The Baron von Munchausen

Lies, wine and gun smoke

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Prologue: No Baron, Just a Damned Narrator

Don't imagine a baron. No gold, no castle, no noble ladies giggling with pursed lips when he sneezes. No. Imagine an old dog with dirty boots, a beard covered in breadcrumbs, ash, and dead flies. Imagine a guy who stinks of wine, horse shit, and lies, yet grins like he's fooled the whole world—which he might have.

That's me. Or what's left of me.

They call me Baron von Münchhausen. Baron! Ha! What a joke. At most, I've been Baron of a crooked bench in a pub, Baron of a pile of empty bottles, Baron of the last chair a dog hasn't puked on yet. Everything else is a lie. But lies are the one thing they've never been able to take away from me.

You're sitting there now, good children, your eyes as wide as saucers, thinking, "Now tell us something, old dog! Tell us about the cannonballs, the moon, the wolves, the damned stag with the cherry in its skull!" And I tell you: Yes, it's all coming. But not as you know it. Forget the children's books, forget the boring storytimes in the classroom, where the teachers lied to you in dry voices that I was a fun, harmless weirdo.

I wasn't a joker. I was a drunk with too much gun smoke in my lungs and too little respect for the truth.

The truth? It's like thin beer: tastes of nothing and doesn't get anyone drunk. A good lie, on the other hand, hits like liquor, burns, and the next morning no one knows if it was real or just a dream.

So listen: I'm no hero, no nobleman, no goddamn baron. I'm a storyteller. And storytellers are the worst pigs. We eat stories, we regurgitate them, we sprinkle salt on them, pour wine on them, and sell them as a delicacy. And you eat them. Always. You want it that way.

I have stories for you that will make your pants drop. I have stories for you that you should never tell your children, because then they'll learn that lying is more fun than math. And yes—I have stories that even the dead would laugh at, if only they had teeth.

I've seen myself die a hundred times, and each time I've gotten up, dusted myself off, and said, "Screw it, just one more cup." Because life is nothing more than a long hangover you have to lie about so you don't throw up.

And if you're now thinking, "But Baron, what is real and what isn't?"—then I'll laugh in your face. Real? What is real anyway? The wine in the glass is real as long as it's not empty. After that, it's a memory, and memories are the worst lies of all.

So make yourselves comfortable, you pathetic listeners. Grab a mug, a pitcher, a whole damn carafe. Because what's about to happen is no fairy tale. It's a bar fight between truth and lies, and in the end, only one will be left standing—and I'm telling you right now, it will be the lie.

You want order? Then you've come to the wrong place. I'm going to tell you how someone drinks: first slowly, then too quickly, then too much, then something falls over, and in the end everyone claims they weren't even there. That's how memory works. That's how fame works. That's how life works, when you're serious and yet not serious at the same time.

I realized early on that the world wasn't waiting for me. No red carpet, no fanfare. More like a barman saying, "Last bar, get out of here," and a dog peeing on your trouser leg while you try to be a hero. So I became what was left: a mouth with legs. A man who lies faster than others blink. And if someone tells me that lying is a sin, I say: Fellow, I'll save your reality by turning it into a story you can bear.

The first rule of storytelling: You need a banging opening. The second: You need a mouth that never closes. The third: You need an audience desperate enough to buy any crap you give, as long as you deliver it with enough confidence.

I started in a pub so crooked the chairs slid toward the bar by themselves. The landlord's name was something that sounded like Potato Soup, his wife was faster with the ladle than God with anger, and the air was a misty concoction of smoke, onions, horse, old beer, new promises, and broken teeth. That's where I learned the trade: to stick listeners like flies to honey. Not because the truth is sweet. Because lies stick.

"Baron," they whispered, "tell me about the cannonball." I said, "Which one? I've ridden more bullets than you've peeled potatoes." "Or the one about the moon." "The moon? I coughed at it, and it still coughs back today." "Or the one about the stag that had trees in its skull." "He was a fruit farmer, to be precise." And they laughed, and I had them. Just a little twist, a bit of cheeky geometry with the truth, and they believed everything I said. Not because I was more

credible. But because they wanted to believe. Faith is a bar: the emptier the mug, the greater the longing.

You want heroic deeds? I'll give you something better: heroic mistakes. I've failed a thousand times and each time I've told the story as if it were intentional. "Of course I rode into the swamp," I said, "I wanted to show the swamp how to swallow properly." "Of course I pulled myself out by my own hair, what else? Should I ask the innkeeper?" People looked at me like I was a magician, and I thought: Guys, this isn't magic. This is just audacity with rhythm.

I understood early on that legends are made with two ingredients: high spirits and an audience. You need one person to jump for joy and ten to say oh. Then you need wine. Not because it inspires—it just softens you. But wine is the glue of the night. It turns strangers into accomplices, doubters into believers, a lousy story into a celebratory tale. When the jug goes around, even the wall becomes poetic. And the wall was often the best thing on some evenings.

Let's talk about style. Some call me boorish. That's courtly for "honest, only louder." I talk the way the floor smells: of work, of dirt, of what falls when someone doesn't pull themselves together. Why should I polish words when no one polishes their boots? I'm not a court clerk. I'm the type who stays in the rain and still claims he's dry. And if it's not true, I claim the rain got wet, not me.

You want morals? Fine: If you fall, fall in front of an audience. If you lie, lie so big that the truth looks like a timid waiter next to it. If you drink, drink as if you were doing it for anyone who's too cowardly. And if you love... oh, never mind. Love is the only thing you should do sober, otherwise you'll forget who you promised it to.

I once knew a sergeant who wrote down everything: names, rations, sins, rainfall, the number of flies on bread. He was convinced that order holds the world together. Then a cannonball came along and upset his bookkeeping, and suddenly his statistics became very private. "How do you deal with this?" I asked. "I'll file it," he said, making a cross in his notebook. The end. That's order. I, on the other hand, climbed onto the ball and said, "Take me closer, I want to see who I'm about to impress." Notice the difference? He was right. I remembered the story. Guess which of us is appearing in books today.

Many ask, "Baron, why so much exaggeration?" Because the world is small, my friend. You wake up, eat bread, go to work, get yelled at, come home, and fall

over. And then you want to tell me the truth is enough? No, it's barely enough for the stove. You need fires for your heart. Exaggeration is the stove for your heart.

Of course, I have opponents. Priests who think I'm violating reality. Officials who think I'm undermining order. Women who say I'm a bad influence on men who already have a bad influence. And soldiers who say I should leave the battlefield to the riflemen. I have a standard response to that: "You're right." Then I wave, drink their wine, and tell them they're part of a story today, and they're soft as butter in July.

One came recently—a priest so dry that Staub was jealous. "Your stories are tempting." "Of course," I said, "otherwise they'd be sermons." "They lead astray." "Well, finally. Those who walk straight ahead only see their shadow." "They trivialize virtue."
"I'll make it drinkable, brother." At the end, he left with a laugh he probably forbade his congregation. I heard him say "Amen" as the door closed.

You want order in the chaos of my storytelling? Forget it. Chaos has its own geometry, and that is: Start somewhere, land somewhere better. I promise you nothing but movements: from the bar to the cannon, from the moon to the pipe, from the swamp to the beard, from laughter to the hiccups. In between, we'll stumble together, catch ourselves with a bad joke, and pretend it's intentional.

I also have days when I don't speak. I sit by the river, watching the water act as if it had a purpose. The river doesn't lie—it just doesn't tell. It acts. I envy it for that. Then I go back to the city, sit down, and do what I can: I lie, so that for a moment you feel like the river meant you as it flowed on.

The audience is an animal. A good one, a hungry one, a lazy one. You have to grab it by the scruff of the neck, not stroke it. Say "dragon," and it pricks up its ears. Say "moon," and it stares. Say "wine," and it nods, because it's the only truth everyone understands right away. Then you give it an image that's bigger than the alley it lives in. You turn its day into a night with torches. And you take away from it in the story the things it can't lift in real life: guilt, fear, boredom. That's the deal. I'm lying—you breathe a sigh of relief.

And yes, there are evenings when I believe myself. I sit there, talking about a cannonball I rode like a boy on a wild horse, and suddenly I taste gunpowder on my tongue. I feel the air tearing, the city shrinking, and I see my own grin reflected in the metal. Those are the dangerous evenings. The narrator

transforms into his story and finds it hard to get back. When I fall out of the stupor, I need a chair, a jug, two hands to hold me—and an excuse. The excuse is usually: "One more?"

I once served a king—yes, me, the Baron from the bar. He wanted stories by the dozen. "Entertain my people," he said, "the taxes are high, the weather is bad, I need a laugh." "Your Majesty," I said, "I have a laugh. But it costs." "Gold?" "Nerve. Yours." I told the story so fast, so loudly, that the crowd first cheered, then cried, then laughed, then cried again—and the king? He sat quietly and drank. At the end, he came to me and whispered: "I envy you." "For what?" "For being allowed to fall without anyone recording it." I patted him on the shoulder and thought: Poor thing, he who can never lie if he wants to be honest.

About the truth: I'm trespassing. I break through the door, rearrange the furniture, hang the pictures crookedly, put a cannon on the wall, put the moon in the aquarium, and then sit on the sofa and ask the truth if it wants a drink. If it says "no," I'll throw it out. If it says "yes," it'll be a good evening.

You can see I'd like to be a better person. But better people are boring. They finish early, they go home on time, they say "please" and "thank you," and when they lie, they do it so badly that no one wants to hear it. I, on the other hand, lie as if God had lent me my mouth and said, "Make something of it, I'm tired." And I do. I make a racket out of paper.

The audience wants blood? I give them juice. They want heaven? I hang lanterns. They want war? I deliver noise without corpses. They want love? I give it to them—but in pieces, because whole hearts are hard to digest. You want lessons? Here:– If someone calls you "liar," say thank you. They've done your work for you.– If someone calls you "baron," drink to their health. They're probably buying the round.– If someone calls you "friend," bury your coins deeper.

I can tell you how I pulled myself out of the swamp by my own bootstraps—I'll do that later, don't worry—but more importantly, I didn't drown because I never gave the swamp the dignity to take me seriously. A swamp is just water with pretensions. A lie is just truth with humor. That's how I sort out the world.

And if you're asking if I'm ever afraid: Of course I am. Of empty tables. Of dry pitchers. Of silence that lasts longer than a breath. Silence devours storytellers. Then I stand up, throw down a stool, shout "Moon!", and follow it with a "cannonball!" and ten pairs of eyes chase after the words like dogs chase a

bone. That's not noble. It's a craft. You learn it like pulling nails: a firm grip, no hesitation, at the right angle.

I never asked for permission. Not from kings, not from innkeepers, not from women, not from history. I took it. And when they tried to take it away, I brought it back bigger. That's the trick with legends: You can't kill them if they keep inflating. You poke them—whoosh—and the next day you get two balloons. One of them tells of a stag that grows cherries in its skull.

You back there, yes, you with the skeptical look: You want proof? Fake event. I have receipts, not proof. The receipts are laughter, hiccups, sometimes applause, often anger, rarely bans from the premises. Officials love proof. Stories love drunks. Decide which church you belong to.

Once, I swear on the bottom of my glass, I convinced a wolf he was a horse. It was winter, I was cold, the sleigh broke down, the horse had been eaten—long story, later chapter—so I harnessed him. It worked. Why? Because I didn't ask him if he could. I told him he'd always been able. That's how you treat people. Don't tell them what they are. Tell them what they'll soon become if they listen to you. That's why teachers hate me and innkeepers love me.

Now you're wondering when the big numbers will finally begin. Soon. Patience, you children of noise. I'm currently building the stage for you. A prologue is like the first glass: Many consider it superfluous, but without it, the rest tastes like work. We first have to lubricate the throat, prepare the tongue, warm the audience until even the chairs are listening. Then, I swear, we'll throw cannons, tie horses to church steeples, plant fruit trees in deer skulls, and when we get to the moon, we'll complain about gravity as if it were the innkeeper closing too early.

I'm no baron. I wear the title like a dented tin drum. I bang on it, you dance. Enough. I'm no saint. I turn water into wine, but only when no one's looking, and the next morning it's all water again, and we have a headache. I'm not a liar. I'm a truth magnifier. I put a horn on reality and call it a unicorn, until even the hunter sees it.

Want to pin me down later? Good luck. I'm made of wood that spins. I'm the picture that looks at you when you think you're looking at it. I'm the voice that says "One more" when you say "Enough." I'm the sound you seek when the night is too quiet. And if you ask me who invented me, I'll say: You. No storyteller exists without people who would rather listen than sleep.

Alright, friends of overwhelmed reality: We've warmed up. Your tongues are heavy, your eyes are light, your chairs creak in agreement. From here, there's no turning back. Anyone who stands up now will miss the accident, and I guarantee it: It will be spectacular. The first to leave are always the ones who later claim loudest that they were there.

One last piece of advice before things get heated: If you laugh, laugh too loudly. If you're amazed, marvel too openly. If you doubt, doubt silently. And if you drink—drink for me. I have two hands, but four stories at once, I can't keep up.

Now I'm turning on the faucet of imagination. It will drip, splash, tear, and rush. We'll be logical until it becomes illogical, and then we'll have reached our goal. It's not about whether I really rode a cannonball. It's about you feeling it right away – in your stomach, in your knees, in the little coward that sits in every chest and screams, "Don't jump!" We'll jump anyway. Together. And if we hurt ourselves, we'll turn it into an anecdote with a punchline. That's my job. Your job is "More!"

So, barman, another round – for everyone. And you, hold on tight. I'm about to tell you how a man without wings smoked his way up to heaven and returned back down without paying. But first: a toast.

To the truth—may it never be caught sober. To the lie—may it always arrive in time. To you—may you stay when things get better.

And here's to me – that my tongue doesn't break before the cannons sing.

Ready? Okay. Now the story begins.

The art of exaggerating with an empty glass

It always starts the same way: The glass is empty. An empty stomach makes you weak, an empty glass makes you dangerous. Because then you talk. Then you spit out words like seeds, and suddenly there are trees, entire forests, growing out of your mouth. Someone says, "You're exaggerating." And you say, "Of course, asshole, that's the idea."

Don't get me wrong. Exaggeration isn't a mistake, it's a technique. A profession. A religion. The church of fantasy, and I'm its drunken pope. Those who preach the truth might get respect. But those who exaggerate get laughs, open mouths, and free rounds. Respect fills you up, but exaggeration makes you immortal—at least until tomorrow morning when the hangover strikes you.

I learned early on that you get more attention with an empty glass than with a full one. A full glass is safe, a full glass is full, a full glass is calm. An empty glass, on the other hand, screams, "Something's missing!" And it's precisely into that gap that you can pour anything—a story, a lie, a baby dragon, a damned moonwalk.

Imagine I'm sitting here, hand on pitcher, glass empty, and the innkeeper says, "Nothing more for you, Baron, your bank account is tighter than my cellar." Then you raise your voice. Not loudly, but so that it rattles like glass in the wind. "Fine," I say, "then I'll tell you the last time I rode half a horse, and it was so fast that the other half was already waiting for it in the future."

Silence. Everyone is watching. The innkeeper frowns, but the looks of the guests give it away: He's lost me. I've got her. And before anyone asks if that can be true, I burst out laughing like a madman, and they laugh along, and in that moment the story is truer than the empty jug.

Exaggeration is like fencing: You always have to be one step ahead of your opponent. If someone comes along with reason, you slit their throat with absurdity. If someone asks for proof, you spit in their face and say, "Proof enough for me to tell you!" Lying is cheap, but exaggeration—exaggeration is art. It's like painting with dirt, only people love the picture more because it reeks of life.

Some say you shouldn't overdo it. I say you should*always*exaggerate. The world is gray enough, with its bread, its work, its wives who snore at night like broken bellows. It needs color. It needs cannonballs flying through the sky, wolves eating sleighs, horses parked against church steeples. Anyone who doesn't exaggerate is already dead—they just don't know it yet.

You think I'm only doing this for the audience? Forget it. I'm doing it for myself. An empty glass screams at me as if it had the nerve to steal my dignity. So I take it back, with words, with worlds, with stories so big that the innkeeper is ashamed because his cellar is too small to store them.

Overdoing it with an empty glass—that's the only way to stay sober without being sober. You understand? I need the buzz, but when it's missing, I create it. Not with liquid, but with imagination. Every sentence a sip, every punchline a buzz, every lie a toast. That's how I stay drunk, even when the carafe is long empty.

And now, friends, you come into play. You sit there, you listen, you laugh, you curse, you shake your head. You think: "No human being could have experienced something like this." And that's exactly the trick. Of course not. But who wants to hear how it's*really*was? Do you want a report? Then go to the town clerk. Do you want the truth? Then marry a virgin. Do you want an adventure? Then listen to me. But don't expect to come out of this sober.

I'm telling you: The greatest luxury a man can have is not gold, not land, not a woman with a decent ass. It's the right to make the world bigger than it is. And the right to have no one behead you for it. Exaggeration is my battle banner, my sword, my bed.

Once, in a damn dive somewhere between Hanover and the end of the world, I stood on a table—because chairs are too small for big lies—and shouted at the guests: "I've impaled the sun!" They laughed. I raised my finger. "No, damn it, I mean it. I jabbed my pike upwards, and for a moment the thing stuck like a lamp in a net." They stopped laughing. They looked at me like idiots. And that's exactly the moment when you know you've got them. They're no longer doubting—they're waiting. Waiting to see how you round it off, how you secure it, how you make the lie so big that even their doubt can't compete with it.

"And then," I said, "I pulled the sun down, held it to my glass, and drank. That's why I'm still glowing today. That's why you can read at night when I'm snoring." Silence. Then laughter. And the innkeeper brought the next pitcher. Free. That's the damn art, you see? Bribing the sky with an empty glass.

You want to know why people love exaggeration? Because they recognize their own miserable lives in it—only bigger, louder, better. A farmer who toils in the mud three times a week laughs like a madman when I tell him how I pulled myself out of a swamp by my own hair. Why? Because he'd love to. Because he knows he'll soon drown in the mud, and for at least ten minutes I give him the fantasy that he's stronger than the swamp.

And the fine people? The kings, the generals, the officials with their tight asses? They believe me the most. They sit there in their palaces, bored with gold and

power, and when someone like me comes in and screams, "I rode on a cannonball!" they clap like children who finally get to see something bigger than their shitty court protocol. Exaggeration is democracy. Anyone can eat it, everyone will get their fill.

But beware, friends: exaggeration doesn't mean babbling. It's precision. You have to know when to take off, when to land, when to deliver the punchline like a punch in the face. Too much, and they won't believe you. Too little, and they'll laugh at you. The measure is the art. You have to exaggerate so much that they say, "It could be... if only the world were less stingy."

Let me give you an example. I once claimed I had killed nine ducks with a single shot. "How is that possible, Baron?" one asked. "It's quite simple," I said. "I shot the bullet through the first duck, the second ate the bullet, flew on, was eaten by the third, which was eaten by the fourth, and so on – up to nine. After that, I only needed one pot." The men at the table laughed until they cried. One said, "What nonsense!" But his look betrayed: He wished it were possible. And that's precisely the difference: I don't sell what is true. I sell what is desirable.

Excess is like wine: The first round is sweet, the second warms you up, the third knocks you off your feet. But the next day you swear you'll never do it again—and the next time you order double.

An empty jug is my starting point. That's where I start. If someone says, "Baron, your glass is empty," then I say, "No, damn it, it's full of stories. Just wait until I pull the cork." And then the orgy begins.

There are nights when exaggeration isn't enough. You have to set the whole place on fire. Imagine: a stuffy tavern, sweating walls, the barman sweating, the customers sweating, and the glasses so empty that even the spiders in the corner are thirsty. That's exactly when I start.

I jump onto the table, tip the jug over my head—empty, of course—and yell, "You think you know what thirst is? I drank so much that the Rhine changed its bed just to make room!" Laughter. Glasses smash. A dog barks. "I drank so much that the Pope personally excommunicated me—not for sin, but because I drank his supply dry!" More laughter. And someone, a farmer with teeth like chipped chalk, shouts, "And then?"

Yes,*and then*That's the word that feeds me. "And then," I say, "I woke up sober—in the stomach of a whale. It was so big it ran a tavern in its belly. Beer in the right lung, wine in the left, and liquor straight from the liver." The crowd

roars. The innkeeper rolls his eyes, but he refills. Free, of course—he knows the fuller I get, the fuller his benches will be.

That's the science of exaggeration: You have to make the space bigger than it is. An inn is four walls, a roof, and a bar. But in my stories, it's a battlefield, a royal court, a damned universe with tables as planets and bottles as comets. People forget they're just looking at bread and cheese. They think they're eating bear liver while racing across eternal ice in a sleigh.

Sometimes I test the limits. I tell the story of a deer whose skull I blasted with cherry stones. A year later—I swear on my life—a tree grew from its horns. The farmers stared at me as if they'd seen the Messiah. One said, "Something like that can happen." "Of course," I said, "I saw it myself. I would have brought you branches, but the birds ate everything." Bam. They believed me. Not because it made sense. Because they wanted it to be true.

Exaggeration fills the belly when the glass is empty. It warms when the stove stays cold. It makes even the dumbest fool feel like he's part of something bigger. And that's precisely my trick: I turn every starving person into a witness. Every witness into a participant. In the end, they continue the story themselves—but smaller, cheaper, without fire. So I come back, add another scoop, and there I am again, sitting on top of the stool, the king among beggars.

I'm telling you: Overdoing it is like whoring—you think you're taking advantage of them, but in reality, you're the one paying. Only I don't pay anything. I get paid. With wine, with laughter, with the kind of looks men give when they fear and love you at the same time.

The best evenings always start the same way: too little money in my pocket, too thirsty in my throat. I enter the tavern, the door is hanging crooked on its hinges, the landlord stares like a dog about to bite, and the benches are already half full. Farmers, soldiers, traveling rabble. All smelly, all tired, all with faces like sacks of potatoes. A perfect audience.

"Baron," someone shouts, "your glass is empty before it was even full!" Laughter. I grin, sit down in the middle, raise the glass, and say, "Empty? You fools. This glass is full of adventure, you just have to look closely."

And then I start. Small at first, so they'll bite. "Last week I chased a rabbit so fast that it overtook itself and ran into my trap from behind." Laughter, jeers.

Someone knocks over their beer. "And then," I shout, "I roasted it—on the fire I lit with my own breath!"

Now they're really listening. Someone knocks on the table, the dog growls under the bench, the air is thick as soup. "I ate cannonballs during the war because the kitchen was empty. Tasted like spicy bread! Later, I spat one out, and it knocked down three more enemies." The soldiers stare. They want to object, but they're laughing too hard.

The innkeeper shakes his head. "You and your fairy tales." I jump onto the table, holding up the empty glass like a relic. "Fairy tales? No, my friend, that's history! Your story is bread and rain. My story is gunpowder, blood, and wine."

The guests roar. One, a young fellow with more courage than teeth, shouts, "Baron, tell us about the moon!" I slam the glass down on the table. "The moon! I visited it. I climbed up with a rope that I tied to the horns of the new moon. Up there are barrels full of sparkling wine, heavier than your entire field. And when I came back, I was thirstier than ever." Silence. They stare like cows at thunder. Then the place roars.

And now—now the mood changes. People stand up, yell, and demand more. One person yells: "Baron, I don't believe a word you say!" I jump down, grab him by the collar, and grin in his face. "Of course not, you idiot. But you'll spread the word. And that makes it true." He laughs, I drop him, and the barman refills his glass.

The night is heating up. Every sentence is a blow, every punchline a knife. I tell how I tied a horse to the church steeple because the snow was so deep that the roof looked like a pasture fence. I tell how I chased a deer that had cherries growing in its skull. I tell how I tricked wolves by letting them pull the sled they wanted to eat. And every time, the room roars as if they had experienced it themselves.

That's the art of exaggeration: You feed them stories until they're full. And when they burst, you pour more. An empty jug on my table is like a drum: It calls. It commands. It screams at me to lie again until the roof cracks.

At the end of the night, the peasants lie under the benches, the soldiers sleep with their faces in the beer, and the innkeeper curses because he knows no one can pay. I go out, my coat full of words, my stomach empty, but my head heavy with the noise. And when someone says, "Baron, you're exaggerating!" I say, "Exactly, damn it. Otherwise I'd be you."

The problem with big lies is that at some point they become bigger than the room you're telling them in. And then it all blows up. Always.

That night, the tavern was a powder keg. Peasants bellowed, soldiers banged on the tables, the dog barked in time. I stood on the table like a general before battle and shouted: "I once rode a storm! A storm so powerful that it tore down churches and pulled forests from the ground. I grabbed the wind's mane and flew across the land. The lightning was my spurs, the thunder my drumbeat!"

The crowd went wild. One man pounded his fist across the bench, another yelled that he wanted to fly too. Then an old soldier stood up—one with a face that looked like a rusted helmet. He stared at me and said, "Liar! No man can ride the storm."

The room fell silent. All eyes on me. This is the moment where you either tip over—or turn on the tap.

I grin. "You're right," I say. "Not human. But I'm not human either. I'm the damned exaggeration incarnate. I transformed myself into the storm, got it drunk, and then rode it. Ask the oaks—they're still leaning today!"

Laughter. Yelling. The old soldier turns red as a ham and tries to get at my throat. A farmer jumps up and shouts: "Leave the Baron alone! Without him, the night would be as empty as his glass!" And then there's a bang. Fists fly, beer mugs crash, someone slips on the dog, and the dog bites back. The tavern goes wild.

I stand in the middle of the chaos, hold up my empty glass, and yell: "Quiet! I'll tell you how I played cards in the belly of a giant—with his entrails as my trump card!" And lo and behold: they stop. Even the soldier stops, the blow still in the air. The lie has tamed them.

And that's exactly the truth, friends: A good exaggeration stops more blows than ten pfennigs. It turns a riot into a play. The brawl becomes the scenery, the lie the stage, and I am the king in the ragged cloak.

In the end, they all lay there, gasping, laughing, half-conscious. The landlord wiped blood and beer off the floor and cursed that he'd have to fix everything tomorrow. I grinned and said, "See, my friend – exaggeration pays the rent."

The tavern was empty, the beer spilled, and everyone's head was filled with noise. I staggered out, my glass still empty, but held high as if it were a scepter.

Outside, it was pitch black, the alley stank of piss, rain, and cheap living. A perfect stage.

A few peasants stalked behind me, like dogs hoping for another bone to fall from the table. "Baron," one called, "tell us something else!" I stopped, swayed, and grinned. "Something else? Sure. I'll tell you how I walked on the moon—but this time without a rope."

They laughed. "Can't do it." "Can't do it?" I raised my empty glass. "I sat on a puff of smoke that a drunken blacksmith had blown into the sky and rode up. Once I got to the top, I played cards with the stars. I lost. And because I couldn't pay, they smeared the Milky Way on my forehead. Do you see the shine?" I wiped my forehead as if it were real.

The guys stared, one of them crossed himself. "By God..." "God?" I laughed. "He was there too. He was shitting."

