broken promises.' And then a sum underneath that would make even God say, 'I don't have a payment plan for that.'" He spread his arms. "Welcome to my accounting department."

For the first time, I really thought about what it would be like if there were such a thing as a last night. Not pathetic, not announced, no dramatic movie ending. Just an evening like any other, where I sit in the back, drinking, smoking, making jokes, staggering home – and something inside me decides: That's it. Whether it's my heart, my liver, chance, or bad luck, it doesn't matter. Somewhere in my system, a switch flips. And the question is: How many unfinished business do I leave with?

“I might still be able to sort out the visible bill somehow,” I said aloud later, more to myself than to the others. “But what about the rest?” Heiner frowned. “Which bank are you going to negotiate remorse with?” he asked. “There’s no such thing as an installment plan. You can only apologize while you’re still able to speak. After that, it gets difficult.” Harry nodded slowly. “My old man died without apologizing to us,” he said. “It used to make me angry. Now I think: He couldn’t go on. He didn’t have the words for it. Maybe I don’t either.”

The waitress set a round in front of us. "The house round," she said, "so you don't owe anything today." The innkeeper grumbled disapprovingly but let her do it. "You overestimate your influence on the world," she said, her voice much gentler than her words suggested. "There are plenty of people out there who are rich in money and poor in everything else. You're poor in both. But at least you know you owe money. That's more than some people ever understand."

The goblin smiled crookedly. "She's right," he murmured. "Self-awareness isn't currency, but perhaps a tip." I looked at him. "Do you think there's such a thing as a moment when the invisible bill comes due?" I asked. "Really? When someone comes along and says, 'Now.'" He looked up at the ceiling as if flipping through an imaginary calendar. "For some, it's an accident," he said. "For others, a diagnosis. For still others, a glance in the mirror that suddenly hits them. For you..." He paused. "...for you, it's more of a gradual process. You receive it in daily installments. Small doses of insight. Whether you use them is up to you."

Later, on my way home, the air felt heavier than usual. Not because there was more smoke, but because for the first time I consciously imagined what it would be like not to leave the invisible bill completely unpaid. I thought of calling my daughter. Of a visit that wouldn't end in a pub. Of a doctor's appointment that I wouldn't cancel. Of an evening spent at home, without television, without a bottle, just with the uncomfortable feeling of listening to myself think.

“That sounds like work,” I said to the goblin as we went up the stairs. He grinned. “It is,” he said. “And I’m the last person who wants to make it easy for you. I make my living off your procrastination. But even I’m curious to see how far you get before everything goes wrong.” He jumped onto the banister and looked down at me. “By the way, you think I don’t have my own bill?” he said then. “Not quite. I owe you one too.”

I stopped. "What?" I asked. He shrugged. "Companionship," he said. "I'll stick with you until you either drop out or go under. I could have switched to a younger, dumber model long ago, one who still thinks drinking is rebellion. But I'm attached to you. You're old enough to know better, and dumb enough not to. It's the perfect combination."

In my apartment, I sat down at the kitchen table as usual, the ashtray looming like a small volcano before me, the letters like geological strata of my failures. I lit a cigarette, even though I had firmly resolved not to today. The invisible bill grinned from every corner: in the form of things that should have been done long ago, numbers in my phone I hadn't called in years, photos I no longer looked at because the man in them was someone who still pretended to have all the time in the world.

“The good news,” said the goblin, “is that no one’s standing at your door yet with a clipboard, saying, ‘Okay, sign everything, please.’ The bad news is that you’re realizing the day is drawing near when you can no longer put it off.” I blew the smoke aside. “Do you think it will ever be too late?” I asked. He smiled gloomily. “For perfection, yes,” he said. “For any semblance of decency, never.”

I sat there, cigarette in hand, and thought, maybe this is Clurichaun's invisible toll: not the punishment itself, but the knowledge of it. The constant awareness that behind the visible bar stands another one, where the reckoning will eventually come. Not in euros, not with tally marks on beer mats, but with what you can still say about yourself in the end without having to laugh at yourself.

When I went to bed, I wasn't any more sober than usual, but my mind was sharper. The imp settled somewhere among my thoughts. "Sleep," he said. "Tomorrow you'll add something to my list again. Or maybe not. I'm curious." Me too, I thought, just before sleep overtook me. And that was a new feeling: not just fear of the bill, but also a quiet curiosity about whether I might still be able to settle one or two small debts before the big blow-up.

Chapter 28 – Memories that smell of disinfectant

There are smells that linger in your mind longer than any song. Smoke, sure. Cold cigarette smoke clings to clothes, hair, wallpaper, conversations. Beer, too—sweet and sour, stale, that sticky aroma of hops, sweat, and self-loathing. But there's one smell that overpowers everything when it appears: disinfectant. That sharp, cold stuff that smells like hospitals, like cleaning cloths, and like fear. When that's in the air, you know: nothing's going to get better here; at best, they're just preventing things from getting worse.

I was sitting in the waiting area of a clinic, in one of those chairs that look like they were designed so no one would linger too long. Gray plastic, too narrow, too hard, too honest. The floor was that neutral linoleum that, just by looking at it, you know someone goes over it with a bucket and a rag every night. The air was a mixture of stale coffee, cheap soap, and disinfectant. Mostly the latter. It hung in my nose like a command: Be clean. Be quiet. Be grateful you were still sitting here and not lying down.

The imp sat on the small metal table, on which lay magazines that no one wanted to read. "Different setting, same face," he commented. "Except they don't serve alcohol here." He sniffed the air, grimacing. "Cleaning fluid instead of beer. And you're still here. Look at that, the gentleman is developing new hobbies." I looked toward the door behind which I would soon be called and thought: If this were a pub, I'd leave immediately. It was too bright, too clean, too serious.

I wasn't here voluntarily. Sure, in the sense that no one brought me in an ambulance, but the invitation had been clear: liver function tests, heart check, blood pressure – the whole nine yards. My family doctor had said it would be "wise" to go for a check-up. "Just to be on the safe side," he'd said. When doctors say "just," you're already halfway to disaster. I nodded back then, the way you nod when someone suggests you finally do your taxes. And now here I was, sitting in a room where every other glance seemed to say, "I hope I'm not the one who gets the bad news."

Across from me sat a woman with a girl. The girl was too pale, too quiet, too mature in her features. In her hand, she held a stuffed animal that had seen better days. The mother stared at her phone, pretending to read, but her eyes kept darting to the door, as if that might influence the diagnosis. Next to me sat a man in a suit, his tie loose, his expression weary. He looked like someone who was always punctual, had done everything right, and yet had still ended up here. The smell of disinfectant settled over them all like a layer, making them all the same: reduced to mere bodies to be examined.

I thought of the place at the bottom of the list. There, nothing smells of hope for improvement. Everything there reeks of "that's just the way it is." Here it was different. Here, every smell was a reminder that people were trying to limit the damage. That someone,

somewhere, had decided that bacteria weren't allowed to live as long as humans, and was attacking them with chemicals. The irony was that many of us were sitting here because we had treated ourselves like bacteria for years: resilient, indestructible, everywhere.

"Do you have to give blood again right away?" the goblin asked, flopping backward onto the stack of magazines. "They like your blood, you know? So nicely spiced." I ignored him. I thought about the previous evening at the Last Light, when the waitress had said, "Go. For real this time. Not like those other appointments you got drunk on and then slept through." The landlord had just nodded, with that look I can't stand—a mixture of concern and annoyance. "If you collapse, at least I want to be able to say I sent you to the doctor," he'd said.

The door opened, a nurse poked her head out, called a name that wasn't mine. The woman with the girl stood up, smiled at the child, that strained smile meant to say "everything will be alright," even though it hasn't been for a long time. Disinfectant stung the room as the door closed again. I felt my stomach clench. Not from hunger, but from memory.

Hospitals have always reminded me of things I'd long wanted to forget. The smell, the bright lights, that sterile white – it all instantly conjures up old images: my father in bed, tubes in his arms; my mother in a chair, too tired to cry; me out in the hallway, chewing gum, pretending it was all just a break from my real life. Back then, I thought hospitals were places for the elderly. Now I'm sitting here myself, smelling of smoke, beer, and a whole lot of missed opportunities.

"It's your turn," whispered the goblin. "Not necessarily for the big bill today, but at least for the interim report." He jumped onto my shoulder, kicking his legs lightly. "They love this: numbers, values, tables. They look at you and translate you into blood pressure, cholesterol, gamma-GT. Then you're no longer a story, but a case." I grinned crookedly. "In the pub, I'm just a guy who drinks too much," I said. "Here, I'm a guy who drinks too much and provides data."

When my name was finally called, it sounded strange in that hallway. I stood up, my knees surprisingly weak, and walked through the door into a room that smelled even more strongly of that sterile stuff. A desk, a doctor, a screen full of colorful bars and numbers. Behind him, a window offering only a view of a gray courtyard. No sky, no moon, no trees. Just concrete, glass, and the feeling that everything here is orderly until you yourself fall out of order.

"Sit down," the doctor said. A different voice than my family doctor, cooler, more routine. He had that look of someone who's used to saying bad things and doesn't cry every time. "Let's go through this calmly." The goblin sat sideways on the edge of the screen. "Well then," he whispered. "Get ready for memories that smell of disinfectant."

The doctor clicked through my test results as if he were checking a broken accounting system. "So," he began, "we have a few things here that we need to discuss." I hate that phrase almost as much as "We need to talk." Essentially, it means, "Prepare to hear things you've been putting off for years." Above the desk hung a poster of a heart, cut open, covered in colorful writing, like an instruction manual for something no one can return.

He talked about fats in the blood, pressure in the vessels, organs that looked tired when viewed from the outside. "Your liver is significantly enlarged," he said. "It's clearly been working under a lot of strain for a very long time." I could have laughed. "It's my hardest-

working employee," I said instead. He ignored the joke, which was probably the most professional thing he could do. "It's not a total loss yet," he continued, "but you're on a path that doesn't leave much room for error."

The goblin slapped his thighs with delight. "I told you so," he cheered. "Your engine's running on reserve, and you keep flooring it." He leaned down towards me. "Listen, maybe there's something in there that even fits inside your skull." I stared at the screen, at the curves and bars that were supposed to describe me. Numbers that proved the body can't just endlessly endure everything, just because you'd like it to.

“You’re drinking,” the doctor said, more as a statement than a question. I nodded. Lying was pointless in this room. It smelled of truth, ethanol, and cold coffee. “How much?” he asked. I shrugged. “Enough that you’d ask,” I replied. He grimaced slightly. “I could give you a standard lecture now,” he said. “You’ve probably heard it all before. But I’ll say it anyway: If you continue like this, your body will give out sooner than it needs to. And not gracefully. In an ugly way.”

Ugly. That was the word that stuck. Not "earlier," not "saying goodbye." Ugly. I imagined what it would look like: not quickly, not gone, but slowly breaking down. A bed, tubes, nurses mixing up names, rooms with televisions on that no one really watches. The smell of urine and disinfectant, mixed with the silence of those who have nothing left to say because no one listens to them.

"Do you have a family?" the doctor asked, his tone as if inquiring about my financial situation. "Children?" I nodded. "A daughter," I said. "Grandchildren." He glanced up briefly from his wallet. "Then you won't be alone when you make decisions now," he said. "You have people who would be affected if you dropped dead tomorrow. Or if you became dependent on care the day after." The imp grimaced. "Now he's pulling out the big guns," he snorted. "Family as an argument. Classic."

I looked at my hands, at my fingertips, which were trembling slightly, even though I hadn't drunk that much today. I thought of my grandson, how he'd seen a beer glass on the table for the first time and asked me why grown-ups drank "such strange water." I thought of my daughter, who had eventually stopped trying to ruin my parties because she'd realized that I loved her more when I wasn't sober. Or at least, that's what she told herself.

“What do you suggest?” I finally asked, because one of us had to take a stand, and it clearly wasn’t me. The doctor took a deep breath. “Reduction would be the minimum,” he said. “Significant reduction. Better yet: abstinence. At least for a while. Your liver needs rest, and so does your heart. And you need a few years without constant full exertion if you don’t want to become a regular patient on my ward in the foreseeable future.” He leafed through the report. “We can offer you options: programs, counseling centers, clinics. But ultimately, the decision is yours.”

The goblin chuckled. "Clinic instead of pub," he said. "New location, same sadness, only with beds instead of stools." He tapped me on the head. "You already know what you're going to do: you'll take the slips of paper, pocket them, go home, sit at the kitchen table, light up a cigarette, think about it for five minutes, go to the nightclub in the evening and tell everyone what the doctor said. Applause, awkward silence, another beer."

The worst part was: I knew he might be right. Part of me was listening to the doctor, another part was already sitting at the counter, turning the diagnosis into an anecdote. "You know," I said to the doctor, "I lived for a long time as if tomorrow were a long way off. And now you're sitting here saying tomorrow could come sooner than expected." He nodded. "Exactly," he said. "And I'm telling you, it's not too late. But it's very, very late to change your mind."

He handed me a stack of slips of paper. Addresses, phone numbers, recommendations. Black letters on white paper that said: "If you really want it, there are ways." I took them, felt their weight. Not much, it was just paper. But in my head, it weighed a ton. "Thank you," I murmured. I meant it. It's not every day that someone takes the trouble to tell you that you're not completely lost.

When I stood back in the hallway, the disinfectant hit me like a reminder of something I hadn't yet experienced: dying. I didn't see the woman with the girl anymore; they were probably already gone. The man in the suit had also disappeared. In his place sat others now. Different faces, different stories, the same fear in different shades. I sat down again briefly, even though I didn't need to. Just to breathe.

The goblin was silent for a moment, which was rare. "Well?" he then asked quietly. "Are we about to have the big awakening moment? You go outside, throw away all the bottles, delete the number of the person who was driving the furthest behind you, get in touch with your daughter, do yoga, and drink smoothies?" I laughed bitterly. "I'm not the hero of a brochure life," I said. "I'm the type who'll be happy if I don't have three more shots tonight."

I stood up and tucked the notes deeper into my jacket pocket, as if I were afraid of losing them. On my way out, I passed a room whose door wasn't properly closed. I glanced inside. Bed, monitor, someone asleep or pretending to be. IV stands, tubes, that constant beeping in the background, a reminder that time doesn't stop just because you're lying down. The smell in the room was even sharper, even more sterile, even less worldly. Disinfectant, sweat, something sweetish that reminded me of old people who never get up.

"That's your future option," the goblin whispered. "If you're lucky." I kept walking, faster, out, through the revolving door, out onto the street. The air outside smelled of exhaust fumes, cold wind, a faint lingering scent of the bakery. It wasn't a good perfume, but better than the one inside. I paused briefly, took a deep breath. Everything felt both clearer and more unstable at the same time.

On the way home, I thought about the other times I'd sat in rooms like these. As a child, as a son, as a visitor. Every time the same disinfectant, just different beds. Every time the same question: "Is he staying? Is he leaving? How much longer?" This time, I was the one they'd eventually dare to ask that question aloud about.

“This,” the goblin said as we stopped at the next traffic light, “will be one of those memories that resurfaces later when you’re stuck in last place again and someone makes a bad joke about hospitals. You’ll immediately have the smell in your head. And you’ll have to decide whether to add fuel to the fire or let it go.” I said nothing. I only knew: The smell of disinfectant wouldn’t just mean hospitals anymore. It would also mean: “Little time. Lots of unpaid bills.”

Back in the back, the contrast was so stark it was almost comical. Inside: white, bright, clean, everything designed to prevent anything harmful from multiplying. Here: yellowish light,

sticky floor, a biological battleground of bacteria, viruses, and stories never aired. It smelled of smoke, spilled beer, cold deep fryer, and the lingering perfume of guests who hadn't quite given up on life. Not a drop of disinfectant in sight. If someone came along with a bucket, the smell would probably take offense.

"Well, survivor," the innkeeper greeted me as I sank into my usual stool. "What do they say? Do you want to grow old or kick the bucket early?" The waitress reflexively placed a beer in front of me, then paused. "Oh," she said. "Perhaps you wanted...?" I looked at the glass, then at her. "The doctor says I should drink less," I said. "You know the song." The goblin sitting on the tap threw up his arms. "Now sing the karaoke version."

Heiner was already there, a glass in front of him, a pack of cigarettes beside him. "So?" he asked. "Not so bad, or is everything half screwed?" Harry stared at me as if I'd brought him lottery numbers. The slot machine player paused as he was counting change. They all had their own medical histories, their own diagnoses, their own lies they'd told each other afterward. I knew if I started now, we could spend the whole evening showing each other our physical defects like collector's items.

“They’re telling me to slow down,” I finally replied. “Not to stop completely—at least that’s not what they said—but to ease off the gas significantly. Liver maxed out, heart under pressure, blood a cocktail you shouldn’t serve.” I tried to say it lightly, as if it were just another anecdote. The goblin listened with satisfaction. “Here we are,” he whispered. “Welcome to the ‘I know I’m sick, but I’ve still got some jokes left’ stage.”

