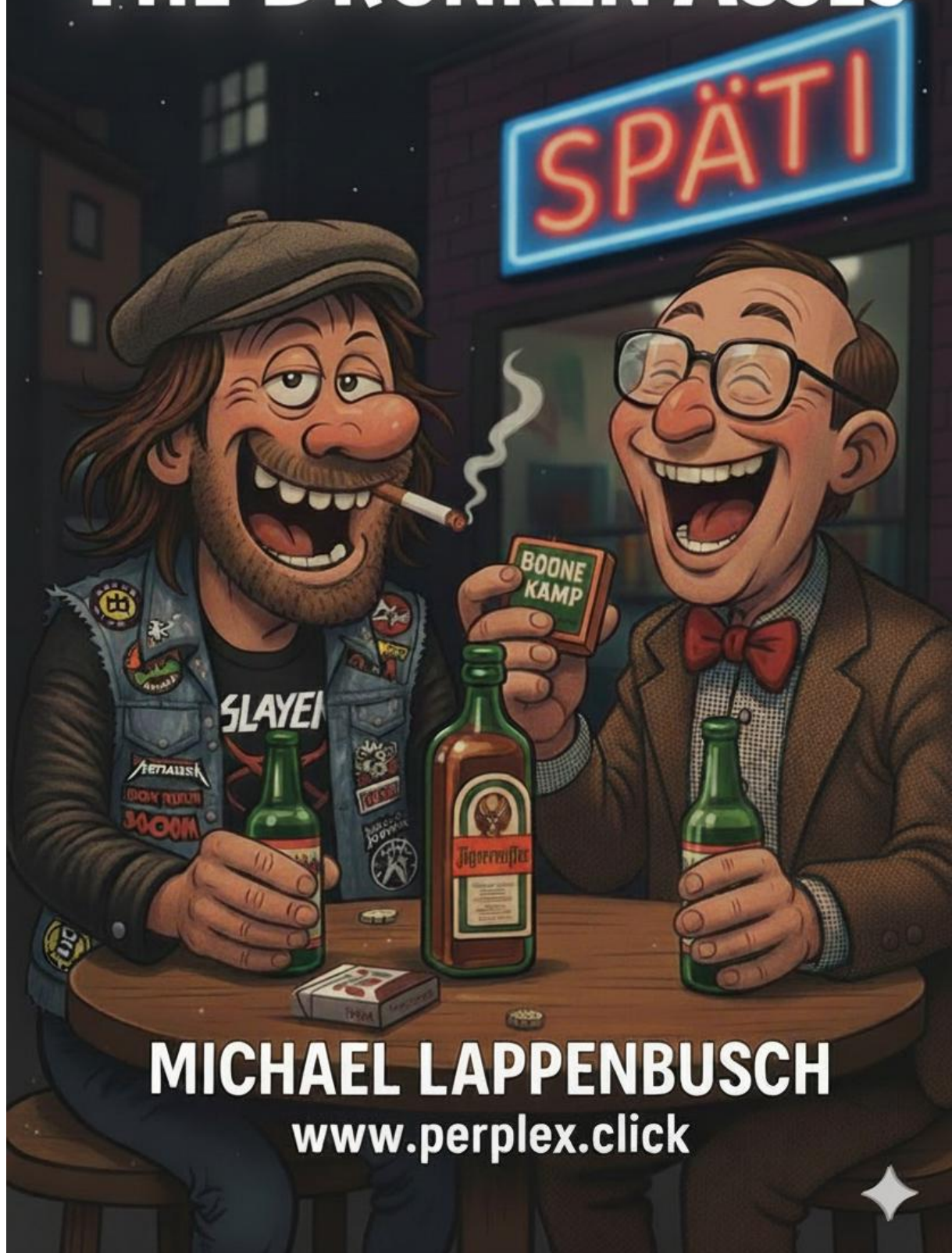


THE DRUNKEN ASSES



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Prologue: The night only begins at the corner store

I first saw the two of them at the corner store, on the corner of Schöneberg, one of those corners where the city has already half given up and only pretends to be alive. A lamppost flickers, trash blows across the sidewalk, and somewhere in the distance someone is shouting for a dog that has long since run away – or never existed.

And there he stands, Kuddel. Officially Kurt Scholz, but nobody calls him that. He's the guy time forgot, sometime around 1988, shortly before the last good Metallica album. That battle jacket has probably seen more concerts than you and I combined, but right now it looks like a compost bin covered in patches. Slayer, Tankard, Motörhead, all plastered on there, as if he'd tried to iron on some respect with patches—and failed.

The jeans on his legs are so ripped that they tell more of his past than any biography. Soil trickles from his boots as if he'd just stepped out of a field, when in reality it's just decades of Berlin grime, compacted into a gray crust beneath his soles. His hair is greasy, long, and hangs in his face like wet strings. When the wind blows, it doesn't move. It's no longer really hair, more like a life form that has decided to stay attached to his skull.

He always has a cigarette dangling from his mouth. Always. For him, the cigarette isn't a commodity, it's a part of his body. When he speaks, it hangs from the corner of his mouth; when he laughs, it glows; and when he vomits, it falls to the floor, continues burning there, and waits until he's finished.

Kuddel is the self-proclaimed alpha male drunk. In his own mind, he's the king of the ladies, the great womanizer, the master of "laying pipes." In reality, he's a chronically drunk guy with a high school diploma and a resume that consists of three words: "Drank himself senseless. That's it."

Next to it is "Heckenpisser" (Hedge Pisser). Real name: Ulf Schröder. A name like an insurance agent who never gets a call.

Heckenpisser is the opposite of Kuddel – at least at first glance. A freshly ironed shirt, pleated trousers, patent leather shoes that gleam in the neon light of the late-night shop as if they still harbored hope. Over this, an old jacket that once aspired to look respectable but now reeks of stale air and missed opportunities. His side parting is perfectly drawn, as if his mother combs it every morning. Thin-framed glasses that make his eyes look bigger, but not any smarter.

He talks as if he's constantly applying for a job interview that never happens. Educated words, little lectures, corrections of minor details – a walking "Ahem, strictly speaking, that's not correct." A know-it-all wrapped in politeness. And beneath this thin veneer of manners lurks a sly little scoundrel with a far too high-pitched chuckle.

"Hehehe." When you hear this laugh, you know that something is about to get unpleasant.

The sad thing is: he has no one but Kuddel. No one who can put up with him, no one who knows his stories and still comes back. So he runs after Kuddel like a badly trained poodle, always hoping that this time he might be petted instead of kicked.

So there they are, standing at the Späti, their unofficial headquarters. Some people call the shop "the corner store." For Kuddel and Heckenpisser, this is their message in a parallel universe: Here, the night is planned, here, reality is softened up.

Elke stands behind the counter. She's seen everything the night has to offer: crybabies, thugs, junkies, lovers who break up at the checkout. And now these two figures, whom she only glances at once and already knows how the evening will unfold.

"Hey guys. Standard?" Standard means: Sternburger Export, as much as it will hold. And on request – which usually means always – she'll add a shot of Jägermeister or Bonekamp directly into their beer. A mixture that should really be considered a crime against humanity, but which these two treat like a delicacy.

Kuddel solemnly calls it an "octane upgrade." Heckenpisser says it's "organoleptically questionable," but drinks it anyway.

When Elke isn't working a shift, Murat is behind the bar. Murat consistently rips them off. He switches the prices, gives them the cheapest rotgut as a "premium specialty," tells them something about "exotic imported beer" while he pulls Sterni from the bottom shelf.

But they come back. Always. Because at least Murat listens to them when they tell their stories of world domination and a surplus of women. And because sometimes, when no one's looking, he still manages to pour a decent swig from their bottles. A kind of respect among free spirits.

Tonight is one of those evenings when Kuddel is really talking a big game. His robe smells of cold smoke and old rain, and his eyes have that glassy glint that either means he's about to have a great idea – or he's about to fall into the bushes.

"Hedge piss, dude," he says, nudging him in the side with the beer bottle, "today we're doing it. Today Hamburg. Fish market. And then... St. Pauli, peep show, you know the drill."

In his head, the Super 8 version of an awesome weekend is already playing: He, Kuddel, world ruler of the Reeperbahn, king of the red lights, the guy who, with a heavy tongue and wobbly knees, is still trying to explain his philosophy of life to someone.

Heckenpisser nodded as if someone had presented him with a stamped daily schedule. "So, Hamburg. Hehehe. Fish market, culturally quite relevant. And St. Pauli... well... an anthropological field study in the realm of prostitution."

He says it as if he were reading a footnote. But his hands tremble slightly, and something is reflected in his eyes that he would never admit: hope that at least one cutie looks at him as if he were more than the guy with the side parting who still lives with his mom.

They call themselves "The Drunkards." It sounds like a bad pub joke, but it's their brand, their small, tattered flag in the wind of insignificance. They're planning big things. They talk about fish markets, peep shows, the Reeperbahn, world domination.

In reality, they rarely get further than: late-night shop – suburban train – first train station with a toilet – blackout.

But today, they vow, everything will be different. Today they'll at least make it to Hamburg. Or at least to the right platform.

And somewhere out there, between Bahnhof Zoo and Sternschanze, fate laughs quietly into its beer bottle and says: "Sure, guys. Go ahead and try again."

Moped-Manni, that old scumbag

Heckenpisser had been standing outside the corner store for quite some time, slumped there like a forgotten election poster. The evening was still young, but he already looked as if he'd just endured three board meetings, two nervous breakdowns, and a parents' evening. His bow tie was askew, his freshly ironed shirt already showed the first signs of stress, and his side parting was battling the Berlin wind like a civil servant fighting overtime. In one hand, he held a bottle of Sterni beer, nervously sucking on it as if trying to wash away a day he hadn't actually had.

Behind him, the refrigerator in the corner store hummed, that dull rumble that never quite fades away in Berlin. A few exhausted insects fluttered above the neon letters "SPÄTI," looking as if they'd chosen the wrong life. Every now and then a car drove by, a dog barked somewhere, and in some backyard a couple argued about who had to take out the trash. Just your average Berlin evening.

Heckenpisser stared at the asphalt, which still held the day's residual warmth, and thought of nothing in particular. He rarely thought of anything in particular. Mostly he just waited for Kuddel to appear and fill his head with stories no one had asked for. He was, after all, the sidekick in a film for which there had never been a script.

And then Kuddel shuffled up. Not walked, not walked – shuffled up. Like a drunken pirate who's lost his way and suddenly realizes there's no sea anywhere, just concrete and old buildings. His leather jacket hung loose around him like a second, grumpy skin. Patches of Metallica, Slayer, Tankard, Motörhead, and some half-torn patch where you could only make out "...ead." Maybe Motörhead, maybe something else, it didn't matter. His boots left little crumbs of dried dirt, as if he were carrying his own little ecosystem with him.

A cigarette, already dangerously short, glowed in the corner of his mouth. Kuddel puffed as if he wanted to burn a hole in the night's belly. His eyes were slightly glazed, but wide awake in that very particular way that only alcoholics are: the world blurred, but his own memories became razor-sharp.

"Hey, hedge pisser!" he shouted, even before he was fully present. "Dude, remember... Moped-Manni, that old bastard?"

Heckenpisser looked up, blinked through his glasses, and pulled his head back slightly, as if he had to dredge up the name from his memory. "Moped-Manni?" he repeated slowly, as if it were a rare animal from a biology textbook. "It's been a long time..."

Kuddel was now close enough that the smell of his beer could be perceived as a separate weather front within a two-meter radius. He grinned, put his bottle down on the standing

table, patted Heckenpisser on the shoulder in a friendly manner – a little too hard, as always – and started drinking without asking if anyone wanted to listen.

“Hey, he tuned his moped up to 120 back then, remember? 120! On such a crappy moped!” he began, a cigarette bobbing in the corner of his mouth. “The bastard used to tear through Friedrichshain on it like he was Valentino Rossi on cheap gas.”

Heckenpisser raised his eyebrows. “From a purely technical point of view, that’s life-threatening,” he muttered, but Kuddel wasn’t really listening.

“And then, listen, Hecke, then the cops got him, well, almost,” Kuddel continued, spreading his arms wide. “They were chasing him in a patrol car, flashing lights, siren blaring, everyone going crazy. Manni floored it, the thing screamed like a buzzsaw on speed. And then the bum just turned onto that muddy track by the S-Bahn station, you know? Really nice and muddy. The cops were right behind him in their big car, and BAM – stuck. Damn, that was awesome!”

Kuddel burst into a loud, raucous, deep laugh that startled a few pigeons on the roof opposite. Heckenpisser couldn’t suppress a grin. He knew the story, but with Kuddel, that didn’t matter—it was never about whether you already knew something, but about it being told again, with more gestures, more beer, and more exaggeration.

“Wow, what a crazy nutcase he was,” Kuddel gasped between drags of his cigarette. “They confiscated the car, of course. Taken to some police museum, I heard. It’s probably sitting there now next to some confiscated hooligan flags and a confiscated rubber truncheon. And Manni? They locked him up. A couple of months, nothing serious. For him, it was practically a spa vacation, I think.”

Heckenpisser nodded slowly and took a sip from his bottle. “Resocialization attempt failed, I suppose,” he said.

“Well, hello!” Kuddel flicked his almost-burned cigarette onto the floor, half-heartedly stubbed it out, and immediately grabbed another one from the pack. “When he came back out, he went completely nuts at his grandma’s place. LSD trip, you know? Really vivid images, everything flickering in his head.”

Kuddel leaned closer to Heckenpisser, as if he were about to reveal a secret that everyone already knew. “He was firing off a gas pistol. In his apartment! At his grandma’s! Bang, bang, bang – all blanks, of course, but the old woman screamed like the Wehrmacht was marching in again.”

Heckenpisser grimaced. “That’s... uh... pedagogically rather unfortunate,” he muttered.

“Unhappy, he says!” Kuddel snorted. “Grandma almost had a heart attack, the neighbors called the cops, the place was full of flashing blue lights. And Manni, completely out of it, runs out into the street, tears his T-shirt on the way – so dramatic, like in a bad action movie – and then he runs through Friedrichshain shirtless. Yelling everywhere.”

Kuddel paused briefly to take a deep drag on his new cigarette. The smoke rose into the cold air, settling like a gray veil over his memory. “He was yelling something about Kurdistan, nobody knew why. ‘Freedom for... anyone!’ and in between, always: ‘Kill me! Just kill me!’”

Heckenpisser shook his head, a high-pitched chuckle creeping into his voice. "It's almost poetic, if it weren't so completely ridiculous," he said quietly. "And also a little bit sad."

"Yeah, sadly drunk, like us," Kuddel said, taking a sip of his Sterni beer. "But that wasn't all, man. And then, and then, and then..." He let the words trail off, as if he were setting a cliffhanger in a bad TV series.

"Now comes the part with the saddle pad, I suppose," said Heckenpisser, grimacing as if he had a toothache.

"Exactly!" Kuddel slammed his hand down on the bar table, the bottles rattling. "He had that totally hideous saddle pad back then. Man, it was so filthy, you could see a rash coming from a mile away. A festering rash, a real..."

"Please, no details," groaned Heckenpisser. "I'm sensitive to figurative language."

"Yeah, yeah, shut up, it gets even better," said Kuddel, grinning. "He took that old lady to the fun and adventure pool. You know, that palace of chlorine and children's screams. First they were making out in the changing room..."

The hedge urinator raised a warning finger. "In professional circles, this is called exhibitionist tendencies, and it's a criminal offense."

"...and then they went up the water slide tower," Kuddel continued unperturbed. "The old lady was standing up there, suddenly turned around, pulled down her bikini bottoms, and then – I swear to you by Lemmy Kilmister – she just pissed all the way down the water slide. From a standing start! A yellow Niagara Falls, bro!"

Heckenpisser slapped his hand up to his face. "Ewww, Kuddel! That conjures up horrible images in my mind's eye." He shuddered slightly. "I'll never be able to slide carefree again."

Kuddel laughed uproariously. "And then, listen, the security guards arrived. They had it all on camera, those pervs. Sitting there in the surveillance room with chips and cola, they saw the old woman christening the slide. Bam, alarm, everything beeping."

"That is quite an outrage," said Heckenpisser indignantly, his voice briefly tipping into a high-pitched "Hihihi," as if his morality were racing against his schadenfreude.

"They took the two of them away," Kuddel continued. "They tucked them under their arms, wet, half-naked, totally freaking out. And just as security was about to hand them over to the cops at the side entrance—you know those ugly doors with 'Staff Only' on them—the old woman completely lost it. She bit her way free, like a terrier on speed, and kicked a cop right in the shin. That's what it said in the newspaper later; I saw it with my own eyes."

Heckenpisser now giggled openly. "Oh yes, I believe you, Kuddel. Hehehe... hehehehehe..."

But Kuddel wasn't finished yet. He leaned forward again, his face close to Heckenpisser's ear, the cigarette glowing dangerously close to his hair. "And then. Then things get really messed up, man. They grabbed the old lady, she was screaming like a broken fire alarm. And suddenly she bites her own hand. Really bites it. Until it bleeds. The blood runs down her, and

the cops are thinking, 'What the hell is she doing now?' And then she spits the blood. At the cops. With a running start. Puff, puff, puff, everything's covered."

"Now you're exaggerating," muttered Heckenpisser, but in his eyes glittered that sadistic pleasure in the downfall of others.

"No kidding, Hecke. And while she's spitting blood in their faces, she's screaming: 'I have AIDS! I have AIDS!' Over and over again. The cops were completely beside themselves. Things got crazy, I tell you. Half the patrol car probably made an appointment with the company doctor that same evening."

Heckenpisser clutched his stomach with laughter, his high-pitched giggles echoing between the walls of the houses. "Oh yeah, I believe you, Kuddel! Hehehe... hehehehehe... Which century was that again? The wild, dark age of public baths?"

Kuddel grinned broadly, took a deep swig of Sterni beer, and placed the bottle back on the table with a dull thud. For a moment, there was silence between them, only the street noise in the background, the hum of the refrigerator, the distant clatter of a subway train heading into another life.

I stood a little apart, watching them as I always did. Two clowns who had never made it into a circus. Two alcohol-soaked archive cabinets full of stories in which someone always went crazy, someone always lost everything, and nobody learned a thing. They lived off such anecdotes, the broken legends of the city, characters like Moped-Manni. The crazier the story, the brighter their evening shone.

And while Kuddel lit another cigarette and Heckenpisser was still giggling, I already knew: Today they would hatch another plan too big for their small lives. Today something would be thrown around again involving "Hamburg," a fish market, a peep show, world domination. And they would take off like Mofa-Manni on LSD – full speed ahead, aimless, with the inevitable punchline somewhere in the dirt.

"Hey, Hecke...", said Kuddel after a while, while wiping the neck of the bottle with his thumb, "you still remember the incident with the sports teacher, right? Boarding school, gym, Mofa-Manni in full swing..."

Heckenpisser took off his glasses, cleaned them with a far too clean handkerchief, and sighed mockingly heavily. "If you're referring to that extremely valuable pedagogical episode with Mrs. Hartmann... yes, unfortunately, I guess I'll never be able to erase that from my brain."

Kuddel grinned so broadly that his cigarette began to wander dangerously. "Mrs. Hartmann... right. The one with the leggings that were always a size too small. You could tell from a mile away that she'd missed her calling and would have been better off selling aerobics tapes. She was always yelling: 'Come on, run, you wimps!' And then that squeal on her whistle... ugh, I can still hear it today."

Heckenpisser nodded. "She was a waddling nervous breakdown on sneakers," he said dryly. "But physically... robust."

"Robust is good," Kuddel snorted. "She was awesome, man, come on. And Moped-Manni... he was always a bit too loose, wasn't he? He sat in the last row of the stands, staring at her

buttocks when she explained pull-ups, and you could practically see the fuses blow in his head."

Hedge Pisser chuckled his high-pitched "Hehehe," unable to suppress it. "Yes, and he already had that look back then," he said. "A bit like a dog who doesn't know whether to be petted or put down."

"Exactly him!" Kuddel made a vague circular motion in the air, as if tracing the look. "And then came that one summer. Remember? That heat where the asphalt in the schoolyard was bubbling and nobody felt like doing the high jump. Everyone was practically comatose, even the teachers, but Ms. Hartmann... she pushed through. She called it 'sports festival preparation.' I call that hell."

He emptied the rest of his bottle, placed it on the table with a dull thud, and automatically reached for the next one that was already there, as if someone had handed him the script.

"That day," he continued, "we had to do those damn pull-ups. Everyone took a turn, one after the other, and Manni, of course, went all out: zero pull-ups, but plenty of bravado. 'Pull-ups are for idiots, I do wheelies on my moped,' he said."

Hedge Pisser nodded slowly. "Yes, that was his version of self-confidence."

"And Mrs. Hartmann was really annoyed, man. She made him do extra laps, push-ups, everything. But Manni just grinned at her. That cheeky, filthy grin, like he was about to steal the school gates. And then..." Kuddel paused briefly, took a drag on his cigarette as if he had to filter the memory through the smoke, "then after gym class he was supposedly sick and was supposed to stay in the equipment room. 'I'm dizzy, Mrs. Hartmann,' he said. And the stupid cow... er... the somewhat pedagogically challenged lady... was left there alone with him."

Heckenpisser raised an eyebrow. "Now we're entering the realm of oral history," he said. "Nothing is documented, it's all hearsay, but the legend lives on."

"Legend, my ass," Kuddel said. "Manni himself told the story years later, completely drunk in the pub. And Manni never joked around about things like that, he only lied about speeds, not about sex."

He leaned forward, bracing himself with both hands on the table. "The story goes like this: The door to the equipment room is closed, there's noise from the schoolyard outside, inside it smells of sweat, leather balls, and that disgusting gym mat stench. And Mrs. Hartmann is standing there with her clipboard and says, 'Sit down for a moment, Manfred, we're going to take your pulse.' And he's like, 'My pulse is perfectly fine, Mrs. Hartmann, it's just that another part of me is having extra heartbeats.'"

Heckenpisser burst out laughing. "He never said that, you liar!"

"Okay, maybe he phrased it differently," Kuddel admitted. "But anyway: the two of them got closer. Too close, some say. Just right, says Manni. And since then, the guy wasn't just called Moped Manni, but also, among a few insiders, 'Sports Hall Manni'. The Bretterpenne made history, man."

He looked up for a moment, as if reliving the scene. "You know, Hecke... if you think about it, that was the only time Mofa-Manni didn't just leave chaos in his wake, but also something like... success. Albeit a rather strange kind."

Heckenpisser shrugged. "The line between success and failure is sometimes very thin," he said. "I suspect in his case it smelled of gym mats."

They were silent for a moment, only the refrigerator in the corner store continued to hum. Then Heckenpisser leaned a little closer, his gaze suddenly curious, like that of a child who wants another scary story. "But the really sick rumors didn't start until later, did they? When he stopped going to school. I vaguely remember a story about... toenails."

Kuddel started to laugh, that heavy, gut-wrenching laugh that made his shoulders wobble. "Yeah, dude! The toenail myth of Moped-Manni, the classic! Watch out."

He set down the half-full bottle as if he needed both hands for this story, and held up an imaginary big toe. "They said Manni had sworn at some point never to cut his toenails again. Just on principle. 'It's my body, I'll do what I want!' he always said. And then he stuck to it. Winter, summer, it didn't matter. Always wearing those faded Adidas slides that everyone knew. And underneath them, the things grew..."

Heckenpisser grimaced. "Please not too graphic," he pleaded, but it was clear he wanted to know exactly what he was talking about.

"...the things just kept growing," Kuddel continued with relish. "Long and pointy, like a bird of prey on welfare. At first everyone laughed, then it started to seriously disturb people. Because you could see the nails sticking out of the front of their shoes. Yellowish, cracked, like little weapons."

"I suddenly feel the need to wash my feet," said Heckenpisser quietly.

"And then came the infamous summer," said Kuddel, his voice becoming a little calmer. "The one where he hung out on his grandma's terrace. She had this rickety white plastic table, you know the kind? Cheap, wobbly, always slightly yellowed. Manni sits there with a can of cheap beer, feet up, nails sticking out like two serial killers. Grandma's cat—just a completely harmless, stupid house cat—skulks around him, either because it wants something to eat or is just looking for trouble, who knows with cats?"

Heckenpisser put down his bottle and listened very attentively.

"Manni wanted to scare them away," Kuddel recounted, "so casually. 'Get lost, you stupid animal,' he probably said. And then he made this movement with his foot, a half-hearted kick in the air, like you would chase a cat away without actually intending to hit it. Only... his toenails weren't just decoration anymore, they were more like a biological stabbing weapon."

Heckenpisser swallowed. "That doesn't sound good at all."

"That wasn't it," Kuddel confirmed. "The cat, the silly thing, moved forward at the wrong moment. And Manni really did catch her. Not hard, but in exactly the wrong place. His big toe, the one with the longest nail, hit her neck. Just a little scratch, I guess, nothing more. No bloodbath, no horror movie – just a stupid, nasty hit."

He shrugged. "The cat runs away, hisses, hides. Manni doesn't think anything of it at first, downs his beer, sits down for another one. But later the old lady notices that the animal is breathing strangely, hiding, becoming increasingly lethargic. Vet, late, everything closed, you know how it is. End of story: The animal dies. Something to do with an infection, who knows. And from then on, the whole neighborhood is saying: Moped-Manni killed his grandma's cat with his toenail."

Heckenpisser stared at him, his eyes wide behind his glasses. "This is... grotesque. Tragic, but grotesque. A kind of... toe disaster."

"Toe disaster, you're such a moron, Hecke," Kuddel grumbled, but he couldn't help grinning. "But yeah. Ever since then, people have been whispering that he scratches benches and slashes bicycles with his toenails at night. All nonsense, probably, but the legend was born. Moped Manni, the man with the killer toes."

Heckenpisser leaned against the standing table as if he needed to let it all sink in – along with the beer. "You know," he said then, "that the combination of gym teacher, water park scandal, LSD trip, and cat-murdering toenail massacre would easily be enough for a lifetime in any halfway normal biography?"

Kuddel nodded earnestly. "Anyone else would have written three books and gotten a Netflix series out of it," he said. "Manni just drank it all away and forgot about it. The guy was like a car crash on two legs. You don't want to look, but you can't look away."

They stood there silently for a moment. In the distance, a police siren drove by, that rising and falling tone they both knew so well. Heckenpisser watched the flashing blue lights as if it were a memory he could no longer grasp.

"Sometimes I wonder," he said quietly, "if he's still alive."

Kuddel took a drag on his cigarette, his gaze becoming briefly thoughtful. "No idea," he murmured. "Maybe he's hanging in some provincial prison, maybe he's buried underground, maybe he's sitting in some village corner shop right now, telling stories about us. 'Back then there were these two guys from Berlin... Kuddel and Heckenpisser... they were even more messed up than me.'"

Heckenpisser chuckled again, but the laughter had a different sound. "That would at least be a form of immortality," he said.

"Immortality, my ass," Kuddel growled, reaching for the bottle. "All we have are stories. As long as someone tells them, the person isn't completely gone. And when no one laughs about it anymore... then it really was just rubbish."

He raised the bottle, pointed it into the night as if making a toast. "To Moped-Manni, the old bastard," he said. "To his stupid ideas, his killer toes, and his legendary fails."

Heckenpisser also raised his bottle, quite formally, as if at a wine tasting. "Cheers to Manni," he said. "May posterity grant him a bigger brain than he had in life. Hehehe."

They drank. The late-night shop was lit, the night pressed against the houses, and somewhere in the city an S-Bahn train traveled along a grey track, past schoolyards, terraces and

gymnasiums that could no longer remember Mofa-Manni – but Kuddel and Heckenpisser did, and that was enough to send the legend another round through the flickering Berlin darkness.

A moment of calm descended, one of those rare pauses when even Kuddel wasn't talking. The stars above Schöneberg pretended to take the city seriously, and a light breeze came from the canal, masking the stale smell of beer for a few seconds.

Heckenpisser stood there, sucking on his Sterni beer, looking like he was mentally taking notes. He was the type who wondered about every story whether it needed a footnote.

Kuddel narrowed his eyes, took one last drag from his half-burned cigarette, flicked the remainder in a high arc onto the asphalt – and you didn't need anyone to tell you that it was far from over. The engine in his head kept running, searching for the next broken chapter in the Manni saga.

“Hey, Hecke...”, he started again, his voice now a little hoarse from talking so much, “do you still remember Moped-Manni’s totally stupid German Shepherd, back then?”

Heckenpisser blinked briefly, then his gaze widened. “You're talking about... Üzgür?”

“That’s exactly him,” Kuddel confirmed, grinning crookedly. “The famous Üzgür. Named after Harald Schmidt’s chauffeur, because Manni once watched the late-night show every night for two weeks and then thought the name was the coolest thing since the invention of mixed beer.”

Heckenpisser pushed his glasses back up his nose. “Yes, that was towards the end of the nineties, if I remember correctly,” he said, his tone sounding as if he were leafing through a history book. “Back then, when Manni was simultaneously socialized by television and alcohol.”

“As if he was ever socialized any differently,” Kuddel retorted. “Now listen: I was out with Manni that day in Neukölln, at Hermannplatz. A really beautiful day, the kind where the city almost makes you believe it has something in store for you.”

I knew this kind of day. The air was warm, everyone seemed a bit friendlier, even the pigeons looked less depressed. And it was precisely then that Berlin made it its mission to show you that politeness here is just a glitch in the system.

“Manni, of course, had his damn German Shepherd with him again,” Kuddel continued. “And as always: offline.”

Heckenpisser frowned. “Offline?”

Kuddel nodded. “Yeah, you know: With Manni, a dog on a leash was 'online'. Off-leash, it was 'offline'. That's what he always said. 'Kuddel, today the dog's offline, he needs freedom.' Freedom, man... as if the mutt had some kind of dissident biography.”

Hedge Pisser giggled. “Hehehe... the digital dog ownership of the analog age.”

“So,” said Kuddel, “we’re walking around Hermannplatz, it’s packed with people. Pensioners, kids, mothers with strollers, drunks, tourists, all mixed together. Street musicians somewhere,

someone's selling fake sunglasses, two others are arguing about who hit whom over the head with a bottle. Just your average Neukölln scene. And Üzgür's trotting along beside us, sniffing here and there, acting like he's a halfway normal dog."

He took a sip, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "And then, man, it starts. Out of nowhere. He must have seen something. Maybe a pigeon, maybe a kebab, maybe just the sheer opportunity to screw up. Anyway, the mutt suddenly bolts. BAM. Completely offline, version 2.0. Runs off like a bat out of hell, straight into the middle of the crowd."

Heckenpisser grimaced. "I sense something bad. Very bad."

"Yeah, you can imagine," said Kuddel. "The dog bolts through the crowd, bodies swerving aside, bags flying, some old lady screams, a toddler starts crying because the dog is bigger than them. And Manni... he just stares dumbfounded after it all, like he's trying to process what's just happened. Brain out, you know?"

Kuddel imitated Manni with a glazed look and slightly open mouth. "And then suddenly, BOOM, the fuse blows. Manni gets furious, his face turns red, his neck veins are throbbing. And he starts yelling, at the top of his lungs, across the entire square:"

'ÜTZGÜR, YOU ASSHOLE! COME HERE RIGHT NOW! ÜZGÜR!!!'

Heckenpisser burst into shrill laughter. "Hehehehe! He didn't really say that!"

"Yes, man, exactly like that," Kuddel insisted. "With that slightly wrong Ü, you know. And Hermannplatz, packed with people, all listening very carefully when suddenly someone shouts 'Üzgür, you asshole!' You should have seen their faces. Some turn around, some look shocked, others pretend they didn't hear anything, but in their eyes was this 'Did you just hear that?'"

He shook his head, grinning crookedly. "A few guys were standing in front of the kebab shop, looking over like they were debating whether to say something or if that would be too much trouble. And Manni didn't even realize what a scene he was making. He just kept yelling, 'ÜZGÜR!!! COME HERE, YOU BUM!'"

Heckenpisser put his hand over his mouth, his laughter growing even louder. "This is sociologically highly explosive," he gasped. "Public insult in a culturally sensitive environment."

"So that's what they call it," said Kuddel. "I just call it: Manni's mouth."

He leaned against the standing table as if he needed to cling to the memory. "The dog kept running, cutting across the square, between two strollers, past a woman with shopping bags – and I swear to you, he was laughing. I mean, the dog. That's what it looked like. Just completely over the top. And then... came the moment when I thought, that's it."

Heckenpisser now looked genuinely curious. "Ah, that's the part with the kebab man, right?"

"Exactly," said Kuddel. "There was this one shop, a standard kebab place, nothing special. But the guy at the spit... he was obviously in a bad mood that day. Maybe the meat was too dry, maybe his wife had yelled at him that morning, I don't know. Anyway, Üzgür raced past

the shop, gave the counter a frantic sniff, and the guy must have thought the dog was about to throw up in the display case. He let out an agitated shout, flung open the door – and of course, he was holding that kebab knife.”

Hedge-pisser briefly closed his eyes. "You mean that long, narrow, slightly menacing thing you use to slice meat off a spit?"

“Exactly that,” Kuddel replied. “So, the door flies open, knife in hand, and the guy yells something – I didn’t understand everything, but the word ‘dog’ and a few other words that I won’t quote were in there. And Manni, man... all Manni registers is: suddenly there’s someone standing there with wide eyes, a big knife, and a lot of anger. And he thinks to himself: ‘Shit. Now it’s about me.’”

Kuddel paused briefly, letting the tension sink in.

"And then I saw something I never thought possible: Manni was running. Really running. Not that drunken stagger we know him for. No, he took off like he was at the Olympics. Starting block invisible, but full throttle. He practically flicked his way to top speed. I swear to you, he easily broke the Guinness World Record for 100 meters. Unfortunately, no one was there with a stopwatch at the time, just me, and I was too busy trying not to laugh my head off."

Heckenpisser clutched his stomach. “Oh God... you’re telling me Manni’s running across Hermannplatz, him in front, the kebab man with a knife trailing behind?"

“Exactly,” Kuddel confirmed, his eyes shining. “Manni was shouting, the kebab guy was shouting, a few people just joined in because it was apparently contagious, and somewhere in between, Üzgür, that stupid mutt, also chimed in, as if it were all just a fun run. ‘Yakety Sax’ was playing in my head, man. Total Benny Hill mode.”

I could see it before me: the frantic choreography of fear, anger, and pure slapstick as she stumbled across the warm square. Berlin sometimes had these moments when it seemed as if someone in heaven was flipping through a really bad comedy channel.

“At some point,” Kuddel continued, “I lost sight of the two of them. Manni turned down some side street, the kebab man following behind, still holding a knife. I stood there, searching my pocket for cigarettes, and thought to myself: ‘Well, one less legend if he’s unlucky.’”

Hedge Pisser looked at him with wide eyes. "And... the dog?"

“The dog,” said Kuddel, “reappeared quite calmly at some point. After about fifteen minutes. He came running up, tongue out, tail wagging, as if he’d just had the best day of his life. He sat down in front of me, looked at me as if he wanted to say: ‘Well, where’s the treat, buddy? I brought some action!’”

Hedge Pisser snorted. "Of course. The dog species. Creates chaos, comes back innocent and pretends it was all just a misunderstanding."

“I grabbed him by the collar – yes, he had one, but Manni never used it – and trotted along with him towards Mariendorfer Damm,” Kuddel said. “I told him along the way that he was a complete idiot, but he just panted and grinned at me. No remorse. Nothing at all.”

Heckenpisser took a long swig, looked at the bottles, at his hands, at the street. "And Manni?" he finally asked. "Did he... get home okay?"

Kuddel shrugged with a mixture of indifference and old worry. "You can't really say about Manni," he muttered. "I didn't see him again that evening. Not until two days later, in some pub, with bruises plastered all over his face and a story on his lips about how he heroically escaped a knife attack. Of course, he was the hero of the story, not the complete idiot who'd put his dog on autopilot."

Hedge Pisser nodded slowly, as if he had expected exactly that. "Reality is a suggestion, memory the final version," he said. "Hehehe."

Kuddel grinned, but his eyes darkened for a moment. "You know, Hecke," he said, "sometimes I feel like not much remains of days like that. Just fragments that we piece together here at the corner store. Dog, knife, running around. And eventually, no one asks anymore what it was really like. All that's left is: 'There was this guy called Moped-Manni, he had a dog named Üzgür, and the two of them terrorized Neukölln.'"

Heckenpisser looked at him, and for a split second there was no giggling, only a quiet seriousness. "And we are the archivists," he said. "The last witnesses. Two drunkards with memory problems."

"That's how it is," Kuddel muttered. "As long as we still know how to open a bottle, we'll also be able to open the stories."

He reached for his Sterni beer and lifted it slightly. "Cheers to Üzgür, that stupid cur," he said.

Heckenpisser, in turn, raised his bottle. "To Manni and his hundred meters in Olympic panic," he added. "And to the fact that we've always managed to land safely at the corner store so far."

They clinked glasses. The bottles clinked softly, the neon strip above the door flickered, and the night absorbed the story of the dog, the knife, and Hermannplatz as if it were just another footnote in the endless chronicle of the clueless.

A dog barked somewhere. Maybe it was just any dog. Maybe it was Üzgür. Maybe it was just an echo from back when Mofa-Manni still ran and Kuddel and Heckenpisser thought the world was big enough to take in all their nonsense.

Kuddel, King of Cigarettes and Sterni

Before Kuddel became the guy everyone at the corner store knew today – the scruffy alpha male with the perpetually drunk breath and the metal jacket that had seen more wild nights than washing machines – he was simply Kurt. And Kurt was one of those guys who never had a real chance, but never really asked for one either.

Kurt was the kind of name you'd see on a yellowed doorbell. You'd expect to find a rented apartment behind it, with textured wallpaper, beer in the fridge, and a guy in a faded T-shirt

saying, "Yeah, come in, but take your shoes off." Kuddel was different. Kuddel was the version of Kurt who had decided at some point, "Screw you. I'm going to make my own mess here."

His apartment was on the third floor of a building that the city council had probably only spared demolition because they'd forgotten it existed. The plaster crumbled in sad flakes, and the stairwell smelled of stale smoke, dampness, and something that could only be described as "social remnants."

When you opened his door, you were met with a cloud of cigarette smoke, cheap deodorant, and stale air. The wallpaper had once been a color, perhaps a friendly beige, but someone—presumably time—had transformed it into a mixture of nicotine brown and gray-green.

There was stuff lying around everywhere: records, empty beer bottles, crumpled old band t-shirts, a few yellowed letters from government offices that had never been answered. Clothes were piled on one chair, and on another, clothes that looked just like the ones that had been on the first chair. There was a bed, sure, but it looked more like a couch someone had died on and then gotten up again to have a smoke.

And somewhere in the middle: Kuddel. Like a king in a kingdom of trash and memories that had brought nothing.

He called himself "King of Cigarettes and Sterni Beer." Not ironically. For him, it was a title. A coat of arms. A job title.

If you had visited Kuddel in the morning – sometime between eleven and three o'clock – the scene would always have been the same: He was lying on the mattress, half-wrapped in the blanket, as if he had fought with it and lost. Next to him was an ashtray that hadn't been able to hold a cigarette butt for a long time without collapsing. Beside it was an empty or half-empty bottle of Sterni beer, sometimes two, sometimes three.

He opened one eye, looked at you, and squinted against the light. "Wow," was usually the first thing he said. "Is it morning already?" No matter what the clock said, for him, after he first got up, it was always morning.

On the bedside table – actually an upturned drinks crate – there was always an unopened pack of cigarettes. That was his seal of approval. As long as there was a pack there, the world wasn't completely screwed up. Cigarettes meant: Life goes on. Another day. Another drag. Another beer.

His love for cigarettes started early. Sometime in the shantytown, in the backyard, stealing cigarette butts from the older boys. At first it was just coughing and showing off, "look, I can inhale," then it became routine. After school, before school, instead of school. And among all the half-baked plans to escape the world, cigarettes were the only thing that worked reliably.

Sterni came later. Sternburger Export – the name sounded more sophisticated than the bottle actually was. The label, in that reddish hue, the slightly old-fashioned lettering, as if you were holding something traditional and not just an alcoholic swill. But for Kuddel, Sterni wasn't a brand, it was a constant.

“You know,” he had once said to Heckenpisser, sometime when the three of them were standing on his balcony – him, Hecke, and the wrath of God in the form of a tomcat – “Sterni is like an honest woman. She doesn’t pretend to be anything better. She doesn’t pretend to be healthy. Basically, the bottle says straight up: ‘Brother, go ahead and open it, I’ll destroy you.’”

Heckenpisser had just laughed, that high-pitched "Hihihi", and said something like: "An interesting anthropological metaphor." Kuddel had just looked at him askance and replied: "Metaphors are for people without thirst."

There was a time when Kuddel had tried to be something other than who he was now. A few odd jobs, warehouse work, kitchen work, a construction project here and there. But everywhere it was the same story: three days he worked, two days he drank, on the sixth day he was late, on the seventh he didn't show up at all, on the eighth he was out.

“I’m not made for capitalism,” he used to say. “The system can’t tolerate my creativity.” The truth was simpler: He couldn’t tolerate the system sober.

Everyone in the neighborhood knew him. Not well, but well enough. The guy in the metal vest who still talked about the eighties like it was yesterday. The guy who rummaged through every flea market for old vinyl records, but was never able to show up on time for any appointment. Some affectionately called him "Uncle Kuddel," others simply "the bum with the cap."

The cap was a story in itself. This old flat cap, a greyish-brown thing that had once had some sort of shape before being transformed by rain, smoke, and grease into something that looked like a piece of rotten tongue. He rarely took it off. If he did, it was only to prove that it "stays on its own."

“Watch out, Hecke,” he had once demonstrated, “this one, it’s so incredibly tough, it doesn’t need a wardrobe.” Then he had taken a running start, flung the cap with force against the wall in the corner store – and the thing had actually stuck. “See!” he had grinned. “Quality, bro!”

Elke had only had to turn away in disgust. "If that thing is still alive in a year, I'm reporting it to the health department."

Despite all the jokes, there were moments when you could see that beneath the grimy exterior sat someone who had once wanted more than just beer and cigarettes. When Kuddel stood alone in front of his place late at night, a cigarette in his hand, the street quieter than usual, he sometimes looked pensive. He seemed like a king surveying his kingdom and realizing it consisted only of empty bottles.

Once, very rarely, he let it slip. "You know, Hecke," he'd said, as the two of them huddled in the stairwell because someone had slammed the front door and no one could find the key, "I actually wanted to get out of this shit. For good. Start a band, tour, record, the whole shebang. I even bought a guitar once. It's sitting somewhere between two crates of empty beer bottles now, probably tuned lower than my life."

Heckenpisser, quite unusually, hadn't given him a clever answer. Just a "Yes..." and a quiet "hehehe," which sounded more like pity than mockery.

Kuddel was chained to his habits. Cigarette, beer, corner store, standing table. The day began with him lighting his first cigarette before he'd even properly sat down, and ended with him crushing the last one before collapsing. In between: Sterni beer as his pacemaker. Each bottle was a tick on the invisible clock running backward.

He saw things differently, of course. "I'm not an alcoholic," he liked to say. "Alcoholics drink anything, as long as it gets them drunk. I drink Sterni. It's culture. Lifestyle. Like wine for the rich, only more honest."

He explained the differences between Lassi beer and "worker's gold," as he called it, with an almost religious conviction. He even once tried to persuade some hedge urinators to attend a kind of tasting.

"Take a sip from this bottle, then from that one, do you notice?" he had said. Hedge-Pisser, who didn't notice anything anymore anyway, had only replied: "I taste mostly... annihilation. Hehehe."

Kuddel didn't see it that way. For him, Sterni wasn't annihilation, but an ally. In his world, it was like this: the city wanted to screw him over, the authorities wanted to screw him over, the years wanted to devour him – but Sterni was on his side. A cheap shield against an expensive reality.

Cigarettes were the second pillar of his crown. If he didn't have any, he became restless, agitated, aggressive. His hands automatically searched for the pack, his lips for the filter. Cigarettes were his pause button. Whenever things got too much for him—and "too much" could be anything from an official letter to the doorbell ringing—he would light up one. "One puff, two puffs, three puffs—and the world becomes bearably ugly again," he often said.

He had smoked so many brands that he knew half the supermarket shelves by heart, but in the end he always reached for the cheapest one that hit the hardest. "Brand is for people who don't know what it's all about," he said. "It's about whether it burns. That's it."

Nevertheless, there was a kind of ritual involved. Tearing open a fresh pack, peeling back the foil, taking out the first cigarette, briefly twirling it between his fingers – as if paying it respect. Then lighting the lighter, the first crackle, the first drag. In those first two seconds, he sometimes looked content. Not happy, that would be saying too much. But content, like a man who at least knows what's coming next.

Outside at the corner store, Kuddel was finally in his element. There, where the neon light laughed at the day and the beer waited for customers in the fridge, was his throne room. He leaned against the standing table, his cap askew, a Sterni beer in his hand, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. People came and went. Kuddel stayed.

People knew his sayings. They knew his exaggerations. But they also knew the feeling that if Kuddel wasn't there for an evening, something was missing.

The city had replaced entire neighborhoods, opened and closed bars, renamed shops, and driven up rents. But Kuddel was still standing at the corner store. Living proof that at least one thing hadn't changed.

King of cigarettes and Sterni beer. No crown, no throne, no people – just a few regulars, a few lost souls who found their way to him in the evenings because they knew: when nothing else makes sense, it still makes sense to light up a cigarette, open a Sterni beer and let Kuddel tell you how the world really works.

He had outlived them all: the moped-riding Mannis, the Üzgür dogs, the trendy bars that came and went. And no matter how deep he was in his own filth – when he stood at the corner store, he didn't see himself as a victim. At least for a few hours, he was what he wanted to be: Kuddel, king of cigarettes and Sterni beer.

On evenings like this, it was easy to see why Kuddel had declared himself king. Not because anyone had elected him. Not because he had won anything. But simply because he had stayed behind while everyone else had moved on.

The corner store glowed with its sickly neon light, as if to say, "Nothing good here, but it's always open." The street was half-damp from one of those light rains that never really start and never really end. Cars splashed past, leaving droplets on the curb. The traffic light on the corner clicked through its colors routinely, without anyone really looking.

Kuddel leaned against the standing table in front of the shop, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, a Sterni beer in his hand. His cap was askew, his eyes half-closed, but his gaze alert. Heckenpisser stood next to him, just far enough away to avoid being constantly hit by the full force of his beer breath, but close enough to catch every punchline.

Elke was inside, sorting cans into the refrigerator and pretending she hadn't already memorized every line. Every now and then she glanced outside at the king and his court jester in his fly shirt.

"You know, Hecke," said Kuddel, turning the bottle in his hand, "you have to take life like a case of Sterni."

Heckenpisser pushed his glasses up. "This doesn't make sense on several levels, but I'm curious," he said and took a cautious sip.

"Listen," Kuddel explained, as if he'd spent hours thinking it over. "The first few bottles at the top—those are the good years. You're young, everything's sparkling, you drink without a care in the world about how you'll manage tomorrow. The middle of the crate is... well, work, stress, kids for some, divorce for most. And at the bottom, the last four or five bottles—that's us. You know you've had enough, but you keep going anyway."

Hedge-Pisser chuckled his famous "Hehehe." "Interesting form of philosophy of life," he said. "I suppose the cigarette is then... the side dish?"

"The cigarette is the common thread, you philistine," said Kuddel. "Without a cigarette, it's just drinking; with a cigarette, it's style."

He said it with a seriousness that was almost touching. I watched the two of them and thought to myself that you could probably leaf through entire shelves full of self-help books without finding such a clear, honest explanation for a messed-up life.

A hooded guy walked by, grabbed a beer, and gave Kuddel a curt nod. The king nodded back—not too friendly, not too hostile, just enough to make it clear: You're accepted as long as you don't bother him.

“Hey Kuddel, are you still there?” shouted someone from across the way, a pale guy with a baseball cap, who was standing at the bus stop and looked as if he had spent most of the day doing nothing.

“I’m always the one who gets stuck when it comes to beer, you loser,” Kuddel shouted back, grinning and rummaging in his pocket for some change. He pulled a second bottle of Sterni from the crate, placed it ostentatiously on the table, gazed at it like a radiant lover, and said calmly: “You see, Hecke – this is my kingdom. Me, the cigarette, and this bottle. The rest is just background.”

Heckenpisser grimaced, not because he wanted to contradict him. Rather, because it was all too close to the truth for him. “Yes...” he said softly, “a very... manageable realm. Hehehe.”

Kuddel took a deep sip and then continued in a tone that suddenly had that mixture of pride and resignation that sometimes overcame him when he thought about something for too long at a time.

“I was at Alexanderplatz once, you know,” he began. “A long time ago, before they made everything even uglier. That’s where I met the funniest man of my life.”

Heckenpisser raised an eyebrow. “At Alexanderplatz? Where humor usually goes to die?”

“Yes, right there,” said Kuddel. “I’m sitting on a bench, Sterni beer in my hand, the place is full of tourists, pigeons, and lost souls. Then the garbage man drives up. A real Berliner, big mouth on his face, a little belly under his orange vest. Pushing his truck, emptying trash cans, watching all the madness without even flinching.”

Heckenpisser listened. He liked such miniatures – Kuddel could, if he wanted to, draw the city in a single sentence.

“He stops in front of me, looks at the bottle, looks at me,” Kuddel recounted. “And then he says: ‘Well, Sterni, huh? You know the difference between a bottle of Sterni and a vagina, right?’”

Heckenpisser almost choked and started coughing. “I have a feeling... this isn't good,” he gasped.

Kuddel paused briefly during the show, looked to the side as if he were seeing the garbage man again, then blurted out the sentence, dry as dust:

“The vagina only tastes like piss at the beginning!”

He burst into a filthy laugh that echoed off the block. Hedge-Pisser grabbed the standing table with both hands, as if he had to hold on tight to keep it from toppling over. “Kuddel!” he cried, half indignant, half delighted. “This is... this is... a catastrophe in terms of taste! Hehehehehehe!”

He laughed that shrill laugh that always sounded as if it was meant for a children's birthday party, but had ended up in a pub.

"Dude, I swear," Kuddel continued, "I almost spat out the beer from laughing. I just look at him, and the garbage man is standing there, completely serious, pulling his bin along and just grinning a little. Like he's just explained the truth of the universe."

"This is... absolutely vulgar," Heckenpisser observed, still giggling, "but also... surprisingly logically constructed. In a very disturbing way."

"That's it," Kuddel nodded contentedly. "You know, sayings like that are like cigarettes. They're not healthy, they're not stylish, but sometimes they're exactly what you need to realize you're still alive."

Heckenpisser took another sip and shook his head slightly. "Sometimes I wonder what would have happened to you if you'd been sitting in a library instead of at Alexanderplatz," he said. "Maybe you'd be a literature professor today instead of the king of cigarettes and Stern beer. Hehehe."

"Literature professor, my ass," Kuddel waved his hand dismissively. "They would have kicked me out during the entrance exam because I can find the coffee machine but not the library. Besides, it doesn't stink of the street in there. I need that. The dirt, the smoke, the shouting."

He looked around, at the street, the corner store, the lampposts, the dirt in the cracks of the asphalt. "Out here," he said more quietly, "I know where I stand. In there..." – he gestured vaguely towards some invisible bourgeois life – "they have to pretend everything's clean. But it isn't. They just drink more expensively and have sex in secret. We just do it outside."

Heckenpisser nodded slowly. "A bit too much truth for my beer," he muttered. "But well summarized."

At that moment, the door to the corner store opened. A small group of teenagers came out, cans of beer in hand, their voices far too loud, far too much energy for the late hour. One of them almost brushed against Kuddel's hat as he walked by.

Kuddel watched him go, took a drag on his cigarette and said: "Look at them, Hecke. They think they have everything ahead of them. They don't even realize that the bottles up there in the crate are also running out."

Heckenpisser regarded the teenagers like a naturalist examining an alien species. "Perhaps," he said cautiously, "one of them will become a king like that someday."

"Maybe," Kuddel murmured. "Or they'll do something in media."

He grimaced as if he had tasted something particularly bitter and drank again.

There they stood, the self-proclaimed king and his know-it-all entourage, stopping time with their stories. To outsiders, it was just another evening in front of a late-night convenience store. To them, it was an entire kingdom of Stern beer, smoke, and memories.

And somewhere in this mixture of humor, disgust, and truth lay exactly what made Kuddel who he was: He had nothing – no career, no future, no clean medical record – but he had his cigarette, his Sterni beer, his sayings, and that damned concrete throne in front of the shop.

That was enough for him. At least for tonight.

On an evening like that, you could see exactly how someone had become who they were. Not all at once, not through some great tragedy, but through a thousand small decisions, all heading in the same direction: another cigarette, another beer, another "Tomorrow I'll start over".

The corner store was now in its element. Inside, the refrigerator hummed; outside, the usual suspects were hanging around. A few kids who looked like they were about to fight over a cigarette, a guy with headphones waiting for something that never came, and a woman with shopping bags trying to notice as little of it all as possible.

Kuddel stood at the bar table as usual, as if he'd been bolted there. His cigarette glowed in the corner of his mouth, his beer was sweating in his hand, and his robe had by now acquired the consistency of a historical document. A hedge urinator stood beside him, his bow tie slightly askew, his shirt no longer as fresh as when he'd left, but still too clean for his surroundings.

"You know, Hecke," said Kuddel, letting the smoke slowly escape to the side, "people always think you wake up one day and suddenly you're a jerk. As if there's some kind of switch: click – now the man is finished."

Hedge-pisser raised his eyebrows. "Well," he began, "statistically speaking—"

"Statistically speaking, I'm screwed," Kuddel interrupted. "It's not like those documentaries where they say, 'And then came that one tragic event...' Blah blah. For me, it wasn't one thing. It was... how should I say it... like when you have a pack of cigarettes and you keep saying, 'Oh, come on, just one more.' And then at some point you look down and all you see are filters. And you can't remember a single cigarette. Only that you smoked them all."

Heckenpisser was silent for a moment. Sometimes you could tell he wasn't as naively romantic as he seemed. He understood such imagery. "That's surprisingly well-phrased," he said then. "For someone who consistently marinates his brain."

Kuddel grinned crookedly. "Yes, sometimes something clever slips out. I have to be careful not to scare myself."

A tram squealed in the distance along the tracks, as if loudly protesting its continued presence. The night wasn't silent, but it was quiet in that particular way, where the city only hums softly, as if bleeding in a half-sleep.

"What was it like... back then?" Heckenpisser suddenly asked. "Before you became king. I mean, before the corner store became your palace."

Kuddel took a long gulp, as if he needed liquid to access his memory. "Back then..." he repeated, looking past Heckenpisser in a direction that held more past than future. "Back then, I just sat around like this too. Only in a different place."

He rested his elbows on the table, the bottle between his hands. "I tried to be normal once, you know that?"

Heckenpisser grimaced. "Kuddel, depending on how we define 'normal'..."

"Shut up and listen," Kuddel grumbled, but without aggression. "I mean, really listen. Training, job, paying rent, the whole shebang. I used to work in the warehouse of a hardware store. Pushing pallets, restocking shelves, explaining to people where to find the screws they couldn't even use properly. Eight hours a day, five days a week. Utter misery."

Heckenpisser briefly imagined it and shook his head. "You in a hardware store. That's like a tiger in a petting zoo."

"Tiger on Valium," Kuddel corrected. "And you know what the worst part was? The colleagues. All of them with their lunchboxes, their family photos in their lockers, and their coffee from thermos flasks. Every morning the same crap: 'So Kurt, late to bed again?' Ha ha. I laughed. For three days. Then I stopped."

He stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray, which by now looked like a mass grave of filters and gray ash. "I kept it up for a while. Really. Pay slips, even a tax statement at one point. I had a folder. ONE FOLDER, Hecke!"

Heckenpisser opened his eyes in mock horror. "That's uncanny. Almost... bourgeois."

"Yes, exactly. And then came that one day," said Kuddel. "Not a fateful day, not an accident, nothing dramatic. Just a rainy Thursday. I'm standing in the aisle by the paint cans – you know, that wall of colorful promises – and a customer comes up and says: 'Excuse me, can you tell me which color would best suit my living room?'"

He looked at Heckenpisser as if asking him to acknowledge this scene.

"And I look at her," he continued, "look at the pots, look at her again – and then it clicks in my head. Not loudly, more like a quiet gong. And I think to myself: 'What the hell am I doing here? I have no idea about her living room. I don't even know what color my own living room is, because I always smoke in the dark. Why is she asking me? I've been completely drunk for three days, but here I am with a name tag, and suddenly I'm an authority on wall color?'"

Heckenpisser chuckled softly. "I hope you recommended something very inappropriate to her."

"I told her to ask her husband," Kuddel said dryly. "She was single. She looked at me like I was the biggest idiot in town. And at that moment I knew: I don't want to be that guy anymore who gets asked about things he's not interested in. If I'm going to talk nonsense, at least I'll do it willingly."

He took another drag from the new cigarette that had appeared in his hand as if by itself. "I didn't quit on the same day. That would be too romantic. I just gradually showed up less and less often. First sick, then 'away for the weekend,' then 'stress,' then simply gone altogether. Eventually, the contract was gone, the email address was gone, the folder was in the trash. All that remained was what I already had: me, the cigarettes, and the thirst."

Heckenpisser looked at him, this time not with the usual mockery in his eyes. "And you never regret that? Not at all?"

Kuddel was silent for a moment. The neon light reflected in the Sterni bottle, the label looking like a faded medal. "Regret?" he repeated slowly. "I don't know. Sometimes... when I see some guy running around with his company ID on his belt... I think to myself: That could be you. And then I see him wolfing down a lukewarm roll during his lunch break, philosophizing about his private pension, and I think to myself: Nah. Better not."

Heckenpisser nodded in understanding. "It's like that joke about the Sterni beer and the vagina," he said suddenly.

Kuddel blinked. "Huh? How did you come up with that?"

"Well," explained Heckenpisser, launching into one of his absurd lines of reasoning, "bourgeois existence is like the vagina in the joke: at first it might taste like piss, but you convince yourself that it goes away. And the rest of life is then – symbolically speaking – rinsing your mouth. Hehehe."

Kuddel stared at him for a moment, then burst into peals of laughter. "Dude, you're so crazy," he gasped, "I love it."

Elke stepped out of the corner store at that moment, a crate of returnable bottles in her hand. "What's going on here now?" she asked, putting the crate down and looking back and forth between the two of them.

"Philosophy seminar," said Heckenpisser, adjusting himself slightly. "Topic: The existential foundation of thuggish humor."

Elke snorted. "As long as you pay for the cigarettes and return the bottles, you can mix Goethe with doner kebab for all I care," she said. "Do you need a shot of Jägermeister in your beer later?"

"Any more questions?" grinned Kuddel. "Get two ready. The king is thirsty."

She rolled her eyes and disappeared back into the shop. She'd known him for so long that she didn't want to change him anymore. Maybe she'd tried once, back when Kuddel had fewer wrinkles. But eventually you realize that some people aren't construction sites, they're finished ruins.

I watched as Kuddel puffed on his cigarette, as Heckenpisser tugged at his collar, as the night wrapped itself around them like an old blanket.

Kuddel wasn't a tragic hero. Nor was he a victim to be pitied. He was simply a guy who had decided to stay at a certain level and make the most of it. His kingdom was small: a standing table, a corner store, a pack of cigarettes, a case of Sterni beer, a buddy with a bow tie.

But when the bottle touched his lips and the smoke hung before his face, he had something many in the city's brighter apartments lacked: the feeling that this moment belonged to him. Entirely to him. No boss, no appointments, no "We need to talk."

"You know, Hecke," he said quietly, almost as if he were saying it mainly to himself, "at the end of the day I don't want much. Just enough cigarettes so I don't go crazy, and enough money so I can sleep. Everything else... is bonus level."

Heckenpisser looked at him appraisingly, then raised his bottle. "Cheers, Your Majesty," he said. "On a bonus level."

They clinked glasses, and the clinking of the bottles was the only courtly ceremony this king ever needed.

Hedge pisser – mama's boy in a tailored suit

Before he was nicknamed "Heckenpisser" (a derogatory term for a scoundrel), he was simply called Ulf Schröder. And Ulf Schröder was the kind of name that made it clear from his school report: This person will never be a rock star. It's the name of someone who does his taxes on time, polishes his shoes, and says "Good morning" to the baker even if it's already noon.

Ulf still lived with his mother. Not because he particularly wanted to, but because his life had never really taken off enough to propel him anywhere. And his mother was like a cross between a cleaning product commercial and a guilty conscience. Her name was Gerda, she wore an apron, always had something cooking in the oven, and a constant worry in her eyes, as if the world might barge in at any moment, not wipe its feet, and ruin everything.

The apartment was on the second floor of a building that, from the outside, looked like it was home to a typical middle-class family. Inside, it smelled of freshly brewed coffee, cleaning supplies, and the phrase "We've always done it this way." Slippers stood neatly lined up in the hallway, like soldiers waiting for their turn. The curtains were freshly laundered, and the potholders were color-coordinated with the tablecloth.

And right in the middle: Ulf. With a side parting, ironed shirt, pleated trousers, patent leather shoes. A foreign element in a world that would actually cry out for sweaty jogging bottoms and discolored undershirts.

His day always began the same way. In the morning – considerably earlier than Kuddel's – the alarm clock rang. Not a shrill "beep-beep," but a soft "bing" from some old-fashioned radio alarm clock his mother had once received for her birthday. Ulf opened his eyes, sorted his thoughts like index cards, sat up, and immediately pushed the covers back neatly, as if he had to behave himself before an invisible audience.

Her first glance went to the chair. Hanging on it was her freshly ironed shirt for the day. Beneath it were her carefully folded trousers, socks, even her underwear, laid out perfectly as if it too had undergone quality control. Gerda had prepared everything. She didn't do it out of obligation, but out of a kind of religious sense of duty.

"Outward order is inner order," she used to say. If that was true, then Ulf was inwardly a military administrative act.

The bathroom was a world unto itself. The tiles were beige, the mirror spotless, the toothbrush holder with exactly two toothbrushes: hers and his. On the sink lay a guest towel that no one ever used because no one ever visited.

Ulf stood in front of the mirror, carefully combing his side parting, smoothing each individual hair into place. His glasses lay on the shelf, waiting until his hair was perfectly groomed. While shaving, he tightened his mouth so precisely, as if someone were judging the shave. Never a stray stubble, never a cut, never an "Oh well."

He wasn't a handsome man, but he tried to package what he had in a way that at least looked "effortless." His eyes were a bit too big, his nose a little too small, his chin too soft. But all of it together created a guy who somehow always seemed like he was about to hand someone a form.

Gerda was waiting in the kitchen. Two cups, two plates, two rolls. Jam, sausage, cheese – all in small containers with lids. The coffee machine gurgled, the radio played the news softly, somewhere a presenter, in far too good a mood, said the phrase "feel-good music," and Ulf would have loved to cut the power.

"Morning, son," Gerda said as he came in. She still called him "son," even though he was so old that others were already divorced. "Sit down, the coffee's ready."

Ulf sat down. Upright. Never slouch. He smoothed his trousers before tucking his legs under the table. "Morning, Mom," he replied, his tone a mixture of habit and silent surrender.

"I ironed yesterday's shirt again properly," she said. "There was a small crease in the sleeve."

"I didn't even notice that," said Ulf.

Gerda nodded sternly. "Maybe not for you. But others pay attention to such things. You want to make a good impression, after all."

And that was the key phrase.

Good impression.

That was the invisible law that governed this apartment. Gerda lived in a world where someone could ring the doorbell unannounced at any time and judge her: the neighbor, relatives, the postman, God. So everything always had to be perfect. The apartment, her clothes, her manners. Ulf was her last great "project," meant to protect her from the creeping decline of old age.

Ulf nodded, popped a piece of bread roll into his mouth, and chewed thoroughly, his mouth closed, almost inaudibly. Two programs were running in his head: one listening to his mother complaining about "young people these days" and how "everyone's glued to their phones." The other was thinking about how he could arrange things so he wouldn't be sitting alone in his room again this evening, sorting through his files.

Sometimes he thought about moving out. Just putting an end to the housecoat, the constant "Put on something decent," and the coffee that tasted like an obligation. But then the bills came. The wages. The rents in Berlin. The quiet fear of being alone.

In the end, he remained a mama's boy in a tailored suit, even if the tailored suit in reality consisted only of C&A clothing and careful folding.

Ulf worked in an office somewhere. It didn't matter what exactly. It was the kind of job you couldn't tell anyone about without them tuning out after ten seconds. Something to do with numbers, lists, and control. He was the type who checked whether others had filled out their forms correctly. He corrected, typed, and stamped. Eight hours a day.

His colleagues liked him "sort of." In that way you like someone you know never causes trouble, never laughs "too loudly," and always has a spare paperclip. He was the one who kept the birthday lists, made sure the cakes were cut neatly, and that no one took more than two slices without asking first.

But in the evenings, when the screens went dark and everyone went home, he sometimes stood a little too long at the bus stop, his briefcase hanging in his hand like a foreign object. In those moments, there was something inside him that rattled softly.

Something that said: Was that all?

This thing had a strange shape. It looked like a small, dirty desire for chaos, wrapped in a silk scarf out of politeness.

And that's where Kuddel came into play.

The two should never have met. In a sensible world, Kuddel would have languished in some other reality, and Ulf would have ended up in some suburb with a carport. But Berlin isn't a sensible world. Berlin is a city where chance stumbles drunkenly across intersections.

The first contact was of course at the corner store. Where else?

Ulf was on his way home that evening, wearing a shirt, bow tie, and carrying a briefcase. It was one of those evenings when you'd normally go straight home, take off your shoes, turn on the TV, and put the day behind you. But something inside him didn't want to immediately return to the freshly mopped hallway with his slippers and the familiar "So, how was your day?"

So he went to the corner store. Just to have a look. Maybe a chocolate bar. Something.

There it was: Kuddel, Kutte, Kippe, Sterni. The holy trinity of crashing and burning.

He leaned against the bar table, laughing loudly at some joke that only drunk people find truly funny, and his presence filled the corner like bad, but loud music. The cap on his head, his hair greasy, his jeans ripped, his boots dirty – everything about him was a "fuck you" to the world of Gerda and her coffee beans.

Ulf stood still for a moment, his hand on his briefcase, waiting for someone to overlook him. But Kuddel rarely overlooked anyone.

"Well, look, the tax investigators are here too," Kuddel exclaimed when he saw Ulf. "Or have you escaped from the savings bank, little one?"

Ulf felt the blood rush to his face. "I... I'm not even..."

He wanted to say something serious. Something like: "I live here" or "I just wanted to...". Instead, an "Um" came out, hanging in the air like a wet rag.

Kuddel – who wasn't yet a hedge pisser back then – stood there, staring at him, realizing that the man in front of him was everything his mother would have used as a negative example. And yet, he couldn't look away.

Kuddel looked him up and down. Shirt, bow tie, ironed trousers, patent leather shoes. "Wow, man," he finally said, "if I knew my life was going to end like this, I'd start praying right now."

Something inside Ulf rebelled. The same voice that sometimes asked at the bus stop if that was all there was to it now spoke up and whispered: Say something back.

And for the first time in a long time, he did.

"Your life ended long ago," he said, surprisingly calmly. "You just forgot to lie down."

It was quiet for a moment. The hum of the convenience store, the noise of the street, everything seemed to go on pause for a moment.

Then Kuddel laughed. Loudly, honestly, like someone who doesn't have to be polite. "Okay," he snorted, "okay, that was good. The suit can stay."

And that was the beginning. The moment when Ulf Schröder slowly began to become a hedge pisser.

He didn't know it then. He only knew that he wasn't going home that evening as if he'd just quickly bought cigarettes. He stayed. He took a beer, much too cold for his settled stomach, stood at the high table, and listened.

Between Kuddel, who told stories of failed jobs and legendary crashes, and the neon lighting that bathed everything in that ugly, honest light, there was suddenly a place for him.

A mama's boy in a tailored suit, suddenly in the middle of the dirt. And for the first time in a long time, he had the feeling that something inside him was breathing, something he had previously only suppressed.

His laughter – that much too high-pitched "Hihihi" – didn't belong outside, didn't belong in the office, didn't belong in Gerda's kitchen. But here, next to Kuddel, in front of the corner store, it sounded for the first time as if it were in the right place.

The evening Ulf first got stuck at the corner store didn't end with a bang, no movie credits, no dramatic music. It ended with cold smoke, sticky fingers, and the realization that he hadn't laughed like that in a long time.

He came home later than Gerda would have liked. Not late in the sense of a "misguided youth," but late in the sense of "almost antisocial by her standards." It was after ten, the

stairwell was dimly lit, and the morning's smell of cleaning products had already been overpowered by what one called "life" in such buildings.

Ulf quietly unlocked the apartment door. He knew every creaking spot in the hallway and tried to avoid them, like a burglar on familiar ground. But the second hallway on the right betrayed him every time. It emitted that small, bright creak – an acoustic clue.

"Is that you, boy?" Gerda's voice came from the kitchen. Not loud, but sharp enough to make him stand up straight.

He sighed softly, put down his briefcase, and hung his coat neatly on the hook. Almost automatically, he smoothed his shoulders with his hand, as if trying to wipe away the day's stresses. "Yes, Mom. It's me."

She stood in the kitchen doorway, her apron still tied around her neck, even though everything was already clean. Her hair was in curlers because tomorrow was another day when someone might be evaluated. In her hand she held a dish towel, which she nervously turned this way and that.

"Where have you been for so long?" she asked. "I was worried sick. It's dark, there are strange characters around, you read in the newspaper about everything that's going on."

Ulf briefly thought of Kuddel, his robe, his cigarette, and the joke about the Sterni beer and the vagina, and had to stifle a hysterical laugh. "I was just... uh... outside for a minute," he said. "At the corner store. To grab a beer."

At the word "beer," Gerda grimaced as if he had said "heroin." "You never drink beer outside otherwise," she needled. "Who were you with?"

He hesitated. How could he explain it? "With an acquaintance," he finally said. "From the... from the area."

Gerda snorted. "That guy who always stands so unkempt in front of the shop? I saw him, he reeks of tobacco and failure from ten meters away."

Ulf ducked his head briefly. He had known perfectly well that they had seen him. Gerda saw more than he gave her credit for. "His name is Kuddel," he muttered, unintentionally.

"Well, wonderful," she mocked. "Kuddel. That sounds trustworthy. I hope he doesn't teach you to smoke too."

"I don't smoke," Ulf said automatically.

"Not yet," she growled. "And that's how it's going to stay. You have a decent job, you're a respectable young man. Don't let those kinds of people drag you down. They're just hanging around on the streets waiting for welfare."

Ulf said nothing. He thought about how he had stood at the high table, a cold bottle in his hand, and suddenly wasn't the same person sitting quietly in the office anymore. He had made jokes. He had quipped back. He had laughed. He had felt alive, albeit in a somewhat cheesy way.

"I'm going to sleep," he simply said. "It was a tiring day."

Gerda looked at him appraisingly, as if trying to gauge his level of intoxication in his eyes. Then she nodded curtly. "Don't forget to put your shirt in the wash. And put your shoes away properly. You're not an animal."

Ulf went into his room and quietly closed the door. His domain was the opposite of Kuddel's apartment. Bookshelf, desk, bed—everything was tidy. On the desk lay neatly stacked documents, a few pens, and a tablecloth without any holes. On the wall, no posters, no clutter, just a framed childhood photo of him standing next to his father, wearing far too large glasses and sporting a far too neat hairstyle.

The father had been dead for a long time. His heart had given out sometime, just like that. A quiet departure, as was typical of him. Since then, Gerda had held onto the boy twice as tightly, like insurance against his disappearance.

Ulf took off his shirt and hung it over the chair, as neatly as she had taught him. Then he sat down on the bed and stared at his hands. They were well-groomed, his nails short, no polish, no grease. Office hands. Hands that carry folders, not crates of bottles.

His head was spinning a little, not from the beer, more from the rupture in the system. "You talked to him," he thought. "To someone like him. And you didn't die immediately."

He didn't know exactly why he went back to the corner store the next evening. He told himself he just wanted to buy a few things. A bag of chips, maybe some chewing gum, anything. But when he turned the corner and saw the standing table where Kuddel was already standing, both arms propped up, cigarette dangling from his face, he knew that was a lie, as transparent as old curtains.

"Well, the tax office!" Kuddel exclaimed when he saw him. "There he is again. Has Mommy let you out of the cage?"

Ulf paused for a moment, feeling the old shame creeping up on him, but this time something else mixed in with it. Defiance. "She's my mother, not my warden," he said. "And I don't need permission to drink a beer."

Kuddel laughed. "Yes, you need it. From yourself. And today you gave it to yourself. Very good."

He slid a bottle towards him, as if it were the entrance to a secret society. Ulf hesitated briefly, looked at the bottle cap, looked at his manicured fingers, then reached out and took it.

"Your name is really Ulf?" asked Kuddel.

"Yes," he replied.

"That's not a name, that's a bad decision," Kuddel commented. "We need something else for you. Something with character. Something you can belt out when you're too drunk to find your way home."

And as is typical with such types, the naming process didn't remain theoretical.

It happened a few weeks later, on one of those evenings that imperceptibly shift from "I'll just have one drink" to "When did I actually go out?". Ulf had become a regular at the corner store. Still wearing a shirt, but his bow tie was looser, his tone rougher. He had learned not to suppress his "Hehehe" laughs anymore, but simply to let them out.

They had drunk too much. Kuddel, Ulf, and two other characters from the neighborhood, whose names only ever came up after the third beer. The air was warm, their heads even warmer.

Sometime in the dead of night, when the city was nothing but patches of lamplight and ugly mugs, they had to pee. Of course. The body has its own schedule.

"I need to go into the bushes," one of them slurred.

"There's a hedge back there," said another.

They stood on some strip of grass, half park, half dog toilet, somewhere between two streets that no one could define more precisely. Ulf wavered. He had never liked peeing outside. It was messy, uncontrolled, animalistic. Exactly what he had always been told not to do.

But the inner voice spoke louder than the upbringing.

"Come on, go," said Kuddel. "It's dark, who cares?"

Ulf hesitantly stood by the hedge. A sad hedge, really. Not those perfect things from terraced house catalogs, but a rotten thicket, with rubbish mixed in and dog marks.

He opened his fly, looked around one more time – and then he let go.

It was the most normal thing in the world. A man urinates in a hedge. Probably happens a hundred thousand times every night in this city.

But for Ulf, it was a break. For him, it was as if he were crossing an invisible boundary. For the first time, he did something that Gerda would have described as "antisocial" without immediately backing down.

Kuddel stood a few meters away, watching him, bottle in hand, grinning. "Well, look at that," he shouted, "fine Mr. Ulf Schröder is peeing in the hedge! Mom would faint."

Ulf had to laugh. Right in the middle of the burst, right in the moment when he should have been embarrassed, he laughed. That high-pitched, bright "Hehehe," cutting through the night like a jarring note.

"Wow, dude, listen to yourself!" one of the others roared. "He's peeing in the hedge and giggling like a schoolgirl! What kind of person are you?"

"Hedge schoolgirl," slurred the second one.

"No way, man," said Kuddel, and something clicked in his brain. "That's our hedge pee-er. Look at him. Shirt, bow tie, parting – but in the end, he's just standing here watering the city's greenery. Hedge pee-er! That fits!"

They all laughed. Much too loudly, for much too long.

Ulf stood there, shook himself off, fastened his fly, turned around – and realized that the name was already closing around him like a second skin.

“Hedge pisser,” he repeated quietly. It sounded like both an insult and a liberation.

In the days that followed, he tried to ignore the nickname. At the office, he remained "Mr. Schröder," the reliable, calm, well-groomed employee who neatly formatted his spreadsheets and offered respectful birthday greetings.

But as soon as he loosened his tie in the evening, undid his bow tie, and his path led him back to the corner store, he was no longer Ulf.

“Well, hedge pisser, offline again today?” Kuddel then called out.

And he grinned. Because there was someone who knew him, not as "boy" or "Mr. Schröder", but as the strange hybrid of mama's boy and secret border crosser.

The nickname stuck. It clung to him like cigarette smoke to wallpaper. Gerda didn't know him. Nobody in the office knew him.

But here, in the small kingdom of neon lights, warm beer and cigarette butts, he was no longer just the same person he had always been.

Here he was:

Hedge pisser.

A mama's boy in a tailored suit, who now had a bit of dirt on his CV – and who secretly felt better than any promotion or salary increase.

It wasn't long before the double life began to tear at the seams. Not with a bang, but rather with a quiet "rip," like a good pair of trousers that have been worn too often.

Heckenpisser – that is, Ulf – moved between two worlds that wanted nothing to do with each other. By day: office. Spreadsheets, emails, meetings, "Could you please double-check this?", canteen coffee, little jokes by the photocopier.

Evenings: Late-night convenience store. Cigarettes, beer, knick-knacks, jokes, stories that would never see the light of day.

And in between: Gerda. Mother. Controlling authority. The question made flesh: "Where were you?"

At first, he managed to keep everything separate. He arrived late, but not too late. He smelled a little of smoke, but not too strongly. When Gerda asked, he said "colleagues' evening" or "we had a long meeting," and she nodded, suspiciously, but not alarmed.

Except that he had changed. Not in grand gestures, but in small ways. Before, he would sometimes take files home after work, sort them, make notes, perfect Excel spreadsheets, as if someone were looking through his documents at night and giving him stars. Not anymore. Now the file folder often just sat in the corner while he lay on the bed thinking about the

scene where he had peed in the hedge and everyone had laughed—at HIM. Not laughed at, but... laughed along with him. That made a difference.

It was noticed in the office too. Not immediately. But at some point, people realized that "Mr. Schröder" often came to work with slightly reddened eyes, a little paler, with a hint of something foreign in his eyes.

"Is everything alright, Mr. Schröder?" asked his colleague Mrs. Baumann one morning when she met him getting coffee.

"Of course," he said, smiling dutifully. "I just didn't get enough sleep."

She glanced at him briefly. "Have you read too much?"

He thought of Kuddel, of Sterni beer, of dirty jokes, and of the garbage man from Alexanderplatz, whom he now knew secondhand. "Something like that," he said.

During the day, he remained reliable. Forms were neat, deadlines met, signatures correctly placed. He knew this persona inside and out. "Mr. Schröder" was like a well-fitting coat: colorless, but functional.

But every time he left the office floor in the evening and the automatic glass door closed behind him, a part of that figure fell to the floor with it. And then, after the bus ride, when he turned the corner to the corner store and saw the neon light, there was this nervous, small, dirty thing in his chest that rejoiced.

It wasn't that Kuddel made him a better person. That would be a lie. But Kuddel made him more honest – in an unpleasant way.

One evening, Heckenpisser was already standing in front of the corner store when Kuddel was still missing. That was rare; normally Kuddel was like part of the furniture, already there before the day had decided to truly end.

Ulf had gotten himself a beer, was standing at the high table, his bow tie loosened, his shirt collar open. He looked almost relaxed, except for his hands, which were holding the bottle a little too tightly.

Murat was on shift. He looked at Ulf the way you look at a suit that has wandered into the wrong bar.

"Well, hedge pisser," Murat said dryly, "out without a bodyguard today?"

"He's not my bodyguard," Ulf protested reflexively. "He's my... uh... friend."

The word hung in the air for a moment, as if it were unsure whether it was allowed to live there.

Murat raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Friend, yeah? You know that guy talks to bottles more than he talks to people?"

"I also talk to bottles," said Heckenpisser. "But most of the time they're colleagues."

Murat gave a short laugh. "Not bad. You're getting more relaxed, man. Before, you looked like someone was about to snatch your tax return."

"I still seem respectable," said Ulf, half serious, half hopeful.

"Brother," Murat said, "you could drink Sterni from an ashtray and you'd still look like you could refuse me a loan."

Heckenpisser laughed. "Hehehe... from a professional point of view, that's not entirely wrong."

At that moment Kuddel came around the corner. Heavy steps, cap pulled low over his face, his robe fluttering slightly in the evening breeze, as if it had plans of its own.

"Well, look who's here, my hedge rat!" he roared, even before he'd properly arrived. "Hydrating again?"

"I was simply taking precautions," replied Heckenpisser, raising the bottle as if to toast. "The circulatory system should be prepared."

"What kind of poets have you all become?" Murat growled. "Back in the day, people just said, 'I'm going to get drunk,' and that was it."

The three of them stood at the high table, three completely different animals from the same dirty continent.

Murat, half businessman, half crook; Kuddel, drunken king; hedge pisser, honorary citizen of the underworld.

"And, Hecke," Kuddel asked after a while, "what does Muddi say? Still satisfied with her model son-in-law?"

Heckenpisser flinched slightly. "She thinks I spend too much time 'on the street,'" he explained with a slight sigh. "She uses that word as if I were about to live in an underpass."

"You are," Kuddel said. "At least mentally. You're already halfway here, old man. The rest is just laundry and raising children."

"She asked me if you were a criminal," Heckenpisser continued. "I said you're just... socially flexible."

Kuddel snorted. "What did you say, old man?!"

"Socially flexible," repeated Heckenpisser. "That sounds better than 'don't feel like working'."

"I've been working," Kuddel grumbled. "More than all you tie-wearing clowns."

Murat nodded. "He really worked hard. Just never long enough to get a cup of coffee in the break room."

It was one of those evenings where the conversation subtly shifts. First jokes, then half-truths, then suddenly sentences that are heavier than the beer allows.

"You know, Hecke," Kuddel said at one point, "I really wonder sometimes what you're doing here."

Heckenpisser took his time with his answer. He looked at the bottle, at his polished shoes, at the cigarette butt that was smoldering in the ashtray next to him – Kuddel had put it there as if it were official territory.

"I'm looking for what everyone is looking for," he finally said. "Only without the bourgeois label."

"And what is that?" Kuddel wanted to know.

"Not being alone," said Heckenpisser.

It was quiet. Not for long, but noticeably so.

Murat cleared his throat. "Brother, the corner store is really the wrong place for that," he muttered. "Here you're always surrounded by people, but you're still alone. It's like a train station – only with alcohol."

Heckenpisser smiled crookedly. "Train stations are honest," he said. "Everyone's just standing around, not quite sure what to do with themselves. It's the same here, only with a higher blood alcohol level."

Kuddel glanced at him sideways. You could tell he wasn't used to hearing phrases like that. He was more the "fuck the world" type than the type for subtle nuances. But he wasn't stupid. Just drunk.

"You know, Hecke," he said quietly, "you may be a mama's boy, but you're our mama's boy. The guys in the office laugh at you because you're different. I laugh with you because you're just like me, only cleaner."

Heckenpisser swallowed, and there was this "Hehehe" that sounded different now. "That was... surprisingly nice," he said. "Almost poetic for you."

"Yeah, yeah," Kuddel waved it off, visibly uncomfortable with his own sentiment. "Don't get used to it. Otherwise, I'll start developing feelings. I don't have room for that in the fridge."

They drank. The night crept further over the city, streetlights came on, shifts changed.

Later, much later, when the evening had almost dissolved and Murat was already closing the shelves inside, Heckenpisser stood alone downstairs in the hallway, the key in his hand, his forehead leaning against the cold wall.

He was tired. Not just physically. Tired of being torn between "Boy, put on some decent clothes" and "Hedge, get a move on."

He quietly unlocked the door and slipped into the hallway. The light was still on. Gerda sat at the kitchen table in her bathrobe, her hands folded around a cup of tea, as if waiting for some bad news that had arrived late.

"There you are," she said. Not a question this time, more of a judgment.

"Yes," he said. "It was... a long day."

She looked at him appraisingly. "You smell of smoke."

"I was standing next to a smoker," he replied.

"You laugh differently," she said.

He paused. "Pardon?"

"Your laugh," said Gerda. "You rarely used to laugh. And when you did, it was... quiet. Now you come home and sometimes... you giggle to yourself. As if you've done something you're not entitled to."

She said it without anger, only with that typical maternal vulnerability, which was even worse than screaming.

"I... have only heard stories," said Heckenpisser. "From people who live their lives... differently."

"Antisocial," she defined it succinctly.

He exhaled slowly. That was the moment when he could say: "Yes, but they are also honest." Or: "The only difference between them and you is that you hide your dirt better." Or: "I like being there."

Instead he said, "I'll be careful."

She looked at him for a long time, then nodded wearily. "You're my boy," she murmured. "I don't want you to ever, anywhere..."—she made an indeterminate gesture, as if abysses lurked everywhere on the edge of the city—"...slip into it. You're better than them."

Heckenpisser thought of Kuddel. Of how he stood at the corner store, king in the dirt, with more honesty in his cigarette than in some resumes.

"I'm not better," he said quietly. "I'm just dressed differently."

Gerda didn't understand. She only heard the words, not the weight behind them.

"Go to sleep," she said. "You have to go back to the office tomorrow."

In his room, Hedge Pisser took off his shirt and hung it smoothly over the chair. He looked at himself in the mirror: his upper body pale, his shoulders somewhat narrow, his face too innocent. He thought about his nickname. "Hedge Pisser." A name that sounded filthy, but felt strangely right.

He lay down in bed, stared at the ceiling, and knew: the next evening he would go to the corner store again. Not because he desperately needed to drink. But because there was someone there who wouldn't call him "boy." And because sometimes it was better to be honestly broken under the neon lights than to function properly in the living room.

Thus, the mama's boy in his tailored suit slowly became what Kuddel had made of him – and what deep inside him had always been:

Hedge pisser.

Between two worlds. Not quite at home in either, but at least not entirely alone in the shadow of the corner store.

Elke, the mistress of the Boonekamp beer tap system

Before anyone said "Elke from the corner store," she was simply called Elke. Only, her name didn't sound the same as others'. For most people, a first name is a formality, something that appears on letters, forms, and ID cards. For Elke, "Elke" was a statement. A word like a cigarette, half-smoked, but still with enough ember to hurt someone if you pressed it into their eye.

She wasn't one of those polished shop assistants in a company T-shirt with a rehearsed "Hello, can I get you anything else?". Elke was a unique section of Berlin's retail scene. A category all her own. If the city had an official catalog of "originals," she'd have her own page somewhere between the homeless guy with the perpetually strumming guitar at Alexanderplatz and the irate bus driver on the M41.

The corner store was their stage. Not a big shop, not a chain-logo box, but a slightly crooked hole in the brickwork that glowed at night like an emergency exit marker in a plane about to crash. Above the door, a flickering sign that had probably originally said something like "Drinks & Tobacco" in clear letters, but now looked more like "Go in, you'll find comfort here."

Inside: A narrow counter with a cash register, a cigarette shelf behind it, the refrigerator against the wall crammed with beer, soda, energy drinks that no doctor would ever recommend. Cans, bottles, bits and pieces. On the other side: shelves with chips, chocolate bars, pasta, a few sad cans of food that nobody bought, except maybe on a Sunday night when someone, drunk on peppermint schnapps, suddenly decided they wanted to cook.