That's how it works. An empty jug, and suddenly you have the cosmos in your pocket.

We moved on, a horde of staggering believers, swallowing everything I spat out. I stopped at the well. "Here, right here, I once caught a fish so big it drank the well dry." "Impossible!" one cried. "Impossible?" I kicked the well's edge. "The fish is still at the bottom, too big to get out. Every full moon, you can hear it coughing." They stared into the depths as if a tail were about to shoot out.

That's the art, friends: The glass is empty, but the world is full to the brim if you just talk loudly enough. You turn a puddle into a sea, a dog into a wolf, a fart into a thunderstorm. And people believe it because they want to believe it.

We stumbled on through the night, every step a promise of a new lie. I stopped at the edge of the field, raised my glass, and called out: "Here I once wrestled with the wind. For three hours. It almost defeated me. But in the end, I caught it and locked it in a bottle. Anyone who listens can still hear it howling!" The farmers crowded around the glass, listened, and swore they heard a whistle. Idiots. But happy idiots.

And then I realized: This is my true art. Not drinking, not fighting, not riding bullets and wolves. But the art of whispering voices into an empty glass until the world inside trembles.

Morning crept in like a lazy dog—stinking, sluggish, and snappy. I lay in the ditch, the glass still clutched in my fist, empty as my stomach but heavy as a

sword. Next to me snored a farmer whom I had convinced just yesterday that he was the lost Prince of Spain. The poor fellow really believed it. Now he lay there, in the dirt, with his mouth open, and I thought: Prince or not—he stinks like a donkey.

My head throbbed as if the devil himself had thrown dice in it. But giving up? Never. I pushed myself to my feet, my shirt torn, my knees covered in mud, and muttered, "I've survived worse nights. Like the one where I fought with winter himself."

A few women walked by, baskets full of vegetables, and stared at me like a dead dog. "The Baron's overdone it again," one giggled. I raised my glass. "Overdone it? Ladies, I wrestled with winter last night. For three hours. He tried to steal my breath, so I knocked out his teeth. Look around you—that's why the morning is so mild!" The women laughed, rolled their eyes, but one winked at me. Damn—they wanted to believe it.

I trudged on, glass in hand, tongue heavy as lead, and everyone who saw me got their story. A dog barked at me. I yelled back: "Brat! I've ridden wolves bigger than your house! Be glad I'm not saddling you." The dog stopped growling. He whined. Victory.

And then – the hangover. The great judge. My stomach lurched, my eyes burned, the world rocked like a ship in a storm. I sat down on a rock, stared up at the sky, and muttered, "I've survived worse. I fell asleep on a cannonball and woke up sober."

This is the truth: Even at the end, when the body breaks, when the glass remains empty, when the world turns gray like ash—even then, the exaggeration remains with me. It is the last sip in the barrel. The sip that no one sees, that only I taste.

And so I stumbled on, a ghost in the dawn, with an empty glass in my hand and stories in my mouth that were bigger than the day itself. And everyone I met got their piece of it—whether they wanted it or not.

You might think I only learned all this in my old age, between war and pubs, between gunpowder smoke and vomiting. Nonsense. Even as a little rascal, I was a braggart as soon as the cup was empty.

I remember: I was a brat, maybe twelve, thirteen, a skinny guy with oversized ears. My father had more holes in his head than teeth in his mouth, and my

mother was tougher than any sword. There was rarely anything to drink except thin beer, and when the keg was empty, we kids were sent to bed. But I was never quiet. I sat down, drummed my fingers on the table, and said, "No more beer? Never mind. I'll tell you how I outsmarted a fox today who was smarter than three priests put together."

My siblings stared at me, tired, hungry, and incredibly annoyed. But I told them. I spun the fox so cleverly that it bit its own leg, I chased it through forests that didn't even exist, and in the end, I came back with a fur that no one could touch because it still bit.

And what happened? My mother—the toughest woman God ever built—laughed. For the first time in weeks. And my father? He raised the pitcher, poured the last drops into my cup, and said, "For the boy, he deserves it."

That's when I knew: Overdoing fills glasses. Overdoing fills stomachs. Overdoing turns a miserable evening into a story that will be retold twenty years from now.

Later, as I grew older, the game continued. I stood with the boys at the well, all thirsty, no money for beer. One of them was whining, "None of us survived anything." I grinned. "Oh, no? I did. I rode a fish last week. Across the river. The boy jumped like a horse, and I steered him with a carrot." They laughed at me, but they laughed—and that was enough.

Even then, I realized: An empty glass isn't an end, it's a beginning. It forces you to either hang your head or inflate the world so that your thirst seems smaller. And, damn it, I never hung my head.

Of course, exaggeration isn't a hobby you can pursue unchallenged. Sooner or later, someone will come along who has no sense of humor. And in my case, that was usually the village priest.

I was maybe fifteen, squatting on a barrel that was long empty, telling the boys how I had caught an eagle that morning by stealing its sunlight and stuffing it into my hat. "The poor bird was blind," I swore, "and I rode it up into the clouds." The boys shrieked with laughter.

Then the priest came, that thin, skeletal figure with a neck so long you could have played a violin on it. He looked at me, his lips as thin as a line, and said: "Münchhausen, you're lying again." "No, Pastor," I said. "I'm exaggerating."

"That's the same thing!" "No," I said, "when I lie, I want to deceive. When I exaggerate, I only want to entertain."

He grabbed me by the ear and pulled me from the keg. "Entertaining? You're corrupting people. The truth is the bread of the soul." I spat on the floor. "Then exaggeration is the wine." And he slapped me down.

I swear, at that moment I knew: I would never be a priest, never a civil servant, never an honest man. I would be the bastard who achieves more with words than with weapons.

But the punishment came: The next Sunday, he stood in the pulpit and ranted against me. "That boy is a sinner! He desecrates the truth!" And the people stared. Some nodded, others grinned. Because they had long since known that my stories tasted better than his sermons.

In the end, I won. Because in the tavern after the mass, someone said, "Baron, tell us what happened with the eagle." And I did, even bigger, even dirtier, even louder. And who paid for my beer? The people who had just nodded.

That's the lesson I learned early on: An empty mug in the tavern beats any full pulpit in the church.

Listen, you pathetic fools: Life is too short for the truth. Truth is like stale water—clear, clean, and after two sips you're full, but you're still thirsty. Exaggeration, on the other hand, is liquor. It burns, it warms you, it makes you bigger than you are.

I've seen it a thousand times: A farmer after work, his glass empty, his shoulders hunched, his gaze dead. Give him the truth, and he'll yawn. Give him an exaggeration—"Yesterday I caught a fish as big as your house!"—and he'll raise his head, his eyes will sparkle, and he'll dream that he, too, could one day experience something bigger than the plaice he's ploughing.

Exaggeration is not a sin. It's an act of grace. Because let's be honest: Who can survive without lying? Who sits in shit their whole life and says, "Yeah, that's my lot, thank God."? No one with a brain. So people like me come along, drunk, dented, dirty, and give you something bigger. A ride on a cannonball. A stag with a cherry tree in its skull. A storm that can be tamed. And you devour it, you crave it, you demand more.

And you know what? Me too. I need it just as much as you do. I need it because otherwise the glass would remain empty. I need it because silence is more

deadly than any enemy in war. I need it because I only live when the world laughs, screams, and holds its breath.

An empty jug is not an end. An empty jug is a promise. It says, "Come, Baron, make the world bigger again." And I swear to you: as long as I breathe, as long as I babble, as long as I still have a damn story in my mouth, no glass near me will ever truly be empty.

So raise your cups, even if there's nothing in them. Look inside, see the sun, the moon, the wolves, the cannonballs. See what's not there—and believe me, that's better than anything that could be.

Because I'm not a man of truth. I'm the man who shows you that even the last drop of dirt still contains an ocean. And once you understand that, you understand me. The Baron. The Liar. The Narrator. And, damn it, your best friend, as long as your glass is empty.

My horse, the swamp and me – and why I'm still standing

It was no royal morning. No sunrise with fiddle music, no heroic banner waving in the wind. It was filth. Pure, wet, stinking filth. A swamp so deep and black that even the frogs kept their mouths shut, because they knew: Whoever croaks here will perish.

I had my horse with me—a proud beast, clever, strong, so loyal it would have followed me into hell. Only, damn it, I would have preferred hell. Because a swamp eats quietly. No fire, no screams, just slurping. The sound that remains when the world swallows you up and no one notices.

And there we stood, my horse and I. I was in front, he was in the back. We were stuck in the mud like two idiots. First just our hooves, then our legs, and soon I was up to my hips in it. "Great," I muttered, "that's how heroes die—knee-deep in nature's shithouse."

The horse snorted as if he understood. He pulled, he strained, he panted. I cursed, yanked on the reins, kicked, prayed, laughed hysterically. But the swamp laughed louder. Every attempt to get out pulled us deeper in.

Now, you think, that's it. This is where the Baron, the great liar, ends up, drowned in the filth before he can tell the next lie. But that's where the thing

comes into play that makes us humans stronger than all animals: pure, naked desperation. And the madness that follows when one refuses to surrender.

I looked up at the sky, emptier than my mug. I felt the reins in my hands, heavy, wet, cold. And I thought, "Damn it, I'm Munchausen. If I go down here, it'll only be if the world gives me a punchline first."

So I took action. I grabbed my own hair—yes, my hair, greasy, matted, dirty—and pulled. I pulled myself and my horse out of the swamp as if I were my own god. You laugh? You say, "Impossible." Of course! But I did it anyway. Because impossible is exactly what an empty jug demands.

I pulled, the horse snorted, the swamp gurgled, and inch by inch we got out. My arms burned, my head pounded, and the sky stared at us like a dumb witness. But we made it. In the end, we both lay in the grass, panting, stinking, wet to the bone. I looked at the horse. He looked back. And we both knew: We should have been dead. But there we were. And we were alive.

"Why am I still standing?" you ask. Because I was too stupid to give up. Because I was too stubborn to drown. Because even as I sank, I wanted to steal a story that was greater than death. And, damn it, because my hair was stronger than gravity.

So I stood up, dripping, stinking of hell and filth, but I stood. And that's exactly why I'm telling you this now—not because it's believable, but because I survived. And if I survived, then it's true, no matter what your damn logic says.

We lay in the grass like two hanged men who had finally managed to get back down from the rope. The horse was wheezing, I was vomiting mud, and the sky was grinning coldly down. I swear I heard the clouds giggling—as if they were betting on whether I could make it or not.

But anyone who thinks that after such a dance with death, you sit down, dry your boots, and say, "It's good we survived"—you don't know the Baron. I stood up like a madman, dripping, shaking, but standing. "Come on," I growled at the horse, "we still have dirt ahead of us."

We staggered into the woods. Every step dragged mud along like a second pair of boots. My legs burned, my stomach growled, my head pounded. And yet, there was that grin. That dirty grin that only someone has who knows: I should have been dead—but I'm not.

"I'll tell them," I murmured. "I'll tell them so they'll eat it. I say the swamp wanted to keep me, but I spat in its mouth. I say the earth swallowed me, but I beat it from the inside until it spat me out. I say—" The horse neighed as if it were laughing.

That's when I realized: The exaggeration begins even before I'm back in the pub. It grows in the dirt, feeds on the mud, and inflates like a drunken heart. I don't need an audience—I am my own audience. Every step through the forest was a new sentence, every wound a punchline.

A hare jumped up. Small, harmless. But in my mind, it was a wolf. "Yes," I gasped, "and then the wolf came. Huge, with eyes like hot coals. But I, the Baron, grabbed it and carried it by the ear to the next village. There they boiled it, pot and all." I laughed loudly, dirty, painfully. The hare scampered away.

You see? That's the trick. Once you escape the swamp, you never need truth again. Truth would have drowned us both. Exaggeration pulled us out. So I stuck with it. Every footstep, every memory, every shitting sound in the woods became a legend even before it happened.

And that's precisely why I'm standing. Because I can't do anything else. Because I'm already deeper in the swamp of stories than any mud could ever swallow me.

I stumbled deeper into the woods, my horse trailing behind me, both dripping like two drowned rats resurrected. The swamp still clung to me, the stench clung to my bones, and it was in this very miserable state that I stumbled into a group of peasants.

Three guys, with axes and baskets, on their way to fetch wood or pick mushrooms—as if life wasn't shitty enough. They looked at me like a ghost who'd had too much to drink. One made the sign of the cross, the other exclaimed, "Holy Mother, what a sight!"

I grinned. This is my moment. This is exactly what survives the swamp. "What am I?" I gasped. "The man who ate the swamp."

They stared at me as if I'd just told them I was the Pope with two too many testicles. "Eaten me?" one asked. I nodded. "The swamp swallowed me. I was already half dead. But I bit back. I ripped out its tongue with my teeth. And then I pulled myself up by my own hair—and my horse."

The guys gulped. One whispered, "Impossible." I stepped closer, dripping mud onto their boots, and snarled, "Impossible? Look at me! I'm proof. I choked and drowned death in the dirt."

Now they were silent. One even fell to his knees as if I were a saint. Holy! I, dripping like a dung heap. I raised my hand, the empty glass still held like a scepter, and said: "You'll tell people about this. In every village, in every tavern. You'll say: 'The Baron was in the swamp and came out alive. He pulled himself out, horse and all.' And if anyone tells you that's a lie, laugh in their face. Because only someone who's never drunk believes in the truth."

The farmers nodded, fearfully, in faith. They would spread the word. I knew it. My legend was already creeping along like a worm in a rotten apple.

The horse neighed. I laughed. The swamp was past, but from now on it was also history. A history greater than death.

I dragged myself, dripping steed, into the nearest tavern. The door opened, and the stench filled the air. The farmers at the bar grimaced, the women held their aprons over their faces. One shouted, "By God, what kind of carcass is that?" I grinned. "Not a carcass. A survivor."

The bartender tried to throw me out, but I slammed the empty glass on the counter like evidence. "Pour it," I said. "And listen. I've been in the swamp. Up to my neck. I was already halfway into the belly of the earth. And now I'm standing here."

At first, people laughed. "Nonsense!" One shouted, "No one comes back from the Black Moor." I stood up, legs wide apart, dripping mud onto the ground, and screamed, "No one—but me! I pulled myself out by my own hair, horse and all. I knocked the swamp's teeth out. I farted in Death's ear, and he didn't survive!"

Silence. Then laughter. Then jeers. Someone rapped on the table: "Again! Tell me again!" So I did. But bigger. Loud images, dirty words, more blood, more madness. I told how the swamp had tongues that wanted to lick me, how black hands reached for me, how I bit them, how I grabbed my horse and screamed: "We get out of here, or we take the whole swamp with us!"

People ate it up. Every sip of my words was sweeter than the beer they held in their hands. They hung on my lips, the women opened their eyes wide, the guys screamed: "Impossible! But only someone who's seen it talks like that."

The innkeeper, who was about to throw me out, brought me a whole pot. Free. "Why am I still standing?" I yelled, raising the mug. "Because I can't die before I tell you. First the story, then death. That's how it goes. Cheers!"

The place was in a frenzy. Men slapped each other on the back as if they themselves had conquered the swamp. And that's precisely the secret: I was no longer alone in the mud. Now they were all there. Each of them had seen the swamp, each of them had climbed out, each of them was still standing.

And me? I laughed. For the swamp had almost swallowed me. But in the tavern, I had drowned him. With words. With wine. With laughter that was louder than his slurping.

The pitcher was full, my glass finally alive again, and people were clinging to me like flies to old meat. I grinned, drank, and every time I put the glass down, someone shouted, "Baron! From the swamp again!"

So I did. But each time I got fatter, uglier, crazier. The second time, I told them the swamp had eyes. Yellow, giant eyes that looked at me like hell itself. I crushed them with my bare fists, I swore, and the farmers screamed with delight.

The third time, I told him that the swamp wanted to swallow not only me, but my horse as well. "It's already sucked in his nostrils!" I screamed, "so I choked the bastard until he spat my horse out again!" The horse outside neighed as if he knew he was about to become a legend.

The fourth time, I explained that I hadn't just pulled myself out of the swamp, but the entire forest. "Look around!" I yelled, "those trees out there are only standing because I pulled them out!" The crowd went wild. One howled as if he had actually seen it.

And then there was no stopping them. Everyone wanted a piece of the swamp. One shouted: "Baron, what did it smell like?" "Like a thousand dead kings in summer." "How deep was it?" "So deep that God missed it." "And how did you get out?" "I insulted gravity until it gave in!"

They laughed, shouted, and banged on the tables. Beer sloshed, mugs flew, and the roof vibrated. The landlord despaired, but he grinned nonetheless, because he knew no one would go home sober today.

I stood there, in the middle of the chaos, my hair still damp from the real dirt, and thought: This is exactly the trick. You almost die – and then you tell it in

such a way that no one notices how close it was. Fear turns to laughter. Mud turns to wine.

And while outside the moon stood over the forest, as still as a silent judge, the swamp had long since been defeated. Not by strength, not by courage—but by the dirtiest weapon of all: my damned tongue.

At some point, the mood shifted. The farmers were no longer just listeners; they were fellow fighters. My swamp story was no longer a fairy tale; it was a war we all fought – with beer mugs instead of swords, with laughter instead of drums.

"Show us how you did it, Baron!" one of them shouted, his cheek already red from the schnapps. I climbed onto the table, legs wide apart, mud still dripping from my boots, and grabbed my own hair. I pulled myself up so hard the skin almost came off my skull. "That's it, you dogs! That's how I did it! I pulled myself out, with my bare hands, with my own hair!"

People screamed, one jumped up, tried the same thing, fell backward, and landed in the beer. Everyone laughed. Another tipped the rest of his mug over his head and yelled, "Now I look like the Baron in the Moor!" Suddenly, people were pouring beer in each other's faces, slipping on the floor, splashing in the slops like mud. It was as if I'd dragged the swamp into the tavern, and now they were all stuck in it.

The innkeeper yelled, "You bastards, you're ruining my place!" I raised the mug, grinned broadly, and yelled back, "No, innkeeper! We'll make them immortal!" And the crowd roared as if the word "immortal" were the trigger for a cannon shot.

There was a farmer lying on his stomach in the beer, flailing with his arms and yelling, "Baron, pull me out! I'm sinking!" I grabbed him by the collar, pulled him up, and screamed, "Saved, you idiot! And now you're part of the legend!" He howled, laughed, hugged me, stank of beer and garlic, but he was as happy as a child.

You understand? That's exactly the secret. It's not just about the story I'm telling. It's about making it so big that everyone gets sucked into it. Everyone wants to be a part of it. Everyone wants to get wet, dirty, drunk—as long as they can say afterward, "I was there when the Baron conquered the swamp."

By the end, the tavern was a mess. Tables were sticky, benches were slippery, the floor a sea of beer, sweat, and lies. And I stood in the middle, glass raised, laughing like a madman, and knew: I had won.

Because when the swamp almost swallows you up, all you have to do is make so much noise that it never dares to touch you again.

At some point, the bawling was no longer enough. Too much beer, too many lies, too many men who loved their fists more than their women. There was a crash. One of them, a guy with shoulders like an ox, yelled: "Your story is bullshit! I've been to the moor too, Baron, and I did it alone, without any hair-pulling or nonsense!"

The tavern fell silent. All eyes on me. That was the moment men are overthrown—king today, figure of fun tomorrow. I smiled crookedly, took a sip, let the beer run through my teeth, wiped it across my chin, and said, "You? In the swamp? Listen, friend, you're already stuck in the mud when you look your wife in the eye."

Laughter. But the ox didn't grin. He stomped over to me, his fists as big as paving stones. "You nutcase! I'll kick your head in." I jumped off the table, stood right in front of him, smelled the garlic from his mouth, and growled, "Then kick, boy. But before you do, listen to how I not only conquered the swamp, but married it."

Silence. The crowd held its breath. I grinned. "Yes," I said, "I married the swamp. I put a horsehair ring on his finger. We had a wedding night, deep, dirty, and slippery like nothing on earth. And in the morning he spat me out again because he knew I was too much of a man for him."

That tore the hut apart. Laughter, yelling, clapping. Even the ox stood there, his mouth open, unsure whether to kill me or make up a lie of his own. I slapped him on the chest so hard he staggered back. "Sit down, friend. Drink. Today you're my best man."

The crowd roared, the ox finally grinned, and the fight was over before it began. That's the power of hyperbole: It hits harder than any fist if you throw enough dirt and fire at it.

The tavern was no longer an inn—it was a swamp, a quagmire of beer, sweat, blood, and stories. The tables were sticky, the benches overturned, men lay like

corpses in the puddles, women giggled with torn aprons, and the dog ate bread from the counter as if he'd seen it all a hundred times before.

I stood in the middle of it all, glass raised like a damned general. "Look at you, you drunks, you scumbags, you five-copper-piece heroes—you were all in the moor with me!" And they shouted back: "Yes, Baron, yes! We did it too!"

One crawled on all fours across the floor, splashing around in the beer, and yelled, "Pull me out, Baron, pull me out!" I pulled him up by the collar, laughed in his red face, and yelled, "You're saved, son—but be careful you don't slip in again tomorrow!" The crowd roared.

At some point, there was no more beer. Only mugs rattling like empty skulls. The landlord cursed, sweated, but still grinned, knowing: Today he'd made more sales than on any market day. I leaned on the bar, dripping, grinning, my tongue heavy, my eyes glazed over, and murmured, "Pour more." "All empty," he groaned. I raised my glass, stared into the void, and said, "Then pour me a story. The rest will follow."

And that's when I knew: I wasn't just out of the swamp. I was the damn swamp. I was mud and blood and madness in human form. Everyone who saw me knew: You can drown—or you can tell.

With this thought in mind, I staggered out into the night. The moon stood high, large, fat, white as a gnawed bone. My horse was waiting outside, still dirty, still faithful. I patted his neck. "See, lad? We're still standing. And as long as we're standing, there's beer. And as long as there's beer, there are stories. Cheers."

We trudged off, both swaying like two drunks. But we stood our ground. And that was more than the swamp ever wanted.

The morning after the moor. I woke up in a haystack behind the inn, my head buzzing like a cannon, my ears filled with buzzing, as if a thousand bees had built a nest in my brain. The horse stood beside me, its eyes tired, its coat still caked with mud. We both looked like two piles of shit with legs attached.

I tried to stand up—wrong way. My stomach lurched forward, I spat into the haystack, and the chickens fluttered away squawking. The taste? Beer, sweat, death. But I grinned anyway, because I knew: every vomit is just a sign that you've lived.

A few children stood there, staring at me with wide eyes. "Are you the Baron?" one asked. I wiped my mouth, stinking of bile and mud, and nodded. "Yes, I'm the bastard who punched the swamp in the face." The children squealed, ran away, shouting, "The Baron has defeated the swamp!"

See? That's how it works. You vomit hay, you stink worse than a pigpen—and yet you're still a legend because someone else tells the story.

I hobbled back to the tavern. The door hung crooked, the floor was sticky, and men lay everywhere like dead fish, their mouths open, their eyes rolled back. This wasn't just a hangover anymore—it was a mass grave of drunkenness. I stepped over a farmer who was wheezing as if he were going through the swamp again in his sleep. I lightly kicked him in the side. "Get up, lad. We're still alive. And as long as we're alive, the swamp loses."

He just groaned, but I knew he'd tell me later. And each time, the swamp grew larger. Deeper. More dangerous. And I became even more immortal.

Because that's exactly the trick: Exaggerations never die from a hangover. They only grow. Your head buzzes, your stomach churns, but the lie lives on, strong as an ox.

So I stood there, swaying, stinking, half dead. But I stood. And that's enough.

Listen to me, you pathetic drunkards, you doubters, you little crawlers in the mud of everyday life: I'm still standing. Why? Because I'm too stupid to give up and too stubborn to die.

The swamp wanted me. It sucked at my legs, it whispered in my ears, it wanted my horse, my bones, my skin. But I pulled back. I bit, I laughed, I pulled myself out of the mud by the scruff of my neck. No God, no devil, no angels—just me, my hair, and my damned will to tell one more story.

And that's precisely the point: I don't live to live. I live to tell stories. I don't stop because my body is so strong. I stop because I haven't blurted out the punchline yet. Death may wait, but it only waits because it wants to know how the next lie ends.

And the beer? That's just the fuel. The mud? Just the scenery. The world? A pile of crap that you keep dumping stories on until it shines like gold.

So, why am I still standing? Because I can. Because I must. Because otherwise you would have nothing but your bland bread, your dry water, your lousy truth.

I give you the intoxication, even when the glass is empty. I give you victory, even when I'm half dead. I give you the legend that is greater than death.

And as long as I give them to you, as long as you eat them, I am the Baron—not in the swamp, not in the filth, but in your midst. Immortal, impudent, invincible.

Cheers.

Fallen from the moon because the pub was already full

You wouldn't believe how empty the sky is when you're perched up there. No pubs, no women, no beer. Just dust, cold, and a few stars that pretend to shine, but in reality, they're just as cold and dead as the fish on yesterday's plate.

I was there once. On the moon. Yes, laugh all you miserable mug-slingers. But I tell you: The way was easier than the walk home from the tavern after ten mugs. A firm pull on my horse's reins, a good run-up, and whoosh—we were flying high, higher and higher, until the wind screamed and the earth shrank, like a beer mat on a table.

And there I sat. On the moon. I swear, I took off my boots, dug my toes into the dust, and the manure was so dry that even the innkeeper would have said, "Boy, you won't get a drop out of this." No barrel, no decanter, not even a damn puddle. Just dryness.

There you sit, looking down at the Earth, and what do you see? A globe full of wine and beer, full of taverns and women, full of voices yelling, "Baron, tell us another one!" And up on the moon you sit, your throat dry as a pyre, and no one refills your glass.

So, what else was left for me to do? I had to go down. But not just like that. No. I stared at the Earth, saw a tavern glowing below like a beacon, heard the voices already roaring through space. And I knew: If I go down now, I'll go straight there.

I grabbed the moonstone I was sitting on, ripped it out of the ground, and threw it to the earth. "Wait for me, you bastards!" I yelled, "I'm coming!" Then I jumped after him. Head first, boots flapping, the horse neighing beside me like a comet.

We raced down, through stars, through clouds, our eyes watering, our asses burning, and finally –*BAM!*– I crashed into the courtyard right in front of the tavern. Dust, sparks, smoke. I stood up, dusted off my pants, and screamed: "I fell because the sky had nothing left to drink!"

The door opened, faces peered out. "Baron, you look like you fell from the moon." I grinned. "I did. But your damned room was already full, so I had to come in through the roof."

And I did. I didn't kick in the door. No, I jumped through the roof. Straw and beams flew, jugs tipped over, women shrieked, men laughed. I stood in the middle of the tavern, smelling of smoke and stardust, and shouted: "Pour out, you dogs! The moon has nothing, but you have everything!"

And they poured. Of course. Because who wouldn't want to drink with someone who just fell from the moon?