The waitress pulled the beer glass back a bit and placed a glass of water next to it. "We're doing a combo deal now," she said. "Whoever survives the doctor gets both." I pulled the beer back towards me. I left the water. The gesture alone felt like I'd made a decision, even though it was just moving the glass. "That smell," I began, "that disinfectant stuff—it lingers. I can still smell it. I feel like when I close my eyes, I see tubes, cables, and posters of organs again."

Heiner nodded slowly. "Hospitals," he said, "have their own hell. My mother lay there, with tubes and all that stuff. I sat beside her bed; she didn't say anything anymore, just breathed like someone carrying a heavy suitcase up a flight of stairs. And above it all, that smell. Since then, I get goosebumps whenever I smell disinfectant. That's when I know: This isn't about time gained anymore, this is about time lost."

Harry stared into his glass. "My old man died in the hospital," he murmured. "We'd had a fight just before, like always. I was drunk, he was sick. Two weeks later, he was lying there, still, smaller than I'd ever seen him. Everything around him was so clean, but he himself was so spent. When I left, I felt like the smell of the stuff was following me. I said then: I'll drink it all away." He laughed bitterly. "Spoiler alert: It didn't work."

The slot machine player simply said, "I don't make any more hospital visits." His gaze was hard. "I can't stand it. The machines, the beeping, that forced optimism. I'd rather come to the funeral. Then everyone knows it's over." The waitress snorted. "You're all so cowardly," she said, without any harshness, more sadly. "You don't face the end, you pretend it's okay. Until you're lying there yourself, hoping someone will come."

The goblin nodded. "Disinfectant," he whispered, "is the smell of consequences. In here in the shop, it smells of avoidance. Two worlds. You move between them like someone who doesn't know which one to stay in." I looked at him. "I know very well which one I want to stay in," I

said. "Neither. I want to be in a third, where I'm only reminded of the others now and then." He grinned. "There is no third world. There is only displacement."

I ended up telling them a bit more about the doctor. About the test results. About the options. About the slips of paper in my bag. It was astonishing how quiet it became, even though the music kept playing and people were laughing at the other tables. For a brief moment, our table was a small, isolated scene from reality. "So? Are you doing anything?" Heiner asked. I shrugged. "I have a slip of paper with a number on it," I replied. "That's more than I had a week ago."

The waitress leaned on the counter with both hands. "If you call them," she said, "we might lose one cup of coffee, but at least I don't need to find you being picked up by police." The owner chimed in. "I don't want anyone from my place being sent straight to the morgue," he grumbled. "We're not a transit center here. We're a break, not the final destination." The goblin gave a dry laugh. "You overestimate your influence, owner," he said. "Some people come here to make the final destination more pleasant."

Later, after the first round of beers and the conversations had settled down, the hospital smell slowly faded from my nostrils. The smoke, the alcohol, the frying oil had masked it. But it wasn't gone. It lay deeper, somewhere in my memory, ready to resurface at any moment if someone said "examination" or "diagnosis." I noticed that between sips, I stopped holding the glass as naturally as usual. It was as if someone had told me to breathe more slowly.

"You can't drink the smell away," the goblin said later, as I stood on the toilet washing my hands. Soap, cold water, a smear of that cheap disinfectant they sometimes use here when someone misses the toilet. "You can only cover it up with something else. But when things get quiet, it'll come back." I looked in the mirror, my eyes red, my skin pale. "I'm not on an IV drip yet," I muttered. "I can still get in and out of here under my own steam."

“Still,” he repeated. “That’s the little word everything hinges on. You can still make a call. You can still have one less drink that evening. You can still get in touch with people before you’re just a photo hanging in their hallway.” I dried my hands and went back to the bar. The water was still there. I took a sip. Not a big one, not a heroic one. Just a sip.

The innkeeper saw it, said nothing, but I noticed he dried himself off a little more slowly. The waitress noticed too, turned around as if nothing had happened, but her shoulders relaxed. Heiner grinned crookedly. "Look," he said quietly, "he can drink other things besides beer." Harry raised his glass to me. "To internal disinfection," he said. "Maybe water is just forgetting about alcohol."

The goblin sighed, feigning annoyance. "Okay," he said. "A glass of water isn't rehab. But it's at least a step in the right direction. I like drama, but I also like series—and you're not even on the season finale yet." I drank my beer more slowly than usual. No one commented. We talked again about football, about bills, about the guy who got kicked out last time because he thought he could live here for free. The evening became an evening again.

On my way home later, as I climbed the stairs, the smell of the clinic came flooding back. Disinfectant, sterile air, the voices in the hallway, the click of shoes on linoleum. I paused briefly, in the middle of the stairwell, my hand on the banister. Downstairs, it smelled of laundry detergent and food; upstairs, stale air. And there I was, caught in the middle, my mind torn between two worlds, both smelling of something that had nothing to do with home.

“Memories that smell of disinfectant,” said the goblin sitting on the railing. “Remember them well. They’re unpleasant, but at least they don’t shine. They stink honestly. Unlike some memories from the pub.” I nodded, unlocked the apartment door, and stepped into my own mixture of smoke, dust, and old life.

Before going to bed, I placed the notes from the clinic on the kitchen table. Not in the drawer, not under other papers. Openly. Visibly. Between the ashtray and the lighter. The air didn't smell of disinfectant. But it was still there in my mind. Perhaps long enough to remind me that the next phone call was more important than the next shot of liquor.

The goblin sat on the edge of the table, swung his legs, and looked at the slips of paper. "All right," he said. "I'm curious what you'll do first: go back to the back of the pack—or dial one of these numbers." I yawned, my body heavy, my head lighter than it should be. "No idea," I replied. "But today I'm not doing either. Today I'm just going to sleep with the smell in my head." And that's what I did. No heroic deed. No vow. Just the faint inkling that the truly important memories never smell of beer, but of things meant to keep you from having to stop too soon.

Chapter 29 – The Day the Innkeeper Stopped Grinning

It wasn't a special day on the calendar. No holiday, no birthday, not the end of the month when people drank more nervously than usual. Just a perfectly ordinary day, and the sky looked like a badly washed tablecloth again: gray, patternless, lacking ambition. As always, I was standing too early in front of the last light, cigarette in hand, hands in my pockets, like a half-grown dog waiting for someone to unlock the door. The imp was sitting on the doorbell, dangling his legs and watching me.

“One day,” he said, “you’ll come here, and the door will stay closed.” I blew the smoke to the side. “Then I’ll have a real problem,” I muttered. “Then I’ll have to pretend I have a home somewhere else.” He grinned. “You’re panicking just thinking about it, aren’t you?”

That day, the door opened as usual. Only different. When the innkeeper unlocked it, there was no quip on his lips, no "So, everything's sorted out in life again?", no crooked smile saying, "It's all nonsense anyway, come on in." He simply opened the door, pulled it open, and let me in as if I were the delivery man. No grin, no twitch of the lips, nothing.

I paused, a second too long. "Hey," I said. It felt almost brazenly normal. He just nodded, wordlessly, walked past me behind the bar, switched on the light as if he'd forgotten how to greet people. The waitress wasn't there yet, the place smelled like yesterday. Cold smoke, stale beer, cleaning water that had more pretended to clean than actually did.

The imp jumped from the doorframe onto the coat rack and whistled softly. "Look closely," he whispered. "Something's shifted today." I sat down on my stool, the same one as always, the stool that over the years had probably seen more of my body weight than my bed. The innkeeper placed a beer in front of me. Just like that. No comment, no "Same as always?", no "Don't you want to start with coffee today, Grandpa?" Just the glass, a dull thud as it landed on the wood.

"Are you okay?" I asked, because it was getting awkward that neither of us was saying anything. Normally, we were two pros at a semi-ironic sparring match. Today, he was completely silent. He glanced at me briefly, his eyes smaller than usual, the wrinkles deeper. "It's going well," he said. A word that explained nothing and obscured everything.

The goblin chuckled softly. "'It's going well' is the new 'everything's screwed up,'" he commented. "Can't you hear that?" I took a sip, suddenly feeling out of place. The counter was the same, the back wall of bottles the same, the coffee smelled of burnt beans as always. But the atmosphere had shifted, as if someone had secretly moved the furniture around in the night.

The waitress came in a moment later, jacket open, hair loose, dark circles under her eyes that weren't from a night of heavy drinking, but from some other kind of tiredness. She looked at the owner, paused briefly. "Did you tell him?" she asked. He shook his head. "Later," he mumbled. Her eyes flicked to me, then back to him. "He'll find out anyway," she said. "He's stuck here like glue."

I pretended I hadn't heard anything, drank, and stared at the grooves in the wood in front of me. The goblin climbed onto my collar and put a hand to my ear. "Come on," he whispered. "Ask. You want to know." I swirled the glass around, as if the movement were meant to give me courage. "What do you want him to tell me?" I growled under my breath. "That the beer's run out? I would have realized the apocalypse was underway by now."

As the evening progressed, the others trickled in. Heiner, his shoulders even rounder than usual, Harry with that "I'm pretending to be funny" look, the slot machine player with eyes that had seen too much neon. One after the other, they sat down, ordered, drank, talked – and gradually everyone noticed the same thing: The landlord wasn't smiling.

No snide remarks when someone staggered to the toilet. No comment when someone brought up the same old story for the hundredth time. No "Are you almost there, Harry?" or "Heiner, no drama today?" He did what needed to be done. Pouring drinks, taking payments, washing glasses, filing bills. No extras, no banter, none of those little niceties you only notice when they're gone. He was suddenly just a function.

"He's got something about him," Heiner said quietly at one point, while the landlord on the other end of the line was talking to a delivery driver. "He hasn't even cracked a stupid grin today." Harry nodded. "Maybe he's faint-hearted about what's really going on here," he said. "If I owned the place, I'd stop laughing eventually, too." The slot machine player snorted. "Or maybe the doctor showed him a list of values," he muttered. "You're not the only one with organs on the verge of failing."

The waitress came to the table and collected the empty glasses. She seemed restless, which was unusual for her. Normally, she was the only one with anything resembling a rhythm, while we all trotted out of sync. "What's wrong with him?" I asked directly. I was too old for beating around the bush. "He doesn't smile anymore. That's not normal."

She hesitated, wiped away a beer stain that deserved a second beer mat, then looked down at us. "The landlord raised the rent," she said. "Not just a little. That's right. The lease is expiring. New lease, new terms. He's saying: Either he pays—or he can find somewhere else." She shrugged. "And where are you going to find a place like this again?"

The goblin whistled. "Ah," he said. "Money. The boss of all moods." I felt the beer grow heavier in my stomach. "How much more?" Heiner asked. She mentioned a number that made all of us wince. Not because we knew anything about commercial rents, but because we knew the landlord wasn't rich. Not even moderately so. "He'll never manage that," the slot machine player muttered. "Not with us as customers."

“Did he accept it?” I asked. The waitress shook her head. “He should decide,” she said. “A few weeks. And in the meantime, he should carry on as if everything is normal. Smile, pour beers, act as if there’s a future here.” She looked at the bar where he stood, his back slightly hunched, his shoulders heavy. “I’ve known him for years,” she said quietly. “Today is the first time I’ve been afraid he’ll just quit.”

The goblin sat on the rim of my glass and watched the innkeeper. "This is the day," he whispered, "when he realizes that he hasn't just been serving you, but essentially subsidizing you. His time, his nerves, his money. And that the system no longer works. No wonder he's not grinning. This has always been a bad business – it's just that today he's really noticing it."

Suddenly everything made sense. The inventory, the lids, the stack of bills that never seemed to get any smaller. The evenings when he'd stayed even after we'd half left. The glances at the door when no one came. For us, the shop was a place to slowly fall apart. For him, it was the shop that devoured his days.

“If the place closes down,” said Harry, “we’re screwed.” He tried to laugh, but it sounded hollow. “Then we’ll have to take our problems home with us.” Heiner nodded slowly. “Then you’re sitting at the kitchen table and the person across from you isn’t the landlord anymore, but your own reflection,” he muttered. “You can’t stand that sober.”

I looked at the bar. The man who had cushioned our falls for years stood there like someone who'd just been told that his own life-long lie now had to pay a rent increase. And for the first time in a long time, I thought: Maybe this isn't just our downfall in here. Maybe it's primarily his.

The news crept through the bar like cold smoke. Some pretended not to have heard, others nodded knowingly, still others looked as if they'd just realized for the first time that pubs don't simply fall from the sky. It was as if someone had turned down the background music and suddenly you could hear just how old the refrigerators really sounded.

The innkeeper continued working, as if trying to prove to himself that he still had things under control. He polished glasses, even though none of them were truly clear anymore. He shoved bottles onto shelves, checked barrels, scribbled something in a notebook that had clearly seen better days. Only his mouth remained straight. No grin, no raised eyebrow, no "Come on, one more."

“We could do a benefit concert,” Harry said at some point, half-seriously, half-drunk. “You know, with live music, passing around a hat, flyers, that kind of crap. People love that sort of thing. ‘Save the bottom of the barrel.’ Even the people who only crawl in here once a year would come.” Heiner sniffed. “They’d come, get completely wasted, and then leave again,” he said. “In the end, the landlord would have more work, more mess, more trouble with the authorities—and two days later everything would be back to normal.”

The slot machine player was thinking more pragmatically. "We could pay off our tabs," he muttered. "Seriously. Not just a fiver here, a tenner there. Really. Each of us chips in what we can." He looked down at his own glass, as if searching for answers within it. "Okay, tough luck if you're broke yourself," he added. "But maybe someone knows someone with money and some sympathy."

The waitress heard this and snorted. "You're lovely," she said, "but you're not the solution. You're the reason he's in this mess. Not entirely, of course—rent, expenses, everything's getting more expensive—but you all happily put him on the tab, all happily let him stay late, all happily bought another round if it was on his tab." She looked around at us all. "You're his heart. And the hole in his bank account."

The goblin clapped enthusiastically. "Finally, someone with more perspective than you all has said it," he said. "You've always seen yourselves as victims of circumstance. Rent prices, politics, cigarette tax, the weather. But you're also perpetrators. You've generously allowed yourselves to be fed off his nerves." He squirted a little beer from my glass onto the counter. "Cheers."

I felt caught out, even though I'd known for a long time that I wasn't exactly the ideal customer. I'd made demands, I'd complained, I'd whined, I'd clung to the bar like it was the last lifeline. And the landlord had put up with it all, for tips, for snide remarks, for a "thank you" that rarely came. Now he stood there, with a landlord breathing down his neck, a mounting bill, and us hanging on his back.

“Have you thought about it yet?” I asked him directly at some point, when the bar was briefly free. “About the contract.” He looked up. His eyes had that dull gleam I usually only saw in us after three days of not sleeping properly. “Yes,” he said. “I’ve been thinking about it. I can’t afford the rent if everything stays the same.” He gestured around the room. “Your tabs, your late nights, my generosity—it all works reasonably well with the old rent. Not with the new one.”

“And what does that mean?” I pressed. He shrugged. “Means,” he said slowly, “that I’d have to raise prices, drastically cut margins, stay open later, bring in more people, be less patient. In other words, become exactly what I never wanted to be: a place that only cares about revenue.” He looked at me. “And if I do that, you’ll be the first to complain.”

The goblin nodded. "That's the dilemma," he whispered. "A shop for failures can't really afford any failures. You're bad customers: lots of time, little money, high wear and tear." He grinned at me. "We know that from you and your life, don't we? Lots of plans, little execution, high consumption."

The waitress chimed in. "He offered to talk to the landlord," she said. "You know, about 'regular customers, social hub, local culture' and all that nonsense you spout when you're hoping there's still a shred of compassion left somewhere." She took a sip of her cola. "The landlord said he understood, but he had expenses of his own. Classic."

“Maybe one of us will buy the place,” Harry suggested, clearly already three beers deep in a daydream. “We’ll pool our money, form some kind of cooperative. Everyone will be a co-owner. We’ll all be in this together.” Heiner gave a dry laugh. “I owe the electricity company,” he said. “If I add a pub to the mix, the bankruptcy trustee will come and move in with me.”

Suddenly, the slot machine operator said something I hadn't expected. "What if you just quit?" he asked the landlord. "No fighting, no negotiating. Just say, 'That's it.' No new contracts, no stress, no fuss. Just hand in the keys, sell the glasses, done." The landlord looked at him, and for a moment there was something like longing in his eyes. "You think I haven't thought of that?" he asked. "I'm tired, guys. I've been doing this for years. Almost seven days a week. I listen to you, I see you crash and burn, I carry your moods, your illnesses, your stories. This isn't just a job. It's like I'm permanently standing in the emergency room for the soul—only without the doctors and without a break."

The goblin nodded respectfully. "The man understands," he said. "He's not just your host. He's your emotional doorman. And the doorman is always in the draft."

For a moment, there was silence at the bar. We all knew we were part of what had worn him down. Not alone, there were others who came and went, who got drunk and disappeared. But the core group, us, who were always there, for days, for years, we had made his place what it was: an escape that was never properly paid for.

“If you close down,” I said quietly, “I’ll be standing in my kitchen every evening, not knowing what to do with myself.” It was selfish to put it that way, but honest. He twitched a corner of his mouth, not quite a grin, more of a reflex from days gone by. “Maybe that’s not so bad,” he said. “Maybe at some point you’ll have to learn to sit in your kitchen by yourself, without a beer in your hand and without me as wallpaper.”