And in between, like a strange priestess of nighttime needs: Elke.

She wasn't young. She wasn't old either. She had simply "been around for a while".

Her hair: once blonde, now somewhere between mousy and nicotine yellow. Mostly in some makeshift updo that looked like she'd said "Oh, screw it" five times, and then squeezed in a clip anyway. Her eyes: tired, but alert. They had that look only people who work nights and try not to fall apart completely have. Her hands: a little rough, fingertips slightly yellowed. From cigarettes, receipts, and constantly reaching for bottled beer.

Elke wasn't fat, she wasn't thin; she had the body of a woman who had worked more shifts than vacation days. And she had the aura of someone who understood very early on that life isn't a wish-granting machine, but rather a jukebox that's constantly jammed, and you kick it and hope that at least one halfway tolerable song comes out.

She stood behind the counter like someone who had decided not just to sell beer, but to rule. That's why Kuddel and Heckenpisser eventually called her "the mistress of the Boonekamp tap system." Even though it wasn't even a real tap system. It was just a bottle that she tilted over open beer bottles with a kind of practiced instinct.

Elke hadn't always worked at the corner store. Before she was drawn into the neon lights, she'd had other jobs: a bakery, a clothing store, and once a call center ("customer service," it was officially called, but it was really "being insulted for minimum wage"). She'd had men, a marriage that was now just a "phase," a guy with a motorcycle and big talk, one in a suit with a small ego, and one she couldn't even recognize from his face anymore, only from the noise he'd made when he left.

In the end, she had left it all in the same way: first trying to fit in, then realizing she didn't belong, then leaving or being left. The corner store was the place where no one expected anything from her other than what she already was: direct, tired, funny, tough.

The shop belonged to a guy you saw so rarely that some people thought he was just a legend. Some Turkish uncle who had the paperwork, the business registration, and two or three other shops somewhere in Neukölln. "As long as the cash register balances and nothing's on fire," he once told her, "I don't care what you do here."

That was the worst and at the same time the best thing you could say to Elke. No control, no fake smile, no corporate bullshit. Just her, the place, and the night.

She knew the people from the neighborhood. The ordinary ones, the lost ones, the dangerous ones, the easygoing ones, the ones who'd ended up here by mistake, having taken a wrong turn looking for a subway station. She knew their faces, the way they walked, the way they said "Another beer." She could tell how they were doing by the brand they chose. A man who usually drank Beck's and suddenly went for the cheapest pilsner was having problems. One who switched from vodka to water had a wife who'd threatened him with a suitcase.

And she had known Kuddel and Heckenpisser since before they even knew they would play a significant role in her life.

The first one to show up was, of course, Kuddel. Sometime in the early 2000s, a year no one could really remember, he stumbled into this shop for the first time. His robe was freshly soiled, his gaze slightly cocky, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, even though there was already a "No Smoking" sticker on the window.

"One Sterni," he had said, without really looking at her, as if it were a formality – like "One ticket AB, please."

Elke had been standing behind the cash register, sorting the chewing gum by color, out of boredom. She looked at him, saw the boots, the dirt, the cap, the face.

"Two sixty-five," she said.

He laid down the money, took the bottle, and opened it right outside with a lighter that had probably survived ten concerts.

He came again the next evening. And the next. And then at some point with the sentence: "You know what I want anyway."

She just shrugged and said, "As long as you don't call me 'honey', I'm fine."

Heckenpisser came along later, like a character introduced in season two of a series so the main character has someone to react to. At first, Elke thought he was an insurance salesman. Too polished, too upright, too polite.

"Good evening," he said the first time, slightly too formally, as if this were a bank and not a place for sleepless nights. "A beer, please."

"What kind?" she asked.

He hesitated. A small but very telltale moment. He didn't know much about beer.

"Uh... what you recommend," he muttered.

She had looked him up and down, his bow tie, his shirt, the parting of his hair. Then, without a word, she had taken a Sterni beer from the refrigerator, placed it on the counter and said: "We'll start with this. Everything else can wait."

He had paid, thanked her, and as he left, there was a little extra ease in his gait that probably no one but her would have noticed.

Over time, Kuddel and Heckenpisser ceased to be "customers". They were part of the furniture.

When Elke was on shift, she knew the two of them would show up sooner or later. Kuddel often came first, with a "Hey, boss?" and the self-assurance of a man who'd been making the same mistake for far too long. Heckenpisser followed a little later, sometimes with a briefcase, sometimes without, but always with that mixture of guilt and secret anticipation on his face.

The whole Boonekamp thing started like everything that started in that place: with boredom, too much alcohol, and the search for a new thrill that cost nothing.

It had been a quiet night. Rain, hardly any passing trade, just a few latecomers getting cigarettes or "something sweet so I don't smoke another cigarette." Kuddel was there, Heckenpisser too, both already two or three beers down.

"Elke," Kuddel said at some point, leaning half over the counter, "I'll tell you quite honestly: Sterni doesn't do it for me anymore. My body has developed a resistance. I need evolution in a glass."

"You need a doctor and a guardian most of all," she commented dryly, without looking up.

Hedge-pisser giggled. "Hehehe... guardian... very good."

"I'm serious," Kuddel lamented. "Something else needs to go in there. Booster. Octane. Something to tell Sterni that he can't just put up with everything."

Elke sighed and looked towards the liquor shelf. There stood the usual suspects: cheap vodka, grain spirit, herbal schnapps, some liqueurs that were probably already expired, but didn't really harm anyone because nobody drank them anyway.

"We have Boonekamp," she said after a moment's thought. "But that's really only for people who have already tried everything else."

"Perfect," said Kuddel. "We are exactly the target group."

She took the dusty bottle from the shelf and turned it in her hand. Boonekamp was the kind of schnapps that looked as if it had once been intended as medicine, before someone decided it was better drunk in dimly lit rooms.

"This," Elke explained, "is officially a digestive bitter. Unofficially, it's: 'Why did I do that?' in liquid form."

Kuddel's face already glowed with anticipation. "Take a shot of Sterni, boss. I want to see if I'll still wake up tomorrow."

Heckenpisser looked on skeptically. "Is that... compatible?" he asked. "Beer and Boonekamp?"

"You're not compatible with life either, and yet you're still going around," Elke retorted. "So shut up."

She unscrewed the Boonekamp bottle, placed it against the neck of the beer bottle, and poured in a generous amount. The color barely changed, but the smell did – a sharp, bitter note that settled over the musty beer fumes.

"So," she said. "Test subject number one."

Kuddel took the bottle, sniffed, briefly grimaced, then grinned. "Smells like a sick note," he commented. "Perfect." He put it to his lips and took a long gulp.

A brief moment of silence. A blink. A gagging sound, followed by a dirty laugh.

"Ugh!" he gasped. "This is... this is really awful. I'll take another sip."

Heckenpisser watched, fascinated, as someone drove after a car that had been driven by a car that was a complete mess. "I... don't know if I'd want to do that," he said uncertainly.

"Yes, you do want it," said Elke. "You look like you could use a little shit. Take it."

And so it was born: the ritual of Sterni beer with a shot of Boonekamp.

Elke had mixed a new drug for her men – and yes, in a way they were "hers". Cheap, dirty, effective.

From then on, she was no longer just the woman at the cash register. She was: Elke, the mistress of the Boonekamp beer tap system.

Not because there was actually a facility there. But because she was the one who decided when the beer got an "upgrade" and when it didn't. And somewhere, deep in the night, when she tipped the bottle for the umpteenth time and saw that brown poison trickle down the neck, she knew: She was just as much a part of this crashing universe as Kuddel and Heckenpisser.

Except that she was standing behind the counter, not in front of it.

The problem with roles is: if you play them long enough, everyone believes you're really that person. Elke understood this early on. She knew that people needed her – not as a person, but as a function. As "the one from the corner store" who sells beer at night, hands over cigarettes, cell phone chargers, three euros for the lottery, aspirin for hangovers, and occasionally offers a nutshell-sized "Oh, it's not that bad."

The corner shop was like an aquarium without the glass. People swam in, swam out, leaving a few bubbles behind. Elke stood in the middle and acted as if she were just the one throwing in the food.

The truth was: she was just as caught up in it as the others. Only with a cash register between her and the abyss.

Outwardly, Elke was... well, tough. Not in the sense of a "thug," but in the sense of "she won't give you any illusions."

If someone came in, already clearly too drunk, and mumbled: "Open another bottle, sister," her reply was dry: "I'm not your sister. And you're only getting one more before you puke in the shop."

When a trembling figure with a hood and wide eyes approached the cash register and whispered, "Can you put it on credit?", she would say, "This is a late-night shop, not a social project. No money, no fabric. Go to the welfare office, not to me."

And when any teenagers tried to buy vodka with fake IDs, she looked at them like bad TV viewers: "You're not even believable in your lies. Get beer from your brothers. Or wait until life destroys you on its own."

She wasn't cruel. She was just over the top. There was a difference.

But then there were Kuddel and Heckenpisser. The two weren't just customers. They were like a continuous program that she watched without having switched it on – and yet, eventually, she could recite every episode by heart.

She knew what Kuddel looked like after his first sip: that little gleam in his eyes that for two seconds made him pretend he wasn't the guy in the ripped jeans, but a boy from his younger days with freshly washed hair and a life ahead of him. And she knew what he looked like after the third, fourth, fifth beer: like a battered boxer who fancies he's still got another round in the tank.

Heckenpisser was a different case. When he first showed up with his briefcase, she thought: "Great, the tax office in human form."

By now she knew: The guy wasn't dangerous. The guy was at risk.

His shirts, his bow tie, his side parting – everything like armor. One that didn't protect against what ended up at the checkout at night: loneliness, failure, worn-out dreams.

"You're too good for this place," she had once said to him when he hesitantly reached for a Sterni beer.

"I'm too refined for many things," he had replied. "And yet here I am, sitting in it. Hehehe."

Elke liked him. Not in the "I'd keep him on my back" kind of way. More in the "when the world hurts you, you come by here and I'll give you something that burns, but at least it's honest" kind of thing.

The Boonekamp was their tool for this. A kind of solace that didn't disguise itself as solace.

"Elke," said Kuddel on one of those evenings, when the rain came horizontally and only the truly lost found their way to the corner store, "you are the only thing that is still constant here."

She stood behind the counter, sorting coins into the change drawer, without looking up. "Well, thanks," she said. "That's the most romantic insult I've ever heard."

"That's just how it is," he insisted. "The neighborhood has changed a thousand times. Bars open, bars close, cafes with vegan crap, boutiques that nobody needs. But the corner store is still there. And you're still there. Always have been."

"Forever, dude," chuckled Hedge Pisser in the back, who was examining a bag of peanut flips as if it were a scientific specimen. "For about... eons. Hehehe."

Elke put the coins down, folded her arms, and looked at the two of them. "I haven't always been here," she said. "I've been here for ten years. Before that, I worked at the checkout in a supermarket. Before that, I sold bread rolls. Before that, clothes. Before that, I got ripped off by a guy on a motorcycle. And long before that, I was a girl from the countryside who thought the world had more to offer than working the night shift at the cigarette counter."

It was rare for her to talk so much about herself at once. Perhaps it was the weather, perhaps the alcohol in the air, perhaps the tiredness.

Kuddel picked up his beer and rested his elbows on the counter. "So?" he asked. "Did she?"

"Who?"

"The world."

Elke thought for a moment. "The world had junk on offer," she said then. "And I took what I could carry. The rest is somewhere along the way."

Heckenpisser nodded, as if he found the answer plausible. "That's... amazingly precise," he said quietly.

"And you two are part of the remaining stock," she added.

"Hey!" protested Kuddel. "We are premium product."

"You're expired lager with character," she retorted. "And he..." – she nodded her chin at Heckenpisser – "is a porcelain cup in the wrong box."

Heckenpisser laughed. "That's the most beautiful picture anyone has ever drawn of me," he chuckled. "Hehehe."

It was one of those nights when at some point someone asked for Jägermeister. Whenever the mood reached that certain point – somewhere between "Let's talk honestly" and "Let's just forget everything again" – that was the moment when liquor came into play.

"Will you make us a clean one?" asked Kuddel, lifting the empty Sterni bottle as if it were an admission ticket.

Elke looked at her watch. A quarter to one. Too early to be sensible. Too late to become sensible.

"Okay," she sighed. "But Jäger today. Boonekamp is too sad for me."

She took the bottle from the shelf and placed three small plastic cups on the counter. Her hands moved with practiced ease, as if she had made this movement a thousand times before: tilting the bottle, the brown liquid, thick as a decision made too late.

"So," she said. "That's life extension in the wrong direction."

Everyone took their little cup. For a moment they stood there as if at a mass, except that the priestess had her hair tied back and the altar was a sticky counter on which someone had once unwrapped chewing gum.

"What are we drinking to?" asked Heckenpisser.

"Not looking to the future," said Kuddel. "It doesn't want us."

"Not the past," said Elke. "That's already full."

They looked at each other, three people standing in the same hole, pretending that it was all just temporary.

"To what remains," Elke said finally. "When the rest is gone."

They clinked glasses. The hunter burned down the path, mingling with beer, Boonekamp leftovers, stomach walls full of fries.

"And what remains?" asked Heckenpisser, as the taste slowly turned bitter.

"This," Elke said. "The shop. The night. Your ugly mugs. And that at least we don't have to fool ourselves."

Kuddel looked at her, longer than he usually looked at anyone. "You're too smart for this place," he muttered.

"And you're too stupid for outside," she retorted. "Perfect combination."

It wasn't that she saw herself as a "mother figure." Good heavens, no. She had no desire to raise anyone. But when the two of them were completely out of line again, she was the one who drew the line.

If Kuddel got too drunk, she eventually stopped giving him Sterni (a type of coin) and gave him water instead. "Otherwise you'll lie down here, and I don't feel like dragging you over the threshold," she'd say.

When Heckenpisser started laughing too loudly, talking too fast, talking too much about his job, his mother, his loneliness, she sent him home. "Call a taxi," she said. "Or walk. But walk. Before you start crying here. Crying will be charged extra."

Sometimes she thought about what her life would have been like if she'd owned a different shop. A boutique with mirrors, music, a boss who said "corporate identity" without laughing. A café with soy milk and banana bread, where people would open their laptops and pretend to work while writing poems about their burnout.

And then she imagined Kuddel strolling into such a shop, in his robe, with his boots, and saying, "Well, boss?" Like Heckenpisser with a bow tie sitting on a barstool, trying to take a latte macchiato seriously.

And she knew: No. This was indeed the right place. However wrong it was.

Later that evening, as the clock ticked closer to "Nobody has any plans anymore," Kuddel and Heckenpisser were standing outside at the standing table again. Elke saw them through the window while she straightened the shelves inside, as if that could somehow organize anything.

She saw Kuddel gesturing, saw Heckenpisser laughing, saw the bottles on the table and thought to herself: They're broken. Really broken. But they're my broken ones.

A drunk man, whom she barely knew, staggered in and mumbled: "Hey... do you have a cigarette?"

"Am I a tobacco emergency service or what?" she snarled. "Get out or buy it."

He bought a box, mumbled something, and disappeared again. The door slammed shut, the neon light hummed.

Elke leaned against the cigarette shelf for a moment and closed her eyes. She was tired. Always.

But she also knew: Tomorrow evening they would return. Kuddel with his royal title and Heckenpisser with his porcelain cup in his chest.

And she would be back. With the cash register. With the bottles. With the Boonekamp.

Mistress of a beer tap that officially didn't exist. Boss of a kingdom of alcohol, stories, and people who didn't quite fit in anywhere else.

Perhaps, she thought, that was more than many others had. Perhaps it was simply what was left over after persevering long enough.

She straightened up, placed a new crate of beer behind the shelf, and called out:

"Hey, you two! If you want another shot of Boonekamp, get it now. After that, the taps are closed!"

Kuddel immediately raised the bottle. Hedgepisser giggled. And the night nodded in response, as if saying:

Okay. One more round.

It was a few weeks after that Jägermeister night when Elke realized how much the corner store had become attached to her. Not just the smell – that was everywhere anyway. No, the stories, the looks, the rituals.

The late-night shop was no longer a store. It was a gateway. During the day, people who functioned came: construction workers, delivery drivers, mothers with children, students with tired eyes. They bought coffee to go, cigarettes, sandwiches. They had a plan, a direction, a schedule. At night, the others came. The lost, the stranded, those who had simply stayed up too late to still be considered normal.

And right in the middle stood Kuddel and Heckenpisser like two fixed points in a system that was constantly changing.

On a Friday, shortly before midnight, the air was heavy with rain and stale beer. The window of the late-night shop was fogged up, and inside were old stickers advertising long-discontinued mobile phone plans. Outside, the asphalt still glowed damply in the lamplight.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser had taken their usual spots at the standing table. A half-empty bottle of Sterni in each hand, a cigarette in each mouth, an insult every minute.

"Elke, do some Boonekamp cold forming," Kuddel called into the shop.

"You're already deformed enough," came the reply from inside. "I don't want to be responsible if you don't know your own name tomorrow."

"I'll never know anyway," he countered. "I'm a free man."

Heckenpisser stood nearby, nervously arranging the beer mats as if they were files. "Freedom is a very elastic concept," he said. "In your case, it's more like: 'I've lost all my obligations.' Hehehe."

Elke rolled her eyes, but she reached for the Boonekamp bottle anyway. She knew the drill. She always pretended to give it to them reluctantly. In truth, these little rituals were what held the night together.

Just as she tilted the bottle over the starfish, the door opened. The wind pushed in rain, which briefly glinted off the linoleum before being trampled underfoot.

A guy came in. One of those types who, from the very first step, say: Trouble.

Mid-twenties maybe, hood pulled low, eyes glazed, jaw tense. In his hand, a crushed can of beer, almost empty yet clutched tightly.

"Cigarette," he said. No "hello," nothing at all. Just that one word, rough, scratchy, as if stuck in his throat.

"Give me money, get me a cigarette," Elke replied. She was just putting down the Boonekamp bottle, without taking her eyes off the guy.

The guy stepped closer to the counter and slammed down the crumpled can with a clatter. "Give me a cigarette," he repeated. "I'll pay later."

Elke leaned back slightly. She knew the type. Too much anger, too little brainpower.

"Listen," she said calmly. "This isn't a free lunch. No money, no cigarette. Go return bottles for the deposit, go steal, do what you want – but nothing here is free."

Through the window, you could see Kuddel and Heckenpisser straighten up. Their bodies were familiar with such situations. Not hero mode, they were too broken for that – but a mixture of stress sensor and latent protective instinct.

The guy at the counter laughed briefly, but without humor. "You're rolling in dough, old lady. Give me a cigarette. Just one. I'll remember that."

"I'll remember every single person who thinks they can act tough here," Elke growled. "Either you pay, or you leave. Last chance."

A moment of silence. The rain drummed softly against the window. The compressor in the refrigerator hummed to life.

Then the guy slammed his fist on the counter. A pack of chewing gum bounced, a lighter fell over. "I said I'd pay later, you cunt!"

The word cut through the air. It wasn't as if Elke hadn't heard it a thousand times before. But it always depended on WHO said it, HOW and WHEN.

She didn't get louder. Just colder.

"Get out," she said. "Now."

The guy huffed and moved even closer. His hand grabbed a handful of peanut bars from a bowl as if they were prey. "What are you doing? Peeking out?" he sneered.

“If you cause any trouble here,” Elke said, “I’ll call the police. I’ve got their number memorized. Faster than you can say ‘cigarette’.”

The guy spat on the ground. "Call me, you bitch."

And right there, something was moving outside.

The door opened before she could reach for her phone. Kuddel was standing in the doorway, Heckenpissler close behind.

The image was grotesque and somehow touching: Kuddel, ripped jeans, metal jacket, cap, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth – the antithesis of authority. A hedge-pisser in a now slightly crooked shirt, but still with that lingering office-office attitude in his shoulders – the antithesis of threat.

But they were there. And they filled the room.

"Everything alright, boss?" Kuddel asked. His voice wasn't loud, but it was deep enough to be heard.

The hooded guy turned halfway around, looked at Kuddel, saw the robe, the look, the small scars on his face that revealed the guy had fallen down before – and not just metaphorically.

"What are you staring at, Grandpa?" he snarled.

"I’m staring because you’re causing a disturbance in my home church," Kuddel said calmly. "This is my corner store. That woman has been giving me beer for years, even though I don’t deserve it. You’re not going to make a fool of yourself here."

The hedge urinator took a step to the side, so that he was in the corner of their eyes. He didn't look dangerous. But he was there. And sometimes, mere presence is enough.

The guy was thinking. You could almost see it. An internal calculation: two against one. Checkout. Camera? Door.

In such people, it's not reason that ultimately decides, but a mixture of adrenaline and remaining ego.

"You're all victims," he finally growled, pushing past Kuddel and giving him a light shoulder nudge. "Fucking corner store, fucking old lady."

The crushed can remained on the counter, a small puddle of stale beer trickled slowly down next to the cash register.

The door slammed. He was gone.

For a moment there was silence. Then Elke sighed. Not deeply, not dramatically. More like the sigh of someone who has just had their groceries roll off the conveyor belt for the tenth time that day.

“Asshole,” Kuddel commented shortly.

"Technically correct," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

Elke automatically reached for a piece of kitchen roll and wiped away the puddle of beer. She didn't look up at them.

"It happens," she simply said. "You don't always have to act like bouncers."

"Yes," Kuddel objected. "We have to. Otherwise, the next bird will come along and think it's self-service with an unlimited swearing policy."

Heckenpisser nodded, wincing slightly. "Besides," he said, "this is our living room too. And you don't vomit in other people's living rooms. Unless you're very drunk and invited."

"You're never invited and always drunk," Elke muttered, but now there was a tiny smile in her voice.

She placed two bottles of Sterni beer on the counter without asking for money. Then she reached for the Boonekamp bottle.

"On the house," she said. "For security services."

Kuddel raised his hand defensively. "Hey, boss, we're not—"

"Shut your mouth," she interrupted him. "If I say it's on the house, then it's on the house. I have my pride too."

She poured a generous shot into each bottle. It was that same small, ceremonial gesture that had become a ritual every evening.

Hedge Pisser took his bottle and twisted it slightly. "Here's to another evening without physical violence," he said. "Hehehe."

"Here's to another evening without cops," Kuddel added.

Elke braced herself with both hands on the counter. "Here's to another evening where nobody tells me how to run my shop," she concluded.

They clinked glasses – glass to glass, separated by air and the bar.

The night continued as nights do. Two more regulars arrived, arguing about football, a woman quickly bought cigarettes and muttered "Thank you for still being open", and a couple insulted each other in English but then chose the same ice cream from the freezer.

Sometime around 2:30, things quieted down. The rain had stopped, the street was emptier than Berlin admits.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser stood outside smoking, holding the bottles merely as decoration. Tiredness crept into their bones, but nobody wanted to be the first to say, "I'm leaving."

Inside, Elke pulled out the cash register, counted the money, and closed the drawer again. She placed the Boonekamp bottle back on the shelf, in its usual place.

Then, a brief moment in which she did nothing. She leaned against the cigarette shelf, closed her eyes and listened: to the residual sounds of the street, the distant hum of the city, the muffled voices outside.

She was tired. She was often tired.

But it wasn't empty. Not yet.

She went to the door and opened it a crack. A cold air rushed towards her.

"Hey, you two," she called outside. "I'm closing in twenty minutes. If you want to chat some more, chat quickly. I have the early shift tomorrow."

"Again tomorrow?" Kuddel whined. "You'll be living here soon."

"I live in my own place," said Elke. "I work here. And my shift ends when I say so."

"Yes, boss," came the chorus.

She closed the door again, shook her head slightly, and couldn't help but grin.

In some parallel universe, she thought, there might be a version of me who sits in the office in the morning, drinks coffee from the company machine, and gets annoyed about Excel spreadsheets. Who talks about vacations with colleagues during breaks and argues with her husband at the hardware store on weekends.

Here, in this universe, she stood in front of a refrigerator full of beer, with a sticky cash register, a half-empty Boonekamp bottle, and two broken guys outside the door who would be even more clearly lost without this shop.

And quite honestly, she didn't think it was that wrong.

Later, when she lowered the blinds halfway and dimmed the neon light a little, the corner store was for a moment not a shop, but simply a room that bore her marks.

Empty Boonekamp bottles in the glass container, cigarette butts in front of the entrance, Kuddel & Heckenpisser on their way home, staggering, half arguing, half laughing.

Elke watched them for a moment. Then she finally locked the door.

"See you tomorrow, you drunken assholes," she muttered into the night.

And the night took it, as it took everything: without comment, but not entirely without respect.

Murat and the fraudulent beer of damnation

There were nights when the corner store was a confessional. There were nights when it was a field hospital. And there were nights when it was a casino where the stakes were always the same: liver, remaining dignity, and small change.

When Murat was on duty, he was above all one thing: a mixture of con man and entertainer before hell.

Murat wasn't like Elke. Where Elke was the weary queen of the night, Murat was the little chaos god behind the cash register. Always on the move, always smiling, always on the verge of making a semi-legal deal that didn't make anyone rich, but made everyone a little more suspicious.

He was short, wiry, with black hair, short on the sides, a bit too much gel on top. A three-day stubble that never became four, because he knew exactly where his line between unkempt and disheveled was. His eyes constantly flashed, as if he were perpetually seeing jokes he hadn't yet spoken. When he laughed, his whole head laughed, not just his mouth. You had the feeling he could, in the same instant, sell you a cigarette, give you some advice—or mercilessly take you for a ride.

His T-shirt was usually black with some kind of logo that had once been white. Sometimes he wore a thin jacket over it, which he never fully zipped. Jeans, cheap sneakers. Everything seemed to say: "Brother, I'm not standing here because I'm making a career. I'm standing here so the night doesn't happen without me."

The shop looked different when Murat was on shift. With Elke, everything was functional, calm, and collected. With Murat, the corner store was... alive. Music played softly from a cell phone behind the cash register, some kind of rap or Turkish pop, mingling with the hum of the refrigerator. The stacks of chips were rarely truly tidy, the chewing gum sometimes crooked, but it felt like: someone was working here, someone who was actually there. Not like a walking cash machine, but like a person who enjoyed watching people get drunk and lose themselves.

Kuddel had a conflicted relationship with him from the beginning. "That guy's a sly fox," he once said. "A little kiosk fox with deceitful eyes."

Heckenpisser, on the other hand, was fascinated. "He's a neoliberal trickster in the low-wage sector," he explained at one point, slightly tipsy. "A kind of... merchant coyote. Hehehe."

The whole thing with the doomsday scam beer started innocently enough. As always.

It was a Saturday night, and Berlin was acting as if it were still young. Lines of cars, hipsters with tote bags, tourists with beer bottles, who were surprised to find that no one arrested them for drinking in the street. Noise everywhere, music, someone shouting for a taxi that never came.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser were standing at the high table in front of the late-night shop as usual. Elke had the day off, at home, presumably with a hot water bottle and a TV series marathon that she would never admit to anyone. Murat had taken over the shop.

"I don't know," Kuddel murmured, "when Murat is there, I always feel like the beer is giving me a funny look."

Heckenpisser sipped his Sterni beer. "The beer doesn't look," he said. "The beer judges. Hehehe."

Murat stood behind the counter, scrolled briefly on his phone, then saw the two of them through the window and grinned. He knew his regular idiots, as he affectionately called them.

The door flew open, and the first group of unfamiliar customers came in. Not your average neighborhood types. Not the dingy characters who'd been hanging around for years. No, these were the others – the ones you could recognize by their clothes.

A hipster couple, perhaps drifted over from Kreuzberg: He was wearing a hat, even though it wasn't winter, with a beard too well-groomed to be taken seriously, and a tote bag with some slogan in English. She was wearing a colorful scarf, large glasses, and an ironic T-shirt that certainly cost more than Kuddel's monthly rent for his underwear.

"Hi," the guy said, as if he were in a concept store. "Do you have craft beer? Anything regional?"

Murat smiled gently. It was the smile of a man who already saw an Excel spreadsheet full of possibilities in his mind.

"Brother," he said, "only the best. Wait, I'll show you something very special."

He went to the refrigerator, rearranged the shelves slightly with one fluid motion, and took out a bottle that looked like... well. Like beer. Not a brand Kuddel had ever seen. A slightly torn label, some pseudo-alternative name in scribbled handwriting that was impossible to decipher at a glance.

"This is a really rare item," Murat explained as he placed it on the counter. "Small brewery, they only make it for friends. Very... authentic."

Her hipster eyes lit up. "Oh, nice!" she said. "How much does it cost?"

Murat quoted a price that even made the refrigerator seem to pause for a moment. It was significantly more than for a normal beer. But it was still just below the point where someone would say, "Excuse me?"

"Wow," the guy said, but you could tell he was more impressed than put off. "Then we'll take two."

Murat collected the money, smiled, and wished everyone "Have fun with it, it's really something special, only available today".

As they walked past Kuddel and Heckenpisser outside, the guy held the bottles like artifacts. "Look," he said to her, "here in the neighborhoods you can still get real stuff. Not this industrial crap."

Kuddel looked at the bottles for a moment. Then he looked over at Murat, through the window. Murat was smiling. That innocent, small, telltale smile.

"What was that?" asked Kuddel, once he was back inside to restock his own Sterni. "Never seen that name before. New beer, or what?"

Murat stretched briefly, pushed a crate aside, and pointed to the bottom shelf. There stood a battery of bottles that looked suspicious. Different labels, same shape. Some said "Premium Craft," others "Urban Brew," and one even had some English nonsense with "Hops" and "Rebel."

"What is this?" asked Heckenpisser suspiciously, who had come into the shop behind Kuddel.

Murat grinned. "This is," he said, and you could see the joy on his face, "the cheating beer of damnation."

Heckenpisser raised his eyebrows. "I assume that's not a registered trademark. Hehehe."

"Brother," Murat said, leaning a little closer, half proudly, half conspiratorially, "it's just a store-bought beer that nobody else wants. Yesterday's shandy, some cheap white beer from Poland, leftover stock. I take the labels from some hipster beer that nobody orders anymore and stick them on. A bit of dirty art. And then I sell them for twice the price. Only to those people wearing hats in the summer."

Kuddel's eyes widened. "You're telling me they drink the same rubbish as we do – but pay twice as much for it?"

"Not quite like you," Murat corrected. "At least you get honestly bad material. They get... a story to go with it."

Heckenpisser chuckled. "That's postmodern critique of capitalism in its purest form," he said. "You're practically a political artist."

"I'm just poor, brother," Murat said. "And they have the money. If they want a story, they get one. That's called value creation."

Kuddel continued staring at the fake beers. "And this stuff isn't poisoned or anything?" he asked.

"Hey, calm down, King," Murat waved them off. "I'm not putting anything bad in it. It's all beer. Just not the kind that says on the sign. They're not going to die from it. They'll just think they're sophisticated while they're drinking the exact same swill they drink every weekend."

Kuddel nodded slowly, and you could see several gears clicking into place in his mind. He respected this sort of thing. Not because it was "fair"—fairness didn't interest any of them—but because it fit so perfectly into their worldview: everything is a facade until you kick it.

"And what about us?" he asked. "Can I have a cheat beer of doom too? Just to test it out?"

Murat looked at him, then laughed. "Brother, I don't need to pretend with you," he said. "You just want to get drunk. Whether it says 'Craft' or 'Grotten' on it – you'll drink anything that lives under a bottle cap."

Heckenpisser raised his finger. "But purely from a scientific perspective, an A/B comparison would be very revealing," he said. "Hehehe."

Murat thought for a moment, then reached into the shelf, pulled out one of the fake beer bottles, and examined it. "Well," he sighed dramatically. "One at cost. For research. But if you tell anyone, I swear I'll fill your Sterni with apple spritzer."

"That would be sacrilege," whispered Kuddel.

They received the bottle. Outside at the standing table, in the neon light that made everything look cheap, they examined the fraudulent beer of damnation like a relic.

"So," said Heckenpisser, "from an external point of view: It's inconspicuously labeled as handcrafted. The design suggests handwork, regionality, authenticity. Blah blah."

Kuddel unscrewed it and smelled it. "Smells like... beer," he said. "Not good, not bad. Just: beer."

They drank. First one sip, then two, then a third.

"And?", asked Murat from inside, without stopping to push forward any more chips.

Heckenpisser smacked his lips exaggeratedly. "Interestingly shallow," he judged. "A taste like... failed dreams that have been subsequently covered with hipster lettering. Hehehe."

"It's just ordinary swill," said Kuddel. "It could be Sterni, it could be anything. I'd drink it. But I wouldn't pay more for it than for Sterni."

"You see," grinned Murat. "That's exactly the point. You get it honestly. The others get it with fairy tales."

And so the legend was born. The fraudulent beer of damnation – a secret product line of the late-night shop, known only to Murat, available only to certain people, and which made it a little easier to breathe in this corner of the city as you watched people wearing irony T-shirts celebrate "authentic neighborhood beer" while drinking canned goods with a new label.

For Kuddel and Heckenpisser, Murat thus became something they hadn't often encountered in their lives: a crook on their side.

"That guy is capitalism critique with a cash drawer," Heckenpisser said later.

"No," said Kuddel, taking a deep swig of Sterni beer and looking through the window at Murat, who was explaining the meaning of "deposit" to a drunk Brit. "That guy's just a bastard who rips off the right people."

He grinned. "And that's why I love him a little bit."

Murat wasn't one of those guys who were evil for fun. He had become a bastard out of necessity – and that's a difference.

If you sit behind a cash register long enough, you'll learn two things:

1. Most people are more boring than they themselves believe.
2. The few that aren't boring almost always cause trouble.

Murat didn't particularly like either – boredom or trouble – but he was realistic enough to know: without both, there's no such thing as a late-night convenience store.

He ended up in Berlin at some point, like so many others. Family somewhere on the outskirts of the city, some cousins who "also do something with cell phones," an uncle with a shisha bar, another with a repair shop. Half the family was trying to stay afloat somehow, the other half was on the verge of falling through the cracks.

Murat had tried a few things. He went to school until almost the end, then "lost interest." He started an apprenticeship as a retail salesman, but two months later he was out because, as a joke, he had mislabeled a pallet of Red Bull for the store manager. "Market test," Murat had said. The store hadn't been impressed.

Then at some point: a late-night shop. "Night shift bonus in cash, a little tip, nobody looks too closely," the uncle, who officially owned the shop, had said. "You do the cash register, clean up, make sure nobody steals. And if someone causes trouble, you call me or the police. But me first."

Murat nodded. And then began to study the system.

It wasn't a grand system. It wasn't a stock exchange, a corporation, or a global supply chain. It was: beer in, money out. In between, people who were more broken than they cared to believe.

He quickly realized that you don't get rich here. Not officially. But he also realized that there were many small places where the world was saying: "Here's a gap. You can exploit it if you're quick enough."

The fraudulent beer of damnation was just one of these fugues. It was, so to speak, his artistic phase.

There were other numbers.

For example, the matter of the tourist deposit rituals.

It was a warm early summer evening, around twenty degrees, and the feeling that one could theoretically be happy outside, if one weren't marinating one's liver at a standing table.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser were standing outside, as always. Heckenpisser had tried to work that day, but had mentally checked out after the third meeting. Kuddel hadn't even pretended to.

Inside, Murat was bustling with activity. It was some kind of fête-de-something, some kind of street festival, some kind of weekend escalation. Berlin didn't need a real reason, but liked to call it that.

Two Brits came in, redder in the face than the traffic light outside. "Hey, my friend!" slurred the taller one. "Two beers, please!"

"Which beer?" asked Murat.

The Briton gazed into the sea of refrigerators as if contemplating a mystery. "The... German one," he said.

Murat smiled. "All is German, my friend," he said. "But this..." – he reached deep, pulled out two Sterni beers and held them up like trophies – "this is very traditional. Very... local. Very... hardcore."

"Oh, hardcore," the other one giggled. "Nice."

Murat placed the bottles down, named the price – plus deposit. The British paid without batting an eye. For them, everything here was "cheap".

As they went outside, they almost stumbled into Kuddel.

"Hey, look," said the taller Brit, "we drink like the locals!"

Kuddel saw the bottles, saw the faces, took a swig from his own bottle and simply said: "Well then, welcome to misery, you tourist animals."

They laughed because they didn't understand the word. He laughed because he understood everything.

An hour later, they were both back at Murat's checkout. The bottles were empty, their eyes even emptier.

"Hey my friend," said the taller one, "we want more beer."

Murat nodded. "Sure. Give me bottles."

They gave him the empty Sterni bottles. Murat took them, casually placed them behind the cash register – an inconspicuous grab, a simple movement.

"You want money back or new beer?" he asked.

"New beer!" shouted the taller one. "Always more beer!"

"Okay," Murat said kindly. "The deposit goes towards a new beer. You only pay the difference."

He quoted a price that was somewhere between "fair" and "I'll round up for myself." The British nodded and paid.

When they were gone, Kuddel and Heckenpisser turned to the door at the same time, like two old detectives, and stared into Murat's room.

"You just took their deposit twice," Heckenpisser observed.

Murat shrugged. "Brother," he said, "they'll go home tomorrow and tell everyone how cheap everything was here. They won't notice a thing. And at the end of the day, I'll have more change for cigarettes. Win-win."

"And the police?" asked Heckenpisser.

"They're busy looking for the guys who are running around with knives," Murat said. "Not the one who swindled two Brits out of ten euros because they were too drunk to think about the bottom of a bottle."

Kuddel snorted, but he grinned. "You're a pig," he said.

"I'm a reflective pig," Murat corrected. "That's something else."

There was also the bonsai moral, as he called it. It was small, pruned, but it was there.

If some rusty old guy shuffled in who had more days on the road than euros in his pocket, and whispered, "Brother, another beer... I'm a little short," then Murat would do strange calculations.

Tourist pays too much? Kuddel sometimes gets a bottle cheaper. Hipster buys counterfeit beer? Someone else, a regular customer for years, doesn't have to pinch pennies for their canned beer.

"You're like Robin Hood," Heckenpisser once said, his voice heavy with alcoholic pathos. "You take from the rich and give to the poor."

"No," said Murat. "I take from the stupid and give to the chronically poor. There's a difference between wealth and stupidity. Rich people rarely get in here."

And then there was that one night when the cheating beer of damnation almost became a problem.

It was a Thursday, a day when the world pretends to go to work tomorrow. But not everyone had signed this contract.

A pack of Erasmus students stormed into the shop. Three Spaniards, two Italian women, a guy from France who pronounced "Berlin" as if it were a cigarette. They were already pre-gamed. Their voices were too loud, their movements too fast, their laughter too shrill.

"We need special German beer!" one of them shouted.

Murat looked at her, and you could practically see the euro signs flashing behind his forehead.

"My friend," he began, "I have something very special. Not tourist beer. Real Berlin beer."

Kuddel, who was standing at the standing table with Heckenpisser, muttered: "Oh, now he's using the good fairy tale labels."

And that's exactly what Murat did. He got four bottles of fraudulent beer, this wild mix of normal swill and new design, and placed them side by side on the counter as if they were four rare wines.

"This is from small brewery in Berlin," he lied with an elegance that was almost art. "Very underground. You don't find this in supermarket. Only here. Because I know the guy."

The student crowd was thrilled. "Ooooh, underground!" "So authentic!"

He named a price that would have left most Berliners in shock. The Erasmus group paid, laughing.

The moment they took the bottles, something happened that can ruin even the most beautiful lie: another regular customer came in.

A quirky guy from the neighborhood, always wearing the same worn denim jacket, always with the same tired sadness in his eyes. He stood next to the tourist group, saw the bottles, and raised an eyebrow.

"Hey," he said, "that's the same warehouse you sold for 79 cents last week, Murat. Only with a new label on it."

Silence. The Erasmus crew turned around as a group, like a school class that suddenly realizes the teacher is making fun of them.

Murat was still smiling, but his pulse was probably performing a little choreography.

"Brother," he said to the regular customer, "shhh."

"What, shhh?" he asked. "I'm just saying... it's the same thing. You can see it in the neck of the bottle. Look..."

He grabbed one of the bottles to demonstrate it.

Murat was upon him in two steps, snatched the bottle from his hand, and smiled dangerously. "Brother," he said quietly, "if you embarrass me in front of customers, you'll never get a credit again. Not for the rest of your life. Do you understand?"

The regular customer, who had more debts than friends, blinked. You could see the information sinking in. A letter was his emergency option. No more letters meant: no beer, nothing at all.

"Just kidding," he grumbled finally, and retreated like a dog that has realized the bone is on the wrong end.

The Erasmus students had become skeptical. One of the Italian women now looked at the bottle with different eyes.

"Is this true?" she asked. "Same beer?"

Murat switched gears. From trickster to entertainer.

"Listen," he said, picking up one of the bottles. "Beer is beer. You understand? In Berlin, in Spain, in Italy – in the end, it all makes you equally stupid. I'm not giving you better molecules. I'm giving you a story. This is underground beer because you drink it here. Now. With your friends. In this neighborhood. Not in the supermarket."

He paused briefly, letting the words hang in his throat.

"You want craft beer, you want experience, you want story. This is story. If you just want to drink cheaply, there's canned beer over there. But then you're just like all the other tourists."

It was a freestyle speech, half honest, half deception, completely effective.

The Erasmus crew looked at each other. The guy from France nodded slowly, the Spaniard grinned, one of the Italian women said: "I like this guy."

"Okay," she said. "We'll drink the story."

And with that, the fraudulent beer of damnation was not only saved, but ennobled. It was now official: narrative beer.

Outside at the standing table, Heckenpisser watched as they staggered out of the shop, bottles in hand, laughing, loud, lively.

"He's selling them a meaning to their drink," he said thoughtfully. "That's almost... literature."

"He's selling them garbage with a cool name," Kuddel corrected. "Like the music industry. Only more honest."

Later, as the flow of customers slowly subsided and only a few figures trudged through the neon lights, Murat came out briefly to smoke. He stood next to the two of them, lit a cigarette, and blew the smoke towards the street.

"Brother," said Kuddel, "you should have become a priest. You preach to them about history and they happily swallow that crap."

Murat grinned. "Priests need God," he said. "I only have pledges and the will to survive."

"You are morally very interestingly crippled," Heckenpisser remarked approvingly. "Hehehe."

Murat shrugged. "I'm not hurting anyone," he said. "They're drinking beer, they would have anyway. I'm just making their wallets lighter and my day more bearable. And with that money, I'll give old Dieter two bottles of cheap swill tomorrow, even if he's fifty cents short. He comes every day. They don't."

For a moment, there was something like respect in the air, but it didn't smell of hops. That kind of respect people feel for each other when they realize they are fighting the same battle,

albeit in very different ways: against being pushed aside, against being forgotten, against a life that is constantly too tight.

"You know, Murat," Kuddel said quietly, "you're an asshole. But you're our asshole."

Murat laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "You're my asshole too, King," he said. "But if you tell me to sell you a fake beer again, I'll put Boonekamp in your coffee."

Heckenpisser absentmindedly rubbed his chin. "Boonekamp in coffee," he muttered. "That sounds like a metaphorical image for the modern working world."

"That sounds like a stomach rupture," Murat commented. "And I have plenty of experience with that."

The night dragged on, hour after hour, bottle after bottle. And somewhere between Erasmus money, rigged beer, and regular customer debts, it became clear:

Murat was no hero. Murat was no villain. Murat was simply the kind of person who emerges when you stand long enough in a corner of the city where everyone is just trying not to be the first to fall over.

The fraudulent beer of damnation was his little finger-pointing at a world that slaps labels everywhere and pretends the contents are more refined just because the writing is ornate.

At least one thing was true about Murat: the fraud was transparent – for those who wanted to see it. And those who didn't want to see it got exactly what they were looking for.

A good story in a bad bottle.

And while Kuddel raised the bottle to his lips and Heckenpisser prepared his highfalutin commentary, the night was already bringing the next little deception into the city. For what they didn't yet know was:

The cheat beer would soon play a completely different role – in a plan that began with "world domination at the standing table" and, as always, would fail miserably somewhere between the train station, the toilet and the hangover.

It was one of those nights when Berlin felt like someone had packed the city into an old jacket that you can't close anymore. Too warm for a coat, too cold for a T-shirt, somewhere in between – like most lives that get stuck at the corner store.

The rain had stopped, but the streets were still damp. Every lamppost reflected in the asphalt like an unsolicited memory. Above the city vibrated a dull background hum of cars, commuter trains, sirens, and people trying to convince themselves they were on their way to something important.

Murat stood behind the counter, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, his finger on the cash register screen, half attentive, half lost in thought. Kuddel and Heckenpisser were of course there. There were hardly any nights anymore when they weren't.

"I'm telling you, Murat," Kuddel grumbled towards the window, "you should patent the fraudulent beer. Then you'll be rich."

Heckenpisser raised a finger in a lecturing tone. "Fraud is difficult to patent," he lectured. "History has had its share of experiences with that. Hehehe."

"History screws me over anyway," Kuddel said. "At least she can pay."

Murat was only half listening. He was tired. Not physically—he always was—but in a different way. It was that underlying exhaustion that comes when you stand in the same corner for too long and watch everything change—except for you and the few figures who refuse to grow with it.

The place was quieter than usual. No Erasmus crowd, no hipster invasion, no aggressive drunks at their limit. Just a few stragglers buying cigarettes, energy drinks, gummy bears, and comfort food.

A woman in a too-thin jacket came in, bought a small bottle of schnapps and a pack of cigarettes. She paid with coins, counting them slowly, as if trying to escape the moment any longer. Murat took the money without question. He saw the dark circles under her eyes, the trembling fingers—he knew the type. "Take it easy," he said simply as she left. There was nothing more he could do.

Then came the guy who set everything in motion.

Middle-aged, wearing a jacket that was too plain, shoes that were too neat, and glasses that made her look like she'd rather be sitting in front of a laptop than a corner store. She held a mobile phone, and her voice had that certain tone: "I have rights and a profile on some rating portals."

He entered the store, looked around like someone checking whether everything was legal. His gaze lingered briefly on the counterfeit beer shelf.

"Good evening," he said, making his point very clearly. "Is this craft beer chilled?"

Murat raised his inner defenses. "Of course," he said amiably. "Refrigerator. Downstairs. It's a special kind, you know? Very... local."

The guy took a bottle out of the refrigerator, examined it like an exhibit. He turned it over, read the label, and raised his eyebrows.

"I don't know the brewery at all," he said. "I'm a blogger. I regularly test beers from Berlin and the surrounding area. Interesting."

A small alarm bell went off in Murat's head. Blogger. Beer reviews. That sounded like someone with too much time on their hands and too many opinions.

"Yes, yes, it's very... small," Murat improvised. "They don't do much. It's more of an insider thing. Many people don't know about it. Only regular customers and people who ask."

The man nodded slowly, as if that was exactly what he wanted to hear. "Aha. And where are they sitting?" he asked.

"Uh...", Murat grabbed the first imaginary district that came to mind. "In... Oberschöneweide. Right on the edge. You don't know it. It's an industrial area. They do... urban things there."

"Oberschöneweide has an interesting brewing history," the man said matter-of-factly. "I even wrote an article about it once."

Murat smiled thinly. "See," he said. "Then it fits. An expert."

The guy put the bottle on the counter. "I'll take two. I might write a blog post about it."

Murat took the money, quoted the price of the fraudulent beer, and packed the two bottles in a bag. The man thanked him, handed over a business card ("Craft & Culture – Beer Blog"), and left.

Murat stopped with the map in his hand, as if someone had just handed him a loaded weapon.

Kuddel had seen the guy outside, at the standing table. "Well, he looked like he was addressing his dishwasher with the formal 'Sie'," he commented.

Heckenpisser chuckled. "That was definitely one of those beer sommelier types," he said. "One who can tell from the foam on your head whether you're living a meaningful life. Hehehe."

Murat came forward, leaned against the door from the inside, and watched them go. "Brother," he said quietly, "if he finds out what he's drinking, he'll write so much about me on the internet that people on Google Maps will think I'm selling used motor oil."

Kuddel snorted. "Oh, come on," he said. "He drinks it, doesn't notice a thing, writes a treatise on 'rough neighborhood authenticity' and gives you five stars because there's no lavender lemonade on the shelf here."

Heckenpisser shook his head. "I don't know," he mused. "People who say 'blog' usually mean it."

Murat took a deep breath and shook his head. "Screw it," he muttered. "He's not going to do a lab analysis right away. And even if he does: let him come. I'll explain to him, it's art."

A few days passed. Everyday life, with all its little dramas, intruded as always between potential consequences and the present. Kuddel drowned his sorrows in alcohol, Heckenpisser chewed over his morals between his office job and the corner store, Elke alternated between early and late shifts, and Murat juggled deposit bottles, counterfeit beer, and his bonsai morality.

And then, on a seemingly insignificant Tuesday, it happened.

It started innocently enough. Murat was behind the till, sorting cartons of cigarettes. It was drizzling outside. Kuddel hadn't arrived yet, nor had Heckenpisser. The shop was empty. The perfect time for trouble.

The door opened. The blogger came back in. Same face, same glasses, this time with a different expression: not curious, but... slightly charged.

"Good evening," he said. It didn't sound like "evening." It sounded like "witness testimony."

Murat felt his neck tense up. "Well, did it taste good?" he asked, trying to sound as relaxed as possible.

The man placed one of the empty bottles on the counter. "I tasted the beer," he said matter-of-factly. "And I examined it."

"Examined," Murat repeated. "How? In the lab or in the heart?"

The man ignored the joke. "I researched the brewery," he continued. "It doesn't exist. The label is from a different brand, sold in a completely different bottle. Of course, I also compared the bottle shape and the contents. This is a standard discount beer that you're passing off as craft beer. At twice the price."

Murat stared at him for a long time. His mind was racing. He could have denied it. He could have freaked out. Instead, he did something the guy hadn't expected: He laughed.

Not hysterical, not loud – more like that quiet, broken laugh that comes out when someone says a truth you've known for as long as you can remember.

"Brother," said Murat, "you're the first person to take the trouble to find out that the world is fooling you. Congratulations."

The blogger was irritated. "This is no joke," he said sharply. "They're selling something as a handcrafted product that isn't. That's deception. I could report this. Consumer protection, food safety authorities..."

Murat threw up his hands. "Calm down, Sherlock," he said. "You want to make a scandal? Look outside. The whole city is a scandal. I'll sell you beer, and it's beer. It won't make you blind, it's clean, it's not expired. You wanted something special. I threw in a story. Welcome to marketing."

"Marketing is a form of fraud," the man snarled.

"Yes," Murat nodded. "Finally we understand each other."

At that moment Kuddel came in. He immediately noticed that the air was thicker than usual.

"What's going on here?" he asked. "Is there a special offer on bad moods?"

The blogger gave him a disgusted look. "You're a customer here?" he asked.

"I am furniture," Kuddel replied. "What do you want?"

“Your friend here,” the man pointed at Murat, “sells fake craft beer. Overpriced. With false stories. He exploits ignorance. That’s fraud.”

Kuddel looked at Murat, then at the bottle, then back at the man. "And?" he said.

The guy was speechless for a moment. "So?" he repeated. "That's not legal!"

“Oh, legal,” Kuddel waved it off. “Legal is when you do the whole thing at Edeka and have a marketing budget behind it. Then they slap some story about an imaginary brewmaster with a beard on it and everyone applauds. Murat does the same thing, just without an advertising agency. I call that efficient.”

Heckenpisser had also wandered in by then, as if the conflict had magnetically drawn him in. He overheard the last few sentences, straightened his glasses, and said: "From a purely philosophical point of view, both sides are right. Hehehe."

The blogger glared at him. "This isn't a philosophical problem!" he snapped. "This is consumer deception!"

Heckenpisser raised his hands slightly. "Calm down," he said. "You're in a corner store. They don't sell ideals here, just disposable crashes."

Murat sighed. He knew this could all go wrong. He remembered his uncle, the business registration, the few paragraphs that were important even in their world.

“Look,” he said, becoming truly serious for the first time. “If you want, write your blog. Write that the guy at the convenience store ripped you off. That you paid more than necessary. Add asterisks, create drama. Go ahead. But before you do that, ask yourself one question:”

He leaned forward, looking directly into the man's eyes.

"Did you enjoy the beer?"

The blogger hesitated. “It was... okay,” he admitted. “I’ve had better.”

"But it wasn't bad, was it?" Murat asked.

“No,” the man said reluctantly. “It was... drinkable.”

"Good," said Murat. "So. You drank a drinkable beer, not adulterated, not expired, not poisonous. You paid more because you thought you were getting something special. And now you're angry because you realize you're not special. Welcome to life."

A brief silence. Even Kuddel said nothing. Heckenpisser stared at Murat as if he had just accidentally hit a nerve.

“You want real lies?” Murat continued. “Look at advertising. Look at banks, insurance companies, politics. They tell you: ‘We’re here for you, we’ll take care of you.’ I tell you: ‘Brother, I want your money, you want my beer, and in between I’ll tell you nonsense to make you feel better.’ At least I’m honestly dishonest.”

The blogger seemed as if someone had run over his firmly held worldview. This guy, this kiosk vendor, had just stabbed his moral compass with his dirty hands.

"That doesn't justify anything," he finally said, but the harshness had dissipated.

Murat nodded. "That doesn't justify it," he admitted. "But explain it. If you want, I'll give you your money back. Or you can buy a case of that real discount beer at cost price today and write on your blog: 'There's a corner store that at least sometimes admits it's ripping you off.' The choice is yours."

It wasn't a grand moment. No heroic music, no ray of light from the sky. Just a bespectacled man suddenly faced with the choice of fighting the system on a small scale or admitting that he might have simply realized too late that he, too, was just a part of it.

Finally, the blogger sighed. "Let's leave it at that," he muttered. "I don't write about kiosks very often anyway."

"You'd be better off writing about beer that's really bad," Murat advised. "You'll have more material that way."

The man picked up his empty bottle again, for some reason, put it in his pocket and left.

The door slammed shut. The convenience store breathed again.

Kuddel looked at Murat for a long time. "Dude," he finally said, "sometimes you're so close to a philosophy degree, it's uncanny."

Heckenpisser nodded eagerly. "That was... impressive," he said. "You're practically... the kiosk Nietzsche. Hehehe."

Murat snorted, flicked his cigarette butt into the ashtray, grabbed a rag and wiped the counter as if he could wipe something away from himself with this movement.

"Screw Nietzsche," he grumbled. "I just want the money to add up and nobody to die."

He went back behind the bar and looked at the counterfeit beer shelf. He considered it for a moment. Then he grabbed two bottles, turned them upside down, and tore off the fake labels completely. The boring original label was revealed underneath.

"What are you doing there?" asked Kuddel.

"Pause," said Murat. "A short break from deception. Today we'll sell ordinary garbage as ordinary garbage. Tomorrow I'll continue lying."

Hedge-pisser smiled crookedly. "You have surprisingly functioning ethical prongs," he commented. "Made of wood, but still."

"Shut up, Hecke," Murat said. "Otherwise I'll write 'Craft Buddy' on your forehead and sell you to tourists as a local character."

They laughed. The kind of laughter that doesn't make you happy, but prevents you from overthinking everything.

Later that night, when the street grew quieter and the rain had completely stopped, Kuddel and Heckenpisser were standing outside again, bottles in their hands.

"You know," Kuddel said thoughtfully, "maybe we are all cheating beer of damnation."

Heckenpisser turned to him. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well," Kuddel explained, "on the outside, a sticker says: 'I'm somebody, I've achieved something, everything's great.' Inside: just a normal, cheap life. A bit stale, a bit bitter, but drinkable. And then you just hope that someone will pay extra for you, just because of the story."

Heckenpisser let that sink in. Then he had to laugh. "Hehehe... that's sad," he said. "But also... very apt."

Through the glass, you could see Murat at the checkout counter, closing the drawer, briefly rubbing his eyes, and then tearing open a new pack of cigarettes. A little king in a realm of glass, neon, and stories that he switched on and off as needed.

The swindle of damnation was back on the shelf. Not discontinued. Just... waiting.

Because one thing was clear: in this world, stories would never run out. Especially not at a standing table where Kuddel and Heckenpisser would eventually hatch their first grand plan for world domination – naturally with beer in hand, naturally with Boonekamp in their blood, and naturally without even the slightest chance that any of it would work.

But that's another story. And it begins at the standing table in the neon light with the words:

"Hecke, I have a plan..."

World domination at the standing table – the first grand plan

There are moments in life when something tips over. Not dramatically, not with a bang, but very quietly – like a half-empty beer bottle that slowly, in slow motion, slides off the table and finally shatters on the floor.

The evening when Kuddel and Heckenpisser first seriously considered world domination began like all the others: with boredom, residual alcohol, and the feeling that nothing better was coming anyway.

The late-night convenience store glowed with its familiar neon light. It was one of those evenings between Christmas and New Year's – not quite a weekend, but no longer a proper workday either. The city was tired, but not ready to go to bed. The sky hung low over Schöneberg, the light from the streetlamps refracting in the small puddles at the roadside.

Kuddel leaned against the standing table, his robe open, his belly slightly protruding, as if he were six months pregnant with beer. A cigarette was stuck to the corner of his mouth, his eyes had that glassy gleam you only get when you lost track of things hours ago but are still pretending it's all part of a plan.

Heckenpisser stood opposite him, his shirt buttons already undone two notches lower than when he'd started walking, his bow tie loose around his neck like a deactivated warning light. His glasses sat crooked, which for him meant he was at least three beers over his intellectual limit. He laughed too often and too loudly, but with him, that was hard to distinguish from the normal version.

Inside, Murat stood at the cash register, playing some beat on his mobile phone and sorting cigarettes, while keeping half an eye on the two figures at the standing table – not out of concern, but because life would be significantly more boring without them.

“Hecke,” said Kuddel, after a long, deep swig of Sterni, pretending he could still salvage something, “quite honestly: We are wasting our potential.”

Heckenpisser blinked. “What potential? Hehehe.”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Kuddel continued undeterred. “We’re too smart for this. Just look at us. We stand here every night, drinking ourselves senseless, telling the best stories since Jesus, and nobody pays us for it. That’s... unfair.”

Heckenpisser thought for a moment, which always looked like several little men were holding discussions in his head. “Well,” he said then, “strictly speaking, nobody pays us for anything. Life is an unpaid internship.”

“Fuck life,” Kuddel grumbled. “I’m talking about something else. I mean... world domination.”

It was one of those sentences that sounds like a joke at first. Then like a bad joke. And then – after enough beer – like a serious option.

Heckenpisser burst out laughing. “Hehehehe... World domination! The two of us? You can’t even afford a monthly transit pass and you want to rule the world.”

Kuddel frowned, as much as he could under his cap. “Hey, listen to me, you armchair academic. Who rules the world now, huh? Rich people, banks, some clowns in suits. So... people like you, only with less character and more money.”

“Oh, thank you,” murmured Heckenpisser, “nice to be mentioned in the same breath as banks and clowns.”

“They’re not doing anything special either,” Kuddel continued. “They sit at tables, drink things, talk rubbish, and push buttons. We sit at a table, drink things, talk rubbish... we’re just missing the button. That’s the whole difference!”

Heckenpisser nodded slowly, as if following a strange mathematical equation. “So you mean,” he said thoughtfully, “that the world is basically run by drunken regulars at a pub with better furniture.”

“Exactly!” Kuddel exclaimed, lightly slapping the bar table with his fist so that the bottles clinked dangerously. “Except they call their beer ‘Chardonnay’ and their drunken stupor a ‘strategy meeting’.”

Heckenpisser laughed. “Hehehe... strategy meeting! Yeah, that’s what it sometimes feels like. Only without the strategy.”

At that moment the door opened, and Murat poked his head out. "Brother, if you want to take over the world, you'll take this place with you, okay?" he asked. "I need a good franchise agreement."

"You'll be finance minister later," Kuddel shouted. "Or head of the secret service. You're such a good liar, that deserves to be rewarded."

Murat grinned. "Then start small, okay? You can't take over the world if you can't even find your own pub without Google Maps."

The door clicked shut again. Kuddel looked at Heckenpisser seriously again – or what he took to be serious.

“We need to approach this in a structured way,” he said, and the word “structured” sounded as if he’d stolen it from somewhere. “Every proper world domination starts with a plan. With stages, you know. Neighborhood, city, country, world. Something like that.”

Heckenpisser leaned forward on the standing table. "Okay," he said, "assuming I take you seriously now, which is quite a challenge – how exactly do you envision this? We're not just going to barge into the UN and say, 'Make way, the drunks are here.'"

Kuddel frowned, took another sip, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "It's quite simple," he said. "We start with the corner store. This is our base. Our command center. We control everything from here. If you control the corner store, you control the flow of beer, cigarettes, and corner store snacks. And whoever controls that controls the night. And whoever controls the night controls the city."

Heckenpisser looked around as if he were suddenly seeing everything for the first time: the sticky ground, the flickering advertisement, the trash in the corner. "That's a... bold claim," he commented. "But please, go ahead. I'm curious when you'll bring the tanks into the equation."

“We don’t need tanks,” Kuddel waved off the suggestion. “We have a method. Look: Every night, people come by here, completely broken, with blank faces and backpacks full of problems. We give them what they need: distraction. Alcohol. Cigarettes. Stories. We’re kind of like... unofficial social workers, only without the paperwork. We just need to... nationalize it.”

Heckenpisser laughed his famous "Hehehe," this time a little longer. "Nationalize it! Yeah, sure. So you want to apply the corner store system to the whole world? A global network of kiosks ruled by you?"

“First from the neighborhood,” Kuddel clarified. “The wider world comes later. Step by step. We’re not stupid. We’ll do it like a franchise. Späti Saufärsche International. With our logo. Like a Sterni with wings or something.”

Heckenpisser immediately got a mental image at the thought and half-shook with laughter. "You want a corporate design for your world domination, oh my God. Hehehehe..."

"Of course!" exclaimed Kuddel. "Look at everyone who's making it big: McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Merkel, Trump – they all have a distinctive identity. We need something too. A vest, a cigarette, a Sterni beer. That's our flag."

Heckenpisser had to admit: As drunk as the idea was, it was somehow logical too. "And how did you get born from the corner store?" he asked. "We can hardly try to sell every head of state a fake beer first."

Kuddel tilted his head. "Well," he said, "we'll have to go online eventually, of course. But not right away. Otherwise, we'll just become some shitty meme. First the neighborhood, then a legend, then online. We'll build it up organically. Word of mouth, you know?"

Heckenpisser nodded. "So first cult status in the neighborhood, later an online presence. A kind of... analog infiltration with digital repurposing."

"Exactly!" Kuddel exclaimed, as if someone had given the right answer. "We'll make it clear here in Schöneberg that nothing happens without us. If someone wants beer at night, they'll have to go through us. Then Neukölln, Kreuzberg, Wedding... eventually Brandenburg, if we take pity on them. And when we have all of Berlin, we'll take on the rest too."

"Sounds like you've been playing Risk too often while drunk," muttered Heckenpisser.

"No," said Kuddel. "I've just lived drunk too often."

They stood there silently for a moment. Cars drove by, someone laughed too loudly somewhere, a siren wailed in the distance. Berlin breathed heavily.

"Do you know what our biggest advantage is?" Kuddel suddenly asked.

Heckenpisser thought for a moment. "Your charming charisma? Hehehe."

"No, you loser," said Kuddel. "Our biggest advantage is: we have nothing to lose anyway. Look at you. Shirt, bow tie, mom. Look at me. Leather jacket, job center, beer. What's going to happen to us? That we fail? We've been doing that professionally for years. We're highly skilled at failing. So we can also try to grow from it."

Heckenpisser stared at him. There were rare moments when he was silent. This was one of them.

"That was..." he murmured finally, "formally speaking... impressive. Almost motivating. Hehehe. Stop it, or I'll get hope, and that doesn't suit me."

Kuddel grinned crookedly. "You see," he said. "That's step one: We believe in it ourselves. Step two: We write it down. Really, on paper. So it's real."

"You want to write down a plan?" asked Heckenpisser skeptically.

"Yeah, man!" Kuddel confirmed. "With headlines and all. Goal: World domination at the standing table. Sub-point one: Secure the corner store. Sub-point two: Expand the network. Sub-point three: Media presence. Sub-point four: Define enemies. Sub-point five: Eventually, a documentary on Arte."

Heckenpisser laughed so loudly that a passerby stopped briefly, taken aback. "Arte! Hehehehe! Yeah, they might just wave us through as a socio-cultural phenomenon."

"If they're already doing segments about French farmers selling cheese to goats, then they can certainly do an hour on us," Kuddel grumbled. "Topic: 'The Drunkards – Marginal Figures in Capitalism'."

Heckenpisser typed invisible bullet points into the air. "I can already see the chapter in front of me: 'Between Sterni and structural failure – a case study at a Berlin Späti'."

At that moment the door opened, and Murat stepped out again, carrying two empty crates. "Brother, you're so loud, I can hear you all the way to the recycling center," he said. "What are you planning? Another trip to Hamburg, or do you just want to get as far as Potsdamer Platz this time?"

"We are planning world domination," Heckenpisser declared with dignity.

Murat stopped, looked first at one, then at the other. Then he started to laugh. Really laugh, with his whole body.

"You two can't even fill out your paperwork for the job center correctly," he gasped. "You want to take over the world? Why not the universe, dude?"

Kuddel crossed his arms as best he could with his robe and bottle. "Big visions are always laughed at first," he said, offended. "Just ask anyone who later became important. They all started small."

"Yes," Heckenpisser agreed, "and some have simply remained small. We're still in limbo there. Hehehe."

Murat put the empty crates down and sat briefly on the edge. "Okay," he said, "let's say I'm taking you seriously for a moment. How do you begin?"

Kuddel looked at him as if he'd been waiting for just this. "Quite simple," he said. "We need a manifesto. A manifesto of drunkards. The kind of thing nobody reads, but everyone quotes. It'll describe what the world will look like with us: more honesty, more beer, less bullshit."

"More cigarette butts," added Heckenpisser.

"More cigarettes, less hypocrisy," Kuddel nodded. "Everyone has the right to three things: cheap beer, honest insults, and a corner store within walking distance. Everything else will fall into place."

Murat raised his hands. "You want to improve the world by standardizing it based on your alcoholism?" he asked.

"I don't call it alcoholism," said Kuddel. "I call it basic cultural provision."

Heckenpisser clutched his stomach. "Oh God, please never stop talking," he gasped. "This is so messed up, it's art again."

The three of them stood there, in a triangle of irony, beer, and a remnant of seriousness that stubbornly refused to disappear completely.

At that moment, there was a spark. A tiny, drunken spark, sure – but a spark nonetheless.

World domination at the standing table was of course a joke. But it was also: an attempt to give one's own existence a bigger meaning than "drinking, failing, dying".

"Alright then," said Heckenpisser at some point, when the plan was half in jest, half in a haze of alcohol. "Write the first version of this manifesto tomorrow, Kuddel. I'll correct the spelling. And Murat gets the distribution rights for the merchandising."

"Merchandising?" Murat asked.

"Yes," said Heckenpisser. "T-shirts. Caps. Ashtrays with our logo. 'The Drunkards – World Domination at the Standing Table since 20XX'. Hehehe."

Kuddel raised the bottle like a scepter. "To world domination," he said. "From a standing table. No suit, no manners, but with a plan."

Heckenpisser raised his glass. "To the first grand plan," he said. "May it fail as spectacularly as everything else – but at least with style."

Murat clinked his plastic cup of cola, which probably contained more vodka than he admitted. "To you idiots," he said. "If anyone truly deserves the world, it's those who have long since fallen out of it."

They drank. The bottles clinked softly, the neon hummed, Berlin roared.

And somewhere, far, far away, the world laughed. Not because it had to be afraid – but because it had no idea that two drunkards had just started hatching a plan at a filthy standing table in Schöneberg.

A plan that would of course never work. But one that, for a few hours, gave them the feeling that they were more than just extras in other people's lives.

It was the first evening when "world domination" wasn't just a stupid saying – but a chapter heading in a book that no one had asked for, but that the night had nevertheless pressed into their hands.

The next day, world domination looked like a migraine.

The sun was already far too high when it did what it should never do: it shone directly into Hedge Pisser's face. He blinked, lying in his far too tidy bed in Gerda's apartment, and felt as if someone had put his brain in a blender and pressed "blend."

He fumbled for his glasses and put them on, even though this only made the light more intense. His head throbbed to the rhythm of a bad techno track that should never be played again.

Fragments of the previous night surfaced in his mind. Kuddel. Murat. Standing table. The "Manifesto" had been uttered. "World Domination at the Standing Table." He had laughed. A lot. Too much.

And somewhere between cheap beer and stupid jokes, a part of him thought: Why not?

He sat up, took a deep breath, and tried to calm his stomach, which was about to file a complaint with customer service.

A knock at the door. "Boy?" Gerda's voice, muffled by the wood and decades of maternal conditioning. "Everything alright? You have to leave for work soon."

He looked at the alarm clock. Shit. Way too late for a relaxed breakfast, too early to just stay in bed and say "sick".

"Yes, Mommy, I... I'm about to get up," he called out.

He forced himself into character. Out of bed, shirt off the chair, a quick sniff of his armpits – still okay. Trousers, belt, bow tie. The bathroom mirror showed the same image as always: mama's boy in a tailored suit, only his eyes a little more wrinkled.

Gerda studied him over coffee. "You look tired," she observed. "Were you out for a long time again?"

"I... had another conversation," he murmured.

"With this... Kuddel?" she asked, pronouncing the word as if she were pointing at a used ashtray.

"Yes," said Hedge Pisser. There was no point in lying; she could smell him all night, even though he had washed his hands thoroughly.

"He'll be the death of you," she said. "Or end up in court."

Heckenpisser took a sip of coffee, felt his stomach churn briefly. He thought of Kuddel's words: "We have nothing to lose." Perhaps that was the only point at which he distanced himself from his mother. In her world, you could lose everything. In his, he felt the loss had already happened; he just hadn't properly filed it away yet.

"I'll be careful," he murmured.

Gerda sighed and placed a bread roll in front of him. "Don't make a fool of yourself," she said. "You're a clever boy. Stop wasting your time in front of this shop. There's nothing for you here."

He thought of the neon lights. The beer. The stupid jokes. The broken plans.

"That's the problem," he thought. "Everything is there for me."

He said aloud: "I'm hurrying now, otherwise I'll be late."

While Heckenpisser sat in the office trying to stare at tables without them turning into Sterni bottles, Kuddel woke up somewhere completely different.

His awakening was less structured. He came to with the mouth feeling like a dead rat and a head that felt as if someone had set up a beer garden set inside it and then jumped on it.

The apartment smelled of ash, old sweat, and the remnants of a life that never had a chance. On the makeshift bedside table—a drinks crate with a shelf—stood a half-full bottle of water, next to it an empty beer can, an ashtray that had forgotten how to empty itself, and a crumpled piece of paper.

He first reached for the bottle, poured the stale drink into his mouth, which at least managed to wash away the worst of the taste. Then his gaze fell on the paper.

Scribbled, scribbled handwriting. A few words he recognized. A few others that looked as if someone had tried to paint their name while wearing handcuffs.

Headline, crooked and starting with two words, then crossed out, then again:

"Manifesto of the Drunkards"

He started to laugh, which immediately turned into a cough. Apparently, he really had tried to write something down last night. Presumably after his blood alcohol level was already in the red zone.

He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and began to read.

"§1: No one has the right to be sober in order to be taken seriously. §2: Everyone is entitled to a standing table that doesn't judge them. §3: Late-night convenience stores are a basic necessity, not a luxury. §4: Lying is allowed as long as it doesn't make anyone richer. §5: The world is broken, but at least we're honestly broken."

Arrows and additional information are shown in between:

"Tipping = fundamental right" "Sterni = currency" "Murat = Ministry of Finance (if he behaves)" "Hedge = propaganda, because he knows words"

He stared at his own handwriting. Part of him found it embarrassing. Another part... didn't think it was so bad.

"Well, look at that," he muttered. "Old Kuddel can construct sentences when he's drunk."

He stood up, looked for his trousers, and found them on the chair that served simultaneously as a wardrobe, a shelf, and a coffin for old plans. From the pocket, he fished out a crumpled cigarette butt, which he reflexively lit before remembering that one shouldn't do such things. He did it anyway.

The idea wouldn't let him go. "Manifesto," he thought. "Plan. World domination."

Of course he knew it was all nonsense. Of course he knew there was no chance that two losers with beer breath could conquer anything, except maybe their local pub.

But suddenly, the idea of having no plan at all was worse than having a hopelessly stupid plan.

"If I'm going to go down," he thought, "then let's go down with chapter headings."

That evening they met as usual at the corner store. The light was the same, the neighborhood was the same, only something was different about Kuddel: he had the manifesto with him. Folded into four parts, in a jacket pocket that looked as if it had already lived three lives.

Heckenpisser had just come from the office, but he didn't look fresh. He seemed as if the day had spat him out. His bow tie was askew, his shirt collar was slightly sweaty, his eyes tired – but there was also a small glimmer of hope when he saw Kuddel.

"Well, world government, how are you?" he grinned.

"I've got something," said Kuddel, sounding almost proud.

"Hopefully not a fungus," replied Heckenpisser automatically. "Hehehe."

Kuddel ignored this, reached into his pocket and pulled out the sheet of paper. "Mr. Manifesto, here you go."

Heckenpisser took the paper, unfolded it, instinctively straightened his glasses, and began to read. He read silently; only the faint hum of the neon light and the clinking of a bottle on the shelf could be heard.

He came to "Section 3: Late-night convenience stores are essential, not a luxury," and the corners of his mouth twitched. His gaze lingered on "Section 4: Lying is allowed as long as it doesn't make anyone richer." At "Section 5: The world is broken, but at least we're honestly broken," he chuckled softly.

"Well?" asked Kuddel, who leaned casually against the standing table and looked like a boss waiting for feedback – except that the boss was half alcohol.

Heckenpisser folded the paper carefully, as if it were something official. "I'm shocked," he said. "That's... not completely stupid."

"Thank you," said Kuddel. "I'll try my best to improve."

"Here," said Heckenpisser, "the layout is, of course, chaotic. But in terms of content..." – he tapped his finger on §4 – "...this is brutally accurate. Lying is allowed as long as it doesn't make anyone richer. That's basically the antithesis of capitalism. Hehehe."

"Antithe... what?" asked Kuddel.

“Counter-model,” translated Heckenpisser. “You formulated a political philosophy while drunk. You disgusting natural talent.”

The door opened, Murat stepped out with a can in his hand that he didn't want to sell because it already had dents. "What's up, you world-arsonists?" he asked.

Heckenpisser handed him the manifesto. "Here," he said solemnly. "Basic program of the party 'The Drunkards'."

Murat didn't read as fast as he could count money, but he did read. At "Cigarette butts = fundamental right" he nodded in agreement. At "Murat = Ministry of Finance (if he behaves)" he stopped and grinned.

““If he behaves himself,”” he quoted. “Brother, that’s discrimination at its highest level.”

"It's only temporary," said Kuddel. "That can still be changed. Maybe we'll just make you shadow finance minister. That's more mysterious."

Murat folded the paper shut, holding it between two fingers like a contract. "You're crazy," he said. "But..."

He tucked the manifesto behind the cigarette display, into a gap between two cartons of Marlboro. "Now it's official," he declared. "Behind the cash register, the law is law. If it's there, it exists."

The hedge pisser opened his eyes in surprise. "You're hanging that there?" he asked. "Seriously?"

“Why not?” said Murat. “No customer reads that little stuff anyway. If they do, they get something out of it. And I get a laugh.”

Thus, a beer-fueled idea became a "document". World domination at the standing table had its first symbolic constitution.

Of course, it didn't stop at paperwork. Heckenpisser, who wanted to structure everything due to professional deformation, couldn't help but continue.

“We need a structure,” he explained that evening. “Like clubs. Only without membership fees, but with more liver failure.”

“We need recruits,” Kuddel said. “People who want to join in. We can’t take over the world with just three of us. Well... we could, but it would take time.”

Murat laughed. "You seriously want to recruit people? Like this: 'Join our movement, we'll just stand around and drink'?"

"Sounds better than most parties," said Kuddel.

Heckenpisser considered this. “Our target group,” he began, “is... everyone who’s already here anyway. The lost, the tired, the failed, the cynical. So... 90 percent of the night population.”

"And what do we offer them?" Murat asked. "Besides a name for their failure?"

"We offer them... belonging," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"And a cool name," added Kuddel. "Saufärsche. That sticks in your mind. You can't get it out of your head."

He looked around, saw the first potential "members": old Dieter, who had been coming for years to get his cans wearing the same jacket and with the same tired look; lanky Tanja, who always claimed she was "just passing through," but had been standing here every Saturday for two years; the guy with the dog, who made more sensible decisions than his owner.

"We do it like some kind of religious guy," Kuddel said. "We approach people when they're at their lowest point. 'Brother, do you need support? We have a standing table.'"

Heckenpisser beamed. "Oh my God," he said, "we are a secular substitute church!"

"We're a bunch of drunks," Kuddel corrected. "Others can do church. We do it with taste."

They tested it immediately.

Dieter shuffled in and placed a few coins on the counter. "Same as always," he muttered.

Murat slid his ration of canned beer over to him. Kuddel stood next to him and put his arm around his shoulders.

"Dieter, watch out," he said. "We've got a movement now."

Dieter blinked. "What?"

"A movement," Kuddel repeated. "The Drunkards. Official. With a manifesto and everything. You can become a founding member. Almost for free."

Dieter looked at the cans, looked at Kuddel, looked at the manifesto, which was half visible behind the cash register. "How much does it cost?" he asked suspiciously.

"Only your remaining dignity," Murat said dryly. "It's worthless anyway."

Heckenpisser switched into "serious" mode. "It's not about money," he explained. "It's about officially acknowledging what we already are: losers with style. You get a title. A kind of... rank."

"Rank?" Dieter repeated.

Kuddel nodded eagerly. "You would be... Chief Drinking Master Dieter. Front line at the kiosk."

Dieter stared at him. For a long time.

Then, for the first time in a long time, his mouth curved into something that vaguely resembled a smile. "Senior Field Master," he said slowly. "Sounds better than 'customer at the office'."

"Well, look at that!" exclaimed Kuddel. "Welcome to the club, comrade."

He slapped Dieter on the back, who almost lost his balance.

"Will I get a discount now?" Dieter asked hopefully.

Murat sighed and reached for another can. "Here," he said. "Welcome gift. But don't tell anyone. I have a reputation as a capitalist bastard to lose."

They laughed. And somewhere in that laughter lay a tiny kernel of something that, with a great deal of imagination, could be called "dignity".

It didn't stop with Dieter. Over the next few evenings, several "recruitments" took place, some more successfully than others.

Tanja became the "cutting scout officer" after she once declared, quite drunk, that she had "a real eye for hot chicks." The guy with the dog was dubbed the "Foreign Minister for Four-Legged Friends" because he managed to get his German Shepherd to "sit" while his own life was in constant motion.

Heckenpisser kept a handwritten list in a small notebook that looked like a ledger but contained much more truth. "Membership List of Drunkards" was written on the front in scribbled handwriting.

"You know that legally it means nothing," he said. "But psychologically it means a lot. Hehehe."

"We're illegal anyway," Kuddel said. "At least morally. That's fine."

And in the midst of this deliberate chaos, between self-irony and genuine longing, something happened that no one spoke aloud:

For the first time in a long series of missed opportunities, Kuddel and Heckenpisser felt they had a thread in their hand. A thin, greasy, easily broken thread – but a thread nonetheless.

World domination was still light-years away. The commuter train station was already difficult enough to reach.

But at the standing table, under neon lights, with a manifesto behind the cash register and "Chief Field Drinker Dieter" in the front row, the world felt for a moment as if it were not just a place that spat them out –

but a place you could shout back at.

It was as if someone had flipped a tiny switch. The neighborhood was still the same. The late-night shop was still the same. The same streetlights, the same street, the same garbage bags on the side.

But between cigarette butts, Sterni beer, and shattered hope, there was now this crumpled piece of paper behind the cigarette shelf – the “Manifesto of the Drunkards”.

And in the minds of Kuddel and Heckenpisser, an idea had taken root like a stray toenail: We have a plan.

Of course, it was still a drunken plan. But a plan nonetheless.

The evening slowly crept towards night. A few casual customers came in, bought beer, cigarettes, and chips. A jogger with a headband bought himself an isotonic soda "as a reward," as if one could buy one's way out of life with sugar. A couple who didn't look at each other as they placed two bottles of wine on the till.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser stood at the high table and suddenly felt not just like two drunks passing through, but like a kind of... board of directors. A board of directors without a bank account, without a club, without a future – but with an agenda.

“So,” began Heckenpisser, “if we take this megalomania seriously for a moment – we need a first... measure.”

“A measure,” Kuddel repeated, nodding as if he had ordered the word. “Exactly. An action. Something that makes history.”

"At least it's local history," added Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

Inside, Murat pushed a new crate into the refrigerator. He heard the words through the half-open door and shook his head inwardly, but he couldn't deny that he was mildly amused.

"What kind of stunt was that?" he asked, as he came back out and leaned against the door. "You can't just say you want world domination and then just stand around drinking. That's what politicians do."

Kuddel shrugged. “We... uh... are starting to free people,” he said.

"What are we talking about?" asked Murat.

“Before she became sober,” Kuddel replied without hesitation.

Heckenpisser burst out laughing. “Hehehehe... that’s the most reactionary revolutionary concept I’ve ever heard of.”

“No, seriously now,” Kuddel continued. “We have to show that we are different. That we are... uh... capable of taking action.”

Heckenpisser tilted his head. "Capable of taking action. You're not even capable of managing your bank account, Kuddel."

"Then... suitable for standing tables," he growled. "We need a first big move."

For a moment, no one said anything. They stared at their bottles as if they would find answers there.

Then it came – the kind of idea that only comes when you're already far beyond the bounds of reason:

"Hamburg," Kuddel said suddenly.

Hedge-pisser blinked. "What?"

"Hamburg!" Kuddel repeated. "Fish market. St. Pauli. Peep show. Everything. We've talked about it a hundred times already. Always just talked. This time we're going to do it."

Murat narrowed his eyes. "Whoa," he said. "Now it's getting dangerous."

"Think about it," Kuddel continued, now getting into his stride. "Every grand world domination plan has a symbol. A myth, some kind of myth. For us, it's Hamburg. We've been saying for years that we're going there, stirring things up, cracking open a crate of Sterni at the fish market, and showing St. Pauli what real drunks are. And every time, we end up getting stuck here, pissing all over the hedges in the red-light district. Not anymore. Now it's... dress rehearsal. Campaign One."

Heckenpisser leaned his flat hand on the standing table as if he had to absorb the weight of his nonsense. "You seriously want to begin our world domination with a trip to Hamburg?" he asked.

"Yeah man!" Kuddel exclaimed. "What's better than Hamburg? The people there are just as messed up as we are, only more expensive. If we can cope there, we can cope anywhere. It's like... a diplomatic exam. Only with the smell of fish."

Heckenpisser thought about how he'd always imagined peep shows: neon, dim lighting, women who wished they were somewhere else, men pretending they were still in control. He thought about how they'd talked about it for years, but never gotten further than the commuter train. But now there was this manifesto. This silly piece of paper behind the Marlboro Red.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "From a purely logistical point of view... tickets, money, hangover, you'll get lost even in the main train station."

"Logistics is for people with a future," Kuddel waved off. "We're planning it today, we're leaving soon. Completely official. As a delegation of drunkards. On a mission."

Murat sat down on an empty crate and lit a cigarette. "Okay," he said. "I'm listening. Explain your mission, world ruler."

Kuddel straightened up, as straight as he could. The king of cigarettes and Sterni beer in an improvised strategy briefing.

"Mission Hamburg," he began solemnly. "Goal:

1. See the legendary fish market before we die.
2. Drinking in St. Pauli until God looks away.

3. Let's see if we can get a foot in the door there. Maybe new territory. Outpost Saufärsche North."

Heckenpisser cautiously raised his finger. "Um... one small objection: We don't even have a 'Saufärsche Süd' (a play on words, roughly translating to 'drinking farts')."

"That will come," Kuddel insisted. "First the north, then everything else. Maybe we'll do a franchise someday. 'Saufärsche – now also in your city'."

Heckenpisser looked at Murat. "Could you please write down that this is the dumbest, yet most consistent idea we've had in a long time?" he asked.

Murat grinned. "I don't have time to document every brilliant idea you come up with," he said. "But Hamburg sounds fun. And at least you have a goal that goes further than the next curb."

"See?" Kuddel said triumphantly. "Even Murat believes in us. And he usually only believes in pawnbroking and his own lies."

"I don't believe in you," Murat corrected. "I only believe that you screw things up. And Hamburg is a bigger stage for your screw-ups. I want to see that."

Heckenpisser ran his hand through his side parting, which by now looked like a construction site. "Okay," he finally said. "Let's assume we pretend this really is our first big plan. What do we need?"

"Money," Murat replied. "You need tickets, you need something to drink, you need return tickets – or you'll stay stuck up there and I'll finally have some peace."

"We'll be back," promised Kuddel. "The neighborhood needs us."

Murat laughed. "The neighborhood needs less broken glass. But okay."

Heckenpisser actually started doing some calculations. "So, Berlin to Hamburg, by train... unless we're taking the ICE, but some kind of slow train..." he muttered. "Then once we get there: fish sandwiches, beer, a peep show... we have to budget for loss of control."

"I'm including my liver in the planning," Kuddel said. "The rest will take care of itself."

"You don't plan anything," Heckenpisser retorted. "You're the inspiration part, I'm the Excel part. That's how it works."

He pulled out his notebook – the "membership book" of the drunkards – and turned to the next page. At the top he wrote:

Operation Hamburg – Field Experiment World Domination

He then added bullet points below:

- Tickets: X
- Beer on the go: X
- Arrival at fish market: "in the morning, if we can make it"

- St. Pauli: "Open end, within the bounds of what is legally intolerable"
- Return journey: "sometime, when we can still walk"

He looked up, took a step back, and considered his own disaster plan.

"You're worse than any project manager," Murat said approvingly. "Except your project is doomed from the start."

"That's the liberating honesty of it," replied Heckenpisser. "We can't fail because there's no realistic measure of success. Hehehe."

Kuddel looked at his hands, at the bottle, the cigarette butt. "Do you know why I want Hamburg?" he asked suddenly, more quietly than before.

Heckenpisser and Murat looked at him. He didn't often say things like that.

"Because we're always just standing here," he said. "Same corner, same table, same broken dreams. We're always talking about doing something 'someday.' Someday the fish market. Someday St. Pauli. Someday everything. And then... we go back home and sleep in the same filth. I want to experience... just once... the same filth somewhere else. Then I can say: I was there. I screwed up. But I was there."