The beams were still crooked, the roof was dripping dust, and people stared at me like I was a miracle or a madman—which is basically the same thing. I brushed the dirt off my jacket, grabbed the first jug, and lifted it up:

"Listen, you landlubbers! I just fell off the moon, and all because you still had a light on and the moon didn't have any beer! If I'm going to die of thirst, I'd rather die in your company."

Laughter, jeers, a few "Cheers!" I took a long drag, let the foam run over my lips, and grinned. "There's nothing up there. No women, no dice, no pub. Just holes. And the holes are so big you could stick your head in and still have room for your damn worries."

Someone shouted, "What were you eating, Baron?" I banged on the table. "Eaten? I was nibbling on stars, my friend! Hard as granite, but with an aftertaste of pepper and despair. And I drank my own sweat. It didn't taste good, but it was warm."

The inn exploded with laughter. An old woman with more wrinkles than the moon itself snarled, "Stop it, boy, you're lying!" I bent down, stared at her, and said, "Of course I'm lying, old woman. But if I don't lie, you'll die tomorrow from telling the truth."

She fell silent. The whole house laughed even louder. One jumped up and shouted, "Tell me, Baron, how did you get back?" I stood with my legs wide apart, drummed my chest, and yelled, "I saw the Earth, your tavern glowing like

a lantern, and I jumped! Through the sky, through the clouds, right here. Just barely missed the sun, and it burned my ass—can't you smell it?"

And they smelled. Not the moon, of course, but just my sweat and dust. But they swore it was sunfire.

Here's how it's done: You come dripping wet off the roof, and ten minutes later they're drinking with you like you were the first man in space.

The tavern was boiling, the people were roaring, and I knew: Now is the time to blow the story up so much that even the stars turn red. So I put down the jug, spread my arms, and said:

"You think I was alone up there? Wrong. I opened the first damn bar on the moon."

Silence. All heads turned toward me, eyes as wide as wheel shields. Then the first roars. "A pub? On the moon?" I nodded. "Yes, sir. I dug out the craters until they became a cellar. I swept up stardust, baked bread from it, and for the drinks—well, I scraped the dew from the stars. Sweeter than your beer, stronger than your liquor."

The inn erupted. Someone yelled, "And the guests, Baron? Were there guests?" I laughed, threw the rest in my face, and screamed, "Of course! The stars themselves! Little glowing bastards, they floated in, burned my ceiling, but they drank like they were my best friends. One of them sang, a song so off-key that the moon itself wobbled. And I sang along until my throat spat fire."

People clapped, stomped, some even jumped onto the tables as if they wanted to go straight to the moon. An old man yelled, "Then why did you come back, Baron, if it was so wonderful up there?"

I leaned forward, raised my finger, and growled: "Because even the moon was full at some point. The tavern up there was bursting at the seams. And I thought to myself: If I'm going to get kicked out drunk anywhere, at least it's down here, with you idiots."

Laughter, jeers, mugs raised, beer poured over their beards. The truth? Screw it. I'd brought the moon down into their glasses, and now every sip tasted like starfire.

It wasn't long before the crowd began to lose control. That's how it always is: First they laugh at the Baron, then they laugh with him, and in the end they swear upside down that they had experienced it all themselves.

A farmer with a face as red as a tomato yelled, "Baron, now that you mention it—I was up there too! I sat next to you, on the crater, and we grilled stars together!" The people laughed, but I nodded seriously, as if he were my brother in space. "Right, you bastard. You were there. You put the first star skewer on the grill. It stank like hell, but we ate it."

Another, thin, with teeth like a worn rake, jumped onto the table: "Baron, I remember! We played cards with the stars. They cheated, the bastards, but you beat them until they spewed sparks!" I slapped him on the shoulder so hard he almost fell off the table. "Right! You counted the aces, I counted the stars, and we both won."

And so it got crazier and crazier. Suddenly, twenty men had been on the moon with me, all of them swore it, all of them shouted it, everyone embellished the story. One claimed he'd tasted the moon wine—"so sweet I was blind for three days, but the women still found me!"—and the crowd roared with laughter.

You see, that's exactly the cool thing: A lie is like an empty jug—if you pass it around long enough, everyone will fill it with their own shit. And suddenly you have an ocean that everyone wants to drown in.

In the end, there we stood, twenty guys, drunk, shouting, all convinced they had fallen from the moon with me because the bar up there was already full.

And you know what? Screw whether it was true. For that moment, it was truer than anything waiting out in the fields.

The crowd roared, every second person already more on the ground than on their feet, and I knew: Now was the moment to put on the crown. I raised my mug, swayed, grinned, and roared:

"You think you have strong beer here? Listen! I drank moon wine—thicker than blood, sweeter than sin, so strong it once twisted my guts out. But you know what?"

Silence. Everyone looked at me like disciples waiting for their prophet's final words. I grinned even wider.

"Your beer down here packs more punch than any drop from the moon! Up there, you'll just go blind. Down here, you'll become immortal!"

The pub exploded. Mugs flew, beer spilled, and a guy slammed his hand on the table so hard that half the barroom shook. One fell backward off his chair and shouted, "Cheers to the earth, the better pub!"

I laughed, drank, wiped the foam from my beard, and added: "The moon wine makes you light, makes you float, makes you believe you're a god. But your beer here—it makes you heavy, it makes you real. It makes you puke, it makes you scream, it makes you fight and fuck and keep drinking until you drop. That's real life! No star can beat that."

They howled, laughed, and screamed. Some stood on the tables and shouted, "Down with the moon! Up with the tavern!" Others held on to the walls because the floor swayed like a ship in a storm.

And me? I stood there like a king who had just declared the Earth itself a goddess. I knew I could have told them I had impregnated the moon and left stars as bastards—they would have eaten it. But sometimes it's enough to twist the truth so that it tastes sweeter than any lie.

I raised the jug again and shouted, "The moon is empty, but down here you're full. Cheers, you swine!"

And they toasted, shouted, laughed – until no one knew whether we were standing in the tavern or floating in space together again.

It was as if someone had poured the entire Milky Way into our mugs. The steam from the beer hung so thickly in the air that you could almost see stars in it. And then it happened: The first one actually climbed onto the roof.

A skinny fellow, his shirt stained, his eyes glassy like two extinguished lanterns, pulled himself up on the beam, stumbled over the heads of the others, and yelled, "I'm coming with you, Baron! Back to the moon!" The crowd went wild. "Yes! Up! Up!" they screamed, and two more idiots climbed after him, tipping over jugs, tearing off their boots as if they were about to take off.

I stood there, saw the chaos, and laughed so hard my lungs almost burst. "You bastards! You can't even pee straight, and you want to go to the moon?" But that didn't stop them. One actually stood on the ridge of the roof, arms outstretched, yelled, "Look! I'm jumping and flying!" – and then crashed headfirst into the dung heap in front of the house.

Silence for a moment. Then the laughter erupted, so loud that the chickens in the yard cackled hysterically. The man scrambled to his feet, his head full of straw and shit, and yelled, "Moon dust! I touched the moon dust!" And the people ate it. They really believed it.

That's how it is: Give them enough beer and a story, and they'll climb your roof like it's a ladder to space. I raised my mug, grinned broadly, and shouted: "Come on, you heroes! Climb, jump, fly! But remember: Whoever tastes the moon wine must also drink the dung heap!"

The tavern shook as if it were about to take off. Someone was crying, someone was singing, someone was vomiting in the corner. And I stood in the middle of it all, knowing: I didn't even need to lie anymore. They were lying for me now, better, louder, more beautifully than I ever could have.

And that's when I realized: The moon isn't up there. The moon is here, in the booze, the smoke, the laughter, the dirt. And damn it, I was its first host.

The night had long since turned. There were no more farmers, no women, no poor dogs with tired faces—no, there were astronauts, space travelers, heroes of the filth. Everyone staggered as if weightless, every reach for the mug was an orbit, every sip a damned rocket launch.

One lay on the floor, flailing his arms and screaming, "I'm floating! I'm floating!" Another stood on a table, swaying, almost falling, but yelled, "Look, I'm a star! I'm shining!"—and peed, beaming, into an empty jug. People laughed, howled, and roared as if he had just performed a miracle.

I stood in the middle, legs wide apart, grinning, and shouted, "You think I fell from the moon? No! The moon fell here, right in the middle of your damned tavern!" They screamed, they raged, they raised their mugs, and suddenly everything was one: the ground sticky like crater dust, the smoke heavy like cosmic clouds, the laughter louder than any thunder.

I lifted the jug, poured the rest over my head, and shouted, "Look around you, you pigs! The earth, the moon, the stars—it's all just one giant bar, and we're its only customers! We drink, we lie, we vomit—and as long as we do that, the sky keeps turning!"

The crowd roared, stamped its feet, one beat a drum from a barrel, others staggered around each other like planets about to collide. A woman threw her arms around my neck and whispered, "Baron, if you really came from the

moon, then take me back with you." I laughed, smelled her breath of liquor and sweat, and growled, "Darling, the moon is already here. We sleep on it, we vomit on it, we love on it."

And in that moment she believed it. They all believed it. The moon was no longer up. The moon was a state. And we were all its damned children.

The sky outside turned gray as the last lights in the tavern went out. No more singing, no more cheering, no more laughter—only the faint gasps of the vanquished. They lay everywhere: on the tables, under the tables, in the dung heap in front of the door. Men, women, dogs—everything was a single heap of rubble. It looked as if a meteorite had struck and dragged the tavern down into hell with it.

One snored so loudly that the rafters shook. Another had buried his head in a jug and was wheezing bubbles like a dying fish. The woman who had wanted to take me was lying across two chairs, murmuring in her sleep: "Baron... more wine... more stars..."

I was still standing. Shaky, my legs heavy as lead, but I was standing. The horse outside neighed softly, as if to say, "Enough, you fool. Time to destroy the next place."

I stepped over the bodies, through beer, vomit, and ash, and stepped out the door. The morning was cool, the sky brightened, and I saw the sun slowly creeping over the fields. I laughed, coughed, spat in the dust, and muttered, "The bar was packed. So I fell from the moon. Screw it."

I swung myself onto my horse, still stinking of smoke and stars, and rode off. Behind me lay an inn that looked like a battlefield. In front of me lay the next one, ready to suffer the same fate.

And so you ride on: from the moon, from the dung heap, from every story, always with the next lie in your luggage. Because when the rooms are full, you simply have to come through the roof. That's the law. That's my law.

The cannonball as a mount

Listen up, you pathetic bar-sitters, you always think the wildest horse is the greatest adventure. Forget the nags. Forget the stubborn creatures that kick

you more than they carry you. The real steed bangs, hisses, screams, and if you're unlucky, it rips you to pieces in the air like old wrapping paper. I'm talking about the cannonball.

Yes, you heard right. I did it. I soared like a damn angel with an iron ass, and my wings were nothing but smoke and gunpowder.

It started, as so often does, in a tavern. A few soldiers were squatting there, faces red from the liquor, tongues loose as old ropes. They talked about the great battle, about powder kegs and cannons that blew away entire castles. I listened, grinned, and thought: Castles are all well and good, but what about me? If a bullet like that can shatter a wall, it can take my damn ass, too.

So I said it, amidst the laughter: "I'll ride the next cannonball you load." Silence. The soldiers stared as if I'd shit in their soup. Then the laughter erupted. "Baron, you're crazy." "Baron, you're drunk." And I grinned: "Both. And that's exactly what makes me faster than any bullet."

They thought I was bluffing. I never bluff—except always. The next morning we stood outside, fog hanging over the field, cannons as big as barn doors. The guys still had beer in their heads, but enough sanity left to pronounce me dead before I'd even set foot in the stirrups—only this time it wasn't stirrups, but the cold iron of a bullet that smelled of blood even before it was fired.

I swung myself onto it, riding the bullet like a damned bull. The soldiers screamed, cursed, prayed. One vomited in the dirt before the fuse lit. I laughed, broad, full of teeth, the air cold, my throat hot. "Fire!" I yelled.

And then it started.

The fuse hissed, a brief shower of sparks, and then –**BAM!**
The cannon roared like an angry god opening its mouth to swallow the world. The earth shook, the soldiers ducked, and I flew.

No horse, no cart, no woman has ever thrown me so hard. My ass clung to the cold iron, my fingers clinging like the thighs of a lover you never want to let go of. The sky ripped open. Smoke, sparks, the smell of sulfur in my nose – and I laughed. I laughed like a madman because there was no turning back.

The wind whipped my face, my eyes watered, my beard fluttered like a flagpole in a storm. I saw the earth beneath me, the forests, the villages, tiny as toys. And I thought: "Baron, if you fall now, at least do it in such a way that people will be talking about your impact for a hundred years."

And the sound—holy shit. The bullet howled, whistled, and screeched, and my heart pounded like a second cannon in my chest. Every breath was gunpowder, every thought a splinter.

And yet it was nicer than being sober.

So there I was, sitting on a piece of iron that was flying faster than any thought, and I swear to you: in a moment like that, you start to take your whole damn life apart.

I thought of the bars, the smell of beer, the taste of cheap wine on a stranger's tongue. I thought of the nights I swore I'd quit tomorrow, only to sink twice as deep into the glass the next day. I thought of the lies—my best friends. Because without them, I'd be nothing. Just a stinking, half-drunk soldier in the dirt.

But with the lies? With the lies, you'll fly on cannonballs. With the lies, you'll be immortal.

The wind ripped the words from my mouth, but I screamed anyway: "Do you hear that, you bastards down there? I'm riding death! And he carries me like a king!"

The bullet hissed, the sky howled, and I knew: If I were to shatter into a thousand pieces, at least I'd shatter into pieces so that people would say, "The Baron? He was so crazy, he rode death."

And I laughed. Laughed until my head nearly burst, until tears streamed down my cheeks, mixed with soot and ash. It was madness. It was freedom. It was the only time I felt truly alive.

The bullet sped on, and I swear to you, every beat of my heart felt like it was going to blow me off the iron. My fingers were numb, my legs numb, my whole damn body just a flag in the wind, ready to rip off at any moment.

At one point, I almost slipped. My ass slid on the round iron, and I hung there, clinging to the edge with only two fingers. Below, the world, small and indifferent; above, the sky, cold as a grave. I could have screamed, but I gritted my teeth and thought, "If you fall now, Baron, you'll be just a speck in the field. If you stay, you'll be a legend."

So I held on. Not with muscle, not with intellect—with pure defiance. With the same stubborn madness with which I enter every tavern, tell every lie, and kiss every woman who should know better.

And in the midst of my mortal fear, I started laughing. Not because it was funny—but because I imagined myself telling the story in the next bar. "Yes, friends," I would say, "there I was, hanging two fingers from the edge, death below me, life above me—and I spat in death's mouth before I rode on."

The bullet howled, the wind roared, and I swore to myself: Even if I shattered, history would survive. And that was enough.

At some point, the sky became empty. Just me, the ball, the wind. And then the clouds came. Big, fat, white creatures, hanging there like drunken angels who'd forgotten to go home.

I rode right into the middle of it, and the fog slapped my face, cold and wet, like a barmaid spilling beer over your head because you once again had your fingers where they shouldn't be. I yelled, "Well, you wet bastards! Are you just decoration, or do you also have booze in your stomach?"

The clouds rumbled, thunder rolled like a grumpy innkeeper bringing the bill. I laughed: "Sure, so you have thunder wine. But I'll still drink faster, you bastards!"

And then the birds. A flock of geese flew by, honking, with faces so silly I almost felt sorry for them. "Well, you bastards," I shouted, "wouldn't you like to join me? We could open a bar in heaven together!" The geese honked more wildly, fluttering away as if they'd seen the devil himself.

I grinned, spat in the face of the wind, and thought: Yeah, damn it. Even up here, on a ball of iron, among clouds and birds—I'm still in a tavern. The customers change, but the company remains the same: a bunch of idiots telling each other stories.

And the Baron? I was the narrator. I was always the narrator. Even when the table was a damn cannonball.

At some point, after all the thunder, smoke, and screaming, I noticed: The bullet was slowing down. No more hissing like a wild pig, but just a deep, tired wheeze. And I thought, "Shit. Now things are getting serious."

Because you know, as long as that thing is beating you around like the devil, you don't think. You scream, you laugh, you cling on. But when it slows down—when you hear the silence—then thoughts start to creep in.

I felt my ass getting warmer and warmer on the iron, how the ball began to tremble as if it were drunk itself. And I knew: the crash was coming soon. I looked down. Forests, villages, fields – everything closer, everything sharper. No more dream, no more legend. Just earth. Hard, dirty earth.

And then, sheer fear gripped me. Briefly. Very briefly. A small, nasty pang in my stomach, like the first sip of bad wine. But I didn't let it. I grinned, growled, and said loudly, "Baron, stop it, you're not a victim. You're the guy who writes stories, not the footnote."

So I did what any self-respecting idiot would do: I rummaged through my coat for the bottle I'd stolen that morning. A leftover bottle of cheap brandy. I unscrewed it while riding the ball, took a swig that burned my tongue, and yelled, "If I'm going to fall, I'm not going to fall sober!"

And I swear to you – the brandy burned more than the entire flight.

And then it went down. No glamour, no romance, no heroic shit. Down like a stone, down like a drunk who misses the stairs.

The wind ripped the breath from my lungs, and the earth rose up like a drunken brawl you can't avoid. I saw the trees, the roofs, the fields—everything rushing toward me. And I thought, "That's it, Baron. Soon you'll just be a hole in the field, and the pigs will piss over your grave."

But you know what? I dug out the bottle anyway. A drop of brandy, warm from the flight, stale like the last drop of beer after a three-day drinking binge. I ripped it open, gulped it down, and it burned so hard that tears welled up in my eyes.

And I laughed. I laughed as the world crashed toward me. "Come on, you whore of an Earth! Come on! Smash me! But I'm not going sober!"

The ground screamed, the bullet hissed, my skull pounded. Everything vibrated. And for a moment—just one damned, holy moment—I felt like the king of all idiots.

No one has lived as stupidly as I have. No one has flown as drunk as I have. No one will come down as badly as I have.

And that is exactly enough.

The impact came like a punch from God himself. A blow that wanted to drive my bones through my skin, that wanted to split my skull, that wanted to pull my soul out of my ass. The bullet pierced the earth, hissed, crashed, and tore a furrow into the field as if the devil himself were plowing.

I flew forward, somersaulted, and slammed into the ground, once, twice, three times. Each impact was a drumroll on my ribs. Dust, dirt, blood—all in my mouth. I tasted earth, gunpowder, and the remnants of brandy that came up.

And then—silence. I lay there, somewhere in a hole, half-buried, half-dead. The birds circled above me, the trees bent as if to whisper, "The idiot actually did it."

And you know what? I laughed. A dry, hoarse, sick laugh that tore my throat apart. I rolled to the side, pulled myself up, staggered, spat out blood and dirt, and stood. Stood!

The soldiers who had fired the bullet ran forward, their mouths open, their eyes wide. One screamed, "He's alive! Holy crap, he's alive!" I stood there, bloodied, swaying, and grinned. "Of course I'm alive, you bastards. I'm the Baron. I ride bullets, and bullets don't ride me."

And then I almost fell over again because the blood was running from my forehead into my eyes. But I held on, laughing again, louder, dirtier. "Keep this in mind, you bastards: I rode the sky and landed on my feet."

And they believed it. Of course they believed it.

So I trudged on. Every step creaked like a broken bone, my skull pounded worse than any drum in war. The blood dried on my face, the dirt clung to me like a second skin. I was a wreck, but a damn wreck who could walk.

And there it was: the tavern. A crooked house on the edge of the village, windows filled with smoke, voices filled with beer. I pushed open the door – and the conversations fell silent.

There I stood, bleeding, stinking, with my clothes in tatters, as if I'd just crawled out of hell. And maybe I had. I grinned broadly, with bloody teeth, and said, "Good evening. I just stepped off a cannonball. Where's my beer?"

Silence. A few mouths were open, eyes wide. Then the laughter erupted. No one knew whether I was lying or shouting the truth. But it didn't matter. They believed it because they wanted to believe it.

The innkeeper placed the largest jug he could find in front of me. I took it, lifted it up, and shouted, "To the heavens that rode me, and to the earth that would have devoured me—if I hadn't been faster!"

And they roared. They cheered. And out of my fall, out of my almost certain death, I made a legend that was even louder than the shot itself.

Because that's how it works, you dogs: It's not about what really happens. It's about who ends up telling the story with the jug in their hand.

The jug was empty, the second one too, the third half-full—and the tavern was buzzing as if I'd shot a cannonball straight through the ceiling. Everyone wanted to hear it, everyone wanted to believe it, and everyone wanted a sip of the legend.

I stood up, staggering, the beer in my stomach, the blood still in my face, and raised the fourth mug. "Listen, you bastards," I said, "I've flown through the sky. I've eaten the clouds, chased the geese away, grabbed death by the ass. And you know what I've learned?"

Silence. Everyone stared, even the barman paused. I grinned, felt the beer loosen my tongue, and yelled:

"Heaven is nothing but a giant bar! Full of smoke, full of noise, full of idiots who don't know when to call it a night. And you know what? I'm a regular! I sit right at the front, right at the bar, and the bartender's name is God—and he has just as shitty wine as you!"

People exploded with laughter, with jeers, with cheers. Mugs flew, beer flowed, someone fell off their stool, but no one stopped laughing.

And me? I drank. I drank until heaven and earth mingled, until the beer hissed like gunpowder in my veins, until I knew: The bullet was only the beginning. The end is always in the glass.

A deer with a cherry tree in its skull

I swear to you, I've seen a lot of shit—men stuffing their guts into their boots, women dancing with knives between their teeth, even a priest who said mass

on Sundays and spilled the communion wine in a brothel on Mondays. But the stag? The stag was the crowning glory.

It was early morning, or late at night—who knows? My head was heavy, my stomach empty, my throat dry as an old field. I stumbled through the woods because the tavern had finally closed, and I was looking for a place to vomit or sleep, whichever came first.

Then I heard it. A crack, a roar, heavy and deep, like the roar of a damned king. I thought it was the forest itself mocking me. But then it stepped out: a stag, as big as a damned horse, its eyes red, its antlers so mighty you'd have thought it had pried the sky itself.

And in those antlers—no, I'm not lying, even if you think so—grew a cherry tree. A real, cursed cherry tree, full of red fruit that glistened like fresh wounds.

I stood there, mouth open, knees weak, and thought, "Baron, either you've finally lost your mind, or the forest has sent you its own inn."

The stag stared at me. We stood there, two drunks meeting at dawn. I raised my hand in greeting. "Good evening, Your Majesty." He bellowed, and I swear it sounded like a roar from a tavern: "What are you staring at, you miserable bum?"

So I did the only thing that made sense: I reached for a cherry.

I reached for the cherry, plucked it from the branch growing in the middle of the antlers, and popped it into my mouth. Sweet, juicy, with a dash of madness. I chewed, and the juice ran down my lips, red as blood, and I thought, "Holy shit, this is the best thing I've had in weeks."

The stag bellowed, stamping its hooves so hard the ground shook. Its eyes blazed as if it wanted to impale me. I grinned at it, cherry juice in my beard, and said, "Calm down, my friend. You've got enough fruit up there, and my liver desperately needs fruit."

He lowered his head, his antlers like a damned throne full of fruit, and snorted. Me? I reached for the next cherry. And another. And another.

The deer took a step toward me, heavy, powerful, every step a thunderous roar. I took a step too—but not back. Forward. With a mixture of a longing for death and a craving for more cherries.

"Come on," I growled, "either you impale me now or we drink together. There's no other way."

The stag paused, its mouth snorting, its nostrils flaring. Then it did something I'll never forget: It shook its antlers, and a whole torrent of cherries rained down. Into my arms, my face, into the dirt.

And I knew: That wasn't a threat. That was a fucking toast.

The cherries lay around me, thick and heavy, as if heaven itself had opened its fruit store. I stuffed my cheeks full, the juice sticking to my beard and dripping down my shirt. I looked like I'd just crawled out of a massacre, but it tasted divine.

The stag stood there, massive, its antlers in the morning light, staring at me. There was that glint in its eyes—not anger, not hatred. No, it was the same emptiness I see in every mirror after the last bottle is empty. The look of a drinker who knows he's already in too deep, but can't stop.

So I raised my mug—yes, I still had the rest of the beer from the night before—and shouted, "To you, you proud bastard!" The stag stamped its hooves as if it were a toast.

I downed the rest, feeling the barley juice hit the cherries in my stomach—a mixture even the devil in his hell wouldn't have brewed. And the deer? He shook his damned antlers once more. Even more cherries fell.

I swear he laughed. Not loudly, not humanly—but that roar, that deep, vibrating rumble, that was laughter. And there we stood: a half-dead baron with a beer beard and blood cherries in his mouth, and a stag using his fruit-filled skull like a beer tap.

The forest around us rustled, swayed, and staggered. And I knew: This wasn't a hunt. This was a damn tavern. And we were both regulars.

At some point it became clear to me: This couldn't end like this. Two drunks in the woods, one with horns full of fruit, the other with a liver that's been working at its limit for years—that calls for a duel.

I wiped the juice from my beard, took a step closer, and snarled, "Come on, Bambi on steroids. We'll settle this. No sword, no gun—just cherries. Whoever pukes first loses."

The stag pawed the ground. A dull growl echoed through his throat, deep as a drumbeat. And I swear, he understood me. He tilted his head so that the branches cracked, and a handful of cherries fell right in front of my boots. Challenge accepted.

So off we went. I stuffed cherries into my mouth, five, six at a time. Sweet, sticky, a sea of juice. The deer tore off entire branches with its tongue, smacking, snorting, and bellowing as if it had found its own barrel. We stared at each other as we ate like two pigs fighting over the last manger.

The forest fell silent. No birds, no rustling. Only the smacking, the roaring, my swallowing, his stomping. A contest fiercer than any battle.

After the third handful of cherries, I was staggering, my stomach full, my throat sticky. I downed the last of my liquor to make room and yelled, "Ha! That's training, you antlered beast!"

The deer snorted, tossed its head so that the cherries rained down on me like hail, and continued chewing undeterred. And I knew: This isn't an animal. This is a damn drunk.

After a while, it became clear: eating cherries alone wasn't enough. A new level was needed. I chewed, spat out the stones, and suddenly,*click*in my head.I tightened my lips, aimed – and*whistle*! The kernel shot out like a miniature cannonball, directly into the trunk of a nearby birch tree. "Ha!" I yelled, "now we have war, you antler-barreled idiot!"

The deer reacted immediately. He shook his damned cherry antlers, and a whole load of fruit rained down on me. Thick, red bombs that ripped my hat off and soaked my skull. I staggered back, sticky, but laughing like a madman. "Well, if you bombard me, I'll shoot back!"

I chewed, spat, chewed, spat—the kernels flew in volleys, like a machine gun, from my mouth. One hit the deer right in the forehead. It shook, stamped, and bellowed as if I had insulted it.

The forest vibrated. Birds flew away screeching, as if afraid to wander into the middle of this bar fight. I stood there, half-naked, shirt open, cherry juice all over my chest and stomach, spitting out pits like bullets. The deer stamped, shook, and rained cherries like a damned tree in a frenzy.