The goblin cheered inwardly. "Yes!" he shrieked into my mind. "That's the plot twist I've been waiting for for years: The innkeeper is becoming more sensible than his guests." I grimaced. "So you want to close down?" I asked. He looked at me for a long time. "I don't know yet," he said. "But for the first time in my life, I don't find the idea completely absurd anymore."

That was the real blow. Not the rent increase, not the contract, not the greedy landlord. But the admission that the man who had kept the place warm for us all these years was slowly, inwardly, detaching himself from the bar. And that's precisely why he wasn't grinning anymore. Because for the first time in a long time, he was thinking about what his life would be like if we were all just memories reeking of smoke and spilled beer.

In the days that followed, the place was different, without saying a word. It looked the same, but the atmosphere had a crack. As if we all had a hairline crack in our glasses, from which something was slowly leaking, something that couldn't be refilled. The landlord only grinned occasionally, reflexively, when one of his old stock phrases slipped out. "It's you again," or "Sit down, this chair knows you." But the remarks were shorter, less frequent, heavier.

The goblin had changed his position. Instead of perching on my glass as usual, he was now watching the innkeeper more often. He sat on the cork of a bottle, at the edge of the cash register slot, on the shelf above the spirits, as if he had grasped that something more crucial than my next drunken binge was happening. "That guy," he said, "has started thinking about himself for the first time in years. That's dangerous. For you."

One evening, when rain had turned the street into a glistening ice rink and hardly anyone ventured out to the back of the pub, it was just us: Heiner, Harry (the slot machine player), Manni, and me. The regulars at the table for losers. The waitress was drying glasses, the

landlord stood at the bar with a cup of coffee. No football, no music, just the quiet hum of the refrigeration units and our voices.

"What would you do if you closed down?" Manni suddenly asked into the silence. Manni of all people, who always pretended he wouldn't do anything if he could. The innkeeper took a sip and put his cup down. "Sleep," he said thoughtfully. "Just sleep for now. For two weeks. No alarm clocks, no delivery drivers, no drinks delivery men, no taxi drivers venting their frustrations here in the middle of the night."

“And after that?” Harry pressed. The innkeeper shrugged. “No idea,” he said. “Maybe a different job. Something where I don’t see people slowly disintegrate every night. Maybe something with daylight.” He wasn’t grinning as he said it. It didn’t sound like a joke, but a serious wish. Daylight. A foreign concept in a world where most important decisions are made after 10 p.m.

Heiner looked down at his glass. "I remember when you took over the place," he said. "You told me you wanted a place where people could be when they couldn't stand being out there anymore. A living room for the poor, you said." The landlord nodded. "I did that too," he said. "But in a living room, people eventually fall asleep on the couch and go to work the next day. Here, they stay put."

The goblin chuckled softly. "You turned his dream into a dead end," he whispered. "You wanted something you could never give back." I frowned. "What about us when you close down?" I asked. It sounded pathetic; I heard it myself. But it was the question hanging in the air.

The landlord looked directly at me. "I'm not your social worker," he said calmly. "I like you guys. I really do. Otherwise, I would have given up the place long ago or turned it into a cocktail bar for students. But at some point, you have to ask yourself: Do I want to sink into the ground with you all here? Or do I want to spend the last few years I have seeing anything other than your backs when you fall off your stools?"

It hurt because it was true. For years, we'd seen him as an integral part of our miserable existence. The landlord was simply there, like the bar, the ashtray, the television. We'd forgotten that he had a life outside that spotlight. Or could have one.

“You can’t just leave us… like this,” said Harry, sounding like an abandoned child. “We’re…” He searched for the word. Family would have been a lie, friends too. “…used to each other,” he finally managed. The innkeeper smiled thinly, the first time that day that he’d managed anything resembling an expression. “Habits can be changed,” he said. “Otherwise, we wouldn’t be drinking so much here.”

The waitress leaned beside him and folded her arms. "He has a right to get out," she said. "You all always want someone to understand you, to support you, to put up with you. But who supports him?" She pointed at the innkeeper. "If he gets sick, none of you will be standing here washing glasses for free. You'll go to another place or home and say, 'What a shame about the place.'"

The goblin nodded gravely. "She's just served you one of the ugliest truths," he said. "You're not the good souls of the bottom of the barrel. You're the ones who inhabit it until someone

can no longer pay the rent." I took a deep swig. It tasted different than usual. More bitter. As if a trace of disinfectant had fallen into the beer. Clinic and pub met in my mouth.

“Maybe,” I said cautiously, “maybe it’s better if you leave before you die in here.” The words were hard to say. “Maybe it’s better if we’re forced to spend our evenings somewhere other than here. Or not even every evening anymore.” I heard the others sigh, but no one objected immediately.

Heiner rubbed his face. "Maybe," he muttered, "this is our extended waiting room. And eventually we'll be called in. But you're not the doctor, boss. You're just the one who puts out the magazines and makes sure nobody falls flat on their face." Harry nodded, reluctantly. "That would be something new," he said. "Evenings on the sofa instead of at the bar. With our own refrigerator as our host. At least it won't get sick from us."

The slot machine player glanced at the ashtray. "You could open somewhere else," he suggested. "Smaller, out of town, lower rent, fewer idiots." The landlord shook his head. "I don't think I'll start all over again," he said. "Maybe I've just drunk enough in my life—with you all and for you. Maybe this is my last place."

The goblin stood up, stretched, and looked at me. "You realize," he said, "that this can't go on forever. Not for him, not for you, not for the group. Things come to an end. Pubs, bodies, relationships, excuses. You now have two options: You wait until someone knocks the glasses out of your hand—or you put them down yourself at some point, without anyone shouting 'time to call it a night.'"

Later that night, as we were leaving, we all felt heavier in our jackets. I paused once more in front of the door, glancing at the flickering "Closing Time" sign. The innkeeper was inside, clearing away the last of the glasses. He glanced up briefly, our eyes met. No comment, no grin. Just a nod. A nod that spoke louder than any of his old phrases.

“When the place closes,” the goblin said quietly as we walked down the street, “it’s not just the end of the place. It’s also the end of that part of your story where you could pretend your life was one endless happy hour with bad vibes.” I put my hands deeper into my pockets. “And what comes after that?” I asked. He shrugged. “Maybe something better. Maybe something worse. Maybe nothing special. But it’ll belong to you more than it did to that bar.”

Back home in the kitchen, I sat down at the table as if someone had carried me there. I kept my jacket on, my shoes on, everything on. I had no energy for transitions. The silence hit me differently than usual. Not that familiar, dull quiet after a too-noisy evening, but a cautious, expectant one. As if the apartment were watching to see who was coming. The guy who wants to repress everything again—or someone who's thinking for the first time about what will happen if their local pub really closes down.

I automatically lit a cigarette, even before I saw the doctor's papers still lying on the table. Between the ashtray and the lighter, like a small court order that no one was enforcing. The smoke tasted sharper than usual. Maybe it was just my imagination, maybe it was the memory of disinfectant stuck somewhere between my nose and brain. I took a deep drag, blew it toward the ceiling, and watched it dissipate. Like everything else here: rising, evaporating, disappearing.

The goblin stood on the stacks of papers, hands on his hips. "Well," he said, "how does it feel when the bar wobbles?" I stared at him. "Wrong," I said. "Like a chair missing a leg, but you sit on it anyway because you don't know any better." He nodded. "The bar was your fourth leg," he said. "You leaned on it so you wouldn't have to think about what the other three were even good for."

I thought of the innkeeper, standing there with his coffee cup in his hand, as if it were his last stop. Of the waitress who had said so calmly and clearly that he, too, had a right to get out. Of Heiner, Harry, the vending machine man, Manni – that sad bunch who suddenly seemed as if they'd been told that the bus they'd been riding for years wasn't running. We'd all grown accustomed to the idea that the last light was a fixed point. Immovable, independent of us. Now it turned out: it was just a shop. One that could get just as tired as we did.

I grabbed one of the doctor's slips of paper, read the first line, but the words didn't really register. Something about "program," something about "outpatient," something about "support." The language was clean, orderly, clinical. The opposite of the babble at the pub, where everything is said in beer and cigarette smoke and yet somehow still sticks. Here it said: "You can..." In the pub, it would have been: "You should..." And I was stuck somewhere in between.

“If the landlord really does close down,” I said after a while, more to myself than to the goblin, “then basically this is all I’ll have left.” I gestured toward the kitchen. Table, chair, ashtray, notes, refrigerator humming away like someone feeling overworked. “Then maybe I’ll go to another pub,” I added quickly, as reflexively as someone says “Just kidding” when they’ve said something true.

The goblin gave a short, unenthusiastic laugh. "You can run into any other dive in town," he said. "The counters are all the same height, the glasses all the same size, the excuses all the same. But you know perfectly well that you'll never sit the way you did in the back of the room again. The place isn't just a pub. It's the backdrop for the version of yourself you've cultivated most." He jumped onto the back of the chair, balancing there as if standing on unstable surfaces were the easiest thing in the world. "When the backdrop disappears, all that's left is the role. And that's thinner than you think."

For the first time, I truly imagined what it would be like if the sign were to go out one day. Standing in front of it in the evening, hands in my pockets, the door locked, the windows dark. Perhaps a note: "Closed for health reasons," "Tenant wanted," or simply "Thank you for the years." And I'd be standing there, like a dog outside a door where it's been fed for years. Without a key, without a plan B.

“Maybe this is the moment you start becoming a regular in your own kitchen,” the goblin said. “You, your glass, your thoughts. No innkeeper standing between you. No waitress bringing you water when you’re overdoing it again. No other failures mirroring your misery so you don’t feel so alone.” I snorted. “I feel alone here anyway,” I said. “With or without the bar.” He nodded. “Exactly. You’ve just learned to cover it up with noise.”

A glass from this morning still sat on the sink, with a residue of coffee at the bottom that looked like a bad prophecy. I emptied it, rinsed the glass roughly, and turned it upside down. A ridiculous gesture, but it felt almost symbolic. "Funny," I thought. "I can turn a glass upside down, but not my life." The goblin grinned. "Start small," he said. "Glass today, head maybe next week."

I sat down again, picked up the slips of paper, and laid them neatly side by side. One number stood out. Large, in bold print, as if it needed to be louder than the others: Addiction Counseling. Such a word, both help and accusation. I stared at it as if the number would dial itself. "Will you call when the store closes?" the goblin asked. "Or before? Or never?" I shrugged. "No idea," I said honestly. "All I know is that for the first time, I'm getting a whiff of what a discount might be. If I start now, I might not have to pay everything down to the last cent."

The silence grew heavier, but not unbearable. A car drove by outside, dishes clattered somewhere in the house, a door slammed, a television droned through a wall. All normal evening sounds. Except that for the first time in ages, I didn't immediately think, "I have to go to the last room, otherwise I'll miss something." Today I knew: even if I did go, I wouldn't miss anything I hadn't already seen a thousand times. A landlord who no longer grins. Guests pretending they weren't startled. A goblin slowly finding new favorite spots.

“You’re afraid that without the bar, nothing will be left of you,” the goblin said quietly. “But maybe it’s the other way around. Maybe then, for the first time, what will remain is what you truly are—and not just the person sitting at the regulars’ table, cracking jokes and waiting for the next round.” I stared at my hands. They looked old. Spots, veins, small scars from things I could barely remember. “And what if I don’t like what’s left?” I asked. He shrugged. “Then you can still drink. The supply isn’t going anywhere. Your liver might, but the poison isn’t.”

I laughed briefly, despite everything. It wasn't a happy laugh, more the kind that prevented a tear from coming to my eye. I shifted the slips of paper so they were directly in front of me. No longer tucked away somewhere to the side, but right in the thick of things. Perhaps, I thought, this is the first step: putting things where you can no longer ignore them. Perhaps the second step is actually dialing a number someday, before the landlord turns the key for the last time and the final lightbulb goes on to exist only as a memory.

The goblin jumped off the table, landed on my shoulder, and leaned his head against my neck. "Don't kid yourself," he whispered. "You won't become a new person overnight. You'll keep drinking, you'll keep avoiding things, you'll keep pretending you have time. But there's a crack in the glass now. You've seen that your landlord isn't an infinite resource. That the place isn't a sanctuary someone else is paying for. And this crack can't be filled with drink."

I took a drag on my cigarette, stubbed it out, without immediately lighting another. The ashtray looked the same as always, but the table didn't. In front of me: slips of paper with phone numbers. Behind me: a pub that might soon be gone. And in between: me, in a kitchen that had never smelled so strongly of "decisions are made here" as it did now.

“When the day comes that the innkeeper really doesn’t unlock the door anymore,” the goblin said, “everyone will say, ‘It was to be expected.’ You can decide today whether they’ll say the same about you later—or whether at least someone will say, ‘That old idiot tried to pull something off in the end.’” I nodded slowly. No heroic “yes,” no oath, no vow. Just a nod that might be worth less tomorrow. But today it was all I had.

I sat there for a long time, without music, without the bar, without other voices. Just me, the kitchen table, the goblin, and the quiet possibility that the last light might not be the last light under which I sit. Eventually, I got up, turned off the lamp, and went to bed. The bar was still open, somewhere over there on the street. I wasn't there. For the first time, it didn't just feel like a loss, but like a rehearsal for something that was inevitably coming my way.

Before I closed my eyes, I heard the goblin murmur softly: "Remember this. The day the innkeeper stopped grinning was the day you stopped believing that all this would go on forever." And for the first time in a long time, I was afraid of the future—but not only that. A tiny, almost invisible part of me was also curious whether out there, beyond the bar and the smell of disinfectant, anything was waiting for me that didn't just smell of beer or cleaning products.

Chapter 30 – Taking Inventory of One's Own Misery

Inventory sounds like something out of a supermarket. Pallets, fluorescent lights, and trainees running through the aisles with tiny scanners, counting cans no one buys anymore. Inventory means: everything that's there is looked at, registered, and recorded. So that no one can later say they didn't know what was there. I never thought I'd ever do something like that in my own apartment. Especially not for myself.

It started on one of those rare sober mornings when I noticed how full my kitchen table was. Not with food, that would be too optimistic. With paper. Letters I hadn't opened. Official forms. Medical reports. Advertisements pretending they could change my life if I just scanned the QR code. Scattered among them were cigarette butts, ash, and empty lighters. A small, organized chaos that looked like my brain in furniture form.

The goblin stood in the middle of the pile, surveying everything with the gaze of an accountant on the verge of a nervous breakdown. "Well," he said, "welcome to the archive of your turning a blind eye. Here we have it all: rejected attempts, missed opportunities, reminders you drenched in beer to make them grow." He held up a crumpled letter marked "Important!" "This is the 'Predictably Ignored' category."

I sat down, slowly, as if the chair might bite me. The air in the kitchen was thicker than the smoke. The smell of disinfectant still lingered somewhere in my mind, mixed with sweat, cold coffee, and that sour aftertaste of sleep deprivation. I stared at the piles as if they were the debris of an explosion I couldn't remember. "I'm not taking inventory," I said reflexively. "Just tidying up a bit." The goblin laughed. "You call every war a 'military operation,'" he said. "Call it what you like. In the end, you have to count."

I picked up the top letter. Some health insurance company wanted to know something. The date was from months ago. I'd put it aside back then because I "didn't have the headspace." The truth was: I had too much on my mind. Too many thoughts, too little courage to face them. I tore open the envelope. Phrases that sounded so friendly they were almost insulting: "We kindly request..." "To avoid delays..." I read, understood, and realized I'd long since missed the deadline. Deadlines. Always these deadlines. In life, in my body, in my job.

“Category: ‘Could have been done if you hadn’t been spending all your time in the pub,’” the imp commented, holding up imaginary index cards. “You have plenty of those.” I put the letter aside and picked up the next one. A bill. Lab results, co-pay, some test I only half remembered. “Due date…” Some date that felt like a past mistake. I sighed and pushed that one aside too. Bills you haven’t paid are like people you never replied to. They keep reappearing, just in different envelopes.

After a while, I realized I wasn't just sorting papers. I was sorting excuses. "I was stressed back then." – "I was sick." – "There was that thing with my job." – "The woman who left me." Each layer had its own "why." But the root cause was always the same: I had been drinking, smoking, repressing my feelings. The stuff on the table was just the visible part of it.

The imp walked along the stacks like an inspector checking if the shelves were labeled correctly. "Here we have the 'Body' section," he said, pointing to doctors' letters, test results, referrals. "Liver, heart, blood, everything you'd rather keep hidden. Over there is 'Money.'" He nudged bills, reminders, bank statements I'd never wanted to open because I'm not a fan of numbers when they involve me. "And here—my favorite shelf—'People.'" A crumpled letter from my daughter, a postcard from some old friend I'd filed away under "Doesn't drink anymore, boring."

“This isn’t an apartment,” he stated. “This is a warehouse for things you haven’t finished.” I took a sip of water—yes, water, not beer this time—because my throat was getting dry. Not from drinking, from swallowing. Some truths are harder to swallow than any shot of liquor.

At some point, I started making trash. Waste paper. Things that absolutely no one would need anymore, not even a bailiff or a nurse. Old advertisements, expired coupons, flyers for events I never went to because they sounded too good to be true. I stuffed the stuff into a bag. Every tear was like a small, blunt cut: You don't need this anymore. This isn't coming back. This was never important. A strange kind of liberation.