It was a moment when all cynicism held its breath for a heartbeat.

Hedge Pisser nodded slowly. "That's the saddest, most beautiful reason to travel I've ever heard," he said quietly. "Hehehe... you asshole."

Murat scratched his beard. "Brother," he said, "that's almost like motivation. We should print that on a flyer. 'Assholes – at least we'll screw up somewhere else.'"

They laughed again, but the laughter had a different sound now. Not just dull. More like: Yes, we know how ridiculous this is – and that's exactly why we're doing it.

Later that night, when the traffic thinned and only a few cars passed by, Kuddel took out a pen. A half-dried-out advertising gel pen that had already survived far too many forms.

He leaned over the standing table, where beer stains formed their own geography, and wrote directly on the surface in a scribbled hand:

"World Domination - Step 1: Hamburg"

The hedge pisser next to it added below:

"If we can extend the S-Bahn to Südkreuz, that will already be a success."

Murat looked at it, shook his head with a grin. "You guys are so stupid," he said. "If someone sees this table, they'll think a really bad cult is meeting here."

"We do that too," said Heckenpisser. "Only without membership fees."

"And without redemption," Kuddel added.

“But with Boonekamp,” said Murat. “So almost the same.”

He disappeared back into the shop, the neon light flickered briefly and then calmed down again.

Outside it was slowly getting colder. The city pulled its blanket tighter around its shoulders.

Kuddel lit another cigarette, even though his lungs protested. Heckenpisser sipped the last of the Sterni, as if trying to coax a few final secrets out of him.

"All right," Heckenpisser finally said. "We have a manifesto, a membership list, a stupid slogan on the table, and a campaign to Hamburg planned. I'd say that's more organization than I ever intended to do in my life."

“You see,” said Kuddel. “We’ve come a long way since yesterday. Yesterday we were just two drunks. Today we’re two drunks with an agenda.”

"That's the scariest word in your mouth," commented Heckenpisser.

They clinked bottles together, even though there was hardly anything left in them.

"To world domination," muttered Kuddel.

“To Hamburg,” added Heckenpisser. “The fish market, which might not even exist the way you imagine it.”

He didn't know how right he was.

Because the fish market that Kuddel had been talking about for years – this myth of music, crab sandwiches, beer at six in the morning and all-nighters – only really existed in one place at that time:

in Kuddel's foggy skull, somewhere between old Tankard songs and repressed official letters.

But they didn't yet suspect that the fish market of the drunkards would only take place in his head for the time being.

And so this evening ended like all others – with cigarette butts, leftover beer, and cloying remarks – but with a new, absurd headline above it:

World domination at the standing table.

The first grand plan was written. Now it just had to fail in the face of reality.

That was then taken over by the fish market, which only existed in Kuddel's head.

The fish market that only exists in Kuddel's head

The morning they wanted to leave "for the fish market" was one of those days when Berlin looked as if it had drunk too much itself.

A gray sky, undecided whether to rain or just look depressed. Streets littered with damp trash, a few pigeons that looked like discarded angels going through withdrawal. The city wheezed its way into the day, subways packed with people pretending everything was fine, even though they looked like they'd slept standing up.

Kuddel was awake unusually early. Well, "early" in Kuddel's sense: it was after nine.

He sat on the edge of the bed in his cave of clothes, ash, and empty bottles, smoking his first cigarette of the day, with that look only men too old for dreams and too young to give up have. His robe hung over the chair, heavy with beer and stories. On the table, a crumpled piece of paper with the heading:

"Operation Hamburg – Field Experiment World Domination"

The cigarette was glowing. His head was throbbing. But there was something inside him that refused to dismiss the whole thing as a drunken joke from yesterday.

"Today," he murmured, "fish market."

The word tasted of salt, beer, and myth in his mouth. The fish market wasn't a real address for Kuddel. It was a promise. A state of being. A place he'd only ever heard drunken demigods talk about, somewhere between a pub and a prison bridge.

"There you are at five in the morning," someone once said, "with a beer in your hand, at the stalls, and everything smells of fish and decay and life. People everywhere, still full from the night before or already full of despair. And you know: If you survive this, you can do anything."

Since then, the fish market was no longer a market in Kuddel's mind. It was a test case.

He got dressed, as best he could. The same ripped jeans as always, boots with half a plowed field underneath, a T-shirt from some long-forgotten metal band, and over that, his battle jacket, which had more patina than fabric. Cap on, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, plan in his head.

"Hamburg," he muttered, "we're coming. You victim."

Heckenpisser had fared worse during the night.

The problem with plans for world domination was: they didn't mesh with Gerda's breakfast ritual. And certainly not with his job.

He had barely slept. Too many thoughts, too many Excel spreadsheets swirling in his head, mixed with beer bottles. In his dream, presentations and fish heads had devoured the

PowerPoint slides. His boss had suddenly taken on Murat's face and said "deposit" when he meant "budget."

Now he stood in the bathroom, looked at himself in the mirror and thought: "I look like the before version in a bad advertising campaign for life coaching."

He knew Kuddel had "fish market" marked on his calendar for today. For the first time in all the years they'd been wasting away together, it didn't sound like complete drivel. There was this note. This list. This crazy idea of at least looking at a dream enough to risk embarrassing himself.

Heckenpisser ran his hand through his hair, which refused to lie properly. He decided against the bow tie – which for him was about as revolutionary as quitting one's job would be for others. Just a shirt, trousers, and a coat.

"Boy, look at that fly!" Gerda called from the kitchen as he walked through the hallway. "You look so... unfinished."

He stopped in the doorway. "I'm... going without them today," he said. "Casual Friday."

Gerda raised an eyebrow skeptically. "You don't even work in such a modern shop," she said. "And you're going to work today, aren't you? Not again... 'later'?"

He swallowed. Hamburg was drumming somewhere in his skull. S-Bahn, tickets, fish market, St. Pauli. Alongside it: Excel, boss, rent, reality.

"I'll... go there first," he said evasively. "Maybe... later..."

"There is no 'later'," Gerda cut him off. "There is only working or not working. The problems start in between."

He thought: The problems started a long time ago, Mom. But that wasn't a sentence you'd say at the kitchen table.

He drank his coffee, took a bite of his roll, tasted nothing. A parallel film played in his head: He and Kuddel, with a Sterni beer, on the train, staring out the window as the gray shit rushed by outside. Arrival at dawn, fish stalls, seagulls, wrinkled faces, big mouths.

"Hedge," he heard Kuddel say in his head, "that's our place of pilgrimage. It's like Mecca, only with eels and less morality."

And somewhere deep inside, he felt that ridiculous little spark that he had successfully trampled to death for years: lust.

A brief urge to do something that wasn't the office, the corner store, or Mom's kitchen. Just to fail somewhere different for once.

"I'm going," he said, placing the cup in the sink.

"Remember your ticket," Gerda called after him.

“Oh yes,” he thought. “Ticket.” But where to?

The late-night convenience store looked like a stage set without actors that morning. The neon lights were still on, but paler. The beer crates stood like remnants of the previous evening's fighting. The street was full of daylight-blooming faces: people with bags, bicycles, and strollers. Suits instead of hoodies, briefcases instead of plastic bags.

Kuddel was already there. Too early, too sober, too focused.

In his hand he held a piece of paper, presumably a printed timetable from some machine or information box. On the other side was a half-used cigarette, which he was burning more than actually smoking.

Murat wasn't there – it was Uncle duty in the morning, some older relative who didn't even know there was a manifesto hanging behind his cigarette display. The door was closed, the blind half down. The corner shop owner was asleep on his feet.

Heckenpisser walked towards him, briefcase in hand, but without a bow tie. Kuddel saw him and whistled once.

"Well, look at that!" he exclaimed. "The man who usually only makes appointments with Excel. Awake at an ungodly hour and without a bow tie. That must be fate."

"Destiny doesn't follow a timetable," muttered Heckenpisser. "Neither does the BVG. Hehehe."

He stopped and looked at Kuddel. It was rare to see him so alert. Even rarer to see more in his eyes than residual alcohol and defiance.

"So?" asked Heckenpisser. "How serious are you about that?"

Kuddel held out the slip of paper. "Regional train to Hamburg," he announced. "Cheap, slow, but it runs. If we leave now, we'll make it... eventually. And if we get off at the wrong place, we'll call it a stopover. We're flexible, after all."

Heckenpisser took the printout. The numbers blurred briefly, then sorted themselves out: Departure. Arrival. Platform. Hamburg.

A perfectly ordinary ticket. A perfectly extraordinary day.

"And the money?" he asked.

Kuddel grinned crookedly and patted his jeans. "I've put some money aside," he said. "And Murat recently ripped off too many tourists and slipped me fifty bucks. 'For world domination,' he said. He wants us to go. So he can be the sole boss of this madhouse."

Heckenpisser did the math in his head. Ticket, a bit of food, plenty to drink, peep show, return trip – if they even made it back. It wasn't enough. Of course not. It was never enough.

But for the first time, "not enough" didn't feel like an excuse, but like a challenge.

"I've got something too," he said, pulling his wallet from his inside coat pocket. A few bills left over from his last paycheck. Basically for "just in case." But what was this, if not "what"?

"We can almost afford it," he noted with surprise. "At least the journey there. Hehehe."

"We'll steal the return trip," Kuddel said. "Or we'll stay there. Become dock bums. Open a branch of Saufärsche Nord. Maybe it's fate."

Heckenpisser glanced briefly to the side, at the street, at a woman with shopping bags, at a man in a suit shouting into his mobile phone. World domination. Fish market. Or office.

"What about your job?" Kuddel asked suddenly, more directly than was usual for him.

Heckenpisser shrugged. "My job is like a bad relationship," he said. "If I stray from it for a day, it doesn't just leave immediately. Unfortunately."

Kuddel laughed dryly. "So... skip?"

"So... setting priorities," Heckenpisser corrected. "Today: fish market. Tomorrow: justification. The day after tomorrow: existential fear. Everything in its own time. Hehehe."

Kuddel looked at him, and for a moment two kinds of despair lay on top of each other: one that had already given up, and the other that at least wanted to say "Screw it" one last time before lying down again.

"So?" asked Kuddel. "Are you coming with me, or are you staying here and watching your life pass you by like you're a bus stop?"

Heckenpisser looked at the timetable. At the word "Hamburg". At the departure time.

What he did wasn't brave. It was cowardly in a different way: he was running away from normality.

"Come on," he said. "Before I change my mind."

Kuddel clapped his hands. "Now that's the kind of propaganda minister I like!" he exclaimed. "Quick, let's grab some cigarettes, then off to the train station!"

"The late-night shop is closed," Heckenpisser pointed out.

Kuddel grinned, reached into his robe, and pulled out a crumpled but almost full pack. "I've taken precautions today," he explained. "World domination without cigarettes is like a peep show without electricity."

They set off towards the S-Bahn. It was just a few streets, a few traffic lights, a few puddles. But every step felt different for a moment – as if they were not just crossing the city, but leaving it.

The platform smelled of urine, stale coffee, and missed connections. Graffiti adorned the walls, cigarette butts littered the edges, and a flickering display promised that a train would theoretically arrive soon, sometime in the future.

Kuddel stood close to the edge, gazing at the tracks as if the entire future were already rolling in. Heckenpisser clutched his briefcase tightly, even though he didn't need it today. It was like a prop, without which he felt naked.

"Do you actually know," Heckenpisser asked after a while, "why you are so obsessed with this fish market?"

Kuddel took a drag on his cigarette and blew the smoke toward the tracks. "Because that's where the people are who won't go to bed when you tell them to," he said. "You meet everyone there: those who stayed up all night, those who start early, those who don't know where they're going, those who want too much. All in one place. And nobody asks you, 'What do you do for a living?' At most, they ask, 'Do you want fish or beer?' And those are questions I can handle."

Heckenpisser nodded. He could picture it: Kuddel right in the middle, amidst the stench of fish and market criers, with a cold beer in his hand and the feeling that he was just as out of place and yet just as right here as anywhere else.

"Have you never considered that things might not be the way they are in your head?" he asked.

Kuddel grinned unilaterally. "Of course not," he said. "Otherwise I wouldn't be me."

A train pulled in. Not theirs—somewhere else, some other life. People got off, got on, didn't see them, walked right past them. Two drunks with plans no one had asked for.

"You know what," said Heckenpisser suddenly. "Maybe it doesn't matter."

"What?" asked Kuddel.

"Is the fish market really what you think it is?" he explained. "Probably not. It's probably disappointing. Too touristy, too clean, too little drama. But in your head, it's... perfectly polluted. And we're going there now to find out if your head is lying or the world is."

"I'm betting on both," said Kuddel.

The display clicked. Her train would be arriving soon. To Südkreuz, then onward, eventually heading north, towards Hamburg. Theory.

In reality, there was a different problem: They had tickets – but only in their heads. Kuddel had the printed timetable. No actual tickets.

"Tell me," Heckenpisser asked slowly as the train approached, "you... have already bought tickets, right?"

Kuddel took a drag on his cigarette, looked at the piece of paper, looked at the train. He paused briefly. One that didn't look good.

"I wanted to," he finally said. "But the machine at the train station was broken. And then... someone started talking to me. And then... I only had enough money for Sterni beer. But I printed out the map. That counts too, right?"

The hedge pisser stared at him. The train came to a stop, doors opened, people streamed in and out.

“You... didn’t buy the tickets,” he said slowly, as if he had to digest each word individually.

“Not yet,” Kuddel corrected. “Technically speaking. We can buy them right away. At the train station. Later. Sometime.”

Heckenpisser looked down at himself – at his clean trousers, his shoes, his briefcase. He looked at Kuddel – his jacket, cap, and cigarette. He looked at the train where people were just getting on their seats, going somewhere they were expected to go.

He could have snapped right then. Screamed. Said: "Typical! You can't do anything right, not even buy a train ticket, you complete idiot!"

Instead, something else happened.

He started to laugh. Not that bright, slightly embarrassed "Hehehe" he always had when he commented on something. A different laugh. A laugh in which resignation, relief, and broken affection were mixed together.

"Of course," he gasped. "Of course you didn't buy any tickets. Of course we're standing here with a timetable and no ticket. This is... this is... so perfect."

"Perfectly screwed up," said Kuddel, and now he was laughing too. "That's... our trademark."

The train started moving again. Without her.

They stood on the platform, two drunks with a plan in their pocket, but without a ticket. Hamburg didn't seem any further away at that moment – it had never been closer than in Kuddel's head.

“You know what, Hecke,” Kuddel finally said, when the tracks were empty again. “Maybe... the real fish market is only in there anyway.”

He tapped his forehead with his finger.

"In reality, it's probably full of tourists, selfie sticks, and vegans debating at the stall whether the fish was ethically killed. In my head, there's only beer, shouting, and people who are honestly ugly. Maybe that's enough."

Heckenpisser took a deep breath. He looked at the stairs that led back up into the city. Back to Schöneberg, back to the corner store, back to the standing table.

“We could... go back,” he said. “To base camp. And you tell me about your fish market. The one in your head. As if we’d actually been there. Hehehe.”

“Story mode instead of real mode,” Kuddel remarked. “Sounds like the internet.”

“And then we’ll write that as a chapter,” Heckenpisser added. “‘The fish market that only exists in Kuddel’s head.’ At least that way we’ll have something that won’t drive away from us.”

They went back up the stairs. The train station remained behind them, with its departure schedules that had never been written for them.

On the way back to the corner store, Kuddel started talking. About stalls he'd never seen. About market criers whose voices he only knew from television clips. About the taste of beer at five in the morning, which he'd borrowed from some other night.

He painted the fish market as a hell where one could be happy if one understood how to stop looking up. Heckenpisser listened, laughed, added to, and commented.

And so, on the way, between the train station and the late-night shop, the fish market came into being, existing only in Kuddel's head:

A place full of rough guys, piss-soaked sidewalks, crooked deals, lost souls, where it looks like night in the morning, and nobody asks why you are the way you are, as long as you pay and keep your mouth shut.

They arrived back at the corner store as if they had never left. Murat was now standing behind the cash register, neon lights on, world turned upside down.

"Well, world ruler," he shouted through the door. "Have you flattened Hamburg yet?"

Kuddel grinned, Heckenpisser giggled. "Sure," said Kuddel. "In our minds, the fish market belongs to us now. The rest will come later."

Murat shook his head and reached for the Boonekamp bottle. "Back to the starting line then," he said. "Beer?"

They nodded. Hamburg was far away. The fish market even further.

But on that day it had become clear:

Some places are only accessible to people like Kuddel via the direct route through their brains. And sometimes that's enough to keep going in the small, dirty universe at the standing table in front of the corner store.

The afternoon dragged on sluggishly through Schöneberg like cold fat in a pan no one wants to heat up anymore. The train station was behind them again, the missed train, the unpurchased ticket, Hamburg. It could have felt like a defeat.

But Kuddel wasn't the type to let reality ruin his stories. If the world didn't cooperate, he'd create his own cinema.

When they stood in front of the corner store again, the day already had that tired yellow in the air that announces: Evening is coming soon, and with it all the people who pretend to still be functioning during the day.

Murat was behind the counter, just taking over from his uncle. Elke was working the late shift somewhere else; today was "Murat day." You could tell because the music was coming from his phone and the chip shelves looked like they'd been stocked haphazardly.

"Well, you long-distance travelers," he greeted them. "Has Hamburg already burned down, or is the train station just full of vomit?"

Heckenpisser chuckled. "We had a technical problem," he explained. "No ticket."

Murat stared at Kuddel. "Don't tell me you drank it all away again," he said.

"I did suggest it," Kuddel corrected. "We failed strategically at the planning stage. That's different from the traditional approach."

"You're the only terrorist cell that can't even get past the ATM," Murat commented. "Respect."

"That's enough now," Kuddel growled. "We've found another solution. The fish market is now... a matter of mindset."

Murat raised an eyebrow. "So, fantasy Hamburg? A borderline vacation?"

"Art," said Heckenpisser, raising his hand and holding up a two-fingered quotation mark. "Creative reconstruction of an event that never happened. Hehehe."

Murat sighed and reached for bottles. "Well then, you literary geniuses. First, a Sterni beer before you get lost in your inner Hamburg."

They stood at the standing table, which by now looked like an unofficial monument: cigarette burn marks, beer stains, a crooked "FUCK YOU WORLD" scratched somewhere, and, brand new, the sentence:

"World Domination - Step 1: Hamburg"

with hedge pisser's addition below.

"So," said Heckenpisser, taking his first sip. "Now tell me, Kuddel. Take me with you. We're here now. Close your eyes, I'm listening. What does your fish market look like?"

Kuddel twirled the bottle in his hand as if it were a microphone. He wasn't stupid, the old drunk. He was just broken. That's not the same thing. And somewhere inside him sat a storyteller who had never been let out sober, because sober everything was too sharp-edged.

"Okay," he said. "Listen. We're arriving. In the morning. Real morning, not that office 'good morning'. But that 'the city still has dark circles under its eyes' morning. Everything is grey, everything is damp. You get off the train, and the station smells of cold fry grease and missed opportunities."

"Very nice," muttered Heckenpisser. "Sounds like Berlin, only with a harbor."

“Exactly,” Kuddel nodded. “And then, Hecke, you go out. Not with those touristy idiots who first have to look for the Elbphilharmonie so they can take a picture, so everyone knows they were bored somewhere else once. We go out the back. Some dingy exit. The one where there are already beer cans on the ground.”

“Of course,” said Heckenpisser. “We always choose the ‘Broken Existence’ option.”

“We set off,” Kuddel continued, “through streets where everything already smells kind of like the harbor, but not romantically – more like someone buried a fish and forgot where. Pubs to the left and right, still closed, but in front of some of them the first zombies are already standing and smoking because they haven’t stopped since yesterday.”

Heckenpisser leaned against the standing table, half-closed his eyes as if he were really trying to see. Murat stood inside, pretending to be organizing something, but he was listening.

"And then," said Kuddel, "we come to the market. You can hear it before we get there. A murmuring. Voices overlapping, market criers who sound as if they've bought their vocal cords on special offer. And above it all, the squawking of seagulls, those filthy white creatures that have been awake since five o'clock because they know something is going to fall to the ground."

"Seagulls are hedge peepers of the skies," Murat interjected. "Always screeching, never working, just eyeing everything."

"The nerve!" said Heckenpisser, but he giggled. "Hehehe."

Kuddel grinned and continued. "You walk in there, and the first stalls hit you right in the face. Fish, hedges. Fish everywhere. Not that supermarket vacuum-packed stuff, but real beasts. Icebergs with eyes. Every other stall shouts: 'Fresher! Cheaper! Come on, young man!' – that's what they say to you," he pointed at Hedge Pisser, "to me they say: 'You look like you were already done for yesterday.'"

Heckenpisser snorted. "Realistic assessment," he stated.

"It smells everywhere, man," said Kuddel. "Not just of fish. Of beer, sweat, sea air, perfume from women who want to look like they're still going strong at five in the morning. Of fried fish, of coffee, of cigarette butts. A olfactory cocktail that tells you right away: If you act like you're something special here, life's going to punch you."

"Sounds cozy," said Murat.

“It is,” Kuddel insisted. “Because nobody pretends to have their life under control. The vendors shout their right to exist at the top of their lungs, the buyers lug bags full of dead animals home, everyone knows they’ll be back tomorrow because nothing really changes.”

Heckenpisser chuckled softly. "You're describing a market and it sounds like group therapy."

“It is!” exclaimed Kuddel. “The whole city is going through withdrawal from the day-night rhythm. And you’re right in the middle of it. With beer.”

He raised the bottle as if he were already drinking there in his mind.

"Of course we'll buy something," he continued. "Not fish, we're not sick. We'll get two bottles at the beer stand. They don't have Sterni there, they have that North German stuff. Some cheap mushroom with an anchor on the label, so you feel like a sailor even though you're from the welfare office."

"Name on it, comfort inside," said Heckenpisser. "Market economy."

"We drink and watch," said Kuddel. "There are guys who have been standing at the same stall for twenty years, with hands like shovels, bellies over their belts, voices like jackhammers. They've seen everything: tourists who faint at the sight of half a fish, drunks who vomit in crates, children who laugh while their parents remain silent."

He took a drag on his cigarette as if he were really there.

"And then," he said, "we come to THE stand. You know. THE stand."

Heckenpisser blinked. "Which stance?" he asked.

"The one with the fish sandwiches," Kuddel explained reverently. "But not half-heartedly. A proper stall. Bread rolls, remoulade, onions, herring, Bismarck herring, salmon – everything. There's this guy standing there, completely screwed up by his own life, but when he hands you that roll, he's like a priest. You bite into it, and for five seconds everything's okay. Five seconds, Hecke! Five seconds without a credit check, no job center, no mother asking when you're finally going to 'do something real'. Just fish, fat, and salt."

Hedge-pisser briefly closed his eyes, as if he could feel the bite. "Five seconds of relief in bread roll format," he murmured. "Hehehe."

"Exactly," Kuddel said contentedly. "And while we're standing there eating, this woman comes shuffling up. Not young, not old. The kind who's heard everything men have ever said to women, and she doesn't care. She's wearing a jacket that's too tight, lipstick that's lost its place, and she smells of cheap perfume and stale alcohol. She looks at you and says, 'So, guys, stayed up all night too?'"

Heckenpisser laughed. "And what do I say?" he asked.

"You say," Kuddel replied, "We are on an educational trip. We are researching for world domination."

Heckenpisser giggled immediately. "Hehehe... oh God, yes. And then she asks: 'So, what? Learned anything yet?'"

"And I say," Kuddel added, "Yes. That the fish is more like us than we think: it hangs around somewhere, gets cold, stinks, and in the end, no one who truly appreciates you takes you home."

Murat let out a short roar of laughter. "Dude!" he shouted from inside. "If you talked like that at the stall, they'd beat you to death with a mackerel."

"At least I'll have a heroic death," Kuddel said. "'Killed by reality in fish form.'"

Heckenpisser could barely contain himself, his laughter erupting. "Hehehehe... I can just picture it all," he gasped. "You in your robe, me in my shirt, both totally out of place and yet perfectly in place at the same time. As always."

"Exactly," said Kuddel. "We're not the exception. We're just one type of customer. The 'latecomer, earlycomer' type."

He took another sip. Then he held the bottle a little tighter, as if he had to hold on to it.

"And then," he continued more quietly, "you end up standing there at the edge. Looking towards the water. Maybe there's fog. Maybe just your own flag. And you realize: This is where everyone who doesn't know where to go ends up. Those who have stayed up all night. Those who have to start the day too early. Those who are lost in their lives and hope that the path through the fish market will take them somewhere more bearable. But it doesn't. It only takes them back home. And again tomorrow. And again."

Heckenpisser had fallen silent. He looked at him – this broken guy in the robe, standing there building a place in his mind that felt more real than anything they had seen this morning.

"You like the fish market because it's like us," Heckenpisser said quietly. "Overcrowded, loud, full of dead things that nobody really wants to see anymore, but everyone needs. Hehehe."

"Yeah, man," Kuddel said. "There you're part of something. Not good, not noble, but part of it. Here..." – he gestured vaguely towards the neighborhood – "...here you're just the bum standing at the corner store. There you're one of many who are up too early. That's something else."

For a while, no one said anything. The streets grew darker, the neon lights brighter. A few teenagers walked by, laughing too loudly, threw a can toward the trash can, and missed.

Murat stepped back outside, two new bottles in his hand. "You're still here," he observed. "I thought you'd gone back to Hamburg. I was thinking about the ICE."

Heckenpisser gratefully accepted the bottle and took a generous swig. "We were there," he said. "In the Kuddelversum."

"So?" asked Murat. "How was it?"

Hedge-pisser grinned crookedly. "Like here," he said. "Only with fish. And even more people pretending they have it under control."

Murat nodded slowly. "Sounds like northern Germany," he said. "I'll stick with Berlin. At least here everyone knows they don't stand a chance."

They laughed. But the laughter now had an undertone – as if they were laughing at themselves at the same time.

"You know what the good thing is?" Kuddel asked after a while. "If the fish market only exists in my head..."

“...no one can take it away from you,” added Heckenpisser. “No gentrification asshole, no tourist blog, no city marketing brochure.”

“Exactly,” said Kuddel. “They can take everything from me: my apartment, my bank account, my dignity – everything. But not the fish market, which I’ve never even seen. That belongs to me alone.”

Hedge Pisser raised the bottle. “To imaginary travel destinations,” he said. “They’re often better than the real ones. Hehehe.”

Murat raised a plastic cup in a toast to them. “To plans we won’t implement,” he said. “Because otherwise they would fall apart.”

Evening finally descended upon the neighborhood. The first familiar faces began to trickle in: Dieter, Tanja, the guy with the dog. Each one carrying their own little tragedy.

And if someone asked, “So, what was going on with you guys today?”, Kuddel would just say:

“We were at the fish market, man. In Hamburg. Very early in the morning. You should have been there.”

And Heckenpisser stood next to him, grinning and thinking:

We were really there.

But not with their feet – but with the last vestige of imagination that life hadn’t yet drunk out of their heads.

The night had only just begun, but Kuddel was already in the thick of it. Not physically – he was still standing at the high table in front of the corner store – but in that half-baked state where thoughts race faster than legs and stories detach themselves from reality like loose wallpaper.

The imaginary fish market was no longer just a story. It clung to the air. Between the haze of Sterni beer and cigarette smoke, it hung over the standing table like a second, salty atmosphere.

Word got around. Not because someone had handed out flyers – others did that – but because words spread faster at the corner store than diseases in a shared apartment.

Dieter came again later that evening, with his usual shuffling gait and the facial expression of a man who had survived too many Tuesday evenings.

“Well, Oberfeldsaufmeister,” Kuddel greeted him. “On duty at the front today? By the way, we were at the fish market.”

Dieter blinked. “What? In Hamburg?”

“Of course,” said Kuddel, without hesitation. “At five in the morning. Fish, beer, seagulls, everything. I almost punched an oyster because it was giving me a funny look.”

Heckenpisser stood next to him, sipped his beer and grinned to himself.

"I thought you never left," Dieter muttered.

"Not physically," Heckenpisser interjected. "But mentally we've traveled further than you have in the last ten years. Hehehe."

Dieter looked at him, looked at Kuddel, looked at the bottle. Then he shrugged.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "As long as beer comes out in the end."

Murat commented from the sidelines: "That's your target audience, guys. If the sentence ends with 'As long as beer comes out in the end,' you can tell them anything."

"We don't sell lies," Heckenpisser said, feigning outrage. "We sell alternative truths with better dramaturgy."

Kuddel nodded gravely. "This man is our press department," he explained.

As the evening progressed, the fish market became a kind of standard program.

Tanja, the pattern scout, eventually showed up in her usual outfit – jeans that were too tight, a jacket that was too short, and lipstick that was a shade below the pain threshold.

"Hey there, you assholes," she rasped affectionately. "What's up? I was in a bar yesterday, and there was this guy who—"

"Later, Tanja," Kuddel interrupted. "We have something much more important to tell you first. We were at the fish market."

"In Hamburg?" she asked.

Hedge-pisser raised his hand. "It's... complicated," he said. "Hehehe."

"Hey, just imagine," Kuddel began, without waiting for a question, "they sell fish sandwiches there that make your cholesterol levels explode just by looking at them. And at five in the morning, the first hotties in faux leather are already standing there, waiting for drunk victims. You'd be queen there, Tanja. Saint of withered flirting attempts."

Tanja looked at him and raised an eyebrow. She wasn't stupid, she was just tired.

"You were never there," she said calmly.

Kuddel flinched. "Deep down, yes," he said.

"I prefer standing in front of the corner store," she said, grabbed a bottle, paid Murat, and still lingered at the table. "It's closer to my comfort zone."

And so the imaginary fish market became no less real. On the contrary – with each repetition it became denser, more detailed. Each time new scenes were added, small variations, like in a series that gets dumber but more entertaining with each season.

The third time she told the story, an old sailor with an eye patch suddenly appeared and addressed Kuddel, saying, "You look like a drunken sailor without a ship." The fifth time, there was a barker who called hedge urinators "Herr Doktor" because only lunatics show up so early in their shirtsleeves. The seventh time, she was chased by a seagull that had supposedly tried to steal a cigarette from Kuddel's mouth.

"These seagulls, man," he explained, "they're basically feathered gentrifiers. They take away everything that's even remotely fun, and they make a lot of noise doing it."

"Gentrif flyer," said Heckenpisser, pleased with himself for using the word. "Hehehe."

Later, as the night grew deeper and the number of remaining dignities in the neighborhood dwindled, the fish market became the stage for Kuddel himself.

He was no longer just the narrator. He became the main character in his own legend.

"Listen, Murat," he began, already quite tipsy. "There was this one moment. I'm standing there, beer in hand, looking at the fish crates, everyone completely screwed – the fish, the people, me. And then this guy comes up to me, a real dockworker, and says: 'Hey buddy, are you here to work or to get lost?'"

Murat was busy restocking cigarettes, but he was listening intently. "So, what did you say?" he asked mechanically, as if performing a ritual.

"I said," Kuddel replied, "'I can get lost anywhere. Working, on the other hand, is limited to a specific location.'"

Hedge-Pisser laughed loudly. "You never said that, you lying clown," he shouted. "Hehehe... that's too good for your brain soup."

"I don't care," said Kuddel. "I'm saying it now, so I've said it. The head is the better record."

Murat half-nodded. "That's how memories work," he said. "You invent until you believe it happened that way. Welcome to humanity."

And that's exactly what happened: "We wanted to go to Hamburg and didn't make it" became "We were at the fish market and survived."

The fact that they had never left the station, that no tickets had been bought, that the plan had already imploded beforehand –

All of that faded into the background, drowned out by the story.

It wasn't the first time that alcoholics had embellished their biographies. But in Kuddel and Heckenpisser's case, it was more than just boasting. It was a survival strategy.

Around midnight, things quieted down in front of the late-night shop. This brief period, in which the early drinkers had already left and the very late candidates were still sitting in their kitchens wondering whether the trip to hell under the neon lights was still worth it.

Murat pulled a new crate forward. Kuddel leaned on the standing table with both hands, Heckenpisser let the bottle slide along his hand as if he needed to make sure that there was still something between him and the floor.

"Do you know what the worst thing is, Hecke?" Kuddel suddenly asked.

"That we started sober?" speculated Heckenpisser.

"No," said Kuddel. "The worst part is: this fish market in my head feels more real than anything we tried today."

Hedge Pisser nodded slowly. "Yes," he said. "That's actually the perfect summary of our lives. Hehehe. The things we imagine are better structured than the ones we actually accomplish."

Murat leaned in the doorway, listening without interrupting. He knew such phrases. They came late, when the level of intoxication briefly intersected with honesty.

"Maybe that's our level," Heckenpisser continued. "We're not built for reality. We're built for stories. Other people build careers, families, condos. We make... anecdotes that never happened."

"I don't even have photos," Kuddel muttered. "Of nothing. No proof of anything."

Heckenpisser gave a short laugh. "Why proof?" he asked. "So someone can say later, 'Look, you were happy then,' and you know you're not anymore? No, Kuddel. We've solved it better than that. We only have stories. Nobody can take those away from us because nobody knows if they're true."

Murat nodded. "Photos are for people who want to forget how shitty the present is," he said. "You don't need photos. You're a livestream catastrophe."

"Thanks, Digga," Kuddel said dryly.

A car drove by, music thumped muffled from half-open windows. Somewhere in the distance someone shouted, a dog barked back. Typical Berlin.

"Maybe," Heckenpisser thought aloud, "it's not so important whether we ever get anywhere. Maybe it's just about trying so that later we can say: 'At least we have a few more chapters than others.'"

"Chapter?" Murat asked.

"Chapters in the mind," he explained. "Every person is just a stack of stories. The rest are bills and organs."

Kuddel looked at him, and for a rare moment there was something like... pride in his gaze. "You're quite the little know-it-all Buddha," he said. "Only with a bow tie instead of an orange robe."

"I left off the bow tie today," Heckenpisser reminded him. "It was a fish market mood."

"That's right," grinned Kuddel. "You did a good job. You looked like someone who either had to go to work or was about to throw their life away. Both were possible."

They continued drinking, silently, each lost in their own thoughts. The corner store was like a spaceship without a destination, tethered to a parking lot.

Sometime around two or three, when the night had the city deep in its throat, Murat asked:

"And what about Hamburg now? Was that just a passing thought, or are you still planning?"

Heckenpisser looked at Kuddel. Kuddel looked at his bottle.

"I don't know," said Kuddel. "Maybe... we'll try again sometime. But this time with a ticket. This time for real. Not just a train station."

Heckenpisser thought for a moment. His brain was drunk, but not dead.

"Do you know what the problem was?" he asked. "We wanted to go straight from nowhere to Hamburg. Without any intermediate stops. No wonder we got stuck at the train station. Maybe we need... intermediate stops."

"Like in a board game?" Murat asked. "First square one: commuter train. Then square two: change trains. Square three: ticket inspectors who will eat you alive."

"Exactly," said Heckenpisser. "We have to take this seriously: The first real step towards world domination isn't Hamburg. It's about getting further than Südkreuz in the first place."

Kuddel nodded slowly. "Ticket to nowhere," he muttered. "First, the S-Bahn. Let's see if we can manage it. And if we screw it up, at least we'll have a new chapter."

Heckenpisser smiled crookedly. "'Ticket to Nowhere – S-Bahn instead of Hamburg,'" he said, pronouncing the sentence as if he were writing it on an invisible title page. "Hehehe. Sounds like our whole biography."

Murat tapped his forehead. "Write that down, Hecke," he said. "Otherwise you'll forget it again. You have more plans than functioning brains."

Heckenpisser pulled his notebook from his coat pocket. The page "Operation Hamburg" filled the top half. Below it, he left some space and wrote in large, crooked letters:

Next chapter: Ticket to nowhere – S-Bahn instead of Hamburg

"There," he said, holding it out to Kuddel. "Before we screw it up, at least it's somewhere."

Kuddel read, nodded, and took the book from him for a moment. He added another line underneath and wrote:

"This time with a ticket (maybe)."

They laughed again. Not because it was funny – but because laughter was still cheaper than therapy.

As the first birds somewhere in the trees began to make their silly, optimistic noises, the group slowly dispersed.

Dieter was long gone, Tanja had disappeared even before, the guy's dog had peed in the bushes, the last bottles clinked in the crate.

"So," said Murat, as he lowered the blind halfway. "The fish market officially belongs to your head now, Kuddel. Hamburg can't afford it anyway. And you two go home now, before you grow here."

Hedge-Pisser pushed his glasses up higher. "We've been growing for a long time," he said. "We just have rotating roots. Hehehe."

"Shut your mouth, poet," grinned Murat. "And get lost."

Kuddel pulled his robe tighter and lit one last cigarette. "Hecke," he said, "next time we talk about Hamburg, let's start with the honest thing: take the S-Bahn. Just the S-Bahn. No overthinking. A reality check."

Heckenpisser nodded. "Agreed," he said. "Ticket to nowhere. There and back... or just get stuck somewhere."

They set off in different directions, but with the same soundtrack in their heads: neon, seagulls, imagined fish and real emptiness.

After a while, the light went out above the late-night shop. The neighborhood sank into that short, thin sleep it allowed itself every morning before the next shift of lost souls floated in.

And somewhere, deep in a smoke-filled brain, the fish market still stood:

Stalls, seagulls, beer, voices – a place that had never been visited, but experienced a thousand times.

A ghostly pilgrimage site for two drunkards who didn't yet know that the next chapter of their non-existent world domination was about to begin.

would not begin in Hamburg, but on a crowded S-Bahn train with a ticket they called "Future",

even if they would end up back at the same standing table in the end.

Ticket to nowhere – S-Bahn instead of Hamburg

The next attempt to call something a "plan" began again with a hangover that felt like an official measure: unannounced, unpleasant, and nobody had asked for it.

Kuddel woke up as usual: first with the noise in his head, then with the smell in the room.

His skull felt like someone in steel-toed boots had trampled through his synapses to the beat of Motörhead. The air in the apartment was a mixture of stale smoke, old beer, and that very particular scent that only develops when a man lives alone for too long and considers cleaning a lifestyle gimmick.

He sat up, scratched his stomach, searched the ground with his feet and first came across a half-empty bottle, then an ashtray, then a pile of clothes that might once have been a chair.

“Ticket to nowhere,” he muttered, more to himself than to the world. “Today, commuter train, hedge. Today we’re getting serious. Or something like that.”

His gaze fell on the wall, where yellowed posters were stuck: Slayer, Motörhead, Tankard. Among all the skulls and logos, a crumpled piece of paper was taped in place: some kind of printout from the railway website, next to it a ballpoint pen mark that looked like an insult in italics.

And below, in his own scribbled handwriting:

"This time with a ticket (maybe)."

He grinned. "Maybe" was his middle name.

He slowly got to his feet and staggered into the bathroom. The mirror greeted him with the truth: dark circles under his eyes, stubble, skin like a badly treated football. He bent over and gasped.

"King, you look like a before-and-after ad for welfare," he said to his reflection. "But today we're riding the commuter train like posh people. Almost."

While peeing, he remembered that one very special stroke of genius from his past – his tattoo. Above the so-called "tap," where other men get dragons, names, or silly lineages tattooed, Kuddel had the following written in crooked, barely legible script:

"No drinking water"

Back then, it was a mixture of drunkenness, bad influence, and the vague idea of preventing "the worst".

"If someone falls for you, at least she should be warned," the tattoo artist had said, a guy with tunnel ears and the expression of a man who had seen too much misery to still judge.

“So that later no one can say: ‘I didn’t know that,’” Kuddel had roared, while the needle buzzed and his brain bathed in alcohol.

Now, years later, the tattoo hadn't become more beautiful, but it was consistent. It was like an official notice on a body part that for years had only been responsible for improvised peeing incidents and rare bad decisions.

"No drinking water," he muttered, pulling up his underwear. "No wonder my life is so thirsty."

Heckenpisser had started the morning again with an internal lecture.

He stood in the bathroom, looked at himself in the mirror, and gave himself an internal presentation:

Slide one: Job. Slide two: Mother. Slide three: Kuddel and the drunkards. Slide four: S-Bahn instead of Hamburg – reality test.

He was more tired than yesterday, but less desperate. There was this small residue of something, something that almost felt like excitement. Not the good kind of excitement before a vacation or sex. More like: "Let's see what happens."

He was wearing a shirt and a bow tie again today. Yesterday's attempt to dress casually had only made him nervous. He needed his armor. Even if they laughed about it, it was his way of telling the world: I tried, okay?

Gerda, his mother, naturally had questions. She always had questions.

"Son, you were out so late yesterday," she said as she poured the coffee. "You can't hang around the kiosk every night. It's not a lounge for... for..."

She was looking for a word that wasn't "failed existences".

"For people with alternative daily routines," Heckenpisser offered. "Hehehe."

"You need real friends," she sighed. "Not this... Kuddel. What kind of name is that anyway?"

"A stage name," he replied dryly. A stage name for a life no one wanted to pay for.

He briefly considered telling her about the train ride. About the plan to just get out, anywhere, anywhere, as long as it wasn't just the corner store and the office. But how do you explain to your mother that your biggest escape in years is a ride on the commuter train without her completely losing faith in you?

"I might be gone longer later," he said, drinking his coffee in quick gulps. "Don't be surprised."

"With this jumble?" she asked suspiciously.

"With reality," he said. "We're still in contact, but it's complicated. Hehehe."

She didn't understand it. Nor did she need to.

The platform would understand him better.

This time they didn't meet by chance. It was a prearranged meeting.

Kuddel was standing in front of the corner store again, even though he was still half asleep. The blinds were half down, the lights were off, and there was only yesterday's trash in the corner. He'd gotten a can of beer from some vending machine that was still attached to one of those kiosks that was always open when all the others were already closed or just opening.

He stood there, puffing on the can, as if it were a trial run for later commuter train drinking.

Heckenpisser came around the corner, briefcase in hand, this time deliberately without going to the office. He had written an email to the boss that morning: "I'm sick today. Headache." That wasn't even a lie.

"Well, ticket-to-nowhere partner," he greeted Kuddel. "Ready for the field test? Hehehe."

Kuddel threw the can in the trash, missed, picked it up, and threw it in again. "I'm ready to screw everything up, as always," he said. "But this time officially on public transport."

Heckenpisser glanced at his watch. "If we get to the station in twenty minutes, we'll catch the next train. This time we're actually buying tickets. That's my personal contribution to civilization: a valid ticket."

"Look at me," Kuddel said, pointing to his robe. "I'm the antithesis of civilization. But whatever. Today I'm going to try legality. Just to see what it's like."

They set off again, through the same streets, past the same pile of dog poop, past the same windows behind which people pretended to have lives that led somewhere.

They arrived at the train station early enough. The vending machines stood in a row like overweight robots waiting for errors.

"Not today, you tin-fucks," Kuddel muttered, pointedly taking a step back. "Last time I tried to be reasonable with you, and the result was: no ticket, but plenty of mental imagery. Today it's your turn, Hecke. You're our go-to person for civilization technology."

Heckenpisser stepped forward, adjusted his glasses as if he were about to perform surgery. He selected targets, tariffs, and pressed buttons with a mixture of matter-of-factness and quiet despair.

"Two AB zone tickets," he muttered. "For the grand illusion: We're going away."

When the machine spat out the tickets, it briefly felt as if someone had given them permission. Not for Hamburg. But at least to pretend for a while that they were on their way.

They boarded the train and sat down next to each other, like two caricatures of commuters: Kuddel, the metalhead with the "No Drinking Water" tattoo in his groin area, somewhere under tattered fabric; and Heckenpisser, the office worker in a makeshift tailored suit, with a briefcase and a mental resignation.

The train started moving, jerked into motion, and picked up speed. Outside, building facades, graffiti, and backyards flashed by. Inside, the usual S-Bahn social study was underway: headphones, strollers, a grandmother with a shopping bag, a guy with a laptop pretending to work but just scrolling aimlessly.

"Now look at us," Heckenpisser said quietly. "We're part of the system. Ticket, seat, destination: something with a final stop."

"I've been stuck at the end of the line my whole life," Kuddel said. "Only this time it's on the screen."

They had no real plan for where they wanted to get off. "Nowhere" was not an official stop.

"We'll just keep driving," said Kuddel. "Until it starts to feel really wrong. Then we'll get out."

"So far, so good?" asked Heckenpisser, looking around. "Hehehe."

A ticket inspector came through the train, like a grumpy angel with a ticket machine. A guy in a neon vest, annoyed look, stamp in his hand.

"Tickets, please."

Heckenpisser was immediately in rule mode. He pulled out the ticket and held it up. Kuddel rummaged awkwardly in his jeans, pulled out the ticket, and held it out to the inspector like a certificate of innocence.

The inspector looked first at the ticket, then at Kuddel. Then back at the ticket.

"Everything's fine," he murmured and continued walking.

"Wow," whispered Kuddel. "For a moment I thought he saw through what was behind the facade."

"What is it?" asked Hedge Pisser. "That you're not drinking water? Hehehe."

Kuddel grinned crookedly. "Hey, that tattoo is a secret," he said. "Only for emergencies. And selected trauma victims."

Heckenpisser couldn't resist. "Tell me again why you got that tattooed," he begged. "Please. I need it."

Kuddel leaned back, looked at the ceiling of the train as if it were a confessional window.

"That was back then, Hecke," he began, "when we were still young enough to believe that the penis was the center of the universe. You know how it was. Everyone was getting some kind of crap tattooed on them: tribal designs, names of girlfriends who cheated on them three weeks later, Chinese characters for 'courage' that actually meant 'chicken soup'... and I was thinking: What's the most sensible piece of advice you can write on your body?"

Heckenpisser listened attentively, while an older lady opposite them frowned.

"And?" he asked.

"I thought to myself," Kuddel continued, "my life is dirty enough already. If anyone gets the idea to use the tap like a drinking fountain, they should be informed beforehand. Like those signs in hotels: 'No drinking water'. I wanted my own built-in warning sign."

Heckenpisser burst out laughing. "Hehehehehe! You've got a warning sign tattooed on you! You're a walking consumer warning!"

"Hey, I'm a responsible citizen," Kuddel defended himself. "I minimized the dangerous situation. That's almost workplace safety."

The old woman opposite snorted, muttered something about "antisocial" people, and demonstratively stood up at the next station to sit further forward.

"See?" said Heckenpisser. "Your tattoo has an effect even when it's not visible. Pure charisma."

Kuddel yawned. "She would never have tried it anyway," he said. "She was still drinking from the tap before they invented limescale filters."

Outside, the city passed by: bridges, grey blocks, and every now and then a tree that looked as if it had gotten lost on the city map.

"You know what I like about it?" said Hedge Pisser after a while. "That you take the responsibility so... strangely seriously. Everything in your life is chaos, but on this topic you think: 'Yes, I'm protecting humanity.' Hehehe."

"Someone has to," grunted Kuddel. "Those up there warn you about gluten and sugar, I warn you about my penis. It's only fair."

A few seats away, someone chuckled quietly. They hadn't been as quiet as they thought.

A guy, mid-thirties, hoodie, headphones around his neck, turned halfway towards them. "Bro," he said, "if you really have 'No Drinking Water' written above it, you're my hero."

Kuddel looked at him appraisingly. "Why, do you have an idea for your next tattoo?" he asked.

The guy grinned. "I work in a studio like that," he said. "I've done a lot of shit. But this is... premium."

Heckenpisser slapped his forehead. "Of course we'll run into a tattoo artist on the train," he muttered. "Reality has a terrible sense of timing. Hehehe."

"Hey, seriously," the guy said. "If you ever want a touch-up, come by. I'll put 'Danger to Life' underneath for free."

Kuddel laughed. "It's more like life-threatening," he said, tapping his temple. "But thanks for the offer."

The guy nodded, got off two stops later, waved, and disappeared into the crowd.

"You see," said Heckenpisser. "Even on the commuter train, people still notice your tattoo. It's like... an invisible character in the room."

"My tattoo has more social contacts than I do," said Kuddel. "That's sad."

Eventually they realized they had been driving for far too long without knowing where they were.

The display above the door was half broken; letters flickered, stations looked like bad anagrams.

"Where are we?" asked Kuddel.

Heckenpisser looked out. The houses looked different. Less Berlin, more suburbia, this "People only come here when they have to" feeling.

"Somewhere outside our area of expertise," he said. "Hehehe."

They got off at the next station, just like that. The train drove away, leaving them on a drafty platform, somewhere out there in the middle of nowhere, which wasn't Hamburg, but also no longer Schöneberg.

It smelled of piss, wet earth, and a long-term lack of prospects. Not a corner store in sight, just a gray underpass tunnel, a few graffiti, a miserable lamppost as tired as it was.

"Great," said Kuddel. "Now we're officially in the middle of nowhere. Mission accomplished."

Heckenpisser looked around. "At least," he said. "We're away from the red-light district. We have tickets, we haven't been caught by the ticket inspectors, and we're standing somewhere where nobody knows us. That's more than some people manage in a whole year. Hehehe."

Kuddel scratched himself, pulling his robe tighter. "And now?" he asked. "Start world domination from the train platform?"

Heckenpisser thought for a moment. Then he pointed at the tunnel.

"Now," he said, "we'll find out where we've landed. And then we'll see if there's at least a toilet here."

Kuddel grinned broadly. "The toilet is good," he said. "Maybe I can show off my tattoo in the wild again. Just as a precaution."

"You're the only health department that can't be taken seriously," laughed Heckenpisser.

And as they descended the stairs into the underpass, into a strange corner of the city, with valid tickets, broken heads, and a tattoo warning of "No Drinking Water" over a reality that had long since lost any source of thirst,

Little did they know that the next chapter would make their idea of "Nowhere" even more concrete:

Downstairs, near the Babylon train station toilets.

The tunnel under the platform was one of those places where you immediately knew: the city had already terminated the lease.

Damp concrete, gray tiles that might once have been white, graffiti in all variations – from "ACAB" to "Kevin 4ever". The floor was sticky, the air musty. It smelled of urine, stale smoke, and that indefinable aroma that arises when too many people with too little perspective walk through the same shaft for too long.

"Well, congratulations," murmured Kuddel, "there are definitely no influencers living here."

Hedge-Pisser ducked his head, as if that might protect him from the smells. "Welcome to the extended suburban belt of failure," he said. "Hehehe."

Posters, crooked and half-torn, were stuck to the walls. One was advertising a concert by some cover band playing in a town hall no one would willingly enter. Another was promoting an adult education course on "Stress Management in Everyday Life." A campaign poster, already outdated, showed a politician pretending to listen while smiling blankly into space.

"Look over there," said Heckenpisser, pointing at the election campaigner. "Another guy who should have 'No Drinking Water' written on his face. Hehehe."

"His name says 'No Backbone'," Kuddel growled. "That's worse."

They came out of the tunnel and stood in front of the station forecourt. "Forecourt" was a bit of an exaggeration, though. It was more like a patch of asphalt with a bus stop and a kiosk that looked like it was suffering from depression itself.

The sky hung low, grey on grey. No tourists, no fancy cafes, just a few people who looked as if they had chosen this corner of the world at some point – or as if it had chosen them.

"Where are we, anyway?" asked Kuddel.

Heckenpisser was looking for a site plan. There was one, behind glass, with fingerprints, scribbles, and sticky dirt.

"Ah," he said, and read out the station name. "Welcome to..." He named a suburb, so interchangeable that you immediately forgot it.

"Never heard of it," said Kuddel. "Sounds like a place where three kebab shops and a nail salon constitute the cultural infrastructure."

That's exactly what it looked like. On the left, a "Snack Express" whose sign had hung in the sun for so long that the colors had faded. On the right, a hair salon called "Hair-Perfect" – a name that betrayed someone's attempt at humor.

In between was a kiosk selling lottery tickets, cigarettes, and mobile phone top-up cards. Not a late-night convenience store – this was provincial life on a city scale.

"I feel uncomfortable," said Kuddel. "Nobody here knows my blood alcohol level."

Heckenpisser chuckled. "Nobody knows your file," he corrected. "It's almost like a vacation."

They sat down on a bench that someone had set on fire so often that the edges were charred. An empty vodka-mix bottle lay underneath it, next to it a crumpled Bild newspaper, the headline half covered with chewing gum.

“So,” Heckenpisser began, “if we try to frame this positively: We managed to leave the neighborhood. We’re somewhere where nobody knows us and nobody misses us. We’ve basically... failed anonymously. Hehehe.”

"The difference to before is minimal," said Kuddel. "Except that there's no late-night shop here with Murat, who at least rips us off."

He looked around. A woman pushed a stroller past, smoking and looking as if she hadn't slept through the night in three months. A guy in a hoodie leaned against the bus stop, staring at his phone as if better news was about to arrive. An old man with a dog crossed the street slowly, as if each step were a negotiation with his own hip.

"World, you look equally awful everywhere," Kuddel muttered.

"Perhaps that's the great lesson of our journey," said Heckenpisser. "Nowhere is just somewhere else."

He took out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to Kuddel. Kuddel took it, even though he had already smoked half of one.

“Do you remember,” Heckenpisser began, while they smoked, “back when people thought riding the S-Bahn was something like freedom? We used to ride it to school, to that old boarding school, and we thought: ‘When we grow up, we’ll travel far, far away, to other cities, other countries.’ And now we’re sitting here at Nowhere Station, pretending this is some kind of expedition.”

“Back then,” said Kuddel, “I used to have this funny belief that my penis was good for something other than peeing. That’s why I had that warning tattooed on it. And what happened? No drinking water, no life, nothing at all.”

Hedge Pisser laughed darkly. "You're the only guy who disclaims both body parts and life choices at the same time," he said. "Hehehe."

The cigarette butt burned down slowly. The day stood still, as if it didn't know what to do next.

“We have to do something,” Kuddel said after a while. “Otherwise, we’ll just sit here like two pieces of street furniture, waiting for someone to kick us over.”

"What do you have in mind?" asked Heckenpisser. "Storming the town hall? Sabotaging the voting booths? Revolutionizing the snack bar?"

Kuddel looked back towards the train station. A sign pointed the way to the toilet – that universal symbol of stick figures stacked on top of each other. In front of it, a downward arrow said: "This is where things go downhill, but officially."

“I have to pee,” said Kuddel.

"This is not yet a political agenda," remarked Heckenpisser.

"Yes," Kuddel objected. "The train station toilet is the true place where you realize how a society treats its weakest members. And those who just need to go."

Heckenpisser tilted his head. "Train station toilet as a reflection of the system?" he asked. "Hehehe. You always surprise me."

"If the toilet is free, there's still hope," Kuddel explained. "If you have to pay when you're about to burst, you know: someone's trying to milk you for all you're worth."

Heckenpisser stared at him for a moment and couldn't help but clap. "That's so broken and yet so true," he said. "Let's test that empirically."

They stood up, walked back towards the underpass, past the kiosk with the sad scratch-off lottery tickets, past the bus stop where the guy in the hoodie was still standing, as if he were glued on.

The way to the station toilet led down half a flight of stairs, further into the belly of the building. The deeper they went, the less of "city" remained and the more of "this is where people throw things they don't want to see upstairs".

The air pressure changed. The sounds were muffled. The smell intensified, with everything that people let out when they are alone and think no one is listening.

A sign came into view: "WC - €1.00 - Only with a valid ticket."

"There you go," said Heckenpisser. "Double access restriction. Capitalism and control in its purest form. Hehehe."

In front of the entrance stood a turnstile, next to it a coin-operated machine. Behind a plexiglass screen sat a middle-aged woman with a facial expression that said, "I've seen it all and don't want any more of it."

"Here you decide," Kuddel murmured, "whether you are a real human being or a paying customer with a bladder."

He reached into his pocket and counted his coins. Not much, but enough for a toilet.

Heckenpisser looked at the sign. "Only with a valid ticket," he read aloud. "That means they only want you to go to the toilet if you're part of the system. Fare dodgers aren't even allowed to pee in peace. It's almost poetically cruel."

Kuddel grinned. "At least we have tickets today," he said. "A chance to legally pee for once in our lives. We should celebrate that."

Before they went through the turnstile, Heckenpisser briefly held his arm.

"Kuddel," he said. "I just want you to know: If anything in there falls on your feet that isn't yours, it wasn't me. Hehehe."

"If anything falls on my feet in there," Kuddel grumbled, "I'll get tetanus just from looking at it."

They each inserted a coin. The turnstile clicked.

The moment they walked through, Kuddel thought about how absurd it all was:

World domination at the standing table. The fish market in your head. The ticket to nowhere. And now: a toilet that only lets you in if you pay and can show a valid ticket.

"No drinking water," he muttered, more to his tattoo than to the world. "But maybe there's still a little bit of truth down here."

Heckenpisser stepped next to him, a smile that hung somewhere between disgust and anticipation.

"Welcome," he said, "to the heart of civilization. Babylon train station toilets. If there's one place where our journey makes sense, it's here. Hehehe."

The door swung open. A smell that could wipe out entire lives hit them.

And as they entered this tiled inferno, Kuddel realized that nowhere was sometimes less a place than a state of being.

and that they were in the process of finding yet another chapter that no one would ever willingly enter –

except for two guys with tickets, broken livers and the urgent need to
To at least flush this world down once, from the train station toilet.

The train station toilet smelled as if someone had evaporated all human decisions of the last twenty years in one room.

Kuddel stopped right behind the door. Not out of politeness – out of pure survival instinct.

The first shock was the smell: a mixture of ammonia, old cleaning product that had long since given up, sweetish decay residue, cold mold and a very subtle note of "someone here has lost their will to live".

"Ugh, kiss my ass," Kuddel choked, half-covering his mouth with his forearm. "Nose hairs die a hero's death here."

Hedge Pisser took a step behind him, leaned cautiously past, like someone peering into a war zone. "This is..." he sniffed, grimacing, "...an olfactory declaration of war. Hehehe."

Tiles on the walls, formerly white, now in various shades of nicotine, urine, and "something's been spilled on them, don't ask." The floor: stained, wet, but wet in that indefinable way where you don't want to know if it's water or a mixture of everything humans can get rid of in liquid form.

A couple of sinks, two of which looked as if they'd spent the last few years only being used for stubbing out cigarettes and spitting out liquor. Soap, of course, was nowhere to be found. Instead, there was an empty dispenser with the word "Hygiene" written on it, like a bad joke.

Three urinals at the rear, three yellow semicircles in front. Next to them, two cubicles, doors damaged, one missing its lock, the other its partition.

A middle-aged man at the urinal, jacket open, belly half out, staring blankly straight ahead, as if gazing at a point in the future where life might still make sense.

An indefinable noise came from one of the cabins. Coughing. Gagging. Cursing. A voice that sounded like a voice message from someone who had given up ten years ago.

"This," said Heckenpisser quietly, "is not just a toilet. This is a sociological field study on tiles."

"This is Babylon," growled Kuddel. "Only without the tower, but with diarrhea."

He cautiously approached a urinal, instinctively searching for the driest edge – a task that, on this floor, was about as promising as searching for meaning on private television.

Heckenpisser paused for a moment, taking in the scene, the flickering neon light, the shadows on the walls, the old scribbles:

"FUCK YOU ALL" "SABRINA 017..." (the remaining numbers had been scratched away)
"GOD IS DEAD – THIS IS THE FIRST TIME HE WAS HERE"

"That's art," he murmured. "Only without funding. Hehehe."

Kuddel unzipped his jacket and puffed. "If I get a urinary tract infection," he said, "as the only one here who actually paid, then I'll sue the railway company. Then the verdict will read: 'Plaintiff: Kuddel, known as a drunkard.'"

"You can be glad if your lawyer doesn't faint when he sees the evidence photos," Heckenpisser retorted.

Kuddel was just about to start peeing when he remembered his tattoo.

"No drinking water"

A warning sign in the intimate area that made more sense at that moment than ever before.

"You know, Hecke," he said, as a meager stream of water found its way out, "I think my tap is the most hygienic thing in here, with a sense of humor. If I drop my pants, you'll have to pay an entrance fee."

Hedgipisser snorted. "Entrance fee here?" he asked. "That would be an assault on reality. Hehehe."

The cubicle door opened. A guy came out – puffy eyes, pupils like pins, trousers half-open, T-shirt with some festival logo from many years ago. He staggered to the sink, turned on the tap – only a thin, brownish trickle came out, which was more of a question than an answer.

The guy briefly held his hand underneath, looked at the water, shrugged, and then simply rubbed it dry on his jeans. When he saw himself in the mirror, he laughed briefly, a short, dry laugh that didn't quite finish.

“No drinking water,” muttered Heckenpisser, more to himself than to Kuddel. “I think that applies to everything here.”

Kuddel shook himself off as best he could in that context and took a half step back. A dirty, quick thought crossed his mind:

If anyone here gets the idea to lick anything on me, they should get vaccinated beforehand.

“Hecke,” he said, “I’m telling you this as your friend: If you ever sink so low in your life that you perform oral sex on someone in a train station toilet – read my tattoo first. I didn’t get it for fun. It’s consumer protection.”

Heckenpisser burst into high-pitched, nervous laughter. "Hehehehehe!" echoed through the tiled room.

The guy from the festival gave them a look that was somewhere between "I don't understand" and "I have other problems right now," and stumbled towards the exit.

Hedge Pisser also approached the urinal, but paused briefly. "I have the feeling my bladder wants to shut itself off here on principle," he said. "It refuses to become part of this ecosystem."

"You're too delicate for the big world down there," Kuddel commented. "Come on, or you'll wake up here as a chalky mess."

He stepped up to the sink and turned on the tap. Water came out. Brownish, weak, offended.

He briefly held his hands underneath, but immediately pulled them away again. "If I let it get to me, I'll develop new illnesses," he said.

Hedge-pisser opted for air-dried minimalism. He simply shook his fingers in the air, as if trying to shed the whole situation.

They headed towards the exit. Before they stepped through the door, Kuddel paused briefly and looked around.

“Do you know what the sick thing is, Hedge?” he asked.

"That we paid for this?" speculated Heckenpisser.

“That too,” said Kuddel. “But I mean something else. Take a look at this.”

He pointed with his chin at the turnstile, the coin-operated machines, the sign “WC – 1.00 € – Only with a valid ticket”.

“Down here, everything comes out that people can no longer keep in,” he said. “Piss, shit, vomit, tears. Everything that no longer fits into life. And the railway company thinks: ‘Great,

we can make a euro out of that.' When you're about to burst, they hold out the plate to you. That's... the perfect metaphor for everything."

Heckenpisser stared at the sign for a moment. Then he nodded slowly, and his smile narrowed.

"That is..." he began, "one of the most brutal, honest observations you've ever made. Hehehe. If you could put that into words soberly, you could give lectures. 'Train station toilets as a mirror of the neoliberal view of humanity.'"

"I'll do it," Kuddel muttered. "In the pub. With a flipchart made of beer mats."

They went out through the door, back into the corridor, which suddenly – compared to the toilet – almost felt like a spa.

"Do you know what we're supposed to call this chapter, Hedge?" Kuddel asked. "Babylon the Train Station Toilet. This is the central temple of our whole shitty system. A room where everything nobody wants comes out, and yet you still have to pay to be allowed to participate."

Heckenpisser pulled his notebook out of his pocket, flipped through it briefly, and looked for the page with the chapters. "It's already in there," he said. "Babylon train station toilet. We announced it, now we've... smelled it. Hehehe."

They climbed the stairs again, back into the daylight. Outside it had become even grayer, as if the sky had briefly looked into the toilet bowl and decided: Nope.

A few new figures stood on the platform: A woman with a suitcase and a business jacket, nervously checking her watch. A teenager with a skateboard, headphones in his ears, his gaze distant. An older man who looked as if he had spent the last twenty years standing in the same places.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser joined the line as if they were some kind of traveler – which, in a way, they were. Only their destination wasn't a city, but a feeling they could never quite grasp.

"So, what did we learn?" asked Heckenpisser, as he put the ticket back in his pocket.

Kuddel scratched his chest and puffed. "That it stinks just as much in the middle of nowhere as it does here," he said. "That you have to pay to pee. And that my 'No Drinking Water' tattoo is probably the honest version of all the signs."

"And?" Heckenpisser pressed. "Do you feel... different?"

Kuddel thought for a moment. He looked at the tracks, at the rails that met somewhere in the distance, without it being possible to see where.

"Not really," he said. "But now I have one more train station toilet that I know I never want to go into again. Maybe that's a kind of progress."

Hedge Pisser chuckled softly. "Progress on the negative list," he said. "When you die, your CV will say: 'Successfully avoided multiple public toilets.'"

The next S-Bahn train arrived. This time it didn't feel like a promise, but like what it was: a vehicle that pushed people from one point to the next without asking if they wanted to be there.

They got in and sat down next to each other again. This time they didn't speak for a while. Outside, nowhere passed by: junkyards, industrial buildings, housing estates that looked like they'd been copied and pasted.

Heckenpisser finally broke the silence. "Do you know what I kind of like?" he asked.

"That you haven't thrown up yet?" Kuddel guessed.

"That we at least tried," said Heckenpisser. "Not Hamburg, okay. But we were somewhere we'd never been before. We saw something we didn't want to see. And we laughed about it anyway. That's... more than many manage."

Kuddel accepted it the way one accepts a compliment one isn't prepared for. He scratched his chin, looked at his own shoe, on which a splash from the hell of the train station was stuck.

"You know," he said, "there are worse things than wasting your ticket to nowhere with someone who at least tells you when you're talking bullshit."

Hedge Pisser grinned. "I'm honored, King of Cigarettes," he said. "Hehehe."

Later, back in Schöneberg, when they tipped off the train at the late-night convenience store, the neighborhood briefly felt like a place you return to, not one where you get stuck.

Murat was standing behind the cash register as usual, neon lights on, eyes alert. "Well?" he called out when he saw her coming. "Didn't see her anywhere? Or was it too crowded?"

"We were in Babylon," said Heckenpisser pathetically. "Babylon train station toilet. And we've come back to report. Hehehe."

Kuddel stood at the standing table, looked at the board that said "World Domination – Step 1: Hamburg".

Slowly, with a very serious face, he pulled a pen from his robe. He added the following to the bottom:

"Step 0.5: Ticket to Nowhere – passed (with flaws)"

Heckenpisser read, nodded. "The defect report goes into the next chapter," he said. "Babylon train station toilet. We'll take stock there."

Murat placed two Sterni beers on the table and poured in Boonekamp, like a priest preparing for Mass.

"Here come you complete idiots," he said. "You're no further along, but at least you have more text."

They clinked glasses. The bottles clinked, and the evening descended again like an old blanket over the neighborhood.

And while they drank, smoked, and laughed, somewhere in the basement of an unnamed station there was a toilet that knew nothing of its symbolic promotion to "Babylon Station Toilet" –

but whose stench had nevertheless burned itself into the manifesto of the drunkards.

The ticket to nowhere had been validated. The next stop was clear:

Babylon train station toilet.

There, the world would be gathered once again into the smallest possible space –

in ceramics, tiles, and the echo of everything that nobody wanted to take upstairs.

Babylon train station toilet

There are places in the world where you realize that God was either never there or looked in at some point and then quickly decided on something else.

Train station toilets are part of it. Especially those in the middle of nowhere, somewhere in the belt of concrete and desolation surrounding the cities.

For Kuddel, this toilet wasn't just a privy. It was a kind of pilgrimage site of misery, a mixture of a smoke-filled den of despair and a ceramic museum for failed bladders.

After their first experience down there, with the coin insertion and the olfactory assault, a sane person would have said: "Never again." Kuddel and Heckenpisser said: "We have to go back there. More sober. And with more attention to detail."

"We are researchers," Heckenpisser had solemnly declared a few days later, as they sat again on the S-Bahn heading towards nowhere. "Sociological expedition. Field study of the Babylon train station toilet. Hehehe."

Kuddel had leaned his forehead against the window and stared outside, where apartment blocks, allotment gardens and car dealerships passed by like faceless NPCs in a game he had never installed.

"Researchers," he grumbled. "We're the only ones who would voluntarily subject themselves to this cesspool again. This isn't field research, this is a character flaw."

"I call it authenticity," said Heckenpisser. "Most people take selfies in cafes, we take mental photos of train station urinals. That's... countercultural. Hehehe."

Murat wasn't there this time. "I've got enough shit here," he'd said when they asked him. "Toilets, shelves, customers – everything that needs to go ends up with me. You can investigate the external shit yourselves."

So there they were, traveling as a pair. Two drunkards with valid tickets and invalid CVs.

When they re-entered that concrete underpass, it was as if the walls recognized them. The same musty draft, the same cold grey tone, the same slightly sticky floor that knew stories no one wanted to hear.

"Back in Babylon," muttered Heckenpisser. "I never thought I'd become a regular at a train station toilet."

"We're not regulars," Kuddel objected. "We're... uh... inspectors. Hygiene doctors. Alternative health service. If I have my 'No Drinking Water' tattoo with me, it's practically an official stamp."

"You're more like a traveling circus of warning signs," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehehe."

They approached the silver turnstile barrier in front of the restroom area again. The sign "WC - €1.00 - Only with a valid ticket" grinned at them like a grumpy cashier.

"You know," said Heckenpisser, "every time I see that, I feel like I have to fill out an application beforehand. 'Reason for going to the toilet: emotional, physical or metaphysical?'"

Kuddel threw in a coin. "Reason: I need to pee. There's no more philosophy to it than that," he said. "And even if there were, reality would pee in my face anyway."

The turnstile clicked, and they entered.

This time, the stench didn't catch them quite so off guard. It was still brutal, but they knew the direction: an ammonia front with a putrid flank, behind it a disinfectant cloud that had long since become purely decorative.

"Maybe you get used to it," said Heckenpisser, breathing carefully. "Like you get used to the news."

"If I get used to this, shoot me," said Kuddel.

It was later in the day than on the first visit. Different audience.

A young guy in a hoodie stood at the sink, trying to rinse the last bit of powder from his nostrils with icy water. A pensioner came out of the cubicle, pulled up his trousers, and shook his head as if he'd just voted on the federal government. Somewhere a lone mosquito flew by, apparently mistaking it for a hawk.

They lined up at the urinals again, this time almost professionally. Researcher posture.

"I was thinking about it last night," said Hedge Pisser, as he unzipped his jacket. "About your 'No Drinking Water' jewelry. It's actually one of the most honest tattoos I've ever heard of."

"I told you so," Kuddel muttered. "Enlightenment by the subject. Others talk about responsibility, I put it where it hurts."

"You know what's even worse?" Heckenpisser began. "There are people who top even that. I once heard of one..."

He paused, grinned, his laughter already rising. "Hehehe... watch out, that's gold."

"Go ahead and shoot," said Kuddel, aiming more or less in the right direction while trying to avoid touching the ground.

"A friend of a colleague," began Heckenpisser – which in her world was the official phrase for "could just as well be an urban legend" – "got a pile of steaming shit tattooed on his stomach. Really detailed. So cartoony, with flies around it, circling above. Right above his belly button, so you immediately lose your appetite when changing at the swimming pool."

Kuddel started laughing, had to stop briefly to avoid spilling. "Oh come on, dude," he gasped. "A steaming pile on your stomach? With flies? That's not even rock anymore, that's just... indigestion in color."

"Wait," said Hedge Pisser, his laughter rising. "Hehehehe... the best is yet to come! The guy was shopping with his father, for clothes, Karstadt style. They go into the fitting room, the father wants to see if the shirt fits or whatever, the son pulls up his T-shirt... and the old man sees this pile of shit with flies on his stomach for the first time."

Kuddel now had tears in his eyes. "Come on," he gasped. "What did he say?"

Heckenpisser paused, playing out the moment as if he were delivering a punchline on stage. "Nothing," he said then. "Absolutely nothing. No swearing, no yelling. The old man looked at what his son had painted on his stomach, took off his T-shirt, left the dressing room without a word... and later the guy was simply disinherited without comment."

He laughed that short, bright, maniacal laugh. "Hehehehehe... disinherited because of a pile of shit! Imagine: forty years of family, raising, living – and the moment he erases his child from his heart is when he sees them getting steaming shit tattooed on their stomach."

Kuddel had to lean his free hand against the wall, he was laughing so hard. "Dude!" he gasped. "This is... this is... I can't..." He burst out laughing again, holding his stomach, which was already borderline acceptable in a train station toilet.

"Disinherited because of a pile of shit," he repeated, once he could breathe somewhat normally again. "It's basically a whole Bible in one picture. The father thought, 'Okay, that's it. That's the sign. The boy is lost. My genes have officially failed.'"

Heckenpisser nodded, still chuckling. "You have to imagine this inner process," he said. "The old man is standing there, looking at his son's artwork, and in his head a silent film is playing: kindergarten, first day of school, first girlfriend, all that – bam, all superimposed on by a steaming mass of flies. Hehehe."

The two of them stood at the urinal and laughed at this nameless guy who was wandering around somewhere in the world with a shitty tattoo and no inheritance.

"Do you know what bothers me so much about it?" Kuddel asked, as his laughter slowly subsided. "Not even the tattoo. Let them slap volcanoes, skulls, penises with wings on their bellies. The worst part is, I can understand the old man. If my kid got shit tattooed on his gut, I'd think: 'That train has no brakes anymore.'"

Hedge Pisser nodded thoughtfully. "The old man probably spent his whole life thinking, 'Maybe he'll amount to something after all,'" he said. "And then he stands there in the locker room and realizes, 'No. He'll just be a canvas for shit.' Hehehe."

"And I thought I was being brave with my 'No Drinking Water' sign," Kuddel grumbled. "But this is... next level. This isn't even a warning sign anymore. This is self-definition: 'I'm a steaming heap with social flies swarming around me.'"

Hedge Pisser turned his head towards him. "If you'd gotten a poop tattoo, at least it would have been honest," he provoked. "You're more like... formerly steaming, now only lukewarm."

Kuddel sighed and zipped up his pants. "The difference is," he said, "my tattoo is a warning to others. His tattoo is an insult to his father. And somewhere in between lives this whole messed-up, shitty generation we've become."

They both took a step back at the same time and looked in the mirror above the sinks. Two guys who looked like society's aftercare cases: Kuddel with his robe, beard, eyes that had seen too many nights. Heckenpisser with his shirt, his glasses, his laugh lines a mix of genuine comedy and self-protection.

"Do you think," asked Hedge Pisser, while pretending to wash his hands, "your 'No Drinking Water' would have caused your father to disinherit you?"

Kuddel snorted. "My father disinherited me when he found out I even existed," he said. "He would never have gone into a changing room with me. He would have tattooed a pile of shit on his own family tree, at most."

Heckenpisser grimaced. "Family system, just as you know and love it," he said. "Hehehe."

The door opened, a teenager came in, with wispy facial hair, an oversized cap, and a hoodie that looked like a uniform for a lack of ideas. He glanced at the two of them, at the surroundings, hesitated briefly, then opted for the quick fix: one cubicle, door closed, everything out, no one talking about it.

"Do you know what the difference is between the shit-pile guy and us?" asked Hedge Pisser as they headed towards the exit.

"He inherited less," Kuddel said.

"Okay, that too," said Hedge Pisser. "But I mean something else. He got that pile tattooed on his stomach to prove something to someone. Rebellion, shock, I don't know. You got 'No Drinking Water' tattooed on your tap to... prevent the worst. That's crazy too, but a completely different kind of crazy."

Kuddel stopped briefly, in the middle of the corridor, the neon tube above him flickering like a heart monitor in a bad hospital series.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Maybe I'm not the great rebel. I'm more like an alcoholic with a built-in safety concept."

"You're the TÜV of the lower abdomen," laughed Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

They went out, through the turnstile, back into the semi-darkness of the tunnel.

"But you know what I find really interesting?" Heckenpisser continued. "That you can really reduce a person to the moment you see their tattoo. The father sees the pile – bam, file 'son' is closed. You see a woman who's had 'Live, Laugh, Love' tattooed across her ass, and you know: This isn't going to work out between us. Hehehe."

"I see someone who doesn't have any tattoos at all, and I know: This isn't going to work out between us," Kuddel grumbled. "Anyone who doesn't get any tattoos still trusts too much that life is fair. I don't want anything to do with people like that."

At the top of the stairs, the milky day awaited once again. The same grey backdrop, the same square, the same snack bar, the same bus stop. Everything seemed as if it were still in a buffer state before anything actually happened.

"So?" asked Heckenpisser as they headed back towards the platform. "What are we taking away from Babylon? Besides a disgusted bladder and three new olfactory disorders."

Kuddel thought for a moment. "That we all have to leave our shit somewhere," he said then. "Some leave it in the toilet. Others on their stomachs. And we..." – he looked over at Hedge Pisser – "...we leave it in stories."

Hedge Pisser nodded slowly. "Better in stories than in inheritance," he said. "Hehehe."

They stood again at the edge of the platform, the tracks in front of them, the sky above them, and somewhere in between, their lives.

"You know, Hecke," said Kuddel, "if I ever kick the bucket childless, at least a few people will know that my tap had a 'No Drinking Water' sign above it. And maybe someone will pass the story on. And some nutcase will laugh about it. That's more than what some people leave behind with their houses, stocks, and inheritance certificates."

Heckenpisser looked at him, and in his eyes there was briefly something like genuine respect, embedded in tiredness.

"There are worse legacies," he said quietly. "Hehehe."

The S-Bahn arrived, the doors opened, people got on and off. Two drunkards with cheaply bought tickets and expensive stories got on again, left nowhere behind, and went back to Schöneberg.

Back to the corner store, back to the standing table, back to her little empire of neon, nicotine and self-made mythology.

And somewhere, in a changing room, in another city, someone might just be pulling up their T-shirt again and showing a horrified father a steaming pile of flies.

Kuddel didn't know him. But in his mind, he toasted him.

Not because he liked it. But because they were all trying, in their own way, to write something on the skin of this shitty world.

so that later one could say:

"I was there. It was absurd. And I witnessed it."

The door slammed shut behind them like the bolt shutting a bad withdrawal.

Inside it was louder than the first time. Not louder in the sense of music or conversations – no, it was the sounds of humanity, unfiltered: splashing, belching, coughing, silent shuffling. And that faint whirring of the neon lights, which always sounds like an insect dying somewhere in the current.

"I'm telling you, Hecke," Kuddel muttered, "if there's a soundtrack to hell, they recorded it here."

Hedge Pisser stood next to him, hands in his pockets, eyes alert, nose cautiously half-closed. "Hell has better ventilation," he said. "Hehehe."

They pretended they were only there to pee, but their eyes worked like tiny cameras. Three urinals, two cubicles, three sinks, a broken hand dryer, a fake soap dispenser – and there you had it: the sacred space of humiliation.

Yellowed notices were stuck to the wall above the urinals:

"Please keep clean" "No smoking" "Not drinking water"

Kuddel laughed at the last one. "Look, Hecke," he said, pointing with his chin. "Here hangs the official version of my tattoo."

Hedge Pisser giggled. "That's right," he said. "Your genitals are basically a train station toilet rolled into one. Hehehe."

"Hey," Kuddel growled, "at least my tap is honest. Here they write 'No Drinking Water', and yet some brown primordial soup still comes out of the taps, which people drink anyway out of desperation."

They lined up at the urinal. To their left was a man who looked like a construction worker on the late shift: orange vest, hands full of dirt that wouldn't come off, a measuring stick on his belt, who probably had his life more under control than he did himself.

The man stared at the tiled wall as if there were better news written there.

From the right side of the cabin, you could hear snorting. With that undertone where you can't tell: Is that still digestion or already crying?

"This is like a confessional without God," whispered Hedge Pisser. "Everyone comes here to unload, and nobody forgives you. Hehehe."

"This isn't a confessional," Kuddel objected. "This is a collection point. Everything nobody wants upstairs ends up down here. Bodily fluids, frustration, graffiti. This is society's backup folder."

As he spoke, his gaze read the walls.

"HANS WAS HERE 2013"

"SUZIE I LOVE YOU""FUCK POLITICS""CALL ME 017..." (the rest crossed out)"FREEDOM FOR..." – the rest had become unrecognizable with brown splashes.

Someone had written above the hand dryer with a permanent marker:

"THIS IS MORE TRUTH THAN ON TELEVISION"

"Someone's got it," said Heckenpisser, pointing. "This is the program in action: people come in, don't talk, just let it all out, then disappear. No applause, no likes, no followers."

"Just an after-effect," grumbled Kuddel.

A teenager with pimples, a combat-style haircut, and athletic pants that suggested he spent his time training rather than drinking energy drinks and playing video games stood at the sink. He splashed water on his face, not to get clean, but rather to stay awake in a life that had long since bored him.

Behind him was an older guy in a tie that was barely buttoned anymore. Shirt untucked, sweat stain on the collar. He looked in the mirror, saw himself, saw Kuddel and Heckenpisser in the background, looked away briefly – as if he'd been caught doing something nobody wants to see: aging.

"Look," whispered Kuddel, "over there. There, the one with the tie. He's probably the head of the investment failure department somewhere. And now he's standing here, pissing like us, staring like us, stinking like us. No difference."

"Except that he has a tax card," added Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

At that moment a new character entered – a kind of walking error in the system: jogging pants, ribbed undershirt, a much too thin jacket thrown over one shoulder, nervousness in his eyes.

The guy headed straight for the booth, yanked open the door, saw someone was inside, cursed, yanked open the other one, also occupied. "Shit!" he gasped. He practically ran on the spot.

"This is the true stress test of civilization," commented Heckenpisser. "When your digestion is faster than the queue."

When the cubicle became free, the guy rushed in and slammed the door. Barely a second later, that characteristic sound of a toilet bowl being met with full force by human despair could be heard.

Kuddel grimaced. "At least he's honest," he said. "He doesn't hide his misery behind small talk. He just lets it go."

They stepped back from the urinal, giving way to the construction worker who stumbled past them, looking as if he had just had a World War II flashback.

They met themselves in the mirror at the sink.

Two guys who looked like they'd laughed a lot in their lives – but never at the right moments.

"Do you know what always gets me going about toilets?" said Hedge Pisser.

"The fact that you see more genuine emotion here than at any fucking company Christmas party?" Kuddel advised.

"Close," said Hedge Pisser. "It's that moment when you look yourself in the eyes after peeing. In the mirror. All the explanations, all the excuses, all the chatter gone. Just you, your face, your state of disuse. For a few seconds... you're more naked than with your pants down."

Kuddel nodded. "That's why I don't like looking myself in the eye," he admitted. "I don't like witnessing my own decline."

Hedge-Pisser grinned briefly, sadly. "Hehehe," he added anyway. "Maybe," he continued more quietly, "that's also why most people here don't look up. They stare at the tiles, look down, look at the toilet – but not at themselves."

A laminated sheet of paper hung above the mirror:

"PLEASE LEAVE THE PLACE AS YOU WOULD WISH TO FIND IT."

Someone had scribbled underneath: "EMPTY"

Kuddel nodded approvingly. "That was good," he said.

"We never find the place empty," said Heckenpisser. "But inside us... quite a lot has become empty. Hehehe."

The cubicle door opened, the guy in jogging pants came out, drenched in sweat, pale, but with that look you only get when you've just narrowly escaped an inner catastrophe. He walked past the sink, briefly raised his hands, looked at the brownish stream from the tap, snorted, and wiped his fingers on his trousers.

"Hygiene," Kuddel murmured. "A matter of faith."

"In the name of the germ, the cleaning agent, and holy disinfection," added Heckenpisser. "Amen, dude. Hehehe."

A guy in a too-tight leather jacket came in, bald, with thick veins on his neck. He moved the way only people move who know they hit more often than they think. He walked heavily to the urinal, pulled out his penis, and let it flow.

Kuddel watched out of the corner of his eye as the guy wedged his phone between his shoulder and his chest while he peed.

"Yeah, bro," he barked into his phone. "I told you, that customer's a freak. If he charges that price again, I'll shit in his mailbox. Yeah... yeah... I'm on my way. I'm at the train station. What? No, man, I'm not at the toilet – I'm on the platform, bro."

Kuddel and Heckenpisser exchanged a glance.

"A truly convincing lie," muttered Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"That's the thing," said Kuddel. "Nobody wants to admit they're standing in the train station toilet. Everyone pretends. As if they're on their way upstairs. But they're all down here, between the tiles and the piss."

The bald man shook himself off, actually washed his hands, glanced briefly in the mirror as if checking if he still looked dangerous. Then he was gone.

"Some people," said Heckenpisser, "are more dangerous out there than any germ in here. At least the bacteria don't try to sell loans."

Kuddel laughed dryly. Then his expression became more serious again, as far as that was possible for him.

"You know, Hecke," he said, "I think everyone in here is the same. Whether construction worker, banker, junkie, drunkard, or bald businessman. Everyone here has to come down. Down with their pants, down with their dignity, down with whatever else they do, push aside."

"Democracy of misery," Heckenpisser declared. "Hehehe."

"This isn't democracy," Kuddel said. "It's more like a forced community. Nobody wants to be here. But everyone ends up here."

Someone flushed the toilet in the back. A short rushing sound, as if the system were trying to flush away the day.

They both knew: This will never work.

They stood once more at the sink, that strange place where people lie to themselves with water.

Hedge-pisser turned the tap on only briefly, letting two or three drops run over his fingers, more symbolically than effectively. "I only do it so my conscience doesn't bother me," he said. "Not because I think anything's getting clean here. Hehehe."

Kuddel leaned forward, looking at his face in the mirror. The neon light was merciless – revealing wrinkles, red veins, and dark circles under his eyes that deserved their own postal code.

“Look, King,” said Hedge Pisser, standing next to him. “That’s us. Two middle-aged guys who visit train station toilets for philosophical reasons. If your mother only knew.”

“My mother only knows that I didn’t become a doctor,” Kuddel replied. “She could have guessed the rest. I’m more like society’s proctologist, but without a practice.”

Hedge peeper laughed. "Hehehehe! Proctologist of society, man, I'm dying."

Kuddel let her gaze wander over her reflections. Two small figures in the dirty glass. Behind them, a door, tiles, urinals – the backdrop for a play for which no one pays admission, yet everyone participates.

“You know what I’m checking out here, Hecke?” he began, and for a moment his voice wasn’t sarcastic, just tired. “Out there, we always pretend we’re on our way somewhere. Corner store, commuter train, Hamburg, peep show, world domination. But basically, we’re just going from toilet to toilet.”

Heckenpisser turned his head slightly, looked at him, not in the mirror, but directly. "You have to explain this," he said quietly.

“Look,” Kuddel said. “You’re out there in life: job, appointments, obligations, future. Everything you do produces some kind of waste. Physical, emotional, mental. And you have to get rid of it somewhere. Some people dump it in relationships. Others in drugs. Still others in God or esotericism or stocks. And we...”

He made a sweeping gesture that encompassed the entire room.

“...we take him where he belongs: into the sewer. Except sometimes we slip in with him.”

Hedge Pisser nodded slowly. "Train station toilet as a metaphor for life," he said. "You should have said that in school. Maybe they would have put you in the right class right away. Hehehe."