It wasn't a duel anymore. It was a damned battle. Fruit against bone, juice against sweat, baron against nature.

And deep down, I knew: This was bigger than any cannonball. This was a war no human should ever win. But I wasn't human either. I was the Baron.

It wasn't long before the forest looked like someone had blown up a fruit market. Cherries were everywhere, burst, mushy, and sticky. The ants cheered, the birds swooped down like vultures to snatch the leftovers, while we two idiots continued to fight each other.

I spat out seeds, my lips sore, my belly bloated like a wineskin. The stag swayed, its antlers heavy with bare branches, its flanks trembling. We looked at each other—two warriors, battered, sweaty, sticky, completely spent.

I stumbled forward, wanting to fire one last salvo, but all I could manage was a pitiful*pop*over my lips. The kernel rolled limply to the floor. I laughed, dryly and hoarsely. "Shit... that's probably it."

The stag bellowed once more, deep, tired, almost like a sigh. Then it slumped to its knees. Not dead, not defeated—just finished. Just like me. I let myself fall into the sap and mud, spreading my arms as if I were lying in a bath of blood and wine. The world spun, and I grinned at the sky.

“Tie, you bastard,” I muttered, “Tie.”

And as the sun pierced through the trees, the forest smelled of alcohol, blood, and fruit. It was as if nature itself had opened a bar—and we two were its first victims.

I lay there, soaking wet with cherry juice, the flies already approaching, the sun pounding on my skull. My stomach was as full as a barrel, my head as empty as a cherry pit. Next to me was the stag, the bastard, breathing heavily, steam from its nostrils, its antlers covered in red residue like a poorly decorated chandelier.

I turned my head and looked into his eyes. There was no more hatred, no more threat—just that tired, glassy gleam. The same look I see in the mirror when I wake up after a binge: the look of someone who knows they've overdone it, but who's going to start again as soon as they can stand.

"Well, friend?" I murmured. "We almost killed each other... just to drink. Sounds like a damn friendship, don't you think?"

The stag bellowed softly, almost a growl, in response. I laughed, coughed, spat out a few kernels that were still stuck in my throat, and turned on my side. I

leaned halfway against its warm body, the way you lean against the person next to you in a pub when the bench is too narrow.

And so we lay there. A baron who no longer knew how many bottles he'd emptied in his life. And a stag with a cherry tree in his skull who was just as screwed as I was.

Two warriors, two idiots, two drinking buddies. The forest around us was silent. The sun flickered through the leaves. And we fell asleep as if we'd just saved the world—but all we'd done was eat fruit until we were sick.

I woke up one day, sticky, smelly, with a tongue in my mouth that felt like an old leather rag. My head was pounding, my stomach was a ticking time bomb, and my clothes were so soaked with juice and dirt that I looked like a walking compost heap.

Next to me was the deer. He was already standing, wobbly, his antlers covered in shredded twigs, his eyes dull. He looked like a guy after three days of a bar fight—bruised, but alive. We looked at each other, and for a moment there was a kind of respect. No heroism, no romance, just two idiots who knew: We survived, even though we shouldn't have.

I stood up, stumbled, wiped the juice from my face, and spat out blood and seeds. "That was nice, bastard," I said hoarsely, "but I think we better not drink together anymore. We'll really kill ourselves otherwise."

The stag bellowed softly, turned around, and disappeared into the forest. No drama, no goodbye, no fairy tale. Just gone. And I was left behind, sticky, stinking, with a story in my stomach that was worth more than any treasure.

So I staggered off. Toward the village, toward the tavern. I knew what to do. They were all sitting there: farmers, drunkards, women, children, clinging to their skirts. And I slammed the door open, spread my arms, and yelled:

“I drank with a deer that had a cursed cherry tree in its skull – and I won!”

Of course they stared, of course they laughed, and of course no one believed a word. But you know what? It didn't matter. I had the story. And as long as I held the jug, I was the only king who mattered.

The wolves that ate my sled – and I ate them back

It was winter, a really dirty kind. The kind of winter that freezes your nose off before you can even say "schnapps." The snow was meters deep, the air so sharp it scratched your lungs. I was crouching on a sled, wrapped in furs that smelled more of dead animal than warmth, and my horses panted in front of me as if they were just as reluctant to travel as I was.

And then I heard it. First a cracking in the snow, then a howl that cut through the night like a knife through a bar when the mood changes. Wolves. Not one, not two – an entire pack, hungry, greedy, their eyes like little bottles of embers.

They came closer, faster, faster, and my horses snorted in panic, their hooves pawed, the sleigh shook. I yelled, "Forward, you lazy bastards! Or the wolves will eat us all!" But horses are like drunken buddies: Once they're afraid, they won't run, they just collapse.

So it was clear: one of us would be eaten. Either her – or me.

The first ones were already jumping, fur, teeth, screaming. I reached for the rifle, but my fingers were too stiff, the trigger jammed. I had nothing but a knife and my damn hunger.

And then madness hit me, that old friend who always comes when the world is nothing but dirt. I roared back, jumped off the sled, and straight into the pack. Fur, blood, snow—a single whirlpool. I hacked, bit, and hit. And yes, I swear on every glass, I bit back. I tasted wolf in my mouth, warm, metallic, like a steak straight from the fire.

The beasts howled, tore, and scratched, but I was worse. The snow turned red, my hands were nothing but clumps of blood and fur. And at some point—silence. Only my panting breath and my mouth full of meat that didn't come from a pig.

I stood there, in the middle of the forest, my face covered in blood, my belly half full of wolf, and I grinned. "You wanted to eat me, you bastards," I growled, "but I'm still my own cook."

There I stood, sticky with blood, half dead from cold, half alive with rage—and my stomach growled louder than the pack. Hunger, that damned dog, had been gnawing at me for days. So I looked at the torn carcasses around me, ripped open, steaming in the snow, and thought, "Baron, now you're either an animal or a genius. But either way, you won't starve."

I gathered dry wood, my hands trembling, but somehow I got a fire going. A miserable thing at first, then a hiss, then a flame that melted the snow. I drew the knife, cut, tore, and threw pieces of meat into the fire. The smoke rose, the smell spread—heavy, wild, metallic, and yet, damn it, it smelled like the dinner I'd been longing for for weeks.

I skewered a piece, held it over the fire until the fat dripped and sizzled. Then I bit into it. Hot, bloody, chewy. I chewed, I swallowed, I grinned as the juices ran down my chin. "Ha!" I shouted into the forest, "who's the wild animal now? Who's eating whom?"

The horses in the back of the sleigh snorted nervously, the wind howled through the trees, but I laughed like a madman. I ate, I drank the snow like it were cheap liquor, and I felt like the king of the damn tundra.

At some point, I'd had enough, my belly as full as a wine barrel, my fingers burned, but I sat there by the fire, the wolf's fur around me, my bones crackling in the embers, and I thought, "Sometimes life is very simple: Either you eat it, or it eats you. And I just won."

My belly full, my hands greasy, my beard matted with blood—I sat by the fire, and the world was silent. Too silent.
The wind howled, yes, but the silence afterward was worse. So I started talking.

"Well, you bastards," I muttered, throwing a rag of fur over my shoulders, "did you think you could make me dinner? Now you're sitting at my table."

I looked into the flames, the bones cracked, the shadows danced. And I swear, they looked like the wolves themselves, standing there, baring their teeth, only now their mouths were full of beer mugs. I toasted them with a half-chewed bone. "Cheers, you dead dogs."

Then I heard it: a growl, a snort—not real, just in my head. But it was enough. I laughed out loud, a dirty, hoarse laugh that thundered through the forest. "Of course, you guys talk now! Every drunk keeps talking, even if they're already lying in the dirt. And I, damn it, am listening!"

I imagined them roaring back, laughing at me, saying, "Baron, you're worse than us. We tear flesh, but you tear stories."

And damn it – they were right.

So I sat there, in sheep's clothing, with dead wolves as imaginary companions, the fire crackling, the snow crunching, and I didn't feel alone. I felt like I was in a pub. Only without the wine. And that was the only mistake of that night.

At some point, I'd had enough of talking. I looked at the half-torn carcasses, the hides, the bones – and thought, "Shit, Baron, this is all dead capital. If you're clever, you'll make something useful out of it."

So I dragged the remains closer to the sled. Their blood was already freezing in the snow, their bodies rigid, their eyes empty. I laughed as I put them together like building blocks. "You wanted to eat the sled? Now you ARE the sled."

I tied the carcasses together with ropes I pulled from the horses. Legs were sticking out in all directions, a tail hung behind like a poor flagpole, and the fur steamed in the remaining embers of the fire. It looked like the work of a madman—and that's exactly what it was.

Then I sat on it. The thing creaked, stank, and still bled a little. But it carried me. A sled made of wolves, sewn together by a drunkard in the middle of the frost. I laughed so loudly the forest shook. "Ha! You wanted to pull me? Now you're pulling me to the next village, you bastards!"

The horses that were supposed to be pulling the real sleigh just stared and snorted nervously. Maybe they thought I'd finally lost it. And maybe they were right.

But in that moment, I felt like a damn king. Not every idiot builds a sleigh out of his enemies.

So I crouched down on my freshly built wolf sled, still warm from the blood, still steaming in the cold air, and gave the horses the whip. At first, the beasts didn't want to move, as if they were afraid to run in front of a sled full of corpses. But a good curse, a strong tug – and they ran.

So I wandered across the steppe, the snow whipping my face, the howling of the night silenced, and behind me the carcasses scraped the ground, their snouts in the ice, their furs fluttering like damned banners. I was a warlord, a madman, a king of the frost on a throne of flesh.

After hours, the first huts appeared. The village was asleep, but the dogs already smelled me, barking and howling, as if they knew a demon was coming. I yanked the reins, the horses bolted into the alleys, and I rode right into the middle of them.

People rushed out of their houses, lights came on, voices screamed. Women held their children in front of their faces, men crossed themselves. There I stood, on my wolf-sled, covered in blood, my beard covered in grease, and roared:

"Listen, you pigs! The wolves wanted to eat me—but I ate them first! And now they're dragging me, whether they like it or not!"

The crowd stared, then a murmur and a scream erupted. Some fled, others stared, one fell to his knees. And I laughed, laughed like a madman, as I rushed through the middle of the village.

Because that was exactly the trick: It wasn't about whether it was true. It was about whether it looked like it could be true.

And that evening, in that damned town, I was no longer just the Baron. I was the devil himself, and my sleigh was hell on runners.

I stopped the horses right in front of the inn. The wolf sled scraped screeching into the snow, and the carcasses lay there like an open altar. The people stood in a semicircle, as if afraid the beasts would rise again. I jumped off, my boots deep in the red snow, my beard sticky, and dusted my hands off as if it had all been just an ordinary ride.

“Valet parking included,” I yelled, “the boys stay outside!” and pointed at the ragged furs that clattered stiffly in the frost.

Then I entered the tavern. Silence. All heads turned, glasses frozen in their hands. I stank of blood, smoke, and death—but also of victory. I slammed the door behind me, walked to the bar, slammed my fist on it, and said: "A tankard. The biggest one you have. And if you don't have one, take a damn keg."

The innkeeper trembled, but he poured. A tankard, as big as a helmet, foaming, golden. I lifted it, tipped half down, and the rest ran down my beard, dripping onto the floor as if it were holy water. Then I put the pitcher down, wiped my mouth, and grinned.

"You out there heard them," I said, loud enough to make every corner tremble. "The wolves. A pack, hungry, wild, full of teeth. They came to eat me. But look out—now they're eating my snow. I slaughtered them, ate them, and built on them. I don't ride horses, I ride my enemies."

The crowd went wild. Men roared, women giggled nervously, one spat his beer in amazement. And me? I raised the mug, drank again, laughed, laughed like a man who knows: It doesn't matter what really happened. The only thing that matters is that the story is big enough to drown out the thirst.

The tavern was buzzing. Everyone wanted to hear, everyone wanted to see, everyone wanted a piece of the legend. I stood in the middle of the room, shirt torn, fingers bloody, beard shining like a damn butcher's shop. The jug was never empty—every time it was, some idiot refilled it, hoping I'd spit out some gruesome morsel of truth.

I talked and talked. Sometimes the wolves devoured my sled in one bite, sometimes I chased them through the snow for three days, sometimes I ate their hearts raw because otherwise they would have frozen to death. Every time someone laughed, I added another. Every cup of wine was a cannonball in my own cannon of lies.

The sled stood outside. The carcasses were stiff, their mouths open, as if still greedily grazing for meat. Children sneaked out, saw it, shrieked, and ran back to bed. Women crossed themselves, men didn't dare touch the beasts, not even dead. It was as if I had parked hell in front of the inn—and no one had the courage to remove the thing.

I grinned when I heard it. "See?" I yelled into the tavern, "those creatures still serve me. Even dead, they scare you. And you think I don't deserve to have my mug filled for free?"

Laughter, cheers, a few nodded. And of course, the glass was immediately filled again.

The night passed in a drunken frenzy, the stories grew, the wine soured, and at some point I was lying half under the table, half on my fame. But no matter how much my head pounded, I knew: tomorrow, when they're talking about me, the sleigh will still be outside. And the story will continue to grow, just like every one of my nights.

Morning hit me like a punch in the face. My head pounded, my stomach rumbled like an old cannon stove, and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth as if someone had poured sand and glue on it. I crawled out from under the table, smelling of old wine, blood, and smoke—a mixture not even a pig would voluntarily sniff.

The tavern was empty, chairs overturned, the floor sticky, and the landlord asleep in the corner like a shot dog. I staggered out into the cold.

And there they stood: the wolves. Frozen stiff, their mouths open, as if they still wanted to snap at my neck. Snow lay on them like an altar, their eyes frozen shut, their fur hard as stone. The sled made of carcasses – a grotesque sculpture in the middle of the village.

The children kept their distance, staring wide-eyed. A woman pulled her brat away when I appeared. Men whispered, not looking directly, as if afraid I might install them in my damned vehicle.

I lit a pipe, coughed, and grinned with a half-toothed smile. "Well, you bastards," I muttered to the dead wolves, "yesterday you kept me company. Today you're just decoration."

Then I turned to the village, my eyes red, my head full of hammers, and roared: "Remember one thing: No winter, no wolf, no death will bring me down. I'll eat anything that wants to eat me. Even hell would be just dinner for me."

And they were all silent. For they didn't know whether to laugh or pray.

I climbed back onto my sleigh of carcasses, gave the horses the whip, and drove off—a stinking, bloody king over snow and corpses.

And deep down I knew: It was just another night, another intoxication, another lie that was bigger than life itself.

Hunting for nothing, but with plenty of powder

I don't know who the hell had that idea back then. Probably me. It was always me. "Let's go hunting," I said, "the air is clear, the snow is crunching, and my stomach is growling like a damn dog." But the truth was, I didn't want to catch anything. I just wanted to shoot.

Look, hunting always sounds so noble: men with guns, focused, silent, like gods of the forest. Bullshit. For me, it was always just noise, smoke, and a pile of wasted gunpowder. I wanted to hear the bang, feel the crash, the recoil in my shoulder – nothing else mattered to me. Whether there was a rabbit, a bear, or just an old tree root in the way: screw it. As long as there was a bang.

So I set off with a rifle so old the barrel had more cracks than my face. And a bag full of powder, heavy as sin. No bullets, no plans. Just powder. "Baron," asked one of the guys walking with me, "what are we hunting?"
I grinned, spat in the snow, and said, "The silence, my boy. We're chasing the silence."

And damn it, that's exactly what we did.

I crammed round after round into the shotgun, so full that the barrel glowed. Every shot was a clap of thunder, the forest shook, the birds fluttered, and the men behind me cursed, afraid I was going to blow us all up. And every time the cloud of gunpowder smoke drifted into the trees, I stood there, laughing, coughing, and shouting, "Don't you see? I'm hitting! I'm hitting the damned void!"

It wasn't a hunt. It was a celebration. A celebration of noise, smoke, and senseless violence.

It wasn't long before I got bored with the usual shooting. A bang here, a burst of smoke there—that wasn't enough for me. I wanted the whole damn forest to shake, for even the dead to rise from their graves and think, "Shit, the Baron's on the loose again."

So I stuffed in more powder. First double. Then triple. Finally, so much that the barrel of my shotgun looked pregnant. The men behind me yelled, "Baron, the barrel can't take it!" And I yelled back, "Screw the barrel! I can't take it either—but I'll keep drinking anyway!"

I rammed down the ramrod, stepped back, aimed – and fired.

The bang wasn't just a bang anymore. It was an earthquake, a clap of thunder, a crack in the sky itself. The rifle nearly flew from my hands, the recoil knocked me off my feet, and I landed on my ass in the snow. My ears were ringing, my beard was burning, my face was as black as a chimney sweep's.

But damn it, it felt good. I laughed, coughed, spat black snot into the snow, and yelled, "This must be what God feels like when he's in a bad mood!"

The men stood there, staring at me as if they'd just seen a madman shoot the sun to pieces. And maybe they were right. Maybe I was mad. But in that moment, I knew: madness tastes better than any roast when it smells of powder.

After the first hellish shot, any normal person would have said, "Enough." But I was never normal. So I kept cramming, shot after shot, powder up to my neck. Every blast nearly tore my shoulder off, every puff of smoke paralyzed the forest.

After an hour, the place looked like the scene of a damned battle. Trees singed, the snow black, the air thick with smoke. It was almost impossible to breathe. The birds were long gone, the deer too, even the squirrels had pissed off. Only I was left standing there, coughing, laughing, with a sooty face and a shotgun glowing like an oven.

The men who had come with me had long since moved away. They didn't even dare to speak to me. They stood there like little children watching their drunken old father set fire to the house. One whispered: "Baron... this isn't hunting anymore. This is madness."

I turned around, my eyes watering from the smoke, grinned broadly, and yelled, "So what?! Did I ever promise anything else?"

And then I fired again. Simply because I could. No target, no reason—just the crash, the tremor, the taste of sulfur on my tongue.

And so I stood there, amidst the smoke and fire, as if I were the last idiot in a war against silence.

At some point, the bag was empty. Not a crumb left. I shook the thing, turned it over, tapped it—nothing. I had shot more powder into the air than an entire regiment in a single battle. And all I had was a burned forest, a throbbing skull, and a shoulder that looked like it had been trodden on by an ox.

The men looked at me as if they wanted to ask, "And now?" But no one dared. So I was the one who broke the silence. I laughed, loudly, hoarsely, and said, "Didn't you see it? Didn't you smell it? I killed him. The damned Invisible Man. A giant, bigger than any mountain. He stood here, right here—and I blew him to smoke!"

They stared at me, torn between fear and disbelief. So I continued. "Ask yourselves: Why did the forest burn? Why is there sulfur in the air here? Do you seriously believe I'm firing gunpowder into the void? No, my friends. I fought against what you could never see. And I won."

I spread my arms, stepped into the smoke that swallowed me, and grinned: "I killed the silence. With my own hands."

The men nodded, one swallowed, another crossed himself. And I knew: The lie was big enough. It grew in the smoke, in the stench, in the fear in their eyes. And that was precisely the real shot that counted.

We trudged back to the village. The forest behind us was smoky, the sky yellow with gunpowder, and I was in front, swaying, sooty, but grinning like an executioner after a job well done. The men behind me whispered, some looked as if they'd just seen the devil. And that was exactly what I wanted.

We'd barely reached the first huts when someone shouted, "The Baron shot a giant!" And whoosh, the story wasn't mine anymore. It was bigger, louder, dirtier. The village absorbed it like a thirsty man's first sip of beer.

I let myself be dragged into the tavern; the proprietor stared, the customers held their breath. I slammed my hand on the bar, clinking the glasses, and yelled: "A giant, invisible, bigger than your entire town—and I blew him to smoke with gunpowder and courage! Now give me the wine, or I'll blow up the next one: you!"

Laughter, fear, cheers—all at once. Pitchers were brought, one after the other. I drank, I knocked back, I talked and exaggerated, until even I no longer knew where the truth lay. But that didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that the glasses never ran empty.

And when I was lying under the table, my shirt burned, my hands black, my head heavy as an anvil, I muttered: "I shot the silence. And it deserved it."

Then there was only darkness – warm, drunken, merciless.

The fish that swallowed me and smelled of wine

It began like so many of my stories: with hunger, thirst, and a bad plan. We were on a boat, somewhere out there, water stretching to the horizon, the sky gray as the liver of a dead horse. The barrel of wine was almost empty, the provisions long since eaten. The men looked at me as if I were the last innkeeper on earth.

"Baron," they said, "catch us something. A fish, anything. We're going to die here." And I, half drunk, half offended because the barrel was empty, grabbed

a harpoon, stomped to the bow, and shouted, "If I fish, it's not for you, it's for myself!"

So I stared into the water, which shone black like a drunkard's mirror. And suddenly—a bubbling, a play of shadows, and there it appeared. Not a fish. A damned monster. Huge, fat, its scales gleaming like wet coins, its mouth big enough to swallow half an inn, complete with its regulars.

Before I could curse, the beast opened its mouth—and whoosh, I was gone. Swallowed. Without question.

Everything went dark. No boat, no sky, no more rumbling of the men. Just a slide into the jaws of fate.

And then—hold on tight—the stench. I expected mold, salt, fish carcasses. But no. It smelled of wine. Thick, sweet, fermenting. As if the bastard wasn't a fish, but a floating wine barrel.

I stood there in his stomach, ankle-deep in a broth that tasted like cheap red wine, and laughed out loud. "Well, if that's the case," I yelled, "then I'll drink you dry, you bastard!"

So I trudged deeper inside. The mouth had long since closed, outside only water and screams I could no longer hear. Inside, however, was a damned tavern for madmen. The floor was littered with bones, old armor, and splinters of wood from boats the beasts had previously swallowed. Everything lay scattered like the junk in a tavern after three nights without a landlord.

And everywhere this wine. Not clear, not clean, but thick, sweet, foamy. Every step slapped like I was trudging through a puddle of old red wine. I bent down, scooped it up with my hand, and poured it down my throat. Warm, sour, half-fermented—but screw it. It was alcohol, and that made it better than anything else.

"Ha!" I laughed, my voice echoing in my stomach. "You idiots out there are starving, and I'm standing in here drinking until I burst!"

I sat down on a pile of bones that looked like a makeshift barstool. In front of me, a piece of mast protruded from the stomach flesh, as if it were the bar. I toasted the skulls around me. "Hey, guys, another round?" I said, and took a drink.

The fish's belly vibrated as it continued swimming. But I didn't care. I had my place, my cups, my intoxication. And the more I drank, the less of a monster it was. It was just a damn barrel with scales.

After a while, I was no longer just a guest in this place—I was a regular. The wine was already sloshing up to my waist, or maybe I was just too drunk to stand up straight. No matter. I raised the bone cup I'd carved from a skull and yelled, "Landlord! One more!"

Of course, nothing came. No barman, no beer, just that dull rumble from the belly when the fish swims. But I was too far gone to keep quiet. "What kind of place is this, huh?" I shouted into the darkness. "Full kegs, but no service! Are you kidding me, you scaly bastard?"

The beast growled again, dull, vibrating, as if the entire pub were shaking. I slammed my fist against the wall of my stomach, which was as slippery as an old bar counter after work. "Finally! Move, landlord, or I'll go somewhere else!"

And then I laughed. I laughed so loudly my stomach hurt, laughed until the entire stinking cavern vibrated. I was a drunk, trapped inside a monster, but in my head I was just a guest yelling at the bartender because the beer was too warm.

"You know what?" I finally mumbled, knocking back another glass and leaning back. "You're the worst host I've ever had. But your wine, damn, isn't half bad."

Then I fell over, half asleep, half laughing, and let the fish continue swimming.

I don't know how long I lay there, in a sea of red wine among bones and armor. But at some point, that damned drunken spirit that always appears when your head is too heavy and your brain too light seized me. I took another swig, wiped my mouth, and thought, "Screw it, Baron, you're not here to get drunk—you're here to ride."

So I started inspecting the belly like it was a damn warhorse. I pounded my fists against the stomach wall, the fish twitched, the wine sloshed. "So, my scaly buddy," I slurred, "now you dance to my tune."

And because I never traveled without a fire, I dug out some leftover powder and my tinder. Yes, I was drunk, yes, I was in the belly of a monster – and that's exactly why it was the only logical idea: to light a fire.

I lit a pile of driftwood and bone fragments I found in there. The belly flared up like a damned hell bar, smoke rose, the beast wobbled, reared up. "Ha! Now you feel it, eh? I'm your rider, your executioner, your host!" I roared as the embers crackled.

The fish sped off, faster, faster, as if the devil himself had grabbed its tail. I grabbed a rib, grinned broadly, and screamed, "Faster, you bastard! Get me out of here, or we'll both burn to death in a drunken stupor!"

And in that moment I knew: I hadn't just caught a fish. I was riding it. From within. Like a drunken god on a scaly thunderhorse.

The fire devoured my belly like a drunk through a free beer buffet. The fish raged, darted up and down, writhed like a devil in a fever. I held on tight, laughing like a madman while the smoke burned my eyes and the wine sloshed up to my neck.

Then—a jolt. A choking. A crash that reverberated through the walls. And before I could curse, the beast spat me out. A torrent of wine, smoke, and bones, and in the middle of it all was me, the Baron, soaking wet, stinking, but free.

I flew through the air, spinning like a cannonball, and finally splashed into the waves. As I surfaced, coughing, spitting, my beard covered in scales, I saw the monster speeding away. A trail of blisters left behind it, as if it had the worst hangover of its life.

The boat appeared on the horizon, the men shouted, rowing to me. "Baron! You're alive!" one shouted. I slapped the water, yelling back: "Not only that—I drank, rode, and sent a damned fish to hell!"

They pulled me aboard, dripping wine like a living barrel, and the men stared. "By all the saints, Baron," one stammered, "you smell like a wine cellar." I grinned, lay down, and mumbled, "Exactly so, my boy. Exactly so."

Then I fell asleep, like a drunkard after a feast, with the sea roaring beneath me—and everyone in the boat knew they had just heard the biggest lie, truer than any other story.

War, bullets and other toys for men

War, my friends, is not glory, not a banner, not a trumpet to warm your heart. War is noise, smoke, and the stench of burnt beards. And I tell you one thing: men don't need war to be heroes. They need it because it's the only toy big enough to kill their damned boredom.

I was young enough, strong enough, and stupid enough to land in the middle of it all. Uniform on, musket on my shoulder, and I was the idiot who was sacrificing his life for some king. But I didn't care. I was there because I loved the bang. The thunder, the crash, the feeling like the world itself was coming apart—just like that time in the woods with too much gunpowder, only bigger, with more screaming.

The generals talked about honor. Screw it. To me, it was a bar fight, only with better effects. The first bullet that whistled past my ear didn't make me duck—it made me laugh. "Ha!" I shouted, while the guys next to me screamed, "that's music, damn it! Better than any orchestra in Vienna!"