But then came the painful parts. An old note on which my granddaughter had scrawled, "Grandpa, will you come again sometime?" No date, just a colored pencil, a heart she'd learned to draw somewhere. I couldn't remember if I'd gone back then. When you don't remember, the answer is usually obvious. The imp looked over my shoulder. "Missed it," he said quietly. "You can't add any marks there."

I didn't put the note in the recycling bin. I placed it in front of me, right in the middle of the pile. Taking stock of one's own misery isn't just about throwing things away. It's also about leaving behind what's meant to hurt. As a warning, a reminder, a punishment, I don't know. I only knew that I didn't want the note to disappear among the phone bills.

After an hour or two—or was it three?—the tabletop was visible again. Not completely clear, but less cluttered. Letters that still had a chance were in one pile. Documents that were beyond saving were in another. Scattered among them were a few things I couldn't categorize: photos, old notes, a prescription with a dosage I'd never tried because I'd always preferred to use a bottle.

"There you go," said the goblin, "it works after all. Inventory is nothing more than: what's there, what's missing, what can go, what should stay. Except your warehouse isn't a supermarket, but a collection of embarrassing things that nobody wants to take off their hands." I leaned back, my back cracking. "And what's the bottom line?" I asked. "What does the balance sheet say?" He grinned crookedly. "Assets: you're still alive. Liabilities: almost everything else."

I could have gone to the back of the line, as usual, as a reward for my "work." Instead, I stayed seated. I watched the piles of stuff breathe, listened to the refrigerator hum. I had the strange feeling that I'd learned more about myself that morning than in the last ten years

behind the bar. Not because I was a genius. But because for the first time I'd seen how much stuff I'd accumulated just to avoid looking in the mirror.

The goblin stretched and jumped off the table. "That was the inventory in the external warehouse," he said. "Congratulations. Next up is the internal warehouse. And there, we won't be counting letters, but the things you've told yourself to become the person you are now." I groaned. "Give me a break," I muttered. "It took you decades to accumulate all this. It'll take me more than a day to count it." He nodded. "All right," he said. "But rest assured: the inventory is underway now. Even if you're not watching."

It's one thing to sort papers. It's quite another to sort your thoughts. With papers, the calendar helps you. It tells you when it's too late. Thoughts, on the other hand, are like those unlabeled containers that end up in the pantry at some point: you no longer know what's in them, only that you kept them for some reason or other. Taking inventory of your mind means: looking at what you've convinced yourself of – and what's still valid.

The goblin insisted we approach this like a game. "Otherwise, you'll shut down after ten minutes," he said. "We don't call it self-analysis, we call it taking stock. You don't like psychologists, but you like lists. So we'll make lists." He sat on the back of my kitchen chair, dangling his legs, and grinned as if he were about to draw lots.

I grabbed an old notebook that had turned up somewhere among bills and broken lighters. It still had a few blank pages. The pen scratched across the paper as if offended that it hadn't been used. At the top, I wrote: "Things I've been telling myself for years." It looked awful, but it worked.

“Number one,” said the goblin, raising his hand like in school. “‘That’s just how I am.’ Your favorite phrase. Put it right at the top.” I wrote it down: “That’s just how I am.” Nothing below it for now. The four saddest words in the world, if you mean them seriously. They sound like acceptance, but are mostly just laziness in Sunday best.

“Number two,” he continued, “'It’s too late anyway.' The phrase you use to call it quits before you’ve even started.” I jotted it down. It was frighteningly easy. I could have written the list from memory without thinking. “Number three: 'I’m not hurting anyone, I’m only hurting myself.' That’s one of your favorites when you’re drinking to escape something.” Again I wrote. The sentences stood there like little judgments already carried out.

I mentally flipped back through the pages. Where did they even come from? At some point, I'd started using them like aspirin for the soul. "That's just how I am" first appeared when I couldn't explain to my ex why I'd rather be at the pub than watch a show with her. "It's too late anyway" surfaced when my daughter told me I should stop sooner, before the grandkids were old enough to understand why Grandpa always smelled like an ashtray. I grumbled into the phone to her back then: "Come on, girl, I'm already at that point, it's not worth the big clean-up anymore." It sounded detached, mature, like old guys talk. In reality, it was nothing more than "I can't be bothered to do anything" in a more elegant package.

“And ‘I’m not hurting anyone, I’m only hurting myself,’” the goblin said, “came up the second time you ruined a relationship because you didn’t want to share the bottle.” I glanced up briefly. “It wasn’t that bad,” I muttered. He grinned. “You started promising everything right on cue with the third beer, and forgot everything right on cue with the fifth. In the end, there were two of you: her with her bag packed, and you with your flag set. And you said,

‘Well, better this than dragging her down with you.’ That’s your clever way of claiming you’re a victim who doesn’t want to be a burden on anyone.”

I continued writing. The sentences became a series of small gravestones on the paper. No flourishes, no floral decorations, just bare inscriptions: "That's just how I am." "It's too late anyway." "I don't hurt anyone..." Next to them, I left space, without knowing what for. Maybe for dates. Or for "that's nonsense" in capital letters, sometime, if I ever find the courage.

“Any more?” the goblin asked. More immediately came to mind than I cared to admit. “‘That’s just how I function,’ I said.” He nodded enthusiastically. “Very good. That’s the one you use to smother any idea of sobriety. Write it down.” I wrote: “That’s just how I function.” In parentheses afterward, without thinking, I added: “…so, bad.” The pen made a little bump, as if it had twitched itself.

“And ‘Others are worse,’” the goblin added. “Your favorite comparison. ‘I’m not lying in the gutter, I don’t hit people, I don’t drive drunk, so it can’t be that bad.’” I wrote it down, with an exclamation mark. Not because I was thrilled, but because that’s exactly how it sounded when I said it: too loud, too defiant, like a child who’s been caught and quickly points at someone else.

I read through the list. It was like looking in a mirror, only without the flattering daylight lamp. These weren't just sentences. These were the hinges on which my entire excuse structure rested. There was less space between them than I'd thought. No room for new stories, just a cramped shelf full of old excuses.

“So,” the goblin said contentedly. “Now that we’ve labeled the shop, it’s time for part two.” I groaned. “Sure,” I muttered. “Lists with sub-items. What’s next, flip charts and index cards?” He ignored the remark. “Next to each sentence, you write: ‘Is that true?’ And then you wait to see if you can actually write ‘Yes’ without feeling sick.”

I stared at him. "That's childish," I said. "What's the point?" He shrugged. "You're not much further along than a defiant child when it comes to responsibility," he said. "So start at the level you already know."

I placed the tip of my pen after "That's just how I am." For a long time, nothing happened. I thought of all the times I'd blurted out that phrase, like a joker. When someone asked me why I wasn't answering the phone. Why I wasn't on time. Why I was at the pub again instead of at the birthday party, the parents' evening, or the doctor's appointment. "That's just how I am"—the all-purpose weapon. Whoever says that doesn't explain themselves; they shut down.

"Is that true?" the goblin asked. I heard his voice in my head, like an echo. Is that really how it is? Are you a finished product, shrink-wrapped, with an expiration date, but with no option to change anything? Or is that just the easiest of all sentences to say? I wrote next to the sentence, slowly, as if I had to weigh each letter: "Not true. I just don't want to change anything." The pen paused briefly on the word "want." Then it continued. I stared at the result and felt my stomach sink a little lower.

"Look," the goblin said quietly. "It works after all. You can write without an angel dying right away." I continued.

Besides "It's too late anyway," I didn't write anything at all. The phrase was old, it reeked of cold stairwells and missed opportunities. Too late for marriage, too late for a career, too late to change direction. Too late for sports, for love, for anything that doesn't taste like a pub. "When exactly did you decide it was too late?" the goblin asked. "At thirty? At forty? At forty-five? And who signed that off on you?"

I thought of the doctor who had said it was "very late, but not too late." I thought of the innkeeper who perhaps really did want to see something other than us. I thought of my grandchildren, who weren't yet old enough to read "too late" in my face. In the end, I wrote next to it: "True for some things. But not for everything. Convenience as an excuse." It almost looked philosophical. But it was just honest.

"I don't hurt anyone, I only hurt myself," I read next. I had to laugh, and the laughter hurt my throat. I saw my daughter before me, closing the door. My ex-wife, how she eventually ran out of tears and only grabbed things quietly. The waitress who developed back problems from carrying our glasses every night so we wouldn't be left to deal with the mess alone. The innkeeper, whose heart raced whenever someone in the restroom didn't respond for too long.

I wrote next to it: “That’s not true. Others have to support me. They’re paying for it.” It was strange to read something like that, so simple and obvious, as if I’d copied it from a cheap self-help book. But I knew: If it were just a simplistic statement, it wouldn’t have affected me so deeply.

"That's just how I function," I mumbled, and suddenly the sentence sounded ridiculous. As if I were an old television with an analog connection, offended because everyone's streaming now. Sure, that's how I function. I've spent decades training myself to only calm down at a blood alcohol level of 0.18%. But that doesn't mean it's a law. It just means I've never seriously tried to think any other way.

I wrote: “I only know this mode. Functioning is an exaggeration. It’s survival on a brute-force level.” The goblin clapped slowly. “You’re getting quite poetic, Grandpa,” he said. “If you keep this up, I’ll print it out and hang it in the taillight. ‘Wisdom of a Late Bloomer.’”

Finally, it was time for "Others are worse." I didn't have to think about it for long. The answer was already written all over my face: Yes, others are worse. Others really do end up in the gutter. Others really do beat their partners. Others really do drive drunk. But what good does that do me? I'm not in a competition for "Who messes up their life most effectively." I don't want to compare myself to a murderer to say, "Well, then my cheating isn't so bad after all."

I wrote: “True, but it doesn’t help me at all. Comparing myself to someone worse is just cheap reassurance.” I added the underscore to “cheap.” Because that was the right word. Cheap in the sense of: costs nothing, achieves nothing.

I put down the pen and looked at the page. On the left were the phrases I'd known by heart for years. On the right were the answers I'd never utter aloud if someone in the group asked, "So, how are you really?" On paper, it looked easier. Clearer. As if you could erase it with a rubber band if it hurt too much. Of course, that wasn't possible. But the thought was there.

"And now what?" I asked, more into the room than to the goblin. "Now I have a list of crap I know about myself. Applause. What do we do with it? Frame it and hang it above the bed?"

He jumped from his chair onto the table and examined the page like an art critic. "Now comes the tedious part," he said. "Now, every time you want to say one of these sentences in your head, you have to remember what's written next to it. Not change it every time. Just notice it. Notice that you're lying when you say, 'That's just how I am.' Notice that you're lining your own pockets when you mutter, 'It's too late anyway.'"

I rolled my eyes. "You're acting like I'm still capable of learning," I said. "I'm forty-eight, not some brute anymore." He grinned crookedly. "You're old enough to know you're fooling yourself. That's a good start. Some people only realize it when they've got tubes in their arms."

At that moment, my gaze fell on the other half of the table. There lay the official letters, the mess with deadlines, threats, and "if you don't get in touch." The inventory in my head and the inventory on paper suddenly converged. It was all the same mess. Unanswered questions, postponed decisions, unspoken conversations. Whether on letterhead or in my own internal monologue, the conclusion was always the same: "Please take care of this now."

I closed the notebook, placing it on top of the pile instead of somewhere in between. A small difference, but noticeable. "That's it for today," I said. "I can't manage any more of an inventory. Otherwise, I'll actually start making changes, and it's too late for that." The goblin laughed. "There he is again," he said. "That same old line. But at least now you know it's a lie."

Later, as I turned off the light and stumbled toward the bedroom in the semi-darkness, I had the feeling that someone had mentally rearranged the shelves. Nothing was truly tidy, but some things were no longer positioned so that I would trip over them without noticing. The inventory was far from complete. But for the first time in my life, I had started it without a doctor, a landlord, or a woman forcing me to.

“Taking inventory of my own misery,” I muttered, just before collapsing onto the mattress. “Maybe this is the only shop I can actually close myself before it eats me alive.” The goblin curled up at the edge of the bed, like an overly alert pet. “We’ll see,” he said. “You’ll probably open it again tomorrow morning. But at least today you’ve made a list of everything. And sometimes real change starts right there: with someone who, for the first time, honestly writes down all the nonsense they’ve been telling themselves for years.”

I didn't reply. Sleep came, heavy, but without any real knockout blow. And somewhere on the kitchen table lay a notebook with sentences that said more about me than all the quotes in the bottom half of the list combined.

The next evening, I was back in the back seat again. Of course. Just because you scribble in a notebook doesn't suddenly turn you into someone who drinks herbal tea and writes in a diary while the rain patters romantically against the window. I sat on my usual stool as if nothing had happened, and yet something was different. Not much. Just a slight shift, as if someone had moved the floor a centimeter.

The innkeeper stood behind the bar, polishing glasses as if they were being given a second life. The waitress moved routinely between the tables, tray, cloth, tray. Heiner leafed through an old newspaper as if it might contain some news item that concerned him. Harry told the same story for the fifth time about a boss who didn't get anything. The slot machine player

stared at the pinball machine, even though it had long since stopped. Everything as usual. Only I had a mental note that read: "Inventory underway."

The imp sat on the rim of the ashtray in front of me, his legs dangling in a pile of cigarette butts. "So," he said, "now we'll put your inventory to the test in a field trial. You're here in the warehouse, right in the middle of your merchandise. Time to check the labels." I took a sip of beer—slower than usual—and looked around, not just with that blurry, "it's my crew" look, but with the question in the back of my mind: How much of what I tell myself about my life is actually true?

Heiner, for example. For years, the man with the pronouncements about "it's all too late" and "that's just how we are." I'd always used him as evidence: if someone's like that, then I'm practically harmless. Now I saw an old man clutching a glass as if it were the only thing he owned. His face was a map of missed detours. "He's just an excuse for you," the imp whispered. "'If he's like that, I'm allowed to be too.' How cheap."

Harry, the great tragedian, who always acted as if his misery were some unique high art. I liked him, no question. But as I listened to him tell the story, for the hundredth time, about how his ex didn't understand him and how the jobs always go to the wrong person, I suddenly realized how much of myself was stuck in his words. "We're all running late"—his motto. Convenient, if you'd rather be sitting at the back of the bus in the evening than on the bus to work in the morning.

The slot machine player, who had long since surrendered his entire inventory to the machine. Win, loss, stake, risk – all hidden in coins and numbers. None of us knew where he really lived. Whether he had a family. Whether he did anything besides play, drink, sleep, and play again. "He's simply outsourced his misery management," said the goblin. "The machine tells him when he's allowed to feel bad."

I glanced at the innkeeper. He was grinning a little more today than on that rainy day with the coffee, but there was a shadow in his expression I hadn't noticed before. Perhaps because I'd never looked. Perhaps it had always been there. A man who for years believed he was the host—and is slowly realizing that he's actually the manager of a sinking ship. And we're the passengers, refusing to put on our life jackets.

"And you're right in the middle of it," said the goblin. "With your list in your head and the glass in your hand. You want to take stock of your own misery? Then start here. What does this place give you that you can't get anywhere else? And what does it take from you without you even noticing?" I looked at my beer. It looked harmless. Golden, with a foamy head and a rim. A drink. Nothing more. I'd make the rest of it.

"That's just how I am," the first sentence whispered. Completely automatically. I heard myself saying the exact same thing as the waitress placed another shot of schnapps in front of me "for my nerves." Before, I would have taken it without a word. Now I looked at it as if she had presented me with a choice, not a glass. I heard the sentence, saw the answer from my notebook: "That's not true. I just don't want to change anything." For a brief moment, I was honest enough not to pretend I was a law of nature.

"It's too late anyway," croaked the second sentence, as Harry started talking about some guy who "started all over again at fifty." I used to brush that off with a joke: "At fifty, the worst that can happen is your joints start hurting again." Today, the remark stuck in my throat. I

heard the doctor: not too late, but very late. The "very" had lodged itself in my skull like a cheap worm.

"I'm not hurting anyone, I'm only hurting myself," my brain muttered as the innkeeper started talking about electricity prices and delivery costs. That the place was barely turning a profit. That paying our bill no longer brought us any romance, only worries. I saw the waitress's shoulders slump a little when he talked about "fixed expenses." I pictured her trudging up the stairs to her small apartment, bones weary, wallet light. I pictured myself telling myself again: "It's only my life I'm wasting here."

"Others are worse," was the last sentence uttered at the party, as someone drunkenly kicked the slot machine. The bartender raised his voice, they calmed him down, and the guy eventually got kicked out. In the past, I would have felt better about it: "See, I haven't reached that point yet." This time, the thought came, clear as day: Yes. Others are worse. And what good does that do you? A discount in hell?

The goblin grinned. "There you go," he said. "You don't even have to sober up to stop taking yourself too seriously. It's enough if you're aware of what you're telling yourself." I picked up the schnapps, held it for a moment, then put it down again. "Later," I said to the waitress. She looked at me in surprise but nodded. No comment. Just a quick glance that was somewhere between hope and skepticism.