“Into the special class for drain children,” Kuddel added. “Boys who already know how to properly read a toilet bowl at the age of twelve.”

They stood there silently for another moment, two half-broken men trying to distill some kind of insight from shame and urine.

Then Kuddel sighed and stepped back. "That's enough," he said. "Before I start praying here."

They headed towards the exit. At the turnstile, Heckenpisser stopped, turned halfway around, and looked back one last time.

“Do you know why I’m glad we were here?” he asked.

“Because otherwise you wouldn’t have experienced anything to write about?” Kuddel speculated.

“Also,” said Heckenpisser. “But mainly because I always thought train station toilets were simply disgusting. Now I know: They’re honest. Dirty, but honest. Nothing is hidden here. No filter, no fairy dust, no glossy finish. Just people who, for a moment, can’t help but let it go.”

Kuddel grinned crookedly. "You're really the only person who makes an essay out of a trip to the toilet," he said. "But okay. Let's put that in the manifesto. Chapter 'Babylon Train Station Toilet – Place of Unfiltered Truth'."

“With a footnote: ‘Not drinking water’,” added Heckenpisser. “Hehehe.”

They pushed through the turnstile, back into the tunnel. Someone was coming towards them – narrow shoulders, hood pulled low over face, hands in pockets. A boy who looked as if he was on his way to taking the same life as everyone else, only with fewer opportunities.

“Maybe this is the true place of learning,” said Heckenpisser as they climbed the stairs. “Not school, not university, not coaching. But toilets, where you realize: at the end of the day, you’re just another organism that delivers.”

"Sounds romantic," said Kuddel. "You can explain it to your mother like that later when she asks what became of you."

“I’ll tell her,” said Heckenpisser, as they reached daylight again, “that I belong to the interdisciplinary poopology team. Hehehe.”

Up on the platform, the world was "normal" again – insofar as one could speak of normality in their universe. Trains, display boards, announcements, this monotonous stream of people acting as if they had reserved a seat elsewhere.

"And now?" asked Heckenpisser. "Back to Schöneberg?"

“Sure,” said Kuddel. “We’re planning world domination at a standing table. And I have to tell Murat that the train station toilet is more honest than any government statement.”

They boarded the commuter train and sat next to each other again. This time they talked less. It was as if they had left a piece of themselves in the tiles below, along with all the others who had passed through.

Heckenpisser eventually took out his notebook. He flipped to the page with the chapters. Under "Babylon train station toilet" he wrote slowly, in his crooked office handwriting:

"A place where clothes come off without anyone getting naked."

"That's good," said Kuddel when he read it. "Add to that: 'This place stinks of what the world really is.'"

Hedge Pisser dutifully completed the sentence. "We should charge admission," he muttered. "Not for the toilet, for the insight."

“We do charge admission,” said Kuddel. “In bottles. Every new insight costs another round.”

When they arrived back at the corner store, the place almost seemed... friendly. Neon lights, glass, shelves, people coming and going. Everything cleaner than the temple down there, but in a dishonest way.

Murat saw her coming: the way she walked, the look, the smell of the toilet plus outside plus residual alcohol.

“Well, toilet theologians,” he shouted, “have you met God between piss and cleaning products?”

“God wasn’t there,” said Hedge Pisser, standing at the standing table. “But we saw his drain. Hehehe.”

Kuddel leaned on his hands and took a deep breath. "Write it in your ledger, Murat," he said. "Babylon train station toilet: checked off. We were in, we got out, and we survived. That's more than you can say about some relationships."

Murat silently placed two Sterni beers in front of them and poured Boonekamp into them. "Here's to those drunken asses who even make a story out of a toilet," he said.

They clinked glasses. The beer tasted of metal, cheap hops, and a hint of Triumph.

Because somehow, as ridiculous as that was,

They felt they had actually accomplished something.

No job, no application, no project,

but a chapter that no one else would write:

Babylon train station toilet –

where the world briefly forgets to pretend, and two guys of the wrong age

realize that they may no longer have anything to say,

but still see enough to continue the story.

Peep show in the mind's eye

There are two kinds of peep shows: the one with a curtain, coin slot, and sticky floor, and the one that plays in your head, even if you haven't inserted a single coin.

Kuddel offered both. Except that he increasingly couldn't afford the entrance fees anymore – neither in Mark nor in Psyche.

The plan "Hamburg / St. Pauli / Peep Show" had failed so many times by now that it almost felt like an old relationship: always talking about it, never going. The image of red neon signs, half-naked women behind frosted glass, and scruffy guys in oversized coats had nevertheless become firmly entrenched in his mind.

"You don't even need to go to St. Pauli," Murat had once said when the topic came up again. "Your head is already like the Reeperbahn with water damage."

And he wasn't entirely wrong.

The evening began like so many others: Sterni, Boonekamp, Kippe. The late-night shop as a lighthouse for shipwrecked sailors who can't swim but still set sail.

Elke was on duty, which immediately changed the atmosphere. With her, the place was less of a "system gap" and more of a "friendly abyss." She knew her customers, knew their blood alcohol level, knew when it was best not to ask anything.

Heckenpisser came straight from work, in a shirt and bow tie, with that office weariness that comes not from the body, but from the eyes. He put down his briefcase as if it were a foreign object he was only carrying along out of politeness, and accepted the first bottle as if he had had to get permission for it beforehand.

"Well, boys," said Elke, sliding two beers across the counter. "World domination again today, or just a short trip into self-loathing?"

"Today," said Kuddel, "I have something ambitious planned. A cultural program."

Hedge-Pisser raised an eyebrow. "You don't mean 'documentary about wildlife' by any chance, do you?" he asked. "Hehehe."

Kuddel grinned crookedly and took a drag on his cigarette. "I'm talking about a peep show," he said. "But not just any peep show. St. Pauli in your mind's eye. A premium performance."

Elke laughed. "You can't even make it to the train station without getting lost," she said. "How do you expect to get to St. Pauli? By telepathy?"

"Exactly," Kuddel replied. "That's the modern version. Hamburg has become expensive anyway. Entry to my mind's eye is free. Well, okay – it costs liver."

They stood at the standing table, which was slowly starting to look like a cross between a monument and an accident scene. "World Domination – Step 1: Hamburg" was still written on it, now supplemented by "Ticket to Nowhere – Passed (with deficiencies)."

"You know what I've noticed?" Kuddel began. "We've been talking about St. Pauli for years, about peep shows, about strip clubs. And where do we actually hang out? At the corner store, in front of the shop window, with a can of beer in our hands and our imaginations running wild. Maybe... this is our Reeperbahn: this corner right here, just without the advertising."

Hedge Pisser took a sip, licked the foam from his lip, and looked down the street. The lampposts, the cars, the slight breeze that brushed against garbage bags. No red lights, no eroticism – at most, a pair of sweatpants that revealed too much.

"If this is our Reeperbahn," he said, "then our red-light district is a broken streetlamp and the only one who gets naked is you when you're too drunk to keep your pants up. Hehehe."

Kuddel grinned. "Yeah, but look," he said. "The principle is the same: men hoping something cool will happen, even though they know perfectly well it won't. Neon signs outside, naked disappointment inside. The only difference is: there they pay an entrance fee, here we buy beer."

Elke leaned against the doorframe, lit a cigarette, and listened. "You have a sick kind of romanticism," she said.

"Romance is just despair with light," replied Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"Do you still remember Uwe?" Kuddel asked after the third bottle, as his tongue softened and his head felt a little lighter.

"Which Uwe?" asked Heckenpisser. "There are approximately 47 Uwes in our universe."

"Uwe with the season ticket for the peep show," Kuddel specified.

Heckenpisser took two seconds, then rolled his eyes. "Aaah," he went. "Uwe 'Semi-professional wanking stand visitor'. Hehehe. Yeah, I won't forget him anytime soon."

Kuddel put down the bottle and leaned on the table. "That guy was my hero. In a really messed-up way," he began. "He really managed his finances so he could afford three or four peep show nights every week. 'It's cheaper than a relationship,' he always said. And 'at least they don't whine when I go out for another beer afterwards.'"

Hedge Pisser nodded. "That's right," he said. "And he had this weird statistic in his head. 'The one in the third window on the left does the best job for your money,' blah blah blah."

"Yeah, man," said Kuddel. "He collected women like football cards. 'The blonde with the tattoos usually doesn't come until 11 p.m.' He knew more about the working hours of the peep-show girls than about the opening hours of the job center."

"It's more reliable too," muttered Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"At some point," Kuddel continued, "he started complaining that everything was getting more expensive. 'Back then you could jerk off like a king for 5 euros,' he said. 'Now you can't even get decent eye contact for 5 euros.'"

Elke burst out laughing. "Yes, yes, the inflation of intimacy," she said. "Kissing is now only available in installments."

"And then," said Kuddel, lowering his voice a little, "came the internet."

Heckenpisser started to comment, but Kuddel raised his hand.

"No, seriously," he said. "That's exactly the point. Peep shows used to be something special. Going out, exchanging coins, the booth, the curtain, your heart pounding, the awkward silence as you left. Today..."

He pointed roughly into the air with the bottle.

"Today you can download any imaginable filth to your phone while sitting on the toilet," he said. "And you don't even have to pull your pants all the way down."

Hedge Pisser nodded. "The great democratization of masturbation," he declared. "Hehehe. All access points open, all categories available, only brains closed."

"For Uwe, that was the end," Kuddel continued. "He was sitting here at the standing table at some point and said something like, 'I don't even know what I'm paying for anymore. I can see everything without leaving. But it doesn't excite me anymore.'"

Elke took a drag on her cigarette. "Yes," she said. "Because at some point he figured out that the real thrill didn't come from the bare breasts, but from the journey there. The commuter train, the door, the coin slot, the feeling of doing something forbidden. And suddenly the forbidden thing was on the Wi-Fi."

"Exactly," said Kuddel. "If everything is always available, the thrill becomes boring. You can look at ten million breasts – eventually you're just looking because you don't know what else to do."

"So basically like us," concluded Heckenpisser. "Only without breasts. Hehehe."

Kuddel laughed briefly, then became more serious again, as serious as a drunk person could become at a Berlin standing table.

"I swear to you," he said, "in my mind's eye, St. Pauli is still better than any porn site. Because I'm directing it myself. I turn on the lights where I want, I make the women as broken or as beautiful as I want, I decide how much misery lies behind it all. And I don't pay by the minute."

Heckenpisser took a sip, thought for a moment. "That's the sad and brilliant thing at the same time," he said. "We can't make it to Hamburg, we can't make it into a real peep show, but we're masters of mental peeping. We're like blind directors with very clear audio descriptions. Hehehe."

It wasn't long before they drifted from Uwe to themselves.

"You used to work in the shop, didn't you?" asked Heckenpisser. "Like, really. Red curtain, coin in, viewing window up, meat inspection."

Kuddel grimaced. "Twice," he admitted. "The second time I realized it wasn't the women who turned me off, but the guys in the next room."

"Because they look like you?" sniped Heckenpisser.

"Because in that moment you realize: you're just one of those sad bastards who secretly hope something special will happen," Kuddel explained. "But nothing happens. You're standing there in the darkroom, letting one rip, trying to breathe quietly, looking at a woman who's already mentally checked out – and outside, some owners are profiting from your attempt to briefly stop thinking about your life."

Hedge Pisser nodded slowly. "But that's exactly the deal," he said. "You pay to be someone else for a little while. Even if it's just a guy with his pants down. Hehehe."

"I'd rather pay to forget myself," Kuddel replied. "That's why I drink. At least then I don't have to absorb someone else's despair."

Elke knocked on the window from the inside. "You guys are the only ones who think about porn in front of my corner store and turn it into a philosophical debate," she said. "The others just sneak a smutty magazine."

"Smutty magazine," Heckenpisser repeated with relish. "What a lovely word. Today it's called 'content.' Back then it was smut. At least you knew where you stood."

Kuddel looked at his hands, at the bottle, at the cigarette butt. "Back then," he said, "you had three naked women in a newspaper and had to imagine the rest. Today you have three thousand categories, but your imagination is as dead as your overdraft."

"For that," Heckenpisser said, "we have a mental movie with its own dramaturgy. You have a Hamburg movie, I have a 'What if I hadn't ended up here' movie. And sometimes both run side by side."

"Yours is more arthouse," Kuddel growled. "My film is playing uncut on Tele 5."

They began to list situations in which their own imagination had fucked them up more than any real encounter:

Heckenpisser's colleague, who had once looked into his eyes for too long and then stripped his mind out in daydreams for three weeks – while in reality she was just checking her emails.

The cashier from the supermarket, with the sad eyes and tattooed fingers, who had once said "Have a nice evening" to Kuddel – and whom he then incorporated into all his fantasies for weeks, in which he didn't end up as a bum.

"And the worst part is," said Hedge Pisser, "in your head everything works. You're funny, you're not that drunk, you're reasonably potent, you always hit the right punchline. In real life... you sit in front of me, burp, and tell me about a guy with poop on his stomach. Hehehe."

"Welcome to the documentary version," said Kuddel. "Hollywood is what you imagine, but reality is MDR at four."

Elke put down the next round, this time with Boonekamp on top. "You think too much," she said. "You have so little, but you think too much. That's a very unhealthy combination. Drink and rant instead; others can put that into perspective better."

Heckenpisser looked at her, smiling crookedly. "Do you know what the problem is, Elke?" he asked. "We're too old to masturbate in a relaxed way anymore, and too young to just play bingo. So our minds are our only playground."

"And it's not TÜV-certified," added Kuddel.

Later, as the water level rose and the passing figures became more and more like shadows, they slipped away from the topic of "sex" to the topic of "longing" without anyone noticing.

"Perhaps the peep show in our heads isn't the problem at all," Heckenpisser said thoughtfully. "Perhaps it's the last thing stopping us from becoming completely brutalized. Because at least we know it's just a movie."

"The problem is," Kuddel replied, "that the film eventually repeats old scenes. Before, you had a new imagination with every encounter. Now, your brain just plays the same greatest hits over and over again. Except that you're older each time, and the protagonists stay young in your mind."

"It's like a best-of CD on repeat," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe. And we're sitting here hoping for a bonus track."

"He won't come," said Kuddel. "He'll only come if you actually go out again. But we're not going out anymore. We'll only go as far as the Babylon train station toilets. And nobody wants to see anything there."

They were silent for a moment. The sounds of the street flowed around them. A car, snatches of music, somewhere loud laughter that didn't belong to them.

"Hecke," Kuddel said at some point, "do you think we'll ever experience a real story again? You know, with a wife, drama, a hotel room, the train back, everything like it used to be? Or is everything from now on just in our heads?"

Heckenpisser took longer than usual to reply.

"I think," he said slowly, "if anything happens at all, it won't be when we plan it. Not in Hamburg, not in the peep-show catalog, not in the script of our minds. But on some shitty evening when you least expect it. Someone stumbles, someone laughs, someone stays. Or not. Hehehe."

"Very specific, thank you," said Kuddel.

"It's like this," Heckenpisser continued. "The cool stuff happens while you're waiting for something completely different. That's the nasty thing. We wait for St. Pauli and get a train station toilet. We wait for a peep show and get Boonekamp at a standing table. We wait for the woman of our dreams and get the ticket inspector on the commuter train."

"He had beautiful eyes," Kuddel murmured.

"Hehehe, shut your mouth," laughed Heckenpisser.

Later, as Elke slowly "closed up" the shop from the inside without throwing the boys out, Kuddel stood there, bottle in hand, cigarette almost burned down, looking somewhere between the street and an inner film.

"You know, Hecke," he said quietly, "maybe St. Pauli was never the point. Maybe it was never about looking at real women in the neon lights. Maybe it was always just about briefly forgetting that we were alone."

Hedge-pisser nodded. He said nothing. Very rare moments when he simply remained silent.

“And maybe,” Kuddel added, “this is our version of a 'peep.' You, me, Späti, Boonekamp. We look at the world spitting past us – and secretly expect it to just drop its guard for a moment and say: ‘Yes, you're right. I'm just as ridiculous as you think.’”

Heckenpisser raised the almost empty bottle. "To the peep show in our minds," he said. "To the films that won't save us, but at least keep us from marrying someone in a train station toilet. Hehehe."

Kuddel raised a glass. "To the women who were never there," he said. "And to the stories we use to pretend they stayed."

The neon light flickered briefly, then settled down. Berlin breathed out and in again.

The big, cheap porn films were shown somewhere else, on screens, in booths, behind curtains. But here, at the standing table, in front of the late-night shop, a completely different kind of peep show was playing:

Two guys who looked into their own misery and presented it in such a way that it was funny – at least as long as there was still beer in the bottle and Boonekamp in the blood.

Heckenpisser slowly twirled the bottle between his fingers, as if trying to roll a coin toss to determine a decision that had already been made. The street rushed by, cars came and went, delivery services pushed boxes into doorways, someone laughed on the balcony over there – that bright, annoyed Berlin laugh that always sounds like the next argument is already planned.

"Do you know what the bitter thing is?" said Hedge Pisser, looking at the label of his beer as if the answer were there. "We pretend we're too messed up for real life. But the truth is: we're too cowardly for real embarrassment and at the same time too uptight for real fun. Hehehe."

“Ah,” Kuddel said. “Philosophy level two. Here comes another story that starts with ‘company seminar’ and ends with long-term psychological damage.”

Elke bent over the cash register and absentmindedly wiped away a sticky spot with a cloth. "Come on, Hecke," she said. "Out with that crap. You have that look in your eyes. It's the 'I've been through something and I'm still ashamed of it' look."

Heckenpisser breathed a sigh of relief. "Okay," he conceded. "One real peep show. Then never again. And I've had plenty on my mind ever since."

He cleared his throat as if he needed to warm up.

“Imagine,” he began, “I was in my early twenties. Fresh in the office, wearing a far too soft shirt, with a far too harsh boss. Three days of seminars in some dead city in the west. Flipcharts and index cards during the day, everyone pretending to be on some important path. In the evening, the boss said: ‘Today, guys, I’m going to show you something about real life.’ – and that’s a sentence that should really make you run for the hills.”

“Yes,” Kuddel nodded. “When people who keep Excel files talk about ‘real life,’ only rubbish comes out.”

“He’s taking us with him,” Heckenpisser continued, “four of us: the boss, two colleagues, and me. We walk through this pedestrian zone where the shops are already closed, but the brothel is still open. Then we go down a side street. Red light. Sign that says: ‘Girls, Live & Sexy’ – as if any guy who goes in there still believes in the word ‘live’.”

“I don’t think it’s ‘sexy’ either,” Elke murmured.

“Inside,” said Heckenpisser, “it smells of perfume, stale smoke, and some kind of floor spray that’s supposed to mask something but just creates a new stench. A bar at the front, a few guys staring at their drinks like they’ve just married their only alibi. And then those windows with the numbers. Small stage, red velvet, women with faces that say, ‘I’m cold and I want to be somewhere else.’”

He took a sip and held the bottle in the air.

"The boss acts like he's a regular customer," he continued. "'Here, guys, this is how it works: You get some chips, go into the booth, insert the token, curtain up, enjoy the show.' Enjoy the show. As if we were in a zoo and the animals had voluntarily signed up."

Kuddel grunted. "He definitely had some line like: 'It's better than sitting alone in a hotel room.'"

“Of course,” confirmed Heckenpisser. “Exactly like that. ‘It’s better than RTL.’ I stood next to it and thought: I don’t know, I’ve never watched RTL dancing, but this is no less sad. Hehehe.”

Elke wordlessly pushed another round towards them. "This is going to be a long one," she said. "You'll need more supplies."

“So we head towards the cabins,” Heckenpisser continued. “Small doors, like dressing rooms in the changing room of a very depressing theater. Dark inside, just a slit for the light. I go into one, close the door. And suddenly you’re all alone with yourself and your own filth. The sounds from outside are muffled. Space like standing in a coffin.”

“Romantic,” Kuddel said dryly.

"A box," described Heckenpisser. "Not big, not cozy. On the wall, this metal box with the coin slot. In front of it, a glass window with a curtain. You can hear faint music from somewhere, some kind of lascivious tune that tries to be sexy, but sounds like it was cut out of a commercial for poorly selling shower gel."

He made a coin-like motion with two fingers.

“I insert the chip,” he said. “Click. Curtain rises. And there she is. Naked, yes. Body okay. But the face... the face wasn’t in the ‘Sexy & Live’ equation. The face said, ‘If you knew how much I’ve already looked at you today, you’d run straight back to the seminar room.’”

Kuddel laughed, that dirty, barking laugh. "Yeah, man," he said. "They're all not there for you. They're there so you forget that you're not there for anyone anywhere."

"She starts to move," Heckenpisser continued. "So automatically, as if someone had pressed 'play.' Her gaze is suspended somewhere between the mirror and the audience. Not even really looking at me. And there I am, standing in my C&A shirt, with my tie still half-around my neck, thinking: What the hell are you doing here? You're the explainer type, not the booth type. Hehehe."

"Were you able to...?" Kuddel raised his hand, half questioning, half grinning.

"No," said Heckenpisser immediately. "Not at all. My brain shut down. Well, not the part that's usually responsible for imagination. The other one: the embarrassing, moral control freak. He was standing there with a notepad in his head, recording: 'Subject feels out of place. Subject feels sorry for himself. Subject is also horny. Subject is ashamed of all three things at the same time.'"

"Aha," said Kuddel. "Classic overthinker masturbation blocker."

"Exactly," said Heckenpisser. "I stood there, hands in my pockets, pretending to look for five minutes, even though inside I was just thinking: How many traces of other guys are lurking in this air? And the worst part: I heard the others through the wall. Not directly, but you can hear their breaths. A clearing of the throat. A soft groan that someone is trying to swallow."

Elke shuddered briefly. "Ugh," she said. "Collective migrant chamber. My idea of hell."

"Then time's up," Heckenpisser recounted. "Curtain closes. Click. Darkness. You're left standing there in your half-finished misery, thinking: Now you could insert a second chip. Or you could leave. And I realized: If I keep pushing money now, I'm actively ensuring that the world stays the way it is. Chief con artists, women behind glass, guys in booths, nobody talks to each other, everyone acts like it's normal."

"So?" asked Kuddel. "What did you do?"

Heckenpisser shrugged. "I'm out," he said. "Waited at the bar, ordered an overpriced, bad whiskey, and pretended I had a blast. The boss came around later and said, 'So, how was it?' – and I said, 'Interesting.' 'Interesting' is the word you use when you think something sucks but don't have the guts to say so. Hehehe."

"You should have said," said Kuddel, "It was pretty cool, but unfortunately you weren't in the window, boss.' Then you would have had some peace and quiet."

"I wanted to keep the job back then," Heckenpisser said. "I hadn't progressed that far in the 'Fuck it' program yet."

They stood there silently. It was one of those moments when the air around the standing table became thicker, as if it were warmer inside than outside, even though that wasn't true.

"Do you know what's been bugging me ever since?" Heckenpisser finally asked. "How everything has become a commodity. Even longing. You pay for someone to briefly make

you feel like you still feel something. Peep shows, Tinder, porn sites, selfies. All just little vending machines with different coin slots.”

Kuddel nodded slowly. "That's why I celebrate my inner cinema," he said. "At least then it's clear that I'm fooling myself. When I go to St. Pauli in my own mind, I know: This is my misery, my camera, my fiction. When I go somewhere where everything is already staged, I just feel like an extra in someone else's sadness."

Elke tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and studied her. "You talk about masturbation as if it's a critique of the system," she said. "But yes, you're not wrong. Capitalism even takes your wank away and sells it back to you packaged up."

"That's the quote of the evening," said Heckenpisser. "Capitalism takes your wank away.' Hehehe. If I ever write a book, that's going on the blurb."

“You’re already writing a book, you plum,” Kuddel interjected. “We’re in it. Elke too. Murat, of course. And Uwe gets his own chapter.”

As if his name had been a signal, Uwe actually appeared at that exact moment. Not for dramatic reasons – just because that's how things sometimes work in the neighborhood.

He came lumbering around the corner, grey jacket, jogging pants, eyes like two half-burned cigarettes.

“Well, you a**holes...” he began, looked around the room, assessed the topic and the mood, and let the sentence trail off into a grumble. “What’s up?”

"Topic: Peep show," said Heckenpisser cheerfully. "We were just dissecting your past as a passionate customer."

Uwe grimaced and put his hand to his chest. "I feel defamed," he said. "I wasn't a passion expert. I was a cultural promoter."

Kuddel burst out laughing. "Cultural funding?"

“Yes,” Uwe said, offended. “If you had been happy for me, there would be even more shops. Now you're all just staring at your phones. The result: fewer jobs. I was practically a social worker at the coin slot.”

"I've never seen it that way before," Elke remarked dryly. "The peep show as a social project."

“Hey,” said Uwe, lighting a cigarette, “for some girls, that was the only job where they at least got paid in cash. The line is crossed when you start doing everything just for clicks and likes. Peep shows were at least honest: money in, tits out. Done.”

Heckenpisser threw up his hands. "We didn't attack you personally, Uwe," he said. "It's just... you're a walking study subject."

“I’m a walking legend, you idiot,” growled Uwe, but ultimately he had to grin himself.

The four of them stood at the high table like a broken group of experts. Heckenpisser with his moralizing, Kuddel with his imaginary scripts, Uwe as a practical field researcher, and Elke as a trained observer of remaining male dignity.

“Do you know the difference between a real peep show and what you’re doing here on your head?” Uwe asked at one point, leaning heavily on the table.

“One costs admission, the other costs mental health?” typed Heckenpisser.

"Wrong," said Uwe. "In a peep show, everyone knows where they stand. Nobody tells you you'll find true love there. No happy ending, at best a damp tissue. Honestly. In your head, you start lying to yourselves. Suddenly a cashier becomes your soulmate, a moment a relationship, a glance a whole fucking Netflix series. You're much more dangerous in there than I ever was in the store."

There was a brief silence. Not because Uwe never said anything intelligent – okay, yes, partly because of that – but the point was made.

"The man is... not wrong," muttered Heckenpisser.

"It hurts when Uwe of all people explains romance to you, doesn't it?" said Elke, taking a drag on her cigarette.

Kuddel thumped his chest. "I never claimed the cashier loved me," he defended himself. "I only claimed she was the only one who didn't look at me like I was about to rob a store."

“Yes,” Uwe nodded. “But in your mind, you already have children, a dog, a joint tax return, and a holiday home in Brandenburg with her.”

Kuddel wanted to protest, but then paused. "Maybe two dogs," he finally said. "But yes. Understood."

Heckenpisser snorted. "We're too poor for real illusions," he said. "So we make up cheap ones in our heads. Hehehe."

The evening dragged on. The neon light grew harsher, the air thicker. Every now and then, other characters came by, fetched beer, poured in some banter, and disappeared again.

The topic of peep shows clung to the conversation like residual shine.

“Actually,” said Heckenpisser after a while, “our whole life is like an endless peep show, only in reverse. We stand outside, looking into other lives through windows, screens, Instagram, you name it. All just snippets. We never see what happens when the lights go out.”

"Yes," said Kuddel. "And you don't even get the curtain anymore. These days something's always open, but it's all wrong. Back then you had to sacrifice a coin to see anything. Now you're bombarded. Advertising, porn, filtered faces. You practically have to pay if you don't want to see anything."

"Premium silence," muttered Heckenpisser. "Will probably be available as a subscription service. Hehehe."

Uwe snorted. "You guys are so complicated," he said. "It used to be simple: either you went in or you didn't. Now you sit in front of a thousand options and still can't get anything done because you're constantly thinking about whether it's all socially acceptable."

"That's the problem with too many channels," said Elke. "You used to have three programs. Now you scroll yourself to death."

She looked at Kuddel. "And you," she said, "have the Reeperbahn on your mind, but can't even manage the Ringbahn without drama."

"I recently tried to board a commuter train," Kuddel defended himself. "That was more risky than my doctor recommends."

"You got 'No Drinking Water' tattooed on you, but the real world is too unhygienic for you," grinned Hedge Pisser. "You realize that yourself, right? Hehehe."

At some point, the topic subtly shifted from peep show to what lay beneath: Not sex. Not tits. Not masturbation.

But this ugly, thin thing that lay underneath like an exposed nerve: being alone.

"We laugh about it a lot," said Heckenpisser, as Uwe was inside getting more supplies from Elke. "About peep, porn, mental movies. But actually... it's just a crutch, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Kuddel without hesitation. "It's all just a way of reassuring yourself: You're not dead yet because you still feel something – even if it's just shame."

He tapped the bottom of the bottle lightly on the standing table.

"Do you know why I love this St. Pauli mentality so much?" he asked. "Because I won't get old there. I'll be 35, just wrecked enough to be charming. Not 50 and washed up. In my head, twenty years from now, the women won't go home. They'll stop in their tracks when I say something. In real life, they'd turn around if they noticed how I smell."

Heckenpisser looked at him, smiling crookedly. "Hehehe," came reflexively, but quieter than usual.

"And you?" asked Kuddel. "What's your peep show in your head?"

Heckenpisser didn't hesitate. "Sometimes I imagine I'd said no at some point," he said. "No to the office. No to the boss. No to that one night out in the other city. No to Gerda when she puts the third plate in front of me. A whole peep show of missed 'no's. I watch my life from the outside, like through a pane of glass. Except no one's topless, everyone's only half awake."

"This is more depressing than anything you've said about porn," Kuddel said.

"Yes," nodded Hedge Pisser. "That's why I drink."

When Uwe came back, his eyes were slightly glassy, already reflecting the evening.

"Let me tell you something," he announced, slamming his bottle down on the table. "In the end, it doesn't matter if you're standing in a booth, glued to your phone, or getting wasted at the corner store. The only important thing is that you eventually realize: no one's coming to save you. No strip club, no woman, no God, no therapy. If you're lucky, someone's sitting next to you who's indulging in the same crap and laughing about it with you."

He looked from one to the other, longer than usual.

"Just like you idiots," he added. "At least you're funny idiots."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said," said Heckenpisser, touched. "Hehehe."

Kuddel stared at the street for a while. At the shop window, in which they were all reflected: him in his robe, Hecke in his bow tie, Uwe in jogging pants. Behind them, shelves full of alcohol. Behind that, Elke, sorting cigarette butts.

A peep show of a completely different kind: Five broken people behind glass, illuminated from the outside.

"Perhaps," he finally said, "we ourselves are the show. And the neighborhood occasionally glances in, looks briefly, shakes its head and moves on."

"Then I want at least someone to put in some coins," replied Heckenpisser. "Otherwise it's not even economically viable."

"The coins," Elke said from inside, without looking up, "are the euros you leave here every evening. You've been running continuously for years. I'm the owner. You're the entertainers. The rest are extras."

"Then," said Kuddel, lifting the bottle and tilting his head slightly back, "to the peep show where we ourselves are the sad characters."

They clinked glasses. The glass clinked softly.

And somewhere, a few hundred kilometers further on,

A red sign flashed into the night in St. Pauli, and he knew nothing about it.

that there was a late-night convenience store in Berlin-Schöneberg, in whose neon light

two drunkards and their supporting roles

negotiated the same garbage –

only without a curtain, without a coin slot,

but with a lot of mental imagery.

The evening had long since entered that phase where the air became thicker than the conversation. The bottles piled up on the standing table like pieces of evidence that would never appear in court.

The street was a flickering film: cars, cyclists, a jogger who looked as if he were running away from something inside his head – not on the street. Above their heads: yellowish lamplight, that broken urban hello that always seems as if someone was too stingy to order proper darkness.

Kuddel had reached a whole new level. Not completely blown up – that took more than just a few Bells – but in this intermediate state, where reality softens and the mind's eye switches to 4K.

Uwe had just steamed off towards the subway, promising to "maybe" come back tomorrow – which in his language meant: "If I don't die or find something better."

Inside, Elke rearranged the last of the shelves, counting cigarette packs as if trying to sort out her own thoughts. Only Kuddel and Heckenpisser were still clinging to the standing table, two shadows, two glasses, two lives that weren't going to change much anymore.

"Do you know what the meanest thing is about all this sex talk?" Kuddel asked suddenly. He stared into the lights of a passing bus, as if searching for an answer in them.

"That you keep ending up here afterwards?" Heckenpisser guessed. "Hehehe."

"No," said Kuddel. "That your body will eventually betray you. Back then, you could just look at a woman and your pants would be as stiff as a tent pole. Now you need three beers, four memories, five lies, and then you still have a good day. Your penis has long since handed over the reins to fatigue."

Hedge Pisser chuckled, but there was something sad underneath. "Hehehe... Welcome to the Middle Ages of man," he said. "The will is there, the rest is burnout."

Kuddel took a sip and let the bottle dangle from the corner of his mouth. "And then," he continued, "the mental movie starts playing. Like a last resort. It tells you: 'No problem, boss, I've got material. Remember that girl in the pub in the summer of '97 who lent you a lighter? Look, we'll re-edit that, a glance becomes a striptease, a smile becomes a handjob, one evening becomes a whole affair.' And you know it's all a lie – but you let it play through because otherwise you'd have nothing left."

Hedge Pisser nodded slowly. "Yes," he said. "That's the point where eroticism becomes nostalgia. Hehehe. You're no longer jerking off to a woman—you're jerking off to the idea of having almost been somebody once."

For a while they said nothing. The neon hummed. A few teenagers stumbled past, laughing too loudly, speaking in words that had more "dude" than substance.

"I went through a phase once..." Heckenpisser began, stopped, took another sip, tried again. "Late twenties, early thirties. I seriously convinced myself I could still experience a real relationship. Not a peep show. You know, the whole... getting to know someone, slowly getting close, that whole kitschy thing. You know?"

Kuddel grinned crookedly. "Yeah. This Netflix crap," he said. "A walk in the rain without catching a cold afterwards, candles without a burn hole in the carpet, sex without that awkward silence afterwards. The premium package."

Heckenpisser nodded. "I had a colleague," he began, and you could already tell this wasn't going to end well. "Marketing. Dark hair, rarely laughed, but when she did, she really laughed. We sometimes sat together on a project after work. I did the Excel spreadsheets, she made presentations look nice. And every time she bent over, she smelled like... I don't know... like a life where people have fresh bed linens."

"That's a strong smell," said Kuddel.

"I built the whole movie in my head," Heckenpisser continued. "We 'just happen' to run into each other after work, have a drink, end up in bed, she says, 'You're not as boring as I thought.' We move in together, I move out of Gerda's, everything changes. In reality... she was simply fired at some point. I saw her one last time in the kitchen, emptying her cup. She said, 'It was nice meeting you, Ulf.' I said, 'Yeah, you too.' And that was it."

He laughed briefly, harshly. "Hehehe... the whole epic fantasy – and in reality not even a hug. No kiss, nothing. Just a 'It was nice meeting you,' as if I were a coffee machine that had lasted a long time."

"Yes," Kuddel said calmly. "That's the real peep show, man. You're looking through the glass at a life that's close enough to smell it – but far enough away that you'll never touch it."

He looked at Elke, who was inside lugging a case of water, holding her back with one hand. "Look at Elke," he murmured. "You know how she ticks, you know her sayings, you know which liquor she hates, you know the look she gives you when someone's too young to be that drunk. But you don't know what her room looks like. What she's thinking when she finishes work. Whether there's someone waiting for her. Or whether she just lies down and stares into space."

Heckenpisser nodded. "We only ever see snippets," he said. "But we act like they're whole movies. Hehehe. And then we wonder why reality always seems like a bad edit."

A guy paused briefly at the corner store, looked in his pocket, and pulled out his phone. Something colorful flickered briefly on the screen; from a distance, all you could see were skin tones and quick movements. He grinned to himself, put his headphones back in, and continued walking.

"There," said Heckenpisser, pointing in that direction with his chin. "Peep show to go."

"Drive-in wanking," Kuddel commented. "You don't even have to stand anymore. You degenerate sitting down."

"I saw that guy the other day," Elke chimed in, having stepped up to the window. "He watches cheap porn on his way to the bus. And then he buys a can of energy drink from me. And he really thinks he lives in the age of unlimited possibilities."

"He does," said Kuddel. "Unlimited opportunities to live blissfully unaware of everything."

All three of them laughed, but none of them really laughed.

"Do you know what the stupidest thing I've ever thought is?" Kuddel suddenly asked.

"You're going to be a father again?" asked Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"No," said Kuddel. "That someone could ever really be interested in me again. Not in some leftovers-the-barrel kind of way. Not like 'there was nothing better around.' But for real. And I don't mean that in a teenage way. I mean this: Someone who sees you with all that crap. Who knows what you look like when you're throwing up. Who knows you have 'No Drinking Water' tattooed on you. And still says: 'Okay, he's crazy, he's messed up, but I'll stick around a bit longer.'"

Heckenpisser looked at him. "And?" he asked quietly.

"It never happened," said Kuddel. "That's why I buried my heart somewhere in my head, between a late-night shop, a train station toilet, and a peep show."

He took the bottle, drank it dry, and set it down firmly.

"That's the biggest lie about the whole sex thing," he added. "They always tell you it's all about breasts, asses, orgasms. But actually... all you want is for someone to say, even just for a moment, 'You're not completely lost. I still see you.' And because that happens so rarely, you go to places where they pretend to look at you. Or you build up a fantasy in your head of a woman who never gets tired."

Heckenpisser took a deep breath. "Hehehe," came out, but it sounded almost like a cough.

"I think," he said, "that we both put more emotion into our imaginary friends than others put into their real relationships. And that's so sad it's funny again."

"Welcome to the cabaret of the frustrated," said Kuddel. "Free entry, no exit."

Later, when Elke finally dimmed the interior lights and only the shop window neon was still burning, the small group slowly dissolved like sugar in schnapps.

Uwe was gone. The teenagers had vanished. A street sweeper pushed his cart alone through the night, as if trying to sweep away the last traces of possibility.

"I'm closing up right now," said Elke. "Otherwise you'll all fall asleep here and I'll have to stack you up."

"Could you please put me on the shelf with the cans?" asked Hedge Pisser. "That's where I belong. 'Long shelf life, little content.' Hehehe."

"I'll only put you with the discounted items," Elke retorted. "Right before the best-before date."

Kuddel grabbed his cap and put it on crookedly. The road swayed a bit, but he was used to that. He knew how to walk more or less straight on uneven ground.

"Will you come with me for a bit further?" he asked Heckenpisser. "To the corner."

"Of course," he said. "I have to make sure you're not chasing after a peep show that only exists in your head. Hehehe."

They said goodbye to Elke with a nod, a joke, a half-smile. Then they set off, side by side, two shadows in the Berlin evening.

On the way home, they hardly spoke. The sounds of the city grew quieter the further they got from the main road. Here, a television behind a thin wall. There, a woman walking her dog, staring at her cell phone as if it held some kind of salvation. A man taking out the trash, looking as if the bin were a better conversational partner than all those waiting upstairs.

Kuddel stopped at an intersection and lit another cigarette. Heckenpisser stopped automatically, as if they had an invisible leash.

"Hecke," said Kuddel, as the smoke crept into his eyes, "do you think it's bad that I live so much in my head?"

"Compared to what?" asked Heckenpisser. "To people who leave their lives in the gym? In Excel spreadsheets? In comment sections? Hehehe. Everyone has their own cubicle."

"Sometimes I'm afraid," Kuddel murmured, "that one day I won't be able to distinguish anymore. Between what happened and what I imagined. That I'll really believe I was in St. Pauli. That I'll really believe someone once told me I was okay."

Hedge Pisser nodded. "I have that fear too," he said. "But you know what? If you have to decide whether you want to die with real memories that only destroy you, or with a few good lies in your head... I think I'll take the lies. Hehehe."

He made a dismissive gesture. "In the end, the brain is just a bad peep show," he said. "You throw experiences in, and eventually distorted scenes come out. The main thing is that you can stand yourself."

Kuddel huffed, a laugh and a sigh at the same time. "Then," he said, "let's at least make some good stories out of it. If we're going to be lost in the aftermath, at least people should say later: 'Those two had a sense of humor as they went down.'"

"Deal," said Heckenpisser. "We're the peep show that comments on itself. Hehehe."

They continued walking until their paths diverged: one corner to the left, one corner to the right, two different stairwells, two different kinds of loneliness.

"See you tomorrow, King of Cigarette Butts," said Hedge Pisser.

"See you tomorrow, Mr. Intimacy Theorist," Kuddel replied. "Dream something you can't have."

"I do that anyway," said Heckenpisser. "For 20 years."

Later, in his room, amidst piles of clothes and empty bottles, Kuddel lay on his worn-out mattress, which looked more like a "storage area" than a "bed".

The ceiling above him had stains he couldn't identify. Smoke stains, dampness, some insect that had had a run of bad luck.

He closed his eyes. And there she was again:

The Reeperbahn he had never seen, St. Pauli in premium filter, red lights, women who could laugh without immediately looking tired, a Kuddel who didn't seem quite so broken.

In his mind he walked through streets he had never been to, stood in front of a peep show shop, opened the door, went in, but this time:

No booth, no coins. Just a stage.

And those sitting in the first row were:

Heckenpisser, Uwe, Elke, Murat,

everyone with a beer in their hand, everyone laughing, everyone watching,

as he stood there, in his robe, with his "No Drinking Water" tattoo, all his misery –

and he understood:

The only peep show that ever really ran was the one of his life.

And the audience was smaller, but more honest than anything that had ever danced behind glass.

With this thought, half sad, half comforted,

He drifted away.

Outside, somewhere a real red light flickered; inside, only the lingering image of his inner cinema flickered.

until that too was extinguished and made way

for the next morning,

where the film would continue with less glamour, but more headaches.

The day after: hangover, cigarette butts, vomit

The morning didn't come like a sunrise. It came like a warning.

No romantic ray of light through the window, no birds singing. Just a dull thud in his head, as if someone had tried to chisel open his forehead with a jackhammer at night, and then stopped halfway through because even he felt sick.

Kuddel didn't really wake up. He rather ceased to be unconscious.

The air in the room was stagnant. A heavy mixture of cold smoke, stale breath, old beer, and something sweet that smelled suspiciously like spilled liqueur and forgotten food poisoning.

He lay half across the mattress, half beside it. His back protested first. Then his head. Then his stomach. The rest of his body was a jumble of resistance.

"Urgh," he said. That was all he could manage.

The wallpaper above him came loose from the wall in one spot and hung down like a tongue. He stared at it. When he moved his head, the room began to rock. So he stayed still and stared at this tongue of wallpaper as if it were about to tell him something important.

She said nothing. Of course not.

Only his skull spoke up:

What happened yesterday?

The night was a puzzle. Fragments emerged:

Late-night shop. Elke. Boonekamp. Uwe. Peep show in my mind's eye. At some point, the intersection with hedge pissers. A laugh that was too loud. A cigarette butt that almost fell in my face.

After that: Nothing more. Black. Or rather that brownish-grey nothingness that drunken brains get when they switch to energy-saving mode.

"Shit," Kuddel muttered. His tongue was as dry as a carpet in the stairwell of a welfare building.

He tried to sit up. Wrong decision.

My head was spinning like a carousel, my stomach was doing somersaults. The room tilted to the left, then to the right, then forward.

"Fuck."

He just barely managed to turn sideways and vomit the remains of the previous evening into a bucket that was standing there as if some smarter Kuddel had thoughtfully provided it the night before.

Everything that hadn't yet been decided upon came out: beer, Boonekamp, stomach acid, two or three scraps of something that might once have been food.

When nothing more came out but air and disgusting noises, he leaned back, panting heavily. The bucket stank like a cheap public toilet. His head was throbbing like a generator in an abandoned basement.

"Good morning, you old wreck," he heard his own voice in his head. "Another day successfully wasted."

He needed a cigarette.

Not because it made sense. Because it was ritual. Rituals held him together like cheap tape.

He felt around on the floor until he found the box. Four crooked cigarettes, one half-used, a filter without anything. He fished one out and smelled it. It smelled of everything but hope.

With trembling fingers, he lit it. The first puff felt like he was drawing in inhaled dust directly into his sinuses. The second puff was slightly better. The third puff was okay.

The first wave of nicotine hit his head, mingling with the haze of residual alcohol. He didn't feel better. Just... more familiar.

"What was that, Hecke?" he thought.

"We're too old to masturbate in a relaxed way, and too young to play bingo."

He laughed dryly, which immediately turned into a cough.

Too old for everything, too young to die, too stupid to change.

That was his true status.

He groped for his mobile phone. It was lying under two T-shirts, an ashtray, and a flyer for some concert he had never gone to.

Display: 09:43.

No messages. No missed calls.

The only "notification" he had was the pain in his skull and the sticky tongue.

He thought about the old days. Back when the day after was still romanticized: Waking up on a sofa somewhere after drinking, everyone laughing, cracking jokes, getting a kebab, "Dude, remember yesterday how...", then partying again.

Now, "the day after" was no longer an adventure. Now, "the day after" was a problem made up of aching limbs, shreds of shame, and financial issues.

Speaking of money:

He reached into the pocket of his jeans, which were lying somewhere next to the bed, half under his shoe, which was standing in the middle of the room as if he had tried to undress yesterday and lost all motivation along the way.

Three coins. A crumpled ten-euro note. Two tickets from the previous day.

He stared at the tenner. Then at the bucket. Then back at the tenner.

"At least I don't have to work today," he muttered. Not as if it were a gift. More as a chronic fact.

His stomach rumbled indignantly. Not so much as something nauseating anymore – more as if it were saying: You idiot, fill me with something meaningful or I'll complain all day.

Food. He needs to eat something. Anything. Something fried, fatty, that will bind the poison.

The thought of food made him gag briefly. He ignored it.

He sat up straight again, took a deep breath, and then stood up very slowly – centimeter by centimeter. His circulatory system reacted to each millimeter with an angry thump against his forehead.

"Stop whining," he growled into the empty room. "You wanted to perform world-class yesterday, now you're causing pain."

He staggered towards the kitchen. The kitchen was really just a corner. A sink, two cupboards, a stove that had looked sulky for three weeks because nobody had really used it. Empty bottles stood among old plates and pans. Lots of empty bottles.

In the fridge: Half a bottle of ketchup. An onion that was already growing out of its shell again. A half-used jar of mustard. Two cans of beer.

He stared at the beer cans. The beer cans stared back.

"Not now," he said. "Later. Maybe. Or never. We'll see."

He grabbed a glass, rinsed off the most obvious dirt, and filled it with tap water. The water was cold, hard, and slightly tinged with everything the pipes had to offer. He drank it anyway. He drank greedily, as if trying to extinguish from within the fire he had started.

He didn't feel any better after two glasses. But the scratchiness in his throat lessened.

He dragged himself back into the room, collapsed onto the mattress, grabbed his phone and reflexively scrolled through nothing.

No new information. No surprises.

He opened some app, no idea why. People were posting photos of breakfast bowls, the forest, the gym, their dog, their child. Someone was posting about their vacation.

"First coffee, then saving the world", was written under a picture with latte art.

"Fuck you all," Kuddel muttered. "I'll be glad if I get to Murat's today without dying on the way."

His gaze lingered on an old chat with Heckenpisser. The last message was from last night:

Hedge:

"Did you arrive safely, King? Or did the road adopt you? Hehehe."

He hadn't replied. I didn't even know if he was still capable of writing when that happened.

He was now typing, slowly, with two fingers:

"I'm awake. I feel like I've been spat out of a peep show. A late-night shop? Later?"

He sent it. He placed his phone next to him. He briefly closed his eyes.

His skull throbbed in time with his own regret. The cigarette in his hand was half burned down, ash on his T-shirt.

How many more times?

The question flashed through his mind. Not as a great drama. More as a tired thought.

How many more times will this process repeat?

Drinking. Philosophizing. Planning. Doing nothing. Staggering home. Vomiting. Waking up. Hating yourself. To the corner store. Starting all over again.

Kuddel wasn't one to wallow in self-pity for long. He was too used to it. It was like an old jacket to him – it stank, but it fit.

Nevertheless, some part of him clung to the idea that the next day might be different. Not better. Just... different.

His phone vibrated.

Hedge:

"I'm still alive. Surprise. I've got a pulse and coffee. You've got what? A cigarette and vomit? Hehehe."

Kuddel grinned against his will. The laughter hurt, but was strangely good.

He typed back:

"Cigarette, vomit, mental images. So, as usual."

Hedge:

"I still need to pretend I have some structure. I'll get back to you in 1-2 hours. Late-night therapy, chapter: The day after. Hehehe."

"Late-night therapy," Kuddel murmured. He liked that phrase.

He put his phone down, leaned back again, and stared at the ceiling. The wallpaper was still hanging down like a tongue.

He held up his hand, examined his fingers. Yellow nicotine stains, small scratches, a plaster from some time ago. Hands that had once held things – guitars, women, tools – now mainly bottles and cigarettes.

"The day after," he said loudly into the room. "Hangover, cigarettes, vomit. And then...?"

The question lingered.

The last sentence from yesterday briefly flickered in my mind:

"The day after – hangover, cigarette butts, vomit."

Almost as if it were not just a chapter in the book – but the title of his daily routine.

He closed his eyes once more. Not to dive away again. Just to briefly endure the morning.

Outside, he heard a car honk somewhere. A child laughed. A neighbor shouted through the stairwell because the mail hadn't arrived.

The world went on. Whether he came along or not was irrelevant to her.

He took the last drag from his cigarette, stubbed it out, and sat back up. "Come on, you wreck," he said to himself. "Take a shower. Or something that sounds similar."

Of course, there was no shower. But a fresh T-shirt. Cold water on the face. And the quiet feeling that it was somehow comforting that at least someone was waiting for him later at the corner store.

Hedge pisser. Elke. Maybe Murat. Maybe Uwe.

No peep show. No red light. No women behind glass.

Only neon lights, cigarettes, and Sterni beer. And the cheap but honest promise:

**You are not the only one,
the day after
kicks you in the face.**

The second attempt to wake up went slightly better.

Kuddel stood in front of the bathroom mirror, looking as if someone had tried to reconstruct a human being from old glass and trash. His eyes were red, his skin blotchy, and his hair in a way that could no longer be called a "hairstyle" without risking a lawsuit.

He leaned forward, braced himself with both hands on the sink, and breathed in what came back up from him with disgusted fascination.

"You're officially no longer a morning person," he muttered to his reflection. "If you ever were."

He turned on the cold water and briefly immersed his entire face. No cautious splashing, no spa treatment – more as if he wanted to test whether drowning might actually be an option.

The water was ice-cold, coursing through his veins like a dirty current, briefly shocking his skull, then that throbbing again. At least the room had stopped spinning. It was only swaying.

He wiped his face with the back of his hand. No towels. Who needs towels when you can just grab a T-shirt that already smells of everything?

He put on a reasonably clean shirt, picked out a pair of jeans that were still wearable, fished socks out of a pile which he only smelled briefly and decided: "okay-ish".

In the kitchen, he shoved down a dry, day-old roll that was more like a weapon. He chewed, even though his stomach protested. "Eat it, otherwise you'll be gone at the corner store before the first bottle has even had a chance to set up," he told himself.

Time dragged on. He sat for a while simply on a chair, staring at a stain on the wall, drinking tap water, and waiting for his pulse to stop pounding in his throat.

The phone vibrated again.

Hedge:

"I can go now. I look like a tax auditor with internal tinnitus. Late-night convenience store in 20 minutes?"

Kuddel typed with his thumb:

"I'm on my way. If I don't die on the way."

He stuffed his cigarette butts, his change, his crumpled tenner, put on his boots – topsoil included – and dragged himself down the stairs.

The stairwell smelled of old cleaning products, dog, a hint of marijuana, and neighborhood grievances. Downstairs, a TV was playing too loudly. Someone was shouting a child's name that sounded like it had been copied from an influencer's playlist.

Outside, the daylight hit him like a slap in the face. It wasn't even sunny, just bright. Too bright for his condition.

He blinked, pulled his cap further down over his face, and put one foot in front of the other.

The street looked the same as always – but today he saw it through that dull veil that only someone who still carries toxic fog from the previous evening knows.

A mother pushed a stroller past, talked on her phone, glanced at him briefly, and then looked away again. A delivery driver jogged almost past him, a brown box on his shoulder, his eyes glued to the scanner. Two schoolchildren laughed at something, probably related to some app that Kuddel couldn't even spell.

He staggered towards the subway, but after two steps towards the stairs decided that he couldn't handle any more underground experiences today and preferred to take the long way on foot.

The body needed air. And time.

Halfway there, he had to stop briefly, leaning against a wall as if waiting for someone. He was just waiting for his brain to return to normal.

"Next attempt," he muttered and started moving again.

When the corner store finally came into view, it almost felt like an arrival. Not home – the place was too honestly lit for that – but like a checkpoint in a game where you'd long since lost track of things.

Murat was already standing in the doorway, holding a can which he was putting on a shelf.

"Well, Jesus on meth," he exclaimed when he saw Kuddel. "Risen from the dead? Yesterday you looked like you'd drowned your soul in the Boonekamp."

"The soul is overrated," Kuddel grumbled, stood at the standing table, and placed his palm flat on the cold surface for a moment. "I'll have a Sterni to counteract any remaining brain cells."

Murat wordlessly placed a bottle and a glass of water in front of him.

"Drink both," he said. "One for the body, the other for the character. You have to figure out for yourself which is which."

Kuddel took the water first. A big gulp, then another. Then the beer afterwards, like a dirty blessing.

Shortly afterwards, Heckenpisser appeared. Unlike Kuddel, he didn't look quite so wrecked – but his particular hangover was more subtle: slightly glassy eyes, a hairstyle that wasn't quite right, a shirt ironed but buttoned crookedly.

"There's my favorite coma patient!" he exclaimed as he approached. "Well, king of evening entertainment?"

"Shut up and drink with me," said Kuddel. "Before I'm sober enough to be truly ashamed."

Heckenpisser put down his briefcase, ordered a Sterni beer for himself, and looked at him more closely.

"Wow," he said admiringly. "You look like someone who was trying to declare world domination yesterday and is already struggling on the stairs today. Hehehe."

"Stairs are also underestimated in their danger," Kuddel retorted. "One wrong step and you're on welfare with a cast."

They took a few sips in silence. The familiar silence of those who know that for now only liquid is allowed to speak, before words can make any sense.

"You know what," Heckenpisser began at some point, "my mother looked at me this morning as if I were an experiment that had gone wrong."

"She was right about that," said Kuddel.

"She asked, 'Ulf, why are you doing this to yourself? You're not a young man anymore,'" Heckenpisser recounted. "I wanted to tell her: 'Because otherwise I'll realize I'm an old man with youthful misery.' But I just said, 'It's after-work culture, Mom.' Hehehe."

Murat laughed softly. "After-work culture," he repeated. "That's when you're so dead that you have to celebrate him when he comes along."

Kuddel took another sip and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Did you guys also have such romantic ideas about the 'day after' back in the day?" he asked. "Like: lying in bed

with a hangover, with someone next to you, coffee in bed, laughing your heads off, 'Remember yesterday...?'"

"Yes," said Hedge Pisser. "I had that until I realized that the person next to me is usually myself in the mirror when I'm kneeling at the toilet bowl. Hehehe."

"I once tried being romantically hungover," Murat chimed in. "It was after a house party. I woke up next to someone, couldn't remember her name. I wanted to make her coffee, but I was so out of it that I put salt in the filter. She took the first sip, looked at me, got up without a word, and left. I never dreamed about the 'day after' again. Since then, it's only been 'survived the day'."

They laughed, that tired, rough laugh that came from the gut and hurt the head.

Kuddel noticed how the hangover slowly shifted from "acute catastrophe" to "chronic low mood." His stomach had stopped rebelling, and his head had decided to settle into a constant, tolerable rumble.

"I think the worst part isn't the hangover," he said. "The worst part is that void. The moment you realize: The evening is gone. All the blather you said, the plans you made, the feeling of being important – all erased. And all that's left is a face like mine."

"Yes," Heckenpisser agreed. "That moment when you think: If someone had had a camera right now, it would be embarrassing – but at least it would be proof that I existed. Instead, you only have fragments. A joke here, a laugh there, maybe another embarrassing moment on hold. The rest is gone."

"Perhaps it's better this way," Murat said. "If all your blather from yesterday had been recorded on video, the domestic intelligence agency would be a regular customer here."

"Oh, come on," said Heckenpisser. "We're harmless. We're only threatening ourselves."

Kuddel stared at the label of his bottle, stroking the print with his thumb as if he could rub away some meaning underneath.

"Last night," he said slowly, "I was lying in bed imagining St. Pauli. Again. Red lights, women, Uwe in the audience, all of you. I realized that my mind has been playing the same movies for years. Always: maybe, someday, one day. And then I wake up, throw up in the bucket, and go back to the corner store. That's what my real series looks like. This is season 9 or something."

Heckenpisser frowned. "I had something similar today while half asleep," he confessed. "Only without St. Pauli. I dreamt I was sitting in a waiting room. Dry plants, old magazines, that number-ticket machine crap. And the display didn't say 'Next please,' but 'Next day after.' And I kept getting up, going through the same door, but each time I ended up somewhere different: an office, a late-night shop, a train station toilet, back home with Mom. Only: it was always the same hangover."

"Wow," said Murat. "You should drink less or take more drugs. Your minds are too sober and in the wrong place."

They drank again. The time in front of the late-night shop had its own unique consistency – slow, but not stagnant.

Eventually Tanja came by, with shopping bags, a stressed face and the look of a woman who had seen too many wrong men and too little proper sleep.

"Well, look at you leftovers," she said. "You look like someone pulled you out of the freezer and thawed you too soon."

"Good morning, Princess," grinned Hedge-Pisser. "How's your hangover level?"

"I don't drink anymore," she said. "I'm an adult now. I'll make my mistakes sober."

She stopped anyway, briefly put down the bags and grabbed a cigarette from Kuddel.

"The day after?" she asked, blowing smoke into the air.

"The day after everything," said Kuddel. "Yesterday, last year, ten years ago. A collective hangover."

"The older you get, the less they're individual hangovers," said Tanja. "At some point, you just have a background hum. And that's what we call life."

"That's my problem with you women," said Heckenpisser. "You manage to pack more truth into one sentence than we can into three bottles."

"Yes," said Tanja. "And that's exactly why we'll leave at some point and you'll continue hanging around the kiosk. I have to go before I remember why I like standing around with you."

She took her bags, nodded to Murat, gave Kuddel back the cigarette – half-smoked – and disappeared back into the flow of the street.

"She's got her peep show on her mind too," Kuddel muttered.

"Sure," said Murat. "Just in a different genre."

The day passed without much happening – and that was precisely the problem. No job center, no appointments, no catastrophe. Just this creeping, sticky "nothingness" that wedged itself between the hangover and the next evening.

"I sometimes wonder," said Heckenpisser towards afternoon, as the sun sank lower and the shadows grew longer, "if this isn't just one long, badly edited scene. No beginning, no end. Just the day after."

"Perhaps," Kuddel replied, "the day after is our real main character. Yesterday we were just extras. Today we see what's left."

Murat placed the next round down and looked at them for a second more seriously than they were used to.

"You know what," he said. "As long as you still come around the next day, at least you're not completely out of the picture. The day I don't see either of you at all, without one of you having sent a text message, is the day I'll start to worry."

"Or plan a funeral," added Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"Then at least make sure," said Kuddel, "that it says on my stone: 'Kuddel lies here. No drinking water.'"

"I'll do it," Murat promised. "And underneath in parentheses: 'The day after won.'"

They laughed. And somewhere behind it, very quietly, there was a small, stubborn part of them that thought:

Not today.

Not yet.

The day after hit again – with a hangover, cigarette butts, and vomit.

But the drunkards were still standing.

Crooked. Filthy. Lost.

But they were standing.

The afternoon dragged on like old chewing gum.

The sun slowly shifted from "too bright for hangover eyes" to "orange sauce on the street." In front of the late-night shop, there was that particular Berlin twilight: not romantic, just a different color for the same grime. Traffic slowed, people lugged groceries, children were being gathered up, dogs needed to pee.

Kuddel leaned against the bar table like a piece of furniture that's become ingrained and never put away. In front of him was the bottle, next to it the ashtray, and around them lay his remnants of hope.

Hedge-pisser sat half on the barstool, half off to the side, as if unsure whether to stay or simply topple over. His shirt was now unbuttoned, his bow tie in his pocket.

"Funny," he said sometime in the early evening, "in the past, the day after was just the prelude to the next crash. Now it's the main event."

"Back then," Kuddel grumbled, "we also had backs that didn't complain with every cough. And a circulatory system that didn't issue a safety warning every third beer."

Murat half listened, half didn't. He went about his usual corner-store business: accepting empty bottles, counting change, explaining the right beer to some tourists, lending a regular customer credit for two packs of cigarettes with the addendum: "Last time, man, really."

Kuddel stared for a while at the passing cars, then at his hands, then at hedge pissers.

"I wonder if any of this still makes sense," he said quietly.

Heckenpisser raised an eyebrow. "Do you mean the alcohol, the world domination plans, or your existence in general? Hehehe."

"It's all in one package," Kuddel replied. "I mean, look at us. We call this 'quitting time,' 'drinking,' 'therapy,' 'cultural evening,' 'peep show in our minds'... but in the end, every day after is the same: You wake up, throw up, feel ashamed, come here, and pretend it's all part of some grand scheme. Is that still living, or is it just repetition?"

Heckenpisser took a long gulp, paused briefly, and then nodded.

"Yes," he said. "But honestly, most people are just repeating themselves. They just have different props. Daycare, office, hardware store. We have Sterni beer, cigarettes, a corner store. They just call their hangovers something different: 'inner emptiness,' 'burnout,' 'midlife crisis.' Hehehe."

"Their cat smells like aftershave," Murat remarked. "Yours smells like a train station toilet."

"Everyone gets the hangover they deserve," said Kuddel. "Mine's fed up with me, I think. He'll quit soon."

They just stood there for a while, letting the day drift by.

Every now and then someone would come by and ask, "Well, still alive?" Every now and then someone would tell an anecdote. Every now and then they would laugh.

But the same question kept creeping in – unspoken, but palpable:

For how much longer?

How much longer can this continue, endlessly revolving around the cycle of "evening – excess – day after – late-night shop – evening" without something finally breaking?

Heckenpisser had to leave at some point. Gerda wasn't exactly a stickler for rules, but she had a knack for spotting runaways. And he didn't want to show up for dinner again looking like nothing more than a cloud of scent.

"I'm getting out of here," he said, grabbing his bag. "Otherwise, she'll call the missing persons unit right away and report: 'My son has fallen back into his old ways.'"

"Tell her you were on an educational trip," Murat suggested. "Module: Social Analysis at the Tap."

Heckenpisser grinned. "She still thinks I'm a notch better than you, Kuddel," he said. "If she knew how evenly matched we are, she'd get heart palpitations. Hehehe."

He patted Kuddel on the shoulder. "Survive the evening," he said. "You have to go to the office tomorrow, don't you?"

That hit home.

Kuddel grimaced. Tomorrow. Job center. Appointment. Some kind of "consultation." Some caseworker who will explain in a gentle voice why his life appears as a problem case in Excel spreadsheets.

"Oh yeah," he growled. "Almost forgot. Thanks for the reminder, you jerk."

"I'm just helping to maintain the dramatic tension," grinned Heckenpisser. "Chapter 'The Day After' naturally ends with the cliffhanger 'Job Center with a lingering hangover.' Otherwise, the punchline would be missing. Hehehe."

"Piss off, literature nerd," said Kuddel, but he couldn't suppress a grin.

Heckenpisser nodded to Murat, gave a quick wave towards the shop window, and then set off. His gait was slightly unsteady but controlled – a man sober enough to walk straight and drunk enough not to think too much.

"Watch your head!" Murat shouted after them. "You only have one. And it's already full enough of shit."

When he left, it became quieter. Not really quiet – Berlin is never quiet – but that particular void that remains when the one guy who talked too much is suddenly gone.

Kuddel and Murat remained engaged in conversation for a while longer. Nothing profound, nothing earth-shattering. Trifles: Who's died, who's moved, who's in jail, who has a new dog.

But at some point it became clear: the day had reached its peak. Nothing more was to come.

"You look like you need to throw up at least one more time," said Murat. "You'd better do it at home before someone decorates my corner again."

"I'm leaving now," Kuddel grumbled, finished his Sterni beer, and placed the empty bottle down like a small declaration of surrender. "Tomorrow I'll stop by after work and tell you how much they've demotivated me again."

"If you oversleep, you'll come by and tell us about it," Murat grinned. "Then I'll get popcorn."

Kuddel set off for home. The hangover was no longer sharp, more dull – like a stone in your stomach that you're carrying around.

The streetlights were now fully on, cars glided through the neighborhood like sluggish fish. A group of teenagers giggled, one shouted something about "brother," someone drove too close to him, someone else was playing music from an open window—a German-language ballad about heartbreak that was getting on his nerves.

Climbing stairs felt like a mountain hike. My body commented on each step with its own sound: knees, back, lungs, heart, everything had something to say.

Upstairs in his room, he unlocked the door and that familiar thing happened: the silent encounter with himself.

No "Hello", no question "So, how was it?", no "Nice to see you". Just a closed door, same air, same weight.

He dropped his boots in the hallway, squeezed past the scattered clothes to the kitchen, and mechanically gathered something edible. Pasta, dry, with ketchup. No enjoyment, just sustenance.

Sitting at the table, fork in hand, he stared at the plate. Every bite felt like chewing through concrete.

When the plate was half empty, he pushed it away. His stomach signaled: that's enough, or I'm quitting.

He went into the bathroom, peed, and stood in front of the mirror for a moment. The light was too harsh, but he didn't turn it off.

"Hey there," he said to his reflection. "World ruler. Peep show director. Train station toilet philosopher. The day after is written all over your face like a criminal record."

His gaze drifted downwards. Just briefly, out of habit.

The tattoo was where it always was. "No drinking water."

He had to laugh, quietly, roughly.

"To be honest," he murmured, "this is what my whole life is about."

He turned off the light, tiptoed back into his room, and sank down onto the mattress.

In the semi-darkness, only silhouettes could be seen: piles, bottles, clothes, and somewhere a mobile phone.

He reached for it, unlocked it, and wrote Heckenpisser one last message without thinking much about it:

"Job center tomorrow. If I don't make it, distribute my Sterni points fairly. And make sure the story about the train station toilet doesn't get lost."

The answer came almost immediately:

"If you die at the job center, I'll submit a request for a literary analysis of your life. Working title: 'The Drunkards - Case File XY Unsolved'. Hehehe. Sleep now. Tomorrow, jazz with a hangover."

Kuddel put down his phone and turned onto his side. His head throbbed less loudly, his body was flat.

The day after was almost over. He hadn't made it any better, nor any worse than the others. He had simply survived it.

That was all I could manage at the moment.

As he slowly tipped over, one last thought intruded:

*Perhaps the real trick isn't surviving the big nights –
but the miserable mornings that followed.*

Tomorrow would be a different morning: neon lights in the waiting room, taking a number, waiting, "How do you envision your professional future, Mr. Scholz?", the typical administrative jargon that caused even more headaches than any Boonekamp.

Job center jazz with lingering traces of alcohol

It wouldn't be a beautiful song – but it belonged on the album.

With this half-baked, half-resigned feeling, Kuddel slipped away,

over into a sleep that did not restore, but merely bridged the time until the next hangover.

Job center jazz with lingering traces of alcohol

He woke up as usual: wrong position, wrong smell, wrong body. First came the taste – a mixture of ashtray, diluted Jägermeister, and metal. Then the throbbing in his skull. Then the faint rumbling in his stomach that said: We need to talk.

He lay still, trying to turn away one last time. Then a thought pierced the fog:

"Job center. Today. Appointment."

"Oh shit," he muttered.

The clock on my phone said 8:37. The appointment was at 10:00. Government. No leniency. No humanity. Just numbers and computer forms.

He sat up too quickly. His skull responded with a dull thump, as if someone had placed a subwoofer right next to his brainstem and started blasting it.

The room still contained the remnants of the previous day: empty bottles, piles of clothes, a plate of dried-out noodles, the bucket that had served as an emergency exit. It smelled stale, of smoke, sweat, and something sweetish that he didn't want to define more precisely.

"Job center," he said again, as if that would improve anything.

He dragged himself into the bathroom and stared in the mirror. The face that looked back at him could have been printed as a warning sign:

"This is what long-term decisions look like when combined with short-term drinks."

Kuddel was pale with that particular hangover gray that had nothing to do with a rocker attitude, but rather with the state of his liver. Dark shadows under his eyes looked as if they had already seen several seasons.

He turned on the tap and splashed cold water on his face. "You have to look somewhat manageable," he told himself. "They don't like it when they think you're dying in the system."

After drinking the water, he automatically reached for a cigarette. Completely the wrong idea – he knew that. He didn't care.

The first drag made him choke, the second burned, the third calmed something inside him that was worse than the hangover: the feeling that the day would not get any better.

In the kitchen, breakfast was emergency-level: a dry bread roll, cold coffee from yesterday which he reheated in the microwave even though it already tasted like a write-off.

When he opened the refrigerator door, he saw it: the bottle of Jägermeister, half empty, with sticky edges. He stared at it, it stared back.

"No experiments," he muttered. "Not today."

He turned the bottle only briefly, saw the green sticker, and an image flickered in his mind that was not from today, but from back then:

Job center consultation. Temporary tattoo on the forehead. Fresh Jägermeister stains on the T-shirt.

He laughed briefly, roughly, almost affectionately.

Back then, he had a date with Heckenpisser. The brilliant idea: "If we have to go to the office anyway, at least we won't be sober." They had drunk themselves into "courage" beforehand. It looked better in theory than in the official files.

They'd stuck disposable temporary tattoos from a gumball machine onto their foreheads – some nonsensical skull with flames and the word "Hardcore" underneath. No, wait. His was "NO FEAR." Hecke's was some tribal crap.

And there were Jägermeister stains on his shirt, because of course he'd spilled some while "drinking for courage." A fresh stain, dark, sticky, right at chest level. That's how he'd been sitting in the clerk's office back then.

"Mr. Scholz..." This "Mr. Scholz," where you knew you were neither Mr. nor Schulz. That was someone else. One who arrived on time and didn't have a skull on his forehead.

"You can't possibly be in this state..." "This isn't a state," he had grinned at the time. "This is my nature."

She just pursed her lips, hammered away at the keyboard, and mumbled something about "lack of cooperation" and "reasonableness." He went home with a sanction and a hangover. Hedge-pisser laughed himself silly for three days afterward.

Today, Kuddel decided, he would at least show up without a temporary tattoo on his forehead. You learn as you go. Slowly. Reluctantly.

He looked for a shirt that smelled only of cigarettes and not of booze. The selection was limited. In the end, he got a black one that said "Kill 'Em All" – his old Metallica shirt, holes and all. For him: almost decent.

Jeans, belt, boots, cap, cigarettes, ticket.

The full official outfit.

It was too bright outside for his liking. The sun had apparently decided to really turn up the heat today, just to rub it in his face.

On the way to the train, my stomach made itself known again with a brief, threatening gurgle. "Not now," it growled. "You had your moment yesterday."

In the entrance area of the job center fortress, that poster was hanging again, showing smiling people looking into the future as if it were an IKEA catalog.

"Your opportunity – We support you on your way to employment!"

Among them was Kuddel, with lingering traces of alcohol, smelly clothes, and eyes that said: I'll only support the cigarette industry now.

The air in the building was its own ecosystem. Not exactly bad, but artificial. A mixture of cleaning products, perfume, cheap body lotion, and nervousness.

He took a waiting number.

B 173.

The display in the corner was showing B 159.

"Great," he muttered. Plenty of time to regret ten times over not having run away.

The waiting room was full of stories that nobody wanted to hear:

A guy in sweatpants, eyes downcast, who looked like he'd gone off the road five years ago and never made it back. A woman in her mid-thirties with two kids glued to their phones while she desperately tried to look serious and strong when she was just tired. An older man leafing through his papers as if searching for his past. A pale boy who looked like he'd stumbled in straight from a computer lab, clueless about how any of this worked.

Kuddel sat down on one of the plastic chairs, which were designed in such a way that you couldn't feel comfortable. Whether he was still drunk or not, he tried to sit as upright as possible.

Next to him someone coughed, two rows away a woman whispered into her mobile phone, at the very back someone was asleep with his mouth open. From somewhere came the low hum of a machine spitting out coffee that undoubtedly tasted of burnt anger.

Job center jazz.

If you listened closely, it all created its own kind of music: the beeping of the call system, the rustling of paper, the clicking of keyboards, whispers, coughs, sniffles, and every now and then an annoyed sigh from the employees creeping through the corridor.

A broken, asynchronous orchestra in which everyone played their own piece, but no one knew the lyrics.

B 160.

B 161.

He rubbed his temples, tried to open his eyes without his skull protesting. It worked, sort of.

Heckenpisser wasn't there. He had another appointment on a different day. "Going to the office in pairs," he'd said last time, "is like going to the dentist in pairs – you can talk about it better afterwards, but they still drill each of you individually. Hehehe."

So Kuddel sat there alone, with his own private weather on his mind.

Somewhere deep down, he was afraid they'd try to sell him something again: a program, job application training, coaching, "activation." Another one who showed up with a flip chart and borrowed optimism, saying, "You just have to want it, Mr. Scholz!"

He had seen so many "you just have to want it" faces that the phrase had started to make him rash.

B 167.

B 168.

A young guy, maybe in his early twenties, slumped down next to him. Ripped jeans, hoodie, smelling of cheap deodorant and something sweet. The boy was pale, with dark circles under his eyes, as if he'd been gaming too much or thinking too much.

He glanced sideways at Kuddel, sniffed minimally, and briefly grimaced.

"Are you also a flag?" he asked quietly.

"I call it continuity," Kuddel murmured. "What's your name?"

"Marvin," said the boy. "At least within the system. I haven't decided personally yet."

Kuddel grinned. "I am Kuddel," he said. "At least in private. In the system, I'm called Mr. Scholz and I'm a so-called placement case."

"What does that mean?" asked Marvin.

"I'm the wrench that no longer fits any nut," Kuddel replied. "Too old for the rest, too young to throw away, too broken to use."

Marvin chuckled. "I'll have to remember that," he said. "I'm officially 'under 25 – difficult to place.' That's what they said last time. They'd barely even seen me. I wasn't even properly in the chair before I was already considered heavy."

B 171.

The neon lights hummed. A toddler at the front started to cry, the mother hissed: "Not now, please, not now." Someone stood up, paced nervously in circles, then sat down again.

Kuddel almost lit a cigarette, then realized he was inside and put it away again. The reflex was there. The urge to briefly smoke away what couldn't be smoked away.

"Did you have a tough evening?" asked Marvin, in a slightly more formal tone.

Kuddel looked at him. "Guys like you don't have to address me formally," he said. "I'm not a civil servant. Just a relic."

"Okay," said Marvin. "Did you have a rough night, Relikt?"

"Normal ones," Kuddel replied. "Late-night convenience stores, beer tents, philosophical self-analysis. You might not know about that yet. It comes when you get older. Then drinking is suddenly called 'processing things'."

"All I know is 'switching it off'," said Marvin. "But it never really switches off. It just flickers differently."

B 173.

The number appeared on the display. He flinched slightly.

"That's me," he said. "Now things are going to get jazzy."

"Good luck," said Marvin. "Or much less bad luck – depending on the circumstances."

Kuddel stood up, feeling every bone, every twinge. Walking down the hallway felt like walking to a stage he never wanted to be on.

Door 3.14 – Consultation. Below it was the name of his caseworker. He knew it by heart, although he always pretended to be reading it for the first time.

He knocked and heard a "Come in" from that toneless voice, which had been specially trained to be neutral.

The room was like any other counseling room: a desk, two chairs in front of it, a computer, a printer, a window overlooking the parking lot where hopes were dashed. On the wall, a motivational poster with a sunrise over a lake, and underneath, some kind of saying about "new beginnings".

Behind the desk: She.

Hair neatly arranged, blouse, vest, a smile that never reached the eyes. Glasses, file folder, ballpoint pen.

"Good morning, Mr. Scholz," she said. "Please take a seat."

He sat down. The remaining flag sat down with him.

He could see a tiny muscle twitch in her nostril as the smell reached her. She said nothing. Of course not. Bureaucrats rarely talk about smells. They just tick boxes for "not ready to integrate."

She typed something into the computer.
Click. Click. Click.

"So," she began. "We had agreed today to talk about your current situation and see what steps we can take to advance your professional integration."

Kuddel looked at her as if she had just spoken a foreign language. "You say that every time," he said. "And every time, I'm sitting here in exactly the same spot next month."

She ignored it. Or had learned to tune out such statements.

"First of all," she continued, "I must point out that it is important to arrive at our appointments in a suitable condition."

There it was. The sentence.

"I'm awake," said Kuddel. "I'm wearing trousers. I even bought a ticket. By my standards, I'm wearing a suit."

She glanced briefly over the rim of her glasses. Her gaze lingered for a moment on his shirt, on the old stains, on the worn lettering.

"Have you consumed any alcohol today?" she asked.

He briefly considered whether he should lie. Then he laughed to himself.

What good would lying do to someone who was already nothing but drop-down menus and standardized text snippets?

"Yesterday," he said honestly. "Today only coffee and water."

"But they smell..." she began, then fell silent, searching for a neutral word. "...still very much like last night."

"I have a very loyal perfume," he murmured.

She started typing again.
Click. Click. Click.

"Mr. Scholz," she finally said, "we have been in contact for some time now. I see from your documents that you have received several job placement offers, but have not taken up any sustainable employment."

"There's little that's sustainable about me," said Kuddel.

"They quit temporary work assignments, didn't start a training program, and declined a coaching offer last week," she read aloud. "Can you explain why?"

He could have said now:

Because I'm not a dog on a leash. Because I don't learn anything in coaching that my back and liver don't already know. Because I'm not the type of person who wants to sit in a seminar room and have a 28-year-old in a slim-fit jacket explain to me how motivation works.

Instead, he simply said:

"I just didn't fit in there."

She sighed softly. Bureaucratic sighs. They sound different. There's no real feeling in them – just processor load.

"What do you envision, Mr. Scholz?" she asked. "How do you think things should proceed?"

He leaned back – as far as he could without the chair squeaking. The hangover was still throbbing in his temples, but the question made him more alert than the coffee.

What do I imagine?

Good question. Bad stage.

Heckenpisser's sentence from yesterday still echoed:

"Tomorrow, jazz with a lingering hangover."

Kuddel cleared his throat.

"To be quite honest?" he asked.

She nodded cautiously.

"I imagine," he said slowly, "that I'll wake up one morning and not have to immediately think, 'How do I explain to someone today that I don't feel like doing their program?' I imagine being able to work somewhere without someone telling me I'm too old, too scruffy, or too difficult. I imagine that after work I might actually be tired from working—and not from collecting hopes and throwing them away again."

She looked at him. A moment when something flickered in her eyes that wasn't just a formality.

Then she picked up her pen again.

"That's... understandable," she said. "But given your current lifestyle, I see little chance of your situation changing."

Kuddel laughed softly, bitterly. "Welcome to my head," he said. "That sentence plays on a loop there."

The job center jazz continued: clicking, printing, paragraphs, sentences like from a cold price tag.

Remnants of alcohol, tired eyes, pub backbone.

The day after had been given a new stage –

This time with a file number.

She leafed through his documents as if she were looking up in an animal encyclopedia whether his species still exists at all.

“Mr. Scholz,” she began again, “you are 48 now. You have been receiving benefits under the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II) for...” – she let her finger wander across the screen – “...several years. In between, you had some short-term jobs, but nothing permanent. We need to find a way forward.”

“I have perspective,” said Kuddel. “It’s just that nobody likes to see it.”

She ignored the comment and continued typing. The clacking of the keyboard was the real rhythm here. Not jazz, more like a metronome with burnout.

"Do you recall that we already reached a so-called integration agreement two years ago?"

Oh yes. He remembered.

That was the legendary day. Temporary tattoo on his forehead. Jägermeister stain on his shirt. Hedge pisser next to him in the waiting room, grinning broadly.

"This is going to be huge," Hecke had said. "We're going in there like two rock stars at a job interview. They should see who they're dealing with. Hehehe."

“I look more like lost festival trash,” Kuddel had replied, pressing the rubber skull to his forehead. “No Fear” was written underneath. Pure irony.

The clerk back then was the same one. Same office, same blouse in a different color, same neutral voice.

“You can’t show up here like that, Mr. Scholz,” she had said, her gaze fixed on his tattoo. “That’s not...”

“...an expression of my inner attitude?” he interjected. “Yes. That’s exactly it.”

Hecke nearly fell off his chair, suppressing his laughter. The Jägermeister stain was still glistening. The meeting had been over in twelve minutes. The minutes were probably longer than the meeting itself.

Now, two years later, he was sitting here again. Without a temporary tattoo, but also without any significant development.

“Yes,” he said. “I vaguely remember it. It was one of my famous performances.”

“Back then,” she continued, “you agreed to a vocational guidance measure and then quit after a few days.”

"The career orientation was quickly sorted out," he muttered. "I was disoriented. That's it."

She breathed in audibly, she breathed out audibly. She probably filed it away internally in the folder "difficult, but not aggressive".

“Mr. Scholz,” she said, “we are not here to waste time with wordplay. You must understand that as a job center, we are obligated to work with you to find a solution. And for that, I need your cooperation.”

“But I’m here,” he replied. “For my generation, this is practically voluntary work.”

A flicker of annoyance and weariness briefly crossed her face. He knew that look. He'd seen it on teachers, social workers, disillusioned women. People who had realized at some point that he listened – but rarely followed.

“I have an offer here,” she said, her voice becoming slightly more formal. “A qualification project in the field of warehousing/logistics with integrated job application training. It lasts twelve weeks and includes practical components. However, physical stamina is a requirement.”

"What does 'practical' mean?" asked Kuddel.

“Shelves,” she said. “Goods movement. Scanning. Basic knowledge of warehouse management.”

He looked at her, then at his hands. Calluses from days gone by, a back that growled like an old dog in damp weather.

“I worked in a warehouse three years ago,” he said. “For two months. After that, I could only tie my shoes while sitting down. I’m not 25 anymore.”

“With the right support...”, she began.

“...the body lasts longer, yeah, yeah,” he interrupted. “Until it finally gives out, and then I’ll be standing there at 55, worn out from working myself to the bone in jobs nobody wants anyway. And you’ll write in my file: ‘Could not be marketed further for health reasons.’”

She pressed her lips together. "You're not the only one having difficulties," she said. "But many others still manage to reintegrate."

"Because they haven't drunk themselves into oblivion as much as I have," he thought, but didn't say it.

Instead, he leaned forward as far as the chair allowed.

"What would you do to me if you had a magic wand?" he asked. "Honestly. If there were no law, no form in the way. What do you see when you look at me?"

She was visibly irritated for a moment. This room was not designed for hypothetical questions, but for "yes/no", "agreement/rejection".

She sized him up. A battle-scarf type in a stripped-down, everyday version, eyes showing too many nights, a T-shirt with a band logo, the smell of yesterday in the air.

"I see..." she began slowly, "...a man with life experience who is apparently intelligent enough to express himself, but..."

"...too stubborn to be bent," he added. "Go ahead and say it."

She nodded slightly. "...but he gets in his own way," she concluded.

"Congratulations," he said. "You have just won first prize in the 'Analysis of My Existence Without Google' competition."

She half-ignored the sarcasm. Perhaps she simply didn't have the energy for it anymore.

"I believe," she continued, "that you could work in a field where you deal with people. Explaining, mediating, advising. But certain prerequisites would have to be met: reliability, keeping appointments, appearing sober, adhering to procedures."

Kuddel glanced briefly at the window. A car was parked below, with a child sitting in the back seat, staring out the window with a bored expression.

"I'm good at explaining to people what's wrong with them," he said. "But I don't think any organization would pay for that."

"There are also options in the social sector," she said cautiously. "Support services, low-threshold programs..."

He laughed, snorting. "Me, a social worker," he said. "Can you imagine me in a youth center? 'Kids, don't smoke and don't drink so much. Become like me instead.' Yeah, that works."

Even she had to grin briefly. It wasn't a broad smile, more of a twitch – but it was there.

"Realistically speaking," she began again, and there it was again: the bureaucratic tone, "we have to take it one step at a time. I can't give you the perfect job. But I can offer you a measure that is an opportunity to bring structure to your daily life. If you reject this, we will have to talk about benefit reductions."

There was the word: cuts.

It was always there at some point. Like a debt collector waiting to finally collect something.

"What exactly does that mean?" Kuddel asked matter-of-factly.

"If there is a lack of cooperation," she said, "the standard benefit can be reduced by 10 to 30 percent. In case of repeated offenses, even more. You know that."

He knew it. His refrigerator knew it even better.

He briefly thought of the corner store, of Sterni beer, of Boonekamp, of cigarettes. Of days when the money was already gone by the thirtieth, even though the office only transferred the funds on the first.

And he thought about the camp. About the pulling in his back. About the cardboard, the boxes, the eternal "faster, faster".

Between "finally destroying his back" and "further thinning his wallet" lay a grey strip on which he had been balancing for years.

"If I say yes," he said slowly, "will we be sitting here again in three months, you reading to me that I was there, but 'not sufficiently motivated,' or that the organization couldn't help me? And I'll be back without a job, but with more notes?"

She shrugged almost imperceptibly. "There's no guarantee," she said. "But without participation, there's no possibility at all."

He stared at her, she stared back. Two people who knew that no miracles were going to happen in that room.

The jazz of the keyboard began again.
Click. Click. Click.

"I propose," she finally said, "that we agree to participate in this program for an initial period of six weeks. If it becomes clear early on that it's not a good fit at all, we can adjust things. If you don't attend at all, I will have to impose sanctions. This isn't personal – it's the law."

"Law," he repeated. "It's like gravity. It doesn't care if you've fallen enough."

He exhaled slowly, heard himself say:

"Okay. Six weeks. I'll check out the place. But I'll say it right now: if someone treats me like a three-year-old, I'm outta here."

"You need to resolve conflicts differently, Mr. Scholz," she said, but her voice was less stern than the sentence. "I will print out the documents for you."

The printer started up, spewing out papers like an animal regurgitating food. She clutched them together and pushed them towards him.

"Here are the details of the program," she said. "Location, time, contact person. And here is the new integration agreement. Please read it carefully and sign if you agree."

He picked up the pages and skimmed through them. The words were half-blurred – hangover, neon light, officialese was a toxic combination.

"I don't sign anything I haven't actually read," he wanted to say. But he didn't.

Instead, he thought: If I don't sign now, I'll have the trouble immediately. If I sign, it will come later.

He reached for the pen. His name always looked strange on paper: "Kurt Scholz".

Kuddel signed as if he were merely quoting himself.

"Thank you," she said. "I hope you take advantage of this opportunity."

"They mainly want me to put a checkmark in the right column," he thought, but only said:

"I hope I can get through the six weeks without my back breaking and me vomiting in someone's face."

"That would... indeed be helpful," she replied dryly.