I saw men fall, I saw horses toppling over like torn curtains, I smelled blood, sweat, smoke. But I also smelled liquor. Because in the midst of all the chaos, there was always someone who still had a bottle, and I swear, nothing warms you up like a sip in the hail of bullets.

And so I trudged through the battle, bullets around my ears, cannons in the bowels of the earth, and thought: War is not hell. War is child's play. Except the children are men, and their marbles are made of lead.

Most soldiers ducked when the cannons thundered. Not me. I stood there, amid the gunpowder smoke, my shirt black, my beard glowing, and laughed like a child seeing fireworks for the first time.

A bullet slammed into the ground next to me, tearing a furrow in the earth the size of an open grave. I jumped in, grabbed the thing, still hot, still steaming, and shoved it back toward the enemy with my boots. "Here, take back your damned game ball!" I yelled, while the guys around me shrieked like they'd seen a demon.

Another time, a cannonball rolled right at my feet, slowly, ponderously, as if it had come looking for me personally. I picked it up, juggled it in my hands, and laughed like a madman. "Too heavy for marbles," I shouted, "but just right for

thirsty men!" Then I let it roll over the rampart, straight into the enemy battery, where it caused more panic than ten well-aimed shots.

For others, the bullets were death and destruction. For me, they were toys, glowing iron balls that you could kick, throw, and hurl, as long as you weren't afraid of burning your fingers.

And every time the ground shook, I didn't think about heaven or hell. I just thought, Shit, this is the biggest fair I've ever seen—and I'm the only one who gets free entry.

At some point, I stopped hearing the roar of the cannons altogether. To me, it was all just a pub, as big as hell itself. The walls were the hills, the bar was the front line, and the cannonballs? Bar stools to be smashed over the enemy's head.

I stood there, musket in one hand, bottle of liquor in the other, thinking, "Come on, you bastards, throw another chair—I'll knock the whole damn door back!" A bullet slammed into the ground next to me, spraying dirt and blood. I yelled, "Ha! Better hit that, asshole, or you won't even get a seat at the bar!"

The guys around me screamed, prayed, and fell. But I trudged on, kicking corpses aside like empty jugs, and darting into the fray just to taste the smoke. Every bang was a belch from the devil, every scream the giggle of a drunken angel.

It wasn't a battle. It was a brawl. A single, goddamn brawl between men who had too much gunpowder and too little sense.

And I, the Baron, was the only one still grinning as the sky above me shattered like a beer keg under an axe.

The battle raged, smoke settled over everything like an old pub veil, and I stumbled through blood and gunpowder as if it were just spilled wine on the floor of a tavern. Men lay everywhere, groaning, wheezing, pleading. And me? I strode on, grinning, my musket empty, my flask half full.

Then I heard it—that whistle, that damned song you recognize before it hits. A bullet, fast, deadly, heading straight for me. And for a moment I thought, "Now, Baron, now it's time."

But instead of ducking, I raised the bottle, toasted the bullet, and yelled, "Death, you bastard! If you want me, then sit down at my table and have a drink with me! Otherwise, you're out of place here!"

The bullet landed next to me, tearing a poor devil to pieces, his blood spraying through the air like a red spray. I just got wet, grinned, and downed the rest of the bottle. "See, Death?" I muttered, wine in my beard and gunpowder in my lungs. "You won't get me that cheap. You'll have to drink with me first. And I swear, you won't be able to keep up."

And while the earth shook, the cannons thundered, and men died like flies, I stood there, alone, laughing, and knew: Even hell would think twice about having room for someone like me.

At the end, when the sky was already black with smoke and the earth stank like an old ashtray full of blood and gunpowder, I was still trudging around like the ultimate idiot who doesn't want to turn off the lights. The men around me lay there—stretched, dismembered, vaporized—and I stood in the middle of them, staggering, dirty, half-blind from smoke, but with a grin on my face as if I'd just walked out of a brothel.

The war was over – for the others. For me, it was just another night in a tavern where too many glasses were broken. The difference? There was no clinking here. Flesh tore here, bones splintered here. And yet – to me, it felt the same.

I stumbled over a corpse, his arms still clutching a musket, and yelled, "Give it here, you don't need that thing anymore!" Then I threw the rifle into the mud and grabbed a half-full canteen from his belt instead. I sniffed it. Booze. Cheap, but booze. I drank. I drank like it was the only prayer that could still be answered in this damned slaughterhouse.

Corpses everywhere, smoke, torn flags—and I, the ultimate idiot, standing upright, stumbling through the chaos as if I were a kid at a fair. "You say war?" I slurred. "Shit, it's just a game! A game for men who don't have dolls!"

A cannon boomed in the distance, a final, belated shot. The bullet whistled past, landing somewhere behind me. I turned around, raised the bottle, and toasted the smoke. "Too late, you assholes! The game's over! I won!"

No one heard. Only me, the echo, and the ghosts of the men who could no longer drink. And for a moment—just a tiny one—I thought I had truly lost. Not the war, not my life—but the bar, the voices, the stupid jokes in the corner, the

loud laughter. Everything that keeps men alive when they're not shooting at each other.

But I didn't let it drag me down. No. I trudged on until I left the smoke behind me, until the sky cleared, until I saw the silhouette of a tavern again. The damned saving grace of every battle: four walls, a roof, and a bar.

I pushed open the door, the innkeeper stared at me like a ghost, the customers fell silent. Blood on my boots, gunpowder in my beard, schnapps in my hand. And I roared until the glasses clinked:
"War is not heroism! War is just a game! And you know what? I've played enough. Now give me wine, enough to make me forget the screams outside!"

And they gave me. Jugs, barrels, everything they had. I drank until my heart no longer thundered, but just pounded like a lame drummer. I drank until faces blurred, voices laughed again, until the world was no longer a battlefield, but once again just a bar with too much smoke and too little light.

And as I lay on the ground at some point, clutching the jug like a lover, I muttered into the dirt: "If death wants me, let him bring his own cup. Otherwise, he won't get anything here."

Then I was gone. Asleep, alive, drunk, but damn it, still the Baron.

Conversations with the Moon by Hangover Light

Morning didn't come quietly. It came like a punch to the face. My skull was an anvil, pounded by an entire army of hammers, and my stomach was a pit full of lazy dogs, all barking at each other. I lay there in the mud in front of the tavern, half man, half corpse, and beside me was the horse—my faithful nag, who looked just as shitty as I did. He was steaming, drooling, and staring at me as if to say, "You're a fucking idiot, Baron."

And above me it hung: the moon. Pale, cold, rigid, as if it had been laughing all night while I buried myself in some hole. A voyeuristic pig, this moon. Always staring, never helping.

I scrambled to my feet, only halfway, and immediately landed on my ass again. "Well, you big peeping Tom," I mumbled, "what did you see yesterday, huh? How I let myself be buried under the table? How I peed against the wall

because I couldn't find the door? How I thought I was the King of Prussia just because I was holding a boot in my arm?"

The moon grinned. I swear. It grinned, that cold, silent grin that only comes from someone who always catches you when you're at your lowest.

"Don't make fun of me, you bastard!" I screamed. "You're just a big, lazy cheese in the sky. And yet you act like you're God himself." I reached for the bottle in my coat. Half empty. Always half empty. I toasted him. "Well, if you see everything, at least listen."

I took a sip. It burned. It burned down my throat like fire, and that was exactly what I needed. Then I spoke.

About the battles. "You saw it, right? Yesterday, last week, all the time. Men dropping like flies, and everyone acting like it matters. But you know better, you old peeping tom. In the end, it's nothing but dirt, smoke, and screams. And yet they keep going. Why? Because they have nothing better. Just like me. I drink because I have nothing else. They fight because they have nothing else. And you? You stare because you have nothing else."

About women. "People say I'm lying. But you know who's really lying? The women. Every single one of them. One smiles at you, whispers sweetly, and you think you're in heaven. Two weeks later, you're sitting there with an empty purse, wondering why you sold your horse. I lied, sure. But at least people laugh at my lies. Theirs just makes you cry."

About the kings. "You see them all, right? Fat, plump, wrapped in gold, and they think they have the world in their pockets. I've got more truth in my piss stain on the wall of a tavern than in all their speeches combined. But you, you don't bat an eyelid. You just grin. Probably because you know that every king ends up lying in the dirt just like I am right now."

The moon was silent. It just grinned. I downed the rest of the bottle, felt faint, but I kept talking because silence was worse than any hangover.

"You know, old man," I muttered, "the truth is like bad wine. Thin, sour, gives you a headache. That's why I invent something better. I don't lie to deceive—I lie to make the world more bearable. And if that means I wake up in the dirt every night and talk to you every morning, so be it."

My horse snorted as if it were laughing at me. I turned to it: "Shut up, you beast. You're just drunk too."

The sun slowly rose, turning the sky pink, and the moon faded. Coward. Whenever things get serious, he runs away. I picked up the empty bottle, about to throw it, but dropped it. It shattered in the mud, and I laughed hoarsely. "That's how it all ends. In ruins."

Then I lay back, the dirt sticking to me, my head pounding, and as the day began, I fell asleep—a drunk, a liar, a half-dead dog who had quarreled with the moon.

Riding on the half horse

I swear, sometimes you wake up and think the world has decided to play a trick on you. I stepped out of the tavern—its head a rotten bell tower that jingled with every step—and my horse was standing there. Okay, okay: It was standing**half**There. Horse in front, air behind. As if someone had planed away the back part with a giant knife in the night: croup gone, tail gone, two legs and a good third of hope – everything was missing. What remained was the head, neck, shoulders, forelegs, the chest up to just behind the withers. And the animal was alive. It blinked, chewed nothing, snorted in offense, as if it were all my fault.

"Shit, dude," I muttered, "you look like a truth: unfinished and painful."

The innkeeper, still in his shirt, sleep in his eyes, crossed his arms. "Baron, I told you yesterday: Don't tie the cattle to the mill. The miller chops anything that comes too close." "The miller chops wheat, not horses," I snarled. "Today, probably both," he shrugged. "He says he took half the hindquarters as an offering to winter." "Winter can eat my ass," I growled. "And the miller can hold his plate."

The horse pawed the ground as if it wanted to end the dialogue. It was alive, damn it. It stood on two legs like a sad saint. Its breath steamed. It looked at me: "Are you riding, or are you just going to complain?" At least, that's what I heard in my head.

I threw the coat over the open cut edge. Pure politeness. Then I put on the reins, grabbed the mane, and swung myself onto it. And yes, I know how that sounds: onto the**front half**of a horse. You laugh – until you see how it starts.

It started.

The front quarters leaped like an angry god. Two legs pounded the morning away. No weight in the rear, no counterforce, just pure, absurd forward fury. We rattled over the pavement, sparks flew, chickens squawked, and I yelled, "Make way! Half horse – full speed!"

The alley stretched out before us like a rope that someone had already tied. We all took it. A cart loaded with turnips came across – we jumped. A dog ran across – we flew over it, I smelled its flea-like scent. An old woman screamed and threw a cross after me. I was going too fast to be blessed.

"Baron!" howled the innkeeper after him. "You'll fall down!" "I never fall down," I growled. "I'll fall**through**."

We roared out of the village, the frost biting, and only then did I notice how cold the air whistled from behind against the coat that was snugly wrapping my poor horse like a poorly tied parcel. I patted his neck. "Are you still holding on, old man?" He shook his head. Yes. Still.

The path became a vein, the landscape bloodless, a white plain into which someone had stuck a few black trees like nails in a coffin. The half-horse ran as if it wanted to catch up with the missing part. Maybe it was. Maybe we're all just chasing after what once made us whole.

After a mile, an embankment leaped toward us, steep, icy, with a gully down the middle that looked like a scar on the face of the world. "No," I said. The horse understood, "now." It took the edge, slipped, caught itself on two hooves, danced high, clanked its shoes as if trying to break gravity's teeth—and stood on top. I laughed. The wind laughed along, but mockingly.

“You see,” I gasped, “you don’t need a backside to live uphill.”

Behind the slope began the forest. A tired, cold forest that smelled of snow, bark, and a bit of old beer—perhaps**I**So. Between the tree trunks, the path was narrow and crouched. The half-horse maneuvered like a knife held upside down, but still cutting. I let the reins go. No hindquarters means no excuses: You're riding in front, so**feel**You're in front. Every kick is a beat on the drum, every bounce is a small explosion.

I remembered the guy in the tavern last night – “Baron, you’re exaggerating!” – and how I had replied: “I**am**the exaggeration, my son."Today I was Exhibit A, with hooves.

We came to a clearing, as smooth as a trampled grave. In the middle: a frozen pond, milky, with cracks that looked like cobwebs. Two lumberjacks stood there, faces as if they'd been blinking too long into the wind, axes in their hands, their minds somewhere behind their beards. One pointed. "By all the saints... it doesn't have—" "Backside," I helped. "Correct. But it has anger. And anger is a better engine." The other: "You'll fall," he insisted. I nodded friendly, pulled on the reins, gave my legs—and half the horse leaped onto the ice.

The world held its breath. Beneath us, the pond cracked like an old knee. The ice sang, that deep, evil song when water has decided it might eat you after all. The two lumberjacks turned white up to their beards. I grinned. The half-horse set its hooves, tiptoeing, sliding, prancing, small steps, quick beats, as if walking over a timpani. It stopped in the middle. The two of us, Thor without a hammer, Don Quixote without a lance, a rider without a hindquarters. I raised my hand. "Good morning." The axes almost fell from their fingers.

Then the inevitable: a loud crack that cut across the pond like a curse. "Back," whispered my remaining sanity. "Forward," said stupidity, my old friend. We took a running start. Half the horse tossed its head, its nostrils smoking, and we shot off. The ice broke behind us, and in front of us it broke too, but right where our hoof was about to land, it held for a second longer—just enough. That's how we reached the shore. Two lumberjacks fell to their knees, and I bowed in the saddle. "Not the first Sunday the Lord has been gracious," I said.

Further.

At the edge of the woods stood the mill of the aforementioned chipper. The wheel was frozen, the stream was still, the door ajar. I stopped. The horse stamped and glared at the building as if it knew exactly who it owed its bad haircut to. I dismounted and tied the reins to a post. "Good boy," I muttered, "I'll get your ass back." The horse blinked skeptically: Sure.

The mill smelled of damp wood, dust, and guilt. The miller—a hulk in human form, as wide as his millstone—squatted on a sack, chewing on an excuse. "Baron, that was an oversight," he began, "the machine—" "The machine eats wheat," I said, "not buttocks. Unless someone has invented a new bread that tastes like horse." He was sweating. "Winter, Baron, I... sacrifice..." I stepped closer. "If winter wants sacrifice, let it stick to you. You're fatter and slower." His eyes searched for the door. My hand searched for his collar. I found both faster. I lifted him a bit—just high enough for him to realize how thin the air is in truth. "Where is it?" He pointed. At the back, on hooks. A pitiful package of

fur, meat, skin—neatly chopped, like half a Sunday roast for giants. I felt sick and sober at the same time. Both are rare.

"You're sewing," I said. "I... what?" "You. Sew. Now."

The next few hours smelled of pitch, pig bristles, gangrene, and prayer. I held, he stabbed, I cursed, he trembled. Outside, the forehand pawed, inside, the miller sweated so much the millstone became jealous. I poured schnapps on the seam, then on my nerves, then on the seam again. The thread broke three times. The fourth time, it held, probably out of fear.

When we were finished, we carried the hindquarters outside like a hopeless truth. The horse raised his head, his ears pricked: he knew his lost part. I put the pieces together like a bad carpenter trying to repair an old house with spit. The miller sewed. I held my breath. The sky pretended to look away.

And then it stood.**Quite.**Wobbly. Unattractive. Cobbled together against all reason. But whole.
I leaned my forehead against his neck. "You beautiful bastard," I whispered, "you're not leaving without me." The horse exhaled long, as if it had just given a speech. Then it took a step forward—left front, right rear, all in time. It**went**.

"What do I owe?" asked the miller, his face as pale as flour. I smiled kindly. "Only this: If you make offerings to Winter again, offer your tongue first." He nodded, as if he had just relearned the commandments.

We rode off. I sat cautiously – one wrong tug, and the seam could scream. The path was suddenly silent, as if the forest were listening to see if the world was still holding together. It held. Step. Step. Breath. Step.

It was already market time in the village. News of a half-horse spreads faster than the plague and has the same effect: everyone wants to see it, no one wants it. Children jumped, women hissed, men said "impossible" in the voice men always use to say "I'm scared." I stopped in front of the tavern. The innkeeper looked at me, the jug in his hand still like a converted sinner. "Baron," he said, "you're alive." "Worse," I said. "I'm functioning."

Someone asked for the story. Of course they did. They always want the movie, never the credits. So I dismounted, patted my horse on the shoulder, felt the warmth beneath the scar—life is a stubborn animal—and stood on the step.

“Listen,” I said, “and learn: A man does not need all the parts to arrive. He needs**Will**and a bit of bad luck ready to transform into good luck. The rest is noise."

I told them. I told them about the stream, the mill, the seam, the ice, the lumberjacks. I left out how my hands had trembled, how my stomach had cramped when I saw the meat. We'll save that for the next morning, when the moon shines again. Today there was only the fabric that keeps us warm: the impossibility that still works.

When the applause came (yes, applause—peasants clap with the same fervor they curse), I raised my hand. "One more thing," I said. "If anyone tells you you're only worth something if you're whole—point at my horse. If anyone tells you you're only a man if you're not missing anything—point at me. I have holes, inside and out, and I still ride."

The innkeeper placed a jug before me, as large as a beggar's hope. I drank. It tasted of metal and morning, of blood and bread. I drank again. The horse outside stamped. I stepped out and rested my forehead on its neck once more. "The two of us," I said quietly, "we're a mistake, and it's gone." It blinked. Winter glanced over briefly and pretended to have something in his eye.

Later—the sun was low, the sky looked as if someone had washed it with cold water—I rode through the alley once more. Slowly. Not in triumph, more like a man who has been stripped of his clothes and is pushing his chair back to the table. The children ran after me, counting seams. One called out, "Baron, is that art?" I turned in the saddle. "No, my boy. It's**Despite**. Art comes later when someone lies about it."

And because the day wouldn't be mine without one last stupidity, I headed for the village pond, where the ice had sung that morning. I let the horse touch the edge. He snorted. I nodded. "No," I said. "Not today. We've already done enough that shouldn't be done."

We turned away. Step by step. The evening smelled of kitchen smoke and the last light. I thought of all the things I was missing in life, and the few that remained. A horse. A lie. A pitcher. A moon that answers too late. And a body that wants to move forward despite everything.

Later in the tavern, when the stove sighed and the jug was heavy again, they asked, "Baron, how did you do it?" I smiled and shrugged. "Like always," I said. "I set off before I knew if I'd get there. And I sewed it together on the way."

Outside, my horse pounded. Inside, my heart pounded. And somewhere, far above the mill, winter pretended it hadn't seen us.

Cheers.

My own butt as a lifeline

The swamp stank of rotten dreams. And I was in the middle of it. Every step was a wrong one. First my boots in the mud, then my legs, then my stomach. It was like a slow drink – you feel yourself being pulled under, but you can't stop. I screamed, cursed, paddled, but the mud just laughed and pulled harder.

Behind me were the hunters, with their rifles, their eyes full of hatred because I had supposedly told stories about their wives (which I may have made up... or not). They stayed at the edge, grinning and watching me sink further. "Leave him alone," one said, "the Baron will become bog fodder."

I cursed: "You cowardly dogs! Come here and pull me out!" But they just laughed, threw a stone that splashed down next to me, and disappeared into the trees. Typical. They always want to hear my stories, but when things get serious, the Baron is left alone.

The water rose up to my chest. Cold, smelly, heavy. I thought, "So this is how the great liars die—in the dirt, with mud in their pants, without applause." No song, no memorial, just bubbling. I kicked. In vain. I sank.

Then, desperately, I tried everything. I reached for branches—too far. I flailed my arms—the swamp immediately sucked them back under. I yelled for my horse—the animal had long since made it to safety, the wiser partner in the partnership.

The cold bit. My muscles grew heavy, my head pounded. I was already halfway under when the madness struck. Madness, my old brother. He whispered, "Pull yourself out." "How?" I wheezed. "With your own ass."

And then I did it. I grabbed my hair, dug my legs into the swamp, arched my back as if I were going to break my spine—and pulled. I pulled myself out, bit by bit. My butt, the last free piece of flesh, pushed against the edge. It was grotesque, ridiculous, impossible—and that's exactly why it worked.

With a smack, a loud, disgusting fart noise that sounded like the earth itself was laughing, I flew out. I landed on the edge, gasping, covered in dirt, stinking like hell—but free. My butt had saved me.

I lay there, laughing like a madman, and shouted into the forest: "Write this in your chronicles, you fools! The Baron survived—thanks to his ass!"

That evening in the tavern, I told the story. They didn't want to believe it. They said I was crazy, I was insane, I was exaggerating. I stood up on the table, pulled my pants down a bit, and yelled: "Here! Here sits the true hero! Not in the heart, not in the head, not in the chest – here, right in the cheeks! This is my lifeline!"

The men roared, the women shook their heads. An old farmer muttered, "The man is right. In the end, only what we ourselves carry will save us." I toasted him. "Exactly, old man! Each of us carries our own anchor! Some in our heads, some in our stomachs, some in our sacks – I carry it in my ass!"

The jugs clinked. The wine flowed. And while night lurked again outside, I sat there, laughing, drinking, and knowing: Today I had once again conquered the world with the most ridiculous truth.

Later, as I stepped outside, the sky dark, the moon pale, I stood at the edge of the forest once more. I looked back at the moor. It was steaming, bubbling, as if saying, "Next time, Baron, I'll get you." I pulled my coat tighter, patted my butt, grinned, and shouted, "Not while I have my cheeks, dude! Not while!"

Then I went back to the tavern where the jug was waiting for me.

Winter, frost and a whistle that never went out

Winter came like an old enemy: without warning, without mercy, with teeth of ice that gnawed every shred of hope from your bones. Everything froze. The ground was so hard that even my horse's hooves struck sparks. The trees stood like frozen drunks who had died standing still, and the wind cut through my coat like a knife through butter.

I had nothing but a skinny horse, a nearly empty wineskin, and—my pipe. It was old, carved from birchwood, with a crack in the bowl and the marks of a

hundred teeth on its stem. But when I lit it, something inside me came alive. It was my heartbeat on cold nights, my only friend when the world was a grave.

I remember that one night. I was alone in the steppe, waist-deep in snow, and the sky hung low as if it wanted to suffocate me. I had nothing to eat, almost nothing to drink, and the horse looked at me as if it were already calculating how many days it would take before I decided which of us would die first.

So I lit my pipe. A spark, a puff, and the smoke rose like a defiant sign to the sky: "Not yet, you bastard." The wind tried to blow it out, but it held. It always held. I sucked on it as if my life depended on it, and maybe it did.

The frost bit my fingers, but the embers continued to burn. I laughed. "Look," I murmured into the night, "you can take my wine, you can take my meat, you can even take my women—but not my smoke!"

And so I trudged on, puff by puff, step by step, plume by plume. Every time the wind blew, I held my hand protectively over the pipe, like a father over his sick child. And every time, it glowed again.

At some point, I came across a village. Or what was left of it. A cluster of huts that looked like old teeth in a black mouth. No light, no laughter, just smoke creeping from chimneys like a last breath. I went inside, knocked on the first door. Nothing. At the second. Nothing. At the third, a woman opened the door, pale, gaunt, with eyes like two holes in the night.

"Fire," she croaked, "do you have a light?" I grinned and held out my pipe. "More fire than you can handle."

She pulled the embers into her hearth with a straw, and suddenly a faint light flared up. Children emerged from the shadows, men crawled forward, all with faces like the dead. They had no more wood, no coal, nothing. Only my pipe, my stubborn little lump of embers.

The night filled with warmth. Not much, but enough for them to breathe again. They sat me down at the table, gave me soup—thin as water, but I swore it was the best stew of my life—and looked at me like I was damned Saint Nicholas.

"Baron," said the eldest, "how did you do it? This pipe... it burns even when heaven itself wants to blow it out." I laughed, took another drag, and the smoke curled around the hut like a dancing devil. "Simple," I said. "The pipe knows I'll die if it goes out. And I know it will die if I do. We keep each other alive. Call it love, call it dependence—I call it necessity."

I stayed in that village for three days. Three days during which my pipe was the only light they had. I smoked it, and they handed me tobacco—what was left of old leaves, moss, and a bit of dried dung. It tasted like hell, but it burned. And that was enough.

On the third day, I stood up, shouldered my coat, and said, "Well, you living, I must move on. Winter calls for more sacrifices, and I want to see if it can get me this time." The woman who had first welcomed me held my arm. "Baron, at least take our bread." I shook my head. "Keep it. You need it more than I do. I have my pipe. And believe me: with smoke in your belly, you live longer than with bread in your stomach."

She cried. But I left. I always leave.

Later, on the walk through the forest, the wind hissed in my face, the frost deposited icicles in my beard, and my horse almost stumbled from exhaustion. I laughed, coughed, puffed on my pipe—and there it was, the ember. Always. A small, stubborn heartbeat against death.

I raised it to the sky, yelling, "Well, Winter? That's all you've got? A little frost? A little wind? I've got more fire in this pipe than you could ever put out!"

And somewhere, deep in the darkness, I think the moon laughed.

Dancing with bears because no one else is listening

There are evenings when you're talking to walls, and the walls have more empathy than the people. I had one of those. Three taverns, six jugs, twelve stories, thirteen insults, and in the end, they looked at me like I was a drunken rooster who had slept through the morning. So, out I went. Night air, cold and honest. The forest stood there like a horde of old creditors waiting for their debts.

I trudged inside, the horse trailing behind me, tired, offended, as if it had the better punch lines. "Shut up," I muttered, "I'm not talking to people today. They're too sober for that." And then I heard it: a deep scratching, as if someone were digging out the earth with a spoon, and a growling that made my ribs fold into accordions.

The bear emerged from the undergrowth like a lost doorman from God. Black, massive, his breath like two small clouds struggling with each other. He raised his head, sniffed at my existence, and twisted his mouth as if he'd made worse decisions, but not many. I raised my hand. "Good evening, Your Majesty. I'm the Baron, and I'm in bad company today. You're the better half."

He came closer. The horse took a step back, suddenly remembering statistical mortality. I stopped. I had no bullets, only a scrap of tobacco, my pipe, a knife, a tortured back, and a shout louder than my mind. "Listen," I said to the bear, "I have no quarrel with you. But the night wants a story, and without you, it'll be boring. So let's dance. Once. You lead."

The thing about bears is: They're like truths. You can't persuade them, only survive them. He stood up, as tall as a church, and I thought, "Wow, heaven has a sense of humor." Then he got back on all fours and, staring, pushed me into an invisible corner. I did what all decent idiots do: I took a step toward him.