"Oh," the goblin breathed, feigning surprise. "We're witnessing historic moments. Grandpa says no to a shot of schnapps that's already on the table. Write that down in your notebook, under: unexplained phenomena." I shrugged. "I don't feel like getting completely wasted today," I muttered. "Half is enough." It wasn't a heroic statement. But it wasn't a lie.

Later, on my way to the bathroom, I paused in the doorway for a moment, looking at the place like a stranger. The counter where, for years, I'd laid down everything I didn't want to carry: work, family, responsibilities, health. The chairs we sat on as if they were our last lifeboats. The jukebox in the corner that always broke down whenever someone tried to play something sincere. Everything familiar. Everything crowded. Everything empty.

“Taking stock of your own misery also means looking at what you've built on,” said the goblin who appeared to me in the mirror above the sink, as if he were my second face. “You've staked your life on a counter that belongs to someone else. On opening hours, on other people, on a few fluorescent lights. When they go out, you're sitting there in the dark. And you call that fate.”

I held my hands under the cold water, longer than necessary. My head was heavy, but not as rock-hard as usual at this time of day. I looked at myself—red-eyed, pale, not exactly an advertisement for a fresh start. But not dead yet either. More like damaged. Like an old refrigerator that hums and sometimes cuts out, but hasn't completely died. "Taking stock," I thought. "Not just in a notebook. In the mirror."

When I went back to the bar, the schnapps was still there. No one had put it away. The bartender took it when I sat down and held it out to me. "It's on the house if you want it," he said. "Or down the sink if you don't." I looked at him. That was a rare kind of offer. No pressure, no expectation, just a choice. I thought about my list, the sentences, the hospital, the day the bartender stopped grinning.

"Pour it down the sink," I said quietly. It was as if someone else were speaking through my mouth. The waitress raised her eyebrows, the innkeeper just nodded. He went to the sink. The sound of the liquor disappearing into the metal was unremarkable. No divine trumpet fanfare, no angelic choirs. Just a soft "clack" from the glass and a "plop" as the stuff vanished down the drain. But I felt it in my gut, as if I had just expelled something that had been an automatic part of me for years.

"Bravo," the goblin said dryly. "You just drank thirty milliliters less misery than usual. No one's going to give you a medal for that. But your liver gave you a polite five-second round of applause." I took a sip of beer, which now seemed almost harmless. Almost. "That's just how I am," the sentence repeated, more quietly. "That's the only way I function." This time something inside me replied: "Maybe. But not one hundred percent today."

When I walked home later, I wasn't sober. I never was at that time of night. The road swayed slightly, but I could walk straight. The moon was somewhere behind the clouds, the sky gray, the air cold. I thought about the notebook on my kitchen table, the notes from the clinic, the barman behind his counter, his tired eyes. And about myself, how for the first time I hadn't drunk everything in front of me.

“Taking inventory in your own misery,” said the goblin perched on a lamppost as I walked by. “Today’s conclusion: warehouse still full, but at least you stopped hauling in new boxes while you counted.” I grinned crookedly. “I’ll probably be hauling again tomorrow,” I admitted. “Sure,” he nodded. “But today you counted. And sometimes that’s the only difference between someone who’s completely sinking and someone who at least knows why they’re sinking.”

Back at the apartment, I sat down at the kitchen table again, opened my notebook, and wrote a new line: "Didn't have a shot of schnapps today." Next to it, in parentheses: "No applause. Just noted." It looked ridiculous. Like an entry in a really bad diet diary. Nevertheless, I left it there.

Before I turned off the light, I looked at the page with the sentences and their answers. None of it was solved. No problem had disappeared. The bar was still there, my liver was still groaning, the debts—visible and invisible—were still there. But between all of that, a thin crack of doubt ran through my old beliefs. And that, I thought, is perhaps the only inventory that truly matters in the end: when you start to doubt your own bullshit.

Chapter 31 – The Goblin and the Last Round

There are these two words that sound so harmless in a pub, yet possess a gravity all their own: "Last call." You hear them constantly, don't take them seriously, wave them off, order another round, argue with the bartender about whether he couldn't "call it a night." Most of the time, they're just words, a formality, a ritual. But then comes the evening when you realize they mean more than just "We're closing soon." They're more like: "That's as far as you'll get with this life."

The evening the goblin and I negotiated our final round of drinks, it all started quite unspectacularly. No special date, no anniversary, no meteor shower. Just a Tuesday, damp,

cold, the street gleaming as if freshly cleaned, even though it was only wet and dirty. I'd resolved on the way there to "really call it a night early." One of those resolutions that starts to crumble the moment I walk into the pub.

The back bar was half empty. The good kind of half empty: enough people so it didn't look like a funeral, but so few that you didn't have to shout to tell your lies. Heiner was there, already quite drunk, Harry was speaking more quietly than usual, and the slot machine player was actually leaning against the bar instead of standing at the machine. The owner looked more tired than usual; even his "Well, it's you again" lacked its usual warmth. The waitress had dark circles under her eyes that looked like badly drawn halos.

The goblin was perched on my usual stool before I sat down. "Welcome to the preview," he said. "Today we're practicing the final round." I snorted. "We've been practicing that for twenty years," I muttered. "I'm a repeat offender." He grinned crookedly. "There's something different today. You've started listening to yourself. That makes every round more dangerous."

I ordered my first beer, as routinely as ever. The hand gesture was practiced: nod, index finger, glass. The waitress placed it down, said nothing, just a quick glance that hung somewhere between concern and habit. I took the first sip, felt it spread through me. My body sighed softly, my head quieted a millimeter. The imp tapped his foot against the rim of the glass. "You know how it goes," he said. "The first two or three are peace. The rest is war against what you don't want to see."

It wasn't long before the conversation at the regulars' table veered into its usual rut. Doctor's appointments no one wanted to keep, letters no one opened, bills no one could pay. The whole inventory of our daily lives. I listened, smoked, and drank slowly. The notebook from the previous evening sat in my mind like a second guest. Every time someone said, "I just can't help it" or "It's too late anyway," I could hear my pen scratching across the paper.

Sometime around eleven, something mundane happened that only later felt like a turning point: The innkeeper suddenly clutched his heart, a brief, reflexive movement, as if trying to catch something in his chest that had shifted. He grimaced, just for a moment, then acted as if nothing had happened. Only the waitress noticed immediately. "Sit down," she said quietly. No joke, no "Grandpa, do you need a cushion?"—just that tone of voice, which allows no room for argument.

He waved it off. "Everything's fine," he grumbled. "Just heartburn." Nevertheless, he sat down on the stool behind the bar, something he only did when his feet were really burning. I saw his hands tremble slightly as he reached for the next glass. The waitress got there first. "I'll do it," she said. "You're breathing."

The goblin watched very intently. "Well, look at that," he whispered. "The system's squeaking. Not just yours." I felt a thin film of sweat trickle down my spine, even though it wasn't any warmer in the shop than usual. Something about that hand-to-chest gesture affected me more deeply than I cared to admit. Maybe because I'd seen the same movement in the hospital corridor. Maybe because it sounded like what I'd been drinking away for years.

Around midnight, things quieted down. A few casual patrons said their goodbyes, leaving coins on the bar, saying things like "See you later" or "Cheers," without meaning to actually

hit anyone. In the end, only we regulars and a couple sitting in the corner arguing, so quietly it was louder than shouting.

The innkeeper was standing again, but differently than usual. No fidgeting, no casual shifting, but that cautious stance that makes you tell yourself each time, "I can still manage." The waitress was close to him. You could tell the two of them had discussed something that hadn't yet been shared with us.

Shortly after one, he cleared his throat. No dramatic clang, no jukebox suddenly switching off, just his clearing. Then he said, "Last round." Just like always, and yet not like always. The usual twinkle in his eye was missing. No "that's it for today," no "you know how it is." Just: "Last round."

I automatically raised my hand. The body does that before the mind even kicks in. The waitress looked at me, paused. "Are you sure?" she asked. The question hit me like a slap in the face. Not because it was so harsh, but because I'd never heard it used in that context. "Are you sure?" Normally, no one asks you that when you're swallowing your life. Everyone assumes you know what you're doing. Or they don't care.

The goblin suddenly stood upright, as if someone had switched on an invisible siren. "There," he said softly. "There it is. The question you never ask yourself when you say, 'Last round.' Are you sure?" I stared at my glass, which was still half full. Still enough for a "that's enough" and for "make another one."

"Yes," I almost said. Reflex. "Of course. I'm always sure when it comes to setting myself on fire again." But the word stuck. Instead, I said nothing at all; my arm just sank a little lower. I noticed everyone glancing over at me, as subtly as drunks think they are. The air in the store suddenly felt thicker.

"Last round," the innkeeper repeated. This time it sounded more like "Last call." Not just for the evening. For something bigger, something we all sensed but no one wanted to name.

"Just fill this one up for me," Heiner said first, as if someone had to save the ritual. "After that, I'm gone." We all knew that "after that, I'm gone" meant: "I'll stay until you really kick me out." But the sentence had to be said, otherwise it wouldn't feel like an ending, but like a break-up.

Harry nodded. "Me too," he said. "So I have something to regret." The slot machine player held up just two fingers, his silent way of saying, "One more, and quick." The waitress took the orders, went to the tap—and then stopped by me. "And you?" she asked. "Last round or last round?"

I didn't understand the difference at first. Then I realized: she wasn't talking about the glass. She was talking about the principle. Pretending once more that everything would continue as normal, or perhaps, for the first time, not participating. I looked at her and realized there was more in her eyes than just professional routine. She'd been serving me for years, with beer, schnapps, mockery, and the occasional glass of water. She knew my face in every state. And now there was a look that said: "I don't want to have to explain the final chapter to you someday, across a hospital bed."

The goblin chuckled. "Come on," he crooned. "Do it like always. Say 'sure, one more,' and we can all rest assured that nothing will change. Consistency is important in old age." I heard him clearly, but for the first time, he sounded not only like temptation but also like boredom. Like an old record played too often.

“I still have some,” I finally said, gesturing to my half-full glass. “This is my last one.” It was a sentence I’d said many times before. The difference was: This time I didn’t mean it as an excuse to secretly have another one later. I meant it exactly as it was written: This glass will determine my diet today.

The waitress nodded, and a flicker of relief crossed her face. Nothing dramatic, just a slight sigh around her eyes. "Good," she said. And went on to serve the others their last round. The owner glanced at me briefly, then looked away. No comment. But there was more respect in his nod than in any of my jokes about regular customers.

“That doesn’t count,” the goblin protested. “You’re cheating. Last round without a new glass, that’s like quitting smoking when you’ve run out of cigarettes.” I grinned wearily. “Who cares,” I muttered. “If it’s cheating, it’s cheating. I’m not starting with heroic deeds. I’m starting by not doing something.” He pouted. “That’s so unpoetic,” he said. “I’d like a scene where you dramatically leave a full glass and run out into the rain.” I shook my head. “I’m too old for that. I’ll finish it. Slowly.”

The final round loomed before us like a mini parliamentary vote. Four glasses, four men, a waitress, a bartender, a goblin providing commentary. We raised our glasses, each in our own way. Heiner said, "Here's to us screwing it up for a few more years." Harry: "To everyone who's already fallen off the bar before us." The slot machine player: "To everything I should have known better." I didn't say anything. I just clinked glasses and thought, "To what I haven't completely screwed up yet."

The first sip was warm, even though the beer was cold. It tasted of habit and a hint of farewell. Not a grand finale, just a noticeably more conscious moment in a sea of automatic movements. The imp clung to my ear. "If you really want to, you can still go to the corner store afterward," he whispered. "Buy cans. Restock. No witnesses." I knew he was right. The last round is never the last if you don't want it to be. There's always another shop, a hiding place, a reason.

“I know,” I replied quietly. “But today I don’t want to be right.” I took another sip, letting it settle. Not tipping it over, not tumbling down. Just drinking it. The conversations grew louder, so as not to delve too deeply. Heiner was talking about something from his youth, Harry laughed at inappropriate moments, the slot machine player kept glancing at the bartender, as if checking to see if he was still standing.

The innkeeper himself had recovered by then, but it was clear that the day had been enough. Perhaps it was the news from the doctor that we hadn't heard. Perhaps it was simply the cumulative effect of arthritis, too many nights spent standing, and too many years with people like us. He looked at the last of the glasses as if he saw more in them than just foam.

“I used to love that,” he said suddenly, interrupting a lull in the conversation. “Last call. That moment when it’s clear: this is the final curtain call for today. Then clean up, sweep out, put your feet up. Today, the words make my stomach churn.” The waitress nodded. “Today it means you’ve made it through another night,” she said. “And we’re all a little more broken.”

The goblin stood up, stretching out his arms like a conductor. "You see," he said, "that's the magic. Each of you knows it won't go on forever, and yet you drink as if this were a rehearsal." He looked at me. "You too."

I looked into the glass. Bottom visible, one more sip, maybe two. Before, I would have pulled it away to order another as quickly as possible or go home before my body realized what was happening. Today, I took my time. Each sip was like a small line on an invisible lid that I didn't want to fill.

“Do you know what the best thing about the final round is?” I asked the goblin. “That it really is the last one someday. Not just for tonight.” He grinned. “So you believe in the big exit? Not a drop tomorrow, yoga, oatmeal, early mornings?” I laughed hoarsely. “I don’t believe in anything,” I said. “I just know that I might have a few final rounds along the way. And any one of them could be the one I remember when things get serious.”

The glasses emptied. The light at the bar brightened slightly, that little turn of the dimmer switch that says, "That's it." The waitress began wiping down the first few tables, the owner put away bottles as if carrying them to an archive. The couple from the corner had long since disappeared, back into their own personal hell.

I drank the last sip. Set the glass down. No loud noise, no symbolic crack. Just a soft "tok" on wood. The goblin leaned forward. "That's it," he whispered. "Not for life. But for today. And today is all you truly have."

"Another one?" asked the old voice inside me, that automatic echo. This time the answer didn't come from my head. It came from my whole body, tired, persistent. "No."

Outside the door, the air was colder than it should have been for that time of day. Perhaps it was just me who, for the first time in a long time, truly felt what the cold was like when it wasn't completely drowned out by alcohol. The street was quiet, a few streetlights, a distant car, somewhere a dog barking as if it didn't quite know why.

I stood beneath the flickering "Last Light" sign, which was finally living up to its name again. It was still lit. But I knew that even neon lights eventually give up the ghost. Just like innkeepers. Just like livers. Just like excuses. The imp was perched atop the sign, dangling his legs. "Well," he called down, "so now what? Home, open the fridge, makeshift extension?"

I shoved my hands deep into my jacket pockets. There, in the left one, were the papers from the doctor. Crumpled, but still there. In the right was the notebook I'd reflexively packed before leaving. I hadn't used it, but it had been with me. Like a piece of evidence I wasn't ready to show.

"I don't think so today," I said upstairs. "No replay in my kitchen tonight." The goblin blinked. "You know nobody's checking up on you, right?" he asked. "There's no cop standing in front of your fridge. If you want, you can down three more cans now and claim tomorrow that you had a good night yesterday." I nodded. "Yeah," I said. "But eventually, every night you can't remember will become part of the final round. I'm getting a bit tired of it."

We set off, down the street, that familiar path I could walk in my sleep. The steps were heavy, but not so heavy that I thought I was about to fall flat on my face. "What I hate about you," I said to the goblin, who landed on a dumpster, "is that you keep showing me options even

when I've already made up my mind." He grinned. "What I find interesting about you," he replied, "is that for the first time, you didn't automatically go for the easiest one."

On the corner, where the late-night shop usually had lights on, it was dark. The shutters were down. A sign read: "Closed for Vacation." I had to laugh. "Look at that," I said. "Even temptations take a break sometimes." The imp grimaced. "Just luck," he grumbled. "If it were open, you'd be in there by now." Maybe. Maybe not. I realized I had no desire to find out.

The stairwell smelled of cooked vegetables, laundry detergent, and that indefinable mixture of human lives behind closed doors. I paused briefly, taking a deep breath. In the past, I would have used this moment to convince myself that I wasn't "ready" to make a change. This time, a different thought came to me: "Maybe there will never be a perfect moment. Maybe every final stretch is only as good as the smallest step taken afterward."

The first thing I did in the kitchen was put the notebook on the table. Not in the corner, not on the pile, but in the middle. Next to it, the slips of paper with the numbers. I kept my jacket on, sat down, and lit a cigarette. The first drag tasted like a pub, the second already like an apartment, the third like something in between. The imp sat on the edge of the ashtray and looked at me.

"So," he said, "let's recap. You went to the pub, you had a drink, you didn't go overboard with the last round, you went home without having another one. Big deal. Really big deal. The world applauds. The universe is over the moon." I grinned. "Nobody's applauding," I said. "Not you, not the landlord, not my liver. But for the first time today, I didn't trip over my own line. That's not much. But it's not nothing."

I opened the notebook to the page with the sentences. "That's just how I am," it said. "It's too late anyway." "I'm not hurting anyone, I'm only hurting myself." "That's just how I function." "Others are worse." Next to it were my notes from yesterday. Today I wrote a new line underneath: "Accepted last round today, no overtime requested." No heart, no "Bravo." Just a period. A perfectly ordinary period.