She clicked again, and the screen displayed a new screen.

"Do you have any further questions?" she asked.

He thought for a moment. A thousand questions. None suitable for this room.

"No," he said. "Just thirst."

She looked at him as if she didn't know whether it was a joke or a statement.

"Then we're done for today, Mr. Scholz," she finally said. "Please get in touch if there are any problems with the measure – early on, not when everything has escalated."

"My default state is escalated," he thought. He just nodded, stood up, and felt the blood briefly pound violently against his temples.

"Goodbye," she said.

"Until the next attempt," he replied and left the room.

The hallway felt different than when I first entered, although of course everything was the same: neon lights, doors, people with paper in their hands, numbers on displays.

Marvin was still sitting in the waiting room, number in hand, eyes glued to his mobile phone.

"So?" he asked when he saw Kuddel. "Are you still alive?"

"Yes," said Kuddel. "But they sentenced me to six weeks in a camp. A testing ground for broken backs."

Marvin grimaced. "My condolences," he said. "Maybe they'll release you early because of your character."

Kuddel grinned wearily.

"If I survive," he said, "I'll tell you at the corner store what it's like inside the inner circle of the decision-making machine."

“Deal,” said Marvin.

Outside the building, the air was different. Still urban, still dirty – but at least authentic. No bureaucratic blanket, no carpet, nobody with forms.

He lit the long-overdue cigarette and let the first drag feel like very bad, but familiar medicine.

Job center jazz with a lingering hangover: He had finished the first verse of the song.

The refrain would come later at the standing table, at Sterni's, at Heckenpissers, at Murat's.

There, where the sentences didn't disappear into files, but into smoke.

Outside the job center, Kuddel just stood there as if someone had accidentally removed him from the waiting room and pressed "pause".

The cigarette in his hand glowed, the smoke filled his lungs, and for the first time in hours the air was not filtered by the office ceiling, the scent of fear and forms.

There was a second poster hanging next to the door. He hadn't even noticed it when he went in.

"We will help you on your way to work!"

Among them were a laughing guy with a toolbox, a woman with a headset, an old man in a shirt and cardigan, all with that "We can do it!" grin that you only get when the photographer has said you'll get paid for it.

"On my way to work," Kuddel muttered. "You just pushed me down a path to a warehouse where I'd throw my back out after three pallets. Thanks for nothing, Motivation Cartel."

He pulled the last bit out of the cigarette butt, flicked it towards the curb, and slowly made his way off.

Not directly to the corner store. He needed a few meters in between to shake off the bureaucracy as best he could.

On his way to the subway, he saw himself reflected in shop windows: a light jacket, a T-shirt, a hangover face, shoulders half-lowered, as if he were preemptively apologizing for existing.

"NO FEAR," he thought suddenly, and had to grin. That temporary tattoo from back then, that had been a different story. Back then, he'd still allowed himself a bit of defiance. Skull on his forehead, fresh Jägermeister stains on his shirt. Hedge-pissers next to him, giggling like a schoolboy sabotaging his teacher.

Today, two years later, there was nothing left on his forehead. Only invisible writing: "Remaining flag." "Measure." "Please don't draw attention to yourself."

He didn't take the subway. The crowds, the smells, the announcements – it would have been too much for him. He preferred to walk, through side streets, past kiosks, kebab shops, and betting offices.

The city was bustling with activity. People with laptops, people with toolboxes, people with shopping bags, people with dogs. Everyone seemed to belong somewhere. Only he wandered in the middle of it all, like a character someone had copied into the wrong scene.

Every time he passed a shop window, he briefly considered simply going in and applying.

"Good day, I'm 48, I drink too much, my back is a mess, but I can talk to people and I know how to survive."

Nobody had job postings for something like that.

After turning a few corners, he finally saw the familiar neon sign of the corner store. This light was like a grumpy star that nevertheless shone reliably.

Murat stood half outside, half inside, with a pallet of water in front of him, which he pulled from the van.

"Well?" he exclaimed when he saw Kuddel. "Did they give you an office job as a motivational trainer?"

"Almost," said Kuddel. "Six weeks of camp. Application trauma included."

Murat whistled briefly through his teeth. "Well then," he said. "Welcome to the club of state-certified cardboard box pushers."

Kuddel stood at the standing table. It was clean today – freshly wiped, new rings made from condensation at the bottom of bottles. He placed his hands on the cold surface.

His head was buzzing. Not as bad as in the morning, but enough to remind him that he hadn't drunk his chamomile tea yesterday.

"One?" asked Murat, lifting a Sterni bottle half questioningly, half already in action.

"One," said Kuddel. "To wash down the bureaucratic mess."

Murat placed the bottle in front of him, along with a glass of water without a word. "This first," he said, pointing to the water. "I can see how your head is blinking."

Kuddel gulped down the water as if it were medicine, then took his first sip of beer. It tasted of metal and cheap hops – but also of routine.

He exhaled deeply. "Job center jazz with a lingering hangover," he murmured. "It couldn't have been composed better."

"Come on," said Murat. "Tell me. Did she attack you with legal arguments again?"

“With paragraphs and PowerPoint in her head,” said Kuddel. “Same old speech: ‘We need to find a perspective, Mr. Scholz.’ I almost told her my perspective is to the left of the beer shelf. But I pulled myself together. You know, getting older.”

The door opened and Heckenpisser turned the corner as if he'd been waiting for his moment. Bow tie askew, shirt half tucked in, briefcase that looked like it was slowly crushing his spine and his dreams.

"There he is, the man with the integration agreement," he called from afar. "Well, have they successfully praised you back into capitalism? Hehehe."

"Postponed," Kuddel corrected. "Six weeks in the warehouse/logistics. Me and pallets. This is going to be a love story without a happy ending."

Heckenpisser put down his bag, grabbed a bottle, and Murat opened it as he walked by. "To German welfare state romanticism," said Hecke, raising the bottle. "No one will be left behind – we'll give everyone one last little push towards the abyss. Hehehe."

They clinked glasses. The sound was small, but genuine.

"What was she like?" asked Hecke. "The woman with the sunrise poster?"

"Neutral as always," said Kuddel. "She tried to make me a case with progress. I tried not to vomit on the desk. In the end, we met in the middle: a measure instead of a sanction."

Heckenpisser nodded. "Yes, that's how I know them," he said. "They're like jazz musicians. They have their standards, but sometimes they improvise a threat in between. 'Sanction, Mr. Scholz, sanction...' – that's their solo. Hehehe."

"Do you know what's really getting to me?" Kuddel began. "They asked me how I envisioned my future. Seriously. In that room. Under neon lights, with the hum of a coffee machine and three pages of printed agreement shoved in my face."

"And?" asked Murat, who now leaned against the door frame with his arms crossed.

"What am I supposed to say to that?" asked Kuddel. "I imagine waking up one day and not wanting to deal with you guys anymore? I said something about 'working without being ripped off, being tired from work in the evening instead of from hope, blah blah.' She gave me a brief, human look. Then she went back to hacking away at the computer."

"The computer is their real boss," said Heckenpisser. "If it says you're a 3 in the 'lost but eligible' category, then you can look like a fictional character all you want. Hehehe."

A few passersby stopped briefly, bought cigarettes, jingled their change, and left again. Life went on, no matter how much of Kuddel's official duties still echoed in his mind.

"I met this boy in there," Kuddel remembered. "Marvin. Under 25, hard to place. Pale as a ghost, dark circles under his eyes like us, but twenty years younger. He asked if I was still drunk. That's when I realized: the next generation is already queuing up."

“Marvin,” repeated Heckenpisser. “Later they’ll call them ‘Generation Perspective Measure’. By the time they’re 19, they already know more job center corridors than playgrounds. Hehehe.”

"He looked at me like I was some kind of future version of him," Kuddel muttered. "Like a ghost train character. 'If you keep going like this, in twenty years you'll look like him.'"

Heckenpisser looked at him. "Well," he said. "We're the warning signs nobody asked for."

Murat laughed dryly. "You're the cigarette pack of the system," he said. "A bit disgusting, but impossible to miss."

Kuddel took a deep sip, feeling the beer coat the taste of the job center. Not wash it away – just mask it.

"I signed it," he finally said, more to himself than to the others. "Me. Integration agreement number three thousand-something. At forty-eight. As if anyone seriously still needed career guidance for me."

"Call it something else," said Hedge Pisser. "Call it End-Level Industrial Internship. You're the final boss in the camp: 'Tired Man, Level 48, Special Attacks: Herniated Disc, Cynicism, Leftover Flag.' Hehehe."

“You’re laughing,” Kuddel muttered. “I’m really scared of this shit. Not of the work. Of myself. That I’ll be standing there after three days asking myself again: ‘What are you doing here, you fossil? Surrounded by 22-year-old logistics guys who still have back muscles and think this is all just a stepping stone?’”

Murat nodded slowly. "Work itself isn't the problem," he said. "The problem is when you realize you're replaceable. And you're the kind of guy who doesn't like being replaceable. You want to fail as a unique individual, at least."

“Exactly,” said Kuddel. “If I die, it won’t be as ‘run-of-the-mill warehouse worker’, but as ‘Kuddel, drunkard, king of cigarette butts and formally useless’.”

Heckenpisser nudged him lightly on the shoulder. "Do you know what you're doing?" he said. "You go there. You watch the gang. If one of them tries to explain the world to you, you say, 'Been there, done that, kid. It was shit.' And then you hold their back as long as you can. And in the evening we come back here and call the whole thing field research."

“Field research in the warehouse area,” Murat murmured. “Subject area: How many crates does it take before a man finally breaks?”

A car honked, someone shouted from a balcony, a dog barked. The neighborhood breathed. Kuddel heard his own breathing in between, heavy but continuous.

“Do you know what the best part is?” asked Heckenpisser, after a while of only noises talking.

“That it will be over at some point?” Kuddel advised.

“That you have a new story,” said Hecke. “‘Kuddel in the program.’ That’s pure material. Imagine the others in there. The motivator in his polo shirt. The participants in their jogging pants. The one who’s always late. That’s a whole series.”

“Yes,” said Murat. “And if you do it right, you won’t come out with a job, but with a book. Radio play series. Chapter: ‘Forklift in the Head’.”

Kuddel had to laugh. Not joyfully, but genuinely.

“It’s crazy,” he said, “that the thought of having stories to tell almost calms me more than the prospect of money.”

"Well," said Heckenpisser. "Money is always too little and always too late. Stories come instantly. And we're junkies for stories. Hehehe."

The sun had disappeared behind the houses. The shadows grew thicker, the faces more anonymous. The neon tube from the corner store was now the main source of light – sometimes flickering, sometimes constant.

"And what are you doing now?" asked Murat.

Kuddel lifted the bottle, examined the sediment at the bottom, and drank it down in one go. "Now?" he said. "I'm going home. I'm going to lie down. Tomorrow I'll call the job center and pretend I'm interested. Then I'll go there and check out the place. And tonight I'll jot down a few sentences before I forget them."

"Write that you were there today without a temporary tattoo," said Heckenpisser. "We don't want the historians to think you've finally grown up. Hehehe."

"No danger," said Kuddel. "Growing up is a process I've abandoned on principle."

They didn't say a big goodbye. In this neighborhood, you rarely said "Bye." You said "See you later" or nothing at all – because the likelihood of seeing each other again soon was high anyway.

Kuddel started back. The bottle in his stomach, nicotine in his lungs, the job center in the back of his mind, a camp in the near future, an old temporary tattoo memory in his heart.

Up the stairs, door open, same air as always. It was as if someone had pressed the pause button while they were away – and now everything continued from the same point.

He placed the documents from the job center on the table, next to yesterday's plate of pasta. "Integration agreement" was written at the top. Below were paragraphs, obligations, rights, and standard phrases.

He stared at it for a moment, as if the text might change by itself if he just looked long enough.

Then he pushed the papers aside and pulled out a crumpled notebook. He sat down and grabbed a pen.

On the blank page he wrote:

Chapter: Job Center Jazz with a lingering aftertaste

Entrance: Neon lights, take a number, remaining flag. Exit: six weeks in camp, new scars, maybe new sentences.

He paused, thinking of Marvin in the waiting room. Of the clerk with her tired smile. Of himself, sitting there trying not to fall over.

He continued:

"They tell you that you just have to want it. But nobody asks how often you wanted it before you started drinking."

The pen scratched across the paper. The words weren't beautiful, but they were honest.

An ambulance drove past outside, siren loud, then quieter, then gone. Somewhere two neighbors were shouting at each other. Above him someone was banging across the room, below him someone was turning up the music.

The job center jazz was far from over. The beat would continue to resonate in his skull for a while.

But today at least the day had a rhythm that didn't just feel like a hangover, but like something that could later be called a "chapter".

He put down his pen, pulled his cap off his head, scratched his hair and muttered:

"Well then, let's take action. Let's see if you can take down a drunkard."

With this semi-ironic promise to no one and everyone alike, he let himself fall onto the mattress.

The hangover hadn't gone away, the worries hadn't lessened, and the future hadn't become brighter.

But in between, between the neon lights of the job center and the lights of the convenience store,

A small clearing had formed:

A few sentences, a few laughs, a little bit of defiance.

And sometimes, Kuddel thought, that's worth more than any mediation proposal.

Hedge pisser's mother strikes back

Heckenpisser's mother was named Gerda, but in his mind she was nothing more than the supreme management of misery.

She ruled the three-room apartment like a tightly controlled allotment garden association: everything had its place, its time, and its rules. And anyone who broke the toilet seat was allowed to make acquaintance with the sacred scepter – a decades-old wooden cooking spoon that had seen more heads than soup pots.

That day, the trouble actually started quite innocently. Heckenpisser came from the corner store, still in his suit, which had seen better days, his bow tie askew, his hair tousled by the wind, and a fine, subtle shimmer of lingering odor over everything.

Gerda stood in the kitchen, stirring a pot as if she weren't cooking soup, but rather renegotiating the laws of gravity. Pea soup, thick as mortar. It smelled of "childhood," but more like the kind of childhood you can only bear in retrospect with a great deal of humor.

"You're late," her voice cut through the hallway, even before he had half taken his shoe off.

"I have arrived exactly at the timeframe that I internally consider appropriate," replied Heckenpisser, putting down his briefcase and coat and trying to appear as innocent as possible.

Gerda didn't even look at him. She always did that – first the frying pan, then her son. Priorities.

"Your trousers smell like a pub," she said. "And your hair like a toilet."

"This is my new perfume," muttered Heckenpisser. "'Eau de Realität'. Very authentic, hehehe."

"Don't laugh," she said. "You probably think I didn't notice you'd been out with that Kuddel again. He's no company for a man your age."

Heckenpisser started to launch into a lecture about "men my age," but then stopped. It never led anywhere. So he bit his tongue and said, "I'm 48, not some communion kid," and headed for the toilet.

Because one thing was clear: before he took on the pea soup deity, he had to manage the inner pressure.

The toilet door squeaked, as it always did. The toilet seat – old, yellowed, with a decoration that might once have been flowers if one had taken enough LSD – stared at him like an offended mouth.

Heckenpisser sighed, sat down slowly, carefully, as if on a wobbly chair in the interrogation room.

Crack.

It started as a very faint noise. A kind of "I didn't do that" crackling sound.

Then a second one, louder, clearer. And then the big, fateful CRACK-GRUM-CRASH, with which the toilet seat finally gave up and a piece of it broke off to the side, as if it had said: "Brother, your ass weight isn't in my price range."

The hedge pisser sat frozen for a moment. The plastic wobbled beneath him, and somewhere in the pipes there was a gurgling sound.

"Oh... shit," he said. Literally and figuratively.

At that moment, the house spirit made itself known. At least in his imagination.

Because in this household, the legend had long circulated that a ghost lived in the toilet, who bit the backside of anyone who sat on it too heavily, for too long, or too disrespectfully.

Gerda had invented the story when Heckenpisser was twelve, to prevent him from reading comics in the toilet for half an hour.

"There's someone living in the toilet, Ulf," she had said back then. "If you sit too long, he'll come up and bite your bottom. Try it out if you don't believe me."

He had, of course, wanted to try it back then. And discovered: The ghost didn't appear.

"He hasn't bitten me yet," he had defiantly sung at some point, sitting on the toilet, his childlike brain cranked up to full blast. "I pooped on his head! Lalalalalaaa..."

Gerda had burst into the door, wooden spoon in hand, and yelled at him to get his ass off the bowl immediately before the neighbors realized she was raising a lunatic.

The story of the toilet ghost remained. Only the ghost had changed its role:

From a child's nightmare to a symbol of all household curses.

And of all days, today, on this shitty late afternoon, the ghost seemed to be taking its revenge – if not by biting, then at least by shattering glasses.

Hedge urinator stood up cautiously. His glasses hung crooked, a piece had chipped off, and one corner was twisted in such a way that sitting down now would result in a really nasty cut.

He stared down. The ghost stared back. Invisible, but grinning in his mind.

"Great," he whispered. "I'll never get that explained again."

At that moment the kitchen door opened. Gerda stood in the hallway. Towel over her shoulder, wooden spoon in her hand like a gavel.

"Ulf," she said. "Did you just break something?"

There are questions where you can't win anything. "Yes" is self-incrimination, "No" is failure, "Maybe" is provocation.

Hedge-pisser opened his mouth, then closed it again. Then he opened the door a crack, just enough for his head to stick out, the rest of him still inside the shelter.

“Define ‘broken’,” he said. “There has been... a structural change. Hehehe.”

Gerda only needed one glance. One glance past her son, at the glasses, at the plastic disaster. Her face contorted into that particular fold where you knew: Now there's no more room for diplomacy.

"You broke... the toilet seat," she said slowly. "With your fat ass."

“I wouldn’t use the term ‘fat’ now...” he began.

The cooking spoon began to move. And with a precision that can only be achieved through years of practice.

GOSSIP.

The spoon landed right on top of his head. Not so much that he lost consciousness, but enough that his skull briefly signaled "Windows is shutting down".

"Ow!" screamed Hedge Pisser. "Mom! I'm almost fifty! You can't beat me like an elementary school kid anymore!"

"If you behave like one, I can," she thundered. "I've told you a thousand times: Sit down carefully! You're not a baby sparrow anymore! The toilet is old! You're heavy! It's a toxic combination!"

“Your cooking spoon is more toxic,” he growled, rubbing his head. “It has more human rights violations to its name than some dictatorships. Hehehe.”

She took another swing. On the second blow, there was a CRACK – but not in his skull, but in the wood.

The spoon broke. The sacred, much-swung, all-seeing cooking spoon broke in the middle, and the upper part flew in an elegant curve into the tub.

Silence fell. Hedgepisser, with a sore head, stared into the bathroom. Gerda stared at the half spoon in her hand as if her drumstick had broken.

For a moment she looked genuinely hurt. Not angry, but... shocked.

“Oh great,” she finally said, and there was more to that “Oh great” than just a kitchen utensil. “Now it’s broken too. It was from my first marriage.”

"The wooden spoon or the toilet?" asked Heckenpisser automatically. "Hehehe."

She gave him a look that expressed three things at once:

1. I raised you.
2. You are my son.

3. I failed badly at one point.

“This toilet,” she hissed, “is haunted. And it bites the backside of anyone who doesn’t respect things. It’s obviously already eaten you.”

Hedge Pisser couldn't suppress an unreal grin. "He hasn't bitten me yet," he said, half-singing. "I shit on his head. Lalalalalaaa..."

The sentence was out before he could stop it. Childhood reflex. The rhyme was like an old scar that itched again whenever the weather changed.

Gerda closed her eyes briefly. It looked as if she was counting to ten internally – but only got to two.

"You're a disgrace," she said. "At 48, you're still singing those toilet songs. May the ghost bite you on the backside one day, then you won't laugh anymore."

"If he finds him," muttered Heckenpisser. "He's long since become desensitized."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing, Mom."

She sighed, differently this time. Not angrily, more wearily.

"You earn money," she said. "You're not a little boy anymore. But I still have to buy toilet seats because you break them. And you eat all my food and come in here smelling of pubs and cigarettes. Someday, Ulf, someday... life will strike back."

“Life has already struck back,” he replied quietly. “You’re just better at shooting.”

She heard it. Of course she heard it. But she didn't react immediately.

Instead, she grabbed the broken spoon head from the tub, looked at it, and said: “Some things break because they’re old. Others because you don’t take care of them. You’re both.”

The hedge pisser had to laugh. It hurt, but he couldn't help it.

"You're my favorite person, Mom," he said. "You can insult and abuse me, and yet you'll still cook me a bowl of pea concrete."

She snorted. Then she turned around and marched back into the kitchen.

"Pull up your pants," she tossed over her shoulder. "And make sure you don't damage your glasses any more. We're going to Bauhaus tomorrow."

"Bauhaus is the true church of the little man," Heckenpisser shouted after him. "There is your god – between dowels and silicone! Hehehe."

He remained alone in the bathroom, his half-broken glasses beneath him, the ghost in the back of his mind, just waiting for his next escapades.

He wasn't going to sit on it again. Not on it. His ass was too precious for that. He peed standing up, carefully, as if he were refueling an old machine that could explode at any moment.

While washing his hands, he saw his reflection. The red dot on his forehead, where the spoon had landed. A small circle, like the sad remnant of a healed temporary tattoo.

"NO FEAR," he thought. The lettering from back then was missing, but his mind remembered.

"You old ghost," he muttered towards the toilet bowl. "Go ahead and bite my ass. I'm used to worse. But if you get cheeky..."

He grinned again, that crooked, slightly insane grin.

"...then I'll shit on your head again. Lalalalalaaa..."

From the kitchen came the smell of pea soup and of something that was in Gerda's tone when she loudly clattered pots:

Dissatisfaction with built-in care.

Hedge-pisser straightened his trousers, smoothed his shirt, took a deep breath and went outside. Broken wooden spoon, cracked glasses, old ghost on his neck.

Daily life with Mom Gerda had only just begun to catch up with her.

Gerda was back at the stove, as if it had just been a technical glitch and not a minor family quarrel. The pot was bubbling, the pea soup making noises like an old man getting up.

Heckenpisser stood in the kitchen doorway, his head still slightly throbbing, his hands in his trouser pockets, like a defendant on the break before the next interrogation.

"Sit down," she said without looking at him. "And if you break the chair, I'll personally take you to the animal shelter."

He sat down carefully. The chair creaked, but held. On the table lay a striped oilcloth that had been in use since the penultimate period of the Deutsche Mark. Next to it were sugar shakers, salt shakers, a jar of pickled cucumbers, and a broken corner of a wooden spoon, which she had probably left there as a memento.

"Do you know what bothers me most about you?" she asked suddenly, as she poured the soup into a bowl that the spoon stood upright on its own.

"My natural charisma?" he tried. "My sense of humor? Hehehe."

"Your sense of humor is the only reason I haven't thrown you out the window yet," she growled. "No. It's that you make a show of everything. Even going to the toilet."

She placed the plate in front of his face. It was steaming. It smelled of smoke, savory, and childhood trauma.

Hedge Pisser bent over it. "If the ghost in the toilet smells that, it doesn't surprise me that he's aggressive," he said.

She sat down opposite him, with her own monstrous plate, and only now did she really look at him.

"You're pale," she said. "And you look like you spent half the night with that..."

"Kuddel," he added.

"...spent with this fossil," she concluded.

"We call it quality drinking," he murmured. "We have profound conversations about failure."

"You have profound conversations with beer bottles," she retorted. "Kuddel is just an extra."

They ate in silence for a while. Only the spoon rattled against the plate, and every now and then a soft "pffff" came from the soup when a bubble burst.

Gerda had that look only mothers can manage when they're debating whether to give a speech or just give up. The corners of her mouth twitched, as if frustration were about to surface, but habit held it back for a moment.

"So," she finally began. "The toilet."

Hedge Pisser sighed. "Yes, Mom. I know. I killed it. It was me. I'm fat, the toilet was old, physics decided. Case closed."

"You're laughing," she said. "But you don't realize that it's not just a pair of glasses. That's how it is with everything for you."

"What now?" he asked with his mouth full.

"You sit on it as if it were indestructible," she explained. "On furniture, on jobs, on friendships, on your health. You always assume it will somehow hold up until it cracks. And then you're standing there saying, 'Oh, shit.'"

He stared at her. The spoon paused briefly in the air.

"That's a very... poetic interpretation of a toilet accident," he murmured.

"Call it what you want," she says. "The fact is: you're almost fifty and still surprised when things break down. Toilets, relationships, agreements. As if the world owes you a breaking point."

He had to admit: for a woman who had spent her whole life shuttling between pots, cleaning supplies and forms, she had a frighteningly precise analytical software in her head.

"I'm working on it," he said. "I have a reintegration agreement again now. I'm in the system. I'm structure."

She sighed. "Integration agreement," she repeated. "That's the best joke. They're trying to integrate you somewhere, and I've been trying for decades to integrate you into your own life."

He chuckled dryly. "Hehehe... I'm a special case."

"You're a joke," she stated.

Silence again. Soup spoons again. In the background, the ticking of the kitchen clock, which at some point no longer just indicated time, but also nerves.

"Do you know when I first realized that something was different with you?" she asked suddenly.

"When I was four and turned the vacuum cleaner on upside down and the curtain got sucked into the turbine?" he tried.

"No," she said. "That's when you were creative. I mean later. At twelve. When that story with the toilet ghost started."

He laughed. "That was your story," he reminded her. "You invented it to limit my time on the toilet. I could have sat there for hours, reading magazines, letting my imagination run wild."

"I just wanted to make sure you didn't get your father's hemorrhoids," she said. "He always sat for too long, too. Eventually, his legs started to crack – only it wasn't his glasses, it was a vein."

"Romantic family story," commented Heckenpisser.

She took another spoonful of soup, swallowed, glanced briefly past him, somewhere at the kitchen cupboard.

"I told you about the ghost," she continued, "hoping you'd hurry up, finish your business, and get out into real life. Do you know what you did?"

"Sung," he said.

"Sang," she repeated. "In the toilet. Loudly. 'There's a ghost in our loo...'" She imitated his old child voice, surprisingly well. "'Who bites everyone's bottom! He hasn't bitten me yet! I shit on his head! Lalalalalaaa...'"

Heckenpisser burst out laughing, soup almost coming out of his nose. "I was a lyrical genius," he coughed. "Hehehe."

"You were a little shit who didn't grasp the seriousness of the situation," she corrected. "I stood outside and knew: He won't be like the others. The others got scared, they sped up. You insulted the spirit."

"Yes," he said, "and today I'm insulting clerks, job coaches, and you. Call it professional development."

She put down the spoon and rubbed her forehead.

“You’re joking,” she said, “because you know you’re screwed. And I’m going to hit you over the head with a wooden spoon because I know that if you keep going like this, you’ll drag me down with you.”

That sentence hit home.

Heckenpisser felt something tighten inside him that had nothing to do with soup or a hangover.

"I'm not pulling you," he said quietly. "I just live here now. I didn't order you."

"I didn't order you," she retorted. "You just showed up. But I raised you. And for years I've watched you drink yourself into oblivion."

He put down the spoon; the soup suddenly felt heavier.

"You're not doing anything differently," he said. "You've been stirring the same pots since the fall of the Berlin Wall. You go to the same supermarket, watch the same shows, complain about the same bills. Where's your wonderful life?"

She flinched as if he had hit her. Just a little. But he saw it.

“My life,” she said, “consists mostly of putting up with your life. That’s enough of a full-time job.”

They didn't speak for a while. The ghost in the toilet seemed to be giggling in the background.

Heckenpisser suddenly no longer felt like the cheeky son with the toilet rhyme, but like a half-torn sticker on the refrigerator door: you can still recognize the shape, but half the color is gone.

"So what do you want?" he asked then, more calmly. "What am I supposed to do? Stop telling me to 'get a real job.' I've been trying to do that your way for twenty years. It doesn't work. I always end up back at Kuddel's place and at the standing table. What's your master plan? Some kind of 'cookie-dough' pedagogy 2.0?"

She leaned back and looked at him more closely.

“I want you to at least realize when you’re breaking something,” she said. “Not just toilets, Ulf. Everything. People, opportunities, the little bit of respect people still have for you.”

"The little bit of respect people have for me is named Elke," he murmured. "And Murat. And Kuddel. We're the clearance section, Mom. The ones nobody wants on the main shelf anymore."

“You say that as if it’s funny,” she replied. “But at some point you wake up and realize: You’re the ghost in the toilet. Everyone’s afraid of being stuck with you.”

That was good. Nasty, but good.

Heckenpisser laughed, even though he didn't feel like it at all. "Hehehe... You should go drinking with Kuddel, Mom. Your sense of humor is worse than his."

She stood up, picked up her plate, and went to the sink.

"I'm not going out drinking," she said. "I've had my fill of drunkenness – that was called marriage, child and reunion. I'm not doing that crap again."

He watched as she turned on the water. The soup stuck to the plate like a piece of concrete. She scrubbed, intently, almost angrily.

"Do you know what the problem is between you and Kuddel?" she asked without turning around. "You never really grew up. You just got older. The difference is that adults eventually take responsibility. You just have your own myths."

"At least we have good myths," he murmured. "Babylon the train station toilet. Peep show in the mind's eye. 'There's a ghost in our toilet' – that's culture, Mom."

"Culture is when people pay to watch it," she said. "Not when I play the lead role in your drama for free."

She placed his plate in the sink, grabbed the towel, dried her hands, and turned back to him.

"Tomorrow," she said, "we're going to the hardware store. New toilet seat, new cooking spoon. And you'll carry the bags."

"Great," he said. "A quality day with Mom."

"And you're not going to Kuddel's today," she continued. "No drunken revelry today. You're staying here. You'll sit at your desk later, do your files, look at your job placement documents. Someone out there is trying to make something of you. I'm going to help them out this once."

He was briefly tempted to say, "I'm not fifteen." But the look she gave him said: You've stopped right there for me.

"Okay," he conceded. "I'll stay here today. Family drinking. With tap water."

She nodded curtly. "Good," she said. "Maybe the ghost in your own head will bite you somewhere other than just in the ass."

He stood up, took his glass, and headed towards the door.

He stopped halfway there and turned around once more.

"You, Mom?" he asked.

"Hm?"

"Despite everything..." he grinned crookedly, "...thank you for breaking the wooden spoon over my head and not the other way around."

She snorted, but couldn't suppress a tired smile.

"Go away before I get sentimental," she said. "And if you end up singing later..."

He raised his hands in a placating gesture. "I'll sing softly," he promised. "The spirit and I have a deal."

"The only one who has an agreement with you here is me," she stated. "The ghost lives in the toilet. I live on your neck."

He went to his room, the words in his head, the red mark on his forehead, the ghost in the toilet, and the split wooden spoon soul in the background.

Gerda was right: He made a show out of everything. But just now in the kitchen, she had shown him that she, too, had a stage to her name.

and that she could fight back if necessary.

In the evening the apartment was so quiet that you could hear the hum of the refrigerator. That quiet, insistent hum that always becomes noticeable precisely when everything is too loud in your head.

Heckenpisser sat on his bed, back against the wall, socks off, shirt half unbuttoned. In front of him was the small desk, piled high with papers like poorly sorted life decisions: letters from the job center, old pay slips, withered notes, a broken ballpoint pen that always stopped working when he wanted to write something important.

He heard through the wall as Gerda turned on the television. Some early evening soap opera where people had problems that were always solved in 45 minutes. Marriage, arguments, mistaken identity, tears – then reconciliation, credits, laundry detergent commercials.

"Luxury," he murmured. "Imagine if your problems were structured like that."

On top of his desk lay the fresh envelope bearing the job center logo. He had carelessly tossed it down after glancing inside. "Measure assignment," "obligation to participate," "information on legal consequences"—the big three terms of German socialist rhetoric.

He grabbed a cigarette butt and lit it, even though he knew that Gerda would immediately start banging on the door again when the smoke drifted under the crack.

He pulled the letter out again, flattened it on the table, and began to read. Really read it, not just the first two lines and then replace the rest with "blah blah blah".

"Dear Mr. Scholz...to improve your integration chances into the labor market...please participate in the following measure...Start...End...Attendance is mandatory..."

He read how others listened to holiday speeches. Not because they believed there was anything fundamental in them, but because it was somehow part of the tradition.

"Labor market orientation in the warehousing and logistics sector with practical components."

"Sounds like a new reality show," he muttered. "'Lager Kings – When Pallets Strike Back.' Hehehe."

He twirled the cigarette between his fingers. The smoke curled along the ceiling as if searching for an escape route.

On the bedside table lay an old notebook – checkered, dog-eared, corners worn. His improvised diary. Nothing regular, nothing organized. Just sentences that had to come out when his head was too full.

He opened it, somewhere in the middle. On one page, written in scribbled handwriting, was:

"Sometimes I think I'm just my mother's extended toilet seat. Everything she couldn't do is now holding my ass."

He grinned. He had written that months ago, long before the plastic cracked today.

He picked up his pen and started again.

"Today my glasses gave up. Maybe that was a sign. Not for them – for me. You can't sit on something forever and hope it holds up."

He paused, staring at the words. Then he laughed briefly, without humor.

"I should charge Kuddel for these words of wisdom," he muttered. "He always listens to all that crap for free. Hehehe."

There was a knock at the door. Not aggressive. Not a wooden spoon-style knock. More like: "I'm standing here so you know I exist."

"Yes?" he shouted.

The door opened a crack. Gerda stuck her head in, saw the smoke, and grimaced.

"Open the window," was her first sentence. "I don't want the place to smell like a corner store's basement."

"The window is broken," he lied. "It's almost impossible to open."

She ignored it, walked over without a word, and threw open the window. Cold air rushed in. He instinctively shrugged.

She stopped, looked at the table. At the letters, at the notebook, at the ashtray.

"At least you read what they send you?" she asked.

"More than most," he said. "I even understood some of the words. Hehehe."

She didn't respond. Instead, she pointed her chin at the notebook.

"Are you writing again?" she asked.

"I paint internally," he replied. "With words."

She looked at him longer than usual. There was something in her gaze that wasn't just annoyance or tiredness. Something rarely seen in her: cautious curiosity.

"May I read?" she asked suddenly.

He flinched. He hadn't expected that.

"This is..." he began, searching for a word, "...private property."

"Your thoughts are the only thing keeping you from a complete meltdown," she said. "Maybe I should take a look at how bad things really are."

He laughed uncertainly. "I don't think you want that, Mom," he said. "The ghost from the toilet lives in there. And it has teeth."

"I brought you into this world," she replied. "It won't get any worse than that."

One point for them.

He flipped back a few pages, looking for a less disturbing passage. He landed on a paragraph he had written a few weeks earlier after a drunken night with Kuddel and Murat.

He slid the notebook over to her and tapped the spot with his finger.

"You can read that one," he said. "The rest is... rated 30+."

She adjusted her reading glasses and sat down on the edge of the bed, as if she were about to examine a report card.

She read aloud, haltingly, each word individually:

"Sometimes I feel like my mother lives in the same house as my guilty conscience. She just uses less friendly language. The job center threatens sanctions, she threatens with a wooden spoon. The effect is similar: I don't budge an inch."

Gerda paused, blinked. Then she continued reading:

"Maybe that's why I turn everything into jokes. Because I know that without humor, things will just fall apart. A ghost in the toilet, a system at the office, a woman in the kitchen who raised me and now has to watch me keep myself down. If there is a God, he has a very strange sense of squatting."

She remained silent. The sentence hung in the room like smoke.

"Well?" asked Hedge-Pisser cautiously. "Already wanting to disinherit me? Hehehe."

She closed the notebook slowly, but kept one hand on it.

"I didn't even know you could see so clearly..." – she searched for a word as if it were hidden somewhere in the wallpaper.

"I'm not blind, Mom," he said. "I'm just often drunk."

Against her intention, she had to laugh briefly. Just a breath, but audibly.

"You could have done something else with your head," she said.

"What then?" he asked. "Who's going to pay guys like me? 'Hedge Pisser – Specialist in Self-Dismantling and Toilet Poetry'? I can hardly teach a course at the adult education center."

"Maybe not," she admitted. "But you could have crashed in a more orderly fashion."

"Orderly crash," he repeated. "That's the best thing I've heard in months. Hehehe. I'm going to write that on the back of my ID card."

She let go of the notebook and stood up again.

"Listen," she said. "You're going to this program. At least for a while. You're going to observe it. You're not going to act like a clown or a philosopher. You're going to act like you're normal."

"That will be difficult," he said. "I'm out of practice."

"And in the evening," she continued, "you come home and write down what you experienced. Not for the authorities. For yourself. For me, if you let me."

He looked at her, blinked. This was new. Gerda, who wasn't just hitting him with a wooden spoon, but with a kind of... frame?

"So you want..." he began slowly, "...for me to officially work during the day and unofficially report on it in the evening?"

"Call it what you want," she said. "You're the one who knows how to phrase things. I just don't want to feel like your life is completely passing me by while I'm here cooking soup and buying toilet seats."

He leaned his head against the wall, staring at her as if someone had suddenly switched his TV picture from SD to HD.

"Do you know what's crazy?" he asked.

"Hm?"

"You hit me," he said. "With a wooden spoon, words, and DIY store orders. But sometimes..." he paused briefly, "...sometimes I feel like you're the only one who's really still trying to hold me back somewhere."

She shrugged, somewhat awkwardly. Compliments were more foreign to her than late fees.

"I don't want to sit in a nursing home and tell people that my son drank himself to death," she said. "I'd rather say: 'My son is a bit crazy, but he writes interesting things.'"

"That's the sweetest thing you've ever said about me," he said. "Hehehe."

She snorted. "Don't get soft," she warned. "I still have a new cooking spoon in the works."

She started walking towards the door, then stopped again.

"And Ulf?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"Sing the ghost-in-the-toilet song quietly today," she said. "I don't want the neighbors to think I'm giving you Mundstuhls for dinner."

He grinned. "I promise," he nodded. "Maybe I'll just hum."

She disappeared, the door closed, the television turned up louder again. He remained in his room, window still open, smoke half outside, half inside.

He picked up the notebook again and turned to a new page.

"Today," he wrote, "my mother hit me on the head with a broken wooden spoon and at the same time offered to take my head seriously. Perhaps that's her kind of love: first a beating, then soup, then a trip to the hardware store."

There's a ghost in our toilet. And in my head, too.

The difference: The one in the toilet bites your butt. The one in my head bites the past.

He leaned the pen down, read the sentence again, and a crooked smile crossed his face.

Perhaps, he thought, "Hedge-pisser's mother strikes back" wasn't just a threat at all.

but also a strange kind of rescue attempt.

Not delicate, not gentle, but honest.

And honesty was a rare commodity in his universe.

In the living room, the television audience was laughing at some joke. Gerda laughed along – a little too loudly, a little too long.

Heckenpisser leaned his head back, took a last drag on his cigarette, stubbed it out, and hummed, very quietly:

"There's a ghost in our toilet..."

The spirit did not make contact. Neither from the bowl nor from the past.

Only his own mind, which for the first time in a long time not only working against him, but also a little bit with him.

Cuts, panties, awkward pick-up lines

Cuts, panties, and clumsy pick-up lines – that was the only area in which Kuddel confidently called himself an "expert", although his success rate was somewhere between winning the lottery and brain death.

The evening was once again one of those that began as a vague disappointment: the sky was grey-brown, the neighborhood half-wet from the drizzle, and in front of the late-night shop there was a touch of gloom that even the Jägermeister couldn't completely wash away.

Kuddel stood at the high table with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, his leather jacket open, revealing a faded Slayer shirt underneath that looked more like it had once been stained with blood than tomato sauce. Next to him was Heckenpisser in a shirt, his bow tie once again completely unnecessary, but he was there as if he were on his way to a funeral with a champagne reception.

"Do you know what the problem is with the cuts today?" Kuddel began, wiping beer residue from the table with the palm of his hand as if making room for a grand theory.

"That they're not in your age group?" typed Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"No," said Kuddel. "That they have eyes."

Heckenpisser raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying women used to be blind?" he asked. "That explains a lot."

"Back then," Kuddel said, taking a drag on his cigarette, "there was a kind of underlying desperation you could exploit. You were the less shitty guy at the bar, and sometimes that was enough. Today they have Tinder, Instagram, self-care. They don't have to drunkenly pounce on the first guy who can still talk coherently. I'm not even second best anymore."

"You're not even the third worst anymore," corrected Heckenpisser. "You're the footnote. Hehehe."

Elke came out, placed a crate of empty bottles next to the door and listened with the door half open.

"Is this the start of women's philosophy again?" she asked. "Then I'll light up a cigarette right away, this will take forever."

"We'll keep it scientifically brief," Kuddel claimed. "Today's topic: cuts, panties, and clumsy pick-up lines. Or: why my libido and reality are no longer negotiable."

"You have a libido?" Murat asked from inside the shop. "I thought that was just a nostalgic phantom pain."

Kuddel pointedly ignored this.

“Do you remember, Hecke,” he began, “when we used to go to the disco? Way back when, when you pretended you’d rather watch people dance than do your taxes?”

Heckenpisser grimaced. "Please don't call it a diss," he pleaded. "That sounds like we were at a village fair in Brandenburg."

"It wasn't far from there," Kuddel replied. "Clubs where the men smelled worse than the toilets, and the girls smelled of sweet vodka and the illusion that life was finally beginning tonight."

"You mean back then at 'Soundwerk'?" asked Heckenpisser. "Or at 'Matrix for the Poor'? Hehehe."

“Exactly,” said Kuddel. “There was always the same choreography: first, standing around for two hours, drinking beer, smoking, watching. Then the moment when you think: now or never. And then you go and say something so incredibly stupid that you’re still ashamed of it in your sleep.”

Heckenpisser took a sip and nodded. "I once said to someone," he began, "'Hey, you look like you have a sense of humor.' She looked at me as if I'd just said I was a tax inspector in the field."

“Humor is dangerous,” said Kuddel. “They don’t want humor. They want sayings they can tell their group of girls. ‘One of them said...’ – you know the kind.”

Elke laughed. "You underestimate how embarrassing most guys really are," she said. "You're not even the worst. That's the sad part."

“I used to be the worst,” Kuddel chimed in. “Berlin, sometime in the late 90s. Me, completely out of it, Slayer shirt, studded bracelet, the whole sad package. Standing at the bar, next to me a blonde in a red leather jacket. Really pretty, the kind you know has options. And what do I say?”

He paused briefly, letting her wait.

"Well?" asked Hedge Pisser. "Don't tell me you started with another diarrhea joke. Hehehe."

“Worse,” said Kuddel. “I look at her, she looks back, and I hear myself say: ‘Nice jacket. Looks like it’s seen a lot.’”

“Oh God,” Elke groaned. “That’s such an intellectual, rubbish sentence, it could have come from a German studies student.”

“She half-smiled,” Kuddel continued, “and said, ‘Yes, she did.’ And then I should have just said, ‘Do you want to dance?’ or ‘Can I buy you a drink?’ – something simple. But no, my brain thought: Now you have to up the ante, now comes the killer. And I said, ‘Definitely more than you.’”

Murat started laughing, right there in the checkout area. "DUDE!" he shouted.

“She looks at me,” Kuddel mimed, “as if I’d just spat in her glass. Turns away, that’s it. Two seconds. Game over. I slapped my own dick, that’s how bad it was.”

Hedge Pisser shook his head and chuckled. "Hehehe... That's truly premium self-sabotage," he said. "'You look like an accessory to your jacket.'"

"That's why you're single," Elke commented dryly. "Not because of your beer belly."

“Cut!” shouted Heckenpisser suddenly, pointing with the bottle towards the street.

Then she arrived. A princess in jogging pants, headphones in, ponytail, shopping bag in hand. Not a "top model", but just the kind who automatically set off a little siren in Kuddel's head.

"There, there, look," he said quietly. "Look at her. Do you see? That's exactly where it starts: in your head. You see a woman with a bag, and your brain turns it into a sex scene where you don't look completely bad."

"My brain makes a scene out of it, telling you to move aside, you're blocking the way," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

The woman walked past without even glancing at them. The drunks were just background decoration for her. Standing tables. Sitting with a beer bottle.

“Back then,” Kuddel began again, “there were also panties stories. Real ones. Today it’s all strings, thongs, laser-cut invisibility. Back then there was cotton with flowers. Giant panties, in which you could have opened a tent camp.”

"You speak as if this is something positive," said Murat.

“Hey, I swear to you,” said Kuddel, “I once hooked up with a girl whose panties were so big, I thought they were the duvet. I almost slept under them. But it was honest. No performance. No Instagram underwear shoot. Just fabric that says, ‘I’m covering my ass and that’s it.’”

Hedge-pisser grinned. "I remember the dental student with the heart-shaped panties," he said. "You bragged for three weeks, 'She's got brains and cotton, she's the perfect woman.' And after a month, she was sleeping with a dentist who had a car. Hehehe."

“Yeah, man,” said Kuddel. “She said I was ‘too destructive.’ She really said that. Too destructive. All I did was rock a chair in her kitchen once.”

Elke leaned on the table with both hands. "How many stable relationships would you have ruined, even if the women had been completely crazy about you?" she asked. "Don't underestimate yourselves. You're walking self-destruct machines."

"I don't think so," replied Heckenpisser. "I think we were never properly tested under laboratory conditions. Hehehe."

Kuddel looked at his bottle and turned it in his hand.

"Do you know what's really getting to me?" he asked. "It's not that it's not working out. I've gotten used to ending the night alone with my dick and my fantasies. What's getting to me is that I still think I have to try and achieve something."

"You mean this thing... Hope?" asked Heckenpisser. "I accidentally put it on eBay Classifieds the other day. No idea if anyone picked it up. Hehehe."

"As if," said Elke. "You guys always talk a big game about cuts, panties, and hot numbers, but when a woman actually looks at you kindly, you can barely get a coherent sentence out."

"Hey," protested Kuddel, "I went through a phase where I was on fire. Really. For about two years or so."

"How old were you then?" asked Murat.

"Between 20 and 22," said Kuddel. "After that, the fire decided to retire."

Heckenpisser sighed. "My best lame pickup line is still the one in the supermarket," he interjected. "When I said to the cashier: 'You have such a calm demeanor, I'd like to do my weekly shopping at your store when I'm dead.'"

Elke stared at him. "WHAT?!" she asked.

He nodded proudly. "She laughed," he defended himself. "Slightly disconcerted, but she laughed. That's more than I usually manage."

"I understand why your mother hits you over the head with the wooden spoon," Elke muttered. "You are a danger to any social structure."

"At least he's creative," said Kuddel. "At some point, I was just churning out the same old classics. Real East German standard crap. 'So, here too?' – that's the level I'd reached."

A group of younger guys walked past the corner store, three cans in their hands, all with freshly shaved heads and wearing the same jackets. One of them glanced over briefly, the others didn't.

Behind them were two girls, roughly in their early twenties, wearing leggings, crop tops, AirPods, and brightly colored hair. One of those typical evenings in the neighborhood, where several generations passed each other without really interacting.

One of the boys suddenly pulled out the courageous option, stopped, grinned at one of the two and said something they didn't understand – probably "brother" was in the sentence, even though he didn't know them.

The girls rolled their eyes and laughed at him – not maliciously, more reflexively.

"Back then," said Kuddel, "at least you could be embarrassingly quiet. Now you get pulled straight into an Instagram story."

"Yes," confirmed Heckenpisser. "These days you can become a meme in three seconds. 'This guy talked to me like this...' – and bam, you're internet property. Hehehe."

"The worst part is," Murat said, "girls are fed up with guys like you. They get ten direct messages a day on their apps from some bearded business students who write: 'Hey, you seem interesting.'"

"I don't seem exciting," said Kuddel. "I seem like required reading about failed lives."

Elke tapped the glass with her fingernail. "You missed your chance," she said. "In your twenties, you were too busy sabotaging yourselves. Now that you're perhaps somewhat self-aware, you're simply no longer on the radar of most women of that age."

"I'm not even in the age filter anymore," nodded Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

Kuddel shrugged. "Nevertheless," he said, "there are moments when I catch myself looking after someone and thinking: If I weren't completely the way I am... maybe."

Heckenpisser took a sip, wiped his mouth, and looked at the street.

"I catch myself doing that too," he admitted. "On the bus, at the office, at the bakery. You see a woman holding her bread bag wrong, and your mind immediately writes her a whole life story. Two kids, divorce, night school, and somewhere inside you are. And in reality, you're just the guy who spills his coffee behind her."

"That's what's screwing us up," said Kuddel. "Not the lack of cuts. The mental imagery. Panties in our fantasies, while in reality the panties are already somewhere in the Zalando returns bin."

"I once had a girlfriend who wore really old-fashioned underwear," Heckenpisser chimed in. "Not sexy. Sturdy. The kind of fabric that doesn't accentuate your ass, but protects it. She was the nicest thing I ever had. Guess how I messed it up."

"With a saying?", Murat asked.

"With a whole series of one-liners," sighed Heckenpisser. "Because I thought I had to deliver wit, depth, and distance all at once. Hehehe. I managed to make her never quite sure if I really liked her or if I was just messing with her head. In the end, she went to a guy who simply said, 'I like you.'"

They were silent for a moment. The wind pulled at the corner, making plastic bags dance.

"Perhaps," Elke said, "the problem isn't with the editing. Perhaps it's because you never really decided: Do I want intimacy or do I just want a story?"

Kuddel stared at her as if she had just said she was from Mars.

"Proximity," he repeated. "That's the kind of place where someone doesn't run away when you throw up, right?"

"Proximity," said Hedge Pisser, "is when someone sees you before you make the joke. Hehehe."

"No one's coming closer than five meters anyway," Kuddel muttered. "Because of the remaining flag and his resume."

"Honestly?" Elke asked. "You wouldn't even be able to stand it if one actually stayed. After three weeks at the most, you'd start tearing it apart. Because you have no idea what a life feels like that isn't constantly on the verge of collapse."

Murat nodded. "You're addicted to awkward pick-up lines and messed-up situations," he said. "Because otherwise you don't even know who you are anymore."

Kuddel took a deep sip, felt the beer in his stomach, the neon in his eye, and the truth somewhere in between.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe anything. But you know what?"

He leaned back, looked at the street, at the jogging pants, at the AirPods, at the worlds that were no longer reachable.

"I still don't stop looking every now and then and thinking: That one girl – if I had ten lives, one might be with her."

Heckenpisser giggled sadly. "Hehehe," he said. "And in nine other places you're still sitting at the standing table with Kuddel."

"Better someone who laughs than no one at all," Kuddel said. "Even if they only laugh at your lame come-ons."

Elke stamped out her cigarette butt and pushed the next round over.

"To the cuts we never had," she said.

"To the panties we only know from legends," Heckenpisser added.

"And to our pickup lines," Kuddel concluded, raising the bottle, "which are so crooked that they can at least be considered art."

They clinked glasses.

Outside, the next generation passed them by, with perfectly styled hairdos, filter-ready faces, and sayings from TikTok videos.

The drunkards stood there, between yesterday and never,

and did what they did best:

talking about what they had missed –

and tell it as if it was almost intentional.

It was one of those evenings when the neighborhood pretended to be sexy – when in reality it was just tired.

Outside the corner store: a jumble of stuff, a hedge urinal, a standing table. Inside: neon lights, shelves, bottled alcohol. In between: the eternal topic of "women," although the last real successes happened sometime between the Deutsche Mark and the age of polytoxicism.

"Do you know when I last really got laid?" Kuddel suddenly asked, looking out at the street as if the answer were walking by.

"Yes," said Heckenpisser. "Back when Napster was still legal. Hehehe."

"Ugh, shut up," Kuddel grumbled, but he had to grin. "No, seriously. I think that was... 2008? 2009? Sometime around the time everyone thought Myspace would last forever."

"Those were the years when you still believed you were a 'wild guy with depth'," Murat commented. "Today you're a 'broken guy with freckles'."

"Back then," Kuddel continued, ignoring him, "I was in this dodgy rock bar, you remember, Hecke? 'Schall & Rauch' or whatever the place was called. Sticky bar, toilets like something out of the doomsday game, music too loud, but just right."

Heckenpisser nodded. "The place where the DJ always looked like he was about to burst into tears whenever someone requested a song," he said. "Hehehe."

"That's him," Kuddel confirmed. "I was standing at the bar, already had three or four beers, still within the 'socially acceptable' range. Next to me was a woman in her mid-thirties, black hair, glasses, band t-shirt. Not that Instagram type, more like... normal. Honest. A bit like a librarian who's had a bad night."

"So exactly your level," Murat muttered.

"I look over," Kuddel continued, "and my head says: Don't screw this up now. One of those rare moments. No pressure. No screen, no apps. Just her, me, and beer."

"So?" asked Heckenpisser. "What did you do? Just stare dumbfounded?"

"No," said Kuddel. "I... wait and see, this will never happen again... I didn't say anything stupid."

All three looked at him doubtfully.

"Yeah, go ahead and laugh," he growled. "But I swear to you. I asked her what kind of shirt it was, she said it was a small band from Poland, and I didn't say, 'Oh, so you're one of those people who pretends to know about the underground scene.' Instead, I said, 'Never heard of them, tell me about them.'"

"Wow," said Heckenpisser, "that's... sociable. Almost human. Hehehe."

"And she talked," said Kuddel. "For over 20 minutes. About concerts, records, some club in Warsaw that doesn't exist anymore. And I listened. Really listened. No stupid comments, no dick-measuring contests, no 'everything was better back then'. Just listening."

"What's she on?" Elke interjected, as she heaved a carton of water forward. "No normal woman talks to you like that."

"She was slightly tipsy," Kuddel admitted. "But not yet in the 'I'll talk to everyone, otherwise I'll cry' phase. She was... normal."

"And you?" asked Heckenpisser. "When did the breakup happen? I'm starting to get scared that you're going to say it went well."

"It went well," said Kuddel. "We laughed, we bought each other beers, and at some point we moved to that dilapidated couch at the back of the shop. You know, the one that no one knew whether it had seen more beers or bodily fluids."

"Yes," Hecke nodded. "The sofa of decisions. Hehehe."

"And then," Kuddel said, "at some point she said: 'I don't want to go home alone.' Just like that. No drama, no hesitation. Just that one sentence."

"Wow," Murat exclaimed. "This is the stage where normal people just... say yes."

"I have too," Kuddel defended himself. "I'm not completely stupid. Not yet."

"Well, then everything went well," said Heckenpisser. "What's the catch? You always have a plot twist in your women's story."

Kuddel took a long gulp, as if he needed to quickly replenish his courage.

"The catch came... later," he said. "We were at her place. Small apartment, bookshelves, sofa, kitchen with magnets on the fridge. Everything so... grown-up, you know? No posters, no pizza boxes on the floor. She didn't turn the lights off completely, just dimmed them. And in my head, the siren went off: Don't fuck this up, you bastard."

Hedge-pisser grinned. "Hehehe. I know what's coming next. You opened your mouth."

"Yes," said Kuddel. "We're sitting there, she sits down next to me. She scootes closer. Puts her hand on my leg. And I swear to you, Hecke, that was the moment when any normal man would just... go along with it. Just kiss her. Or at least say nothing. And what do I do?"

He paused, looked at them one after the other: Murat, Hecke, Elke. They looked back like an audience before the punchline.

"I looked at her," he said, "and said – literally, I've never forgotten it: 'Are you sure you want to do this with me? You actually look too sensible for such a decision.'"

Silence. Then Heckenpisser let out a sound that was somewhere between laughter and gagging.

"Hehehehehe... you... what?!" he gasped. "You... you... you warned her about yourself?"

"I thought I was being fair," Kuddel muttered. "I thought it would be... I don't know... honest."

"You basically told her, 'Run while you still can,'" Murat translated. "And then you were surprised that she actually did run at some point."

"She laughed first," said Kuddel. "Such an irritated laugh. Then she said, 'You're weird.' And I thought: Weird is good. Weird is my thing. So I added another one: 'I mean it. I'm not the kind of guy who'll fix my life for a woman. I'm the kind who'll drag you down with me.'"

"You are truly a genocide against all romance," Elke stated. "And it was predictable."

"She looked at me," Kuddel continued, "and I saw in her eyes how individual doors closed. Those invisible ones, you know. Where before there were possibilities. Snap, snap, snap. Then she stood up. Said: 'You know what? I really find you interesting. But I don't have the energy anymore for men who tell me right from the start that they're going to disappoint me.' She called me a taxi. I never dialed her number again."

Hedge Pisser shook his head, very slowly. "Hehehe... you're the first peep show to close itself down," he said. "Sorry, we're open, but I strongly advise you to stay outside."

"I've had one or two more flings since then," Kuddel confessed. "But honestly, they were more like... accidents. Sofa falls, drunken stupors, those kinds of things you just file away the next day as 'it just happened.' But with her... something normal could have come of it. Really normal. Underwear on the radiator, brushing teeth in the same bathroom, that shit."

"And you were pulling a Bukowski there," Heckenpisser analyzed. "Sabotage everything before things get serious. Hehehe."

"I thought I was being fair," Kuddel repeated. "Today I know I was just a coward. If you say 'I'm bad for you' before anything even happens, you don't have to prove later that you can handle it. It's convenient. In a really messed-up way."

A woman in her mid-forties walked by, shopping bag in hand, tired eyes. She recognized the drunkards by sight and gave a brief nod. Kuddel nodded back. That was all there was to it. And that was all there was to it.

"I was also good at talking things to pieces," Heckenpisser chimed in. "My great love, you remember? The nurse who could laugh so hard you thought the sky was about to crumble?"

"Yes," said Kuddel. "The ones with the Doc Martens and a back like a tank."

"Exactly her," Hecke nodded. "She once asked me if I could imagine moving in with her. A completely normal moment, nothing dramatic. We were lying in bed, she still had her T-shirt on, I just had my boxers on and my delusions of grandeur."

"And of course you killed it with a witty remark," Murat said.

"I said," Heckenpisser deliberately raised his voice slightly, "Move in together? In theory, yes, but in practice I'm already overwhelmed with myself. I can't let you check into my chaos for no reason.' Hehehe."

"You're another one of those 'warning sign instead of invitation' types," Elke said. "I can't believe it."

"She laughed," Hecke recounted. "Sort of. Then she said, 'That was an honest answer. But not one I want to grow old with.' Two months later she was gone."

"And you were proud of your honesty," said Kuddel.

"Of course," nodded Heckenpisser. "A real idiot is always proud of his honesty. Hehehe. Honesty is only cool if you also have something good to offer."

Life in the neighborhood continued in parallel: A couple argued quietly in front of the cigarette machine. A delivery driver cursed into his cell phone. A guy in a suit grabbed a beer "for the way home," with a look that said: My family knows I'll be late, but not why.

"Okay, fine," Elke summarized. "You both actively talked your way out of situations that worked. Congratulations. And now you're sitting here, drinking Sterni beer and talking about underwear that no longer belongs to you."

"Correction," said Kuddel. "We're talking about the panties that never belonged to us."

"I almost collapsed in the lingerie department at Kaufhof once," Heckenpisser suddenly confessed. "Christmas, buying presents, everything full of bras, thongs, lace stuff. I'm standing there in the middle of it all and I'm thinking:
That's where all the crap hangs that we're no longer meant to be used for. Hehehe."

"I saw one the other day," said Kuddel, "she was wearing one of those bodysuits, you know, those modern ones. Open jacket over it, high-waisted jeans. And I swear, all I could think was: Man, back in the day you would have at least felt like you were being harassed. Now you just look and think: 'This isn't your era anymore.'"

"We're the generation that changed our underwear," mused Heckenpisser. "Back then it was cotton, now it's an emotional support thong. Hehehe."

"If you're still talking about underwear at 50," said Elke, "you've taken a wrong turn somewhere."

"Oh, come on," Kuddel protested. "Panty is legendary. It tells stories. The first pair you took off, the last pair you didn't want anymore, the ones you thought: Dude, this is beyond my level."

"I once had a wife who wore such absurd lacy panties," said Heckenpisser. "I felt really uncomfortable. Like I'd walked into an apartment where everything was designer furniture and you know: My beer doesn't belong here."

"The best ones were always the ones where you could tell they weren't meant for Instagram, but for real life," Kuddel murmured. "Cotton, a little faded, the rubber slightly stretched out. But the person inside dared to show it to you, without any show. That's more intimate than any porn pose."

Murat nodded thoughtfully. "That's the sad part," he said. "You understand all of this. And yet you're standing here. Alone."

Kuddel looked at him. "Understanding and being able to do something are two different things," he said. "I can understand how a plane flies. But don't put me in the pilot's seat. That'll just make for a documentary on N24."

"What if," Elke began, "someone actually showed up tomorrow? Someone who didn't think you were completely awful. Who laughed when you made jokes. Who saw your quirks and didn't run away immediately. What would you do then?"

Heckenpisser was the first to reply. "First, analyze it to death," he said. "Hehehe. See where the catch is. Then think about it for three nights. Then talk to Kuddel about it. Then sober up. And if she's still there then... probably panic."

"I'd try," Kuddel said slowly, "to keep my mouth shut for five minutes. Just five minutes. Not funny, not profound, not dramatic. Just to be there. That would be an advanced course for me."

"You wouldn't be able to do it," Murat said. "After thirty seconds you'd say, 'By the way, I'm not emotionally suited for serious relationships, but we can have sex.'"

"Yes," Kuddel admitted. "Probably."

He drank the rest of his bottle, put it down, and looked at the condensation that left rings on the tabletop.

"Maybe," he said, "Elke is right. Maybe we never really wanted closeness. We just always wanted to make a great story out of our failure. And cuts are just the projection surface."

"This is the most expensive projection surface in the world," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

Elke pushed forward the next round. "Here," she said. "To your honorable failures. And to the few women who actually took a chance on you. They showed more courage than you."

"To those who stayed until they realized that we will remain as we are," said Kuddel, raising the bottle.

"To the cotton panties," added Hedge Pisser. "The only ones who ever truly understood us. Hehehe."

They clinked glasses. The beer was cold, the evening was grey, the air tasted of smoke, rain and wasted time – but at least there was still room for jokes.

A few meters away, a young couple laughed, took a selfie, and kissed without thinking about it.

The drunkards glanced over briefly, then looked away again.

"You know, Hecke," Kuddel said quietly, "if I'm being completely honest... Sometimes I'd like to be 25 again and totally embarrassing. But not so consciously yet."

"I wish I were 25 and already had the mindset I have now," said Heckenpisser. "Then maybe I'd do less stupid shit. Hehehe."

"No," said Murat. "Then you would have just gotten old sooner. And I would have had to put up with you at the corner store back then."

They all laughed, the way people laugh when they know the topic affects them more than they'd like.

"Okay," said Kuddel, "cuts, panties, cheesy pick-up lines – end of story. That's all we're getting from this segment today."

"Yes," said Hedge Pisser. "One last lesson: If your mouth is faster than your heart, you'll always be lying in bed alone. Hehehe."

"And if you can still laugh about it," Kuddel added, "you are officially a drunkard with a badge of honor."

The night crept on through Berlin. And somewhere, in some apartment, a woman was putting on her panties, unaware that outside two guys with beers in their hands and jokes in their mouths were

wondered what their lives would be like if they didn't sum everything up with a saying.

would have talked it down.

The evening slowly shifted from "grey with opportunities" to "dark with routine." The streetlights switched on as if they didn't feel like it either, but had a contract.

The neighborhood got louder. Groups passed by – the new generation of drinking culture: canned beer with energy mix, Bluetooth speaker, all wearing the same sneakers, the same "Bro, what's up?" tone of voice.

Kuddel leaned on the standing table with both forearms, the empty bottle in front of him, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth once again. Heckenpisser had meanwhile switched from Sterni to mixed drinks – that dubious concoction of cheap schnapps and cola that pretended to be a cocktail.

"Do you know how I can tell we're old?" asked Kuddel, without looking up.

"Is it the backache, the hangover, or the fact that nobody calls us 'bro' anymore?" asked Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"It's because," said Kuddel, "we talk more about women than we ever talk to them."

Heckenpisser was silent for a moment. Then he raised his glass.

"To our scientific work," he said. "Field studies without field contact. Hehehe."

At that moment, something happened that had become so rare that both of them briefly broke out of their routine: Someone spoke to them.

"Excuse me?"

The voice was female. Young, but not quite a teenager. The kind of voice that automatically set off an alarm bell in Kuddel's head.

He turned his head.

She stood there, right by the counter, between the bottle return bin and the gumball machine: black leggings, an oversized hoodie, the hood pulled back, her hair tied in a bun, a nose piercing, a discount store shopping bag in her hand. No "cut" in the catalog sense – no high heels, no glitter, no dramatic makeup. Simply: a tired woman in her late twenties or early thirties, who looked as if she'd already accomplished more real things today than the two of them had in a week.

"Do you have a light?" she asked.

Kuddel took two seconds too long. Heckenpisser was faster, already fiddling with the lighter he always carried with him, "for romantic occasions and nicotine addiction," as he liked to say.

"But of course," said Hecke, handing it over with a small bow. "Fire is the last socialist resource."

She grinned slightly. Pulled a cigarette from the pack, put it in her mouth, and leaned forward. Heckenpisser held the flame out, a bit too theatrically, but at least without comment.

Kuddel observed the scene with the attention of a zoologist rediscovering an extinct species.

"Thank you," she said. "Mine just went for a swim." She briefly showed her own lighter – completely rusted, as if it had once been dragged through a filthy kitchen sink.

"It happens to the best of us," said Heckenpisser. "Or to us. Hehehe."

She gave a short, nasal laugh. "You two are here quite often, aren't you?" she asked, looking alternately at Kuddel and Hecke.

"We're permanently installed," Kuddel replied, feeling his inner voice already searching for a remark that could ruin everything. "Standing table fixtures. If Murat ever kicks us out, the whole structure will collapse."

"Murat said you guys are 'drinking asses'," she said. "At first I thought he was kidding me."

ZACK.

There was the word. Her name. Her legend. Her insult and her title, all in one.

"Did he?" asked Heckenpisser, pretending to be honored. "Then he's finally made us official. Hehehe."

"I used to walk past here a lot," she said, inhaling her first drag, "but somehow... I don't know... I thought: I'm not going there. They look like a cross between a problem and a podcast."

Kuddel laughed. "That's the best description I've heard in years," he said. "Problem and podcast. We should charge for our conversations."

"No one pays for your conversations," Murat shouted from inside. "People turn around as soon as you so much as take a deep breath."

She nodded at Kuddel. "Are you Kuddel?" she asked. "The one with the stories?"

Heckenpisser looked at him as if someone had just said: "Is this the artist?"

"It depends," Kuddel said cautiously. "It depends on whether Murat bribed you to ask the question."

"No," she said. "He just meant you were a kind of... how did he put it... 'antisocial storyteller with a side of alcohol'."

"That's character assassination in the best sense," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

Kuddel felt his brain reboot like an old computer. Things started whirring away that hadn't worked in a long time: Flirting? Small talk? Dignity?

He nodded in her direction. "And who are you?" he asked. "A late-night shopper who's finally laughing at us? Or a neighbor who wants to complain that we think too loudly?"

"I live up on the side street," she said. "I'm always just rushing through here. Work, shopping, end of the day, next round. You've become..." she searched briefly for a word, "...a kind of... background noise in my life. Now I thought: it can't hurt to take a closer look at that noise."

Heckenpisser was delighted. "Hehehe... We are the white noise of social decline," he said. "Very charming."

She took another drag on her cigarette, blowing the smoke towards the street, not in her face.

"By the way, I'm Jana," she finally added. "In case you're interested."

"We are interested in everything," said Kuddel, "as long as it doesn't come from the Federal Employment Agency."

"I work in a hospital," said Jana. "Night shifts, day shifts, broken backs, screaming relatives. One of my colleagues sometimes comes by here. She said the other day: 'There are two guys standing here who look like they've done everything wrong – and yet they're laughing. It's kind of reassuring.'"

Kuddel felt something inside him briefly warm up, and it wasn't the beer.

"We're the warning signs with entertainment value," he said. "Imagine walking along the edge of a precipice and us shouting: 'Don't jump, it's not worth it. We've tested it.'"

"Yes," she said. "That's exactly how it looked to us from a distance."

He felt his standard response about to kick in: a cheesy pickup line, an exaggeration, something about "panties," "cuts," or "damage." But for the first time in a long time... he kept his mouth shut.

Only briefly. Just a few seconds. But it was as if someone inside his skull had turned down the volume control of his self-sabotage.

"And you?" she asked unexpectedly. "What do you do besides stand here and convert Bells?"

The question that clerks at the office had asked him a thousand times. But coming from her, it sounded different. Not like a form. More like: "Are you more than this counter?"

He could have said: "I'm making myself comfortable in the social dregs." Or: "I live off the state and my stories." He could have cracked a joke.

Instead, he said, surprisingly calmly:

"I... sometimes write down what I see. And drink while I do it. You could say I do field research into the biographies of people who have crashed and burned."

"Are these real stories then?" she asked. "With a beginning, middle, and end?"

"Mostly just the beginning," grinned Heckenpisser. "We never quite get the ending right. Hehehe."

Jana smiled. But it wasn't a "haha, you guys are funny" smile. It was that slow, probing smile you use to check if there's more to someone than just a facade.

"That doesn't sound so stupid," she said. "I expected worse."

"Thank you," said Kuddel. "'Not so stupid at all' is the highest praise we've received in years."

A mobile phone vibrated. Jana pulled her phone out of her pocket and looked at the display.

"Shit," she said, "message from the station. A colleague is sick, I have to start earlier tomorrow."

She flicked the cigarette butt into the ashtray and pulled up the shopping bag.

"It was nice to see you all, not just as a background," she said. "Maybe I'll chat with you again sometime. Wave to me when I walk by."

"We're always waving," said Heckenpisser. "We're like those bobblehead dogs in the car. Hehehe."

Kuddel felt he had to say something. This time not off-key, not rhyming, not self-destructive. Just... something that wouldn't push everything away again.

"Hey, Jana," he said before she could turn away.

She looked at him questioningly.

"If you ever finish work and don't know what to do with your head," he said, "we're usually here. We're harmless. Just loud. And we've already done everything wrong once so you can skip it."

She grinned. This time a little wider.

"I'll remember that," she said. "But if I then show up in your stories gossiping about my underwear, I'll hit you with the IV pole."

"Fair deal," said Kuddel.

She left. Not in slow motion, not into the light – simply down the street, towards the sea of houses, the hospital world, life that functioned yet still lived on the edge.

For a few seconds nobody said anything. Then Heckenpisser slowly turned to Kuddel.

"Dude," he said respectfully. "You just talked to a woman."

"Shut up," said Kuddel. "It was small talk."

"You didn't talk about underwear, nor did you declare yourself a disaster beforehand," Hecke noted. "That was... character development. Hehehe."

"She was just a sister," Kuddel muttered. "She's seen worse than us."

"Yes," said Murat. "But she didn't treat you like you were the lowest of the low. That's rare."

Kuddel stared at his empty bottle. Images mingled in his mind: cotton briefs, bodysuits, the woman from the club back then whom he had pushed away...and that brief smile from Jana just now.

"I wasn't trying to seduce her," he said slowly, more to himself than to the others. "I was just... talking normally."

"Feels strange, doesn't it?" asked Hedge Pisser. "Hehehe."

"Yes," Kuddel admitted. "Almost as if I had briefly been part of the same species."

"Perhaps," Elke suggested, leaning quietly back against the table, "that's the trick: to stop immediately opening the dating screen in your head with every woman. Just to talk without thinking: What does this mean for my bed?"

"My bed," said Kuddel, "is just a mattress at floor level anyway. Nobody needs to read anything into it."

Heckenpisser giggled. "Hehehe," he went. "Imagine, Kuddel: You'll become a guy you can just talk to without everything smelling like a peep show or a catastrophe."

"Maybe," Kuddel replied, "I'm just getting old."

They stood there, drank another round, letting the sounds of the neighborhood wash over them.

The conversation drifted off again – to jobs, measures, chaos in the warehouse, the hedge-pisser's mother and the toilet seat, the ghost in the toilet. The usual drunken drivel mix.

But somewhere in between, in the spaces, a small difference had taken root:

The realization that not every woman who walks by is a missed opportunity –

but sometimes a person who pauses briefly at their own noise and says:

"You're strange. But you belong here."

As the evening wore on and heads grew heavier, Kuddel eventually leaned his back against the wall of the late-night shop and looked up at the sky – a muddy, light-polluted something.

"Hedge?" he asked.

"Yes?" replied Heckenpisser, who was trying to light a cigarette with trembling fingers.

"If I get another chance like I did back then in the club," said Kuddel, "this time I won't do the warning sign move. I'll just shut up and see what happens."

Hedgepisser grinned crookedly at him. "Hehehe," he said. "I don't believe a word you say. But I'd like to see it."

"Perhaps," said Murat, closing the door, "you should see yourselves less as 'drunkards' and more as... I don't know... last witnesses of how to screw up and still laugh. That works better than any lame come-on."

"'Last Witnesses' sounds like we're about to kick the bucket," Kuddel grumbled.

"We will eventually," said Heckenpisser. "But until then..."

He raised the bottle once more.

"...we talk about cuts, panties and lame come-ons," he concluded, "and sometimes we even manage to just be human, without anyone needing a punchline. Hehehe."

They clinked glasses.

The city grumbled, the night was not yet over, and somewhere in between all this, a small, almost imperceptible progress had quietly crept in:

At least on that evening, the most awkward pickup line was...

The one that wasn't done.

Kuddel and the Legend of the Perfect Drunkenness

The legend of the perfect drunkenness was as old as Kuddel himself. Perhaps even older. Perhaps it had already been told about him in the pubs before he had even held his first real beer.

In any case, she was always there. Like a myth from a better, worse time.

The perfect drunken stupor – that was the one thing the old drunks used to talk about at the bar when the air was already heavy with smoke and music and the missed life.

"Once," someone in some dive bar had said, "just once I had the perfect drunken stupor: everything soft, everything warm, all worries quiet, no blackouts, no vomiting, no stress, just the feeling that you are exactly where you're meant to be, right here, right now. And the next morning you're just tired, but not destroyed. Once. Never again after that."

Back then, Kuddel was in his early twenties, his liver still fresh, his brain not yet completely clouded. He'd looked at the guy and thought: I want something like that too. Just once. A legendary drinking session like that, one that's worth it.

Since then, he has been chasing after this ghostly state. For years. For decades.

The evening when the legend was brought up again looked like any other.

Späti.Berlin-Schöneberg, corner of Hauptstraße, the world in grey and neon. The standing table, this sad monument of wood and nicotine, with carved initials, old beer stains and the chronicle of hundreds of night shifts.

Kuddel stood there, wearing his vest, which was more memory than fabric. "Metallica" on the front, "Tankard" on the back, patches that had once been freshly sewn and now dangled from him like war medals.

His boots were heavy, his jeans ripped, a cigarette butt stuck to the corner of his mouth. He pulled on the bottle of Sterni as if he were signing his own name.

Heckenpisser arrived as always: in a shirt, bow tie, coat, briefcase, as if he were officially late to a meeting that was only important to him.

"Well, there you are, king of the lingering alcoholics," he said, putting down his bag and pulling his bow tie aside. "Searching for the Holy Grail in the bottle cap again? Hehehe."

"I'm doing field research today," Kuddel grumbled. "Chapter: 'How much do I have to drink before I finally stop thinking about tomorrow?'"

Murat appeared in the doorway, a cloth over his shoulder, his eyes on the cash register.

"The perfect drunken stupor, huh?" he interjected. "I overheard you guys talking about that the other day. It doesn't exist. It's like playing the lottery without a ticket."

"Of course it exists," Kuddel objected. "It has to exist. I've almost felt it twice in my life. So close. Everything easy, all the ugly thoughts gone, music in my head, no hate, no pain – just a vague 'it's alright' feeling. And then..." He made a gesture as if something were about to tip over. "...two more beers too many, and bam, you're back in that train station vomit movie."

Heckenpisser took the first bottle and turned it between his fingers. "The thing is," he said, "you only realize the perfect buzz when you're already over it. Hehehe. Before that, you think: I can still get more drunk."

"That's the problem," Murat confirmed. "The only perfect moment is when you think, 'Maybe I should stop now.' And then you don't stop. Because you are you."

Kuddel took a sip and wiped his lip with the back of his hand. The air was cold, but not fresh. Typical big-city freshness: exhaust fumes, fast-food joints, cigarette smoke, spilled kebab, late-night convenience store breath.

"Back in the day at the milk bar," he began, "there was a guy named Dieter, but everyone called him Deluxe Dieter. To this day, I don't know why. He didn't look deluxe at all. More like a bad Photoshopped version of Macke. But he always had the same story: 'I once had the perfect drunken stupor. Back in the eighties. Christmas Eve, night shift at the pub, only regulars, Nirvana on the radio, everything was going smoothly. No stress, no fights, no trouble with women, just drinking, laughing, music. I went home that night, lay down, woke up in the morning and thought: This is how it should always be. No headaches, just peace.'"

"Did he really say that?" asked Heckenpisser. "Peace?"

"Yeah, man," Kuddel nodded. "Peace. The man who later threw an ashtray at his wife talked about peace. That must have meant something."

"And you thought to yourself: Challenge accepted," grinned Hedge Pisser. "Hehehe."

"Exactly," said Kuddel. "I want that just once. Only once. Not this 'getting wasted until I black out' kind of thing. No hospital, no train station toilet, no 'where's my wallet, where's my phone.' Just: wasted, but clear-headed. Wasted, but not wasted. Perfect."

Murat snorted. "That's called being tipsy, you idiot," he said. "We've all been there. At 18. After that, it's biology."

"No," Kuddel insisted. "Being tipsy is like halftime stuff. I'm talking about that plateau. Don't you know what I mean? When you drink and drink and drink—and suddenly you realize: now. Now everything's in balance. You feel everything, but nothing stings. You're there, but without weight. No self-loathing, no panic, no blackout. Just an imbalance with awareness."

"How long did this plateau last when you had it?" asked Hedge Pisser.

"Five minutes," Kuddel admitted. "Maybe ten. Then someone gave me vodka."

They laughed. That rough laughter that was too harsh to be truly funny, but too soft to be completely sad.

“Remember that time,” Heckenpisser began, “when you thought you’d found the perfect drunkenness, and I had to scrape you off the curb in the middle of the night? Hehehe.”

“That was something else,” Kuddel objected. “That was... a research surplus.”

It was the early 2000s. Berlin was in that strange in-between state: the wall was gone, the money was gone, hope was also somehow gone, but everywhere there were late-night shops and clubs that looked like makeshift living rooms.

Kuddel, then in his mid-thirties, believed he was still indestructible. It was a New Year's Eve that nobody had really planned. Spontaneous get-togethers, cheap sparkling wine in plastic cups, firecrackers from Poland that you'd rather not hold onto.

“Today,” Kuddel had said back then, “today I’m going to drink myself into a perfect state. No aggression, no stress, no arguments. Just getting drunk in style. No mixing, just beer and maybe a Jägermeister if necessary.”

In the end, it was: beer, Jägermeister, vodka, some disgusting peach liqueur, two glasses of red wine that didn't belong to him, and a stranger's joint.

He had indeed captured that moment at midnight. Just very briefly, as if through a keyhole.

He stood on a hill in Hasenheide Park, looking out over the city, firecrackers everywhere, showers of sparks, people hugging each other. One man was howling, one was vomiting, one was running across the meadow with a sparkler.

Kuddel suddenly felt... calm. His heart beat normally, not frantically. His head was full, but without chaos. He thought: That's it. Exactly like that. Nothing more now. Just stand still, breathe, look.

He held the Jägermeister in his hand. The friend next to him yelled: "Come on, let's drink to everything we've screwed up!"

And Kuddel, the idiot, had taken aim. Because you don't make good decisions in moments like these.

Two hours later he was down at the curb, somewhere in Neukölln, and Heckenpisser was standing next to him and said: “Hehehe... You are so perfect that you can’t even find your shoes anymore.”

"You were lying there," Heckenpisser recounted now at the standing table, "like a toppled advertising column. I asked you: 'So, legendary?' And you just said: 'I don't give a damn... about anything.' And then you spat on the sidewalk. If that was the perfect drunken stupor, I don't want to experience the beta test."

"It was perfect for a moment," Kuddel insisted. "Up there, on the hill. I told you so!"

"Yes," Hecke nodded. "And I already told you back then: The perfect drunkenness is probably the one you don't drink yourself into oblivion. Hehehe."

Today, sitting at the standing table, Kuddel was more realistic. His body had slowed down, his hangover more aggressive, his boundaries narrower.

"Perhaps," he said, "the perfect drunkenness is like the perfect woman. Everyone talks about it, but no one has really had her for long."

"I had her," Murat said dryly. "The perfect woman. For three months. Then she realized that I am me."

"What was she like?" asked Heckenpisser curiously.

"Sober," Murat said. "And that was her mistake."

They laughed again.

"If we're honest," said Heckenpisser, adjusting his glasses on his nose, "we no longer drink to find the perfect drunkenness. We drink to find the perfect oblivion. Hehehe."

"Forgetting is such a false promise," Kuddel muttered. "I've never really forgotten anything. I've just pushed it somewhere else. And they all come back eventually. At the latest at night, when you have to pee."

"The best drunken nights," said Elke, leaning against the door again, "are the ones where you suffer the next day, but you can still remember everything. The nights when you say: 'That was crap, but it was mine.'"

"I had one like that once," Kuddel chimed in. "I was in my mid-twenties with three friends in the park, drinking Stern beer, smoking a few joints, listening to some guy we didn't know playing guitar. We spent the whole evening talking nonsense about everything: politics, love, death, recycling. And at some point, I was lying on the grass, staring up at the sky, stars, airplanes, anything. I was high, but clear-headed. I was sad, but not desperate. And I thought: If I don't wake up tomorrow, at least I didn't make any mistakes today."

"And?" asked Heckenpisser.

"I woke up," said Kuddel. "With sore muscles in my face from laughing so much. Headache, sure. But otherwise? No drama. No blackout. No arguments. No embarrassing moves. Just memories. Maybe it was the perfect binge and I didn't even realize it."

"See," said Hecke. "You only ever recognize perfection in retrospect. Hehehe."

Kuddel looked at his bottle. The foam was long gone, leaving only the thin beer underneath, like an honest broth.

"But at some point," he added, "it becomes dangerous. When you realize you're chasing after the legend, you no longer drink because you feel like it. You drink because you want to achieve something. And that's the most ridiculous thing of all: ambitious drinking."

"Ambitious drinking," Murat repeated. "That's the moment when you know you're officially crazy."

"Back then," mused Heckenpisser, "I used to tell myself: Today it will be legendary. Today I tell myself: Today you won't completely destroy yourself. Progress. Hehehe."

"I'd like a drunken stupor that doesn't smack of self-harm," Kuddel suddenly said quietly. "One where you don't feel like you're punishing yourself for something again. But simply... being there. Without expecting anything in return."

They fell silent for a moment. Elke took a drag on her cigarette, letting the smoke escape through her nose.

"Maybe this isn't even drunk," she said. "Maybe this is sobriety with one too many beers. You're confusing states."

"I'm too old to stay sober," Kuddel muttered.

"You're not too old," she countered. "You're just too persistent in your escape."

He wanted to say something rude, some standard crap like "You don't understand," but nothing useful came out. Instead, there was this faint feeling that she might be right.

"The best hangouts," Heckenpisser said at one point, "were the ones where we didn't try to perfect them. The ones where we simply... forgot that we were trying to achieve something. Hehehe."

"Man, stop being so clever," Kuddel growled. "You're ruining my legend."

"The legend isn't broken," said Murat. "It's just honest. The perfect drunkenness is the one you no longer need."

That hit home. Much more so than any bureaucratic drivel at the job center.

Kuddel took the last sip, put the bottle down, felt the pulling in his back, the burning in his stomach, the slight buzzing behind his eyes – this mixture of "still okay" and "not much longer".

He looked them both in the face. Heckenpisser with his know-it-all grin. Murat with his "I've seen it all five times before" look.

"All right," he said. "No perfect binge today. Just a normal crash with conversation. The legend isn't going anywhere."

"No," said Heckenpisser. "It sits in the back of our heads and laughs at us. Hehehe."

"The legend of the perfect drunkenness," Kuddel murmured, "is probably exactly that: a story we need to keep going."

"Like Christmas for children," Murat added. "Only with more liver failure."

They laughed. Again. Because laughter was the only thing that wasn't punished.

And somewhere, deep inside that dented, drunken part of Kuddel, there was a tiny thought that he didn't dare to think aloud:

Maybe I'll never experience it – the perfect drunkenness.

Perhaps at some point I will have to learn to endure a reasonably tolerable everyday life instead of seeking the perfect high.

But he wasn't there yet. Not yet.

Today, the drinking continued.

Not perfect. Just consistent.

The evening dragged on, and with each bottle the question moved further into focus: Did this perfect drunkenness really exist – or was it just a fairytale character from the Grimm collection of tales of drunkenness?

"Do you know where it all started?" Kuddel asked after the third round, cigarette dangling from his mouth, eyes slightly glazed but still focused. "With this shitty idea that you could optimize all of this."

Heckenpisser smirked. "You mean your famous drunkenness matrix?" he asked. "Hehehe."

"Yeah, man!" said Kuddel. "Go ahead and laugh. Innovation is always ridiculed in this country."

Murat snorted. "Innovation? You wrote down on graph paper the mixing ratio that makes you throw up the least," he said. "That's not innovation, that's the worst chemistry lesson ever."

Kuddel pushed himself away from the standing table as if he were giving a speech. "Listen," he said. "That's how it was back then..."

He was in his late twenties, early thirties, somewhere in the area. Job gone, relationship gone, but the pub was still there. The Milchbar, some dive in Kreuzberg, which today would probably be a vegan tapas place with a DJ set.

"I was fed up with random highs," Kuddel explained. "You know how it is: sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the night is great, sometimes you wake up with blood in your mouth and don't know if it's from you. I thought to myself: This has to be plannable."

So one evening he sat down, alone in his one-room apartment, with a checkered notepad, ballpoint pen and a bottle of schnapps, "for creativity." At the top of the page he wrote:

Project: The Perfect Drunken Intoxication

These include columns: "Beer", "Grain", "Jägermeister", "Mix", "Number of cigarette butts", "Food intake", "Vomiting level", "Blackout yes/no", "Shame factor".

"I really did keep track of it," said Kuddel. "Like other people keep household accounts. Night after night. What I drank, when, how much, how I felt."

"You kept a drinking diary?" asked Heckenpisser. "Hehehe. That's so messed up, it's professional in a way."

"Yes," said Kuddel. "I thought: If I have enough data, I'll see patterns. Others do stock market analysis, I do noise analysis."

"And?" asked Murat. "What was the result, Mr. Scientist?"

"The result was," Kuddel said dryly, "that I have a tendency to do 'too much.' No matter how I start, no matter what I set out to do – at some point there always comes a time when I think: one more thing. And that's exactly the death blow."