"That's no way to start a dance," any woman would have said. But the bear wasn't a woman. He growled, and I growled back—a sound that sounded more like a bottle than a throat. I took my pipe, lit it, pulled, and a small ember popped up like an angry flea. The smoke rose directly into his face. The bear squinted, snorted, sneezed. And I swear, that was the first applause.

"All right," I growled, "it won't be a waltz. Let's say it's in 2/4 time, without music, in fear of death." I put the pipe in my mouth, dropped my gloves, raised my arms, and took a step to the left as if I were the worst dancer in a very hungry ballroom.

The bear placed its paw, heavy yet delicate, directly in front of my boots. I dodged—a breath, nothing more—and we began to circle. Not pretty. But true. The ground crunched, the snow wheezed, the forest held its breath. My heart drummed the accompaniment, and somewhere in the distance a woodpecker hammered, as if setting the pace.

We circled. I saw his eyes—black, but not empty—I smelled his fur—warm, iron-rich, as if someone had mixed blood with honey. I spoke because I always speak when things get quiet: "Listen, old man. I gave away the truth in three taverns today, and no one wanted it. It was the good truth, wrapped in a lie, just the way I know how. But they were too fed up. That's why it's your turn. Let's dance the truth. Short, painful, without an audience."

The bear didn't object. He breathed in my face—forest, winter, antiquity—and I felt my body finally open itself to something concrete: not to opinions, not to bills, not to dirty looks. To weight. To proximity. To the big, old "there."

"Go," I whispered. "Lead me." He led. A paw that sniffed at my coat, lifted it, turned me, tested me like a pawnbroker. I dodged, I slipped, I found my footing again. For a second, we were a system: his weight, my defiance, the frost as an orchestra.

Then it happened. He became curious. Not hungry—curious. He lifted himself, I raised my arms, and for an absurd heartbeat, his left paw was in my right, his right on my shoulder, my left on the nothingness vibrating between us. We stood like that, ridiculous, dangerous, tender. I smelled my own fear sweat and had to laugh.

"You see," I gasped, "that's closeness. No one has been this close to me in weeks without a knife in their sights. You're just hungry. That's more honest."

He hummed, deeply, and I felt the sound in my bones. I took two small steps, as if I knew an invisible melody. He followed, irritated, but without tearing me apart. We swayed. I felt my knees choosing between flight and rhythm—I chose the sound of footsteps in the snow, that "ch-crr, ch-crr," as old as any bar floorboard in the world.

The horse made a loud comment that said something like:*Don't get lyrical, you'll die soon.*I ignored it. I raised my whistle and blew a thin stream in the bear's face. He sneezed again. A joke. A real one. In the wild.

"Okay," I said, "part two: the 'You want to eat me, I want to understand you' character." I turned away, he followed, the paw came, I ducked, felt the air taste of metal. He ripped my coat at me, but didn't tear it open. I understood: we were testing boundaries. I laughed, he grumbled. We agreed that unity wasn't necessary.

So we danced, two idiots, a few motionless fir trees as our audience, the moon as our silent conductor. I felt warm, stupidly warm. That's what happens when you temporarily transform fear into work. I spoke, quietly: "You know, Bear, among people you always have to deliver. Punch line, moral, consolation. With you, it's enough not to die immediately. This is the best contract I've signed in years."

He sat down suddenly, heavy as a rock, and snorted. I stopped, my breath hanging between us like a crossbow string. The bear blinked, slowly, as if closing a file. I blinked back. "Break?" I asked. He lowered his head, grumbling from below, a sound that felt like an old blanket over cold feet.

I sat down too. Not too close. Close enough. The pipe glowed. I held it out to him, legs bent, my back against a tree trunk. He sniffed the small, hot mouthpiece, recoiled, like a child licking a candle and realizing that fire isn't food. I grinned. "Not food. Just a memory."

We sat. I told him, half-aloud, about Constantinople, which we would overdrink later anyway. About wolves you have to eat if you want to live. About cannonballs that can be ridden like very capricious horses. About women who undress you by dressing you. About nights that are greater than any morning. The bear listened as bears listen: silent, uninvolved, completely there. No questions. No advice. Just this big, warm existence that tells you:*You are ridiculous – and alive.*

At some point, I realized I was freezing, even though I was sweating. The kind of cold that comes from within when the embers get too small. I scraped a bit of resin from a spruce tree, stuffed it into my pipe with some old tobacco and a scrap of shirt, lit it, took a puff, and the flame gave a little, offended curtsy—but it stayed. I held my hand over it as if it were a wounded bird.

"I have to go," I said finally. "You made me listen, more than any tavern. Thank you." The bear stood up, without drama. I did too. We looked at each other, two poor dancers who at least hadn't completely lost the beat. He took a step, big, away from me, then another. I raised my hand, and it looked like a blessing, but it was only a*Goodbye, if we deserve it*.

The horse approached as if it had the courage now that the loan had expired. I patted its neck: "Once in your life, you dance with reality—and it doesn't bite. Write it down, boy." The horse didn't chew anything, but made an approving sound, longing for hay.

We started the return journey. The forest breathed again, like a room after a feast: sharp, sensible, boring. Behind me, tracks crunched next to each other: hoof, boot, paw. It was almost too poetic to be true. I deliberately walked crookedly so it wouldn't look corny.

At the edge of the village, a lantern burned, small and yellow, a human heart in its glass. In front of the tavern, the innkeeper stood scraping ice off the sign,

which read "To the Golden Wind" in flourishes. A lie. Nothing about it was golden. He saw me, saw the scratches on my coat, the steam rising from me as if I had a knitting fire in my stomach. "Baron," he said, "you look like you've kissed hell."

"I did," I said. "She kissed back and was cleaner than I thought." He didn't blink. We were long past that part of our relationship. "Drinking?" "If you ask, it's too late," I said, stepping inside.

Inside, it smelled of beer, cabbage, wet dog, and guilt. The men looked, the women looked more closely. "What was outside?" asked one man, whose courage was always tied to the presence of others. I shrunk my coat on the nail, placed my pipe on the bar as if it were a trophy, and said, "Waltz with a bear. Two bars of nature, one bar of fear, breathing in between."

Laughter that wasn't real. "Baron, you're crazy." "Yes," I said, "and better than you." I took the tankard the innkeeper had silently placed, drank, and put it down. "Do you want the story or the proof?" "Proof," one shouted, glad he sounded clever. I turned around, stepped out, returned, and held out the thing that had been lying on the threshold: a single, broken claw, black, curved, as big as a jackknife. I placed it on the bar. The room became a graveyard for a second, then it breathed again. "He lost it," I said, "while he was dancing. I'm giving it to the house. Maybe it'll help your beer become more bear-like."

They stared. Someone crossed themselves against superstition, someone else against the truth. The innkeeper took the claw, weighed it, and placed it on a shelf, as if it had always been there. "On the house," he said simply, and refilled the glass.

I told them. Not everything, not too much. Just enough so that by the end, they felt like they'd been there without even stepping outside. And when they laughed, they really laughed this time—not because I'd exaggerated, but because I'd lied less than usual. Bears are helpful in this case: They're the part of the fairy tale that the truth has written.

Later, much later, when the stove stared empty into the embers and the last schnapps made an offer no tomorrow could keep, I went back out. The air was sharp. I looked back into the forest. Nothing. Only night. But I knew something was there. A heavy, slow, old friend, who for once wasn't eating, but was understanding.

I smoked the pipe to a sliver, put it in my jacket, and said quietly to the sky: "If no one's listening, dance with the bear. He doesn't judge, he just counts steps." The moon did what it always does: it forgot to nod. I took it as approval.

I fell asleep against the stable wall, my head on the saddle, the horse close, the smoke in my wool, the claws behind the bar wall, and music that consisted of only three things: breath, heart, snow. Enough. For one night. For one chapter. For a man who talks too much and, for once, didn't have to die.

In the morning, the innkeeper asked if I could do the thing with the bear again—the guests would pay. "No," I said. "Dancing isn't a trick. It's just grace, which you can't get twice in the same place." He nodded. He didn't understand. That was comforting.

I saddled up, I drank, I left. And the forest watched me as if it had made a better joke than I had.

A city in the belly of my stomach

There are nights when you devour the world – and it devours you back. I had one of those evenings in Riga, maybe it was Moscow, maybe just some godforsaken place, where the streets smelled of urine and women's eyes shone like cheap coins in candlelight. In any case: I had been drinking. More than allowed, less than necessary. And something bigger than myself was raging in my stomach.

I swear: I felt my stomach start to grow. Not that little rumbling after a bad bowl of soup, no – this was a construction project. Streets were being paved, towers were being erected, hammers were banging, workers were screaming. I heard it. I felt it. I was a walking construction site, and the foundation was liquor.

First came the streets. I felt my stomach expand, as if paving stones were being laid, tight, straight, with that rhythm of beats that drives your teeth out of your ears. "Tack-tack, tack-tack." I lay on a bench in the tavern while the others were still drinking, and I sweated because I knew: more than digestion was happening in there. Someone was building a damn road network.

Then the houses. Brick by brick, wall by wall. I heard them, I smelled them, burnt, red, warm. And suddenly I felt like I had to burp – and with the burp

came a chime. A real, deep, echoing sound that made everyone in the room shake their beer mugs. People looked, I grinned. "Just my stomach," I said, "someone's building a church."

And indeed: inside, beneath my ribs, rose a cathedral. Did I feel the spires scratching against my esophagus? Yes. Was it painful? Hell, yes. But I was proud. Who else wears Gothic architecture under their skin?

The city grew. A market sprang up in my stomach, full of voices, laughter, and the calls of merchants. I heard them. "Fish! Bread! Wine!" – Wine? cried my stomach. "Of course, wine!" I tipped the next jug after it, and down below it flowed across the market square like a small red river. The townspeople cheered, the children jumped in, the elderly wept with gratitude.

I stood up, staggering, and yelled, "I am your God! Drink while the river flows!" The bar fell silent, everyone looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. But I knew: I had found him. In my belly, in this living city.

The landlady came over and folded her arms. "Baron, you've had too much again." "No, woman," I said, "I have too little. A city demands more than one pitcher." And I ordered three more.

On the second night, the wolves came. Wolves always come. They stalked the city in my belly, howling, scratching, trying to tear down the walls. I heard them, I felt their claws in my abdomen, and I knew: If I didn't stop them, everything would collapse.

So I kept drinking. Every sip was a soldier, every bottle a cannon. I stood in the tavern, swaying, shouting, "Attack!" and felt my liver become a fortress, my ribs forming ramparts. The wolves repelled me. And inside, inside me, the townspeople cheered.

A man in the room, a short, beak-nosed official, shouted, "You're crazy!" "No," I said, "I'm the mayor of my own stomach. And that's more than you'll ever be."

Laughter, half pity, half fear. But I knew: I had won.

On the third day, the city continued to grow. It gained a library—books made of breadcrumbs, stories made of old tobacco smoke. It gained a barracks—my veins were the streets, my heart the drumroll. I lay on my back in the alley, half-puking into the snow, and felt a chime ringing downstairs, as if the citizens had started a festival in my honor.

"Baron," whispered one of the drunkards, "you're sick." "No," I gasped, "I'm populated."

But every city has its downfall. Mine came in the form of too much cheap brandy. I tipped over, I drank, I roared, and then I felt the houses shake. The streets burst open, the towers collapsed. My stomach trembled. People screamed, the bells rang in alarm, the walls fell.

I ran out into the courtyard, fell to my knees, and vomited. Vomited like a volcano, like a revolution, like the fall of Troy. Everything came up—wine, bread, bile, bells, chimes. And in the final choking, I heard the sigh of an entire city sinking into rubble and ash.

I lay there, trembling, empty, burning. Inside me: only rubble. On my lips: ash and wine. I laughed. "This is how cities die," I whispered. "This is how empires die. In the stomach of a man who drinks too much."

Later, as I crawled back into the tavern, the landlady asked me, "Baron, what have you lost?" I smiled, blood and wine in my beard. "Just a city." She shook her head. "And what have you gained?" I raised the jug that was placed before me. "Enough room for a new one."

About lies that are truer than life

I'll tell you right away: Truth is a tired dog. Lying on the street, stinking, scratching its balls, hoping someone will pet it. But no one does. Too boring. Too ordinary. Who wants a dog anyway? Everyone wants the wolf, the beast, the mouth full of teeth. And that's exactly what a lie is. But damn it: A good lie.

I realized early on: If you serve people the truth, they'll push your plate away. "Too bland," they say, "too bitter." But if you give them a lie—a big, fat, dripping lie—they'll eat your hands off of it. And if you do it right, if you embellish the thing so it sounds like a saint's confession, then at the end they'll exclaim, "That must have been how it was!"

Once I was sitting in a tavern in St. Petersburg, surrounded by a crowd of merchants, all well-fed, all fat, with bellies that looked like upholstered chairs. They asked me about my travels. I could have told them the truth: that I almost froze to death in Riga, that I was eaten by fleas in Vilnius, that I slept on the

streets for a week in Moscow because no one would pay my bills. But who wants to hear that?

So I told them I rode to Constantinople on a cannonball. Their eyes widened, their mouths dropped. One dropped his spoon. They hung on every word.

And I thought, "That's the trick. The lie gets you attention, the truth will only get you a shake of the head."

Another time, I claimed I shot a deer carrying an entire cherry tree in its skull. Nonsense, of course. But I described the scene like this: The red fruit dripped like blood, the birds fluttered out like flying thoughts, and as I fired the shot, the tree sang one last song. They sat there, silent, spellbound.

An old man wiped a tear from his beard. Because of a lie. Because of a damned, made-up story. But it struck him deeper than any sermon.

And then I knew: lies are like wine. A good vintage, a little bit of lying, makes life bearable. Truth is like water: clear, healthy, but boring after three sips.

Of course, they accuse me of being a braggart. A liar. A baron of poetry. They say I'm tarnishing the name of truth. I tell them: "Truth never got my ass out of the swamp. But a good lie paid for my pitcher every time."

Because that's the truth: Lies pay the bills. Truths fill graves.

I remember a woman in Warsaw. Beautiful as sin, precious as a king. She asked me if I'd ever touched the stars. I could have told her, "No, I'm just an old drunk who can barely climb the stairs." Instead, I took her hand, placed it on my chest, and said, "I have them all in my heart. Do you hear them clinking?"

She cried. She believed me. And for one night, I was more than I was. Was that a lie? Of course. But it was more true than the life we otherwise had left: cold, lonely, with too many bills to pay in the morning.

Sometimes, when I sit alone, pipe in mouth and bottle in hand, I wonder if it wouldn't be better to keep quiet. Just tell the truth. Just be what I am: a man who drinks too much, talks too much, lives too much. But then I hear the bells of my own stories again, laughing, clanging, carrying more weight than any "honest" confession.

The truth dies in the darkness. The lie lives in the light. It dances, it laughs, it spits in your face—but it gives you a reason to keep going.

So yes, I'm a liar. But I lie in such a way that you'll recognize yourself in them. My lies are mirrors, just a little foggy from the smoke. You look into them, you laugh, you cry—and in the end, you believe me more than any damn priest.

And when they lay me in my grave one day, they should write on the stone: "Here lies Baron von Münchhausen. He lied. And every one of his lies was truer than your life."

The Baron becomes a farmer – and the field almost eats him

The day came when I thought I had to grow up. Yes, that kind of nonsense happens to me too. After years of booze, cannonballs, bears, and lies that made the world look better than it was, I suddenly stood there and thought, "Maybe I should do something solid. Something tangible. Something people respect."

So I bought myself a piece of land. A field as big as my megalomania and as fertile as an old horse—that is, not at all. I stood on it, the wind blew in my face, and I shouted, "This is my kingdom now!" The horse snorted, the crows cawed, and the earth fell silent. I should have interpreted the silence. But I, the idiot I was, just grinned and thought, "A baron becomes a farmer. What could possibly go wrong?"

On the first day, I took the plow. I hitched the horse to it, grabbed the handles, and started plowing. After three meters, my hands were blisters; after five meters, I hated the sun; after ten meters, I hated humanity. The horse pulled, puffed, stumbled, and I screamed like a madman: "Pull, damn it, pull, or we'll turn you into goulash!"

But the ground laughed at me. Hard, dry, and full of stones. Every step was a fistfight. The plow jumped, the handle hit me in the stomach, and I saw stars, even though it was midday. I fell into the grass, gasping, sweating, and thought, "This is what work feels like? No wonder farmers are always in such a bad mood."

On the second day, I thought, "Maybe it's the technique." I poured a bottle of wine behind my head, lit my pipe, and set off. "Everything goes better with momentum," I told myself. After 20 steps, I stumbled, landed headfirst in the field, and tasted more dirt than a worm.

And then it happened: The earth grabbed me. No joke. The furrows ripped open, clay hands grabbed at me, cold fingers tugged at my boots. I kicked, I

screamed, I felt myself sinking deeper. The field had decided it was fed up with my megalomania. "Back to the earth with you, Baron," it growled, "you're fertilizer, not a farmer!"

I screamed, pulled, wrestled, and once again, only my damned instinct, somewhere between desperation and idiocy, saved me: I reached into my belt, drew the knife, and stabbed the ground. Again and again. Left, right, wildly. The field howled, the earth shook, and I spat dirt and curses until it finally let me go. I crawled out, covered in mud, stinking, half-dead—but free.

In the tavern, they laughed their heads off. "The Baron wants to be a farmer!" they roared. "The field is eating him up, and he's vomiting dirt like a mole!" I raised the jug, grinned with crooked teeth, and shouted, "Yeah, go ahead and laugh! But better a farmer who's almost being eaten by the earth than a farmer who just dies on it!"

They toasted, they laughed, they shouted, "Baron, you're crazy!" And I thought, "Maybe. But the earth swallowed me once and spat me out again. That means: I don't belong to it. I belong to myself. And to my wine."

Later, on one of those nights when you breathe more smoke than air, I stood at the edge of the field again. The moon hung pale over the furrows, the wind blew cold through the stalks, and I swore I heard them whisper again: "Come back. We're waiting."

I laughed, lit my pipe, and shouted, "Not today, field! Not while the jugs are full! Maybe tomorrow. Maybe never. Until then, eat your own stones!"

And the field was silent. But I knew: It hadn't forgotten.

Drinking competition with the Pope

Sometimes, when you've had enough, reality seems so ridiculous that you think: Screw it, I'll just replay it. That's what happened in Rome. I had no reason to be there, except that my horse had taken the wrong path and I woke up two days later in a carriage that reeked of incense and rancid olive oil.

And suddenly I was standing in the middle of the Vatican. White stone, golden gates, cardinals with faces like yellowed tombstones. Everywhere this whispering, this gesticulation, this eternal "God here, God there." I just thought: "If your God were any good, he would have put a glass in front of me by now."

A Swiss Guardsman came, a stuffy fellow with a lance longer than my entire career, and asked, "Who are you?" I grinned. "Baron von Münchhausen. A man with more thirst than your holy scriptures allow."

Normally, they would have thrown me out. But apparently, the Pope was bored that day. Someone whispered something in someone's ear, and before I knew it, I was standing in a hall as big as a slaughterhouse, only cleaner. Marble floor, frescoes above my head, the saints grinning at me as if they knew what was coming next.

And there he sat. The Pope. The Holy Father. White, golden, shining like a statue that's been polished too much. And beside him: a cup. Silver. Large. Filled. Wine, red, heavy. I swear, the smell alone made my knees weak.

He looked at me as if someone had just smuggled a clown into his mess hall. "Baron," he said, "they say you can drink more than a battalion of German mercenaries." I pulled my pipe out of my mouth, grinned, and said, "Holy Father, mercenaries only drink when they're paid. I drink because otherwise the world is unbearable. That's the difference."

He nodded slowly. Then he raised his cup. "Shall we see?"

And so began the holiest drinking bout of my life. Cup upon cup, jug upon jug. They had barrels in the cellar, older than my lies. Wine so thick it tasted like liquid confession. I drank, he drank. I belched, he blessed. I swayed, he smiled.

After the fifth cup, I asked, "Holy Father, do you actually believe your stories?" He didn't answer. He just tipped it back. I understood: This was the most honest answer from a pope in centuries.

The cardinals around him grew nervous. "Holy Father, your health!" they whispered. But he waved them off. "The Lord will decide." "No," I said, "the wine will decide. And I prefer that."

By the tenth cup, we were both sweating. My head was pounding like a bell, his tiara slipped askew. He grinned, suddenly human, almost chummy, and said, "You're a heretic." "No," I said, "I'm a drinker. The difference is: a heretic believes differently. I don't believe in anything except the next sip."

At the end, we were both standing there. The hall was awash, the angels on the ceiling were dancing the can-can, the cardinals were clutching their robes as if they were afraid we were about to vomit eternity all over them. The Pope raised the last cup. I raised mine. We clinked glasses. It sounded like thunder.

Then he drank. I drank. The wine flowed, the world spun, and I swear: in that moment, we were brothers. Two men, two bodies, one god made of grapes.

He was the first to collapse. Quietly, with dignity, with a sigh that sounded like a prayer. I was still standing, staggering, laughing, sweating. "A miracle!" one cried. "A scandal!" another cried.

I raised my arms, wine dripping from my beard, and I yelled, "The Pope is defeated! The Kingdom of God has no more damn water!"

Of course, that was my last day in the Vatican. They dragged him out, they threw me out, and later, somewhere in the alleys of Rome, I woke up with a flag that could have consecrated half of Italy. But you know what? I had done it. I had drunk with the Pope. And won.

Since then, I've said: If you ever doubt your strength, ask yourself if you could drink a pope under the table. If so, then you don't need heaven. If not, then keep drinking.

Cheers.

An elephant in a china shop – and me in the elephant

The city—be it Gdansk, Warsaw, or some other market town with too many bureaucracies and too few brains—was celebrating a fair. Stalls everywhere, shouting everywhere, stuff no one needed that everyone would buy if the wine was right. A ballad singer tortured a lute, children ran around like badly behaved chickens, and in the square stood a miracle so large that even my megalomania froze for a moment: an elephant.

He came with a caravan, from somewhere made of sand and stories, and he carried a gilded tent on his back like a portable kingdom. He was gray in every shade from "screw it" to "calm down, I'm still breathing." His eyes said: I've seen more than your entire city combined, and I can still put up with you. I liked him immediately.

The showman, a fat old fellow with a waxed beard and top-boots, trumpeted: "The gentlest of creatures, the wise man of the desert, tame as a lamb!" – and at that very moment, a child's drum ripped somewhere, a goat jumped onto

the cart of gingerbread, a dog yelped, and the elephant decided the world was too loud today. He snorted, stamped, turned his head – and walked off.

Not "go" like a stroll. "Go" like a thunderstorm with toenails. One step, and the gingerbread stand shook; two, and the blacksmith lost his hat; three, and the crowd parted, like the sea when someone finally roars louder than their fear. The showman shrieked, "Quiet! Quiet!" and the trunk swept the man aside like a fly on a tavern bar.

I was near the china shop. It was seriously called "Zum Fragrechlichen Glück" (Fragile Happiness). I giggled, then yelled, "Don't go in there!" and that's exactly why the elephant went.**in there**He poked his head through the double doors, which weren't built for such a thing, and suddenly the street sounded like an orchestra of a thousand plates dancing their last waltz. Shards flew, cups screamed, jugs died, vases shattered in memory. The shopkeeper, a man whose mustache looked like two staples around a much too small life, exclaimed, "My luck!"

I did what heroes do when they have drunk too much: I ran**there**I took my voice out of my mouth, shoved my fear into my boots, and called to the animal: "Hey, Your Majesty! Turn around, there's nothing but noise and bad decoration here!" The elephant saw me. His eyes, large and old, glided over me like a tired judge over a confession. Then came the trunk.

He smelled of hay, dust, the circus, rain on fur, and work no one understands. He wrapped his arms around my waist, not roughly, more like, "Okay, you're coming with me now." Before I could curse, I was in the air. The animal lifted me up—a gentle arrest warrant—and put me where my pride was tightest: in its mouth.

A moment of twilight, a tooth in the corner of my eye, a tongue inspecting me like a curious priest, and then—the swallow. The world tilted. I slid through the damp, tube-like land you only get to know if you're dumber than all the warning signs combined. I arrived in the warmth.

In a belly.

I know I've already mentioned the fish thing, but fish are just wine barrels with bones. An elephant is a cathedral. There's room inside. Room for half an orchestra, for my stupid fear, for the entire trembling fairground crowd if they had shrunk. It smelled of grass, of old hay, of a melancholy known only to animals who remember more than they say.

I stood. The ground was... tough. A carpet of half-digested plantations, cleaner than any tavern I'd ever slept in. Above me: a rhythmic rumble, deep, non-threatening. An organ that breathed. I felt my way forward, found something uneven—a rope, a piece of stall decoration that the animal had eaten—and used it to weave my dignity together. "Baron," I said to myself, "you're in an elephant. Admit it: This is new."

Outside, far outside, the shattering of porcelain, the shrieks of merchants, the mindless "Help!" of the crowd. Inside: me. My pipe was still there, half-wet. I tapped, I cursed, I laughed. Then I lit. A pitiful spark, an offended flame. My stomach grumbled disapprovingly. "All right," I whispered, "just a little light in this big, gray church."

I made myself a camp of straw bales, found a tin spoon tip (God knows where), and devised a plan that smelled of liquor: If I calm him down from the inside, he'll turn around. If I guide him from the inside, he'll go out. If I**annoy**, he barks at me. All three sounded tempting.

I decided to talk. I like to talk when the world is too loud. "Listen, dude," I said to my stomach. "I know noise. I**am**Noise. But the noise out there doesn't make music. You need a beat. I'll give you one." I took my belt, wrapped it around my hand, and drummed. Gently. Left, right, pause. Again. Left, right, pause. A march without soldiers.

The animal was listening. I felt it. The organ changed its tone, became quieter. I continued drumming, singing something like a lullaby, only with lyrics: "No porcelain, no porcelain, we're going out, we're going in..." – my muse was still outside, probably drunk. But it was enough. My stomach tilted. We turned – yes,**we**– and rocked. One step. Another. A long, warm river flowing in a dark direction: the exit, somewhere.

Then someone from far away shouted, "He's eating the city!" The elephant froze, like someone saying the wrong word in a confession. He took a breath. I knew a move I didn't like was coming. So, Plan B:**Annoy**.

I refilled the pipe, added a few more stems, lit it more crisply, and blew the smoke upwards. Not much, not harshly, just enough to tickle. My belly twitched, my trunk roared, my throat went "HNNGG!" I built a rhythm out of it: two puffs of smoke, a belt tap on the "right wall," a pause, a hum. The elephant let the air rush through him, snorting, as if trying to expel a frog from the organ.

“Exactly,” I said, “promote me.”

And then the best thing that can happen to a man who has been inside a warm animal for too long happened: He was fired.

Not with honor. With style. The throat opened like the door to a bad theater, I slid forward on my tongue, the trunk grabbed me, took me in, twisted my self-confidence into a knot – and**lap**me through the door.