The goblin was reading along. "You realize it looks ridiculous to compare your whole life to this?" he asked. I nodded. "Sure," I said. "But if I look at my whole life, I'll just keep drinking. So I'm looking at today. At this evening. At this last round." He tilted his head. "That's almost... sensible," he said. "It doesn't suit you."

“You always said you’d stay until things really go wrong,” I said. “But what if they don’t go wrong? What if it’s more like a slow, subtle click, where you can feel the mechanics changing?” He considered this. “Then I’ll stay anyway,” he said. “I’m your liver’s imp, not your guardian angel. I want to see what you do with this little bit of knowledge.”

I got up and went to the refrigerator, just to open it. There they were: a few bottles, leftovers from days when I'd bought things "for home." They glittered in the light like little promises. Before, I would have said, "What a waste." Today, I looked at them and thought, "You're not going anywhere." I closed the door again. No drama, no tears, no "Never again." Just a "Not today."

"That wasn't the last lap of your life," the goblin said as I sat back down. "Don't worry, you'll have plenty more chances to mess things up. But it was a lap where you consciously said,

'That's enough.' And that's what makes it dangerous. For me. For your old self. For everything that was meant to last."

I picked up the pen again, hesitated, then wrote in the corner of the page, almost sheepishly small: "Maybe not too late for a few trifles after all." I stared at the sentence as if I had just signed a dangerous contract. The goblin read it, snorted. "Trifles," he repeated. "As if 'not always being drunk' and 'not dying in last place' were trifles."

I put the pen down again. The cigarette was burned down, the filter bitter. Outside, it was slowly getting lighter, that miserable, milky urban dawn seeping through the window. Night shift over. The day stood at the door like a salesman trying to unload his wares: hangover, regret, lingering hope.

“Last round,” I said quietly, more to myself. “Maybe that’s not just the innkeeper saying it, but an offer.” The goblin nodded. “It’s always an offer,” he said. “The only question is whether you accept it or order another.” He looked at me, seriously, for him. “Today you accepted it. We’ll see what happens tomorrow.”

I got up, turned off the light, and left the papers and notebook on the table. The bedroom smelled of stale sweat and smoke, but for the first time in a long time, it didn't feel like the set of an endless loop. More like the backstage area of a show that might eventually come to an end.

Before I closed my eyes, I heard the goblin whisper: "I'm far from finished with you. But this final round isn't just for me. From today on, you'll have a say in it." And I knew: He was right. Nothing had been won, nothing saved, nothing smoothed over. But somewhere between "final round" and "that's enough for today," a small crack had appeared in the thick wall behind which I had hidden for years.

Perhaps, I thought, just before sleep overtook me, perhaps everything that later becomes great begins just so small: with an evening when you truly accept the last round as the last. Not for life. But for that day. And I never really have more than one day in my grasp at a time anyway.

Chapter 32 – How to Drink A Crash Beautifully

There are two kinds of crashes. One happens in the body: you collapse, your head hits something, you throw up, you cry, you wake up somewhere you hadn't planned on sleeping. The other happens in the mind: you look at your life, and something inside you just "clicks." The trick is to package both of them in such a way that you mistake them for style and not for what they are: a slow surrender. That's exactly what I call "drinking your crash into a better light."

I've done it a lot. Almost professionally. A tough day? Crash, but I call it "deserved." A shitty doctor's appointment? Crash, but I call it "reaction to bad news." When a woman leaves, I call it "drinking grief." If I've been single for a long time, it's "creative retreat." You can label anything, as long as there's enough alcohol on the label.

After that night, with that deliberate last round, I briefly thought I was on a different track. Not sober, my imagination didn't quite stretch that far. But a little less blind. For a few evenings in a row, I actually stuck to two or three beers, went home without stopping anywhere else. I wrote things in my notebook like: "Only slightly tipsy today" and "No hard liquor, but I did eat two slices of bread." It looked silly, but something inside me patted itself on the back for it.

The imp watched with the skepticism of someone who's seen too many diets. "You're at that stage where people say, 'I've really got it under control now,'" he said as I drank a glass of water in the kitchen before leaving, "and then three weeks later you're lying in a ditch." He stood on the sink, watching me brush my teeth as if it were some exotic ritual. "You don't do things halfway, Grandpa. You've been all or nothing for years. This 'just making a little less damage' thing doesn't fit your folklore."

Of course, the day came when the old machine inside me kicked back into high gear. There was no dramatic trigger. No death announcement, no firing, no letter with red ink. It was just a perfectly ordinary, miserable afternoon. The office, numbers, a boss who speaks in clichés, colleagues who act as if working from home is just another stage for the same old drama. I'd slept badly, overthought things, and eaten too little breakfast. Just one of those days where everything's just slightly off.

“Today would be a good day to leave it at that,” the imp said as I closed the apartment door behind me. “Kitchen, TV, two sandwiches, early to bed. You even have bread in the house.” I looked at him and felt my hand instinctively point in the other direction: toward the street, toward the taillight. “Just looking,” I said. “Don’t let it get out of hand.” This sentence is the older, uglier sibling of “I’ve got this under control.”

The bottom of the table was louder than usual. Some game, important for people who paint their faces in club colors because they have no other sense of belonging. Voices everywhere, glasses everywhere, that inflated football patriotism everywhere, which feels like reheated national pride in plastic cups. I don't like it, but sometimes it's easier to drink in the noise than in the silence.

The innkeeper saw me and just nodded. No lecture, no "So, how are the water weeks going?", nothing. The waitress raised an eyebrow briefly as I sat down. "Beer?" she asked. In the old days, that wouldn't have been a question, more like a greeting. Today, there was a hint of doubt in her voice. "Beer," I said. "Large." I added, "It's just one of those days."

The first sip felt like coming home. Not in a pleasant way, more like returning to the old room with the ugly wallpaper, where at least you know every flaw. The second sip was already relaxation, the third the beginning of: "Oh, come on, we're not counting today." The imp jumped onto the rim of my glass. "Attention," he said. "This is where you start telling yourself why THIS particular crash is different from the others. Wanna bet?"

He didn't lose the bet. After the second beer, I was in "You've got to live sometime" mode. After the third, it was "If I'm going to die, at least it won't be with water in my blood." The sentences flowed so easily from my mouth, as if they'd been waiting to be used again. Heiner was doing well, Harry even more so, and when everyone else is in freefall, your own crash feels like flying in formation.

“You know what’s really getting to me?” I said at some point, already with that slight emphasis that only comes when the articulation is accompanied by a drink. “That everyone out there pretends to be healthy. But they’re just as broken. They’re just taking different things. Burnout, yoga, online courses. At least we’re honest: Our antidepressant has a percentage on the label.” Heiner raised his glass to me. “We’re honest decay,” he said. “Not like those people with their self-improvement apps.”

The goblin applauded sarcastically. "There it is again, the self-aggrandizement," he grinned. "'We may die like flies, but at least ironically.' You wouldn't believe how many have perished with that thought in their heads." I heard him, but I was listening to myself more loudly. And at some point, the line between "a little less" and "screw it" was finally crossed.

I don't remember exactly who brought the schnapps into the conversation. Maybe Harry, maybe me, maybe it just appeared as always: as a matter of course on an evening that was already going awry. "Just one," I said, "to calm my nerves." The waitress looked at me as if I'd just asked her to commit a minor crime. The landlord didn't say anything. He was too busy with other glasses. Everyone here knew: "Just one" is a fairy tale from another world in these parts.

The first shot burned. Beautiful. Familiar. Wonderfully terrifying. Afterward, I felt briefly alive. Or what I'd long believed to be alive. The second was no longer a decision. "If I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it right," I said. "Tomorrow's going to be shit either way." The crash was already underway, but I called it something else: "letting off steam," "letting it all out," "being free." The words were grand, the reality small.

At some point, I realized I was saying things I'd survived saying just a short while ago. "I tried to drink less," I whined to the group, "but what's the point? The doctor gives me numbers, the bar gives me glasses. I can't see the numbers, but I can see the glasses." Harry nodded as if I'd said something profound. Heiner patted me on the shoulder. "You're just a systems person," he slurred. "You need structure. Your structure is the bar."

The goblin sat down opposite me on the table and folded his arms. "So," he said. "There it is. The crash. Not the physical one, that comes later. The mental one. You watch your own betrayal and comment on it like a documentary about other people." I laughed. "That's called self-reflection," I said. "It's totally trendy." He shook his head. "No," he said. "That's called drinking yourself into oblivion. That trend is old."

When I stumbled over the curb sometime in the night, it was quiet outside, and even louder inside me. I remember thinking, "I deserved this crash. After so much thinking." And that was the worst part: that I even considered it a kind of reward, finally being truly rock bottom again.

The next morning wasn't a "hangover." Hangovers are harmless. Two aspirins, coffee, a few hours of self-pity, then you're good to go. What awaited me was more like what happens when a hangover brings a whole pride of lions home. My head was like a construction site without a helmet, my mouth was as dry as cellar dust, and my heart was pounding to the beat of a bad punk band. Every movement was a protest.

The apartment looked like someone had tried to throw a party in the middle of the night and then decided the host was too boring. Jacket draped crookedly over a chair, shoes half-off, ashtray overflowing, two glasses, one containing what I hoped was water. It wasn't. The

carpet had a mark on it, and I didn't want to know if it came from me or from something inside me.

The goblin sat on the back of the chair, scratching his head. "Well, artist," he said. "How does freedom taste?" I sat down, or tried to. The chair moved away, and I landed half on it, half off it. Everything inside me screamed for something: water, coffee, air, a shot, anesthesia, release. "Shut up," I croaked. He grinned. "There it is again," he said. "Your favorite phrase the morning after."

I dragged myself into the kitchen, poured water into a glass, drank too fast, and felt my stomach protest. My head was no longer a head, more like a drum being played with wet fists. In my chest, that familiar tug I knew all too well by now. Like someone inside was pulling on a cable and saying, "One more time like that, man, and we're seriously talking about a breakdown."

“That,” said the goblin, “is the part of the fall you never include in your romanticizing. In your stories, the evening is colorful, loud, tragicomic. The morning is just a fade-in.” He hopped onto the sink, watched me search for the pill packet, my fingers trembling, my breath bad. “To drink oneself into a romanticized version of reality also means: always telling stories only up to the point of creating a pretty picture.”

I thought about the notebook. It was still lying on the table, open, the pen beside it. I hadn't written anything in it before I left. Nor did I intend to. Who takes inventory of their own misery when there's a clearance sale going on? Now it lay there like a grumpy witness. I pushed it a little with my hand, but didn't have the guts to open it.

The workday was a joke. I dragged myself in like an extra in my own life. Monitor, keyboard, random numbers, emails, faces. "Everything alright?" the boss asked, with that forced concern you learn in training courses. "Upset stomach," I lied. "Something wrong with it." Not even original. "You should watch your diet," he said. I could have laughed, if I'd been able to.

During my lunch break, I sat outside, smoking too fast, too shallowly. My body had developed its own twitches, like a poorly synchronized video. The inner critic sat on my shoulder and was silent. That was the worst part: when it was silent. Its chatter was my background music. When that was off, all that remained was what I myself was thinking. And I rarely liked that.

"So, was it worth it?" he finally asked. I shrugged. Bad idea, everything hurt. "I don't know," I mumbled. "Yesterday, yes. Not so much today." He nodded. "Welcome to the basics of a crash: The one who decides is the one who doesn't see the consequences anymore. The one who pays the price today."

Back at the apartment that evening, his body was so empty it was already screaming for refills. That's the vicious cycle: you're completely wasted from drinking, and your brain suggests that the only remedy is exactly what got you into this mess in the first place. "Hair shot," whispers the old voice. "Just one to straighten you out." The imp clapped his hands. "There you have it. Chapter one of the manual 'How to Drink Your Way Through a Bad Day'."

I stood in the kitchen, the refrigerator door in my hand. The bottles looked at me like well-behaved dogs wanting a walk. Just for a short time, just a little bit. "You know exactly how

this goes," said the goblin. "One, then two, then three, then you say the day was so hard you deserve overtime. And the day after tomorrow you'll be back at the bottom of the pile, telling everyone how you 'just had a moment of weakness.' And everyone will nod because they know the drill. And the fall will become a story."

I closed the door again. Not heroically, more out of exhaustion. I was too worn out to watch the same movie again. My hands were trembling, my head was pounding, my stomach was churning, my heart was making its own noises. I sat down at the table, the notebook in front of me. I opened it. Page: "Inventory." Below were my sentences. Below that, the entry from the other day: "Didn't have a shot today." It was like something from another life.

I got the pen, wrestled with the nib, which wouldn't cooperate. Then I wrote: "Full throttle today. Tried to drink myself into a better world, won reality." I looked at the sentence. It was ugly, but honest. "You're trying to reframe the crash as a learning experience," the goblin laughed. "That's level two of drinking myself into a better world: self-destruction as character development."

I thought about it. An unusual act in that state. Was it really just wishful thinking? Or was there something in there that I could actually use? My body said, "You're an idiot." My head said, "You knew this would happen." The inner critic said, "I even waved to you as you started running, you moron." And yet, there was a small part of me that, for the first time, didn't say, "See, I can't do it," but rather, "Okay, so this is what happens when I let it happen."

“How many more crashes do you need before you stop using them as a stylistic device?” the goblin asked. “You’re not Lappenbusch. You’re a guy with empty bottles and back problems.” I grinned crookedly, even though I didn’t feel like it. “Maybe that’s the point,” I said. “That I finally get it.”

I slept badly that night. Sweating, racing heart, those brief moments of wakefulness when you think you're going to stop breathing. Anyone who says alcohol is relaxing has missed the part where your body has the panic attacks at night that you drink away during the day. Sometime very early in the morning, as the garbage truck was hauling up the bins outside, I lay there and thought: So this is what a crash feels like when you can't drink it away anymore. Just sober. Just raw.

"That's the ugly core," said the goblin, somewhere in the darkness. "No music, no buddies, no bar, no jokes. Just you, your heart, your head, and the fact that you can't be sure if the next crash will end the same way: in bed, awake, alive."

The day after—that is, the day after the day after, when my head no longer felt quite as if it had been through explosives—came what I used to call "normalization." Nowadays, I know: This is the phase in which you decide how you integrate what happened into your biography. As a warning. Or as another chapter: "That's just how I am."

They were already sitting in the back. Of course. Heiner, Harry, the slot machine player. Manni too, for once. I stepped inside, felt that brief twitch in my chest: a feeling of being caught, even though no one was checking my ID. The waitress saw me, for a second she searched my face for something, then just nodded. "Same as usual?" she asked. I stopped.

The goblin folded his arms. "Now you'll show me how to drink away a bad night," he said. "Pay close attention, you're your own instructional video." I slowly sat down on my stool, my

back protesting, my head dull but no longer explosive. The memory of the last two nights clung to me like a wet towel.

“Beer,” I said. “But a small one.” The sentence hung between us like a grumpy referee. Heiner laughed. “Diet?” he asked. “Or are we taking it easy on the liver?” Harry grinned broadly. “Small beer, big man,” he commented. In the old days, I would have retorted with something like, “I’ll make up for it later,” or “start slow, finish strong.” Today, I just shrugged. “Stomach,” I muttered. “Wasn’t so great yesterday.”

That was a lie and an honest truth at the same time. My stomach was a disaster, yes. But that wasn't the main reason. The truth would have been more complicated: "I realized that if I kept going like this, I was headed straight for a bed with bars, and I didn't want you guys sitting at the bar later saying, 'The old man just went too far.'" I didn't have the energy for that.

The goblin was merciless. "You're turning this crash into a harmless episode," he commented. "'That was too much, less next time.' You know the pattern. It's helped you not take yourself seriously for decades." I took a sip of my small beer. Tasted the same as always. Maybe a little thinner. Or maybe it was just me.

“You were really on fire yesterday,” Harry said, as if I’d won a prize. “We thought we were going to have to roll you up.” Heiner nodded. “You were talking some stuff, man,” he said. “Philosophical stuff. About doctors, about last rounds, about meaning and all that. It was almost a shame that you started mumbling at some point.” The slot machine player looked at me. “For a second I thought you were going to collapse,” he said matter-of-factly. “You were as white as the walls in the hospital.”

I laughed, that short, hoarse laugh you use when you have no answer. "Well," I said. "You don't get any younger." The phrase was the cheapest coin in my repertoire. And yet, there was something else in it: the realization that at some point there are no more crashes you can "batter." At some point, you fall and stay down. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But that day had drawn closer.

"How to drink away a bad fall," whispered the goblin, "goes like this: You make a story out of it. You exaggerate a little, leave out the most disgusting parts, garnish the rest with self-irony. And when everyone laughs or falls silent in stunned silence, you've incorporated it. Then it belongs. Then it's no longer a warning sign, but an anecdote. And you're already on your way to the next one."

I felt the words rattling in my mind. I could do exactly that: tell the story, paint a vivid picture of the night, describe the morning dramatically, and present the following day as a "lesson learned." The group would have listened attentively, made jokes, and we would have confirmed to each other just how broken we were. And in the end, we would all have been one step deeper into the hole, but in good spirits.