He remembered one entry perfectly, because he had never thrown the slip of paper away:

Thursday

5x Sterni, 3x Jäger, 1x Korn. Eaten: 1 doner kebab (half eaten, lost the rest). Vomit level: 7 out of 10. Blackout: only pieces. Shame factor: 9 ("insulted strangers, bit my own hand")

"The shame factor was my favorite category," said Kuddel. "At some point, I started thinking of it in terms of colors. Green: you're only embarrassing to yourself. Yellow: a few people saw it. Red: you have to take detours to avoid running into anyone you know."

"How many times have you been in Rot?" asked Heckenpisser.

"So often that I eventually gave up on the definition," Kuddel said. "There were nights when I would have needed a new category: Purple. That's when the police know your name."

They laughed, but there was this other thing underneath – this quiet "we all know how close we were".

"I kept a log for months," Kuddel continued. "Trying to find patterns. For example: beer plus Jägermeister = social, but prone to aggression. Beer plus schnapps = headache hurricane. Just beer = slow descent, but with more control. Beer plus schnapps plus weed = completely wrong genre."

"So?" asked Heckenpisser. "Did you find it? The code?"

"I've discovered that the perfect binge doesn't depend on mixing ratios," said Kuddel. "But on things you can't control."

"For example?", Murat asked.

"For example: how broken you already are inside before you even start," Kuddel said calmly. "What you want to forget. Whether you had a good day beforehand or one where everything is a mess. Who you're drinking with. Whether you feel ashamed before you open the first bottle – or only afterwards."

Heckenpisser nodded slowly. "That's the perverse thing," he said. "You can have two drinks in the same evening and get two completely different movies."

“Once,” Kuddel recalled, “I had an evening when everything would have been perfect. Really. Remember, Hecke? Barbecue in the backyard, summer, music, no stress, no government office, no ex, nothing. Just meat, beer, friends, peace and quiet.”

“Yes,” said Hecke. “Legendary barbecue. Hehehe.”

“I started off moderately,” Kuddel said. “I drank water in between, ate, and laughed. I had this feeling: if I just stay like this, tomorrow I’ll only have a slight pressure in my head and good memories. And then...”

“...then came the schnapps,” added Heckenpisser.

“No,” said Kuddel. “Then I went to the toilet, looked in the mirror and saw: I’m having a good evening. And that sight... devastated me.”

"What do you mean?" asked Murat.

"Well," said Kuddel. "I was standing there, slightly drunk, red cheeks, a bit sweaty hair, but okay. And I thought: You have no wife, no real job, no prospects – and yet you're laughing right now. You've got it way too good for your life. And then I thought to myself: That's a lie. And... I added fuel to the fire."

Hedge-pisser shook his head and chuckled bitterly. "Hehehe... You're the only guy who can't stand a good night," he said. "You need misery as a side dish."

“Yes,” Kuddel admitted. “The perfect binge-drinking experience I’ve always been looking for is actually: the evening when I don’t punish myself.”

Elke postponed the next round, but remained standing with her arms folded, listening.

“You underestimate,” she said, “how many people are exactly like that. They can’t even be normally drunk anymore. It’s either complete blackout or self-hatred in the form of a bottle.”

“I tried to quit once,” Kuddel interjected, as if he were mentioning a war between three sips. “Three months.”

"Oh," said Heckenpisser. "Did I miss that? Or repress it? Hehehe."

“You were busy with your mother at that time,” said Kuddel. “I was on a solo mission. No beer. No liquor. Just water, cola, coffee. I thought, maybe... then I’ll finally know what’s left if I don’t drink.”

"And?", asked Murat.

"What was left was: the job center, an empty apartment, a messy past," said Kuddel. "I saw everything even more clearly. Without filters. It was great. Two weeks."

"And then what?" asked Elke.

“After that, I realized that I’m still the same person without alcohol,” said Kuddel. “Just without the numbing effect. And if you feel bad for ten hours a day, at some point you’re no longer proud of being sober. You’re just tired.”

“Weren’t you more productive?” Heckenpisser inquired.

“I did more washing up,” said Kuddel. “I aired out the rooms more. I showered more often. But the legend of the perfect binge drinking... kept working in my head. It said: Maybe you shouldn’t drink for a while now – and THEN the one time you get drunk will be even better.”

“The legend is like a drug dealer,” Murat observed. “It says: ‘Go ahead and stop for a bit. I’ll still be here if you want me to come back.’”

Kuddel nodded heavily. "I started again after three months," he said. "And the first high was... sobering. In the truest sense. No magic, no myth. Just: Oh yeah, that's it. And yet I stuck with it. Because... what else am I supposed to do?"

Heckenpisser looked at him for a long time, without a hint of humor in his eyes.

“We always talk about getting completely drunk,” he said then, “as if it were something glorious. But actually, it’s just the version of us who finally want some peace and quiet. Hehehe – not even that’s funny.”

“I once had the perfect drunken stupor,” Murat suddenly interjected.

"Now it gets exciting," said Elke. "Let's go."

Murat leaned halfway into the door frame, like someone briefly unpacking his own legend, which he rarely tells.

"That was before I had this place," he said. "Back then, I was a bartender at a club in Neukölln. Three days in a row, hardly any sleep, always the same faces, always the same lies. On the third day, around four in the morning, the place was almost empty. Just two regulars having a slow-motion argument, and me. I made myself a drink, just once. Then another. Eventually, the sun came out, I closed up, counted the cash, lay down on the benches in the back, and... everything was just quiet. I was drunk, yeah. But not so drunk that I had to fight. Just so drunk that I didn't care if I was a bartender, a king, or a garbage collector. I didn't feel bad, not great, just... okay. And the next day... hangover, sure. But I remembered everything. No blackout. No shame. That was my perfect high."

"And?" asked Kuddel. "Why don't you repeat it?"

Murat laughed briefly. "Because I didn't try to reach him back then," he said. "I was simply at my wit's end. The intoxication was a side effect, not the goal."

They were silent for a moment. The wind blew an empty chip bag along the sidewalk.

“Maybe,” said Heckenpisser slowly, “that’s the trick. To stop trying to find the perfect binge. If you’re looking for something, you start dosing. And we... can’t dose. Hehehe.”

“We can’t even prepare canned soup properly,” Kuddel said.

"You can't even control your own emotions," Elke said. "You always go all out. Whether it's self-hatred or fun."

Kuddel shrugged. "Half measures were never my thing," he said. "Either nothing at all, or until it hurts."

Heckenpisser tipped over the rest of the bottle, put it down, and looked at his buddy.

"Do you know what the saddest realization is in this whole legend?" he asked.

"That she's lying?" murmured Kuddel.

"No," said Hecke. "That you've probably already had the perfect binge-drinking experience – on some night where you just thought: 'That was okay.' And instead of taking it and saying: That was my moment, you've been chasing after it for years as if it were still hidden somewhere."

"Maybe," said Kuddel, "I believed for too long that my perfect high should feel like salvation. And at some point it was just... not quite as bad as usual."

"In plain English," Murat translated, "your perfect binge is: you're drunk and for once you don't do anything stupid. No train station toilets, no crime scene, no hospital. Just a late-night shop, a standing table, the walk home, sleep. That's it."

Kuddel thought about it briefly. Standing table, laughter, mental images, walk home, sleep. No drama. No escalation.

"That would be a lot," he said. "More than I've had in recent years."

He looked at his hands. His fingernails had nicotine stains, his skin was cracked, but still there.

"Perhaps," he added, "the legend shouldn't be called: perfect intoxication, but rather an evening without self-destruction. It just doesn't sound as romantic."

"Romance," said Heckenpisser, "is just a lie you put over reality so it doesn't look so shitty. Hehehe."

Kuddel's mouth twisted into a crooked smile.

"All right," he said. "No attempt to reach the legendary level today. Today I'll drink so much that I'll still remember tomorrow how you annoyed me."

"That's the beginning of wisdom," Murat observed. "Or early liver failure."

They ordered another round anyway. Not heroically. Not mythically.

Only the way you drink when you slowly realize that the great legends

These are mostly just small truths, blown out of proportion by people.

who cannot bear that their best evenings

They were actually quite simple nights.

It was considerably later when the legend of the perfect drunkenness made its next appearance – not in the mind, but as a springboard.

The corner store was now brighter inside than the street. The neon lights hummed, the beer crates were half empty, and outside at the standing table, there was a weariness in the air that came not only from alcohol, but from years.

Kuddel was now in this intermediate stage: no longer drunk enough to seem invincible, but also not yet sober enough to really want to go home.

Heckenpisser had hung his coat over the back of the chair, loosened his bow tie, and rolled up his shirt sleeves. He looked like a lawyer who had finally lost the case against his own life.

“You know what I’m wondering?” said Kuddel, as he uncorked a new Sterni and deliberately flicked the bottle cap far towards the street.

"Will you ever stop analyzing the same crap?" asked Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

“No,” said Kuddel. “Isn’t it all just an excuse? This legend. The perfect drunken stupor. Maybe it’s the romantic version of: I don’t want to take responsibility.”

Murat, who was refilling his cigarettes, glanced over briefly. "Ugh," he said. "Depth alert."

“I’m serious,” Kuddel continued. “Back when I was 20, 25 – I drank because I thought: party, fun, life. At some point, it became a mission. I didn’t just want to drink anymore, I wanted to find that state. That one moment when everything is right. And the more I searched for it, the less I cared about everything else.”

"You mean: job, women, health, that sort of thing?" asked Heckenpisser.

“Yes,” said Kuddel. “I always told myself: I’m not an alcoholic, I’m a researcher. What nonsense. I was just a bum with Excel for brain.”

Heckenpisser laughed briefly. “Hehehe... ‘I’m not drinking, I’m researching,’” he repeated. “That’s like: ‘I’m not unemployed, I’m in research mode.’”

Kuddel took a sip, looked into the street where a bus was passing by, a yellow box full of faces who had no idea that someone was squatting out here, dissecting his own life like a bad crime scene.

“Look,” he said. “You. Me. We’ve been telling each other the same stories for years. ‘If I had reacted differently back then...’, ‘If the measure hadn’t been so shitty...’, ‘If the cuts had stayed...’ And the bottom line is: We always took a wrong turn somewhere that hurt. And instead of turning around, we said: ‘Then I’ll just drink myself into oblivion.’”

"You're telling me the legend of the perfect drunkenness is a traveling trophy for people who no longer fight?" asked Heckenpisser.

“Yep,” Kuddel nodded. “Something like that.”

Elke came out with a new box and placed it next to the table. “Why are you thinking about it so much today?” she asked. “Usually you drink, rant, philosophize briefly, and leave. Today it almost sounds like a... concept.”

“Because I’ll soon be running around in some training program, getting boxes thrust into my hands, and some guy in a polo shirt telling me it’s all my own fault,” said Kuddel. “And I swear to you: when I’m standing there listening to that drivel, I at least want to be able to say, somewhat clearly to myself, where I’ve been screwed over.”

Heckenpisser put his hands on his hips. “You’re afraid of the camp,” he observed. “Hehehe.”

“I’m afraid of that,” Kuddel corrected, “that I’ll be standing there, starting again, trying to stick it out – and then have an evening where I say to myself: Now you’ve actually earned something, you were on time, you’re not completely in the way – now you’ve earned the right to get drunk. And bam, I’m back in the drunken lottery.”

“You’re saying,” Murat said, “that you don’t even trust yourself not to immediately drink away a success.”

“Exactly,” said Kuddel. “I don’t trust myself when I’m sober. And certainly not when I’m drunk. What a load of crap.”

Heckenpisser took a long gulp himself and looked at the wet street.

“You know what I sometimes think?” he said. “For us, the perfect drunkenness wouldn’t be the one where everything is soft and peaceful – but the one where you reach a point where you say, ‘That’s enough. I’m going home now.’ And then you actually do. Hehehe.”

“I did that once,” Kuddel muttered. “Only once.”

“Now for the kicker,” said Elke. “A Bible story.”

Kuddel grimaced as if he were reluctant to share an embarrassing anecdote.

“It was a few years ago,” he began. “New Year’s Eve. Not the New Year’s Eve with the curb incident. Later. I was invited to some cheap party, a shared apartment, too many people, too little air. Cheap sparkling wine in plastic cups, the usual stuff. I’d had quite a bit to drink. Not a complete blackout, but definitely over the limit. And at some point around two o’clock, I’m standing on the balcony, looking down at the street, everyone’s shouting, firecrackers going off, someone’s singing an anthem off-key, I don’t know. I look at my cup, I’m feeling a little dizzy, my head’s spinning – and I think: If I stay here any longer, it’ll be the same old story. Some argument, some outburst, something embarrassing. You know the script. And I... just poured the cup out, grabbed my jacket, said goodbye, and went home.”

“Wow,” said Heckenpisser. “Character moment. Hehehe.”

“At home,” Kuddel continued, “I made myself some tea. Yeah, go ahead and laugh. Tea. I lay down on the mattress, turned on some quiet music, and... just lay there. My head was racing, sure. But: I didn’t destroy anything, I didn’t snap at anyone, I didn’t break any glasses, I

didn't throw up in a stairwell. I was just... drunk in my own filth and I managed to handle it. The next morning, a hangover, obviously. But no second-hand embarrassment. No 'Who did I call?' No 'Who do I need to avoid?'"

"And you don't call that a perfect drunken stupor?" Murat asked.

"Not back then," said Kuddel. "Back then I thought it was lame. Today I think: Maybe that was exactly it – the best high I ever had. Only without the fireworks in my head. Only without the legend."

"Because you always associate the legend with drama," Heckenpisser explained. "Hehehe. In your head, the perfect drunkenness has to be something you could film. In real life, the perfect drunkenness is probably the one no one sees."

They were silent for a moment. An empty beer can rolled across the street, pushed by the wind, and got stuck on the curb.

"And why don't you do that more often?" Elke asked suddenly. "If you know you can do it? Just finish earlier?"

Kuddel looked at her as if she had suggested he should become Federal President.

"Because I'm a stupid bastard," he said. "Because every time I think: this time I'll control it. And because I'm afraid of feeling too much when I'm sober."

Heckenpisser snorted. "Hehehe... Welcome to the club," he said. "I've proven to myself a hundred times that I can theoretically turn things around. But theory isn't fun."

"You know what I really can't stand to hear from you two anymore?" Murat interjected. "This constant 'That's just how I am.' As if it were a tattoo, not a personality trait."

"I have a tattoo," Kuddel muttered. "That's enough for both."

"You can get a new layer tattooed over a crappy inscription," Murat said. "Maybe someone should just hammer a different word into your head over 'the legend of the perfect binge.'"

"Which one?" asked Kuddel. "'Mediocre'?"

"'Survival,' said Murat. "Not pretty, not sexy. But honest. You and Rausch – you're like bad exes. You can't do without each other, but together something always burns down."

Heckenpisser laughed, but there was no real amusement in it. "Hehehe... You have a talent for making things unfunny and true," he said.

"You don't want the truth any other way," Murat growled and disappeared back inside.

Kuddel lit a new cigarette, even though the old one was still half-glowing. His hands trembled slightly, just enough for him to notice.

"Hecke," he said quietly, "do you think it's possible to change one's relationship with drinking when one is almost fifty? Or is this simply the style until the end?"

The hedge pisser was quiet for a moment. Very briefly.

"I think," he said then, "you can change your relationship to it. But not by finding the perfect drunkenness – but by accepting that it doesn't exist for you. Hehehe. And slowly learning to live with an imperfect one."

"That sounds like a support group," said Kuddel. "'Hello, I'm Kuddel – and my best binges are average.'"

"Yes," said Heckenpisser. "Perhaps that's what adulthood is about: accepting that average is better than broken."

"But I don't want to be average," Kuddel growled. "I am Kuddel."

"You're the kind of guy," Elke said dryly, "who sits at a standing table, drinks Sterni beer, and tells stories about a legend that's been fooling him for twenty years. It's nothing special."

The sentence was spot on. Simple, dry, without any embellishment.

"Do you know what would be truly legendary?" she asked afterwards. "If you could one day say: I got drunk yesterday, it was okay, and I didn't ruin anything. No qualms. No 'buts'."

Kuddel looked at her. The wind caught his robe, the cigarette butt slowly glowed down.

"You ask for little," he said.

"No," said Elke. "I demand the bare minimum. Just one evening without drama. Just one evening without a new story that makes everyone say, 'Wow, that's intense.' Just one evening where you don't tell it as a warning."

Heckenpisser tapped the bottom of the bottle lightly against the tabletop.

"Come on, man," he said. "At least today. No camp, no job center, no ex, no ghost in the toilet. Just us, the corner store, beer. No excess. No train station. No ambulance."

"We're almost out of beer," Murat chimed in from inside. "Then you'll either have to call it a night or start drinking mouthwash."

Kuddel looked at his bottle. A quarter of it was still there. The evening was in his bones, the legend in his head, the future screwed.

"Okay," he finally said. "Deal. Tonight... no legend. Just one night. I'll finish this one, maybe one more... and then I'm off. No drama. No detours."

"You're really going home if you say so?" asked Heckenpisser skeptically. "Hehehe."

"Yes," said Kuddel. "I swear by the toilet wall of the Babylon train station toilet."

"This is not a reliable authority," Elke commented.

"It doesn't get any better than this," said Kuddel.

They continued drinking, but more slowly. They talked about the measure, about Heckenpisser's mother and the new toilet seat, about Jana from the hospital, about old concerts that none of them could stand for much longer.

The conversations became shallower, no less honest, just... less charged. The intoxication came, but it didn't race. It rolled.

Eventually the bottles were empty. The refrigerator hummed, but Murat was already closing the roller shutter.

"The last round is over," he shouted. "Anyone who's still thirsty needs to pray."

Heckenpisser pulled his coat and briefcase back towards him, adjusting his bow tie, which nobody would see anyway.

"And you, drug researcher?" he asked. "Are you making a getaway or looking for a gas station? Hehehe."

Kuddel stood there, weighing the weight of his body, feeling the slight swaying, the familiar rushing, that "You could still" whisper in the back of his mind.

He looked out onto the street, at the gleaming rails, the dark doorways, the options: the train station, detours, and potential future disasters.

Then he thought about that hill back then, about New Year's Eve, about leaving, about the tea. About the evening he had never filed away as "perfect," even though it perhaps was—by his standards.

"No," he finally said. "I'm going home now. No bonus level today."

Heckenpisser grinned. "Hehehe... I want to see that," he said. "I'll take you a little further before the ghost in the neighborhood eats you."

They said goodbye to Murat and Elke, quite unspectacularly – "See you tomorrow", "Take it easy", "Take care of your back".

Then they started moving. Two figures, slightly unsteady, but not completely off course. No big story, no drama.

Halfway there, Kuddel paused briefly, turned around, and looked back at the late-night shop, which now only appeared as a yellowish dot in the street.

"You know," he said, "maybe the legend of the perfect drunkenness needs to be rewritten."

"Come on," said Heckenpisser. "Version 2.0."

"The perfect drunkenness," Kuddel stated, "is the one where you don't wish the next day that you had been someone else."

Heckenpisser chuckled softly. "Hehehe," he went. "Then we're well on our way to a half-baked drunkenness today. That's enough for initial success."

"Start small," Kuddel murmured. "We can always go completely bust later."

They kept walking. No ambulance. No train station toilet. No epic breakdown.

Just two drunkards who, for once, didn't try to make a legend out of the night.

And somewhere behind that, deep in that part of Kuddel that hadn't completely given up,

The old legend of the perfect drunkenness sat in the corner like a tired dog and thought to himself:

Okay.

Maybe I'm just...

A fairy tale.

And maybe that's it

in the end

Not the worst thing at all.

When Sterni becomes philosophy

"Gutter philosopher" was not a title anyone would voluntarily print on their business card. Especially not if his name was Kuddel and he drank Sterni beer straight from the bottle.

But that's exactly how it was: when Kuddel had enough Sternburg beer, the scruffy old metalworker in the flat cap suddenly became someone who could spout the theory of everything from a shelf of canned beer. Not because he wanted to – but because his brain was too lazy for hope and too alert for mere drunkenness.

It was late. The clock on the kiosk across the street showed some time that already looked like "you don't have to get up early tomorrow." At the late-night shop, the neon light flickered as if it were about to finally say: Screw you all.

In front of the shop: The standing table. The altar.

Around it: Kuddel, Heckenpisser, Sternburg, Boonekamp. As always.

"Do you know what the difference is between a philosopher and me?" asked Kuddel, looking at the Sterni bottle as if it were an oracle.

"One guy writes books, the other gets banned from the premises," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"Wrong," said Kuddel. "One guy gets funding for his depression, the other gets, at best, a ban from Murat's house."

Murat poked his head out of the shop. "As long as you don't attract students, everything's fine," he said. "If suddenly people with tote bags start taking notes, I'll personally throw you all out."

"Imagine this," chuckled Heckenpisser. "Seminar: 'Urban Sociology as Exemplified by the Standing Table – Lecturer: Kuddel, Gutter Philosopher. Prerequisite for participation: Only those who have cried at least once in a train station toilet.' Hehehe."

Kuddel took a sip, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, took a drag on his cigarette, and looked out onto the street. Cars, a bus, a bicycle courier, some guy with a garden-style haircut and a laptop bag. All on the move. All going somewhere. All with some purpose they'd convinced themselves was being there.

"You know, Hecke," he began, "I was sitting in the job center today and read this poster slogan: 'Those who want to work find a way. Those who don't want to find an excuse.'"

Heckenpisser rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that passive-aggressive motivational crap," he said. "Hehehe. They probably had it printed at a psychological torture printing company."

"And I swear to you," Kuddel continued, "at that moment I thought: *You have a completely wrong idea about reasons.*"

"In what way?" asked Hecke, already in lecturer mode.

Kuddel lifted the bottle, letting the beer act like a pointer.

"Look," he said, "for those up there – job centers, politicians, self-improvement podcast gurus – the reason is always something like: 'I'm lazy' or 'I can't be bothered.' But the reasons why people like us are standing here chugging Sterni are..." he searched for a word that didn't sound too clever, "...more complex than their lunch break."

"You're saying you don't drink because you're lazy, but because you overthink things," Heckenpisser summarized. "Hehehe."

"I drink," said Kuddel, "because being sober in this system is just as unhealthy as getting drunk. Except that at least when you get drunk you get a warm feeling before it kills you."

He leaned against the corner store window, the glass cold against his back.

"Do you know what Sterni is?" he asked.

"Proof that God wants poor people to be allowed to get drunk too," said Murat.

"Wrong," Kuddel objected. "Sterni is liquid social criticism."

Heckenpisser burst out laughing. "Hehehe... Please explain to me now how canned beer is a critique of capitalism. That will be my highlight of the week."

Kuddel held the bottle up, shook it slightly, so that the little bit of foam stirred.

"Look," he said. "Sternburg is the cheapest beer you can find at a corner store without going blind immediately. No fancy brand, no stylish label, no image. You don't buy it for Instagram. You buy it because you're starving and your bank account is screwed."

"So?" asked Hecke. "It's just cheap beer."

“Exactly,” Kuddel nodded. “Cheap beer for cheap people, say those who order Beck’s for four euros at the bar. But the truth is: nobody buys Sterni for prestige. Anyone who drinks Sterni has accepted one thing:
I am not the target audience.”

Heckenpisser tilted his head slightly. “Target group of what?” he asked.

“All that crap,” said Kuddel. “The lifestyle. The advertising world. Organic supermarkets, craft beer, start-up company jokes, everything that’s hip in Berlin. Look at the posters – you see people jogging, smiling, drinking lattes, using apps, and looking healthy. We’re not in those pictures. We’re... rejects.”

“We are the people,” added Heckenpisser, “who appear on the posters at most in the background as a social backdrop. Hehehe.”

“Exactly,” said Kuddel. “The roll of fat on the margins of society. And Sterni is the consequence of that. It’s the beer that tells you: ‘Brother, you’re out of the game, but you can still drink along. Just in the back. With us other waste products.’”

"That's the best product description Sternburg never booked," Murat muttered.

Kuddel turned the bottle so that the label shone in the neon light. Pale, red, ugly-honest.

“When I drink Sterni,” he said, “this is what happens: The world out there – with its goals, careers, self-care nonsense – becomes quieter. Not gone. But quieter. And other things become louder: That you love your mother, even if she beat the childhood out of your head with a wooden spoon. That you are lonely, even if you always say you don’t need a damn. That you are tired, but not from the day – but from life itself.”

Heckenpisser stared at him. "Dude, the beer's really hitting me hard today," he said.
"Hehehe."

"The beer has no effect at all," said Kuddel. "The beer just creates space. For thoughts that I try to scroll away sober."

Elke came out and lit a cigarette.

“Most people,” she said, “drink to turn their minds off. You drink so that you can get started.”

“When I’m sober,” Kuddel explained, “I’m kind of like a... buffering symbol. You know that YouTube thing when the video is loading? A circle that spins. That’s my head without alcohol: Loading, loading, loading – but nothing comes out.”

"And with Sterni?" asked Hecke.

“With Sterni,” said Kuddel, “at least something comes out. Maybe mud. Maybe shit. But something.”

He took another sip. The beer had gotten warm; it tasted of aluminum and hop residue. He grimaced but drank it anyway.

"You're the kind of guy," said Heckenpisser, "who could look at an empty bottle and give a lecture on transience. Hehehe."

"Of course," said Kuddel. "Empty bottles are like us – they were once full of something that others thought was cool. Now they just get in the way until someone stuffs them into a box."

Murat nodded. "Philosophy on the bottle return shelf," he commented. "Top-notch."

For a moment the corner was silent. Traffic passed them by, a bus, a siren in the distance, somewhere a guy laughing too loudly to be happy.

Heckenpisser leaned closer to Kuddel.

"What do you really think will happen if you stop drinking completely?" he asked. "Not three months. I mean... really."

Kuddel shrugged. "Then I'll be unbearable," he said. "For myself and everyone else. Because then everything that's currently shrouded in fog will become crystal clear. Every missed opportunity, every screwed-up relationship, every time 'job quit, wife dumped, boyfriend disappointed.' I know myself. I don't just lash out at others. I mostly lash out at myself. Drinking is... an airbag."

"You know that airbags will deploy even if the car is already totaled," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"Yes," Kuddel grinned crookedly. "But at least your face isn't directly in the windshield."

He lowered his voice slightly, as if briefly revealing something that was lurking inside him, unpaid rent:

"The truth is: Sometimes I feel like I'm not really a person anymore. I'm just a backdrop. The guy who's always standing in front of the corner store so others can say, 'See, that's not how I want to end up.' I'm like a warning sign in a leather jacket."

Heckenpisser frowned, that typical "I want to laugh, but I hear something else" face.

"Hehehe... You're the anti-influencer model," he said. "That's what you become when you ignore all the tutorials."

"Yes," said Kuddel. "And yet people like Jana come by, get a light, talk briefly, look at us and think:

They're somehow honest.

Do you know what that means? It means that our shit is still more authentic than their optimization drivels.

"Gutter philosopher," Murat smirked. "You should do a podcast: 'Sterni & Crisis of Meaning'."

"Episode 1: Why happiness only exists in cans," Hecke added. "Hehehe."

Kuddel snorted.

"Happiness," he said, "is a marketing concept. What really exists is: brief moments when you feel like you don't have to be ashamed that you're breathing. That's all."

He thought for a moment, staring at the neck of the bottle.

"Do you know when I had that?" he asked. "That lack of shame?"

"What if you're lying drunk in the hospital and everyone thinks you're an accident victim?" suggested Heckenpisser.

"No," said Kuddel. "When I stood with you, Hecke, and Marvin in front of the job center, all of us with letters in our hands, all of us completely screwed – and we still laughed. Not because anything was good. Nothing was good. But we laughed. Not at others. At ourselves. That's... almost dignity."

Heckenpisser turned serious for a moment. "Yes," he said. "These are the moments when I think: Maybe we're not completely worthless. Hehehe."

"We are recycled material," Kuddel corrected. "You can't build anything beautiful out of us anymore, but we still serve as a deterrent, inspiration, and a bad example."

Elke snorted softly.

"You underestimate," she said, "how many people need you. Not consciously, but subconsciously. They walk past you, look at you, and think:

Okay, it's not that bad for me yet.

And on bad days they might think:

Wow, they're still there. Maybe I can do it too."

"So we're psychological junk with symbolic value," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"Exactly," Kuddel nodded. "And Sterni is the sponsor."

He put the empty bottle down and looked at the circle it had left on the tabletop.

"Do you know what Sterni is better at than any philosophy lecture?" he asked.

"No approval is needed?" advised Hecke.

"It's honest," said Kuddel. "It doesn't tell you: If you believe in yourself, everything will be alright. It tells you: You're broke, but for a euro you can convince yourself that things aren't so bad today. It doesn't promise anything more than that. And most of the time, the world can't offer you anything more either."

Heckenpisser nodded slowly, looking at his own bottle.

"Nevertheless," he said, "I'd like to know what you'd be like if you didn't need all this every night to think. Whether the gutter philosopher would then truly become someone who..." He searched for a word that didn't sound like motivational speaker. "...who doesn't just speak for the bar."

Kuddel shrugged, a little resigned, a little defiant.

“Maybe that will still happen,” he said. “Maybe I’ll go into the program, not pass out, pull myself together, write down what I experienced in the evenings – and at some point... my mind will need less backup.”

“And maybe,” Murat said, “everything will stay the same. But you’re putting it a little more clearly. And sometimes seeing things clearly is more than most people can manage.”

Kuddel stretched, his back cracking like an old wooden staircase.

“No matter how you look at it,” he finally said, “we’ll end up here again. You behind the bar, Hecke with a bow tie, me with a Sterni beer. And we’ll pretend we’re a bad joke with depth.”

Heckenpisser grinned. “There we are again with the gutter philosopher,” he said. “Hehehe. The man who makes a school of life out of a Sterni bottle.”

“Call it what you want,” Kuddel muttered. “I call it: survival with commentary.”

He reached for the next bottle and opened it – slowly, without fanfare.

“Over Sterni,” he said. “The only degree program you don’t need a high school diploma for.”

“In the gutter,” added Heckenpisser. “The place where you learn more about people than in any seminar.”

“And philosophy,” said Elke, “is only worthwhile if you can explain it at a standing table without anyone falling asleep.”

They clinked glasses. Beer, glass, night.

And somewhere between the bottle deposit box, nicotine, and the siding, Sterni began again to do what it was responsible for in its universe:

Not to make the world more beautiful, but at least explainable –

for the gutter philosopher who knew too much to be silent and was too broken to stay sober.

The next day, Kuddel noticed the gutter philosopher in his head before he had even seen his first beer.

His head throbbed, but not like before – like a siren alarm – more of a dull throb, as if someone had spread a damp cloth over his brain. He wasn’t completely wrecked, just... tired on a deeper level. So tired that even giving up felt like an effort.

He sat in his kitchen, if you could call it that – a two-burner stove, sink, cupboard with crooked doors, a table with burn marks, and a chair that could have said: I’ve seen better lives.

On the table: an ashtray, a half-full cup of coffee, filter coffee brand “unemployment”, and a crumpled piece of paper on which he had jotted something down last night in a semi-drunk state.

He picked up the cup, took a sip, grimaced – cold, bitter, yuck – and reached for the piece of paper.

"Sterni = honest poverty, Beck's = lies in glass bottles."

He chuckled briefly. Yes, that was him. A gutter philosopher in full mode.

Including:

"We are not the dregs, we are in contact with the ground."

"Dude," he murmured, "that wasn't bad at all."

He stroked his face, ran his thumb and forefinger over his eyes, as if he could knead the horror of the next job center appointment out of his skin.

There was no knock – the door opened directly. Only one person in his life still consistently disregarded door rules: hedge peepers.

"I rang the doorbell, you loser," he said from the hallway. "But your doorbell sounds like tinnitus, so I just grabbed the doorknob. Hehehe."

"Tomorrow," grunted Kuddel.

Heckenpisser came into the kitchen, looked around as if he were still shocked every time – even though everything looked exactly the same as always: A little like yesterday, a little like "I tried, but then life came along."

"Well, you gutter philosopher," he grinned. "Have you found the formula for everything yet?"

"The less I drink, the more I think about why I drink," said Kuddel. "That's not progress, that's a complaint hotline."

Heckenpisser sat down, took a cup without being asked, and poured himself some cold coffee as if it were a ritual.

"Maybe you're not a gutter philosopher at all," he said. "Maybe you're just a guy with too much brainpower left in a world that no longer has any use for it. Hehehe."

"Quite possibly," said Kuddel. "But the world doesn't pay me rent for thinking."

They sat there silently for a moment. Two men in their early, mid, and late forties – the ages blurred – in a kitchen where nothing anymore pretended to be a transition.

Heckenpisser took some papers from the table and leafed through them.

"What is this?" he asked. "Your new manifesto?"

"Those are remnants from yesterday," said Kuddel. "Sterni prayers."

Hecke read aloud:

"Freedom is when you have nothing left to lose – and still get beer."

"Those who survive the gutter fail in the corridors of power."

"I don't drink to escape. I drink to stay – in a world that would otherwise kick me out."

He whistled softly through his teeth. "Hehehe... You're at a dangerous level, man," he said.
"Two more months like this and you'll either be sober or dead."

"Or bestselling author," Kuddel muttered. "But I still need 50,000 people who are interested in our crap."

Heckenpisser put the notes down again and leaned back.

"Do you know what the difference is," he asked, "between you and people like that who talk about social division on the radio?"

"They get paid, not given a hangover," said Kuddel.

"They're talking about people like us," said Hecke. "You're talking as one of us. Hehehe. That's not the same."

"Yes, great," said Kuddel. "They get airtime, I get deposit slips."

He stood up, went to the window and opened it halfway. Street noise, birds squawking, somewhere a garbage truck clattering. Berlin was breathing, but hectically.

"Sometimes," he said, "I wonder why we even think about everything so much anymore. We could just become dull. Shut up, open a bottle, turn on the TV, and that's it."

"Too late," said Heckenpisser. "We've been preoccupied with our own downfall for far too long. Hehehe. It's like a TV series you've gotten too invested in."

"You mean we're our own multi-part series?" asked Kuddel.

"Yes," Hecke nodded. "Title: 'Two guys realize too late that they're too hungover for the lead role.'"

They both laughed, that exhausted laugh that released more air than joy.

After a while, Heckenpisser said:

"You know that philosophy exists even without Sterni beer, right?"

"Yes," said Kuddel. "But she scares me."

"Why?" asked Hecke. "Because you can't hide behind the bottle?"

"Because it doesn't stop," Kuddel replied. "When I philosophize sober, it starts with: What did I screw up? Then: Who am I without alcohol? Then: Who do I want to be? And at the

very end: Why am I even still here? And I don't have an answer to that last question that I can take to bed."

Heckenpisser looked at him, suddenly very awake.

"Hehehe... you're joking about it," he said, "but I hear something I don't like to hear."

"Don't panic," Kuddel waved it off. "I'm not going to kill myself. If I'd really wanted to, I would have done it years ago. I'm too curious. I want to see how much worse things can get."

"That's the stupidest form of will to live I've ever heard of," said Heckenpisser.

"But effective," Kuddel replied.

He turned away from the window again, grabbed the coffee cup, rinsed it with water, and put on a new one. He had to add a little more coffee grounds because his hand was trembling. It wasn't a dramatic tremor, more like an old machine giving a brief jerk.

"Look," said Hecke, pointing at his fingers. "Is that from drinking or from thinking?"

"Combination," said Kuddel. "I call it existential vibration."

Heckenpisser lowered his hands. "Tell me," he began cautiously, "have you ever thought about getting help somewhere? I mean... anything other than a Boonekamp."

Kuddel exhaled through his nose. Long. Annoyed.

"Therapy?" he asked. "Self-help group? Clinic?"

"For example," said Hecke. "I'm not saying it's great. But maybe..."

"I've thought about it," Kuddel interrupted. "More than once. But honestly? I don't trust them."

"To whom?" asked Hecke.

"The people who are paid to make me feel better," Kuddel said. "I don't trust anyone who looks at their watch after 50 minutes and says: That's it for today, see you next week, think about your patterns. My patterns are everywhere. I stumble across them every day. I don't need an 80-euro hourly wage for that."

Heckenpisser was silent for a moment. Then he added:

"Hehehe... you're afraid they'll take your Sterni away."

"I'm afraid they'll take away my excuses," said Kuddel. "And then I'll be standing there – without a legend, without a buzz, without an excuse. Just me. And quite honestly, Hecke – I don't know if I can stand seeing myself in HD."

"You see yourself every evening in the corner store's neon window," said Hecke. "You can't get a sharper image than that."

"I only see the end credits," Kuddel replied. "Not the whole documentary."

The coffee brewed, smelling of cheap wake-up temptation. Kuddel poured two cups full, placed one in front of Heckenpisser, and sat down again.

"The gutter philosopher," he finally said, "is just a mask. One that suits me better than 'loser', but in the end it's made of the same stuff."

Hedge pisser nodded slowly.

"Maybe so," he said. "But do you know what the difference is? If you just call yourself a loser, nothing happens. If you call yourself a gutter philosopher and write down sentences, maybe someday people who feel the same way will read them. And they'll think: Okay, I'm not the only one who's crazy. Hehehe. That's an upgrade."

"You seriously want to tell me I should see my drinking as a way of improving literature?" asked Kuddel.

"No," said Hecke. "I want to tell you that you're going to drink anyway. Then at least you can do something with it. It's better to write something down than to just talk to a brick wall."

Kuddel stared at him.

"You're worse than the people at the office," he said. "They want me to move boxes. You want me to empty my soul."

"I want," said Heckenpisser calmly, "for you not to just drink into nothingness. For the gutter philosopher to not just be a drunken idea, but a character. Something that remains when you're no longer standing at the corner store."

The kitchen felt heavy with the thought for a moment. From the picture: The standing table stays, Murat stays, Elke stays, Heckenpisser maybe, but Kuddel won't be around for long.

Carried away by time, by the body, by a final intoxication that turned out to be more than just an airbag.

"Do you know what I really think about sometimes?" Kuddel asked quietly.

"I don't want to hear that, but yes," said Hecke.

"I imagine," Kuddel began, "that at some point – when I've been destroyed, in some way or other – someone will stand in front of the corner store, look at the standing table and say: 'There used to be a guy like this who always stood here. Wearing a leather jacket. Drinking, smoking, and saying such crazy things that you didn't know whether to laugh or cry.' And then he'll move on. And that'll be it."

Heckenpisser looked at him, the teasing tone already gone. "Hehehe..." came only halfway through, quieter. "You want more."

“Of course I want more,” Kuddel said. “I want some of the nonsense I’m spouting here to stick somewhere. Not because I want honor – honor is for people with careers. I want someone who feels the way we do to feel less alone.”

"Then write," Hecke said quietly. "Write, you asshole. Don't just write on beer mats and scraps of paper stuck in your kitchen. Write in one go. Chapters. Turn the gutter philosopher into a character. Kuddel, the Sterni-Bukowski of Schöneberg. Hehehe."

“Nobody wants to read that,” said Kuddel.

“You read it, don’t you?” Hecke countered. “And so do I. And maybe a few others you don’t know. You don’t have to save everyone. Just a few who are already on the margins.”

There was a knock on the bedroom door – even though it was open. It wasn't Gerda, she lived somewhere else. It was reality that came crashing down shortly afterwards: rent, medical treatment, liver function tests.

But for a moment, just for that brief moment in that smoky kitchen, there was something else:

A thin thread separates gutter philosophy from something like meaning.

"Okay," Kuddel finally said. "I'll try. I'll write. Not today. Not today yet. But soon."

"You're not going to get drunk today," said Hecke. "Hehehe."

“Today,” said Kuddel, “I’ll drink at most half a glass. I’ll write down the rest.”

Heckenpisser stood up, took his cup, put it in the sink, and patted Kuddel on the shoulder.

“Listen, you gutter philosopher,” he said. “If you ever become famous, please say in interviews that I was your guilty conscience.”

“If I become famous,” said Kuddel, “you’ll only end up in the appendix. Footnote: ‘Hedge piss, mama’s boy, sidekick.’”

"Hehehe," he laughed. "That's fine. The main thing is that I exist in your damn book."

When Heckenpisser left the apartment and the door clicked shut, Kuddel remained seated for a while.

Alone, but not quite. On the table: coffee, ashes, notes.

He took a pen, pulled the next page from an old pad, and wrote at the top:

The gutter philosopher

Chapter 1: When Sterni starts to think.

Then he paused, took a breath, thought of the corner store, of the hedge, of Murat, of Elke, of Jana, of the job center, of the ghost in the toilet, of his mother, of all the nights he had almost forgotten but never lost.

And for the first time in a long time

There was a thought that came neither solely from the Sterni (a type of beer) nor solely from the pain:

Perhaps all of this wasn't just a crash –

but also raw material for something,
which was larger than the standing table.

No happy ending. No wonder.

But perhaps a story that was more than just

Another drunken rant with commentary.

The gutter philosopher had announced his arrival – on a piece of checkered paper in a smoky kitchen – but as is often the case with characters invented by mistake: they don't want to stay in the drawer. They want to get out. To the bar. Into the neon light.

Less than 24 hours later, Kuddel was back where it all began: at the corner store, at the altar, at the standing table.

The day had passed like a poorly paid side job. He had tidied up a bit, drunk a bit of coffee, stared into space a bit, and glanced at the piece of paper every now and then:

"The Gutter Philosopher - Chapter 1".

It was evening now, Berlin had turned on the lights, and Kuddel had Sterni beer in his hand again. Not as an enemy. More like a co-author.

Heckenpisser rolled up as usual in his after-work attire – coat open, shirt slightly askew, briefcase in one hand, bottle in the other, after he had paid in the store.

"Well, Mr. Author," he greeted him. "Any signing planned yet? Hehehe."

"Shut up," said Kuddel, but not aggressively. "I wrote something today."

"Really?" asked Hecke, raising his eyebrows. "Like, really? Sentences in a row and all that?"

"Yep," said Kuddel. "Not just slogans on the kitchen table. With a headline and everything. Almost literary."

Murat leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed.

"Seriously?" he asked. "You wrote something down that doesn't fit on a toilet door?"

"Just you wait," said Kuddel. "One day this will be hanging on the shelf of a late-night convenience store as a book. Between cigarette butts and condoms. A real classics corner."

"Title: 'Thinking with a lingering sense of humor'," Heckenpisser chimed in. "Hehehe."

They gathered around the table as usual; the first round was still half full, the night still undecided whether it would be pleasant or grueling.

"Okay," said Hecke. "If Sterni becomes philosophy, what is the first tenet?"

Kuddel thought for a moment, looked at the street, at the asphalt, at the passing faces that were not interested in his inner debate.

"The number one principle," he said, "is:

Everyone claims they want to be free – but most can't even cope with having some freedom of choice."

Hedge-pisser whistled through his teeth. "Straight in," he said. "Not even a warm-up. Hehehe."

"Look," Kuddel began, "everyone talks about freedom. Freedom from the boss, freedom from the system, freedom from relationships, freedom from alcohol. But freedom means: you have to decide. Always. Every day. And that's exactly where we fail."

"Do you mean 'we' in the sense of 'we here' – or 'we' in the sense of 'people'?" asked Hecke.

"Both," said Kuddel. "We're just the honest version. We admit that decisions overwhelm us. That's why we go in circles: standing table, late-night shop, train station, toilet, bed, government office, standing table again. The others think they're free because they can choose between five kinds of craft beer and three types of yoga. But in the end..." – he tapped his forehead with the bottle – "...they're just as scared as we are."

Murat grimaced. "Of course," he said. "Only they have any money left at the end of the month."

"Money is no guarantee of freedom," Kuddel said. "But poverty is a guarantee of being unfree. That's the difference."

Heckenpisser nodded slowly. "Hehehe... You're getting better and better at insulting and relieving people at the same time," he said. "Almost like a therapist on welfare."

"I'm not giving therapy to anyone," said Kuddel. "I'm just trying to sort out my own mess. If someone else is helping me with that – fine. If not – that's okay too."

They drank a drink, the bottles grew lighter, the words heavier.

They stood there silently for a while. Inside, Elke rearranged the shelves, Murat checked the cash register and the lottery, outside cars drove by that looked like they were headed for a better life, and people who acted as if they were on their way there.

Then Heckenpisser said:

"I sat in the office today, like every day, staring at the screens. Excel, emails, appointments. And every now and then I thought: Maybe I'm the bigger idiot of the two of us. Hehehe."

"Why?" asked Kuddel.

"Because at least you're not pretending to be part of a game you've already given up on," Hecke said. "I put the mask back on every day. Mass email face. Serious phone conversation face. Friendly colleague face. And in the evening, I'm standing with you, drinking Sterni and acting like some gutter intellectual. We're all just different versions of: I can't cope with myself, so I'm playing a part somewhere."

"Congratulations," said Murat. "You have explained burnout without using the word."

"Burnout is for people with resumes," Kuddel muttered. "We're more like... slowly burning-out fuses."

He tipped the bottle, emptied it, set it down, and looked at it as if it had just given the wrong answer on "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire".

"Do you know what I wrote down today?" he then asked.

"Come on," said Heckenpisser. "Give a reading."

Kuddel took a folded piece of paper from the inside pocket of his robe. It was already slightly creased and had a coffee stain that looked like a continent.

He unfolded it, cleared his throat exaggeratedly, and read:

"Gutter philosophy – basic thesis:"

Society acts as if there are two kinds of people: those who have 'made it' and those who have 'failed'.

In reality, almost all of them got stuck somewhere in between, on the landing.

We, standing at the high table, are the ones you can see it on from afar."

Heckenpisser grinned. "Hehehe... you're a danger to every motivational coach," he said. "If they read this, their PowerPoint slides will fall out of their hands."

"Send this to the job center," Murat suggested. "Maybe they'll hang it up next to those filthy slogans."

"Never," said Kuddel. "Authorities are allergic to that sort of thing. Any form of honest description is considered sabotage."

"And what are you going to do with it?" asked Heckenpisser, pointing at the note. "Just read it here? Or send it somewhere?"

"No idea," said Kuddel. "Maybe Michael will type it up someday – the one with his audiobooks – and have a good laugh. That's all I need."

He put the note away again, reached for the next bottle, but more slowly than usual. Not that hectic "refill before the thought comes," but rather "accompaniment."

"Do you know what the best thing about being a gutter philosopher is?" he suddenly asked.

"That no one gives a grade?" advised Hecke.

"That you don't have to promise anything to anyone," said Kuddel. "No customer, no boss, no family. You only have to be able to look yourself halfway in the eye. Everything else is a bonus."

"And can you do that?" Elke asked from the doorway.

He thought for a moment. "It depends on the level," he said. "After three Sterni, I can almost forgive myself for existing."

"Romantics," she said.

—

Later that evening, Jana reappeared – shopping bag, hoodie, tired eyes.

She saw the two of them, who already seemed slightly tipsy but not destroyed, and this time she stopped of her own accord.

"So, have you started your standing-table philosophy yet?" she asked.

"Always," said Heckenpisser. "24/7 service. Hehehe."

"Today's theme is 'Freedom and Failure'," Kuddel explained. "Free entry, outcome uncertain."

Jana put down her bag, lit a cigarette, and paused briefly.

"I had two patients today who both said the same thing," she began. "One was old, the other in his mid-thirties. The old one said: 'I tried everything, but in the end I was my own worst enemy.'"

The younger one said, 'That's just how I am. I can't help it.' I swear to you – the sentences sounded identical, only in different tones of voice.

"So?" asked Kuddel. "Which one was more honest?"

"The old man," she said. "Because he knew that 'that's just how I am' is a convenient version of 'I stopped trying at some point.'"

"Ouch," said Heckenpisser, clutching his chest. "Hehehe... That one stung."

"Welcome to the club," said Jana. "I hear sentences like that every day. And sometimes I think to myself:

We are all little philosophers – but most of us don't dare to listen to our own thoughts for more than five minutes without reaching for our mobile phones."

"That's why we drink," Kuddel said. "It's our offline version of scrolling."

She grinned. "At least you guys are consistently analog and broken," she said. "Respect."

"Tell me, Jana," asked Heckenpisser, "when you see so much misery – in the hospital, in families, among colleagues – why aren't you completely cynical?"

She thought for a moment.

"I am," she said. "Cynic enough to make stupid jokes about almost everything. But not cynical enough to believe that no one has a chance anymore. I see too many who somehow manage to make it, despite everything."

"And us?" asked Kuddel. "Do you see us as 'in spite of everything' or just as a negative example?"

"You are..." she searched for the word for a moment, "...you are like a control group. You show what happens when the system works, how it works – and people still fail. That is important. Not pretty. But important."

"Control group Saufarsch," laughed Heckenpisser. "Hehehe. Looks good on your name tag, Kuddel."

"I'd rather be in the control group than completely ignored," Kuddel said. "Being invisible is worse than being wrong."

"That's true," Jana nodded quietly. "The worst ones are the ones nobody asks about. That's why I'm standing here. Because at least you're loud enough to be heard."

She took another drag on the cigarette and stubbed it out.

"So," she said. "I need to sleep. Geriatric bingo again tomorrow."

"Good night, control group observer," said Kuddel.

"Good night, gutter philosopher," she replied. "Write something down. Don't just keep it in your head."

She left. The bag swung slightly, her steps sounded tired, but not broken.

"You've been exposed," said Hedge Pisser. "Hehehe. Now they're all calling you Gutter Philosopher."

"Let them," Kuddel said. "Better than 'the one who always gets completely drunk'."

He leaned back against the standing table, looked at the bottles, at the street, at his hands.

"You know, Hecke," he said quietly, "maybe that's what it is in the end: Not that we stop drinking. Not that we suddenly make a career. But that we stop seeing ourselves as just trash. And start to understand ourselves as... a footnote in a larger text."

"Hehehe... You want to be a footnote?" asked Hedge Pisser.

“Yes,” said Kuddel. “An honest one. Where it says at the bottom:
This is where those whom the system has forgotten live – but they continue to comment.”

Murat clapped his hands. “That’s it,” he said. “Enough with the philosophy. I’m about to get sentimental, and I can’t afford that in front of my tax advisor.”

“That’s alright,” said Kuddel. “We’re calling it a day mentally.”

He lifted the bottle once more, not high, not pathetically – just like that.

“On Sterni,” he said, “the fuel of people who are fed up – but still want to know how the story continues.”

“To gutter philosophy,” Heckenpisser added. “The only school of thought where you’re allowed to show up with beer breath. Hehehe.”

“And here’s to you idiots,” Elke added. “Because you prove to me every night that you can still have something like dignity even without hope – as long as you can laugh at yourself.”

They clinked glasses.

The beer was just beer again, the night just night, Berlin just Berlin.

But later, in some checkered notebook, in a kitchen with a wobbly chair, a man in a robe would sit.

and write down a few new sentences,

so that everything that would otherwise have been drunk away,

perhaps something like gutter philosophy

will be – for those who drink because they think,

and for those who think that’s because otherwise they would just drink.

The evening when something almost worked out

The evening began like one of those that doesn’t really deserve its own name. Gray in the head, gray on the street, gray in the calendar.

Kuddel was tired in a different way than usual. Not just from drinking, but from the warehouse. Three days of the program had taken more out of him than ten years of living on welfare.

“I’m telling you, Hecke,” he growled, his elbows propped up on the standing table, “if I hear the words picking list or pallet location B-17 one more time, I’ll run naked through the aisles shouting: ‘I am the Santa Claus of failure.’”

Heckenpisser put down his briefcase and pulled his arms out of his coat like a grumpy penguin stepping out of a tuxedo.

"Hehehe...", he said, "you're acting like you've done physical labor. You've seen boxes for three days. That's not war."

"Shut up," said Kuddel. "I'm no longer suited to productive spaces. Neon lights everywhere, no ashtrays, no people who actually want to achieve something. It's like a documentary about an alien species."

Murat came out of the store with two Sterni beers and a shot glass.

"Well, returning war veterans," he said, setting down the bottles. "How was it at the front?"

Kuddel took the first bottle and screwed the cap on as if he were twisting someone's neck.

"They have this scanner there," he said. "It beeps every time you do something right. Imagine running around all day chasing after a machine that's smarter than you. It's degrading."

"Welcome to the year 2025," Murat said. "Soon they'll be scanning you when you go to the toilet."

"There's a scanner in our toilet," chuckled Hedge Pisser. "Hehehe. It beeps every time you try to think."

It was an unusual approach in the air: Kuddel wasn't directly aggressive, not completely resigned. There was something like... a thin tension. Like a rubber band about to break.

"You know what was funny?" he asked after his first long gulp. "It went well. Well... sort of. I didn't knock over any pallets, insult any colleagues, or yell at the boss. They even said once, 'You did a good job sorting that, Mr. Scholz.'"

Heckenpisser looked at him as if he had just admitted to accidentally doing some volunteer work.

"So?" he asked. "Did you have an allergic reaction? Hehehe."

"I felt like they'd made a mistake with the name," said Kuddel. "Mr. Scholz. Well-sorted. That doesn't add up. It's like 'vegan kebab'. Something's not right there."

Murat rolled his eyes. "Perhaps you're not quite as incompatible with the world as you think," he said. "Shocking, I know."

"Perhaps," murmured Kuddel, "that was the problem."

He looked at the street, at the people walking by, acting as if they had to go somewhere – which might even have been true. Buses, bicycles, delivery vans. The neighborhood functioning normally.

"What's the problem with something actually working out for once?" asked Heckenpisser.

“The problem is,” said Kuddel, “that the legend then shakes.”

"Which ones?" asked Murat.

“The ‘I’m just so broken, I can’t help it’ attitude,” Kuddel explained. “If there are suddenly moments when you don’t screw everything up – you have to ask yourself why you’re so consistently driving everyone else into the wall.”

Hedge Pisser nodded slowly. "Hehehe..." he whispered. "You're not just drunk today. You're in advanced brooding mode."

Elke came out, cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth, wearing a tank top, her hair pinned up.

"Well, my philosopher pigs," she greeted them. "Anyone analyzing existence today, or just starting with the basics?"

"Kuddel had a verbal smiley face in the camp," explained Heckenpisser. "The boss praised him. His worldview is crumbling. Hehehe."

“Oh God,” said Elke. “First the job center, then praise. That’s torture in two acts.”

"I'm just saying," Kuddel murmured, "tonight would be a dangerous evening. Tonight would be one of those evenings where you easily think: Maybe something could change. And those are exactly the evenings when you end up waking up naked in a train station toilet."

“Or,” said a voice from the side, “you can just go home, eat something and sleep.”

They all turned their heads.

Jana. Hoodie, bun, backpack instead of shopping bag, tired eyes, but alert in mind.

"Shift over?", Murat asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Three dementias, two relatives, a doctor with a God complex. I’m done.”

She joined them without asking. The corner was no longer just a men's reserve.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked Kuddel. "You look... differently exhausted. Like you didn't just run away from your own life today."

“Kuddel was in the program,” said Heckenpisser. “He did things. Productive things, even. Hehehe.”

"Wow," Jana said dryly. "Have you checked if you might have a fever?"

Kuddel had to grin, even though he didn't feel like it.

“I was holding a pallet,” he said. “Feels like an alien species. Work material. The last thing I carried this consistently was beer crates.”

"And?" she pressed. "Was it that bad?"

He shrugged. "It didn't hurt," he said. "That's the worrying thing."

It was quiet for a moment. Not unpleasant. Just... difficult.

Then Jana said:

"Maybe tonight isn't the night you need to get completely wasted."

Hedge-pisser laughed reflexively. "Hehehe...", then he fell silent because she was looking at him.

"I'm serious," she said. "There are these rare days when reality, for just a moment, doesn't just beat you down. You've worked, you haven't screwed everything up, you're standing here, not in the hospital, not in jail, not in detox. Why not just... endure that for once?"

"Because endurance is our weakest discipline," said Kuddel.

He took a sip, but not a greedy one. More like a test.

"You know, Jana," he began, "whenever anything starts to look like it might work...I automatically pull the plug."

"Like women," Heckenpisser chimed in. "Hehehe."

"Like everything else," Kuddel corrected. "Jobs, relationships, actions, resolutions, everything. As soon as something feels like: This could be a turning point, I panic. Because I don't know myself without my failures."

Jana supported herself with her hands on the edge of the table.

"And you want to tell me," she said calmly, "that you would rather suffer guaranteed because you know what it is – than take the risk of perhaps suffering less, but not knowing who you would be then?"

"Something like that," said Kuddel. "It's stupid, I know. But familiar."

Hedge-pisser snorted. "Hehehe..." came an even quieter murmur. "Comfort zone of misery."

A group of teenagers walked by, loud, music blaring from a speaker, cheap but energetic. One shouted something about the district, another laughed, one wore a glittery jacket that flickered in the streetlights. A world that "almost" still had something to do with a future.

"Do you know what the nasty thing is?" said Jana. "I see it every day. People who are about to do something different – and then they do nothing. Because the familiar, even if it's broken, is less scary than the unknown."

"They call that psychological..." Heckenpisser began.

"Don't come at me with technical terms now," Jana interrupted him. "You are the practical example; I have enough theory on the ward."

Murat intervened by placing three shot glasses on the table.

"How about an evening," he suggested, "where you not only analyze why everything is crap – but test whether it can be done halfway decently without sabotaging it?"

"What do you mean?" asked Kuddel.

Murat turned his head towards the street.

"There's a pub over there," he said. "Not far. No hipsters, no nonsense. Old wooden tables, a dartboard, music that doesn't try to impress anyone. You two go there with Jana, drink like normal people, talk, laugh, come back or go home. No train station toilets, no police intervention, no legend-making. Just an evening that is... almost normal."

"What is normal?" Kuddel asked suspiciously.

"Normal," said Jana, "is when you can say the next day:
It was okay. I didn't break anything."

Heckenpisser looked first at her, then at Kuddel, then at his bottle.

"Hehehe...", he said. "The three of us in a pub. This is either a sitcom or a disaster."

"I have the early shift tomorrow," said Jana. "I can't stay up all night. Either it's a somewhat grown-up evening – or I'm out."

Kuddel felt something inside him resist. That inner dog that growls when you try to take away its old blanket.

"And what if I mess it up?" he asked.

"Then you'll be exactly where you are now," she said. "At the standing table, telling stories about how you messed it up. The only difference would be that at least you tried."

Hedge Pisser nodded slowly. "Hehehe..." this time like an affirmation. "I'm in. If we fail, at least document it."

Murat grinned. "I'm not going to write anything on your forehead," he said. "Not yet."

Kuddel looked at his hands. The old scars, the new cracks, nicotine stains. The hands of a man who had held more bottles than anything else.

"One evening," he said. "Just one. Without getting drunk, without escalation. One evening where... something might almost work out."

"Exactly," said Jana. "Almost is enough for me."

"Almost is dangerous," he murmured. "Almost are the sentences that stick in your mind."

"Then collect them," she said. "You might need them for your book."

They paid for their round, put away their bottles, and Murat nodded to them.

"If you're still alive and haven't bled in two hours," he said, "you'll get a free coffee from me tomorrow, Kuddel. Philosopher's bonus."

"Deal," said Kuddel.

He pulled his robe tighter, put away his cigarette butt, and glanced briefly at the standing table, as if saying goodbye to an old friend.

Then the small group set off: Kuddel, Heckenpisser, Jana. Three characters who would never appear in an advertisement, but in any honest city story.

They walked past parked cars, closed shop fronts, and a guy arguing with his dog as if he were its son.

The closer they got to the pub, the louder the muffled murmuring from inside became. No bass-heavy club music, no shouting – just voices, laughter, the clinking of glasses, something rocky from the jukebox.

Kuddel stopped just outside the door.

"That's the moment," he said, "when everything usually changes."

"Not today," said Jana.

"Not today," repeated Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

Kuddel grasped the handle, felt the metal that had opened and closed a thousand other evenings.

He breathed in, out, in.

Perhaps, He thought, is this the start of an evening that won't make the top 10 list of the greatest acts of self-destruction?

Maybe, just maybe,

would that be the evening

something almost worked out.

The pub was called "Altberliner Eck" (Old Berlin Corner), although none of the regulars had said anything "old Berlin" for twenty years. From the outside, the place looked like a bad memory: a yellowed company sign, two milky windows, a door that was more often slammed shut than opened.

Inside it was... warm. Not cozy – that would be too much – but warm in the sense that there were people sitting in here who weren't about to run out. Wooden tables, heavy, with notches

and carved initials. A bar, behind which stood a woman who looked like Elke in ten years' time, if she'd ever decided to die at the beer tap instead of at the corner store. On the wall, a dartboard, next to it a jukebox, from which "Motörhead – Ace of Spades" was currently crawling at living-room volume.

"Welcome to the parallel universe," muttered Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

Kuddel paused for half a heartbeat too long before continuing. His eyes needed a moment: away from the neon, towards that yellow glow from old bulbs, in which all faces looked a bit as if they had been carved from cigarette smoke.

A few heads turned briefly, performing a quick check of the newcomers: Man in a robe – okay. Man in a shirt and bow tie – hmm, office worker, but still acceptable. Woman in a hoodie – unremarkable. No one looked like trouble, no one looked like they were going to be in an Instagram story. So everyone turned back to their glasses.

The landlady came forward and dried her hands on a towel that was more symbolic than functional.

"Well?" she asked. "New to the area or only rarely in civilized spaces?"

"A field study as a regular customer," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"Two beers, one for him, one for me," said Jana, gesturing to Kuddel and then to herself. "And for the gentleman with the bow tie... what does a mama's boy drink in the wild?"

"I'll have a beer too," Hecke said theatrically. "I don't want to be the odd one out today."

"Three beers," she repeated. "Bottle or glass?"

"Glass," said Jana.

"Glass," said Heckenpisser.

"Bottle," Kuddel said reflexively.

She raised an eyebrow. "Well," she said. "One pragmatist, two civilized people."

She sat down at a table in the back, half in the corner, half facing the shop. Old pub rule: Never sit in the middle if you're not drunk yet. Always leave an escape route.

"If this goes wrong," said Heckenpisser, "I just want to record for the record: It was Jana who dragged us into this. Hehehe."

"If anything goes wrong here," said Jana, "it's because of the two of you – not because of the premises."

Kuddel sat down, his robe creaking on the bench. He had this strange feeling he couldn't quite place: he was sitting in a pub – his natural habitat – but the assignment was different. Not "a drunken stupor, a catastrophe, something stupid." But rather: a reasonably normal evening.

The beers arrived. Two in glasses, one in the familiar Sterni bottle.

"Here," said the landlady. "You can pay later, or if you leave. And we don't throw out anyone who just laughs loudly. Only those who vomit loudly."

"I'll pass that on to his liver," said Jana, pointing at Kuddel.

The hedge pisser took his glass and lifted it.

"All right," he said. "Here's to the evening when something almost works out."

"Almost," said Jana.

"On 'not completely screwing up'," Kuddel muttered.

They clinked glasses.

The first sip was almost too ordinary. No train station, no late-night convenience store aroma, no plastic chair. Just beer in the glass, silence between sentences, music in the background.

Two older men sat at the bar, their backs saying "This local pub used to be a home," their faces saying "Today it's a refuge in the noise." A couple in the middle, both with soft drinks, probably in the "We're not drinking right now" month.

"How are you feeling?" Jana asked after a while, her elbow on the table.

"Like an imposter," said Kuddel. "As if I had infiltrated a group of people who have a bit more control than I do."

"You're sitting here with me," she said. "I don't have everything under control either."

"You don't have a beer belly or a robe," he replied. "You have a job. A real one."

"Having a job doesn't mean you're coping," she said. "It just means you have a place where you're allowed to fall apart and still use a time clock."

Hedge Pisser nodded in agreement. "Hehehe..." he went. "My colleagues think I've got everything under control because I know how to feed an Excel spreadsheet. If they only knew that I spend my evenings getting drunk with a guy who's on a first-name basis with train station toilets..."

"Oh, come on," Kuddel muttered. "You're more functional than I am."

"More functional simply means I can disguise myself better," said Hecke. "Nothing more."

The jukebox changed the song. Someone had put on "Type O Negative". Dark, plodding, melancholic – as if someone had been listening to Kuddel's music from the inside.

The landlady placed a bowl of peanuts on the table. "For the brain," she said. "So it has something to do."

“Thank you,” Jana nodded. “We need them.”

Kuddel reached in, took a few nuts, and looked at them.

"This is so stupid," he said. "I'm sitting here, drinking my beer – and just waiting the whole time for me to break something."

“Maybe you should just leave it alone this time,” Jana said. “You’re not a volcano. You’re a tired coal furnace. It doesn’t just explode. At most, it belches out soot.”

Hedge Pisser giggled. "Hehehe. You're calling him an old heater."

"It's an old heater," she said. "But one that still gives off heat."

Kuddel initially wanted to protest, but then decided against it. It was too close to something that sounded dangerously like a compliment.

"What do we do now?" he asked. "Like... somewhat normal people?"

“We’ll drink our beer in peace, we’ll talk, we’ll observe,” said Jana. “No program, no challenge. You don’t have to prove anything here. Neither that you can pull yourself together, nor that you can’t.”

"Hehehe..." said Hedge Pisser. "This is worse than any task. Just... don't freak out."

At the bar, the two old men started arguing about football. Not aggressively, more in a ritualized way. "Back when they actually played properly..." "Oh come on, things weren't all better back then..." The old record, which in Berlin was both a source of comfort and a threat.

“I sometimes wonder,” said Jana, “what you would have done if your lives had really taken a few different turns. Not Hollywood, not the lottery. Just... better timing, better encounters.”

“I would still be screwed,” said Kuddel. “Just packaged differently.”

“Not me,” said Heckenpisser. “Hehehe. I would have become a captivating middle-class loser. Terraced house, burnout, mistress from accounting.”

"You're being very specific," Jana grinned.

“I’ve seen too many CVs,” he said. “The patterns repeat themselves.”

Kuddel took another sip, felt one of those gears start turning in his head that otherwise only struck the gutter philosopher.

“Perhaps,” he said slowly, “the whole thing isn’t so complicated after all. Perhaps ‘the evening when something almost worked out’ is exactly that: You’re sitting somewhere, for once you don’t ruin everything – and in the end you still go home alone. The only thing that’s almost is: You didn’t completely mess it up.”

“But that’s already huge,” Jana countered. “You didn’t mess everything up in one evening. In your statistics, that’s a sensation.”

Hedge-pisser raised his index finger. "Hehehe... just you wait," he said. "The evening isn't over yet."

The landlady came back.

"Another round?" she asked.

Kuddel automatically opened his mouth to say "yes." This old pattern: if it's halfway okay, add more before doubt creeps in.

Jana was faster.

"Yes," she said. "But without liquor. Only beer."

The landlady nodded. "You don't look like drunks today," she said. "You have this 'I'm trying not to go completely crazy' look."

"Good observation," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

She brought three new beers and left again.

Kuddel looked at Jana.

"Why no schnapps?" he asked.

"Because liquor is the shortcut back to your old script," she said. "With beer you can still turn left and right. With liquor, it's all downhill from there."

"Sounds like you're speaking from experience," he said.

"I don't drink hard anymore," she replied. "Not because I'm moral. Because I know how quickly I'd end up where you are now otherwise."

Heckenpisser nodded respectfully. "Hehehe... the woman is ten moves ahead of us," he said. "We're playing checkers, she's playing chess."

A guy from the bar came over with two darts in his hand.

"You look like you're thinking," he said. "That's unhealthy. Want to buy a drink? A distraction?"

Heckenpisser was immediately on board. "Me," he said. "I'm perfect for precision sports after three beers. Hehehe."

"Are you okay?" Jana asked Kuddel quietly, as Hecke was already halfway to the vending machine.

"Yes," he said. "I'm just watching. If I start competing now, my ego will start to bite me."

"Good," she nodded. "Then we can have a drink in peace."

The next few minutes were a strange mix: Hedge-pisser at the dartboard, serious, focused, surprisingly good – like someone who formats Excel spreadsheets in his spare time. The barman next to him, a bit too loud, but not unpleasant. Jana and Kuddel at the table, in a bubble that looked like "two normal people having a conversation".

"Tell me something honest," she demanded suddenly. "Not gutter philosopher, not legend, not drunkard. Just Kuddel. What was the last night when something actually went right? Not 'almost'. Really."

It took him a long time. Too long.

"I... don't know," he finally said. "No idea. That's the worst part. I can tell you about ten nights when everything went wrong. But one night when I thought: Yeah, man, that was good... they're... gone."

"Maybe they weren't so spectacular after all," said Jana. "Maybe they were just evenings like this one. Only without the jukebox."

"Maybe," he admitted. "Maybe I only ever highlighted the disasters and forgot about the rest."

"Then start tagging the others," she said. "Tonight. The night you went to a pub with two people who really know you – and you didn't break anything. No argument, no fight, no embarrassment. Just beer and... normal conversation."

"Normal conversations," he repeated. "That's your measure of success."

"For you? Yes," she said. "You have been experts in escalation for years. An evening without escalation is... almost revolutionary for you."

Heckenpisser cheered at the dart machine. "Hehehe!" he shouted. "Triple twenty! I am the king of failure with pinpoint precision!"

A few people turned around briefly, grinning. Nobody seemed annoyed. Nobody shouted "Quiet".

Kuddel looked over, and for the first time in a long time he didn't think: I'm embarrassing myself, but simply: That's my friend. He's crazy. But that's okay.

"You know what's crazy?" he said quietly.

"Hm?", said Jana.

"I'm sitting here, on my third beer – and I haven't had a single moment where I thought, 'Screw it, I'm going to destroy everything,'" he said. "That's... unusual."

"Perhaps," she said, "it's because tonight you allowed yourself not to be the tragic hero of your own documentary. Tonight you're just a guy sitting there. Not the protagonist. Not the victim. Just... present."

"Attendance as a criterion for success," he muttered. "That's both sad and comforting."

"It's honest," she said.

Time dragged on. The glasses emptied, the shop filled up. Two new people came in, a woman with brightly colored hair, a guy in a band t-shirt. Neither stood out, neither attracted negative attention.

Kuddel felt the beer slowly making its usual loops inside him – but less aggressively. More like a doctor saying: "Let's see what else is moving around in there."

"What do you think will happen," Jana asked, "if you actually go home somewhat sober today?"

"I'll lie in bed and think," he said. "Maybe write. Maybe stare at the walls. Maybe hate myself."

"And what if you don't hate yourself for once?" she asked. "Just for one night. Just: It was okay. You didn't accomplish anything great, but you didn't ruin anything great today either."

He looked at her, really, not through beer, not through posing, but as if he were checking whether she had just set a trap or opened a door.

"You know," he said quietly, "that would be the real evening, the night when something works out. When I go home and I'm not ashamed."

"Then let us take care of it," she said. "Before you get too tired to decide clearly."

Heckenpisser came back to the table, slightly sweaty, but beaming.

"Hehehe!" he said. "I almost beat the barman. I sense talent. National darts team, here we come!"

"Very good," said Jana. "Then you're our safety officer from now on. If Kuddel starts acting strangely, you'll drag him out."

"He always starts acting strangely at some point," Hecke grinned. "The only question is: what to do with him?"

"Today," said Jana, "I'm going home. Not to the train station. Not to the corner store. Straight away."

Kuddel heard himself talking before he had actually decided:

"Okay," he said simply. "One more. Then we'll go."

"You mean... ONE beer?" Hecke asked suspiciously.

"One beer," Kuddel confirmed. "No shot parade, no extra tour. One beer. Then I'm off."

"I am a witness," said Jana.

"Me too," said Hedge Pisser. "And if you don't obey – hehehe – I'll tell your mother everything."

"My mother already knows more than I'd like," Kuddel muttered.

The last round arrived. They drank, not slowly, not greedily – somewhere in between.

And as the evening turned into night, there was, for the first time in a long time, this thin, fragile feeling:

That something might actually work out here right now.

No happy ending. No wonder.

But it was an evening that didn't go up in flames.

The thing about agreements is: When you're sober, they sound logical. After three beers, they start to seem like bad jokes.

Kuddel had said, "One more, then we'll go." The sentence hung in the air like an annoying motivational speaker.

The last round was half empty, the air in the pub had become thicker, conversations louder but not aggressive. The dart machine beeped in the background, the jukebox had landed on some 80s hard rock that no one had ordered but that sounded familiar to everyone.

"Well, decision stage reached?" asked Jana, turning her glass in her hand without drinking.

"I'm in overtime," said Kuddel. "So is the bottle."

Heckenpisser squatted half on the bench, half on reality, his face slightly red, but his eyes unusually clear.

"Hehehe...", he said, "I have to say: I've seen worse interim results. No shouting, no arguing, no discussion about honor or football – you're almost civil today."

"Just because you threw three arrows straight once doesn't make you the benchmark man," said Jana.

The landlady came by again and briefly leaned on the neighboring table.

"Are you two okay?" she asked. "Looks like you're either about to have sex or have a nervous breakdown."

"Don't worry," said Hedge Pisser. "We don't have the right underwear for that. Hehehe."

"We're just conducting a small field study," Jana explained. "Topic: Is it still possible to make reasonably sensible decisions at certain blood alcohol levels?"

"Answer: no," said the landlady. "But you can at least package wrong decisions nicely. If you need anything else, just call."

She moved on, leaving them with the question that no one dared to ask aloud:
What else do we want from this evening?

Another beer? Another joke? Anything else to prove they weren't completely lost?

"Okay," Jana said at some point. "Let's get down to brass tacks, Kuddel. If you could do whatever you wanted tonight – completely free from the job center, your liver, and your past hanging over you – what would the perfect scenario look like from now on?"

"Perfect?" he asked. "Doesn't exist."

"Then 'least shitty'," she corrected.

He leaned back and stared at the nicotine-stained ceiling.

"Okay," he said. "The least awful thing would be: We drink this up. You go home, get to sleep reasonably well, get up tomorrow, go to work and don't think: Why did I put up with these idiots?"

Hecke goes home to his mother or wherever, lies down, and does not turn completely in circles at night.

And I... go home, lie in bed without having breathed in the train station air beforehand, and think to myself: It wasn't a highlight, but it wasn't a disaster either.

"And that's it?" asked Jana. "No wife, no drama, no big speech?"

"We've had enough drama," said Kuddel. "My wife... I messed up. I gave a big speech yesterday in front of the corner store. That should be enough."

Hedge Pisser frowned. "Hehehe..." he said. "Do you know what I would see in the perfect version of this evening?"

"Well?", asked Jana.

"That you dare to not be funny for once," said Hecke, pointing at Kuddel. "Just five minutes. No joke, no gutter philosophy, no Kuddel show. Just... saying what is."

"I'm not in the circus," Kuddel growled.

"Yes," replied Hecke. "You are your own circus. Have been for years. But today would be a good opportunity to turn off the lights for a bit."

Jana took note, took a sip, and put the glass back down.

"Okay," she said. "Then just do it. A little exercise: Imagine there's no pub here, but your head. No spectators."

Just you, me, and Hedge. What would you say if you knew that everything would be deleted tomorrow?

He turned the bottle, watching the foam creep to the edge.

“I would say,” he began slowly, “that I am afraid.”

The hedge pisser fell silent. “Hehehe...” stuck in his throat.

Jana just nodded, as if she were internally pushing "further".

"Afraid of what?" she asked.

“That things could really change,” Kuddel said. “That one day I won’t be the type who drinks everything to pieces. Because then... what will I be then?”

“Maybe... normal?”, dared Heckenpisser.

“Normal is foreign territory to me,” Kuddel said. “I only know extremes: either the after-work gulag or train station hell. What lies in between... I’ve never trained for.”

"This is training," said Jana. "You sit in a pub, drink beer, you're not quiet, but you don't run away either. You put up with it. And with us. That's more than you think."

He wanted to make a joke, something about "self-help group for the half-broken", but it stuck in his throat.

Instead, the sentences that usually only surfaced at night in the kitchen came out:

"I've had so many evenings where I thought: If someone else were here, something good could happen. Some woman, some opportunity, some job. But I was always me. And I always downplayed it. Out of fear – and out of habit."

Heckenpisser looked at him as if someone were holding up a mirror to him, one that also reflected his face.

"Hehehe..." he said in a muffled voice. "I know that feeling."

Jana rested her chin in her hand.

"And today?" she asked. "Is today different?"

“Today...,” said Kuddel, “everything feels like a turning point. A moment where in five years you can say: At least I tried not to take the same crappy path again. Or: I missed it again.”

"You've made a decision," Jana said. "You finally want to have an evening that you don't feel like throwing up about – figuratively speaking. So don't ruin it for yourself."

Heckenpisser finished his drink and put down his glass.

"I'm surprisingly calm when I see this," he said. "Hehehe. Normally I would have been adding fuel to the fire by now. But somehow... I think it's great that we're not completely dancing on the edge of the abyss for once."

“We’re still standing on the edge,” Kuddel said. “We’re just not stupid enough to jump off for a moment.”

The landlady called over: "Last round, children! Anyone who wants one now has to shout loudly!"

Kuddel flinched noticeably. That was the moment. The trigger. Normally his time.

"None," Jana said immediately.

"None," said Heckenpisser, after a half-second delay.

All eyes turned to Kuddel.

His mouth and his body were rarely so at odds as at that moment. Everything inside him screamed: Of course! One more! One last! Otherwise, the evening was pointless!

But somewhere in between, in that newly created, still shaky area of his brain, another signal flickered:

If you say "yes" now, you know exactly where this leads.

He felt his heart, not dramatically, just... more present.

He looked at Jana. No moralizing in his eyes. Just vigilance. Hedge-pisser: nervous grin, ready for either direction.

"None either," Kuddel finally said.

The landlady nodded as if she already knew the result.

"Fine," she said. "Then you pay and leave before you think you need to make a myth out of it."

Together they came to a surprisingly small amount. Old pubs hadn't completely fallen into disarray with the world.

As they stepped outside, the cold draft hit them like a third opinion.

The street was quieter now, the buses less frequent, the voices more subdued. Berlin is never quiet at night, but sometimes it seems less hysterical.

The three of them stood in front of the shop for a moment.

"And now?" asked Heckenpisser.

"Now we're going home," said Jana. "All of us. No detours."

"Späti?" Kuddel tried half-heartedly.

"No," she said. "Not for you. If I were Murat, I wouldn't sell you anything today."

As if they had summoned him, a WhatsApp message arrived at Heckenpisser's inbox as confirmation. He read it and laughed.

“Hehehe... Murat writes: ‘If you show up before it’s light, you’ll get homework instead of beer.’”

“Homework?” asked Kuddel.

“‘Write down every shitty thought that would otherwise drive you to the bottle,’” Hecke read aloud. “Original quote.”

Jana grinned. "See," she said. "You have an audience."

They set off. First as a group of three, then the group would branch out.

"Where is your path?" asked hedge pisser Jana.

"Straight ahead, left, two more streets," she said. "I'll be gone in a flash."

"There you go," he said. "Then we'll walk you to the corner. A gentlemanly gesture with a shred of dignity. Hehehe."

"If you vomit, I'll tell the hospital I don't know you," she said.

They ran. Footsteps on asphalt, the city's noise level now more background noise than an attack.

“Actually,” said Jana, “it was a good evening.”

“Actually,” Kuddel repeated. “The deadliest word in our language.”

“For you, it means: You expected everything to go wrong – and in the end it was... bearable,” she said. “That’s almost a luxury.”

"You should give motivational speeches," he said. "Only for people with damaged liver function."

They arrived at the corner where Jana had to turn.

“So,” she said. “This is where the paths of the control group diverge.”

“Thank you,” said Kuddel, and the word sounded unfamiliar, almost awkward.

"What for?" she asked.

"For not laughing when I was... normal," he said. "And for taking us to a pub today instead of a peep show, where we didn't feel like complete caricatures."

“Listen,” Jana said, looking at him seriously. “Today wasn’t Hollywood. Today wasn’t a miracle. But today wasn’t Babylon the train station toilet or a hospital with lingering breath either. Today was... almost something else. If you don’t make anything of it, it’s not the fault of the beer, not the job center, not your childhood. Then it’s your decision.”

He nodded. Heavily.

"I'm fine," he said.

"I even believe you," she said. "A little bit."

Then, completely unexpectedly for him, she briefly placed a hand on his forearm. Just briefly. No big drama, no movie kiss, nothing.

But that moment burned itself into his memory more deeply than many of his drunken escapades.

"Write it down," she added. "Make something of it. Or drink it. But don't say you had no choice."

"Good night, sister control group," he murmured.

"Good night, gutter philosopher," she replied. "And you, hedge – watch over him."

"Hehehe," said Heckenpisser. "I'll stumble along beside him, that's all I can promise."

She disappeared down the side street. Just footsteps, then just the city.

Kuddel stood there, his hands in the pockets of his robe, the beer still buzzing, but more quietly.

"Well, dude," said Heckenpisser. "That was a moment you could exploit in your book."

"There was only one hand on my arm," said Kuddel.

"In your universe, that's practically highbrow erotic culture," Hecke grinned. "Hehehe."

They continued walking, now just the two of them. Back towards the Kuddel-Bude.

"Do you know what's crazy?" said Kuddel after a while.

"That we are NOT looking for a gas station right now?" asked Hecke.

"That for the first time in a long time I don't have the urge to ruin this evening," said Kuddel. "It's... delicate. Broken, but delicate."

"Remember that," said Hedge Pisser. "Otherwise, I'll tell you tomorrow how you looked."

"What did I look like?" he asked.

"Like someone," said Hecke, "who realizes for the first time that 'almost something worked out' isn't just sad – but also hopeful. Hehehe. But only a little, no panic."

They arrived at Kuddel's front door.

"Come on," said Hecke. "Get inside. Write. Smoke. Sleep. In that order."

"And you?" asked Kuddel.

"I'm going home and pretending to be a respectable office worker," said Hecke. "Back to Excel tomorrow, today it's about making ends meet."

They shook hands. Firmly, briefly.

"Thank you," murmured Kuddel.

"That's what we're here for," said Heckenpisser. "At least as long as we can still stand. Hehehe."

Later, as Kuddel sat in his kitchen, free of Sterni beer, with a cigarette and a pen in his hand, he wrote in large, scribbled letters:

The evening when something almost worked out

Almost means it was possible.

And for the first time in a very long time, I didn't drink it all myself.

He put down the pen, took a breath, and lay down.

No train station toilet. No script crash.

Just an evening in which nothing spectacular happened –

And that was precisely what made it so spectacular.

The next morning was not an "I want to die" morning. It was an "I'm screwed but still in the system" morning.

Kuddel woke up as he usually did: First the feeling that something heavy was lying on him – then the moment of shock, wondering whether it was guilt, a hangover or just the blanket.

The blanket was thin. So guilt and a slight pressure in the head remained.

He lay on the mattress for a while, staring at the ceiling. No blackout. He could remember everything. The pub. Jana. The hedge. "No last round." His hand on his forearm. The sentence he had written:

Almost means it was possible.

"Shit," he muttered. "I created a cliffhanger for myself yesterday."

He sat up slowly, as if testing whether his body was planning a rebellion. No vertigo, just that slight swimmer in his head saying: We worked yesterday, but this time without an explosion.

The kitchen still smelled of stale smoke and cheap coffee. The note lay where he had left it. Not gone. Not embarrassing. Just... honest.

He lit a cigarette, picked up the note, and read the last sentence again. He had to grin.

“Gutter philosopher, you old filthy swine,” he said to himself. “You’re starting to quote yourself.”

The day dragged on. Another routine check, warehouse, pallets, that scanner beeping that burrowed into his brain. But something was different.

In between – during one of those gloomy minutes when everyone stares at their watch as if for a mercy shot – he caught himself thinking:

I didn't destroy everything yesterday.

No train station. No theater. No embarrassing performance. Quite the opposite: An evening that – objectively speaking – was so normal that it wouldn't appear in any screenplay.

And yet there was this pull: Almost. Almost something that would have worked.

Not with Jana. Not with a job. Not with fame.

But with him himself.

In the evening at the late-night shop, the standing table was in its usual place, as if someone had chained it. The neon lights were on, Berlin was awake, the neighborhood had put its everyday mask back on.

Heckenpisser was already there. Exceptionally without a briefcase – just with a coat and a look that hung somewhere between pride and a hangover.

"There he is, the man who's almost sensible," he said, lifting the bottle he was holding. "Hehehe."

"Shut up," Kuddel replied, but without venom. "What do you say, Hecke – did we accomplish anything yesterday, or did I just drink myself into thinking it was okay?"

"You didn't exaggerate at all," Hecke clarified. "You actually understated it, by your standards. Hehehe."

Murat appeared in the doorway. No beer in his hand – just a paper cup.

"Here," he said, pressing it into Kuddel's hand. "Before you ask: Yes, there's coffee in it. No, I didn't buy the wrong thing. Yes, that's intentional."

"Since when do I get house coffee at the corner store?" Kuddel asked suspiciously.

“It’s been a long time since you needed a legend to explain your life,” Murat said. “Jana told her story. It’s the first time in years you haven’t wasted a night. That’s a bonus.”

"So she's gossiping," Kuddel muttered, but couldn't suppress a small smile. "Snitch."

Hedge Pisser giggled. "Hehehe..." he went. "She was proud. Of US. Imagine that. Someone who isn't completely screwed up was PROUD of us."

“She said,” Murat added, “quote: ‘The two of them are still broken, but yesterday, for once, they didn’t blow themselves up.’ I’d say that’s progress.”

Kuddel took a sip from the paper cup. It tasted like: too hot, too strong, too honest.

"And you?" he asked Heckenpisser. "How was your morning? Any train station concourses on your mind?"

“My head was spinning, yes,” said Hecke. “But without any trains leaving. Hehehe. I woke up with a hangover, but no catastrophes. No messages like, ‘What did you do yesterday?’ No fear of my phone. That was... new.”

The three of them stood there – two drunkards and a late-night convenience store owner – and for once they had nothing big to confess.

“Do you know what I realized today?” Kuddel began after a while.

“That you can drink coffee in this city without vodka?” Murat asked.

“That ‘something almost worked out’ is still better than ‘nothing worked out at all’,” said Kuddel. “I used to hate the word ‘almost’. For me, it was the anteroom to self-abasement. Today I think:

Almost means I didn't completely mess it up.“

Hedge Pisser nodded. "Hehehe..." he laughed. "You're slowly mutating from a tragic actor to a supporting actor. That's good. Supporting roles don't always die."

“Not yet,” Murat said.

Elke came out, rubbed her hands as if there were a coldness she could grasp.

"Well, there you are, you poster children for failure," she said. "I heard you had one of those 'grown-up nights' yesterday."

“Define adult,” Kuddel grumbled. “If you mean: ‘No one threw up in the sink’ – well, we did.”

“Jana told me during the break that you guys had been in a pub,” Elke said. “Quiet. No drama. No escalation. She was slightly irritated.”

“That was me too,” Kuddel admitted. “Because I realized at times that I could... endure it.”

"What is it?" asked Elke.

“Me,” he said. “You. Hedge. That shop there. The evening. Without blowing it up.”