I flew. I swear, I briefly looked like a butcher's angel. The space below me: a sea of broken glass. The crowd: "Oooooh!" The sky: laughed. I smashed into a pile of tablecloths someone had dragged away and got stuck, half baron, half linen cake. I stood still. The world went "ping." I went "ouch."

The elephant stood in the doorway of the china shop, looking as if he'd wandered into a dream that didn't suit him. I walked over, slowly, my hands open. My shirt smelled of inner life and decision. "It's okay," I murmured, "we're all having bad days. You more than me."

I placed my hand on his forehead. Warm. His eyes: old, tired, knowing. He blew a pinch of the barnyard scent into my face, and I took it like incense. "Get out of the shop," I said quietly. "Get out of the noise. I know a field. There's only a blade of grass in the way."

The showman crawled out of a cloud of broken glass, cursing in three languages, and no one was convincing. "The animal! The animal! My merchandise!" "Your lies," I said, "and your bad advertising. You promised him peace. You gave him a circus. No wonder he's tearing apart the Church of Plates." "What? Church?" "Stop thinking," I advised gently. "Even the elephant found it exhausting."

I took the reins. He lay there as if he'd been waiting for a sensible hand. We walked. Not solemnly, not guilty, simply: forward. The crowd formed a corridor, as quickly as people make way when they realize they'll otherwise cling to the truth. The animal followed. Porcelain churchyard behind us, market criers to the side, the smell of roasted almonds in front of us. I placed the beat on his forehead once more, very lightly: left, right, pause. The organ inside was humming, yes.

He stopped on the meadow in front of the city gate. A gray mountain, finding its place again. I turned around. The shopkeeper—mustache in clamps—stood

in the distance, his hands on his temples, as if checking if his head was still sane. I raised my hand. "I'll negotiate."

The showman waddled up, now mottled, less gold, more dusty. "Who pays for the damage?" "The one who said 'tame,'" I said, giving the elephant a pat on the shoulder for his courage. "And the one who fills the city so full that even patience stumbles." He gasped. "That's—" "I know who you are. And I know what you're doing now: You give the man with the shop half the cash register, you stand up again tomorrow, but on**edge**, and you tell people: He's big, he's old, he's tired. Not 'tame.' Just honest."

He thought about what was hurting him. "And you?" "Me?" I relit my pipe. "I'll take a walk, a reconciled animal—and a cup of wine, if anyone's smart enough to bring it."

The city was exceptionally smart. The innkeeper at the "Three Pitchers" sent a boy. I raised the pitcher, drank, and let the red flow like a contract I finally understood. The elephant wagged its ears, which I interpreted as applause.

And because a chapter without a showcase is not my style, I climbed – yes, I**rose**– once again on his shoulder. Not "on top" like a general, but more "at the side," like someone who knows where his place ends. I sat on his neck, his trunk like a question mark fanfare in front of us, and the city watched like a drunk learning to sit quietly.

We went through the gate once more. Not along the market. Up the stream, over the small bridge, through the meadows. Children ran along, barefoot, laughing. One called out: "Baron, is he dancing too?" "Not today," I said. "Today he's just breathing."

He stopped at the water's edge. He filled his trunk, splashed, a rain without guilt. I laughed, letting the spray baptize me. "That's how you clean a city without killing a single plate," I said.

The showman came, more humble. The shopkeeper came, cautiously. The two looked at each other like two dogs who realize the bone doesn't belong to either of them. I set the pace: "You pay. You forgive. And you," I tapped the elephant on the forehead, "you stay big."

The matter ended as all decent things do: with a nod that wasn't too grand, with a jug that wasn't empty, and with a story that was bigger than all three men put together. That evening, something new hung above the bar at the

"Drei Krügen": not a piece of bear claw this time, but the shard of a blue and white vase, on the rim of which was an imprint like that of a soft, very large lip. "The Elephant's Kiss," someone wrote underneath. Kitsch? Yes. True? Also.

I went out late, the horse snorted, the moon did its pale routine. I leaned against the wall, smoked my pipe to the scar, and said quietly into the night: "Most disasters begin with a lie about gentleness. And stop when someone finds the rhythm."

From the darkness came a deep hum, far beyond the meadows, as old as three continents. I raised my hand. Go, great friend. I'm going my own way. Neither of us has anything broken to mend today.

And because I'm me, I turned to the door, knocked, and called out: "Landlord! I'll have another drink for the vase."

The evening nodded. The city, too. And the elephant—the elephant had long since understood.

Conversations with dead people at the bar

The night was like old pants—full of holes, but still wearable. I stumbled into a tavern that had more shadows than customers. A place where the beer wasn't cold, the wine wasn't authentic, and the waitresses were so tired they looked at you like a confessional that had long since closed.

The counter was sticky. The wood was so old you could swear it was filled with the stories of men who had drowned their livers here a hundred years ago. I sat down, ordered a pitcher that tasted of cellar and mold, and waited for something to stop me—tiredness, booze, or fate. Instead, someone I'd long thought dead sat down next to me.

He looked like a general I'd seen die in the war years ago—only paler, thinner, with eyes that had no bill to pay because they'd long since been paid. "Baron," he said, grinning, "you're still drinking like a damn regiment."

I stared at him, pulled my pipe out of my mouth, and laughed dryly. "You're dead." "Maybe," he replied. "But the bar here knows no boundaries. Living, dead—all customers."

Little by little, the tavern filled. Not with flesh, not with breath, but with shadows, with figures crawling through the cracks in the floor. One sat down on the bench opposite: a hunter who had been mauled by his own dog. He toasted me with a glass that never emptied. Next to him: a woman I had once kissed in Warsaw, before the plague took her. Her lips were still red, but the rest was gray as ash. She grinned as if she knew she was more beautiful than most of the living.

And then the old man came, my father, or perhaps just the ghost of my memories of him. He didn't put down a pitcher. He put down a mirror. "Look at yourself, boy," he said. "See what you've become."

I looked—and saw a man who always laughed because crying would have drowned him. A man who drank because the world was too dry otherwise. A man who lived because he was too cowardly to give himself up. I grinned at the reflection and toasted myself. "I don't look so bad."

The conversations grew louder. The general talked about the field he had never left. The hunter spoke of the bones he could no longer count. The woman whispered that kissing in death was better because there was nothing left to lose. And my father remained silent—he just watched.

I asked, "Why are you here?" They answered in unison: "Because you won't let us go. Because you tell stories. Because you lie, and we continue to live in your lies."

I tipped the jug. The wine dripped onto the floor, and the shadows licked it like dogs. I laughed, hard, hoarse, and shouted, "Well then, stay, damn it! As long as I'm drinking, you're not dead!"

The landlady—old, wrinkled, her eyes like a grave that holds too many secrets—placed a new carafe in front of me. "From whom?" I asked. She grinned crookedly. "From those who can pay—with memory."

The night dragged on. I spoke with men who were never born. With women who never died. With children who grew up and grew strong in my stories, even though they had long since disappeared in real life. I laughed, I cried, I cursed. The bar became a boundary between two worlds, and my glass was the key.

Finally, I stood up, staggered, and staggered to the door. Behind me, my father called out, "Watch out, boy. Every sip buys you company—but at some point,

you'll just be a guest yourself." I turned around, grinned with crooked teeth, and said, "Hopefully at a damn good bar then."

And I went out into a night that was suddenly quiet. Too quiet. But in my stomach, in my throat, in my head—they kept talking.

The Wine River of Constantinople

I entered the city like a lost cork: chipped, hollow, yet confident that somewhere there was a barrel left for me. The Bosphorus glittered like a snake that had consumed too many secrets, and the sun burned on my skull as if it wanted to fry the last decent thoughts out of me. I had none. I was just thirsty.

The first pub wasn't even a building, more like a patched-together promise: two planks, a crooked bar, three barrels for stools. The landlady grinned toothlessly, as if she'd sold every smile on credit. "What'll you have, stranger?" "A miracle," I said. "Or a cup of wine, and the miracle on the back." She slammed down a tankard so dirty it was already making history. I drank and tasted homecoming, sin, and a faint hint of bucket. "One more," I said, and my throat burned like a fuse.

Word got around that a baron was in town. That's what happens when you stick your title like a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound: people believe you before they ask. An interpreter appeared, thin, with a face like a damp rag. "They say you can... set things in motion." "I can turn the truth inside out and sell it as silk," I said. "What do you need?" "Wine," said the interpreter, looking as if the word were too small for his mouth. "Not jugs. Rivers. The city is thirsty. The merchants are hoarding. The palace is laughing." I grinned. "Rivers, then. That can be done. I've set worse things in motion, like my morals."

The landlady laughed dryly, like a hinge. "If you make a river, Baron, you'll have my best barrel." "And your worst," I said, "for research."

I never claimed to be honest. I only claim that a good lie has the purpose of reminding the world of its possibilities. So I set off, interpreter in tow, through alleys so narrow even the cats held their breath. We found a gunner in the harbor, a bull of a man with a heart I only discovered because it rumbled with every sip. "I need your gun," I said.
"For what?" "For peace," I said. "And for thirst." He scratched his beard. "Do you have money?" "No," I said, "but I have a story that will put you in the

history books." He thought for a moment. That took a while. "And what about gunpowder?" "It's in my blood," I said. "All I need is the spark."

Money is a form of poetry that pleases everyone. Having little poetry, I needed access to a place where the barrels were heavier than the arguments. We crept into the palace cellar—what's "crept"? We rushed in like two half-baked prophets searching for a miracle that dared not contradict. The guards were tired of wealth. Whiskey glances, wine footsteps, that kind of weariness. With a friendly nod and a fictitious invitation ("The Sultan sends his regards and requests that the oaks be carried to his altar"), we suddenly found ourselves among labyrinths of barrels. Wine everywhere. Black-red, ruby-red, damned heart's blood.

"Do you see this?" I whispered to the interpreter. "This isn't storage. This is deprivation of liberty." "We can't carry her." "Carry her? My boy, we'll let her go."

The plan was simple, like all great crimes: We connected the barrels with hoses we "borrowed" from the dockworkers—silver in hand, lies in ear. Then we laid the cannon on its side, stuck the barrel into the belly of a barrel, and transformed the thunder tube into a gigantic tap. "That's blasphemy," said the interpreter. "That's hydraulics," I said. "And theology for people with dry throats."

The gunner appeared, sweating, smiling, the kind of guy who takes every sunrise personally. "I brought powder." "Wonderful. We're not shooting at people. Today we're shooting at thirst."

We lit a fuse that was more symbolic than instrumental. It hissed, it crackled, and then the cannon coughed as if it had a cold—and the wine burst forth. First a stream, then a gush, finally a gurgling, red hurricane. The barrels groaned, the skins sang, and the alleys filled with liquid laughter. The wine sought its way like cats that know there's fish somewhere.

Constantinople suddenly smelled of confession. Men stood on the steps, rubbing their eyes and saying things like, "I deserve this" and "This is the punishment I've always wanted." Women held out bowls and buckets, children dipped bread into them as if it were a mass, and the seagulls stumbled noisily over their happiness, too drunk to believe in any kind of sublimity anymore.

"Baron," gasped the interpreter, "that's... that's a river!" "Call it what you will," I said. "The city needs legends like a drunk needs back braces."

The first to protest were the merchants. Of course. Their faces were the color of unopened safes. They cursed, threatened, and waved papers that looked like they were printed on parchment and fear. But the wine was already flowing through the streets, and the city was listening. The great thing about a river is that it drowns arguments out of hand. You can argue with water, but water is patient. Wine is more patient—and laughs along the way.

The guards arrived too late and too thirsty. One stared into the red stream, then raised his hand in salute and said: "In the name of..."—he trailed off—"...public order: a cup, please." I handed him a bucket. Order must be maintained.

Imagine the Bosphorus, only smaller and drunk, like an uncle at a wedding. The wine rolled down the slopes, kissed the stones, and even made the cats pious. At the mosque, the minarets hung like straws in the sky, and I swear, for a moment, the wind gusted as if it wanted a sip itself. The muezzin paused, his voice breaking into a chuckle, and mingled with the prayers was something like, "God knows this was necessary today."

The gunner shot corks into the air from a second cannon—as a warning, he claimed, but really because it sounded nice when the things whistled like drunken birds over the rooftops. If you whispered a kind word to a cork, it would fall softly; if you cursed it, it would catch a gutter.

"What if the palace hangs us?" asked the interpreter. "Then at least we won't be hanging by the bottle," I said, and drank. "But I have a theory: No ruler messes with a celebrating crowd as long as the drums are still beating. We have drums made of barrels, trumpets made of throats, and kettledrums made of hearts."

There comes a point in every orgy—even organized ones—when the music becomes too quiet and the laughter too loud. The river reached the harbor, fed the ropes, colored the water, and the ships rocked as if they had finally understood what the sea was for. Sailors bent down, filled their bellies, and sang songs that undressed themselves. The wine became softer, warmer, thicker. It took on a mood. And then, like all miracles, it came to an end.

The barrels stopped groaning. The hoses hung sadly. One last belch from the cannon, and silence. I stood on the quayside, my boots reddish-brown, the city's laughter still ringing in my ears. The interpreter looked at me as if I'd given him a secret he couldn't give back. "What now?" "Now," I said, "comes

the hangover. And the regret. And then comes the myth. Three courses, served in exactly that order."

The merchants found their voices again, the guards their duties, and the city its memory. I made myself small, which wasn't difficult. The gunner disappeared into a side alley, the barrel over his shoulder as if it were a log. The innkeeper found me first. She smelled of pepper and tobacco and a trace of hope.
"Baron," she said, "you really did it." "I just pulled the plug," I said. "The longing flowed on its own." She placed two barrels at my feet—her best, her worst. "A deal is a deal." I nodded. "The best for today, the worst for tomorrow. The body is a temple, but faith is a gamble."

At night, the wine crept back into the stories. That's its natural habitat. The alleys smelled of sugar and sin, and somewhere two lovers wept because the truth tastes worse sober. I sat on a barrel and polished my conscience with the back of my hand. It remained dirty, so I gave up.

The interpreter sat down next to me. "Why do you do such a thing?" "Because the world has a dry mouth," I said. "And because lies, well lit, shed more light than many a truth."
"And if they go wrong?" "Then it's called experience." He nodded. "And the palace?" "Don't forget: palaces get thirsty too. Tomorrow they'll tell it in a way that sounds more noble. Today it's ours."

A donkey stumbled by, its hooves sticky, staring at me as if I were the culprit. Maybe I was. Maybe I was just saying out loud what everyone was thinking: that we'd rather drown than slowly die of thirst. I raised the jug. "Cheers to you, you stubborn saint." The donkey belched. I call that consent.

Towards dawn, as the sky changed its shirt and the first prayers trickled into the alleys, I took a last sip from the best barrel. It tasted of manic clarity. I stood up, pulled my coat tighter, and left the worst barrel hidden for later. A man must make provisions—for bad times, for good lies, for longer nights.

"Baron!" someone called. A guard, young, with eyes like undecided coins. "The Sultan wants to know who turned the city into a vineyard." I smiled. "Tell him it was thirst. I was just the gardener." "He will..." He paused, searching for a word, but found none. "He will speak to you." "Speaking is good," I said. "Better than hanging. And better than silence."

We set off, the interpreter, the guard, and I, past drops still clinging to the walls like bad intentions. I knew what was coming: questions, threats, offers. It's all a market. I'm good at markets. I deal with improbabilities.

I turned around once more, looked at the alleys, the harbor, the city. It was quieter. But there was a sentence in the air, unspoken, already true. I picked it up and put it in my pocket. You never know when you'll need it.

And if you ask if it was really like that—if I really chased the wine out of the barrels and left the city afloat—then I say: Who wants to know? The thirsty one, or the one who wants to do the math? I'll tell you what's going to be drunk. The rest is bookkeeping.

Such was the day Constantinople buried its thirst and rose again with red lips. Lies, wine, and gunpowder smoke—three words that, at the right angle, look like truth. The moral? There is none. Only this advice: When life finally flows, drink. When it dries up, tell the tale. And if neither helps, add gunpowder.

I am the Baron, and I promise nothing I cannot speak louder. Tomorrow I will reinvent the sea. Today, an empty jug and a city that knows how to forget are enough for me.

A horse tied to the church tower

I swear, I just wanted to sleep. But sleep is a whore: It takes your money, your time, and when you wake up, you're still empty. I was lying in some goddamn alley, my head in the dust, my tongue like a piece of leather, and the only thing keeping me company was my horse. It chewed on my coat as if to remind me that even in misery, you can still be useful—as fodder.

"You're a damn philosopher," I growled. The horse whinnied. I swear, it laughed.

The first farmers appeared like weeds. Crooked, sweaty, stinking of dirt and mistrust. One pointed with his spade. "Baron," he said, the word sounding like a mocking song, "you're talking to a horse." "And it answers better than your wife," I said. The laughter was short, harsh, and on my side.

Then I saw the church tower. Crooked, gray, ugly like the morals of the priest who lived there. I suddenly had this idea, a good one: "Listen, you pea-shitters.

I bet I'll tie my horse to the church tower. Up there. By the bell tower. So it farts in the angels' ears."

Silence. Then a murmur. Farmers love two things: wine and betting. Since I had the wine in me, the bet remained. "And if not?" asked one with a potato face. "Then I'll drink nothing but water for a week," I said. They laughed. I knew I had them.

We tinkered. With ropes that had more fleas than fibers, with pulleys we cobbled together from wagon wheels, and with the patience of a village that was too stupid to stop me in time. The horse looked skeptical, but I explained to him: "Brother, this is art. And art hurts."

The ascent was grotesque. The animal hovered above the rooftops like a holy sack of potatoes. The crowd stared as if it were an apparition. The priest stepped out, his belly like a monstrance, his face red with disbelief. "This is blasphemy!" he cried. "No," I shouted back, "this is architecture with a horse!"

And when the horse finally hung atop the tower, tied to the church steeple cross, the miracle happened: It neighed, stretched its tail—and peed. A golden stream, directly down onto the cheering crowd.

The farmers screamed, laughed, and opened their mouths like birds in a nest. The priest crossed himself and murmured, "A sign from heaven!" "A blessing," I said, "a new baptism. Holy urine, handed down from heaven."

I bowed so deeply that bile almost rose in my throat. "Remember the day," I cried, "when the Baron showed you: Heaven is nothing more than a horse that shits wherever it pleases."

And the moral? None. Just the truth: You can make anything count—even a horse—if you lie and drink enough, and the stupid people watch.

The devil offers cards, I still lose

I have made many stupid decisions, but few as solemn as this one: I sat down, brushed the dirt off my collar, looked at the evening as if it had done something to me, anddrank one before**Whiskey.**Not a gentle sip, no—an honest plunge from the glass down my throat, as straight as a judgment. It burned sweetly like a lie that works, and placed a warm plaster on my soul. A

second one afterward, for good measure. Then I was ready to ruin everything that was still intact.

The pub was called "The Last Anchor," which I took as a threat. The lighting was dim, the tables were crooked, and in the corner stood a cheap wooden Madonna that looked as if she had pledged her virginity to the harbor. Smoke crept into my eyes, and from the back room came a laugh that changed teeth halfway through.

"Baron," hissed the landlady, wiping with a rag that had long since given up. "Someone in there is asking for you. He has... well... special hands." "I prefer special hands to special morals," I said, taking the bottle with me. She shrugged—either in agreement or arthritis.

In the back room, four figures sat at a green felt chair, seeing everything and helping no one. Three of them were ordinary: a fisherman with eyes like wet nails, a sailor with the face of a fist, and a scribbler who smelled of ink and ate notebooks. The fourth figure smiled at me as if sending me both a compliment and a bill. Black coat, clean collar, a ring that looked as if it had belonged to many fingers. The pupils were too calm, too round—like coins. He raised his hand. The fingers were long, the nails too neat. "Sit down, Baron."

"And you are?" "A friend of the game." He sipped his words like wine. "Call me what you will. Some say**Nick**. Other**Mr. Night**. The old people don't call me at all." I sat down. "I call you**Fate on two legs**. And if that is too long, I call**You**." He laughed softly. It sounded like steam whistling out of a hole that shouldn't be there. "Cards?"

He shuffled, and I swear the deck sighed. The cards whispered as if afraid of a future they themselves were bringing about. I saw marks that weren't there, felt moves that hadn't been made yet. I raised the bottle. "Rules?" "Simple: whoever loses pays. First with coins, then with memories, then with something that hurts them. I'm fair: everyone gets to choose what hurts them." "That's very Christian of you," I said. "I only make offers. You humans accept them."

The scribbler opened his book. I sipped my whiskey—my throat was now a well-paved road—and asked for two cards. I looked into them as if into a mirror in a bad mood: a king, a seven. The devil—excuse me, Mr. Night—had nothing on his face, and his face was as honest as a coin trick.

We played. First small. Copper, then silver, then the gold ring I once bought from a beggar because he claimed it was from the Pope's childhood. I won one

round, lost two. My heart stopped, only my hand acted as if it were the calmest in the room.

"More," said Mr. Night, placing a joker on the table with no picture on it, just a shadow. "I offer cards. You offer bets. Your move, Baron. A coin is boring." "I offer..." I searched my pockets for something that didn't smell of metal. "...the memory of my first kiss." "How old?" "Old enough to hurt." He nodded. "Write it down," he said to the scribe, "the Baron is exchanging a memory for hope." "Who spoke of hope?" "Me. But you take that too."

The round went badly. I lost the kiss. A warm shadow, pulled away like a blanket. In its place remained a hole, small but with sharp edges. I drank. The whiskey filled the rim, not the hole.

"More," said Mr. Night. "Your wager will do you more justice than your reputation." "I offer the sound of my father laughing," I said. "Your father?" "He was stern," I said, "his laughter rarely showed. That's precisely why." "Accepted."

I won—of all rounds. I got my laughter back, but it sounded... sorted. Tidier than before. I felt cold. I like memories full of dirt; the dirt proves they're real.

"Faster," murmured the sailor, "or I'll fall asleep." "Sleep," said Mr. Nacht kindly, "my business runs best with my eyes closed."

We moved further, faster, higher. I marked cards with a drop of whiskey on my thumb—an old art—and controlled the cut with the lip of the bottle, which reflected what it shouldn't. I thought I was clever. Mr. Nacht let me be clever, like giving a knife to a child, because the lesson is in the fingers.

"Now," he said, "we'll bet something no pawnbroker knows." He flicked a card into the air. It stayed there, as if the smoke didn't blow it out. "Your shadow. Or your breath. You choose."
"My shadow?" I asked. "Yes. It follows you too faithfully. A little freedom would do you good. Or the breath: a handful of moves you would have liked to have had later." "And if I don't want either?" "Then someone else plays. I offer cards, Baron. But I don't force anyone." He smiled, and his smile had edges.

I drank. I thought, which rarely ends well for me. The whiskey gave me courage and put reason on ice. "The breath," I said. "I offer ten breaths from a future night, if it's mine." "Deal." The writer wrote as if his pen were being fed.

I was dealt two aces. I knew it was a gift, and I knew gifts come with a price. I raised, Mr. Nacht went with him, the sailor cursed, the fisherman gave up. The landlady stood in the doorway, the rag in her hand like a banner of futility. I smelled sulfur.

We turned up the heat. I released the aces. Mr. Nacht showed three sevens—a smile in numbers. "Close," he said, "but close is my favorite measure."

It went on like this. I offered a scar I liked, a fear I wouldn't miss, and a song that helped me when the night was too long. The song was lost. The fear remained—it has good lawyers.

"Baron," said Lord Night gently, "you can still walk." "I won't walk if I fall. I'll fall until I'm lying down." "Then let's fall properly."

The last round came as last rounds always do: too early, with bad timing, nicely disguised. The stake was freely selectable. I looked around and found nothing that wasn't already nibbled on. I lifted the bottle, sniffed it. It smelled of wood and apologies. I took a sip and said: "I'm betting my**hand**." "The whole one?" "The right one. With it, I lied, signed, stroked, stole, and counted. It would be a clean sacrifice." "And what do you want in return?" "Your ears for a minute. Nothing more. Just that you listen." "Why?" "Because no one has ever listened to me pretending to be God for the poor."

He thought about it—I heard it click, like a mousetrap in my head. "Agreed," he said.

The cards landed. I had a picture that couldn't be right: four identical queens waving to me. Mr. Nacht hadn't revealed anything, yet he had everything in his hand. I knew I was dead—but I'm polite when I die. I quietly placed the queens in the smoke, as if they were flowers on a grave.

Mr. Nacht turned slowly. A road. Clean, straight, inevitable. He nodded regretfully, and the regret was as genuine as a pool of staged blood. "You lose, Baron." "Of course," I said. "I always lose unless I make up my mind otherwise." "The hand," said the clerk, licking his fingers.

I looked down at my right hand. There it was, beautifully ugly, with a scar in the shape of a bad promise. I picked it up and placed it on the table—not down, just on top. "Before you take it," I said to Mr. Nacht, "you pay me for my minute."

He leaned back. "I'm listening."

"I don't want to win anything," I said. "Winning is for people who have a place they want to stay. I want to leave, and to do that, you need losses. They make it easy. Today I lost memories that softened me, and a song that held me. That's good. It gives me more space. I don't want to give up my hand because I love it. I want to give it up because I want to see if I can still lie when I have fewer resources. That's the bet: not against you, but against me. Besides, who writes history if I win? No one. Victories are silent. Defeats chatter."

The minute wasn't up yet, but he was already nodding. "Interesting. Wrong, but interesting." His fingers twitched, and the air thinned. I felt a tug on my hand, as if the table wanted to keep me. I was sweating whiskey.

"Leave me the tongue," I said quickly. "Take what you want, but leave me the tongue." "That was never in danger." He smiled and let go. "I'm not taking the hand. I'm taking what comes out of it when it reaches for happiness." "My happiness?" "No. Yours**Lucky find**. The little lucky coincidences. The last drop on the right side of the scale. From today on, the knife will slip less often from the vice to the bread. You'll live on, of course, but the good coincidences are mine. In return, you keep your hand—and your tongue. Deal?" I looked at him. He hadn't blinked since I entered the room. "Deal," I said. "But drink first." I pushed the bottle over.

He drank. His Adam's pomme traced a small sin, up and down. "Bad," he said. "Cheap," I said, "but honest. Like me."

He stood up, slapped the deck as if it were a prayer he no longer needed. The landlady stepped aside as if the wood hissed beneath his shoes. The sailor woke up, not knowing why he was tired. The fisherman counted his fingers. The scribe blew the ink dry and wrote:**Debt paid / Happiness borrowed**.

"One more thing," said Mr. Nacht at the door without turning around. "Why did you drink the whiskey beforehand?" "So I'd remember my stupidity when it tasted good." "And now?" "Now it tastes like shit. But it tells a better story."

He laughed again, the steam whistle, and was gone. I sat there, my right hand on the table, as if it had just made a confession. I clenched it. It was still there, weaker, or I imagined it was. I raised the bottle. Nothing left in it. Of course. Lucky finds are gone.