Instead, I just said, "That was awful. Really awful. It felt like someone was stacking sandbags inside my chest." There was silence afterward. No laughter, no "I know that feeling," no "it'll pass." The waitress glanced over, the owner continued wiping. Heiner nodded slowly. "Yeah," he said. "I know that feeling. At some point, it tips from 'I can still handle it' to 'I won't be able to handle it much longer.'"

Harry tried to make a joke, but got tangled up. "We're all going to die," he wanted to say, but it came out more like, "We're all seeing that..." He stopped, took a deep drag. The slot machine player stared at his glass. "I told a colleague in the office the other day I'd be dead by now if my body weren't so stubborn," he muttered. "He laughed. I didn't."

The goblin nodded approvingly. "Not bad," he said. "You didn't completely gloss over the fallout. You cleaned it up a bit, yes. But you didn't completely sweep the dirt under the rug." I took another sip of my small beer, put down the cigarette without taking a drag. A new record in the discipline of "minimal self-deception."

Later on, when the usual songs started playing on the jukebox and the place slipped back into that semi-dark, self-sustaining mode, I went to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, I still didn't look like someone who had their life together. More like someone living just below the line where everyone says, "We saw it coming." But I also saw something in it that had been missing before: a tiny, faint trace of "I'm fed up with watching myself do this."

"You'll crash again," said the goblin perched on the soap dispenser. "Don't forget that. This wasn't the last time. You're no prodigy. You'll drink too much again, lie again, and exaggerate again. The only question is whether you'll make a little less of it each time, as if it were rock 'n' roll. Or whether you'll pretend until the very end that every fall is a work of art."

I splashed cold water on my face and took a deep breath. "Maybe that's the whole art," I murmured. "Not pretending it's art anymore." He grinned. "That's a sentence you should remember."

On the way home I was slightly tipsy, but not out of it. No crash, just a slight dip. Maybe boring. Maybe essential for survival. The streetlights made the road patchily bright, somewhere a car was speeding, a siren wailed in the distance. Normal city sounds. Not a soundtrack to a grand drama, just background noise to a small, unspectacular shift.

Back at the apartment, I sat down at the table again, opened my notebook, and wrote: “Experienced a crash, not glorified. Feels worse, but more real.” No smiley face, no extra comment. Just a period. I looked at the sentence and realized it made me uncomfortable. Not because it was wrong, but because it wasn't cool.

“So,” said the goblin, swinging on the lamp, “and that’s exactly where it starts to get dangerous. When you’d rather be uncomfortably honest than comfortably interesting.” I grinned wearily. “Maybe I’m just too old to find my downfalls sexy anymore,” I said. “Then don’t drink them away anymore,” he said. “Drink them if you have to. But watch what you’re doing.”

It wasn't a vow, a "everything will be different starting tomorrow," a sacred promise. Just an evening where I hadn't turned a crash into a legend. Perhaps just a small footnote. But I knew: if I ever really hit rock bottom—physically, in the hospital, or mentally, emotionally—it would make a difference whether I had faced things honestly beforehand or had convinced myself until the very end that it was all a big, romantic movie.

And as I turned off the light, I thought: Maybe this is the only way to get through a crash in a halfway decent way – by finally stopping trying to drink it away.

Chapter 33 – When even the Clurichaun is silent

There are nights when the noise in your head is worse than anything happening outside. Voices, memories, sentences you've been telling yourself for years, as if they were prayers. And right in the middle of it all, the goblin who always has something to comment on. Mockery, scorn, irony, sometimes a truth you resent. I'd gotten so used to him being there that it never occurred to me that things could be worse if he just shut up for once.

The night the Clurichaun fell truly silent for the first time wasn't the night of the big fallout. Not the day in the hospital. Not the evening with the last round. It was one that, from the outside, seemed completely unremarkable. Not the kind of event you'd later write a pub anecdote about. Just a gray weekday where nothing went terribly wrong, and yet everything felt wrong.

The hours in the office dragged on like a poorly oiled conveyor belt. The boss talked about "goals," "quarters," "synergies"—words that had nothing to do with my life but appeared on my payslips. Colleagues nodded, took notes, feigned interest. I stared at numbers I could no longer see properly, heard my own voice in meetings saying things like, "We need to stay on top of this" and "We should prioritize this." It sounded like someone else was speaking. Someone I couldn't stand.

Normally, the inner critic chimes in during situations like this. It makes quips about the absurdity of the adult world, whispers to me that we'll catch up on real life in the evenings. This time, nothing. No comments, no "Are you even listening to yourself?" Just silence, an uncomfortable, dense silence in my head. As if someone had turned off the sound, but the movie kept playing.

On the way home, I really noticed it. The street was the same as always. Cars, cyclists, people with bags, with dogs, with strollers. I was walking right in the middle of it all, hands in my pockets, my body on autopilot. Normally, the imp would have been sitting somewhere on a street sign, on the edge of a balcony, on a trash can. Making his usual pronouncements about the faces passing by, about their bags, their postures, their lukewarm dreams. But that day, there was nothing. Only the sound of my own footsteps. I heard them for the first time in ages.

At home, I took off my jacket, hung it over the back of the chair, and sat down at the kitchen table. The papers from the doctor were still there. So was the notebook. Normally, the imp would have immediately sat down on it, made jokes about my handwriting, and asked if we were playing inventory again. Nothing. The apartment was so quiet that even the hum of the refrigerator sounded as if it were apologizing for being there at all.

I lit a cigarette, waiting for the goblin to say something. "You know you're going to come in last again." "You're going to leave anyway, why are you kidding yourself?" Something like that. But there was only this silence, in which every thought of my own suddenly became so loud I could barely stand it. No mockery, no ironic detachment. Just me. And I wasn't pleasant company.

"Well?" I said aloud into the room at some point, like an idiot talking to the wallpaper. "No opinion today?" There was no reply. No flippant answer, no cynical comment. I only heard my own voice bouncing off the kitchen wall. In that moment, I realized how dependent I'd become on that little piece of junk. On the goblin in my head. It had been my excuse, my

commentator, my shield against the stark silence. Now it had left me alone with myself—and it felt as if someone had swallowed the last sound in the room.

The TV switched on, almost by itself. A reflex. People talking louder than your thoughts are still the cheapest medicine. Some show, something with an audience, applause, jokes that weren't really jokes. I stared at it without really looking. My mind was racing. No great revelation, just a series of small, uncomfortable questions that were usually drowned out by the noise: What if that really was all there was to it? Work, pub, kitchen, sleep, start all over again. What if the landlord actually closes down? What if I keep doing this for another twenty years?

I expected the goblin to interrupt me at that moment. "Don't be such a baby," he would have said. "You're not a tragic hero, you're just a guy with a belly and debts." But even the mockery was absent. Only my pulse, racing a little too fast. Only the thought: Maybe he's silent because he's run out of jokes. Or because he's showing me something he can't express with words.

The idea of going to the back of the room was hanging there like an open door. All I had to do was get up, put on my jacket, go outside—lamps, bar, glasses, voices. That whole familiar routine that would have instantly pulled me back into my comfort zone. I even got up and walked to the kitchen door. Reached for my jacket. Waited for the comment: "Come on, you know you're going. Stop playing games." Nothing. Just my own breath.

I stopped, my hand on my jacket, as if I'd caught myself moving. Without the goblin who usually makes the decision for me, there was only me. And I didn't know what I wanted. To drink, sure. But why? As a reward, to numb myself, out of habit? I realized I hadn't had to answer these questions all these years because I'd always had a voice that said, "Just do it. I'll explain the meaning later." Now the voice was gone. No meaning. No excuse. Just a door and a man who didn't know whether to open it.

I left my jacket hanging and went back to the table. I sat down. I looked at the papers, at the notebook. The silence in the room was so thick it hurt. I wanted Clurichaun to say something again, something that would anger me, contradict me, distract me. But he remained silent. And the longer he was silent, the clearer it became to me: This is perhaps the first evening in decades that I am truly just me, without constant commentary.

It felt like a crash without the alcohol. Raw, angular, sobering. And yet I stayed put. No pub, no bar, no landlord. Just me, the kitchen table, the silence – and a silence louder than anything the goblin had ever said.

The next day, I thought the silence would be over. That the imp would return when I went to the back of the pub. Like a dog that runs away briefly but always finds its way home when there's food. I almost expected him to be sitting on the tap somewhere, cracking jokes, as soon as I pushed open the pub door. But the silence remained. It was as if someone had turned his volume down to zero, without a mute button.

The place was as usual. Smoke, voices, that mixture of stale beer and fresh resignation. Heiner waved, Harry called out, "Hey, philosopher!", the slot machine player nodded, the landlord muttered his "You again," the waitress brought my beer before I even said a word. The whole process worked without me having to do much. I sat down, took the glass, and drank. My body remembered every move. Only my mind was blank.

Normally, the goblin would have already commented on how full or empty it was, whether the music was awful, whether Heiner was spouting the same old nonsense again. This time, I sat there and listened to the others talking as if they were speaking loudly for the first time. Heiner was telling the story for the hundredth time about how he'd been fired from his old job. Harry was ranting about the government, about "those in power," about everything that wasn't his fault. The slot machine player was philosophizing about how gambling was at least honest because it tells you to your face that you're going to lose.

I drank my beer and noticed how their voices suddenly no longer did me the favor of drowning out my own inner turmoil. There was no more turmoil, just a void. I felt like I didn't belong, but I didn't feel better either. Not above it, not below it. Just beside it. I laughed at the right moments, nodded at the familiar phrases, raised my glass when they toasted. From the outside, everything looked the same. Inside, it was like watching a movie in which I was also acting, without any lines.

The innkeeper came over and leaned against the bar with both hands. "So?" he asked. "Everything alright?" Before, I would have answered, "Within the bounds of a catastrophe, yes." Or some other quip. This time I just shrugged. "I don't know," I said. "It's just... quiet." He frowned. "Quiet, what do you mean?" I tapped my head. "Up there. No more comments. The little man's taking a break."

He grinned briefly, unaware of how serious I was. "Maybe he's burned out," he said. "Or you paid him too well, now he's retired." The waitress half-listened and set down a fresh glass. "Some people would be happy if their minds were quiet for once," she remarked. "At night, I have this constant soundtrack of worries and jumbled thoughts; I'd be grateful for five minutes of silence."

I nodded, understood what she meant, but it felt different to me. This wasn't a comforting quiet. It was more like the void after a power outage, when even the refrigerator stops humming and you realize for the first time just how loud it used to be. That kind of silence that immediately asks, "Now what?" The goblin had done me a service all these years that I only realized when he was gone: he had saved me from having to look directly at myself.

“Maybe he’s offended,” Harry said when I brought up the subject later at our regular table. “You’ve been nagging him a lot lately. Inventory, the clinic, drinking less—he’s afraid you’ll fire him.” Heiner laughed. “Imagine if we all had a goblin like that. The place would be full of them, sitting on the edges of tables, yelling insults at us.” I looked around and pictured it: small, flickering figures everywhere, on glasses, on ashtrays, on shoulders. Some loud, some quiet. And all saying something that people need to keep them from moving.

“My inner voice is silent,” I said. “And without it, I don’t know how to decide.” The slot machine player looked at me seriously. “Perhaps that’s exactly the point,” he said. “Perhaps you need to learn to manage without a safety voice. We all make decisions without a myth. We just like to blame something that doesn’t exist so we don’t blame ourselves.”

The sentence hit home. Not because it was particularly profound philosophically, but because it came from someone who otherwise blamed everything on machines. "The machine malfunctioned," "Tough luck," "Wrong timing." Now there was someone standing there saying to my face, "It's your turn." And the goblin let him have his way. No argument, no joke. Nothing.

I noticed how the beer went down differently when no one was drinking it with me in my head. It was less calming. No feeling of "me and the little guy against the world." More like: "me and the glass, and no one in between to comment on it." Sip, silence, sip, silence. Before, there had always been a voice in between, making something of it. Now there was just a void.

When I went to the bathroom, I lingered in front of the mirror longer than usual. No goblin in the reflection. No little figure on my shoulder or on the soap dispenser. Just my face. Tired, older than my age, wrinkles, dark circles under my eyes, corners of my mouth drooping. I raised my hand and touched my cheek. I felt less present than I looked.

"Where have you gone?" I asked softly. It was as if I were talking to an invisible friend who had finally moved out. No answer. Only my own reflection, looking back at me questioningly, as if it had the same question.

Back at the bar, I didn't order another beer. Not out of discipline, not out of fear of God, but because the taste was bland without the accompanying commentary. Like food without salt. The waitress raised an eyebrow but said nothing. The owner nodded briefly, as if accepting that someone would make less money today, but perhaps be a little less disheveled.

“I’m going home,” I said, earlier than usual. The others grumbled, made jokes about “retirement,” but I didn’t feel strong or morally superior. I felt more like someone whose voice had been cut off and who therefore no longer wanted to stay in the game.

On the way home, the silence in my head was still there. No "Look over there, look over here," no "You're an idiot, but I like you," no "One more beer will make the evening complete." Just my footsteps, my breathing, and that quiet, unsettling thought: Maybe Clurichaun wasn't just my imp. Maybe he was my most convenient excuse not to take myself seriously. And now that he was silent, all the misery lay naked before me—unfiltered, without a punchline.

The silence persisted. Not in the world, which was as loud as ever. Buses, sirens, televisions, colleagues, pub noise. But inside me, it remained strangely muted. The imp wasn't gone—I knew this because I sometimes saw him out of the corner of my eye, as a shadow on a lamp or a vague flicker on the kitchen table. But he said nothing. He was there like a switched-off radio. Presence without sound.

On the third day of this radio silence, something happened that I hadn't expected: I started thinking the sentences he would have otherwise said. Not in the same tone, not so casually, not so wittily. More raw, awkwardly. I was sitting in the kitchen, staring at the ashtray, at the notebook, and a thought surfaced that felt like his voice, but without the protection of irony: You're tired. Not "Haha, you're a wreck, dude," but: you're really tired. To the core.

In the past, the goblin would have made a joke out of it. "You're not old, you're just poorly stored." Or "You're not tired, you're marinated." Now there was only the statement. No joke, no apology. You're tired. You're no longer willing to cushion everything with alcohol. You also have no idea what to do instead. I heard this thought and realized how much I had previously relied on the show the goblin had constructed around such truths.

During the days he was silent, taking stock of my own misery suddenly ceased to be a game and became a kind of permanent state. I began to count automatically. Not just glasses, not just cigarettes, but also moments: How often do I think about being in last place? How often

about the clinic? How often about my daughter? How often about the possibility that the innkeeper might actually close down? How often about the fact that one day I won't have that choice between the pub and the kitchen anymore, but only between bed and bed?

Work became mere background. I typed, made phone calls, nodded. But another list was running through my mind: "Things I'll experience if I continue like this." Hospital. Early retirement, not for pleasure, but out of necessity. A slow withdrawal from everything human, because no one wants to watch you fall apart anymore. And something else that hurt: grandchildren who will one day say they have no real memories of me, only the smell.

I waited for the inner critic to intervene. To say, "Now you're exaggerating." Or, "Oh, come on, it won't be that bad." Or, "You can think about that later." Instead, nothing. I had to endure my own words. You underestimate how exhausting that is when you've delegated it for years.

In the evenings, I deliberately chose not to sit in the back room, but in the kitchen, without the television or music. Just me, my notebook, and the scraps of paper. I didn't write every day, no sudden diary career. But every now and then I jotted something down. Small, unheroic sentences: "No liquor today." "Too tired to drink today." "Thought about the hospital today and didn't go." They looked like the notes from a really bad self-help course, but they were mine.

On one of those evenings that need no date, I sat there again, cigarette in hand, water in my glass, notebook open. The silence in my head no longer felt solely threatening. It was still uncomfortable, but it had developed corners I could hold onto. I heard my own thoughts more clearly: not better, but undistorted.

“You know what’s funny?” I finally said aloud, though I wasn’t sure if anyone was listening. “I needed you for years to keep me from going crazy. And now that you’re silent, for the first time I feel like maybe I’m not completely losing it when I’m alone.” Then, very quietly, almost like a cough in the next room, I heard him again for the first time.

"Aha," said the goblin. Not with the usual theatrics, no trumpets, no applause. Just that short, dry "Aha." I jumped and looked up. There he was, sitting on the edge of the notebook, legs dangling, eyes smaller than usual, as if he himself hadn't had enough sleep. "Well, there you go," he said. "So you can think for yourself after all. It was about time you figured that out."

I stared at him, angry and relieved at the same time. "Where were you?" I asked. "I was searching half-crazy in your silence." He grinned narrowly. "I was there the whole time," he said. "I just kept my mouth shut. Wanted to see what you'd do without me. Whether you'd completely fall apart or if there was still a part of you left that didn't need a commentary program to keep from collapsing."

I wanted to make a scene. Tell him that you just don't do things like that. That you don't just leave someone alone with themselves when they've had such a terrible time for years, just struggling to look straight ahead. But I realized it was pointless. He wasn't a therapist, a friend, or a god. He was a part of me that had decided not to push itself forward this time.

"So?" I asked, still annoyed. "Satisfied with the experiment?" He pouted. "Let's put it this way," he said. "You didn't collapse. You didn't immediately run to the fridge. You stayed in the kitchen for a few evenings without completely numbing yourself. You thought without me writing every punchline for you. For you, that's close to a miracle."