She glanced at him briefly, the way you look at someone who might make a joke – and then doesn't.

"Well, then," she finally said. "Congratulations. Yesterday was the first time you didn't try to turn your life into an action movie."

"More like a TV movie on the third channel," grinned Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"TV movies save lives," she said. "Because they don't overwhelm anyone."

The evening began to unfold. People came, bought cigarettes, beer, and pre-packaged rolls. A few familiar faces, a few new ones.

Kuddel had his second beer in his hand much later than usual. Not because he suddenly wanted to get better – but because it no longer felt like he had to immediately drown every thought in alcohol.

"Do you know what Jana said yesterday?" Heckenpisser asked at some point.

"Well?," said Kuddel.

"She said we could be the subject of a book," said Hecke. "Hehehe. A real one – with a publisher and everything."

"The book already exists," said Kuddel. "It's just spread across three people, a standing table, and a pile of empty bottles."

"She said," Hecke continued, "that you should write. And that I should pester you until you do."

"You've been doing that for years," said Kuddel.

"Yes, but so far only to make you miserable," Hecke grinned. "Now, for a change, I'm going to annoy you in a different way."

"Hope is dangerous for us," Murat warned.

"Hope," said Kuddel, "is like a train ticket you bought at some point and always carry around in your jacket pocket. You don't know where it went anymore, but you can't throw it away either."

"Hehehe...", Hecke said. "Write that sentence down, you bum. It's too good to just disappear here."

Kuddel nodded. Not much. Just briefly.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Today we're drinking. Normal. Sort of."

Normal. The word hung strangely in the air.

Half an hour later, Jana suddenly reappeared. Not in uniform, not sweaty from her shift, but in jogging pants and a faded T-shirt. Her hair was loose, her eyes tired but clear.

"So, what about the control group?" she asked. "Is everything back to normal, or have we already won a Nobel Prize?"

"We're practicing reverting to everyday life," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"I thought you were at home," said Kuddel.

"I am too," she said. "Three streets away. But I wanted to see if you had reversed your experiment right away."

She studied him. He had a beer in his hand, sure. But no alcohol breath, no glassy eyes, no that "I'm about to pass out" flickering.

"It doesn't look like it," she said. "There you go."

"Don't kid yourself," he warned. "We're still us."

"I don't have any," she said. "But I do have eyes."

She leaned against the door frame, pulled out a cigarette, and Murat threw her the light.

"I was thinking of you all today on the ward," she said. "We had a guy in his late fifties, liver shot, heart on its last legs, lungs completely shot. He always said, 'I'll quit someday. Just not today.' And now he's lying there with tubes. And he says, 'I should have stopped making excuses sooner.'"

"Relaxed topic," murmured Kuddel.

"It's not about suddenly stopping drinking," Jana said. "You wouldn't be you. It's about whether you want to be able to say at 60: I never tried any other way."

Silence. Only the hissing of the refrigerator, the clicking of the cash register, a car somewhere.

"Yesterday," she continued, "was an experiment. Nothing more. No Hollywood, no redemption. But proof that you are not completely remote-controlled."

"We almost made it happen," said Heckenpisser.

"That's almost enough for now," she said.

Kuddel looked at his bottle as if it contained an answer.

"You know, Jana," he said, "in the past, 'almost' always meant something humiliating to me."

Almost finished the job.

Almost caught a woman.

Almost didn't get arrested.

Almost always, the appetizer was failure. Yesterday... for the first time, I thought:

Almost – but this time it wasn't because I messed up.

It was because I didn't yet know what it might feel like if it actually worked out.

"Then collect those almost-evenings," she said. "And make something of them someday. Better a bunch of 'almost' than no chance at all."

Heckenpisser tapped his forehead. "Hehehe..." he went. "We need a new chapter: 'The evening we realized that almost is sometimes enough.'"

“A chapter,” said Kuddel, “in which no one vomits, no one bleeds, and no one is arrested. That will be the least popular chapter in my mind’s eye, but perhaps the most important.”

Jana stubbed out her cigarette butt and flicked the remains into the ashtray.

"I'm going to bed," she said. "I just wanted to check if she was still standing."

"We'll fall later," said Heckenpisser. "But maybe, just this once, only into bed."

"Do that," she said. "And Kuddel – you know what to do."

“Writing,” he murmured. “Yes, yes.”

She turned around and left.

"That woman is worse than any case manager at the job center," Murat observed. "Only more intelligent."

"And less susceptible to bribery," added Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

The evening wore on. Another beer, two. The conversations became less intense, not in the sense of becoming "stupid," but more relaxed. Fewer grand theories, more small observations. The ghost in the toilet, the toilet glasses incident, Murat's horror of tax audits, the hedge-pisser's mother and her new frying pan.

No escalation. No police. No embarrassment that would have required a new legend.

Later, much later, when Kuddel was sitting in his kitchen again, this time with beer but without the urge for self-destruction, he took out the pad on which it already said:

The evening when something almost worked out.

Below it he wrote:

"Tonight was the evening after."

In the past, the evenings after disasters were always the punishing companions of catastrophes. Today, the evening after is just... another day in which nothing bad happened.

For others, that's normal. For me, it's almost science fiction.

He paused. Then he added another line below:

"Perhaps this is what can work: not from 0 to 100 – but from catastrophe to almost okay."

He put down the pen and leaned back.

He was still the gutter philosopher. And the drunkard, too.

But somewhere, way in the back, something small had shifted:

The realization that "almost" is not just the anteroom to failure –
but sometimes the quiet beginning of something
which could later be called "it worked".

Pub crawl in a gentrification area

It started like a drunken idea, which is usually what it was when hedge pissers left their mouths open a little too long.

“We’re going to do something cultural today,” he said, placing his briefcase next to the standing table as if he were signing up for a business workshop. “Hehehe.”

"If you say 'cultural,' I get a rash," Kuddel growled, took a drag on his cigarette, and downed the rest of his Stern beer. "What are you up to? A museum? A poetry slam? I'm going to punch you in the face."

“Pub crawl,” Hecke declared solemnly. “But not here. Not our moldy bunkers. Today we’re going where the real money is drunk away. Gentrification area. Craft beer country. Hummus-with-oat-milk zone. Hehehe.”

Murat stuck his head out of the door, towel over his shoulder, skeptical look.

“You two and a gentrification area?” he asked. “That’s like wild boars in an organic market. That’s bound to go wrong.”

"I call it field research," announced Heckenpisser. "The drunkards on an expedition into enemy territory."

"Enemy territory is anywhere where beer costs more than three euros," Kuddel muttered. "I don't even have shoes for places like that."

“You’ve got boots,” said Hecke. “You look like a stuffed roadie. In these shops, they call that ‘authentic.’ They’re going to love you. Hehehe.”

Elke came forward, lit a cigarette, and looked at the two of them.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked. "Weserstraße? Graefekiez? Or right where the rents are outrageous?"

“Weserstraße,” Heckenpisser said promptly. “That’s where all these bars with uncomfortable chairs and people dictating their problems into their iPhones.”

“I hate to say it,” said Elke, “but a beer there costs as much as half a night here.”

"Then we'll just drink less," said Hecke. "Science demands sacrifices. Hehehe."

“Drinking less is not a concept that fits my operating system,” Kuddel grumbled. “I’m programmed for flow.”

Jana came out of the corner store at that exact moment, hoodie open, backpack on one shoulder.

"What is being planned?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

“A cultural excursion into a gentrification area,” Heckenpisser explained. “We are infiltrating Weserstraße. Field study on ‘How much irony can a craft beer glass withstand?’”

Jana looked from one to the other.

“You guys on Weserstrasse?” she asked. “Please tell me I can come along. I want to see how long it takes you to knock a MacBook out of a guy’s hand.”

"You're not coming," Kuddel said reflexively. "It's all full of your people."

“My people?” she repeated.

“Well, people who actually function. Who drink coffee with oat milk and still don’t throw up,” he explained. “I feel like junk at a design flea market.”

“That’s precisely why I’m coming along,” she said. “For sanitary support.”

Murat leaned his head against the frame.

"I'll give you a deal," he said. "You go there, but you don't come back here to get completely wasted afterwards. If it goes wrong, you go straight home, understand? I'm not your after-show recovery service."

“Hehehe...”, Hecke said. “We’re doing our best. Well... what’s left of it.”

The S-Bahn towards Neukölln was an ordeal right from the start. Kuddel was wearing his old jacket, which looked like it had been steeped in beer, smoke, and decades of wear. Heckenpisser was wearing a coat, shirt, and bow tie, as if he were on his way to a theater premiere, where he was sitting in the cheap seats. Jana, in between, in jeans and a hoodie, was the epitome of compromise.

“I swear to you,” said Kuddel, holding onto the pole with one hand, “Neukölln used to be really rough. You got off the train and knew: either you got punched in the face or a cheap kebab. Both options were honest.”

"Today you'll get a vegan burger and a microaggression discussion," said Hecke. "Hehehe."

A guy opposite them was wearing headphones, AirPods, a cap, and a freshly trimmed beard. He glanced at them briefly – robe, bow tie, hospital hoodie – and probably categorized them as a "marginal note of contemporary history".

“I’m telling you,” Kuddel murmured, “the youth of today all look like interns from the same start-up.”

“Maybe they are,” Jana said. “Not everyone can have a career as a late-night convenience store philosopher and drunken bloke.”

They got off at Hermannplatz, walked through the usual mix of kebab shops, discount stores, shisha bars and organic markets, which stared at each other like feuding clans.

“This is where the divide begins,” said Heckenpisser, gesturing to the left with a pseudo-professorial air. “Over there, five-euro cappuccinos with plant-based milk, up ahead, vodka from the discount store. And in between, us: a social firestorm.”

"Shut your mouth, Professor," growled Kuddel, but he couldn't suppress a grin.

Weserstrasse greeted them like a bad joke that took itself too seriously.

Bars to the left and right, all varied within the same concept: chipped walls "for character", retro furniture "for vintage", bearded guys "for discourse" and everywhere that smell of craft beer, spilled IPA and perfume that was called "unisex" and smelled like nothing Kuddel knew.

“There!” shouted Heckenpisser, pointing to a bar with a chalkboard in front of the door. It said:

“IPA, Pale Ale, Stout, Sour – Support your local brewery.”

"I'll support my local liver cirrhosis at most," Kuddel muttered. "But fine. Let's see how much contempt can fit in a glass."

They went inside.

Inside: wood, concrete, lots of beard, few smiles. The bar was lit as if it were a stage. At one of the tables sat two guys with laptops, as if they were editing presentations in a pub. Next to them, a girl with brightly colored hair was scribbling something in a notebook and occasionally casting important glances into the distance.

The bartender looked like he had a podcast. Thin mustache, tattoos, t-shirt with a band logo that Kuddel didn't recognize. Probably something to do with Post-something.

"What can I get you?" he asked in a voice that sounded like "I'm actually an artist".

"Do you have any pilsner?" asked Kuddel.

The bartender hesitated, as if someone had asked for currywurst in a Michelin-starred restaurant.

“We have a Helles on tap, two IPAs, a Pale Ale, a...”

"Do you have any Sterni?" Kuddel interrupted.

It became VERY quiet for a short time within a radius of two meters.

“We’re a craft beer shop,” said the bartender, very politely, very coldly. “Not a convenience store.”

"Calm down, Hop King," interjected Hedge Pisser. "Our friend is... a beer migrant. Hehehe. Give him something that doesn't smell like grapefruit, and he'll get used to it."

"I'll have the light one," sighed Kuddel. "But only if it's beer and not some liquid podcast."

“For me, IPA,” said Jana. “With less attitude, please.”

“Pale Ale,” ordered Heckenpisser. “I don’t want to draw attention to myself. Hehehe.”

They got their glasses: deliberately crooked things with too much foam, everything looked like it was a design patent. Kuddel took a sip of the light beer and held the liquid in his mouth. It was... okay. Smoother, cleaner, less harsh. Like beer that had never seen a bar fight.

“It tastes,” he said slowly, “as if it listens to podcasts about sustainability in its free time.”

Jana laughed. "Come on, it's not that bad," she said, taking a sip of her IPA. "Mine tastes like liquid bread crust with lemon."

Heckenpisser swirled his pale ale like a red wine.

“Hehehe... mine tastes like ‘I studied and still want to rebel’,” he analyzed. “Interesting.”

They stood at a standing table – made of recycled wood, of course – and looked around.

A huge poster with the inscription "" hung on the wall" was hanging on the wall.

“Support Diversity – Smash Fascism – Drink Local.”

"At least," Jana murmured. "They mean well, at least to some extent."

“Believe me,” said Kuddel, “most people who hang things like that on the wall panic when a real jerk stands in front of their shop.”

"You're being a real jerk in her shop right now," she retorted.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m their decoration for tonight. ‘Look, a real nutcase, honey – totally authentic.’”

He was right. A guy at the next table – cap, flannel shirt – nodded at them with that intense look that was supposed to mean “Respect, brother,” but came across more like a zoo visitor. The girl with the colorful hair glanced over, then back into her notebook, probably writing: “Today: discovered two relics in front of the standing table.”

"How are you feeling?" Jana asked.

“Like wallpaper in an apartment I can’t afford,” Kuddel said. “I belong here, but not in the price system.”

Heckenpisser had put on his observer glasses.

"That's fascinating," he said. "They're sitting here, drinking beer that costs as much as our weekly groceries, talking about critiques of capitalism, and simultaneously planning their next co-working project. Hehehe."

"They're not all like that," Jana defended them half-heartedly. "There are some who just want to drink beer and not be lonely in their kitchen. Just like you. Only with better hair care."

"Look there," whispered Kuddel, nodding his chin at a table. "The one with the MacBook. What's he doing?"

"He writes," said Heckenpisser. "Probably a novel about the inner emptiness of the middle class. Or a column: 'How I learned to love the gutter without going down it.' Hehehe."

Jana grimaced. "You're being unfair," she said. "You don't know what they've been through."

"But they don't know what we've been through," Kuddel retorted. "And they don't need to know. That's the whole point."

He took another sip and looked around.

At the bar, someone ordered a "Whiskey Sour with egg white". The bartender shook, stirred, and smiled.

"Look," Kuddel muttered. "They have more words for cocktails here than I have for my problems."

Hedge Pisser nodded. "It's like talking about the same hunger in a different language," he said. "Hehehe."

"Maybe we're jealous," Jana admitted.

"Envious of what?" Kuddel asked. "That they sit in bars and imagine their broken middle-class psyche is subversive?"

"Envious that they can afford to be unhappy without freezing to death," she said.

The sentence hit home. Not harshly, more like dissectingly.

"Maybe," Kuddel admitted.

They finished their drinks. Kuddel was surprised that he didn't immediately think "another one." That typical store logic—loud music, a packed bar, flashing lights—was absent. Everything here was controlled. Even the drunkenness looked like it had a deadline.

"One more?" asked the voice from behind the counter.

Kuddel saw the map. Saw the prices. Saw the faces.

"No," he said. "We're hiking. It was... interesting."

The bartender nodded, professionally friendly, without flinching.

Outside the air was rougher again, more authentic. Street noise, rental cars, pizza boxes on top of the garbage cans.

"So?" asked Heckenpisser. "First gentrification project completed. Conclusion?"

"They only drink to cope," said Kuddel. "Only they convince themselves it's a lifestyle and not the same escape in a prettier package."

"Welcome to the sociology seminar at the Schöneberg Adult Education Center," Hecke giggled. "Hehehe."

Jana took a drag on her cigarette, blowing the smoke towards the street.

"Next bar?" she asked.

"Sure," said Kuddel. "The tour is just beginning. Maybe we'll find a place where the chairs are uncomfortable, but the lies are a little smaller."

They continued walking down Weserstrasse.

Passing a shop on the left, where there was a sign:

"Natural Wine – Small Plates – No Assholes."

"We can't get in there," Heckenpisser stated. "Hehehe."

"I am not prepared to pay thirteen euros for grape juice with attitude," said Kuddel.

"Then," said Jana, "we'll go along the path where your people disappeared – and see who replaced them."

They turned off, into the next pub, into the next attempt to enter a piece of the city that was still officially called Berlin.

but slowly they no longer looked like them.

The second pub at least smelled of something Kuddel recognized: beer, sweat, frying oil, cheap perfume.

From the outside, it looked like something out of a flyer advertising "authentic corner shop, let's save the neighborhood culture". Inside, it quickly became clear: nothing had been saved here, everything had been newly staged.

An old wooden counter, yes. But freshly sanded. Black and white photographs from "back in the day" on the walls – only half of them clearly came from a vintage shop. Retro neon signs that looked like they'd been ordered from Etsy yesterday.

"Look," Kuddel muttered as they shuffled through the store. "They've renovated poverty."

Heckenpisser pushed up his glasses and looked around as if he were on an excursion.

“Hehehe... it’s like a museum of local life, only with card payment,” he whispered.

Four people stood around a foosball table, all wearing caps, all slim, all at that age where you don't yet know if you're young or old. They called out "Dude" to each other in a tone that betrayed they had all received student loans at some point.

Jana paused briefly, taking in the room.

"So that's it," she said. "Neighborhood romance for people whose parents still text them when the rent will be debited."

They went to the bar. The bartender – bearded, but less dangerous than the IPA swinger from before – smiled.

"What can I get you?" he asked.

“Beer,” said Kuddel. “A normal one. Nothing that sounds like a Spotify playlist.”

The bartender grinned. "We've got a draft pilsner," he said. "2.80."

Kuddel blinked. 2.80 for a beer. In his currency, that was almost a small loan.

“I’ll take it,” he said anyway. “If I’m going to live in colonial times, then I’m going to do it properly.”

“I’ll have a Pilsner too,” said Jana. “I want to see what the neighborhood feels like in its touristy version.”

“I’ll have...” Heckenpisser began, glancing briefly at the menu, “...also a Pilsner. Hehehe. No experiments today.”

They received their glasses, normal pilsner, normal size, normal temperature. But the context made it something else.

There was still a free standing table by the window; they stood there, their backs to the street, looking into the shop.

"So," began Heckenpisser, "what do we have here?"

Kuddel sipped, letting the beer run through his mouth.

"This is the kind of pub," he said, "where guys like us used to sit and kill ourselves. Now it's full of people who blog about it."

At the next table, a group of people in their early thirties: two women, two men, all with analog cameras around their necks or somewhere on the table. They were talking loudly about light and shadow, street photography, "capturing the last remnants of real Berlin before it's all gone."

"Do you hear that?" whispered Kuddel. "They're talking about us."

"Maybe they'll secretly take your picture," Jana grinned. "'Subject: the last drunk before the demolition.'"

One of the women glanced over briefly, her eyes lingering on Kuddel. Not disgusted, not arrogant – rather interested, as if she were considering whether his face looked good in black and white.

"Now I'm standing here like a seasoned junkie extra," he muttered. "Great."

Heckenpisser took a sip and put the glass down.

"I find it fascinating," he said. "They sit here, drinking €2.80 beers, talking about how bad gentrification is – and don't realize that they themselves are the moving crew for rents. Hehehe."

"Maybe they realize it," said Jana. "And yet they still can't escape their lives. Just like you."

That hit home. But not like a blow, more like a knot in the head.

"Do you know what the difference is?" asked Kuddel.

"Between whom?" she inquired.

"Between them and us," he said. "If we drink the neighborhood into oblivion, nobody gives a damn. But if they take over a shop here, they tweet that they want to preserve the spirit of the neighborhood."

Hedge Pisser laughed dryly. "Hehehe..." he went. "'Ghost of the neighborhood,' dude. The Ghost of the Neighborhood is a mixture of Sterni breath and cold fryer oil."

"And a train station toilet," Jana added.

"Yes," said Kuddel. "And none of them over there really want to keep it. They just want to keep the story. The difference between us and them is: We are the anecdotes – they are the ones who tell them."

For a moment they simply stood there and stared. Not out of envy, not out of hatred – more out of a kind of weary wonder.

Then the first minor collision occurred.

The guy with the analog camera – middle parting, earring, shirt that looked as if it was intentionally too big – came over.

"Sorry," he said, "may I... ask something quickly?"

Kuddel tensed up slightly, an old reflex before things get stressful.

"It depends," he said. "If you're asking me about tobacco – yes. If you want to ask me if I've ever thought about my drinking habits – no."

The guy laughed awkwardly.

"No, it's okay," he said. "I... uh... I'm doing a series about Berlin characters. Pubs, the neighborhood, that sort of thing. I saw you guys and thought... well..."

He hesitated. It was clear: He wanted to say "you look interesting," but all he said was:

"You're somehow part of it. May I take a picture?"

Heckenpisser grinned evilly. "Hehehe..." he chuckled. "Finally, Kuddel, your modeling career. In 30 years you'll be in a photo book: 'Vanished Alcoholics of Yesteryear'."

Jana watched the scene without saying anything.

Kuddel looked at the guy, saw the camera, saw Jana, saw Hecke.

There it was, the classic moment: the moment when you either growl, send the guy away, let everything escalate – or do something else.

"Do you want a real picture?" asked Kuddel.

The guy seemed briefly confused. "Uh... yeah?" he said.

"Then make one," said Kuddel. "But with one condition."

"Which ones?" he asked.

"You write underneath," Kuddel said slowly, "not 'drunkard', not 'bum', not 'drinking legend', not 'Berlin original'. You write: 'One who's still around.' Nothing more."

The guy blinked. Then he nodded. "Okay," he said. "I promise."

"And I want to see the picture," Kuddel added. "I don't want you putting me on a poster later with an anti-alcohol slogan."

"I'll send it to you," the guy said spontaneously. "Do you have Instagram?"

The silence that followed was... brutal.

Hedge Pisser broke it first. "Hehehe...", he neighed. "The man asks the gutter philosopher about Instagram. That's art."

Jana rolled her eyes.

"You can give him my email address," she said. "I'll forward it. Then you won't have to explain to him what an app is."

"Deal," said Kuddel. "Take your picture, kid. But I don't want to look like a memorial in it."

The guy nodded, stepped back a little, and raised the camera.

Kuddel turned slightly to the side, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, beer glass loosely in his hand, robe open. Hedgepisser stood beside him, in a coat and bow tie, like a bad lawyer. Jana stood at the edge, half in, half out of the frame.

Click.

A sound that somehow seemed more honest because it wasn't digital.

"Thank you," the guy said. "Really."

"What are you going to do with all that stuff?" Jana asked.

"I'm working on a book," he said. "Photos of old and new Berlin. Before, after, all mixed up. Not so romantic, more... like it is. I hope."

"Great," said Kuddel. "Then we're officially part of your research hell from now on."

The guy actually smiled, not ironically. "You're part of my city," he said. "That's... important to me. Even if you hate me for it."

"I don't hate you," said Kuddel. "I just don't trust you. That's a difference."

"Fair," the guy said. "But... thanks anyway."

As he returned to his table, Heckenpisser said quietly:

"Hehehe... you know you've just allowed someone else to frame your existence."

"Better than if only the job center determined my parameters," Kuddel muttered.

They continued drinking. Slowly. Each lost in their own thoughts, in their own roles.

"You know what was crazy?" Jana said at one point. "You made a condition. Not just putting on a show. No heroic bullshit. Just: 'Write that I'm still here.' That's... pretty much the most honest demand you can make."

"That's all there is to it," said Kuddel. "I'm not a role model, not a hero, not a token antisocial person. I'm just someone who hasn't been filtered out yet."

Heckenpisser nodded slowly, visibly moved, although he tried to hide it behind mockery.

"Hehehe...", he said. "I want an addendum too. If I end up in a photo like that, it should say: 'Mama's boy in free fall'."

"You'll get your own caption," Jana grinned. "'The man who knew too much and still didn't change anything.'"

"Thank you," said Hecke. "I feel understood."

The air grew thicker, not from the smoke – people were smoking on the sidewalk – but from the knowledge that they had just revealed more about themselves than one normally does in such shops.

"Where are we going next?" asked Jana.

"I want a proper old-fashioned pub," said Kuddel. "No craft beer, no vintage concept, no analog photography project. Just: a bar, regulars, bad music."

"The problem is," said Heckenpisser, "that these very shops are slowly dying out. Hehehe. For economic reasons."

"We're dying for economic reasons too," Kuddel replied. "But until then, I at least want to see one more landlady who calls me 'darling' and secretly puts a shot in front of me."

"You have Murat," said Jana. "He doesn't call you 'sweetheart,' but he looks at you like he knows when you're going to mess up again."

"I need other kinds of love too," said Kuddel.

They finished the rest of the pilsner and put down their glasses. This time nobody came to ask "Anything else?" – the place was too busy with itself.

Outside, you could hear Berlin breathing again. Cars, bikes, voices, a siren in the distance.

"What do you say, gutter philosopher?" Jana asked. "Is a gentrified area a worthwhile tourist destination for drunkards?"

Kuddel thought for a moment.

"It's worth seeing that we're not the only ones running away from life," he said. "They're just running away into more expensive glass."

"Hehehe...", commented Heckenpisser. "That's the best summary I've heard today."

They walked on. Past bars serving wine in stemless glasses. Past shops where beer was called "Culinary." Past tables where people were discussing precarious working conditions – while they had thirty euros for drinks on the table.

"Do you know what the worst part is?" said Jana.

"That at some point we won't even be able to walk through here without having to pay rent?" Kuddel asked.

"That you might just disappear one day without any of them even realizing you were ever here," she said.

Kuddel paused briefly. He looked down the street. He saw the bars. He saw himself in the window of a shop that sold soy lattes.

"That's why," he said quietly, "we'll at least have our picture taken once. So that somewhere, on some piece of paper, there's a picture of us hanging with the caption: 'One of those who was still there.'"

"For now," Heckenpisser emphasized. "Hehehe."

"For now," Kuddel repeated. "Before they filter us out completely."

They turned into a side street, out of the Instagram version, towards a corner where "Sky Sports Bar" was still written on the wall, with yellowed stickers, ashtrays outside, two regulars smoking, who looked like extras from Kuddel's past.

"There," he said. "That's where I'm going now. That's my nature reserve."

"And we," said Jana, "will come along and see if your species still exists there."

"Hehehe...", laughed Heckenpisser. "Welcome to the reserve of the still-drunk old Berliners."

They entered, and for a moment Kuddel heard the gentrified area behind him, like another planet where people also drank,

but always only in a way that looked good.

The Sky Sports Bar looked from the inside like the last resistant organism in a contaminated biotope.

At the entrance, two worn-out slot machines with lightbulbs that flickered more than they shone. On the wall, three TVs, all showing sports, but the sound was turned down; the commentator moved his mouth, but nobody really wanted to hear what he was saying. At the bar, a woman with short, dyed hair, whose face said: I've seen all the guys – and you're not even in the top 50 disappointments.

"So," murmured Kuddel, "here. Here my inner organizational chart feels understood."

The hedge pisser stopped and sniffed the air.

"Hehehe...", he said. "Finally, it smells like failure and deep fryer again. I was getting dizzy from all the vegan candles in the other shops."

Jana looked around. At a table in the corner, two old men, both with half-empty beers and full stomachs, stared at the television without really reacting. At the dart machine, a guy in sweatpants looked like he hadn't had a sober shower since 2003. Another man leafed through a worn betting slip like an old Bible.

"Welcome to the real neighborhood," she murmured. "Not the Instagram version."

They went to the bar. The landlady wiped a glass with a cloth that had definitely seen worse days.

"Well, boys and girls," she said. "What can I get you?"

No craft beer, no chalkboard. Behind her, a clear assortment: Pilsner, Helles, Korn, Futschi, Vodka, Jägermeister. The basic colors of despair.

"Pilsner. Bottle," said Kuddel. He didn't even have to think about it.

"I'll have a Pilsner too," said Heckenpisser. "Today I'm totally with the working class. Hehehe."

"I'll have a Coke," said Jana.

The landlady raised an eyebrow. "Cola?" she asked. "Voluntarily?"

"I'm the one who has to lift people tomorrow," Jana explained. "If I wobble while lifting them, it will be noticeable."

"Fair," she said. "One time responsibility, two times escape."

The bottles arrived. No perfect foam, no photo opportunity. Just beer. The way it should be: honest, blunt, and a little offended.

They stood at an empty table facing the counter and screens.

The main TV was showing a Bundesliga match; another was showing boxing; the third was showing some kind of darts tournament. Three sports, one theme: men exhausting themselves so that others have a reason to keep drinking.

"Here," said Kuddel, "is my language. Bartender, television, regulars who look as if they are rooted to the ground."

Heckenpisser took a sip and nodded in satisfaction.

"Tastes like the old days," he said. "Hehehe."

"It used to taste like worse beer and more smoky," Kuddel corrected. "But yes, it's close."

Jana leaned against the wall, which was sticky, without specifying exactly what it was sticky with.

"I'm glad I met you here and not in the craft beer shops," she said. "In a bar like that, they'd just use you as a story. Here... you're just two guys drinking."

"We would like to be more," Heckenpisser interjected. "Hehehe. But yes, basically correct."

After a short time, one of the old men from the corner stopped beside them. Grey hair, face like an ashtray, plaid shirt, jogging pants.

"I know you," he said, pointing his beer at Kuddel. "You used to hang out in that... what was the name of that place again... 'Rumpelkammer' in Neukölln, right? With another guy. Loud as a siren."

Kuddel blinked. "Could be," he said. "The junk room has seen me more often than my ex."

"Yeah, yeah," the old man nodded. "I once bummed a cigarette from you. You told me I should get a job so I could buy some myself." He grinned. "I thought that was cheeky. Now I think it was consistent."

Heckenpisser burst out laughing. "Hehehe... that fits," he said. "Kuddel, a social worker completely drunk."

"What are you?" asked the old man. "Hartz IV recipients? Brothers in spirit?"

"We're a research project," said Heckenpisser. "Pub crawl. Topic: 'How does a neighborhood die?'"

The old man nodded slowly and looked into his beer.

"The neighborhood isn't dying," he finally said. "It's just becoming less friendly to the wrong people. The pubs will stay, but the people in the pubs will change. You used to have guys here who worked on the assembly line. Now you're filled with parcel carriers and burnt-out IT workers."

"And where are the really old people?" Jana asked.

He shrugged.

"They're dead," he said. "Or in the surrounding area. Or they don't dare go out anymore because they don't know if the place is still the same." Some come in, look around, see new faces and think: 'This isn't for me anymore.' Then they leave again."

"I know that feeling," Kuddel muttered. "Only the other way around. I go into the new shops and think: 'This was never for me.'"

"Well, there you go," said the old man. "Everyone feels like a stranger, and yet you all drink the same beverage."

He tapped the neck of the bottle against Kuddel's, as if it were an accolade.

"Welcome to the transition zone," he said. "I'll sit down again, I've got a bet with myself about how many more times Hertha can screw this up."

He left. As unspectacularly as he had come.

"That was good," said Jana.

"He was at home," said Kuddel. "And we're just visiting."

They kept drinking. It didn't get pretty. But it got right.

A few younger people came in and sat down at the table behind them. No laptops. Ripped jeans, worn hoodies, cheap sneakers. One was still wearing his delivery jacket, the name half-worn.

"Today was hell again, man," someone said. "30 more stops because some manager thought AI would make us more efficient."

"AI will only destroy you faster," muttered Heckenpisser, who was overhearing. "Hehehe."

"We are all interchangeable," Kuddel observed. "Whether it's cashier, warehouse, parcel service, convenience store, or care work. Only the rents are fixed."

"And the liver," Jana added.

Eventually, the moment came when Kuddel had to go to the toilet. A mandatory trip. If only to check the condition of the facilities – an unwritten ritual.

The toilet was... a summary of the place: a crooked mirror on which someone had scribbled "Hertha lives", a flush that needed convincing to take its job seriously, a smell of piss, cleaning products and old age.

On the inside of the toilet door, written in permanent marker:

"There used to be more beer here. Now there's more rent."

Among them someone else:

"There used to be more of me here."

Kuddel stared at it for a moment. Then he laughed softly.

Yeah, man. he thought. "I used to be more here. Now I'm scattered – standing desk, hospital, job center, train station toilet, training program. And now also in a photo project."

When he returned, Heckenpisser was having a discussion with Jana.

"...I'm just telling you," he said, "that your foster boys and our drunken asses have more in common than they think. Hehehe."

"What is it?", asked Jana.

"Everyone keeps the system running," he said. "Some work until they're broken, others show how broken you become when you can't keep up anymore."

"Philosophy at the beer tap," Kuddel commented. "Stop competing with me."

Jana looked at him, scrutinized him.

"And?" she asked. "How's the toilet?"

"Honestly," he said. "Terrible, but honest. Someone wrote on the door: 'There used to be more me here.' I felt briefly addressed."

"Didn't you once have that ghost in the toilet that bites your butt?" asked Hedge Pisser.
"Hehehe."

"He's only responsible for our toilet," said Kuddel. "Someone else lives here. He doesn't bite – he holds up a mirror to you."

They finished their drinks. The pilsner went down faster than the craft beer, but it also wasn't meant to be accompanied.

"What's the conclusion, research director?" Jana asked. "You've now walked through three zones: hipster hell, a renovated poverty setting, and a real Sky Sports bar. Where do you feel least ripped off?"

Kuddel thought for a while. Longer than a punchline should take.

"At the corner store," he said after a while. "Honestly. Because nobody there pretends it's some deeper experience. Everyone knows: beer, cigarette, boonekamp, shut up. Done. Here on Weserstraße, everyone acts like their drinking is going to change the map of the city. But in the end, we all end up in the same toilet."

Hedge Pisser nodded in agreement. "Hehehe..." he said. "I think you've just written the subtitle for our lives."

"Ask me again in ten years," said Kuddel. "If there's a co-working space with yoga on this corner instead of a bar."

"You don't belong there," Jana said.

"Yes," he said, grinning crookedly. "I could become a relaxation coach. Breathing technique: Inhale, Sterni, exhale, 'Screw you all.'"

They laughed. Not loudly. But genuinely.

Time had slipped on without anyone noticing exactly when. The Sky Sports bar filled up a little, then emptied again, like a breath from the chest of the neighborhood.

"Another round?" the landlady asked at some point.

Kuddel looked at the beer, looked at the clock, looked at Jana.

"No," he said. "We have to go back. The field trial is over."

"You're more sensible than you look," she said.

"That's our trick," replied Hedge Pisser. "Hehehe."

They paid, counted bills, jingled change, a little too much of a tip, perhaps out of respect, perhaps out of emotion.

The air outside was colder now. The neighborhood seemed less loud, but not friendlier.

"What are we taking with us?" asked Jana as they walked towards the subway.

"Athlete's foot from the Sky toilet," said Heckenpisser.

“And the realization,” Kuddel added, “that they see us everywhere else as mere scenery – and here at least as fodder for conversation at the pub.”

“And the photo,” Jana reminded her. “Don’t forget that.”

She stopped, pulled out her mobile phone, and showed him an email that had just come in.

“Here,” she said. “The photographer from earlier. He was quick. Subject: ‘One who’s still here.’”

She opened it. A picture. Black and white.

Kuddel, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, beer in hand, vest open, his gaze somewhere between tired and defiant. Next to him, Heckenpisser with a bow tie, grinning like an idiot, but awake. Jana on the edge, half in shadow.

Including:

"One who is still there."

Neukölln, 2025.

No further text.

Kuddel stared at the picture for longer than he would have liked.

"Well?" asked Hedge Pisser. "Are you happy with your own face, Mr. Gutter Philosopher? Hehehe."

"I've seen worse mirrors," he muttered. "But this is the first picture where I look the way I actually feel."

"How are you feeling?" Jana wanted to know.

He thought about it. Weserstrasse behind him, the S-Bahn in front of him, the Späti somewhere in his mind as the endpoint.

“Like a relic,” he said finally. “But a living relic. No longer fitting, but not yet gone. One that is still there – and refuses to dissolve completely into nostalgia.”

“Hehehe...”, said Hedge Pisser. “A defiant fossil.”

“Exactly,” said Kuddel. “A fossil with liver spots.”

They got back on the S-Bahn. The faces around them were different again – but somehow also the same as always.

“You know what?” said Jana in the carriage, as they stood side by side, holding onto the poles.

"What?" he asked.

“You’re not out of touch with the times,” she said. “Time has just slipped uncomfortably far. But today...”

Today you marched with us. Not as tourists, but as witnesses.”

Kuddel looked out at the darkness between the stations. Thoughts like graffiti on the wall, briefly visible, then gone again.

“Perhaps,” he said, “the next chapter will no longer be called ‘How we lost everything’, but rather ‘How we saw what came next – and still kept drinking’.”

"And what do you call this?" she asked.

He thought. He looked down at himself, saw the hedge, saw her cola, saw the city.

“Pub crawl in a gentrification area,” he said. “Subtitle: ‘How we realized that we are not only the past – but also proof that it really existed.’”

"Hehehe..." said Hedge Pisser. "Write that down before you forget."

Kuddel looked at him. "I'll do it," he said. "Today. Before everything here is renovated – including my memory."

The train pulled into Schöneberg, and somewhere there, between the lights of the late-night shop and remnants of Sky Sports in my head,

Kuddel knew:

This evening had not only been a tour through foreign territory,

but also a map of where he himself

still belonged there.

Pseudo-intellectual escalation at the bar

The evening didn't start with any escalation at all. More like the rest of the program.

The neighborhood was damp, but not terribly so, a typical Wednesday when even the junkies looked tired. Kuddel stood at the high table like a piece of furniture no one wanted to move. His jacket was open, a Sterni beer in his hand, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

Heckenpisser was fresh from the office, his shirt half out of his trousers, his bow tie a little crooked, as if he had deliberately tried to appear less correct, but had only half succeeded.

Murat stood half behind the counter, half in the doorway, a cloth over his shoulder. Elke sorted cigarette packs as if they were files in a law firm.

"Today," said Kuddel, "is one of those days when even depression is too lazy to really grab hold."

"Hehehe," said Heckenpisser. "That's the low-energy version of an existential crash."

Murat snorted. "You two only have two modes," he said. "Either disaster or commentary."

"Commenting is my form of self-defense," said Kuddel, taking a drag on his cigarette. "If I'm not talking, I'm actually listening. And nobody can stand that."

It looked like it would be a quiet evening. Until the pseudo-intellectual showed up.

He didn't arrive with a drumroll, he arrived like everyone else: quietly, with a jute bag. Lanky, thirty-something, glasses with frames that were too thin, a coat that looked like "second-hand, but expensive". The jute bag had something about "discourse" written on it, which said it all.

"Mhm," murmured Kuddel. "Danger detected."

"Oh, come on," said Jana, who came around the corner at that moment and was about to roll a cigarette. "Maybe he's just buying cigarettes and will leave again."

"Nobody with a bag like that just buys cigarettes," said Hedge Pisser. "Hehehe. He buys cigarettes, a Club-Mate, and tries to explain his master's thesis to you."

The guy entered the corner store, looked around briefly, registered the scene: counter, Murat, Elke, two drunks at the standing table, Jana, who was stuffing tobacco into her bag.

He smiled. A dangerous smile. The smile of someone who has googled "subproletarian milieus".

"Good evening," he said. "Uh... a pack of cigarettes, red Gauloises. And... a Club-Mate, please."

Murat couldn't suppress a grin. "Of course," he said. "The classic."

The guy straightened up at the counter for a second too much, as if he were considering whether to say something. Then he did.

"It's quite fascinating," he began, "how a corner store functions as a social space, isn't it?"

Kuddel closed his eyes briefly. "There we have it," he murmured. "That's how it always starts."

Jana looked interested. "Come on," she whispered. "Treat yourself."

Murat put down cigarettes and mate. "2.90," he said. "Not exciting at all."

The guy chuckled softly, the kind of laugh you get in a seminar. "I mean..." he started again, "the corner store as a third place, beyond work and home. Fluid boundaries between public and private, the intertwining of subculture and precariousness..."

“Brother,” Kuddel said loudly, “if you say another word like that, I’ll get a fever.”

The guy turned half towards him, half towards the counter.

"I didn't mean to disturb anyone," he said. "I just find it sociologically interesting."

"Everything is sociologically interesting," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe. Even your shoes. But we still don't need them explained to us in detail."

The guy politely ignored it.

“I’m currently writing a paper on urban transformation processes,” he explained. “And this neighborhood is... let’s say... exemplary. A kind of laboratory.”

"They just called us lab rats," said Kuddel. "Have you heard?"

"That was a metaphor," the guy defended himself.

“It’s a metaphor when I say, ‘Sterni is my blood,’” Kuddel said. “You’ve just officially made us a subject of study.”

Jana noticeably held back. She knew both sides: the hospital, university chatter during breaks – and this corner where nobody wanted to feel like a footnote.

“I find it really... fascinating,” the guy continued, apparently unable to back down. “Like you guys here... well...”

He was looking for a word that wasn't "hanging around".

“...performs,” he finished the sentence. “The way you stand, the way you speak, your codes...”

“Performed,” Kuddel repeated slowly. “Hedge, did you hear? We’re performing.”

"I didn't even know I was an actor," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe. Where's my payslip?"

Murat raised an eyebrow demonstratively. "Listen up," he said quietly to Elke. "Things are about to escalate – but with foreign words."

The guy moved half a meter closer to the standing table, using a Club-Mate as a shield.

"I don't mean that in a derogatory way," he emphasized. "You are, in a way... authentic voices of the neighborhood."

“In your language, ‘authentic’ means: We look like we’re broken enough to be quoted,” Kuddel said. “Right?”

The guy started to say something about "discursive", but didn't get around to it.

“Listen up,” Heckenpisser interrupted, now running uphill. “Hehehe. You come in here, grab your symbolic mate, look at us like we’re an art project – and think that if you throw in a few

clever terms, we'll suddenly be part of your field study. But we're not a footnote in your master's thesis, buddy. We're the ones who'll be hanging around here when you later go back to your old apartment to think about 'transformation'."

The guy blinked. This wasn't the conversation he'd prepared for.

"I just wanted to... understand," he said.

"Understanding is great," said Kuddel. "But you don't come here to understand. You come here to have your theory confirmed. Let me tell you my theory: You're not one of us, you never will be, you don't want to be – but you need us to make your work feel somehow 'realistic'."

Jana coughed, half laughing, half "uff".

"Listen," the guy tried again. "I come from a family where..."

"Let me guess," Kuddel interrupted. "Teachers, lawyers, something in the arts? Father a Social Democrat, mother a member of the Education and Science Workers' Union, both think it's important that you 'do something with people,' but in the end they still want you to be a civil servant."

Heckenpisser burst out laughing. "Hehehe!" he said. "That man reads resumes in faces."

The guy fell silent. Then he muttered: "Something like that."

"You see," said Kuddel. "You're not bad. You just... started somewhere else. And now you're standing here trying to explain to us how our lives theoretically work. But you know what? We don't need theory. We are practice. Hardcore."

"I'm just trying to... recognize a structure," the guy said, sounding slightly desperate.

"The structure is quite simple," said Kuddel, counting on his fingers. "Job center, training program, maybe short-time work, some kind of mini-job, burnout, depression, doctor, pills, keep drinking, keep going somehow, eventually hospital, eventually retirement if you make it that far. Or the cemetery before then. That's the structure. Write it down. You don't need four semesters of sociology for that."

Heckenpisser nodded gravely. "Hehehe...", but this time without mockery. "He's right. It's not a novel. It's a timetable."

The guy looked genuinely hurt for a moment. His hand gripped the mate bottle more tightly, as if it were suddenly embarrassing.

"I... know that I am privileged," he said more quietly. "I don't want to... put myself above you."

"But you do that automatically when you talk about us instead of with us," Jana said suddenly. "There's a difference between 'Hey, how are you?' and 'You're just repeating a certain pattern.'"

He looked at her as if he had hoped to at least receive a lenient assessment from her.

"And you?" he asked. "You're also... uh... in the social sector, right?"

"I'm a nurse," Jana said. "I don't write concept papers. I clean up after people when they can't manage on their own anymore. And I can tell you one thing: none of them in the ICU are interested in 'transformation processes' anymore. They're interested in: can I breathe, can I get painkillers, will someone come who still remembers my name?"

"I don't know your name," the guy admitted meekly.

"It's a start that you're noticing it," said Kuddel. "I'm Kuddel. This is Heckenpisser. Those are Murat and Elke. And that's Jana. We're not 'case studies'. We're bad decisions on two legs."

"Hehehe," said Hecke, "speak for yourself, I am at least three bad decisions."

Murat leaned forward.

"What's your name?" he asked the guy.

"Timo," he said quietly. "I... uh... am studying sociology and urban studies."

"Of course you will," Murat said. "Listen, Timo. Let me tell you something: You can stand around here as long as you want. You can drink your Club-Mate. You can even take notes if you absolutely have to. But if you say again that we are 'performing' here, you'll be banned for three days. Not for insulting anyone – for misusing language."

"Hehehe!" Heckenpisser slapped the tabletop. "Language abuse. Best diagnosis of the day."

Timo grinned involuntarily. "Okay," he said. "I... understand. Maybe."

Kuddel took a long swig of Sterni and breathed deeply.

"Why don't you sit down?" he said then, surprisingly. "Don't run off again right away. If you're already here, at least listen instead of filtering everything through your university brain."

Timo hesitated. Then he joined the group at the standing table, holding the mate like a confession.

"Okay," said Jana. "Now that you're officially with us, you'll get an introduction: Rule number 1: We don't talk in footnotes. Rule number 2: If one of us makes a joke that hurts, they're usually honest. Rule number 3: If you don't understand something – ask instead of making up a theory."

"Hehehe... and rule number 4," added Hecke, "you don't use the word 'authenticity' anymore today. Otherwise, the ghost will throw you out of the toilet, straight out the back exit."

"Mind off... what?" Timo asked, puzzled.

"Long story," Kuddel waved it off. "Just remember: there's a creature living in our toilet that bites people's asses if they talk too much nonsense."

"You mean metaphorically?" asked Timo.

"No," Kuddel said dryly. "I mean, it's in my biography."

The first laughter that followed was... strange. Not just at her expense. Also at his.

"Okay," Timo sighed. "Explain your world to me without footnotes. I'm listening."

"That's the beginning of everything," said Jana. "Not talking to sound clever to yourself – but listening to realize that you're not the first person to think they've understood the world."

"Hehehe," Heckenpisser added. "Welcome, Timo. You came as close to pseudo-intellectual escalation as Kuddel did to a train station toilet."

"I've been more often IN the escalation than out of it," Kuddel corrected. "But today... is one of those days when I'd rather talk than hit."

Timo nodded, took a sip of his mate, and grimaced slightly, as if he were suddenly embarrassed by his own taste.

"What was your chapter again?" Jana asked, "with the philosophy and the Sterni?"

"When Sterni becomes philosophy," said Kuddel.

"Exactly," she said. "Today we're doing: 'When university slang gets stuck at the bar.'"

"Hehehe," laughed Hecke. "And we are the peer reviewers."

The night was still young. The bar became a stage, the late-night shop a seminar room –

But for the first time in a long time, it wasn't just the phrases,

but also that the people there are reasonably honest.

Timo was now officially part of the circle. No longer an outside observer, but part of the scene. At least provisionally.

He held his Club-Mate as if it could serve as a shield if someone were to throw too much reality at him.

"All right," said Kuddel, placing his bottle on the table and rubbing his face with his hand. "You want to know something about our 'social space,' Timo? Then let's start with the easiest question."

He pointed his chin at the mate.

"Why are you drinking that?"

Timo blinked. "What? Mate?"

"Yes," said Kuddel. "Do you drink it because you really love it – or because you stopped noticing at some point that it tastes like a cold ashtray with a hint of citrus?"

Hedge-pisser chuckled. "Hehehe."

Timo looked at the bottle as if he were holding it for the first time.

"I..." he began, "it's just... I'm used to it. Everyone at university drinks it. To stay awake. And because... well, caffeine, but not so much..."

"Blah blah," Kuddel interrupted. "I'll tell you why you drink it: Because you want to belong. Not to us – to those people there, in your old-building seminar. Just like we drink our Sterni, because we want to belong to those who have given up pretending they have a future."

Timo wanted to protest, but Jana raised her hand.

"Leave him be," she said. "He has a point. We're all consumer lemmings."

"Hehehe...", said Heckenpisser. "Nice picture."

"Okay," Timo said slowly. "Then tell me: Why do you drink Sterni? Really. Not just because it's cheap."

Kuddel laughed briefly. Not a joyful laugh, more the kind that gets stuck somewhere between his stomach and lungs.

"Do you know how I started?" he asked. "With Beck's and Krombacher. Of course. Back then, I thought I was something special compared to the rest of the riffraff. Turns out: the only thing that was better was the price – for the others. When money got tight, you automatically end up drinking Sterni. And at some point, you realize: this beer is honest about your bank balance. It doesn't pretend you're part of some 'lifestyle' thing. It says: you lost – but you can still join in."

Hedge pisser nodded.

"Hehehe... Sterni is like a bad relationship that you don't end because you can't find a new one."

"And why are you staying then?" Timo pressed. "So... why don't you say: I'll drink less, I'll try something else?"

Kuddel looked at him, long enough that it could become uncomfortable.

"Because I don't just drink it for the alcohol," he said. "I drink to signal: I'm out. Out of your university world, out of the career world, out of the optimization circus. Every bottle says: I'm fed up with trying to be someone you can still include in your discussions."

"But you're part of it," Timo said. "You're... a city dweller, an affected party, a subject..."

"And you're right back to being close to a footnote," Murat warned.

"Hehehe!" said Hecke.

Jana tilted her head slightly to the side.

"Look, Timo," she said. "It's not about whether you're smarter or dumber. You come in here and you see: two guys at a standing table, beer, cigarette, corner store. You think: exemplary. We see: two guys who didn't end up in the hospital again today. That's a difference."

Timo took a deep sip of mate, probably reflexively, then briefly grimaced. Perhaps because of the taste, perhaps because of the situation.

"I'm really trying to understand," he said. "But when I express it in my own language, it's wrong. And when I try to speak your language, I feel like a tourist."

"Welcome to our world," said Kuddel. "This is how we feel when we have to repeat bureaucratic language."

Heckenpisser nodded eagerly. "Hehehe... 'In your case, there is a barrier to mediation,'" he quoted. "Which translates to: You didn't fit into our statistics, but of course we don't say it like that."

Murat sighed. "Those people at the office should do an internship here," he said. "After two weeks standing at a desk, they'd have different drafting templates."

Timo was thinking. You could practically see his mind trying to carve out a new category.

"Okay," he said. "Then let's try to talk without jargon. What does success mean to you?"

Heckenpisser and Kuddel said at the same time:

"Don't vomit in the morning."

Everyone laughed. Even Timo.

"No, seriously," he insisted. "You're not just passive. You think a lot. You reflect on yourselves. There must be something where you say: That was a good day."

Kuddel scratched the back of his neck as if he had to retrieve the thought.

"A good day," he said, "is one in the evening when I don't feel like I need to apologize to the mirror. Not because I've accomplished something great, but because I haven't seriously dragged anyone down with me."

"Hehehe...", Hecke smiled crookedly. "For me, a good day is when my mother doesn't say, 'My boy, you could have amounted to something.' When she just says, 'Are you eating enough?'"

"And for you?", Jana asked Timo.

He was briefly taken aback. He obviously hadn't expected this follow-up question.

"I..." he began, "for me, a good day is when I feel that what I'm learning or writing isn't completely pointless. When... when I think: Maybe this will contribute to ensuring that people like you aren't completely forgotten someday."

Kuddel raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, look," he said. "The boy wants to archive us."

"Don't archive it," Timo protested. "Make it visible."

"We're visible enough, brother," Kuddel said. "We're the faces people look past to feel better about themselves."

There was a brief silence. Not hostile, more... heavy.

Jana broke the silence.

"Do you know where you're meeting?" she asked. "You, Timo, and Kuddel?"

"In alcohol addiction?" he tried a joke that didn't land.

"Again," she said.

He sighed. "No idea."

"You're both scared," she said. "Just of different things. He's scared of the possibility that things might change. You're scared of the possibility that everything will stay the same – even though you've thought about it."

Heckenpisser slapped the table lightly again. "Hehehe... Jana, a certified psychologist from the gutter."

"That's right," she said. "Look at him. He's standing here trying to fit us into his theoretical system so his mind can rest. You're standing here trying to immediately talk down any suggestion of change so your mind can rest. In the end, you both want the same thing: not to have to think so much anymore, because thinking hurts."

Timo opened his mouth, then closed it again. No clever word pushed its way to the forefront.

"Perhaps," he finally began, "thinking is the only thing I'm really good at. I can't build anything, repair anything, wipe anyone's ass, or work night shifts. I can only... observe, classify, write. If I stop doing that, I'll be left as someone who can't do anything with his hands and has too much in his head."

"Welcome to the club," said Kuddel. "At some point, all I could do was think. Only nobody paid for it."

The hedge pisser tilted his head.

“Hehehe...”, he said, “do you realize that you’re both describing the same nonsense – just with different life stories?”

Murat leaned on the counter with both hands and intervened again.

“Look, Timo,” he said. “You’re standing here thinking, ‘They’re down, I’m up, I’ll analyze this.’ But the truth is: Here are four people who have been chewed up by this system in different ways. Jana’s bones are being ruined by working herself to the bone in the hospital. Hecke is selling his concentration to office workers. Kuddel quit early and is paying for it every day. You’re selling your brain to a university that will replace you in five years.”

"If you even get in," added Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

Timo sighed. "Yes," he said. "Maybe I really am more arrogant than I thought."

"That's not even the worst part," Jana said. "Arrogance can be reduced. What's bad is when you try to turn us into a theory, but never come back when your project is over."

“I wouldn’t,” he said spontaneously.

Kuddel gave a short, bitter laugh. "Of course you would," he said. "Not even out of malice. You write your thesis, get a grade, move on, maybe do a PhD, move to another city. This evening will remain an anecdote for you. For us, it will remain...either another laugh at the bar or—if we're lucky—one of those rare nights when we realize we're not aliens."

"And what if I do it differently?" Timo asked defiantly. "What if I come back? What if I read your website voluntarily? What if I try to take it seriously?"

"Then," said Heckenpisser, "you'll be the first socio-Timo who not only conducts fieldwork but also attends the regulars' table. Hehehe."

Jana frowned. "But be careful," she said. "The closer you let us get, the more you'll realize that we're not 'cases,' but people who will disappoint you—just as you can disappoint us. That's something your professors don't teach you."

"They're teaching me to be detached," said Timo.

“Being detached is a luxury,” Kuddel said. “We afford it by getting drunk. You afford it by using empty phrases. In the end, we’re both cowards.”

Heckenpisser rubbed his forehead as if he had a headache from the density.

“Hehehe...”, he said. “You two are about to hug and I don’t know if I want to see that.”

"Don't worry," Kuddel waved it off. "We're not there yet. I might give him a cigarette if he's short of cash."

"That would be more hospitality than I often receive," Timo murmured.

—

The discussion has now taken a strange turn. Less "we're on top, you're on the bottom," more "everyone's somehow stuck in between."

Timo recounted seminars where people passionately debated whether "the precarious space" is perceived objectively or subjectively – while none of them had to worry about the rent.

Jana told stories of night shifts where she wiped the backsides of old men who had probably previously complained about "those down there" in the same way – and now, with tubes in their noses, became whiny.

Heckenpisser told of colleagues who booked almost burnout workshops to learn how to work themselves to the point of exhaustion even more efficiently.

Kuddel told stories of nights at train stations when he stood on the platform with people who didn't know whether they wanted to get on the train or fall in front of it.

"And you want to make a job out of all this," Kuddel concluded.

Timo raised his hands defensively. "I want to understand," he said quietly. "And I know that I'll probably never fully understand. But at least I can try not to pretend to be neutral."

"Only refrigerators are neutral," said Murat. "Everything else is partisan – whether you like it or not."

"Hehehe..." Hecke nodded. "You've just officially gone from observer to player, Timo. Congratulations. No going back."

Timo took a deep breath and looked into his mate.

"Okay," he said. "Then tell me one thing: If I were to write about you – what should it contain so that you don't think: 'Another one who hasn't understood anything?'"

Kuddel thought for a moment. The bar, the neon light, the sounds of the street, everything faded briefly into the background.

"Write it down," he said slowly, "that we are not just victims. That many of us actively helped to ruin their lives. Write it down that poverty is ugly and drinking isn't romantic. Write it down that we're sometimes funny because otherwise we'd cry. And write it down that you stood at the bar on a Wednesday evening, in your stupid coat with your clever mind—and realized that you weren't so far removed from what you usually only warn against."

Heckenpisser nodded slowly, seriously.

"Hehehe... and write that you wanted to say 'performative' but didn't dare," he added. "Because the corner store would have burned down otherwise."

Everyone laughed. Even Timo. And for the first time, there was no arrogance in his laughter.

"I think," said Jana, "the pseudo-intellectual escalation has failed to materialize today."

"No," Kuddel objected. "It did happen. Just not the way he thought it would. We didn't escalate it. His entire university vocabulary died on him at the bar."

"Hehehe..." chuckled Hecke. "Strong image: Master's thesis found dead at a standing table."

Murat tapped the counter once with the flat of his hand.

"So," he said. "That's enough for today. If you keep philosophizing, I'll have to charge admission. Timo, take your cigarettes and your mate and go home before you get the idea to keep a record of this. And you two..." he gestured to Kuddel and Hecke, "...have one more beer, not five, and then piss off too."

"Yes, sir," Kuddel said, saluting.

Timo hesitated.

"May I... come back tomorrow?" he asked.

"This isn't a seminar with an attendance list," Murat said. "If you come, you come. If not, life has taken you somewhere else."

"But when you come," Jana said, "leave the jute bag at home."

"And say 'Moin' instead of 'I find that sociologically interesting,'" Heckenpisser added. "Hehehe."

"I will," said Timo.

He looked at Kuddel.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "For... well, for not throwing me out immediately."

"Thank you," Kuddel replied, "for not immediately turning on an audio track for your podcast."

They briefly shook hands.

Timo left. With cigarettes, mate – and a head that was probably more fuzzy than before.

The corner shop was breathing normally again.

"Well, gutter philosopher," said Jana. "Congratulations. You've successfully deprogrammed a sociologist."

"Not yet," said Kuddel. "He still needs a few sessions. But at least today he realized for the first time that his words look awful under neon lights."

"Hehehe...", laughed Heckenpisser. "And we realized that not every university guy is automatically the enemy. Just a little lost."

"Like us," said Jana.

They drank their "last" beer – really the last one. No liquor, no crazy idea.

Outside, Berlin swirled around her. Inside at the bar, however, something had happened that was neither described in seminars nor in pub guides:

A sociology student had learned that his words don't always help –

And two drunkards had learned that not everyone who analyzes them immediately betrays them.

The pseudo-intellectual escalation had taken place –

not in shouting and egos, but in,

that someone finally listened

and the others who dared,

to say more than just: "Let's get another bottle of Sterni."

Timo was gone, the corner store was quiet again, but something still hung in the air – between cigarette butts, neon lights and leftover beer.

"That was exhausting," said Kuddel after a while, as if he had just finished a shift in a psychiatric ward.

"Hehehe...", said Heckenpisser, "the boy had so many words in his head, I was briefly afraid he was going to vomit up a glossary at our feet."

Jana stretched her back and kneaded her neck.

"At least he made an effort," she said. "That's more than you can say for most of the people who stumble in here."

Murat wiped the counter with a rag, but it didn't actually get any cleaner.

"I hate to admit it," he muttered, "but I preferred Timo to the guys who come in here, look us up and down, and then whisper: Look at those jerks in front of the corner store. At least he thought out loud."

"Thinking out loud is sometimes more dangerous than being quietly despised," said Kuddel, tipping over the last of his Sterni beer like an exclamation mark.

"You're in philosophical mode again," Hecke warned. "Hehehe. One more beer and you'll be giving me a lecture on class consciousness in the tote bag age."

"As if you wouldn't secretly find that hot," said Jana.

For two days, nothing much happened. At least nothing of historical significance. Kuddel dragged himself to the appointment, let the scanner beep, and drank afterwards. Heckenpisser was chewed over by the office staff: Excel spreadsheets, emails, meetings—polite brain-

burning. Jana was on the night shift: too much blood, too few staff, monitors beeping too quietly.

The corner store remained what it was: a filter, a catch basin, a constant.

Timo reappeared on the third evening.

It was later than usual, somewhere between "too early to be completely drunk" and "too late to still be respectable." The jute bag was the same, but somehow... askew. His glasses weren't quite right. And in his hand: no Club-Mate. A bottle of cheap beer from the back shelf—which Murat had sold him without a word.

Kuddel first noticed him out of the corner of his eye.

"There comes the field study again," he murmured.

The hedge pisser turned around. "Hehehe... he has beer. There is hope."

Timo approached the standing table uncertainly, as if he were late for a meeting.

"Moin," he said. Not "Good evening," not "Hello everyone," just "Moin."

Murat nodded to him. "That's better," he said.

"I wanted to..." Timo began, then he paused. "I just wanted to... well..."

"Follow-up check?" Jana asked. "To see if the subject is still alive?"

"I wanted to say thank you," he managed to say. "For the other day."

Kuddel raised his eyebrow.

"For not hanging you from the lamppost?" he asked. "No problem. It was a close call."

"For forcing me to stop talking like a seminar report," said Timo. "I read my notes afterwards. It was... unbearable."

"Hehehe!" exclaimed Heckenpisser. "Self-experimentation with side effects."

"I deleted parts of it," Timo confessed. "Really. Sentences like: 'The corner store functions as a liminal threshold space.' I was ashamed. Not for you. For myself."

"There you go," said Jana. "Little miracles still happen."

Kuddel leaned on the table with his forearms and looked at Timo as if he were feeling him up.

"So?" he asked. "Have you found a new language now? Or are you standing here to sell us an updated version of your theoretical circus?"

Timo took a sip of beer. He grimaced slightly. "This is..." he began.

“Be careful,” warned Hecke. “If you say ‘interesting’ now, you’ll go back two spaces.”

“Shit,” Timo corrected. “That’s shit. But honestly.”

Kuddel grinned. “Welcome to base camp,” he said.

They stood there silently for a while. Berlin rushed past them as always: cars, voices, a cyclist shouting, an ambulance with flashing blue lights, without any drama.

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Timo began at some point. “About what you said. About...that I made you examples too quickly.”

“It happens quickly,” Jana said. “Sometimes it’s enough to look at you for two ten-minute periods, and you automatically think: cases.”

“Hehehe,” laughed Hecke. “Cases with a smoking break.”

Timo looked at Kuddel.

“You said you guys are practical – hardcore,” he said. “And I’m just theoretical. Maybe that’s why I tried so hard to name everything. Out of fear that without my terms, nothing would be left.”

“That’s obvious,” said Kuddel. “I also went through a phase where I imagined my crap would be better if I told it in beautifully formulated sentences. The truth is: it still stinks. It’s just that a few people listen longer.”

“The difference is,” Jana interjected, “at least you make art out of your shit. Or try to. Timo wanted to make a diagram out of our shit.”

“Hehehe...” Hecke gasped, laughing. “Shitty diagram, man.”

Timo had to laugh himself. Honestly. A little desperately.

“Okay, yes,” he said. “Bullseye. I acted like I was on a city tour of misery. ‘Here you see the typical welfare recipient and alcoholic in his natural habitat...’”

“That’s exactly what those documentaries on Arte sound like,” Murat said. “Only with a voice-over and a piano loop.”

“I don’t want to be like that,” said Timo. “Really, I don’t.”

“Then don’t,” said Kuddel. “So simple. So difficult.”

He took out a new cigarette, turned it, and lit it.

“What you can do,” he continued, “is something else: Write your thesis. Get your degree. Go your own way. But if you write about people like us, make one thing clear: We are not just a backdrop for your moral argument. We are the end product of a machine that you up there find quite clever, as long as it doesn’t eat you.”

Timo nodded slowly. "I know," he said. "At least I'll start."

"Catching is half the battle," Murat grumbled. "The other half is not falling back into old phrases after three weeks."

"You'll fall over again," Jana said. "Guaranteed. It's normal. But maybe next time you won't fall over quite so far."

They started talking, this time without anyone feeling they had to defend themselves.

Timo told about his shared apartment in Neukölln – three people, all "something to do with media or society", high rent, high fear, political discussions at the kitchen table, but nobody knew how to change a broken fuse.

"We were raised to talk about everything," he said. "But not to do anything with our hands."

"And not just letting things slide," Jana added. "Always commenting on everything. Selfie from the demo, Insta story from the strike, tweet about poverty. But when you're really standing in the dirt, there's no one there to hold your feet."

Heckenpisser nodded. "Hehehe..." he said, "we are the commentary generation. Just in different price ranges."

Kuddel spoke of nights on the street when he felt safer than in the job center waiting area. Of the time when he still thought he was "just going off the rails for a bit." Of the first moments when he realized:

I might never get out of here.

"And then," he said, "someone like you, Timo, comes along and asks: 'How does your precariousness feel?' And you just want to say: 'Cold.' But that doesn't fit into the analysis."

Timo lowered his head. "I have a lecturer," he said. "She once said: '*We mustn't get stuck in our grief. We need to abstract, otherwise we'll become sentimental.*' Back then I thought that was clever. Today I think: Maybe that's exactly what's going wrong. We abstract ourselves away until there's no human being left."

"Anyone who has never been sentimental," said Jana, "has never really looked."

"Hehehe...", added Hecke. "Or he's completely dead in the head."

It was one of those evenings where the city played in the background like a broken television. Everything was there – sirens, trams, voices – but what was happening right around the standing table was more important.

"You know, Timo," said Kuddel after the third bottle, "you recently asked what we wanted, what was in your work. I answered you, just off the cuff. But I have something else."

"Go ahead and shoot," said Timo.

“Write it down,” said Kuddel, “that we don’t just consume what’s left over, but also produce stories that no one ordered. We’re not just the broken characters, we’re also the ones who tell their own stories – before someone like you comes along and builds a theory out of it.”

“Hehehe...”, said Hecke. “And write in that one calls himself Kuddel and the other Heckenpisser, so that the people who read your work have to swallow hard for a moment before they continue.”

“I’ll do it,” said Timo. “Really.”

“And now,” said Jana, “stop promising us what you’ll write in your work. Better yet: promise yourself that you won’t forget how this felt.”

He nodded. You could really see how he was trying to memorize it not just mentally, but physically: the sticky table surface, the flickering neon tube, the cold draft when the door opened, the sound of bottles clinking together.

"I'm scared," Timo said suddenly, quietly.

All three turned to him.

"What are we talking about?" asked Jana.

“That I’ll end up like the people I’m criticizing now,” he said. “With a secure job, good intentions, and zero connection to what I’m talking about.”

“Hehehe...” said Hedge Pisser. “We’re afraid we’ll never become like that. You’re afraid you’ll become like that. Balance.”

“You’ll be like that,” said Kuddel. “Pretty sure. But maybe...” he hesitated, “...you’ll keep a little part of you that remembers that bar. And when you’re back to crafting big concepts, you’ll hear my voice in the back of your mind for just a moment: ‘Write it down that it’s cold. And that they’re tired.’ If you can manage that – you’ll be ahead of most.”

Timo looked at him – this time not as a “case”, but as someone who had allowed him to do something that no one at the university did: doubt.

It got later. Not "station clock" late, but "last cigarette butt" late.

Murat came out and flicked away ashes.

"Okay, you seminar drinkers," he said. "I'm shutting down in twenty minutes. I need a break from your life plans."

“You love us,” said Jana.

“I love your sales,” he corrected. “And your slogans. You can keep your problems.”

"Hehehe," laughed Hecke. "Fair deal."

Timo finished his cheap beer, looked at the Sterni in Kuddel's hand, then at his mate bottle, which was empty on the windowsill from last time.

"Can I...", he asked shyly, "may I come back again? Even if I don't have to hand in a term paper about you?"

"Brother," said Kuddel, "this isn't a seminar or a self-help group. You don't need any authorization. If you come, come. If you don't come, we'll still talk. But if you do come—don't do it because you think you have to do research. Do it because you need a break from acting so clever."

"And bring some of your university food," Heckenpisser chimed in. "Hehehe. I want to know what tofu tastes like when it thinks it's something special."

Jana yawned. "I have to go," she said. "The hospital is calling. Old people don't die on time just because I'm tired."

She patted Timo on the shoulder as she passed by.

"Listen, Timo," she said. "You're okay. A little spaced out, but okay. You don't have to save us. But if you ever find yourself somewhere where people are talking about 'those down there' – then say something. Not as a hero. Just as someone who has stood here."

"I will," he said. And you almost believed him.

She disappeared during the night.

When Timo finally left – this time without saying a proper goodbye, just with a "See you sometime" – the standing table remained with its original idiots.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser. Sterni, Kippe, Neon.

"Well," said Hecke, "how are you feeling, Professor? Hehehe."

"Like a poorly paid lecturer on real life," Kuddel remarked. "Maybe I should charge daily rates."

"They wouldn't pay," Murat said. "You're too honest. Honesty is bad for branding."

They were silent for a moment, then Hecke frowned.

"Seriously," he said. "Do you really think he gets anything? Or is this just a short romantic phase before he disappears back into his seminars?"

Kuddel took one last sip and put the bottle down.

"Both," he said. "He gets it. And he'll still disappear. Because that's life. Most people only brush against the truth – and then run away before it sticks."

"And what about us?" asked Hecke.

“We have no more escape routes,” said Kuddel. “We are already standing in the middle of the sticky mass.”

"Hehehe," muttered Heckenpisser. "The bar as a pit of pitch."

Kuddel grinned crookedly.

"But you know what?" he said. "Today was okay. No fight. No train station. No drama. Just Timo learning that you can't say 'liminal' at the bar."

“And a Kuddel,” said Murat, “who has learned that not everyone with glasses and a jute bag is automatically an asshole.”

“Yes,” Kuddel admitted. “Even if it skews the statistics.”

Hedge pisser pushed himself away from the table.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here before you try to develop a theory about microclasses. Hehehe."

Kuddel reached for his robe, patted his pockets, and nodded to Murat.

"See you tomorrow," he said.

"Until now," said Murat.

On the way home, with leftover beer in my blood and lingering conversation in my head,

Kuddel thought of Timo, of Jana, of the corner store, of all the words that had been flying around that evening: precarity, structure, fear, practice.

And somewhere in between, a sentence emerged that stuck in his mind:

"We are not stupid, we are just too low to have our language quoted in footnotes."

At home, in his dingy kitchen, he sat down at the wobbly table, took a pad and pen, and wrote on top:

Pseudo-intellectual escalation at the bar

Chapter note:

"If someone comes using university slang and wants to leave sober, they have to leave it at the standing table."

Otherwise, the ghost will bite him right in the ass in the toilet.”

Then he put down the pen and pulled the blanket over his head.

and thought, before sleep caught up with him:

Perhaps I'm not against intellect at all. Perhaps I'm just allergic to people who think they understand us without ever having actually had a drink with us.

A heart for alcoholics – or not

The evening started with a cardboard box. And cardboard boxes are rarely a good sign unless you're an Amazon delivery driver.

The cardboard box was sitting in the middle of the standing table when Kuddel shuffled in from the side street. His jacket was open, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, and he was waving a Sterni beer flag.

“What kind of crap is this?” he asked, even before he had said “Moin”.

Heckenpisser was already standing there, coat on, shirt buttoned up, bow tie crooked. He looked like he was about to lead a craft club.

“Hehehe... project work, my friend,” he said. “Social engagement in Schöneberg. Welcome to ‘A Heart for Alcoholics’.”

The cardboard had been smeared with felt-tip pen:

DONATIONS FOR THE LOCAL DRINKER COMMUNITY

(No collateral, just love)

Kuddel stared at it. “You can't be serious,” he said. “Tell me that this was Murat's idea, and I'll only hit it once.”

Murat poked his head out of the corner store, cash register in the background, neon light at the back of his neck.

“My idea was: to finally send you two to the moon,” he said. “The donation box is from two female students. A project from the social work college or something. They were here earlier. They asked if they could try out a project at the ‘neighborhood hub’.”

“Hehehe...”, Hecke said. “The hub of the neighborhood. We are infrastructure, Kuddel.”

“We're just a stumbling block at best,” Kuddel growled. “What did they want?”

Elke joined us, a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth, the butt already slightly smoked crooked.

“They had clipboards,” she said. “They asked how ‘we’ deal with ‘people with alcohol problems’ here. I said: We take their money and give them beer.”

“Technically absolutely correct,” Murat remarked dryly.

“Then they asked,” Elke continued, “whether there were any ‘support structures’ in the area. I pointed at you, Kuddel, and said, ‘That one has structure. The same one every evening.’ They weren’t too thrilled.”

Hedge-pisser giggled. "Hehehe."

Kuddel looked at the cardboard box again. "And what's all this nonsense about?" he asked. "Are they going to finance a therapy dog for us or a coffin?"

“They actually wanted to collect deposit bottles,” Murat explained. “They said something like, ‘We’re collecting empty bottles for a good cause – prevention work in the neighborhood.’ Then I said, ‘Empty bottles are practically the only possessions some people still have. If you take the deposit from them too, you’re no better than any supermarket.’ So I suggested to them, ‘Just put out a box, but be honest and say who it’s for.’”

“Drinking community,” Heckenpisser read aloud again. “That sounds like a Facebook group with 12 members.”

“Why does it say ‘no collateral, only love’?” Kuddel growled.

“Because they thought it would be funny,” Murat said. “And modern. And not so stigmatizing.”

"Kid, I'm offended by a sticker," Kuddel muttered. "You have to hand it to him for that."

Jana came around the corner, backpack over her shoulder, dark circles under her eyes, but alert in her gaze.

"What kind of box is that?" she asked. "Looks like a bad bet."

“Social project,” explained Heckenpisser. “A heart for alcoholics. Version 0.1.”

“Ah,” said Jana. “I heard the university of applied sciences is sending its trainees out into the real world again. Internship at the wildlife park.”

She stepped closer, read the saying, and grimaced.

“No deposit, just love,” she repeated. “Yeah. Exactly what alcoholics need. More vague bullshit.”

For a while, they just stood there and looked at the cardboard box as if it might explode. Passersby walked past, some read the sentence, grinned crookedly, shook their heads, one threw in 20 cents as he walked by without looking.

It made a measly clinking sound.

“There,” said Heckenpisser, “now we are officially a cause for donations. Hehehe.”

"You know what annoys me the most?" said Kuddel. "That they act like we need a heart. We need a liver. And peace and quiet. And maybe fewer cops in front of the train station."

“And fewer people analyzing us with clipboards,” Jana added.

The first discussions didn't take long to start. A married couple in their mid-fifties stopped. He was wearing a functional jacket, she was carrying a cloth bag: "Organic is logical."

“You see,” she said, pointing at the box, “at least someone is doing something for them. A little bit of help.”

"They get drunk voluntarily," he muttered. "I'd rather donate to animal welfare."

“We’re standing right next to it,” Kuddel said loudly. “Just in case anyone’s interested.”

The couple pretended not to understand him and mumbled away.

“A heart for alcoholics, or not,” said Hecke. “I’m more inclined to say ‘or not.’”

Later that evening, the perpetrators appeared. Two young women, somewhere in their early to mid-twenties. One with a bun and glasses, the other with a blue knitted hat. Both with that cautiously open expression that university teaches you:

I want to help, but please don't touch me.

"Hello again," said Dutt as they approached. "We just wanted to... see... how it's received."

“It’s rattling,” said Murat. “But not with joy.”

“We already have...”, Mütze leaned forward, shook the box slightly, “...1.80 euros. Not bad for a start.”

"I'll buy two Sterni beers on sale and half a beer from yesterday," said Kuddel. "Project successful."

The two female students tried to smile, but it was clear that they had planned this differently.

“We don’t want to... finance alcohol,” Dutt explained. “We want to raise awareness of the situation and collect funds for prevention. So... long-term.”

"Prevention of what?" asked Jana. "Of life?"

“From... alcohol abuse,” Mütze said bravely.

Heckenpisser leaned on the table and put on his best know-it-all face.

“Hehehe...”, he began, “if I may add briefly: The preventive phase was completed for our friend here...”, he pointed at Kuddel, “...about 25 years ago. There was no prevention involved. It was just: pouring it in.”

“You have to understand...”, Dutt began, “we... we see this as part of our... uh... field research on marginalized groups in urban areas...”

“We’re not wildflowers,” Kuddel interrupted. “We’re weeds in concrete. You can do field research somewhere else. In a field, for example.”

Elke snorted. "You caught him off guard," she said. "Today is his sensitive day."

"I'm sorry if our project somehow...", Mütze searched for a word, "...compliments."

"That's not intrusive," said Jana. "That's just naive. It becomes intrusive when you take pictures without asking."

"We would never do that!" Dutt exclaimed indignantly. "We work anonymously!"

"Sure," said Kuddel. "'Subject A, male, later consumer, everyday life of the corner store.' I can tell you the title of your work: 'Between Sternburg and Stigma – Alcohol as an Expression of Urban Disintegration.'"

Hedge-Pisser laughed himself silly. "Hehehehehe!" he gasped. "I can't anymore..."

Mütze looked genuinely impressed. "Did you... study?" she asked cautiously.

"Yes," said Kuddel. "At the Institute for Applied Failure. Doctoral thesis abandoned: 'Long-term effects of job center letters on the nervous system'."

"Hehehe... Magna Cum Laude," Hecke added.

After a while, the initial defensiveness crumbled a little. Not completely, but enough that one could talk without immediately firing off barbs.

"Okay," Dutt said at one point. "Perhaps the saying on the box was... a bit unfortunate."

"No deposit, just love," Jana quoted. "That's the sentence you stick behind the bed of terminally ill alcoholics before putting the bottle away."

"We didn't want to evoke any false pity," Mütze explained. "We wanted to bring in some humor."

"The best humor comes from the people themselves," said Kuddel. "Not from external humor experts."

"But don't you think," Dutt insisted, "that society needs more... compassion for people in difficult life situations?"

"Maybe a heart," said Jana. "Just not in the format of a fundraising gala. 'A heart for children,' 'A heart for the homeless,' 'A heart for...' – I've seen enough hearts in the hospital that twitch on the EKG and change nothing in real life."

Kuddel nodded slowly.

"Do you know what the problem is, sweetheart?" he asked Dutt. "Everyone has hearts. No one has patience. You throw a gala for children. You invite tears into the living room for cancer patients. But for alcoholics? We're the end of the line. The ones everyone says about: 'If they'd stopped earlier, this wouldn't have happened.'"

“Hehehe...,” Hecke began. “No one would watch ‘A Heart for Alcoholics’. Unless we were recovered and told everyone how great everything is now and that we’ve forgiven the red wine.”

"That would be a ratings hit," Murat said. "As soon as you stop drinking, they'll love you. As long as you're still drinking, you're teaching material."

Dutt looked genuinely affected. Real – not feigned.

“But... there are options,” she said. “Counseling, therapy, self-help groups...”

“Yes, it exists,” Kuddel confirmed. “I’ve looked into it all. You know what I experienced? At first: empty seats. Enthusiasm. ‘We’ll meet you where you are, Mr. Scholz.’ After the third relapse: annoyed glances. ‘You have to... move.’ After the sixth: ‘We have to concentrate our resources on those whose prognosis is better.’ The heart is always there. But only for those who can still be rehabilitated.”

Jana nodded heavily. "It's the same in the hospital," she said. "As long as someone is still fighting, everyone stands around. If someone comes in for the third time with alcoholic pancreatitis, everyone says, 'Serves them right.' And I'm standing there at night, giving them the injection, thinking to myself:

Yes, maybe. But that doesn't make it hurt any less.“

Mütze looked at the cardboard box as if the thing were suddenly a bad joke.

“What are we supposed to do?” she asked. “If donations and projects all seem so... wrong?”

“Nobody said that donations are wrong,” Murat said. “But you have to be honest about what they’re for. If you’re collecting money so that Caritas can print a new brochure saying that drinking too much is unhealthy – don’t even bother. If you’re collecting money so that small pubs can offer free coffee to broken people – maybe that will be more helpful.”

“Or so that someone takes a crappy bus to the lake once a month and they can all get out,” Jana interjected. “Not as a pedagogy – but as a reminder that there’s more to life than concrete.”

Heckenpisser nodded. “Hehehe...” he said. “A heart for alcoholics would mean: paying without taking photos. Helping without a project application. And not expecting us to end up on some stage in a suit jacket saying: ‘Thank you for helping me get my life under control now.’”

“Spoiler alert,” said Kuddel. “We never really get our lives completely under control anyway. But maybe we can be spared a few evenings where things completely go off the rails.”

For a while they spoke concretely. Not in headlines, but in mundane things.

It helps if someone gives you not just a euro in winter, but a damn jacket. It helps if neighbors don't immediately call the cops when someone's sleeping on the stairs, but first check if they're still breathing. It helps if the late-night convenience store doesn't just sell alcohol at night, but also gives away a bottle of water if someone can barely stand.

“We’re no saints,” Elke said. “I make a living from this stuff. But I’ve also turned people away. If someone’s so drunk they can’t even straighten their head, they won’t get any more from me. Not because I’m moralistic. Because I don’t want them dying on my doorstep.”

Dutt listened, but wrote nothing down. Perhaps for the first time since starting his studies.

“I think,” she said quietly, “we imagined it all too... smoothly. ‘Plan a project, set up a box, raise awareness, collect donations, write a report.’ But you are not a project.”

“We are a permanent state of affairs,” said Kuddel.

“And you’re not all the same,” Jana added. “That’s the next problem. There’s no such thing as ‘the alcoholics’ any more than there is as ‘the students’ or ‘the caregivers.’ You have those who crash and burn and are completely gone. Those who function and secretly drink themselves into oblivion in the kitchen. Those who have wanted to quit for twenty years. Those who will never quit. And a few who manage to quit. But nobody sees them anymore because they’re no longer here.”

The hedge pisser was exceptionally quiet. Only briefly.

“Hehehe...” came a quieter voice. “And then there are those who don’t know which category they’re in and have to reclassify themselves every night.”

Later on, a drunk guy threw a fiver into the box as he walked by, almost falling on his face in the process.

"For the brothers!" he roared. "Have a drink for me, you bums!"

"There's your heart," Murat said dryly. "Money so you can keep drinking. Without any reporting requirements."

"That's usually how it goes in real life," said Kuddel. "Some people have a heart – but only in the form of pity from afar. Others have a heart – but only in the form of 'Drink up, bro, I know what you mean.' There's not much in between."

Dutt pushed the box towards him.

"I'm taking the box back with me," she said. "This is unacceptable."

"Leave them alone," said Kuddel. "Leave them. But stick something else on them."

"What is it?" asked Mütze.

Kuddel thought for a moment, then pulled the marker pen out of his breast pocket, which he had stolen at some point for use on toilet doors.

He crossed out “No pledge, only love” and wrote underneath:

FOR THOSE WHO ARE STILL HERE.

(Not for her image. For her evenings.)

He put down the pen.

"There," he said. "Now it's more accurate."

Dutt read, nodded slowly.

"Okay," she said. "I can live with that."

"We do too," said Jana. "More than with our hearts."

Heckenpisser grinned. "Hehehe... 'A heart for alcoholics – or not,' he said. "In the end, all that's left is a box that says we're still here. That's more than some people give us credit for."

"And if anyone asks where the money goes," Murat said, "I say: Into coffee, water, an emergency taxi if someone else is sleeping in a ditch. And if there's anything left over – for all I care, into Sterni beer. Because we don't pretend everything's perfect here."

The evening continued. People came, went, looked, read, threw something in, or didn't.

There was still no heart for alcoholics.

But at least there was a cardboard box.

with one honest sentence and four people,

who no longer had to pretend they were just material for other people's stories.

The crate now stood there like an additional regular customer. Not loud, not active, but present. A silent drinking companion who says nothing, but takes everything in.

"For those who are still here," Kuddel murmured at some point, as if he himself had forgotten that he had written the sentence. "It almost sounds romantic if you don't think about it."

"Hehehe...", said Heckenpisser. "We're the leftovers of life. 'Still here' in the sense of: not sorted out."

The evening continued as evenings usually do. Shift changes in the pubs, subway screams in the background, wind that kept blowing the cigarette butt in the wrong direction.

The first people to take the cardboard box seriously weren't the couples with organic cotton bags and newly awakened consciences. They were the broken ones.

One of them came, whom Kuddel only knew as "Slipper Uwe." Because he always walked around in the same worn-out Adidas slides, no matter the season. Jogging pants, three jackets on top of each other, a beard like a bird's nest.

Uwe stopped, read, glanced into the shop window, saw Murat, saw Kuddel, saw the cardboard box again.

Then he rummaged in his trouser pocket. For ages. Loose change, old tickets, cigarette butts, something that had once been a candy wrapper.

He took out a coin. 50 cents. He looked at it, looked at the box.

"Come on," said Kuddel. "We don't bite."

Uwe pushed the coin in. It clinked distinctly.

"For whom, then?" he asked suspiciously. "I don't want some club profiting from this, do you?"

"For us, you stag," said Murat. "For people who always show up here. For when someone needs a coffee or a taxi, when otherwise they'd die on a park bench in winter."

Uwe nodded slowly.

"Good," he said. "I don't have any relatives who would cry. But maybe a corner shop owner who remembers."

He continued walking, shuffling in his slippers as if the asphalt were about to swallow him up.

"That was really sad," said Jana. "And beautiful. Completely broken."

"Hehehe..." said Heckenpisser. "Romance in Adidas slides."

Naturally, the first conflicts were not long in coming. Where money is involved, there are always two types of people: those who give – and those who think that others don't deserve it.

A guy in an overly clean down jacket, fresh haircut, gym body, stopped. He had an energy drink in his hand, and in his eyes that specific kind of disgust that reeked of a "self-improvement podcast".

He read the sentence on the box and snorted.

"For those who are still here," he said loudly. "Well, hopefully not for long."

Kuddel slowly turned his head.

"Did you say something or just think it?" he asked.

"This," the guy tapped the can against the cardboard box, "is exactly the problem. You're making it even easier for them to drink. Instead of telling them: Stop getting wasted."

"You look like you're going to blow your shoulder off at the gym," said Kuddel. "But I'm not going to put a can with a heart on it in front of you either."

"Hehehe," chuckled Hedge-Pisser. "A heart for protein junkies."

The guy ignored him.

"I pay taxes," he said, "so that social workers can run around here, implement programs, and provide therapy places. And then you put a box here so they can make themselves even more comfortable."

"Brother," Murat said calmly, "nobody will get comfortable in this box. This isn't a VIP lounge. It's a makeshift solution for five evenings a year when nobody should freeze to death."

"Or needs a coffee instead of schnapps," Jana added. "Or a taxi to the clinic."

"If they want help," the guy snapped back, "they should go to the clinic. Not hang around here."

"If you want help," said Kuddel, "you should find someone to pull that thing you call a stick out of your ass."

The hedge pisser burst out laughing. "Hehehehe!"

The guy took a half step closer, chest out.