The landlady came and put a glass in front of me. "On the house," she said, "for the show." "What's in it?" "Water." I drank. It tasted like the truth, and the truth rarely gets a tip.

"Baron," said the clerk reverently, "you were playing with the devil—with the master." "Nonsense," I said. "I was playing with my reflection, only it was better coiffed."

I stood up, wobbled, and stopped. The night outside had teeth. I zipped up my coat, saluted the Madonna, and she responded with the silence that only cheap wood can produce. Outside the door, it smelled of salt, rust, and a morning that didn't like me.

I put my right hand in my pocket and felt nothing but food crumbs and a cork. I had once used the cork as a lucky charm. It now felt like a stone. I wasn't sad. I was... empty in the right place.

So if you ask me how it was—whether the devil offered cards and why I still lost—I'll say: Because losing is the only sport I'm a world champion at. My consolation is my tongue, and with it I can invent new rules. Today I learned: You can choose your bet wisely and still slip up when someone else takes your luck away. But you know what?**Stories need stumbling.**Smooth parquet makes no noise.

I staggered to the quay, where the ships snored. The wind pulled the thoughts from my head and laid them neatly on the pier. I took one back: Tomorrow I'll win again. Not at the table—at the bar. I offer the truth, and the world pays with laughter. This is the only game I still carry.

And for today? I'll find a bed that doesn't ask questions. The whiskey's out, my luck's out, the devil's had his fill. I'm the Baron—I lose well. And as long as I have my tongue, I lose in a way that's worth listening to.

Fire, gunpowder and the smell of burnt mustaches

It started as always: with boredom and a bottle that was emptier than my bag. A bunch of soldiers squatted in the camp, scratching their bags and staring into space, while the officer groomed his mustache as if it were a sacred relic. A mustache like a damned awning—waxed, twirled, arrogant. I swear, he talked to his mustache more often than to his men.

"Baron," he crooned, "you claim you know gunpowder better than any of my gunners?" "Powder," I said, "is like a woman: too much, and you'll blow up; too little, and nothing will move. The secret is the rush in the middle." The soldiers

laughed, but the officer didn't. He put his hands behind his back, proud as a sow who thinks she's a peacock. "Then show us how to fire a cannon."*correct*loads."

I was drunk enough to say yes, and sober enough to go through with it. So I crammed the load in, not by the book, but by gut feeling—and my gut feeling had never read a book. A spark here, a nudge there, and the air smelled of sulfur and stupid decisions.

"Stand down!" the officer shouted. But no one stood down. Soldiers love two things: disasters and the chance for the officer to embarrass himself.

The fuse hissed like an evil tongue. I grinned, raised my mug—empty, of course—and waited. Then: a crack, a thunder, a scream. The cannon bellowed like a donkey with bronchitis and spat the ball not straight ahead, but at an angle—right into the middle of the row of tents, where the laundry fluttered. Shirts flew like white flags, trousers flapped like cowardice.

But that was just the beginning. The recoil swept sparks through the line of onlookers. And sparks love mustaches like fleas love dogs. First a hiss, then a snarl, and suddenly three proud upper lips were ablaze.

I'll never forget the image: three seasoned men dancing like fakirs, waving their hands and shouting "Help!" while their faces smelled like a meatless barbecue. The officer screamed the loudest—his mustache, his pride and joy, burned like a good prayer in the oven.

The soldiers laughed until they cried. One tipped his beer over the officer's snout, not out of sympathy, but out of thirst—he wanted to see if there was anything left in it. The officer stood there, smoking, the wax dripping like candle stubble, and stammered: "That... that was sabotage!" "No, that was art," I said. "Strategy. We call it*Fire war of the upper lips*The enemy will panic when he sees our burning beards. Believe me: fear smells like burnt hair."

The soldiers clapped. They clapped so loudly that the officer couldn't help but raise his chin, as if it had all been planned. "Yes!" he roared. "A new tactic from the Baron!" I bowed and hoped no one noticed that I was almost shitting my pants.

Later, we sat by the fire, the smell of burnt hair still hanging in the air like a bad joke. The men toasted me. "Baron, that was the best day in months," one

exclaimed. "I didn't know war could smell so funny." "It's simple," I said. "Gunpowder, fire, and enough stupidity. The rest takes care of itself."

The officer reappeared at some point, with a stumpy beard, pale as a virgin in intercourse. He didn't say a word, sat down, and stared into the fire. I swear he wept quietly—not from pain, but from loss.

And me? I raised my mug, which someone had filled for me, and drank. It tasted of victory, defeat, and smoke. And I thought: A mustache is like courage—it burns faster than you think. But the smell lasts forever.

My journey through the ear of a cannon

They say you shouldn't look into the mouth that feeds you. But I put myself in the ear of a cannon, and it swallowed me like a cheap mistress. It wasn't planned, of course—my plans are like virgins in harbor bars: rare, short-lived, and usually expensive. I really just wanted to show that I have more guts than sense, and that's a promise I regularly keep.

It began at a feast, like so many things. The officers sat at the table, stuffed with roast meat, liquor, and vanity. Their mustaches—those that weren't already burned—gleamed in the candlelight like oily caterpillars. I sat there, half guest, half court jester, and poured myself one jug after another. At one point, someone said: "Baron, you're always talking about your travels, your adventures, your wonders. Have you ever*true*Limit crossed?”

I grinned because I knew what was coming next. To me, borders are just curtains that you char until they disappear. I looked around, saw the courtyard, saw the cannons standing silently against the wall like old dogs that only show their teeth when you kick them. There I had my answer.

"A border?" I cried. "I'm traveling through one no man has ever crossed—I'm traveling through the ear of a cannon!"

Laughter. One man spat beer. Another choked on a bone. The commander shouted, "Impossible!" "Impossible," I said, "is just a word for people without thirst."

So they brought the cannon over, a black beast, as thick as three widows side by side. I wasn't deterred, took off my coat, and lay down in the barrel like a

bed of a very cold lover. The iron tasted of blood and thunder. Behind me, they stuffed it with gunpowder, more than necessary—and that was just the right amount.

"Baron!" one shouted. "You won't survive this!" "Be quiet," I shouted back, "the Baron is leaving!"

Then the fuse hissed, and my heart laughed like an idiot. A bang, a jolt, a shock that drove my soul through my ribs, and I flew. I didn't fly like an angel—angels are clean. I flew like a cannonball: dirty, screeching, merciless. The world became a line, the sky a mockery, and I sped through it like a lie no one can stop.

I swear, I saw things in there. In the gunpowder smoke, in the heat: faces of women I'd cheated on, dice I'd lost, a priest praying I'd finally shut up. Then there was only light.

I shot over the wall, over the heads of the enemy guards, who gaped as if the sky itself were falling on them. I landed not like a hero, but like a sack of bones, in the middle of a dung heap that cushioned my fall and simultaneously made me feel like the devil himself had shit in my face.

The enemy screamed. They thought I was a new secret weapon. "A human bullet!" one shouted. "Hell sends soldiers!" I stood up, staggered, stank, drew my sword, and acted like it was all part of the plan.

And you know what? They were running. They were running as if I had death on my sleeve. And all I had was dirt in my hair and a laugh in my throat that scared even me. I didn't chase them. I was too busy keeping my stomach down and fanning the flies out of my face.

Later, my comrades followed suit, found the enemy gone, and declared me a genius. The commander with the half-moustache picked me up, even though I still smelled of manure, and yelled, "The Baron has brought us victory!"

I bowed deeply. "No," I said. "That wasn't a battle. That was a journey. A journey through the ear of a cannon, and believe me, it listens better than all of you put together."

Since then, they've called me the man who traveled with thunder. But in truth, I was just a drunk who crawled into a hole and was spat out by fate.

And if you ask me what it was like: It was loud, hot, brutal—and the smell of burnt gunpowder still lingers in my nostrils. But I would do it again. Because every journey that begins with whiskey and ends in the dirt is a journey worth telling.

The wolf who carried me like a kangaroo

There are nights when you wonder if God has a sense of humor or just very bad taste. I lay in the woods, half hungover, half dead, my stomach empty, my head full, and thought:*Now it would be convenient if a miracle brought me home.*Instead, a wolf came.

Not an ordinary wolf—no. The beast had eyes like two extinguished candles, and its fur was as gray as if it had rolled in ash. It stood before me, its lips half-open, and I smelled its mouth: flesh, blood, corruption. I reached for my dagger, found only my empty bottle, and raised it like a weapon. "Come," I slurred, "we'll share the last drop."

The wolf stared, snorted, and I swear to all the saints, he grinned. Not a hungry grin, but one that said:*I know something you don't know.*Then he did something no wolf should ever do: He turned around, thrust his belly toward me—and there was a damn pouch. A real, living belly pouch, like a kangaroo's.

I thought the liquor was hallucinating for me, but the wolf came closer, grabbed me with his claws, and*whoosh*, there I was. I, the Baron, in a wolf, in a bag, in the middle of the forest.

It was warm, cramped, and smelled of wet earth and old blood. I crouched like a child in the womb, except the mother was howling wolves outside. The wolf leaped—and I flew with him. Every leap catapulted me against his ribs, every jump made my teeth chatter. It was like hell on a horse with too many legs.

We raced through the forest. Branches whipped, leaves thrashed, and I heard the hunters cursing behind us. Apparently they had hunted the animal—and now they were hunting it, unaware that their beloved Baron was sitting in its pouch like an oversized prune. I yelled, "Don't shoot! I'm diplomatically charged!" But my voice sounded muffled, as if I were speaking from a barrel.

The wolf carried me across streams, over rocks, jumping, running, racing, until I thought my bones were playing dice against each other. But at some point—

and I don't know if it was minutes or hours—he stopped. He stood on his hind legs as if he were about to snarl at the stars, and I saw the sky through the crack in his pocket: black, sparkling, mocking.

Then I understood: The animal did not want to eat me. It wanted me*show*As if I were his trophy. A human in a belly bag, paraded before the night. And the night laughed, I swear.

Finally, he let me out. Just like that. He lay down, yawned, as if the whole thing were just a walk in the park, and looked at me: "You don't belong here," his eyes said, "but I carried you anyway." Then he disappeared, as silently as he had come.

I stood there, stinking, shaken, half-naked, not knowing if I had survived or simply fallen into a worse dimension. But when I heard the hunters whispering about "a miracle" in the distance, I did what any wise baron does: I lied.

"Yes!" I cried. "I've tamed the wolf! He carries me like a carriage horse, he obeys my command!" They stared, their mouths open, their heads full of superstition. And me? I smiled as if it were the purest truth.

Since then, they've been saying in the villages that I made the wolf my mount, a damned trick of nature, a baron's trick. I never correct them. Let them believe I rode through the woods like a king in a fur coat with a pouch.

But the truth is: I was swallowed, shaken, and spat out again. And yet I still walk around telling the tale. That's my triumph.

And if you ask what it was really like: It was dark, it was disgusting, and I'll never get rid of the smell. But I'll tell you one thing: being carried when you're already on the ground is perhaps the only miracle that even a liar can't drink away.

Women who lie more than I do – and that means something

They say I'm the biggest liar this side of Constantinople. I say: Nonsense. I'm an amateur, an apprentice, a fool with a crown when I stand next to the women I've met. They don't lie for fun, not to pass the time like I do. No. They lie on principle, out of passion, with a precision that makes you believe they themselves are the truth in clothes.

I remember the first one. An innkeeper's daughter in Belgrade. She had eyes like two honest wells—so clear you'd want to fall in immediately. She swore to me she'd never been close to a man. That same evening, I discovered her "brother" in her room, naked as a skinned chicken. "He's just sleeping like that," she said, "he's a hypochondriac." I nodded, kept drinking, and knew: This woman is in a different league.

The second was a countess, somewhere in the north. She had lips like freshly varnished apples and promised me eternal loyalty. Even as she swore this, her servant stood behind her, his belt untied, his breath short. "He's helping me dress," she trilled. I thought:*Fine, then he'll probably help you undress too.*I smiled, kissed her, and forgot about it. Because what could I do? Jealousy is work, and I'm lazy.

The third was the worst. A gypsy at a fair. She told me I'd be rich, famous, and eternally young. I laughed, because by then I was already poor, drunk, and old enough that my ribs cracked when I coughed. But while she was talking, she stole my wallet from my pocket. I didn't notice until later, when I was about to pay for liquor. And then I knew: her lie was so big that it swallowed reality itself. I almost had to applaud.

And the same realization comes again and again: I lie to tell stories, to bring people to the brink of belief. But women lie to conquer you, to possess you, to destroy you, or simply out of boredom. Their lies aren't a game. They're weapons.

Once, one of them claimed she was pregnant with my child, and I believed it. I sweated, I calculated, I was already planning the bastard's name. Then she laughed, sucked in her belly, and showed me it was all just bread and wine. "You're as gullible as a chick," she giggled, and I felt like a rooster without feathers.

But do you know what's most beautiful? I love them for it. Every single one of them. I love these deceivers, these murderers of the truth. Because they give me what no war, no cannon, no devil can give me: the feeling that I can still learn. When I lie, I'm an artist. When they lie, they're God.

So yes: women lie more than I do—and that's saying something. But I raise a glass to them. Because without their deceptions, I would just be a man with stories. With them, I am a man with wounds that can be told.

And that's the only wealth I have left. Cheers.

A ship that sailed on sand

Sometimes I wonder why I'm still amazed. I've let myself be shot out of cannons, used wolves like stagecoaches, and believed women who smiled in my face while simultaneously emptying my pockets. And yet – as I lay on the beach one night, half-drunk, half-dead, I was amazed again. For I saw a ship sailing not on water, but on sand.

It wasn't a mirage. I'd already drunk enough to turn any mirage into a lover, but this was real. The planks creaked, the sails billowed, and the keel cut a furrow through the sand as if the earth had suddenly become an ocean. I smelled the resin in the wood, heard the creaking of the ropes, and swore the wind was singing sea shanties that made even the mussels blush.

Of course, the fishermen laughed when I shouted, "The ship's sailing! Look!" They saw only a wreck that had long since lain aground, eaten away by mussels, bleached by salt. "Baron, you're seeing ghosts," they mocked. "Drink less, then you'll see clearly." "Screw clarity," I said, "only the dead see clearly."

I approached, placed my hand on the wood. It vibrated, like a heart that didn't want to die. And suddenly: a jolt. The ship lifted off, shook off the sand like an old dog shakes off water, and began to glide. Forward, over the dune, up onto the beach, right through the village. A ship that sailed where there wasn't a drop of water.

The farmers screamed, ran, and dragged their children out of the way. The chickens fluttered, the dogs barked, and the church bell rang by itself, as if to announce the miracle. But I jumped aboard, stumbling over nets, bottles, and a half-skeleton that was still grinning, and shouted, "Set sail! We're going to the desert!"

And we sailed. Over sand, over fields, over roads. The farmers' horses stared, as if they had suddenly realized how superfluous they were. Sparks flew as the keel scraped against stones, and the wood creaked, but the ship held its course. It sailed because I commanded it. Or because it wanted to sail itself—who knows?

In the distance, I saw soldiers entrenched. They were out collecting a tax, of course. They had their cannons, their banners, their arrogant faces. But when they saw me coming, plowing across the sand on a ship, they fell to their knees.

"A sign!" one cried. "The seas have risen!" Another fled screaming as if the devil himself had grabbed his buttocks.

I laughed, and my laughter flew in competition with the seagulls. Because in that moment, I wasn't a beggar, a drunkard, or a liar. I was a captain of a sea that didn't even exist. And that's more than most people can ever claim.

But like all miracles, this one too ended in the mud. At some point, after hours or seconds—time was drunk with me—the ship got stuck. In the middle of a farmer's field. It snorted one last time, the sails sank, and it stood still. Only I remained on deck, jug in hand, heart in my throat.

People came, whispered, laughed. "It was just a dream," they said, "just the Baron's imagination." I jumped off the deck, brushed the sand off my jacket, and said, "Of course it was a dream. But I'm the only one who rode it."

And if they call me a liar—let them. I know what I saw, what I rode, what growled beneath my feet like a living animal. A ship sailing on sand.

And if that isn't proof that the world has more imagination than any human being, then I don't know what is.

The nights in Petersburg where the vodka always laughed

Petersburg wasn't a place; it was a frenzy of addresses. The city didn't stand on foundations, but on ice, fog, and the breath of drunks. And I swear, the vodka there had a laugh of its own—a throaty, dirty one that grabbed you right in the chest and said:*Come on, Baron, one more, you haven't had enough yet.*

The nights always began the same way: with the promise to take it easy. A glass, maybe two, to warm up in this godforsaken cold that made even the dogs curse. But Petersburg is a devil in human form—you barely sit down when the first bottle rolls onto the table, then the second, and before you know it, you're talking to the chandeliers as if they were old friends.

I remember a tavern called "The Hanged Tsar." The proprietor was a pig in a fur coat, his wife an angel with fists, and the patrons were a mix of officers, thieves, and poets, all with the same look: that mixture of pride and despair that thrives only in Russia. One read poetry while vomiting, another swore he'd

played cards with Rasputin, and a third tried to sell me my coat while I was still wearing it.

The vodka laughed. It laughed from the glasses, it laughed from the throats, it laughed even when it was already dripping from your eyes. And you laughed along, whether you wanted to or not. Because in Petersburg, there's no choice: Either you drink, or you freeze. Some managed both at once.

I drank with generals who had more medals on their bellies than sense in their heads. I drank with beggars who stole your boots while toasting you. I drank with women who swore they were virgins while untying your trousers. And every time I thought: Here, right here, is the truth of Russia – in the glass that's overflowing and in the hand that's already trembling.

I remember one night in particular. The snow fell thick as pillows, the streetlights were out, and we were sitting in a cellar so cramped that even the rats politely asked for space. The vodka was passed around like a sermon. One person started crying because he thought of his mother, another laughed because he didn't have one. I sang a song no one understood, and everyone sang along anyway. And at some point, we rushed out, staggered through the streets, and I swear, even the statues were grinning at us.

In Petersburg, you don't sleep—you faint. And when you wake up, you never know whether you're lying in bed, in the snow, or in a horse-drawn carriage. Once I found myself at the opera, half-naked, wearing a fur coat that didn't belong to me. The audience clapped as if I'd sung an aria. I bowed, and the vodka laughed along with me.

The next morning, the city stinks of smoke, vomit, and unanswered prayers. But no one complains. Because everyone knows: The night will return, and with it the laughter in the glass.

And me? I didn't conquer Petersburg; it swallowed me, spat me out, and invited me back. Every night. And as long as there's vodka that laughs, I'll go there, I'll drink, I'll lie—and in the end, no one will notice that I lost long ago.

Because what else remains in this city of ice and shadow? Only the vodka. And his laughter.

A king, a court, and a bunch of idiots

Sometimes you wonder if the world wouldn't be better off without a crown, without a court, without all that nonsense. I tell you: Yes, it would be. But at the same time, it would be more boring. Because nowhere else do you collect more stories, more scandals, more gold-wrapped dirt than at a court.

I arrived as usual: unplanned, half-drunk, with a horse that looked more likely to end up in the slaughterhouse than in front of a palace. The guards eyed me as if I were a piece of cattle being led onto the dance floor, only to scratch the shine. I grinned, spat in the dust, and said, "Baron von Münchhausen. Tell the king to open the decanters."

They growled. I growled back. In the end, we all stood there growling until one of us gave in—not me, of course.

The hall: large, cold, and golden. Velvet everywhere, mirrors everywhere, faces everywhere that loved themselves more than the world. The king sat on his throne, a man with more jewelry than sense. He grinned at me, that fake smile that says: I have power, and you only have stories.

"Baron," he said, "they say you can conjure with words." I bowed—well, I pretended to. "They also say you can rule."

Silence. Then a nervous chuckle, somewhere among the courtiers. I grinned. Point for me.

The court—God, what a parade of idiots. A bunch of peacocks in silk who spent more time in front of the mirror than in the fields. Every second person called themselves a count, every third person "of something," and all of them were as empty as a Monday morning jug. They whispered, they squinted, they laughed at jokes that weren't even jokes.

I told a story. About the cannonball. About the fish that swallowed me. About the moon. All lies, yes—but lies with soul. They hung on my every word because they had nothing else to hang on to.

The king nodded, drank, grinned, but I saw it: envy. The guy who had everything envied the guy who had nothing—except a tongue that was worth more than his entire damned kingdom.

And then the evening came. The court wanted to dance, drink, and gorge itself. I sat there, drank the wine, which was better than anything I could afford, and

watched. How the Count of Somewhere pinched the minister's wife's hip. How the court jester vomited while laughing. How the princess played with eyes that knew more boredom than desire.

A king, a court, and a bunch of idiots. That's how it was, that's how it is, and that's how it will remain.

I stood up, raised my cup, and roared: “Your kingdom is great, your court is magnificent, but your heads are emptier than the decanters after midnight!”

They stared. The king froze. Then he laughed. Loudly, boomingly, off-key. Everyone laughed along. And I laughed too—but at them, not with them.

At the end of the night, I was lying under the table. The king lay beside me. We toasted each other, two men who couldn't be more different, yet equally drunk. He whispered, "Baron, you're a pig." I grinned, "Your Majesty, at least an honest one."

And then we fell asleep, side by side, while the courtyard still danced, laughed and stank.

About dying that never really works

Dying—that's a funny thing. Everyone tells you how it's going, and no one comes back to confirm it. I tried it a few times, whether I wanted to or not, and each time I found myself standing there again, with dirty boots, an empty cup, and the realization: Even death doesn't want me sitting in his bar.

The first time, I thought it was over. I lay in the dirt after a duel, my stomach ripped open like an old sack, the blood running from me like wine from a bad barrel. My opponent grinned, the spectators whispered, and I thought: Now it's time to call it a day. But death didn't come as a gentleman. He didn't come at all. I wheezed, I waited, and then – I swear on every empty bottle – someone poured half a carafe over my wound. It burned like hell, but I got up again. And death? He stood in the corner, offended, as if I'd taken his toy away from him.

The second time, it was the horse. Yes, a damned horse. It bolted, ran, stumbled, and I flew. High, far, deeper than my pride would ever allow. I slammed into a tree, broke my ribs, lost consciousness. I saw the light. Really, I saw it! But it was only the moon shining in my face as I awoke among the roots,

half dead, half tree. I felt life trying to let me go—but it didn't. I coughed, spat out blood, and laughed. Not today, death. Not today.

The third time—and believe me, the list is long—was the river. I had drunk too much, lied too much, laughed too much. I fell in, the current swept me away, I swallowed more water than wine. I sank. Everything went black. And then I heard a voice, not a divine one, but my own, saying, "Baron, if you die now, you'll never get another jug." That was enough. I kicked, I wrestled, I crawled to the bank like a wet dog, and Death stood on the other bank, grinned, shook his head, and left.

The problem is: At some point, you almost want it to work. Because it would be easier. No more lies, no more bills, no more broken glass on the floor. Just peace. But every time I got close, I still found a reason to come back: a jug, a horse, a woman, a laugh.

And so I sit here today, half dead, half alive, and say: "Dying is like a bad landlord. You order, you wait, and when he finally arrives, the bill is too high."

Someone at the bar once asked me, "Baron, aren't you afraid of death?" I laughed so loudly that the decanters clinked. "Afraid? I'm more afraid of an empty glass. Death has stood me up so many times—I think he doesn't like me. Maybe he drinks somewhere else. Maybe he has a local bar I'm never allowed to go to."

And maybe that's my curse. Or my luck. As long as death doesn't have room for me, I have a place at every damn bar in the world.

The Baron's Last Drunk

There are nights that have no tomorrow. Nights so deep that even the rooster refuses to open its neck. This was one of them. I knew it when I raised the first glass. The wine tasted of the end, of grave soil, and of a joke no one wanted to tell anymore.

The tavern was almost empty. A few shabby souls who looked as if life had already dumped them three times and yet still let them back in. The baron was cleaning glasses that never came clean and looked at me as if he knew: The Baron is staying late today, perhaps forever.

I drank. Not slowly, not with relish. No, I drank as if I wanted to drain the river of time itself. One pitcher after another, decanters stacked like tombstones on the counter. I laughed, I cursed, I talked to myself.

"You know, Baron," I said to myself, "life was never a heroic poem. It was a tavern. Sometimes full of noise, sometimes empty, but always sticky." I nodded to myself and ordered more.

The memories came. They came like rats from the darkness: the horse stuck in the swamp; the moon I danced on; the fish that swallowed me; the king I fooled; the dead who drank with me. They all sat around me, ghosts of my own lies. They toasted me, they laughed, they shouted. I heard my life, and it sounded like a drinking song that never found a melody.

"Was it worth it?" asked the woman from Warsaw, who had long since turned to dust. I laughed, coughed, and spat on the floor. "Everything's worth it, as long as someone listens."

At some point, my hand trembled. Not from the wine, not from age—from the end. I lifted the cup, but it fell from my fingers. It shattered, the wine spilled onto the floor, and I swore it looked like blood. I stared at it and thought: Maybe this really was it.

The innkeeper came and wanted to clean up. I yelled at him: "Leave it! This is my legacy!" He nodded, shrugged, and silently placed the next pitcher in front of me.

The night grew longer than any night should be. I heard Death knocking on the door outside. Quietly. Patiently. He knew I wasn't running away this time. I toasted the darkness and said, "Wait a minute. One more pitcher will do."

And I drank. Slowly, sip by sip, until the carafe was empty. Then I looked up. The tavern was empty. Just me and the innkeeper. And perhaps Death, who had long since been sitting beside me.

I laid my head on the bar. Wood, warm from the wine, cold from the end. My eyes grew heavy. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I murmured, "Write on my stone: Here lies one who has lied more than all the kings combined—and drunk better."

Then everything went black. No trumpets, no angels, no fireworks. Just silence. And the feeling that my stories are being drunk on somewhere, even if I'm no longer there.

So the Baron died. Not on the battlefield, not on the moon, not in the belly of a fish. But at the bar. Exactly where he belonged.

Cheers.

Epilogue: The narrator turns off the light and laughs

And here I sit. No longer a baron, no longer a hero, no longer a liar—just someone who spits his words onto the bar like others spit out their teeth. Munchausen is history. But what is history anyway? Nothing but a bottle that gets passed around until it's empty—and if you're lucky, it makes quite a racket.

I saw him, the Baron. Not in the flesh, not in blood. In the lies that felt better than any truth. In the eyes of people who wanted to listen because their own lives were too small. I saw him, staggering, laughing, cursing, lying—and in the end, with his head on the counter. Where everyone worth their salt ends up sooner or later.

And me? I told stories. I turned wine into words, broken glass into adventures, and dirt into legends. I cheated on death, betrayed the truth, and gave heaven the middle finger.

Now I get up. The decanter is empty, the pipe has gone out, the night has left me tired as an old dog. I walk to the door and turn around once. The tavern is empty, the chairs are leaning, the bar glistens with the last drop.

I blow out the lamp. Darkness. One last puff. One last laugh. No applause. No consolation. Only the echo of stories that no one can get rid of.

And then I go.

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