I gave a short, dry laugh. "I felt awful," I said. "Honestly, like never before." He nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Welcome to life without constant numbing. It's no spa treatment. But at least it's not a lie."

The silence hadn't disappeared when he started talking again. It had simply changed. It was no longer the void I had feared, but rather the space where his voice and mine met. No longer so loud, no longer so dominant. More like background noise, into which I could add my own sentences.

"Why did you start talking again?" I asked. He grinned. "Because you stopped using me as an excuse," he said. "Since you realized that you can make mistakes without me, but also that you can make fewer mistakes without me, it's fun to be around you again. Before, I was just your court jester. Now, maybe someday I'll even be part of your management team."

I shook my head. "I don't have a management team," I said. "I have a bunch of broken shelves and a bit of inventory." He looked at the notebook, the scraps of paper, the cigarette butt in the ashtray, the water in the glass. "Looks like more than you've allowed yourself to admit for a long time," he said. "And now that I know you're not just filling the silence with booze anymore, I can chime in again without taking everything away from you."

I leaned back, feeling how the tiredness manifested itself differently this time. Not as a numbness, but as a body that truly craved rest. Not just a coma. I nudged the cigarette pack away, left the glass of water half full, without feeling like I was missing out on anything. It was quiet outside, and quiet inside too – despite the goblin.

“If even the Clurichaun is silent,” I thought, “that’s not a sign that it’s all over. Maybe it’s a sign that for the first time, you have to speak for yourself.” I looked at him. “If you do that again,” I said, “warn me beforehand.” He chuckled softly. “That’s not how it works,” he said. “Life doesn’t announce its hardest moments either.”

Before going to bed, I wrote one more sentence in my notebook: "He was back again today—and I didn't need him to keep me company anymore." It wasn't a grand finale, no turning point in the Hollywood sense. But somewhere between the silence and the first "aha!" moment, something had shifted: I was no longer just the guy who hides behind his inner imp. I was also the one who had managed an entire evening without him.

And for some reason, that scared me more than any crash – but also gave me a little bit of hope that didn't smell of alcohol.

Chapter 34 – The Reckoning Without the Goblin

Bills have an ugly habit: they never come alone. If you're unlucky, they come in waves. First the small ones that just annoy you. Then the medium ones that ruin your month. And eventually the big ones that explain how your life has really been going so far—and what it's cost. The last few weeks have felt like some higher-up debt collection agency decided to finally pull my file out of the bottom drawer.

The first bill was still a paper one. A letter from the health insurance company, some kind of statement about examinations, lab results, doctor's visits. Numbers, amounts, shares. "Your co-payment," it said. Nice word. Co-payment. As I read it, I thought: If they only knew what my real co-payment is. The part I can't pay, no matter how many monthly installments I arrange. Years I've left in the lurch. Organs that are no longer in their original condition. People who've run off because I've always played the same game.

The second bill came in my head. The kind that builds up slowly, like a hangover that's no longer just a headache, but a balance sheet. I was sitting at the kitchen table, the health insurance mail in front of me, next to it the other letters I'd ignored for too long. Reminders, payment demands, something from the authorities that always sounds like they're in a hurry to remind you of things you'd rather forget. The little imp sat on the pile, leafing through my chaos with his bored little hands.

"You've certainly collected a lot, mate," he said. "Paper is patient. Your organs, not so much." I stared at him. "Let me do the math," I said. "But without you." He laughed. "Without me?" he repeated. "You might be able to drink without me—theoretically, anyway—but you can't do the math without me. I'm in every single item."

I retrieved the old notebook, which by now knew more about me than any therapist I'd ever seen. New page, new heading: "What's still possible – what's no longer possible." It looked like a poor template for a motivational chart some coach might hand out in a seminar. Still, I thought it was better than just piling the letters away.

Under "What's no longer possible," the first thing I wrote was: "Continue as before." I stared at the four words as if they were a joke gone too far. The goblin clapped ironically. "The man's going radical," he said. "What's next, vegetables?" I ignored him. Below that: "Ignore the hospital." "Cancel doctor's appointments." "Pretend that last place is immortal." The list filled up faster than I would have liked.

Under "What else is possible," there was nothing. White. Emptiness. I scratched my head, as if I had to open a drawer somewhere high up, a drawer full of ideas. "Completely abandon the pub," I thought—and crossed the sentence out again before I'd even written it down. I wasn't that far along. Maybe never. That would have been the honest answer. But something had to be there, otherwise the page would look like a death certificate.

“You can start small,” said the goblin, surprisingly gentle for him. “It doesn’t have to be ‘I’m going to become a new person.’ Write: ‘Two evenings a week, don’t finish last.’ Or: ‘Sometimes really last round and no overtime.’ Or: ‘Sometimes drink water and don’t pretend it’s cleaning fluid.’” I growled. “That’s ridiculous.” He shrugged. “More ridiculous than pretending, at almost fifty, that unchangingness is a character trait?”

I wrote: "No more going to the pub every night." Period. No "never again," no "starting today," no "I swear." Just one sentence that looked more like a suggestion I was making to myself. Below it: "Pay part of the tab to the bartender." And, with a slight shrug: "Don't just look at the number for the addiction counseling service."

"This is all very modest," the goblin judged. "No major transformation, no redeemed protagonist, no saint under neon lights." I sighed. "I'm not the type for big transformations," I said. "I'm happy if I can manage small changes of direction without immediately running into a wall."

I remembered that day at the clinic. Disinfectant, tubes, numbers on screens. The doctor who said it was late, but not too late. "The bill's coming," he hadn't said, but he meant it. And I knew: if I didn't change anything, a bill would eventually arrive, one that wasn't in euros. Diagnosis, prognosis, end of story. No payment plan would help then.

“You can’t do without the goblin,” I muttered. “You’re always in it.” He nodded. “Exactly,” he said. “It’s not about taking me out of the equation. It’s about including me. I’m part of your story. But I don’t have to call the shots until the very last line.”

I flipped through the notebook again. "That's just how I am," "It's too late anyway," "I'm not hurting anyone"—all the phrases I used to use to avoid paying bills. Now they seemed cheap, like sayings on postcards from a bargain bin. The new list looked more matter-of-fact. No rambling, just "can't do it anymore" and "maybe still possible." It was less poetic than my crashes, but more real.

"And what about the invisible bill?" the goblin asked as I closed the book. "The one for your daughter, your grandchildren, all the people you've stood up at some point?" I rubbed my eyes. "There's no bill," I said. "Just outstanding debts that will never be paid. At best, I can prevent more from accumulating."

“Sometimes,” he said, “that’s precisely the only form of restitution that realists can manage: not making things worse.” I nodded. That sounded like a level I felt I could reach.

The idea of doing the math without the imp was a joke. It didn't exist. But for the first time, I could try to do it not just in his head, but in mine. With him on the sidelines, as a commentator, not as an accountant. And perhaps that ultimately meant that I stopped putting everything on my tab that was too inconvenient to pay for right then and there.

The real bill was waiting at the back. Not figuratively, but quite literally: a stack of beer mats with my name on them, totaling an amount that could have covered a few good months if I had invested it in something other than foam and empty talk.

I went there one early evening, earlier than usual, when the place wasn't quite open yet, but not completely empty either. No games, no music, just the TV on silent, chairs half-occupied. The waitress looked surprised when I came through the door so early. "Shift change in your head?" she asked. I shrugged. "I just wanted to come in before the day ate me up again," I said.

The landlord was standing behind the bar, actually sorting beer mats. No stock photo, real work. He flipped through them, crossed things out, did mental arithmetic, jotted down numbers on a pad. When he saw me, he just nodded, without a word. "Good timing," he said. "I'm just going through the old stories."

I sat down at the bar, not at the regulars' table. This wasn't an evening for the group. This was an evening between me and the man who had served my misery in glasses all these years. The imp sat on the edge of the cash register, watching, fascinated, as the landlord juggled lids and numbers. "At least this guy can do math," he commented. "Unlike you."

"How much is it?" I asked before I could back out. The innkeeper looked me over briefly, then reached into the stack, pulled out a pile of bottle caps bearing my name, and placed them on the counter. Many lines, old stains, years written in pencil and ballpoint pen. He calculated

with his eyes, then named a sum. It wasn't so high as to be impossible, but high enough to sting.

“I haven’t calculated everything,” he said. “Some of it is so old, it would be more archaeology than accounting. But this is what I can still write down with a clear conscience.” I nodded. The goblin whistled softly through his teeth. “That’s a lot of evenings of ‘write it down on me,’” he muttered.

I took out my wallet, counted out money—more than I'd ever put on the counter before. It wasn't the full amount; it wasn't enough. But it was a start. A down payment. "The rest next month and the month after," I said. "If the place is still standing by then."

The innkeeper looked at the money, then at me. It was a moment when everything that had happened between us over the past few years briefly stood between us: the evenings with stupid remarks, the drunken binges, the ambulances, the fights, the jokes, the sadness. He nodded slowly. "I'll book it as a serious attempt," he said. "And that's more than most people around here ever manage."

The waitress placed a beer in front of me without asking. I looked at it. "I don't want to ruin you," I said to the bartender. "Or myself." He gave a short, dry laugh. "Too late for either of those options," he said. "But I'm glad you're at least trying to pay before I drop dead."

"Do you already know what you're going to do?" I asked. "When you close up?" He looked out the window, where a stretch of gray road was visible. "I have an appointment with my doctor," he said. "That's something, at least. And I have a brother who says I could help him in the workshop. Less night, more wrenching. Maybe I'll get just as tired of you humans, but at least you're not all crazy."

I took a sip. Slowly. The goblin leaned back and watched. "You're paying," he said. "In cash. For stuff you put on credit elsewhere. Feels bad, doesn't it?" I nodded. "Yes," I said. "But it's a bad feeling I can live with. What would be worse is if I found out someday that the store was gone and I'd never even tried to be honest."

The door opened, Heiner came in, saw us, saw the money on the counter, saw my serious face. "Whoa," he said. "Funeral atmosphere?" The landlord waved it off. "Just a tax audit," he grumbled. "Internal." Heiner sat down a few stools away, ordered, and acted as if it were none of his business. I knew he was taking everything in.

“You know the others will think you’re crazy if you seriously start paying the tab,” the goblin whispered. “Not just here, but in life too. People like it when you go down with them. Not so much when someone suddenly starts swimming.” I grinned crookedly. “I’m not swimming,” I said. “I’m just trying not to put extra stones in my pockets anymore.”

The innkeeper pushed the stack of bottle caps aside, took the money, and put it in the till without any fanfare. No ceremony, no handshake, nothing. Just business. And that's how it felt: not like a moral cleansing, but like a business transaction. I owed him something. I paid part of it. The rest remained outstanding, but no longer indefinitely.

"And the other bill?" the goblin asked later, as I stood outside the door smoking a cigarette. "The one without me?" I blew the smoke into the cold air. "I'll start that one at home," I said. "You'd always object here anyway."

On the way home, I thought about how I probably owed my landlord more money than I owed my daughter emotional apologies. Both were sums I would never be able to fully repay. But I could stop pretending they didn't exist.

The visible bill at the inn had shrunk. The invisible one, for myself, had become a bit clearer. Maybe that was the deal: you can't pay for everything you've messed up, but you can at least stop "accidentally" throwing the bill away in the ashtray every time.

The last bill was waiting for me at home. The one no one sends you, the one with no deadlines, no subject line, no IBAN. The bill you issue to yourself—or perhaps don't. I sat down at the kitchen table, again with my notebook, again with the scraps of paper. The cigarette glowed in the ashtray, the water in the glass slowly grew warm. The gnome sat on the windowsill, looking out as if checking to see if the world was still there.

“So,” I said, more to myself than to him. “We’re doing this now. The calculation without you. And with you. Simultaneously.” He turned his head. “I’m curious to see how you manage this,” he said. “Invoices aren’t your strong suit. You were always better at cover letters.”

At the top of the page, I wrote: "What I can still pay." Below that: "What I have to accept will remain open." It felt like I was taking stock, even though I hoped there were still a few years left. I was 48, not 80. But in a life like mine, things count differently.

Under "What I can still pay for," I first wrote: "Outstanding bill at the pub – in installments." That was concrete. Below that: "Keep my blood test appointments." "No more lying to the doctor." "Try not to drink every night." "Say no occasionally when the group wants 'just one shot.'" "Call my daughter before she calls and asks if I'm still alive." Things that seemed small and yet were big at the same time.

Under "Remains open," things got tougher. "Years missed with my daughter." "School performances I didn't see." "Nights when my grandchildren didn't know where I was." "Body parts that won't heal." "People who left and won't come back." I wrote the items down, one by one, and each one hurt, like a bruise being squeezed.

"And now?" the goblin asked as I put the pens aside. "Are you sending remorse? Or what's the plan?" I looked at him. "No plan," I said. "Just... no more new entries in the second column, if possible."

He came down from the window and sat on the edge of the notebook so that his small shoes almost touched the words. "You know this won't work out perfectly," he said. "There will be days when you put your money on the wrong side again. Days when you'd rather write it off because you don't have the strength to pay. Days when you send me ahead again."

I nodded. "Yes," I said. "But maybe there will be a few more days when I don't do it. And maybe that's enough in my price range."

My gaze drifted to the phone number for the addiction counseling service, still written on the slip of paper the doctor had given me. I had it memorized by now, which was useless if you never intended to call. Today, it stared at me like a cross between a threat and a life preserver. The imp followed my gaze.

"That would be something like a partial payment," he said. "Not a full settlement. But a sign that you understand you can't handle everything on your own." I took a deep breath, my stomach twitched, my head throbbed slightly, my heart beat a fraction too fast. My fingers rested on my phone, motionless.

“I’m doing it now,” I said. My own voice sounded strange, like I was imitating someone else. The goblin raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Without three days of drama first?” he asked. “That’s pretty unusual.” I grinned crookedly. “Maybe I’m just tired of drama,” I said. “I’ve had enough of it.”

I dialed the number. Each digit felt thick, as if I had to push it through syrup. Before I could press "Call," I glanced at him. "You're staying?" I asked. He grinned. "Where would I go? I'm your Clurichaun. I'll come with you whether you drink or talk or both."

The phone rang. Once, twice, three times. I could have hung up. I used to. I would have told myself it was a sign that no one was answering. This time I stayed on the line. A voice answered. Friendly, neutral. No moralizing, no sanctimoniousness. "Addiction counseling, good evening."

I gave my name. I said I wasn't entirely sure why I was calling, only that things couldn't go on like this. I said I was a drinker who most of the time pretended it was a way of life, not a problem. I heard myself saying it, as if I were my own narrator. The inner voice sat next to the phone, listening, saying nothing. That was a good thing. The voice on the other end asked questions. Nothing profound, just: "How much? How often? How long have you been drinking? What does the doctor say? Have you ever tried drinking less? What do you wish for?"

“I don’t want to die with a glass in my hand that I can’t even hold anymore,” I said at one point. That was perhaps the most honest sentence I’d uttered in years. The voice nodded in my imagination. “Then you have a pretty clear goal,” it said. “We can look at how you can get there. Step by step. No promises, but possibilities.”

We talked for a while. Not long. No miracle cure talk. Just a first feeling-out. An appointment, a suggestion, a "if you'd like," a "you don't have to be alone." When I hung up, the apartment was the same, the ashtray the same, the imp the same. But something had shifted: For the first time in my life, I had done some calculations not just in my head and in his voice, but out loud. With a person who doesn't work in a bar.

"Well," said the goblin after the silence fell. "That's it? Now you'll get sober, get a new liver, make peace with everyone, and die with a glass of water in your hand?" I laughed, even though I didn't feel like it. "I don't know," I said. "Probably not. But that was a down payment."

I wrote another sentence in the notebook, with a hand that trembled less than I had expected: "Today, for the first time, I tried to help ensure that the bill isn't just written by the body." No comment, no rating. Just the date.

The goblin watched, nodding slowly. "You know," he said, "you can do without me, but I always turn up somewhere in the footnotes. The difference is: I used to write them for you. From now on, you write them yourself. And I'll scribble next to them."

"And what will the final result be?" I asked. He shrugged. "Maybe a loss," he said. "Maybe a small gain. Maybe just a zero. But even a zero is better than never looking and eventually just signing whatever others put in front of you."

It was getting dark outside, and dark inside too – but not so dark that I was afraid to turn off the light at all. I got up, went into the bedroom, my body tired, my mind more alert than usual after such a day. The imp followed me, jumped onto the bedside table, and sat down.

“Good night, Grandpa,” he said. “Tomorrow there will be plenty of opportunities to screw things up again. But today, for the first time, you tried not to completely ignore the whole mess.” I lay down, pulled the blanket up to my chest, and thought, just before sleep came: Maybe that’s all there is to it—not salvation, not healing, not a new life. But just the attempt not to be completely eliminated from the mess that’s coming anyway.

And deep inside me, behind all the unfinished business, lay a quiet, small thought that smelled almost like a clean kitchen after tidying up: Maybe that's enough. Not for a happy ending. But for something that one could call the latest status without shame.

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