"I've got my life under control," he said. "I get up in the morning, go to work, go to the gym, make something of myself. And you guys are standing here, getting your brains out and still want applause for it."

"Nobody's applauding," said Jana. "This isn't a concert. We're standing here because otherwise we'll fall apart. You just walk away on a treadmill. That's the difference."

"Do you know what you are?" he asked. "Towpaths. You're dragging the whole neighborhood down. Drinking, puking, yelling. And then you're surprised when the rents go up and you get kicked out."

Murat put the towel down and came closer without raising his voice.

"Do you know what you are?" he asked. "Tired. Tired of being strong, of being perfect, of 'I've got everything under control.' You're reacting aggressively because you're afraid of ending up right here one day. And the truth is: you're only two or three blows away from fate. Accident, illness, dismissal. Then you'll be standing at my counter asking for a letter of recommendation."

The guy wanted to reply, but the words briefly stuck in his throat.

"I'll never be like that," he said defiantly.

"That's what I thought when I was 25," Kuddel interjected. "By 30, I was already halfway here. And now I'm just decoration."

"Hehehe... Limited Edition," commented Hecke.

The guy snorted and shrugged.

"It's your own fault," he said. "That's the point."

Jana nodded. "Yes," she said. "Partly. But guilt is neither currency nor blanket. It doesn't warm you. It doesn't get anyone safely through the night."

The guy looked at her, briefly irritated, perhaps because he had expected her to be on his side – she looked too much like “functioning”.

"You work in a hospital, don't you?" he asked. "You know how that ends."

“That’s exactly why I’m talking like this,” she said. “I’ve seen enough people die where everyone said, ‘It’s their own fault.’ And yet they stood there, with tubes and in pain, and I gave them morphine. Not morality.”

Silence fell. Only the hum of refrigerators. A distant siren.

The guy sipped his energy drink and drank as if he needed to drink himself into a stupor.

"I'm leaving now," he finally said. "Do your stuff. But don't expect me to throw anything in that box."

“Nobody has any,” said Murat. “We only accept what is offered voluntarily. The tax office already handles compulsory payments.”

The guy turned around and left. His shoulders were just as broad as before, but somehow... heavier.

"A heart for alcoholics – or maybe not," muttered Heckenpisser. "More like biceps for high achievers."

“He’s one of those,” said Jana, “who only learn compassion when something is torn away from them.”

"It's coming," said Kuddel. "The world is busy polishing."

Later, the box was half full of small change, three bent five-euro notes, a tattered ten-euro note, and – for some reason – a scratch-off lottery ticket that had already been scratched clean. A dud.

“Symbolism 10 out of 10,” said Jana. “Hehehe,” Hecke chimed in.

"And what exactly do we do with it now?" Elke asked. "Before anyone gets the idea to buy a case of cheap vodka with it."

“I’m in charge,” Murat said. “I’m the curb-certified finance minister here anyway.”

“Then you need to have a plan,” Jana said. “Otherwise, it’ll fizzle out like any good idea.”

They sat down together in an impromptu "crisis meeting." At a standing table. With beer. With cigarettes. With the city at their backs.

“So,” Murat began, “rule one: No liquor will be financed from the box. Period. Beer – fine, if someone is really on the verge of shaking. But no hard liquor.”

“Rule two,” Jana added, “part of it goes into water and coffee. Not esoteric, quite practical. So that I don’t see every other person here as a dehydrated wreck.”

"Rule three," said Heckenpisser, "taxi money. Hehehe. If someone's so drunk they can't get safely back to their dump on their own, we'll pay for a taxi. Cheaper than a funeral."

“Rule four,” Kuddel chimed in, “emergency fund for tough nights. If someone’s standing at the train station wondering whether to go to the platform or to bed: taxi, coffee, maybe a sandwich, so they realize that someone else is aware they exist.”

Murat nodded.

"This isn't a social services center," he said. "But we can cushion a few corners before someone finally hits rock bottom."

“And rule five,” Jana grinned, “no PR. None of us will make a social media post about how heroically we are collecting hearts for alcoholics.”

“Hehehe,” confirmed Hecke. “Influencer-free zone.”

The first test came sooner than they would have liked.

It was around 12:30 when "Karl with the bad knee" shuffled up. Karl was in his fifties, a former construction worker, had fallen badly once, broken his back, painkillers, then alcohol. The classic case. Kuddel knew him from the train station toilets, from bad nights, from stories in which the word "back then" played a major role.

Karl was staggering, but not drunk. More like physically exhausted. His breathing was ragged, his face gray beneath the tan.

"Well, Karl," said Murat, "where's the fire?"

“Everywhere,” he managed to say. “I have to... get to Urban. But I don’t have a ticket... and... I can’t... I’ll fall over.”

He leaned against the table, panting. His left leg was trembling.

"He looks awful," said Jana. "Even awfulr than usual."

She briefly felt his pulse, felt his forehead, routinely.

"Hospital," she said. "My lungs sound like an old organ with water in it. And this time not by bus, it'll tip over on the way."

Karl shook his head listlessly. "I don't want to... they'll just make me wait anyway," he muttered.

"Better to wait than to get cold," said Jana. "Murat... the box."

Murat didn't hesitate for a second. He pulled the box towards him, reached inside, and collected two fives, a ten, and a few coins.

"Enough for a taxi and a coffee from the vending machine," he said.

"I'll call one," said Heckenpisser, actually pulling out his antique cell phone. "Hehehe... Schöneberg, a service desert, is becoming an oasis."

"Tell the driver to take him straight to the emergency room," Jana said. "And that Karl doesn't burn down while he's getting out of the car."

Karl seemed to only half take it all in. He was in that in-between zone between "I'm about to collapse" and "I haven't taken a doctor seriously in years."

The taxi arrived. The driver looked as if he'd heard all the stories before. Murat handed him the money.

"Here," he said. "The ride is paid for. If he throws up on the way, it's our karma. Please take him right up to the emergency room. Don't just drop him off and leave."

The driver nodded and looked at Karl. "Get in, boss," he said. "I'll even open a window for you."

Heckenpisser and Kuddel helped Karl into the car. His body was heavy, somehow softer than usual. Jana knocked on the roof.

"If they try to sell you compression stockings, put them on," she said. "And make sure you see a doctor, not an intern."

Karl nodded, tired, grateful, anxious. "Thank you," he murmured. "You are..."

"Shut up," Kuddel interrupted. "Thank me when you're standing up again."

The taxi drove off. The box had become noticeably lighter.

For a while, nobody said anything.

"So," Murat eventually broke the silence. "That was... point three and four at the same time."

"Hehehe... Heartbeat for alcoholics," muttered Heckenpisser. "We're the phone-a-friend lifeline before intensive care."

"That wasn't heart," Jana said calmly. "That was... minimal solidarity. None of us are any better off because of it. But maybe he won't die this week."

Kuddel looked at the cardboard box. It was no longer full, but not empty either.

"That's what it's for," he said.

Later, when the traffic subsided and only the last stragglers rattled through the neighborhood, Kuddel leaned on the table with both hands.

"Do you know what the irony is?" he asked the group. "If some politician comes by tomorrow and sees the box, she'll say, 'See, the neighborhood takes care of things. We don't need any

more government services.' And if no one takes care of things, they'll say, 'See, people have become callous, we need more programs.'"

"Hehehe...", said Hecke. "They're twisting their arguments around like bottles."

"A heart for alcoholics," Murat grumbled. "For the cameras, yes. For the evenings... rather rarely."

Jana pulled her hood over her head and got ready to leave.

"I'll tell you what a heart would be," she said. "If it weren't just the four of us who had to put up with this crap."

"If it weren't always the same people cobbling together makeshift solutions – while others debate whether the slogan on the poster is sensitive enough."

"I don't care about sensitivity," Kuddel said. "Honesty is enough."

He took the box and pushed it slightly to the side so that it wouldn't knock over the ashtray.

"For those who are still here," he read again. "So that they might still be here tomorrow," he added in a low voice.

"Hehehe," grinned Hecke. "Not because they're cured – but because they somehow made it through the night again."

"Does that count?" asked Jana.

"For us, yes," said Kuddel. "For those with the project proposals, probably not. But screw it. We are not their success. We are just... not their loss."

The neon tube flickered, then stabilized.

The box contained loose change, crumpled bills, a useless scratch-off lottery ticket, and the suspicion that "heart" is sometimes nothing more than a taxi, a coffee, and three people who are just barely interested in you.

not just leave you lying on the street,

even if they know that you will be standing at the standing table again tomorrow –

with beer, with trembling, with the same question over and over again:

Does anyone still have a place for me?

Karl was gone for a while. In a taxi, in the hospital, in the system. The box was back on the table, half empty, half full – depending on whether you still had hope or had already had enough.

The evening dragged on like chewing gum on a pavement.

"Funny," said Heckenpisser, "when you see that the money in there is really going towards something like that... suddenly it doesn't feel so funny anymore. Hehehe."

"For the first time, we have something like a purpose," Murat said. "Otherwise, money here is just fuel."

"I don't know if I should approve of this," Kuddel muttered. "If we start to do anything meaningful here, it might be the beginning of the end."

"Kuddel, you'll only become truly useful when you're dead and someone writes down your stories," Jana said. "Right now, you're at most... useful in bad moments. That's something, isn't it?"

"Hehehe...", Hecke raised the bottle. "To usefulness in bad moments. Our CV."

They clinked glasses.

Later that evening – after two or three meaningless rounds, a few jokes among regular customers, a cigarette debate outside – a woman came by whom none of them knew.

Mid-forties perhaps, clean jeans, a tidy jacket, that exhausted look of someone who has been too busy managing things over the past few years.

She stopped in front of the box, read, looked up at the corner store, saw the group at the standing table.

"For those who are still here," she read softly. "Hm."

She rummaged in her handbag, took out her wallet, hesitated briefly, then very carefully placed a twenty-euro note in the box. Not thrown in. Laid down.

"Well, that's big," Elke murmured from behind the window.

The woman stopped. She pulled out a cigarette, then realized it had no light.

"Fire?" she asked the group.

Kuddel held out his lighter, suddenly surprisingly polite. "Sure," he said.

She lit her cigarette and took a deep drag, as if she were taking a break from something.

"May I ask something?" she said, in that tone of voice of people who have received bad answers too many times.

"It depends on how much it hurts," Jana replied.

The woman pointed at the box. "Who wrote that on it?" she wanted to know.

"I," said Kuddel.

"And what does that mean for you?" she asked.

Kuddel leaned back a little, as if he needed to make room for the thought.

“That means,” he said, “that we’re not collecting stories here for pristine biographies. Not for success stories in self-help groups. But for people who... haven’t been completely washed away yet. Still here. Still breathing. Sometimes that’s the whole achievement.”

The woman nodded slowly, looked into the box, then looked up again.

“My brother,” she said suddenly, “was also an alcoholic.”

The word was difficult to say, but not hysterical. More like a diagnosis one has become accustomed to without ever truly accepting it.

“‘War’ doesn’t sound like a happy ending,” Heckenpisser said quietly. “Hehehe.”

She smiled briefly, sadly. “No,” she said. “There was no happy ending. He drank himself to death eventually. Nothing spectacular. No big fallout, no train station toilet drama. Just... a little more and more. Liver, heart, eventually it was over.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jana. And you could tell that this wasn’t just a platitude, but the words of someone who had seen too many bodies that eventually couldn’t go on any longer.

The woman nodded and took another drag on her cigarette.

“I always thought,” she said, “that if he came to a gala – ‘A Heart for Alcoholics’ or something – everyone would say: ‘The poor man, he has to get out of there! We’ll help him!’ In reality... everyone said: ‘He has to want it.’ And when he couldn’t go on anymore, they said: ‘Serves him right.’”

“Classic,” murmured Kuddel.

“I yelled at him too,” she confessed. “Saying, ‘Get a grip!’ Saying, ‘You’re ruining everything!’ Saying, ‘Think of Mom, think of me!’ But never...” she paused, “...never asking, ‘How bad is it in your head right now?’”

“Because you were afraid of the answer,” Jana said gently.

“Yes,” she whispered. “And because I had to work. And the children. And the household. And everything. At some point I gave up. Then came the call from the hospital.”

It was quiet. Only the wind played with an empty receipt.

“Then why are you throwing something in the box?” asked Heckenpisser cautiously. “Hehehe. They could have just said: ‘They’re all losers, they had their chance.’”

She snorted dryly. “Because ever since then, I’ve had to constantly hear,” she said, “that I did everything right. ‘You couldn’t have done more for him.’ ‘It was his decision.’ And I know that’s partly true. But something... I don’t want to believe that’s all there is to it.”

“It isn’t,” said Kuddel.

"When I walk past here," she continued, "I see people like him every day. A little different, but... alike enough. And every day I think:

He could have been standing there if he were still there.

Then I watch the news, seeing how they're collecting donations for all sorts of things – children, animals, disasters – and I switch it off when alcohol comes up because it makes me feel sick. Today... I saw the box. 'For those who are still here.' And I thought:

Maybe they'll get a moment he didn't have. An extra taxi ride, an extra coffee, a night where someone doesn't fall quite so far.

That's what the twenty is for."

She flicked the cigarette butt into the ashtray as if she had just made a point that no one should comment on.

"You don't have to explain anything to me," she added. "I only know one thing: It's easy to have a heart for someone who's successfully sober and cries on TV. It's hard to have a heart for someone who's drunk and slurring their words at your door."

"Hehehe..." muttered Hedge Pisser. "That's where romance separates from everything else."

"I couldn't do it," she said. "I was too tired. But maybe... this will help a little. Not for my conscience. For you."

She nodded to the group, then left. No dramatic exit. Simply: gone.

"Ugh," Jana said after a few seconds. "That was... real."

"She was tougher than any social worker I've ever seen," said Murat.

"Hehehe...", said Hecke, "and more honest than all the therapy brochures combined."

Kuddel looked into the box as if he could make out faces among the coins and bills. Uwe. Karl. The woman's brother. And himself.

"A heart for alcoholics – or not," he said. "For them... there was one too. Too late."

Later, when the corner store half-closed its shutters, only the die-hards were left. In other words: them.

"So," said Murat, "taking stock: We started with a crappy car, a crappy slogan, and a crappy idea. Now we still have a crappy car, but a better slogan and... well... a few real bets."

"Hehehe...", Heckenpisser counted on his fingers. "Karl's taxi, coffee, water, a round of bus fare the other day... And once you bought a jacket for the guy who always sleeps at the snack bar."

"That wasn't something I did out of the blue," said Murat. "That came from my guilty conscience."

"It all comes down to the same thing," Jana said. "In the end, it's all just one big, shaky pot of leftover dignity and leftover money anyway."

“You know what,” said Kuddel, “actually this is the most honest ‘Heart for Alcoholics’ I’ve ever seen. No logo. No sponsors. No photos. Just: a few broken people who aren’t letting each other completely die.”

"Oh," Murat waved it off. "Don't romanticize it. Tomorrow someone will be here again, yelling at you, and you'll want to smash the box over his head."

"True," grinned Kuddel. "But at least I know that the box has already experienced something useful before it lands on someone's head."

“Hehehe...”, Hecke giggled. “The first donation box with trauma.”

Jana looked at her watch. "I have to," she said. "Just a few more hours of sleep, then early shift. Today we had one guy who bit the TV in a delirium because he thought the news was coming for him. Tomorrow's the next round."

"You're no better off than we are," said Kuddel.

“No,” she replied. “I just have other bottles in my hand. IV bags.”

Later, when Kuddel sat alone in his kitchen, the box wasn't there – but the images of it were in his mind.

He pulled out his notebook, the one with the crooked lines, where "Moped Manni", "Babylon train station toilet" and "Peep show in the mind cinema" had already been written.

At the top he wrote in large letters:

A heart for alcoholics – or not

Below it he began, scrawled, slowly:

"They always want to hand out hearts, as long as you obediently quit and can speak in a coherent sentence. As long as you put on a shirt and go on a talk show to tell everyone how bad it was and how great it is now."

For those who are in the thick of it, there are usually only two kinds of looks: disgust or a sense of duty.

He paused and took a sip of tap water. No beer – just this once. The day had been hard enough.

He continued:

"There's no 'A Heart for Alcoholics' on television because we don't provide good images. We're not cute like children, not innocent like animals, not suddenly shaken like accident victims."

We are slow, sticky, unpleasant. We remind everyone what can happen when you stop functioning at some point.

He thought of the woman with the brother, of Uwe, of Karl in the taxi.

“And yet,” he wrote, “there are these small, ugly moments of heart in between: a box with the wrong sticker that someone corrects; a twenty from a sister who realized too late that love isn’t a program; a taxi at night, paid for with small change, so that someone who has done everything wrong at least collapses in the hospital and not in the park.”

Perhaps this is the maximum amount of compassion we can get: not applause, not rehabilitation, but that someone pauses briefly and says: 'He's still alive. Don't just drop him.'"

He put down the pen and rubbed his eyes.

Outside, somewhere, a distant siren droned. Perhaps an ambulance. Perhaps someone was lying where Karl had often lain before.

Kuddel stood up, went to the window, and looked down at the street. Empty bottles in the bushes, yellow lantern light, wind that pressed an old advertising poster flat against the wall.

A heart for alcoholics, He thought, or maybe not.

He snorted, softly, half laughing, half coughing.

"You know what," he muttered into the kitchen, into the wall, into his own face reflected in the dark window, "I'm satisfied if they just stop hating us. They don't have to love us. Just... stop pretending we never existed."

He went back to the table, picked up the pen again, and wrote a sentence underneath:

"We are the ones who screwed up – but still show up."

And as long as we're still here, sometimes a damn cardboard box with the right inscription is more than enough to win all the hearts in primetime."

Then he closed the notebook, pulled the blanket onto the sofa, and listened to the city breathing.

and thought in his half-sleep:

Perhaps this is the greatest kindness we can receive: that we are not completely forgotten.

even if no one ever created a donation logo for people like him
would cling to the skyline.

Hospital visit with hospital beer

Of course, it didn't start with a doctor's letter, but with a phone call that nobody wants to receive.

Not from the hospital itself – the system wasn't that professional – but from some mobile phone number that Kuddel hadn't saved.

That was suspicious. Nobody who really knew him called him. The people who knew him knew: if Kuddel answers, he's either drunk or unreachable.

This time he answered.

"Yes?" He lay on the mattress, cigarette in the corner of his mouth, one eye on the ashtray, which was threateningly full.

"Am I speaking to... uh... Kurt Scholz?" asked a female voice that sounded like neon lights and overtime.

"Depends on who's asking," he muttered.

"This is the emergency room at Urban Hospital," she said. "You are the contact person for... Karl M., known as Karl with the broken knee."

Kuddel sat up abruptly. The ash from his cigarette fell onto the bedspread.

"Yes," he said. "Unfortunately, he belongs to me."

"He was admitted to our hospital last night," the voice explained. "Severe respiratory distress, suspected pulmonary edema, heart failure, liver problems too... well, you know. He named you as 'the only one left.'"

Kuddel swallowed.

"Is he alive?" he asked.

"Yes, at the moment," she said. "But it would be good if someone came by. Not as a medical measure – just so he knows he's not completely alone. He keeps asking if it's still the weekend outside."

"It's not even the middle of the week," Kuddel muttered. "But it's about right."

"Room 317, internal ward," she said. "Visiting hours from 2 p.m. And please... no glass bottles."

"Sure," Kuddel lied automatically.

After he hung up, he just sat there for a while, cigarette in his hand, heart somewhere between his throat and stomach.

Room 317.
Still there.

"Shit," he said loudly into the room. "It's starting."

Heckenpisser was already standing at the high table at the corner store, briefcase on, bow tie half loosened. He saw Kuddel coming and immediately realized that this was no normal day.

"Well, you look like a bill about to be paid," he said. "Hehehe. What is it? Bed frame? Ball rats? Anal herpes? Flight gonorrhea? Are you now officially becoming a medical work of art?"

"Shut up," said Kuddel, but it lacked its usual bite. "Karl's in the Urban. Room 317. Lungs, heart, the whole shebang. They called me."

The hedge pisser fell silent. That didn't happen often.

"Oh," he said. "Oh you... Fuck..."

Jana had just come out of the corner store with a case of mineral water when she heard that. She stopped, holding the case half in the air.

"Karl Urban?" she asked. "The one with the bad knee and the broken everything else?"

"The one with the face like an old couch, yeah," said Kuddel. "They say he's still alive."

"For now," commented Murat from behind the counter.

"I was on night shift last night," Jana said slowly. "We had a Karl M. on the ward. Emergency room, blue eyes, fluid in his lungs, liver like a mushy lemon. He kept asking if it was still the weekend outside. Shit. That was your Karl."

"They called you?" asked Hecke. "Hehehe... you're officially a contact person now. It's like being married, only without the tax bracket."

Kuddel reached for a bottle of Sterni, paused, and put it back down.

"They want someone to come," he said. "Not as a clown. As a... witness, I think."

"Do you want to go?" Jana asked.

"Do I want to? No," said Kuddel. "Can't I go? Also no."

The hedge pisser raised his hand. "I'm coming along," he said. "Hehehe. Who knows when it'll be my turn, so I want to know what the view is like."

"You don't go there unprepared," Murat interjected. "It's a hospital. Different rules apply there. Even for you bums."

"No glass bottles," Kuddel remembered hearing the voice on the phone.

"That's why," said Murat, bending down under the counter, "hospital beer."

He pulled up a white plastic bag. Inside: four cans of beer, a bottle of water, two bananas, a shrink-wrapped cheese roll that looked like the saddest compromise in the world.

"Canned beer, in case anyone asks, 'That's malt beverage,'" he explained. "Water, so Jana doesn't freak out. Banana and bread roll, so you can say you were concerned about nutrition. Hospital standard."

"Hehehe... I love this man," said Heckenpisser reverently.

"Hospital beer," Kuddel repeated. "That's the level we're at now. Beer with a conscience."

Jana put down the case of water and brushed a strand of hair out of her face.

"I'm on the late shift today," she said. "I'll be here from 4 p.m. anyway. If you show up reasonably sober, I might be able to... sneak you past the nurse unnoticed."

"What is 'somewhat sober' in your definition?" asked Kuddel.

"Don't yell for disinfectant when someone touches you," she said. "So... one beer, not one train station."

Heckenpisser looked at his watch, then at the standing table.

"We can have another drink now," he said. "Hehehe. Purely psychological."

"We don't do pre-hospital drinking," Jana growled. "Karl's up there on an IV drip, and you want to stagger in pretending to be sick?"

Kuddel sighed. "Okay," he said. "No Sterni until after the visit. This will be my toughest detox program since I was born."

"I am a witness," Murat said. "If you drink beforehand, I'll tell the nurse you'll be banned from visiting."

The S-Bahn ride to Urban was a completely different beast when sober.

No beer burping, no urge to use the train station toilet, just the rhythmic rocking and the faces that look as if they all had to show up somewhere too early.

"I've never voluntarily gone to the hospital sober," Kuddel muttered. "They've always brought me in lying down."

"Hehehe... Premiere," said Hecke. "It's like a class trip, only without the slatted bed base."

"A slatted bed frame isn't a sexually transmitted disease," Kuddel muttered. "It's your brain."

"Yes," contradicted Hedge Pisser. "A slatted bed base – that's when you fuck so much your spine squeaks. Hehehe."

An older woman opposite her regarded her skeptically, pulling her bag closer to her as if she had just announced an attack on decency.

"If anyone has a sexually transmitted disease today, it's Karl," said Kuddel. "He's spent half his life catching things that aren't even in textbooks."

"He's got nothing more than rats with heart failure," said Hecke. "Hehehe."

"You are disgusting," Jana commented. "And I have to pretend to be a respectable caregiver with acquaintances who are somewhat civilized."

"Then walk five meters in front of us," Kuddel suggested. "Then everyone will think we're just two random bums."

"They already think that," she said.

The Urban Hospital stood there like a concrete block with bad karma. Typical post-war architecture: grey, angular, too many windows, too little comfort.

The smell overwhelmed her as soon as she walked in. Not just disinfectant – a mixture of sweat, cleaning agent, fear, and that indefinable hospital stench that you can never get out of your nose.

"Ugh," said Heckenpisser. "That smells like death and tea."

"It's a hospital, after all," said Jana. She had separated herself at the entrance, briefly showed her employee ID, and received a green wristband that looked like it conferred certain responsibilities.

"Listen," she said. "Go to the information desk now and find out exactly where. Be honest and say you're friends. But don't immediately say, 'We're the drunks from Schöneberg.' If you behave yourselves, I'll see you upstairs. If not, I'll have to pretend I don't know you."

"Hehehe... she does that sometimes anyway," giggled Heckenpisser.

"Hecke," she growled, "if you continue to act like a clown here, I'll personally throw you into the emergency room. Without an appointment."

She disappeared into the staff quarters.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser stood around briefly in the entrance hall, lost among vending machine coffee, people with flowers and those help signs that always have something to do with "Onko", "Ortho" and "Innere".

"Info," said Kuddel, pointing with his chin. "That's where the gatekeeper sits."

The woman at the information desk had the aura of someone who had seen it all: hysterical relatives, drunken brothers, confused grandfathers looking for "the old room". Her glasses sat hard on her nose, her smile was professional but not warm.

"Yes?" she asked.

"We're looking for Karl," said Kuddel. "With the broken knee. Karl M. Internal medicine ward, I think."

She typed something into the system, "Karl M., 58, male, Internal Medicine 3," she murmured. "Third floor, Ward 3B, Room 317. Visitors are allowed. Mask on, disinfect hands, no glass bottles, no..."

Her gaze lingered for a moment too long on the plastic bag containing the hospital beer.

"...please leave large bags unattended," she added, in a conspicuously neutral tone.

"That's food," said Heckenpisser quickly. "Hehehe."

She looked at him the way you look at a child who claims the dog ate their homework.

"Third floor," she repeated. "Next, please."

The elevator was crowded. Too many people in too little space, all wearing masks, all with that embarrassed look, as if they were in God's waiting room.

"I hate elevators," Kuddel muttered.

"I hate stairs," Hecke muttered. "We're even."

The elevator made that typical hospital noise: pling – door open – door closes – floor higher: another floor where someone had just lost a piece of their life.

When they got off on the third floor, the sound was different from outside by the corner store. No cars, no tram, no laughter. Just shoe soles on linoleum, quiet voices, the beeping of monitors, an occasional cough, a groan from a room, a door closing.

"Here, you die to the beat," Kuddel said quietly.

"Hehehe," Hecke said, but it didn't really sound funny.

Room 317. White sign, black name, far too businesslike.

Kuddel took a deep breath, as if he needed a starting signal. Then, without waiting for an answer, he knocked and entered.

Karl looked as if someone had taken him out of his body, rinsed him briefly, and then stuffed him back in wrong.

He lay half-supine in bed, tubes in his arm, oxygen mask in his nose, grey skin with a strange yellowish tinge. His eyes were awake but tired – as if they had already seen too many blankets.

"Well, Karl," said Kuddel. "You old bastard. A vacation on sick leave?"

Karl turned his head slowly, as if pushing against water. Then he recognized her and a crooked grin spread across his face.

"Of course," he croaked. "If so, then only a single room with a sea view. And who comes to visit me? Those drunkards. I can't believe it."

"Hehehe," Heckenpisser said, stepping closer to the bed. "You look awful, but somehow well-groomed. That irritates me."

"Welcome to the wellness area of the internal organs," commented Karl. "All inclusive: shortness of breath, water retention in the legs, and if you ask nicely, you might even get a free catheter."

"Did you have something to do with a slatted bed frame?" asked Heckenpisser. "Or more like flight gonorrhea?"

Karl laughed, immediately started coughing, hooking his own cough until the monitor next to him blared a shrill alarm. Then it calmed down again.

"Lungs are shot," he gasped. "Heart's offended. Liver's applied for retirement. But otherwise, I'm fine."

Kuddel stepped closer and placed the plastic bag on the side table.

"We brought hospital beer," he said. "All in cans, completely hygienic. No risk of broken glass. And water, so Jana doesn't go crazy."

Karl blinked.

"You guys are the best," he murmured. "I thought I'd have to drink diet juice here until I rot away."

Heckenpisser took out a can, held it in his hand like a forbidden treasure.

"If anyone asks," he said, "we say it's a special isotonic drink for long-term patients. Hehehe."

"If someone asks," a voice from the door interjected, "you don't say anything because you keep your mouth shut while I'm out of sight."

Jana stood in the doorway, wearing surgical scrubs, a scrub top, a name tag, and a mask under her chin because she was taking a break. She had that look you get when you've been working at your limit for eight hours but still have to function.

"Hospital beer," she sighed when she saw the can. "Of course."

"That's a medical issue," Kuddel defended himself. "For him, beer has long since become a vehicle for his psyche."

"He's got a point," Karl muttered. "If I die sober, I'll sue you all."

Jana half-closed the door behind her, glanced briefly down the hallway, and saw no one in sight.

"One," she said. "One can. For the three of you. And you share it. If someone ends up in the ward with a blood alcohol level of 2.3, I'll get the blame."

"Hehehe... Communism beer," said Hecke. "Everyone was cheated equally."

"This isn't a pub," Jana said, cutting off his grin. "This is a hospital. People are dying here while you're making jokes. If you make him laugh – great. If you make him faint – you'll both be out."

Kuddel nodded seriously.

"No train station bullshit," he said. "I promise."

They opened the can carefully, as quietly as possible, as if the hiss alone would set off an alarm. Then they actually drank "round" – each taking a sip, just like in the worst of times, when the money had only been enough for half a case.

When it was Karl's turn, he held the can as if it were a harmonica solo before the final curtain.

"Cheers to the drunks," he whispered. "And to the fact that you're even here. I wouldn't have thought it."

He took a sip, closed his eyes briefly, and smiled slightly.

"It tastes like a festival," he said. "Only without the bands."

"A festival with IV drip stages," muttered Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

Jana stood at the foot of the bed, arms crossed, but you could see that she wasn't quite as strict as she sounded.

"And?" she asked. "How does it feel to be on the other side for once, Karl? Not outside on the bench in front of the emergency room, but inside at the end of the tube?"

Karl looked down at himself – IV drip, oxygen, hospital gown that was open at the back.

"It feels," he said slowly, "as if my body has finally realized that it's not 25 anymore. And as if it's asking me: 'Why did you think I'd keep going on like this any longer?'"

Kuddel nodded. He knew this question. It was always there, in the background, like a tinnitus of reason.

"Do you know what the worst part is?" Karl continued. "They always say here, 'You have to want it too, Mr. M.' But all I want is one thing: not to die so miserably. BUT..." he drew out the word, "...when I look at how I've lived: it's almost fair."

"Justice is a whore," said Kuddel. "It only goes where there are cameras."

"Hehehe...", said Hecke, "sometimes you're almost smarter than the rest of your body."

Jana looked from one to the other.

“You two are the wrong people to be handing out morals here,” she said. “But maybe you are the right people to make him understand that he is not solely to blame.”

She tapped against the drip.

“This,” she said, “is not just his decision. This is: working himself to the bone, no precautions, no time, no interest from politicians, no one to say, ‘Sit down for a minute before you collapse.’ But in the end, here he is, and everyone acts as if this was just his personal hobby.”

“My hobby was drinking,” Karl objected. “This is... the bonus package.”

"You're still a victim," said Kuddel. "Even if you sabotaged a lot yourself."

"I hate that word," Karl muttered.

“Me too,” said Jana. “But when I walk through the rooms at night and see the people who are on IV drips, I think to myself:

You weren't all stupid. You were just tired – and superfluous to those who made the decisions.“

Room 317 fell silent. Only the beeping of the monitor, the dripping of the IV, and Karl's breathing, which was heavier than necessary.

“Hey,” said Heckenpisser finally, to save the mood, “when you get out of here, Karl, we’ll have a real hospital beer party. At the corner store, with IV drips to go. Hehehe.”

"If I get out of here," said Karl, "I won't get out at all. I'll probably go straight to rehab. And when they see me there, they'll say, 'Oh, that gentleman used to frequent the corner store.' Don't try to fool me – I'm well-known at the clinic."

“We’ll bring you mail from the ghost in the toilet,” said Kuddel. “He’ll write you a card: ‘Get well soon, or I’ll bite you right on the inside.’”

Karl smiled crookedly.

"You're all healthy and disturbed," he said. "That's a good thing."

Jana stood up and brushed her hair away from her face.

“I have to move on,” she said. “Three more rooms with painkillers, a bladder that can’t hold any more, and two relatives who think we’re deliberately letting people die here.”

She bent down briefly and placed a hand on Karl's shoulder.

"I'll be back later," she said. "If this guy..." she pointed at Kuddel, "...doesn't drive you absolutely crazy."

"Don't worry," Karl murmured. "As long as I can still laugh, I'm not completely lost."

She nodded to the two of them. "No second can," she warned. "And if someone throws up, I'm not cleaning up after you."

Then she was out.

Room 317 shrank back down to three guys, two of whom were still standing and one lying down – but all three knew perfectly well that they were on the same train, just in different carriages.

For a while, they simply said nothing at all.

Kuddel stood at the window as if studying the view. There was none. Just a backyard with garbage containers, a tree that looked as if it had grown there by mistake, and the back of another house that looked just as tired as the people inside.

Hedge-pisser sat on the visitor's chair, which was at just the right height to cause back pain. He tapped his foot as if he could shake off the nervousness that way. "Hehehe" was all he could manage for the time being.

Karl lay there, in the middle of this sterile setting, with oxygen goggles and knotted tubes, and yet he still didn't fit in. He was like an old pub counter in the middle of a white Ikea showroom.

"You know what's sick about this?" Karl muttered at some point, his voice rough from the air and the hospital. "They talk about values here all day long."

"What kind of values?" Kuddel asked, without turning away from the window. "Moral ones, or the ones that blink?"

"Both," said Karl. "Blood values, liver values, circulatory values. And then: worth living. But nobody explains to you how much residual value you still have."

"Hehehe...", Hecke began, "you're a totaled wrecked car that isn't being taken off the road because nobody wants to fill out the form."

Karl grinned, then coughed briefly again.

"The doctor this morning," he continued, "said, 'You absolutely must stop drinking, Mr. M. Otherwise...' And then he pauses, you know? That theatrical pause. I said, 'Otherwise I'll die?' He said, 'Yes.' So I said, 'I'm going to die one way or another. The only question is how much fun I can have beforehand.' He looked at me like I'd committed blasphemy."

"They hate it when you ruin their dramatic moment," Kuddel said. "They practice those pauses in their studies. And you're kicking them in the punchline."

"I don't begrudge them their punchline," said Karl. "But I'll allow myself mine."

He looked at Kuddel properly, not just glancing away.

"Why did you even come, old man?" he asked suddenly. "You could have just stayed at the standing table and said, 'Hospitals aren't for me.'"

Kuddel pulled at his shoulders as if someone had asked why he was breathing.

"Because I was the idiot who paid for your taxi," he said. "If you had died here and I hadn't even looked at what you looked like... my guilty conscience would have refused to drink with me any longer."

"Hehehe...", chuckled Hecke, "emotional blackmail protection, chapter 1."

Karl nodded.

"I really thought," he muttered, "they'd leave me to die alone in a hallway. Or next to someone who keeps yelling 'Mommy'."

"Give the system another day," said Kuddel. "They'll manage it."

The door opened, another nurse came in. Not Jana, but one who looked as if she had been on the job for twenty years – with those quick, routine movements that no longer waste any energy.

She checked the IV drip, the monitor, Karl's pulse, his breathing. She cast a brief, skeptical glance at Kuddel and Heckenpisser, but apparently decided that she didn't have the energy for discussion right now.

"Are you in pain, Mr. M.?" she asked, without much of an introduction.

"Only when I think," said Karl. "And when I breathe. And when I'm awake. So yes."

"Then ring the bell," she said. "We can give you something."

"Can you offer something against the last 30 years?" he asked.

She sighed, that deep, heavy sigh you eventually learn after doing something for too long.

"You're too late," she said. "We're only dealing with what's currently urgent."

"Ring the bell anyway," she added, "don't play the hero here. Heroes die faster."

She rushed back out, the door half ajar.

"I like her," said Kuddel. "At least she doesn't lie."

"Hehehe...", said Hecke, "that's a sister who would still sell you a cigarette if you messed up."

Karl looked towards the door, then back at the two of them.

"You know," he said, "that you'll end up here someday, right? Maybe not in 317, but somewhere. With a hose, with beeping, with someone saying, 'You have to want it too.'"

"I'm going for a swim beforehand," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe. In the Jägermeister Lake."

"I'm not going to the hospital," Kuddel claimed. "I'll just collapse in the corner store and stay there."

"Don't make fun of me," Karl said quietly. "They said if I'm unlucky, I'll get a second shot. If my heart acts up again, they'll do rehab. And if they bring me back, they'll send me to detox, whether I want to or not."

"And do you want to?", asked Jana from the doorway – she had reappeared, more quietly this time.

Karl looked at her, then up at the ceiling.

"Yes," he said. "No. I don't know. I don't want to die like this, of course. But I also can't imagine walking around sober. Life is already barely bearable with medication."

"Hehehe...", Hecke began, "we have a philosopher in the hospital."

"We have three," Jana corrected. "One in bed and two idiots without lab coats."

There was a knock, and without waiting for an answer, a doctor came in. Not the head physician, more like a ward doctor, late thirties, stubble, dark circles under his eyes, wearing a lab coat with a pen and sticky notes in all his pockets.

He stopped, briefly scanning the scene: patient, tubes, visitor, half-empty can on the table.

His gaze lingered on the can a touch too long.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Isotonic hop drink," said Heckenpisser immediately. "For the soul. Hehehe."

Kuddel didn't say anything, only internally: Shit.

Karl was surprisingly fast.

"My visitor," he said. "He grabbed the wrong one. That's her can. I only smelled it." He grinned. "My nose is still clear. Something has to work."

The doctor sighed. This sigh was different from the nurse's – less tired, more... resigned.

"Mr. M.," he said, "we are not in a beer garden here."

"I see," said Karl. "The service is worse."

"I'm serious," the doctor continued. "Your test results are bad. Very bad. You have fluid in your lungs, your heart is working at its limit, your liver is enlarged, your kidneys are pissed off – figuratively speaking. And you... are drinking here?"

"He doesn't drink," Jana interjected calmly. "He took a sip. So he wouldn't completely lose his footing. The two of them are the only friends he has."

The doctor gave her a sideways glance. "Are these your friends?" he asked. "Or your... case studies?"

"Both," she said without flinching.

Kuddel raised his hand. "We are the drunken bastards from Schöneberg," he said. "You can't save us. Don't worry."

"Hehehe," added Heckenpisser, "we are immune to success."

The doctor rubbed the bridge of his nose with two fingers.

"Listen," he said, again to Karl. "I'm not your enemy. But I'm not your buddy either. My job is to make sure you survive the next few days. If you sabotage yourself in the process, we'll reach a limit."

"I've been successfully sabotaging myself for 30 years," said Karl. "You arrived late to the party."

"I was invited late," the doctor corrected. "Otherwise you would have been here earlier. Perhaps with better chances."

This awkward silence arose, in which everyone knew that nothing nice was coming, but also nothing completely wrong.

The doctor continued, more matter-of-factly.

"There are options," he said. "We can stabilize you with medication, reduce the fluid retention, and decrease the strain on your heart. We can refer you to a detox clinic, outpatient care, or a support group. But in the end..."

"...I have to want it," Karl finished the sentence. "I know. It says so in every brochure."

The doctor nodded. "Yes," he said. "Ultimately, you have to want it. And I can honestly tell you: I know how difficult that is. You're not the first person I've seen lying here. You won't be the last."

"What would you do?" Karl asked suddenly. "If you were me."

The doctor seemed momentarily taken aback. Then he turned his chair from the desk to the bed and sat down. He took his time – which was unusual.

"If I were you," he said slowly, "I would first try to get through this acute phase without completely lying to myself. I would accept that my body has reached its limit. And then..." He took a breath. "...I would talk to someone who doesn't just think in medical terms. Therapy, a support group, anything. Because alcohol isn't just a substance, but also... everything it masks."

"Concealed dirt," Kuddel muttered.

"Yes," said the doctor. "Exactly."

Karl looked at him, serious, almost sober in his expression.

"What if I can't do it?" he asked.

"Then you'll die from a combination of liver failure, cardiac arrest, and lung failure," the doctor said calmly. "I could put it more nicely. But that would be a lie."

"Hehehe...", whispered Hedge Pisser, "you're my favorite doctor since he started working here."

The doctor ignored him.

"But," he continued, "you're going to die one way or another eventually. The question is: Do you want to try to live a few more years without shortness of breath? Or do you want to keep drinking and hope that you won't realize how bad things have gotten when you're drunk?"

Karl thought. There was nothing much in his face, just a very slight twitch around his eyes.

"I don't know," he said honestly.

The doctor nodded. "That's the most honest answer I've heard from you today," he said. "I'll come back later. Until then... please, no more beer experiments."

He stood up, patted Karl on the bedspread, looked briefly at Jana, then at Kuddel and Heckenpisser.

"And you two," he said, "please don't make a fuss here. You may stay. But don't forget where you are."

"Hospital," said Kuddel. "Not hell. But with a similar color palette."

The doctor left, closing the door completely this time.

For a while, nobody spoke. Everyone had enough to do with their own thoughts.

"Great," Karl said at one point. "Now we officially have a plot."

"Hehehe," Hecke giggled again, "'Karl is at the crossroads: rehab or relapse.' That sounds like a bad early evening series."

"It's one too," Kuddel remarked. "Just without the commercial breaks."

Karl looked at his hands. They had become thinner than he had noticed. The skin was yellowish, the nails brittle.

"You know, Kuddel," he said, "I always thought I'd die outdoors. A park bench, an underpass, maybe a train station toilet. I never would have bet that I'd end up here – in white, with beeping."

"Me neither," said Kuddel. "I would have bet five euros that you'd collapse in the corner store one day and Murat would sell you as an art project."

“Hehehe...”, Hecke interjected, “‘Last regular in the glass frame’.”

"Shut up, Hecke," said Karl, but without any venom. "I like you."

"What a sad diagnosis," muttered Heckenpisser.

After a while, Kuddel stood up and walked around the room a bit, as if he had to measure the rectangle.

He stopped in front of the window.

“You know, Karl,” he began, “I’m going to tell you something that I usually only think when I’m too drunk to write it down.”

"But sober now?" Karl asked suspiciously. "That could hurt."

“Yes,” said Kuddel. “Exactly. If you haven’t at least tried once to crawl out of the mire, your death will just be another joke in the train station toilet. ‘Karl with the broken knee – didn’t even try.’ If you try and fail – at least you can say: ‘I wasn’t completely screwed up by choice.’”

“Hehehe...”, Hecke nodded, “Success is overrated. Don’t try.”

"I'm scared," Karl whispered. "Not just of dying. Of being sober. What if I realize how much I've missed? How much I've ruined? I already know too much of it."

"You already know everything," said Jana, who had leaned against the door again. It was noticeable that she frequently peeked in. "Being sober just means you see it for longer."

"You're a real ray of sunshine," Karl murmured.

“I didn’t say it would be beautiful,” she replied. “But maybe... not quite so short of breath.”

“Hehe... ‘Therapy with Jana – honest, but shitty’,” Hecke muttered.

Kuddel went back to the bed and supported himself with his hands at the foot of the bed.

"Let me tell you something," he said. "If you go into withdrawal, I'll come visit you. With non-alcoholic beer, so you have something to hate."

"And what if I don't?" asked Karl.

"Then I'll come visit you too," said Kuddel. "Here. Or on ward 4. Or down in pathology, when you're just lying there as a number. I don't care. I started to accompany your shit – I'm not going to stop halfway through."

Karl swallowed. "You're a shitty friend," he muttered. "But a friend nonetheless."

“Hehehe...”, said Hecke and Jana almost simultaneously.

Time dragged on in the room. Every now and then an assistant came in, bringing a plastic cup of jelly. Kuddel stared at the stuff.

"If you eat that," he said, "we're no longer friends. That's not food, that's hospital decoration."

"I haven't had anything proper since yesterday," said Karl. "My stomach doesn't even know what's real anymore."

Heckenpisser took the cheese roll out of the bag and unwrapped it.

"Here," he said. "Hospital gourmet: a bread roll from the corner store, half cold, half stale. A delicacy for bodies that have already given up."

Karl took a bite and chewed slowly.

"It tastes like the outdoors," he said. "That's good."

Jana looked at her watch. "I really have to go," she said. "If I stay around here any longer, my colleagues will think I'm having a secret affair with the riffraff in the neighborhood."

"Hehehe...", said Hecke, "you have a long-term relationship with despair. Almost the same thing."

She stepped up to the bed and looked directly at Karl.

"Listen," she said. "You might survive this. You might not. If you leave, please don't leave thinking everyone has written you off. There are two complete idiots out there at the corner store who will miss you."

Karl nodded, his eyes shining, but not from fever.

"And if you live," she continued, "then at some point you'll wish you had come here earlier. But then it's like always in life: detention."

"Detention in addiction support group," Karl muttered. "Great."

"I'll bring you a notebook," said Kuddel. "Then we can do our homework together."

"You guys are so shit," said Karl – and laughed as he said it.

Jana left the room for good. Hedge peeper stood up.

"I'm just going to step outside and find a coffee machine that hasn't completely given up the ghost," he said. "Do you want some, Karl?"

"Black," he said. "Like my chances."

"Hehehe...", Hecke nodded, and was already out the door.

Then they were alone for a moment. Karl was in bed, Kuddel was in the chair.

"Tell me honestly," Karl asked quietly. "Are you afraid of what's going to happen to me here?"

Kuddel thought about it.

"Yes," he said. "Sure. But not just because of you."

"But then?", Karl pressed.

"Because you're like a teaser," said Kuddel. "A trailer. You're the movie, and I'm watching the sneak preview. They're saying things like, 'My heart, lungs, and liver are giving out.' And my organs are sitting somewhere in the background shouting, 'Spoiler!'"

Karl laughed dryly.

"I always thought I was the horror movie," he said. "Turns out: I'm the documentary."

"If I didn't go here," said Kuddel, "I could continue to imagine that I still have years left. As it is... I see you lying there and know: The distance is smaller than I would like it to be."

"So? Are you drinking less now?" asked Karl, with a hint of mockery.

"Today," said Kuddel. "Tomorrow... we'll see."

Karl laughed again – but it sounded more like a cough.

"At least they're honest," he said. "Better than those who tell you in the hospital that they 'have their lives totally under control now,' and after rehab you see them with a bottle of schnapps by the canal."

"Maybe," Kuddel said slowly, "maybe honesty is the only thing we have left. No success, no role model, no shit. Just that we don't pretend this is anything other than the finale of a very long, very drunken season."

"Hehehe," came a voice from the doorway, Hecke holding two paper cups. "Finale of the Bundesliga of the Underdogs."

"Coffee?" he asked. "Tastes like liquid printer cleaner, but it wakes you up."

Karl took the cup, blew on it, and sipped.

"It tastes like a hospital," he said. "So I don't forget where I am."

As they left – visiting hours were officially over, and even Jana couldn't hide it forever – Kuddel was standing at the door, turning around one last time.

"Hey, Karl," he said. "If you come out of here, there's a late-night shop on the corner. If you don't come out of here... I'll still wait a little while before I follow."

"Go ahead and do it," said Karl. "Someone has to keep the standing table warm."

"Hehehe..." Hecke waved. "We'll bring you greetings from the ghost in the toilet, no matter where you are."

"If there is a ghost here," said Karl, "he should hurry up. I don't want to wait long."

They closed the door and stood briefly in the hallway, as if they had just crossed a border that one cannot see but can feel.

The way back to the elevator was the same as before. And yet completely different.

"Hospital beer," Heckenpisser finally said, as they stood outside again, the air damp and the city more lukewarm than the hospital corridors. "Hehehe. This is the saddest ritual we've had so far."

"It would have been sad not to go at all," said Kuddel. "This way... at least we had a halfway decent afternoon in real life, instead of just in our heads."

"Do you think he can handle it?" asked Hecke.

Kuddel finally lit a cigarette and took a deep drag, as if he hadn't had one for days.

"I have no idea," he said. "All I know is: if he tries, they'll tell him, 'Good job, Karl, you're strong.' And if he doesn't succeed, they'll say, 'Too bad, but that was to be expected.'"

He exhaled the smoke and looked towards the S-Bahn station.

"And we," he continued, "will then be standing at the corner store. With hospital beer in mind and the very real question: How much longer do we have until someone frees up room 317 for us?"

Heckenpisser nodded, seriously for once.

"Hehehe..." came the only whisper. "Maybe we should write him an email: 'A heart for alcoholics – or not. But at least a place in the waiting room.'"

They boarded the train back to Schöneberg, among people with shopping bags, headphones, appointments, children, and plans.

Kuddel saw his reflection in the window. Robe, dark circles under his eyes, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

And somewhere behind him, invisible, lay Karl in room 317.

with hospital beer in his stomach, tubes in his arm, and a decision to make,

for which there was no really good answer.

Two days later, Berlin was back to its usual mess. Buses that were late, people talking too loudly on their phones, and politicians smiling into cameras as if Room 317 didn't exist.

But at the standing table it was different. There was an additional silence that had settled between the cigarette butt and the Sterni beer, like an invisible fellow drinker.

"Did you hear anything?" asked Heckenpisser, without hesitation, when Kuddel arrived.

"Nothing yet," said Kuddel. "No call, no message. And if no hospital calls, it usually means: either he's alive – or they have the wrong number."

"Hehehe..." Hecke whispered. "You're a calming influence again today."

Jana arrived later, still in civilian clothes, her hair in a rubber band, her eyes tired.

"I was on a different ward yesterday," she said, without greeting anyone. "But I just checked the duty roster: Karl is now on ward 2C. Down from acute danger, up to 'We'll see what's left.'"

"So you're alive," said Kuddel.

"Yes," she nodded. "The question is: How."

They went back again. This time without much preparation, without the theatrical hospital beer ceremony. The can stayed at the corner store. You live and learn. Sometimes.

On 2C, it smelled less like drama and more like being put on hold.

Old people who were practically melting into the furniture. A guy with a recently operated hip who looked like he was fused to his crutch. A woman in a wig who carefully counted her own steps as she walked.

Room 214. No private room this time. Three people sharing. Three men, three stories that nobody wanted to know completely.

Karl at the window bed. Without oxygen goggles, but still with that greyish-yellow tinge in his face that says: The body hasn't won the war, only the day.

"Well, you jerks," he grinned as they came in. "I thought you'd misplaced me by mistake."

"We just wanted to check if you still had a warranty," said Kuddel.

Heckenpisser stopped in the doorway and looked around.

"Hehehe... shared rooms. Deluxe version of 'No private life'."

The two other patients glanced at them briefly. One was too tired to be annoyed. The other just snorted, as if he'd seen worse.

"Well, Karl," said Jana, who happened to also be at the station and came in, "how's the show going on level two?"

"Less beeping, more snoring," said Karl. "I'm now officially in the 'Not dead enough for intensive care, not fit enough for rehab' department."

“Interim storage,” Kuddel commented.

“Hehehe,” said Hecke, “hell with breakfast.”

"And?" asked Kuddel, sitting down on the chair, which was just as uncomfortable here as in 317. "What do you say?"

Karl shrugged.

"They say," he said, "the diuretic has worked. My heart is still beating, albeit resentfully. My liver... is acting up, but not completely shot. I'm getting pills for everything: blood pressure, water retention, blood thinning, good mood. Just not a pill for stupidity."

"It would be sold out," said Jana.

"And what about withdrawal?" asked Heckenpisser. "Hehehe. Or are they offering an alcohol-free all-inclusive here now?"

Karl looked to the side, then back at them.

"They were here yesterday, the people from the addiction counseling service," he said. "With folders, flyers, and kind words. 'We'll meet you where you are, Mr. M.' I said, 'I'm lying down.' Nobody laughed."

"And?", Kuddel inquired.

"They offered me rehab," he said. "A clinic somewhere in Brandenburg. Dry air, dry conversations, dry jokes. At least six weeks. Not a drop of water, no corner store, no beer, no drunks. Just me and my head. And now I get to sign or not."

He nodded towards the bedside table. There lay a slip of paper. With a stamp, logo, and checkboxes.

"And?" Kuddel asked again, but his voice was different now. A mixture of concern and curiosity.

"I've been looking at it since this morning," said Karl. "As if it were a death sentence. If I sign, it is one. If I don't sign – that's fine too."

“Hehehe,” whispered Hecke, “Dilemma in DIN A4 format.”

Jana stepped closer to the bed and crossed her arms.

"What scares you more?" she asked. "Rehab or drinking?"

Karl thought for a moment.

“Both,” he said then. “But rehab... feels like: I go somewhere where they force me to think about myself. And drinking... is what eventually brings me back here. With maybe not enough left to talk.”

"Let me tell you something," Jana said. "There's no option without fear. Only options where you get different monsters. In rehab, the monster is your head. Outside, it's your body."

"Hehehe..." Hecke began, "in both cases, one will eat you alive. The difference is: in rehab, there are mealtimes."

Karl half-grinned.

"Dude," he said, "you should work in a clinic. As a cautionary tale."

"I am a freelancer in failure," Hecke replied.

"What would you do?" Karl suddenly asked, looking first at Jana, then at Kuddel.

Jana didn't hesitate for a second.

"I would sign," she said. "Not because I believe that rehab solves everything – it doesn't. But because I've seen too many people who didn't even try. And in their cases, the death certificate still blamed someone else."

"Hehehe...", Hecke interjected, "you love our responsibility."

Karl looked at Kuddel. That was the more important answer.

Kuddel stared at the piece of paper as if it were a time bomb.

"I would..." he began, stopped, and took a breath. "...lie if I said I would sign. If I were me, I'd probably chicken out."

I know myself. To this day, I haven't submitted a single application that didn't smell half like an ashtray.

Karl nodded slowly. That was no surprise.

"But," Kuddel continued, "you are not me. You are already a step ahead. You are lying here. I am not – yet. So I tell you: Sign. Not because you will die a cleaner death. But because you won't have to reproach yourself later for never having tried."

"Hehehe..." muttered Hecke. "He just expressed a sensible opinion. Mark the day on your calendar."

"If you don't sign," Kuddel continued, "we'll still be your friends. We'll still stand at the corner store and drink to your memory. But I don't want to have to stand at the bar and tell people, 'Karl had his chance and said, 'Screw you.' I want to be able to say, 'He tried. He wasn't joking. Even if he was telling one.'"

Karl looked at him for a long time. The noises in the room – breathing, clearing of throats, the murmur of the TV from the neighboring bed – became quieter because the moment was more profound.

"You'll come visit me when I'm sitting out there in Brandenburg prison?" he asked.

“Hehehe...”, said Hecke, “if they let us in. I don’t know if they’ll accept trained drunken asses there.”

"I'm coming," said Jana. "If I get the day off, I'll bring you some disgusting filter coffee and a crossword puzzle. Then at least you can try looking for words other than 'schnapps' for a while."

Kuddel nodded.

"And I'll bring you a notepad," he said. "Then you can write your own shit down. Maybe you'll laugh about it someday. Maybe not. But at least then the crap will have some form."

Karl took a deep breath. The wheezing sound wasn't pleasant, but it was lively.

"Give me a pen," he finally said.

Jana reached into her scrub pocket and handed him a cheap ballpoint pen with the clinic logo.

"You don't have to do it now," she said. "You can still—"

“Yes,” he interrupted her. “If I don’t do it now, I’ll never do it.”

He took the slip of paper and placed it on the tray that was suspended above his legs. He held the pen as if it were something that didn't belong to him.

"I hate you," he muttered. "All of you."

He signed it. Crooked, askew, trembling. But it was there.

Heckenpisser breathed out audibly.

“Hehehe...”, he said, “so. Now you’re officially in the club of people who have at least once tried not to completely ruin everything.”

"This isn't a club," said Jana. "It's a self-help group with a bad coffee machine."

Karl put down the pen as if he had just lifted two tons.

"So," he said. "Now I've signed. If I die now, it's your fault."

“Even if you hadn’t signed, it would have been the same,” Kuddel replied. “The difference is: this way I can sleep better at night.”

They stayed for a while longer, talking about shitty everyday life, about some guy who had recently fallen asleep half in the trash can in front of the corner store, about Murat, who was seriously considering offering espresso ("because people need more coffee than beer - but I'm not going to tell them that"), about a woman who had named her dog after "Foucault" in the corner store without being able to explain who that was.

They laughed. Not loudly, not happily. But they laughed. And in the hospital system, where everything else is just beeping, that was almost a nuisance.

When they left, the signed note was lying in Karl's bedside table.

"I have an appointment in Brandenburg now," he said. "Hopefully there are at least some trees there."

"Yes, there are," said Jana. "And too many mosquitoes."

"Hehehe...", Hecke interjected, "when you come back you'll either be dry or allergic."

"When I come back," said Karl, "I'll be standing with you at the corner store. With water. Or beer. I don't know yet."

"That's okay," said Kuddel. "The main thing is that you're standing. And not lying down."

They left the room, went down the corridor, past the station room, through the elevator, past the information desk, through the revolving door to the outside.

Outside, the air was normal again. Dirty, cold, real.

"Hospital beer without beer," Heckenpisser finally said. "Hehehe. We're coming to our senses, Kuddel. That scares me."

"We won't become sensible," Kuddel objected. "We're only awake for a short time. Tomorrow we'll drink again. But we now know where the road leads if you keep going long enough."

"Room 317," Hecke murmured. "And then 2C. And then Brandenburg. Or Holz."

"Or wood," Kuddel repeated.

Later, at the corner store, when they were standing at the table again, Murat automatically put down two Sterni.

"And?" he asked. "What does he look like?"

"Like someone who was almost across," said Kuddel. "And now... I don't know. Wait and see if he regrets getting another chance."

"Hehehe...", added Hecke, "he signed up for rehab. Voluntarily."

Murat whistled softly through his teeth.

"Courageous," he said. "Or desperate. Probably both."

Kuddel took the bottle and held it in his hand. He turned it over, looking at the label as if it would give him answers.

"You know what's so bad about it?" he said. "I'm drinking this knowing that this is the very stuff that almost killed him. And probably me too, someday. And yet I'm still doing it."

“You’re honest enough to say it,” said Jana, who had just finished work and joined the group. “That’s more than many people manage.”

“Hehehe...”, grinned Hecke, “maybe you’ll get an honorary medal later: ‘Brave in continuing to drink with full awareness’.”

"With hospital beer as a medal," Kuddel muttered.

He put the bottle to his lips, paused, then put it down.

“To Karl,” he said. “Not because he’s a hero now. But because he dared to be afraid and still pick up the pen.”

They clinked glasses. Sterni bottles, Späti neon lights, Berlin breath.

“To Karl,” Jana repeated. “And to everyone who couldn’t try it anymore.”

"And here we come," said Heckenpisser. "Who are probably way too late. Hehehe."

“Maybe,” Kuddel said quietly, “someday there really will be a heart for alcoholics. Not on television. Here.”

He pointed to the box with the inscription
FOR THOSE WHO ARE STILL HERE.

"Until then," he continued, "we'll just keep visiting the hospital with hospital beer – or without – and pretend we're just visiting this whole mess. Even though deep down we're already patients."

The wind briefly passed through the corner, causing the sign on the late-night shop door to rattle.

and somewhere, in a shared room overlooking a backyard in Kreuzberg,

Karl lay there, looked up at the ceiling, and perhaps thought exactly the same thing:

that he had not suddenly become a role model with his crooked, trembling signature –

but perhaps something he had always lacked:

a person who, at least once, had not completely given up on themselves.

The Lost Night in Neukölln

There are nights that start normally and end normally. And there are nights that start normally and then disappear somewhere between the third cigarette butt and the last train into a hole, of which you only find fragments the next day.

This was one of those Neukölln nights. Lost before it had even really begun.

It started – like almost everything – at the corner store. Schöneberg, corner, standing table, neon light. The cardboard box “FOR THOSE WHO ARE STILL HERE” was still there, with little money and much meaning.

Kuddel stared at the box as if it could give him an answer that didn't smell of hospital.

“I can't visit Karl anymore,” he said. “Otherwise I'll really start believing in myself. And nobody wants that.”

Heckenpisser adjusted his bow tie as if he were preparing for an important appointment, although he looked like someone who hadn't had any important appointments in years.

“Hehehe...”, he said, “you need a distraction. A professional one. Not just a corner store program.”

“Distraction is my middle name,” said Kuddel. “My first name is ‘failure’.”

Murat placed two Sterni beers on the table. “Here,” he said. “Distraction in bottled form.”

Jana wasn't there – she was on the late shift. Karl was somewhere between the hospital and rehab in Brandenburg. The ghost in the toilet was taking a break.

It was one of those evenings when the air is too mild to stay home and too heavy to do anything sensible.

“You know what I suddenly feel like doing?” said Heckenpisser after the second bottle.

“If you say ‘yoga’ now, I'll shove a cigarette in your eye,” Kuddel replied.

“Neukölln,” said Hecke. “Hehehe. Down there, Hermannplatz, Sonnenallee, ticking off all the clichés. Since Üzgür mobilized the kebab man back then, I haven't really covered any ground there.”

Üzgür. The dim-witted German Shepherd from bygone days, named after Harald Schmidt's chauffeur. Who went offline at Hermannplatz and put half of Neukölln on high alert.

Kuddel grinned crookedly as the memory briefly flashed back.

“Back when the kebab guy chased you with a knife because you yelled ‘Üzgür, you asshole’ through the crowd,” Kuddel said. “Those were some sporty nights, man.”

“Hehehe,” chuckled Hecke, “I’m telling you: If anyone ever ran the world record in the 100 meters, it was me ahead of this guy.”

Murat intervened.

“You two to Neukölln,” he said. “That’s like rolling two burning garbage cans into a pile of tires. But...” he shrugged, “...if you absolutely have to: U8, Hermannplatz, then turn left. Everything else will fall into place.”

"Sounds like a plan," said Kuddel. "A very bad one, but at least it's a plan."

They took the train.

Subway rides in Berlin have their own chapter in the misery encyclopedia. Neukölln, U8, evening – bonus level.

The car was half full of everything the city leaves behind after a day: Disorganized tourists with wrong subway maps. Kids with bass blaring from Bluetooth speakers. A woman whispering into her phone as if it were glass, holding her life captive. A guy with a guitar and sad eyes who looked like he'd already butchered every Dylan song.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser didn't sit down. They stood by the door, didn't hold on, and let themselves be rocked.

“Everything here reeks of cheap perfume and abandoned hope,” said Kuddel.

“Hehehe...”, said Hecke. “It’s our natural habitat.”

At Kottbusser Tor, the next dose of reality boarded. Someone smelled of grass, someone of cold grease, someone of the day he hadn't survived.

A guy with baggy trousers and too many gestures started preaching to the people, something about religion, doom, and repentance.

"I don't need to turn back," Kuddel muttered. "I'm already going down."

“Hehehe,” chuckled Hecke, “if he only knew all the things we haven’t reversed...”

Hermannplatz.Station of chaos.

They stepped out into the typical mixture of drafts, human noise, and the smell of old kebabs, fresh cigarette butts, and sewage coming from somewhere.

"Here we are," said Heckenpisser. "Ground Zero of Neukölln folklore."

Up on the square, it looked as usual: the Karstadt department store, which had definitely seen better days. A mix of street musicians, aggressive advertising, hungry people, and bewildered pigeons. And all under that pale lamplight, which doesn't make things more beautiful, just more apparent.

“Where do we start?” asked Kuddel.

“There,” said Hecke, pointing towards Sonnenallee. “There, where everyone says you shouldn’t go too far in at night. Hehehe – those are exactly the corners that deserve us.”

They started running. Two guys who looked like they were either about to collapse or about to do something.

Sonnenallee at night was a kind of hell all its own. Garish neon from shisha bars, snack bars, and phone shops. Lights that promised everything was cheaper, except life itself. Arabic music, car horns, voices all jumbled together, snatches of languages they didn't understand.

"Everything here smells of coal, sugar, and wasted opportunities," said Kuddel.

“And garlic,” added Hecke. “Don’t forget. Hehehe.”

They passed three shisha bars, all with names like "Palace", "Lounge" or "Royal", although inside they contained the same worn-out sofas as in every other basement pub in Wedding.

"You know you're old," said Heckenpisser, "when you think of a lung specialist instead of fun when you hear 'shisha'."

"When I think of shisha, I think of mint-flavored Happy Sheets," Kuddel muttered. "But it doesn't matter."

They eventually ended up in one of those bars that look like they started out semi-legal and then just stayed: dimly lit, music too loud, beer that was more expensive than at the corner store, and a toilet that probably hadn't been officially approved for years.

"Two beers," said Kuddel at the bar. "Cheapest you have."

The bartender looked at her, saw her robe, saw the shirt and bow tie combination, saw the tiredness in her eyes, and placed two bottles in front of her.

"Cash or card?" he asked.

“Face,” said Kuddel. “We pay with time.”

“Hehehe...”, laughed Hecke. “Sufficiently covered.”

They sat down at a table in the corner, from which they could see the door and the bar. Old habits die hard.

At the next table were two guys in jogging pants and gold chains, acting like they were important. On their table: vodka, energy drinks, a hookah hose, a phone with an overly bright display.

At the table opposite: three female students, presumably, wearing second-hand jackets and experiencing those emotions you savor before you finally lose them. They were talking too loudly about something to do with "toxic relationships" and "safe space".

“Look,” said Hecke. “Here sits the whole of society in a budget version: dealers, victims, observers, and us.”

“We’re the extras in the background,” said Kuddel. “The ones nobody really remembers later.”

The beers ran out, the noise grew louder, the head felt lighter. At some point, a guy stood next to their table, middle-aged, with a well-groomed beard and a jacket that was too clean.

“Brother,” he began, “do you want something better than this?” – and pointed at the beer bottles.

“There’s nothing better than Sterni,” said Kuddel.

“Hehehe...”, added Hecke, “except maybe an organ donor card.”

The guy wouldn't let up. "I've got good stuff," he said. "Coke, pills, a little haze. Neukölln standard."

Kuddel looked at him as if he were considering whether to give him a lecture or just laugh him off.

“Brother,” he said then, “do you see us? Do you see this face?” – he tapped his forehead. “We’re not the ‘a little coke after work’ crowd. We’re the ‘one more beer even though tomorrow won’t be any better’ crowd. Your target audience is over there, with the girls with trauma and daddy issues.”

The dealer glanced briefly at the female students, then back at them.

"You're funny," he said. "But poor."

"Poor is relative," said Hecke. "We are rich in bad decisions. Hehehe."

The guy snorted and moved on. Two minutes later he was standing with the group of girls, and not five minutes later they were laughing too loudly.

"You were right," Kuddel murmured.

“I am an underground sociologist,” said Hecke.

Later, when the bar was nothing but a mixture of bass, muddy voices, and sticky flooring, they went outside. To get some air. Or pretend to.

Outside, Neukölln had become even louder. Cars driving without exhaust pipes, just to prove they existed. Teenagers on e-scooters who looked like they'd rather be somewhere else, but didn't know where.

"Do you actually know where we're going?" asked Heckenpisser.

"No," said Kuddel. "It's a wasted night, isn't it? A plan would be counterproductive."

They staggered towards the Reuterkiez neighborhood without realizing it. Sign after sign, neighborhood after neighborhood, eventually they arrived at a Späti (late-night convenience

store) that wasn't theirs. A Neukölln Späti. Different people, different atmosphere, same emptiness on the shelf behind the counter.

"Two more," said Kuddel. "For when we're on the go."

The convenience store owner glanced up briefly, saw her, saw her level of sophistication, but didn't make a scene. He was selling. Business is business.

"Have you ever noticed how many nights of our lives differ only by the sign 'Späti'?" asked Hecke as they continued walking.

"Yes," said Kuddel. "And how few people are aware of what actually happens inside."

At some point, the evening became... slippery.

They were at the canal. The Landwehr Canal, the wound that ran through the city and reflected everything except the sky.

"I almost fell over here once," said Kuddel, stopping at the railing. "Drunk as a kite, one wrong step, half my leg was in the water. If Hecke hadn't grabbed me back then, I'd be 'Man Who Tragically Drowned in Berlin' by now."

"Hehehe...", said Hecke, "I only grabbed you because you still had a full bottle in your hand."

They laughed, but there was something heavy in it.

A guy with a bicycle stood on the bridge, smoking, looking into the dark water. His face was one of those you forget immediately – and yet recognize ten years later if you meet him again.

"Nice evening," said Kuddel, because sometimes you say things like that even though they aren't true.

The guy nodded without looking up. "Depends on where you're looking from," he said. "From above it's okay. From below it's crap."

Hecke wanted to say "Hihihi," but it got stuck. Sometimes sayings are like cigarette butts—they don't always burn.

"Have you ever thought about jumping?" the guy suddenly asked, still without taking his eyes off the water.

"Yes," said Kuddel. "But I'm afraid of heights. Even here."

"Hehehe," came a quiet voice. "And a water contact allergy."

The guy glanced up briefly and looked her over.

"You two look like you've tried everything except quitting," he said. "Respect."

"Quitting is for people who have another option," said Kuddel. "Ours is: keep going or stay put. Jumping is more effort than necessary."

The guy nodded again, threw the cigarette butt into the canal, got on his bicycle and rode off.

"He didn't sit quite right with me," Hecke muttered.

"He was closer to us than you'd like," said Kuddel.

From then on, it becomes blurred.

They ended up in some other pub – no longer shisha, but more like an old building meets a run-down scene: beer 3.50, toilet without a toilet seat, someone playing guitar even though no one had asked.

Kuddel held some semi-philosophical monologues about "brokenness as a lifestyle that doesn't want to be a lifestyle," Heckenpisser discussed literature with a bearded man, even though he only knew half of the books the guy quoted.

"Hehehe... Bukowski was just a drunk with a typewriter too," Hecke exclaimed. "The difference is: he actually went through with it and wrote it down."

"We'll go through with it," said Kuddel. "We're just too lazy to write it."

At some point they weren't dancing, but the ground moved beneath their feet as if they were. The faces around them became blotches, the voices a murmur.

There was a red-haired woman who looked at Kuddel as if she were briefly interested, but when he opened his mouth, something came out that sounded too much like a corner store and not enough like a future. She turned away. Rightly so.

There was an argument in the bathroom because some guy thought Hecke had cut in line. "I didn't cut in line, I just failed faster," he said. "Hehehe," but that didn't help. There was pushing and shoving. Someone intervened. No bloodshed. No heroics. Just another evening where nothing escalated completely—and nothing got better.

Eventually – much too late and yet too early – they were back outside. Neukölln had spat them out, like a dog that has chewed on a stone and realizes there's no meat on it.

"Where are we?" asked Heckenpisser.

"Neukölln," said Kuddel.

"Yes, thank you," said Hecke. "Which part of Neukölln?"

Kuddel looked around: A kiosk he didn't recognize. A park that could have looked like any other park at the wrong time of day. Graffiti that meant nothing to him.

"No idea," he said. "But we're still in Berlin. And we're not in the hospital yet. That's something, at least."

It was that moment when the alcohol had passed its peak and began to erase things. Wipe them away. Streets, faces, sentences.

They just ran. Left, right, straight ahead, without a plan. Right across the neighborhood, without even knowing it was happening.

Later, Kuddel would try to reconstruct the lost night: Was there a kebab shop? Was there an argument with a taxi driver? Did they end up sitting on some steps and talking to someone about God whom she no longer remembered?

Everything blurred.

What remained: A picture of Heckenpisser, standing in the middle of a zebra crossing, spreading his arms and shouting: "Neukölln, you old filthy pig, you're like love! Everyone talks about it, but nobody gets out unscathed! Hehehe!"

And a taxi that honked. And a driver who shook his head. Not because he hated her – but because he had seen her too often.

The next morning, Kuddel woke up in his apartment. He was still wearing his robe, his shoes were off, and his trousers were half-open. He had a headache like a jackhammer in a backyard.

On the table: a half-full bottle of water, an empty bag of chips, a piece of paper.

In scribbled handwriting:

"We apparently came back alive. Neukölln: 1. Drinking farts: also 1."

I threw up. You were there before.

Hehehe.– Hedge”

Kuddel stared at the note as if it were evidence from a criminal case.

A lost night in Neukölln. She had truly been there – and yet gone.

What stuck with me wasn't the exact route, not the names of the bars, not the conversation with the dealer or the woman with the red hair, but this dull feeling.

that they had once again crossed the city like two ghosts pretending to still be part of the game
–

and that somewhere, in a hospital bed, someone was lying

who probably wondered,

whether he had decided for or against another lost evening.

The note lay there like an official document from the "Office for Screwed-Up Nights". Handwritten, slightly smudged, with that "Hihihi" at the end that looked as if Hecke had been trembling while writing it.

Kuddel sat in the kitchen, his head in a vise, his stomach like a bucketful of wrung-out rag. The ashtray was overflowing, even though he couldn't remember smoking there. That was the nasty thing about nights like these: your apartment looked like you'd been living, but your mind knew nothing.

He grabbed his forehead. It felt as if someone had tried to undress him from the inside.

"Neukölln: 1 – Saufärsche: also 1," he muttered. "A draw, man. We're getting old."

He dragged himself into the bathroom. The reflection stared back at him like a bad joke that had been told too often: red eyes, grey skin, scraggly beard, splashes of Sterni beer somewhere on his shirt that looked like abstract art.

He turned on the water, splashed some on his face, and waited for the great enlightenment.

Didn't come.

Just the sentence from my head: Lost night in Neukölln.

"What exactly have I lost?" he asked loudly into the room, which didn't answer. "Brain cells, dignity, or just my damn ticket?"

There was this strange in-between time after such nights. No longer properly drunk, not yet properly sober. A hangover like the afterglow of an explosion that had taken place in the head.

He sat back down in the kitchen, lit a cigarette – the first drag was like a punch to the lungs – and tried to pull the night out of his head like a film whose file was corrupted.

What scenes did he have?

Late-night convenience store in Schöneberg – of course. Subway, Hermannplatz – of course. Sonnenallee. Shisha bars. Dealer who misjudged her. The guy on the bridge who talked about jumping. The pub with the guitar and sticky floor. Red hair. Argument in the bathroom. Then... fog soup.

"Shit," he muttered. "I was there, and yet somehow I wasn't."

There was a knock.

Not a gentle, polite knock, but this "I'm too hungover to have patience" knocking, which clearly sounded like a hedge urinator.

Kuddel dragged himself to the door and opened it.

Hecke stood there in a shirt, coat over his arm, bow tie in his jacket pocket, dark circles under his eyes as deep as two ashtrays. He held a to-go coffee cup in his hand that looked more like decoration than medicine.

“Well, Neukölln survivor,” he said. “Hehehe. Are you still alive or is this already a post-mortem illusion?”

"Come in, you idiot," Kuddel muttered. "We need to discuss Exhibit A."

He pointed to the piece of paper on the kitchen table.

Hecke stepped closer, read, and grinned.

“I quoted myself,” he said. “That’s art. Hehehe. But I can only remember up to the moment I wrote that.”

"What else do you remember?" asked Kuddel. "I have gaps. Racing cars have big gaps."

Hecke sat down, put down his coffee, and rubbed his face.

"So," he began, as if he were writing a police report. "Us: Späti Schöneberg. Then subway. U8. Kottbusser Tor, Hermannplatz. Sonnenallee. Bar with music too loud, dealers, female students with future trauma, check. Then out. Canal. Suicidal poet with a bicycle who looked like he considered every night whether to jump or just watch. Then... another pub. Guitar guy, toilet fight, redheads who glanced at you briefly and then decided you weren't their salvation."

"That's already more than I had," said Kuddel. "And then what?"

Heckenpisser made this noise, which was somewhere between laughter and groaning.

“After that,” he said, “we went outside, tried to find our way home. And got lost – on foot. I remember at one point you thought we were heading towards Hermannstrasse, and when we looked at the street sign, it said something about a street I’d never heard of. We walked in circles, brother. About three times around our own misery.”

"Hehehe..." Kuddel said automatically, even though he didn't feel like laughing. "A living GPS with alcohol impairment."

“We went to a kiosk to get some beer,” Hecke recalled. “Two cans. You insulted one guy because he didn’t have a Boonekamp. You said, ‘What kind of corner store are you without a Boonekamp? You’re like a moral defect in the corner store system.’”

Kuddel grimaced. "I can't remember," he said. "But it sounds like me."

“Then we sat down somewhere,” Hecke continued. “On some steps. Or a curb. Or the base of some shitty monument, I don’t know. You started talking about Karl. Hospital, rehab, all that signing crap. You said you thought it was cowardly that you yourself never signed it. And that you still demanded he do it.”

Kuddel fell silent. "Did I say that?" he asked quietly.

“More or less,” Hecke replied. “It was a bit of a hungover situation beforehand, but understandable. You said you were always good at pushing others to be honest, while you yourself were swimming in beer.”

“Yes,” said Kuddel. “That really sounds like me.”

Heckenpisser took a sip of coffee and grimaced.

"This stuff is cold," he muttered. "Like our conscience."

They were silent for a moment, each with their own movie in their head.

“Do you know what else stuck with you?” Hecke then asked. “The guy on the bridge. Not what he said—that was standard existential crap. But the way he looked at us. Like he saw us and thought:

If I'm not careful, I'll end up looking like that too. And if I'm unlucky, that's even the better option.“

"He'll have his own wasted evening tonight," Kuddel muttered. "Or his wasted time."

"Maybe he has a job," said Hecke. "Maybe he has children. Maybe he's someone who's done everything right and yet still stands on bridges at night, looking into the water."

"Then he's in a worse situation than we are," said Kuddel.

“Hehehe...”, Hecke nodded. “At least we have an excuse: We screwed up. He just gained the realization that even ‘doing it right’ can feel like shit.”

They smoked, drank water, and racked their brains. Some things came back, fragmentary.

“I think we were chatting with some Polish guy,” Kuddel suddenly remembered. “He said Kreuzberg wasn’t Kreuzberg anymore. ‘Everything’s organic and vegan now. No real beer anymore. Things were better in the old days.’”

“Yes,” said Hecke. “You told him: ‘Things weren’t any better back then. You were just younger and could stay up for three days straight without your heart giving you the middle finger.’ He looked at you as if you had ruined his favorite fairy tale.”

“Lost night,” Kuddel repeated. “We walked through rooms that felt nothing to us.”

“We walked through districts that have learned to tolerate us,” Hecke corrected. “Hehehe. We’re not important enough to embarrass them.”

Around noon, Murat came by without being called. He "just happened" to be off work and "just happened" to have too much time on his hands.

"Well, Neukölln tourists," he greeted them in the kitchen. "I had a threat from you on the table yesterday, saying you were gone and might never come back. I woke up this morning and you didn't even make a headline. Disappointing."

“We tried,” said Kuddel. “But Neukölln didn’t issue press accreditation for us.”

Murat sat down and grabbed a cigarette without asking.

“They always say, ‘One night in Neukölln and you’re a new person,’” he said. “But you all look just like the old ones.”

“What do you expect?” asked Hecke. “Hehehe. That we’ll stand on the edge of the city in the morning, tears in our eyes, and say: ‘Neukölln has shown us how beautiful life is’?”

"Neukölln shows you above all how many different ways there are to live a crazy life," Murat said. "And that you're just one of them."

He looked at Kuddel.

"So? Was it at least good?" he asked. "Well... not objectively. Subjectively, in your ravaged brain."

Kuddel thought.

Was it good? Was there joy, a crash, an insight? Was there anything worthwhile, apart from the fact that they ended up back in their corner?

“It was...” he began, searching for a word, “...loud. That much I can say. Neukölln is always loud. But it wasn’t loud for us. It was just loud.”

“Hehehe...”, Heckenpisser nodded, “we were extras on the sidelines of the noise.”

"And yet you still went there," said Murat.

“Because we thought we’d be less ourselves there,” Kuddel replied. “In a different neighborhood, you’re briefly someone else. Then you realize: You’re still the same person. You just have different wallpaper.”

Murat half-grinned.

“That’s the difference between tourism and refugees,” he said. “Tourism takes photos. Refugees leave gaps.”

“We only have gaps,” Kuddel muttered.

They began to dissect the night like a forensic study. Who had said what, when, argued with whom, laughed with whom?

“Do you remember the guy in the pub with the guitar?” asked Hecke. “The one who wanted to play ‘Wonderwall’ and you shouted at him.”

"Did I?" asked Kuddel.

“Oh yes,” said Murat. “He was at the late-night shop this morning and complained.”

“What?” Kuddel turned around.

Murat grinned broadly.

“He said,” he imitated, “Yesterday there was this scruffy guy in a robe who said that if I started the song, he would be forced to kill himself with the barstool.’ I said, ‘Yeah, that sounds like my kind of clientele.’”

"Hehehe!" Hecke almost fell off his chair. "You're officially street theatre, Kuddel."

Kuddel groaned.

"You shouldn't say so many honest things when you're completely drunk," he muttered. "They come back to haunt you the next day like bad reminders."

“You’re not entirely wrong,” Murat said. “If I got a euro in every pub when some pissed-off guy sabotaged ‘Wonderwall,’ I wouldn’t need the corner store anymore. But you were... consistent.”

"Great," said Kuddel. "Consistently embarrassing."

Later, when Murat had to leave again, one question lingered in the room: Why did it all feel so empty?

Kuddel stared at his fingers, which were trembling slightly.

“Do you know what’s really getting to me?” he asked Hecke. “Back then... Mofa-Manni, Üzgür, train station toilets – at least our nights had a sense of adventure, even if they were completely ridiculous. Now... you run through Neukölln, drink, chat, get lost – and in the end, all that’s left is: We were somewhere we didn’t belong again.”

“Maybe,” said Hecke, “we don’t belong anywhere. Hehehe. We’re like error messages in the nightlife scene.”

“In the past,” Kuddel continued, “I was at least curious about the next chaos. Now all I think is: Please, no hospital. Please, no train station toilet. Please, nothing that burns longer than a cigarette butt.”

Hecke became serious for once.

"That's what you call getting older, old man," he said. "Hehehe – or something like that. You trade risk for tiredness. Do you remember how we used to say in our twenties: 'As long as something happens'? Now you say: 'As long as I survive the walk to the toilet.'"

“Do you know what the saddest thing is?” Kuddel asked, more to himself than to him. “Neukölln didn’t change much at all last night. I did. And you only realize that when you’re right in the middle of it and you’re fed up with playing the role you’re too old for – but you don’t have a new one either.”

He leaned back, staring at the yellowed ceiling, which was slowly developing cracks.

“Lost night,” he said again. “Perhaps it wasn’t lost at all. Perhaps it just showed me that I can’t lose anything new anymore. Because everything has already been used up.”

“Hehehe...”, said Heckenpisser, “this is the moment when normal people start doing yoga, buying detox juice and listening to podcasts about self-discovery.”

“If you ever catch me doing yoga,” said Kuddel, “please hit me with a full case of Sterni beer. I mean it.”

The phone vibrated. Unknown number.

Kuddel and Hecke exchanged a glance. The last few times unknown numbers had called, it had been the hospital, the job center, or just some people who had dialed the wrong number and still managed to say too much.

Kuddel answered.

"Yes."

A man's voice, slightly distorted, slightly too cheerful for the time of day.

"Is that... Kurt Scholz?", the voice asked.

"It depends on whether you want to sell something," said Kuddel. "If so, I'm dead. If not, maybe."

"This is Timo," said the voice. "The sociologist from the corner store. You remember him?"

Hedge-pisser's eyes widened. "Hehehe... field study!" he whispered.

“Timo,” Kuddel repeated. “What do you want in my tomcat?”

“I just wanted to ask,” said Timo, “if you happened to be in Neukölln last night.”

Kuddel and Hecke stared at each other.

"How do you know that?" grumbled Kuddel.

“Because I’m pretty sure,” said Timo, “that I heard you philosophizing in Reuterpark around 2:30 in the morning. With a guy on some steps who was crying and had a bottle of the cheapest vodka in his hand. I wasn’t quite sure if it was really you or if my brain had decided to supplement my field research with hallucinations.”

Kuddel grabbed his forehead. There was a rag. Stairs. Shadows. Someone sobbing. Himself, saying something like, "Brother, you're not the first to think the park's going to eat him." Hedge, going "Hehehe" and giving the guy his last cigarette.

"Maybe," Kuddel said slowly. "I have gaps in my knowledge."

"I don't have any," said Timo. "At least not there. I just wanted to say: You guys weren't as messed up as you always claim. You didn't mess with the guy. You didn't knock him out. You just sat next to him until he stopped crying. Then you staggered on."

There was a brief silence.

"I thought you'd rather know what you did with your lost night," Timo continued. "Not just because of the field study. Because of you."

"Hehehe..." came a quiet voice from Hedge-Pisser's corner. "Accidentally valuable from a social-pedagogical perspective."

Kuddel swallowed. The hangover in his head briefly shifted aside, making room for something else.

"Thanks, Timo," he said gruffly. "For the record."

"Sure," said Timo. "And... if you ever feel like me not just quoting you, but buying you coffee – let me know."

"Yeah, yeah," Kuddel grumbled. "Hang up now before you get too nice."

He did it.

They were sitting in the kitchen again. Kuddel, Heckenpisser, a long-cold cigarette in the ashtray, and Timo's sentence in the room:

You simply sat next to him until he stopped crying.

"There you go," Hecke finally said. "The lost night in Neukölln wasn't completely lost after all. We cushioned someone's fall a little."

"We were keeping a drunk man company," Kuddel corrected. "That's our area of expertise."

"Hehehe...", said Hecke, "yes. But for him that was perhaps the difference between 'I am completely alone' and 'there are two idiots sitting there who at least take me seriously enough to light a cigarette on me'."

Kuddel lit a new cigarette, took a deep drag, coughed, and took another drag.

"Perhaps," he said quietly, "that was the only moment of the night that was not completely in vain."

"Hey," replied Hecke, "that's a pretty good turnout for an evening in Neukölln."

Outside, a siren drove by somewhere; the city wheezed into the day.

And Kuddel thought, as the smoke caught on the yellowed ceiling:

Perhaps the lost nights are the ones in which we were there most for others – and least for ourselves.

But aloud he only said:

"Today we're staying in Schöneberg."

"Hehehe," Heckenpisser nodded. "One lost night is enough for this week. The neighborhood can wait."

The day dragged on like chewing gum stuck to a shoe. Nothing really happened, but everything lingered.

Kuddel had showered at some point – so half-heartedly that the dirt was more offended than removed – put on a pair of somewhat clean jeans, the same robe, the same head. Heckenpisser had left after a while, supposedly "to work," which usually meant: sitting around somewhere, pretending to be important, and hoping that no one would ask too many questions.

In the late afternoon, the city hung in that gray in-between: too late for "Good morning," too early for "So, after-work beer?" The sky over Schöneberg was leaden, the streets tired, and so were the people.

Kuddel didn't quite know what to do with himself. Staying at home was dangerous – thoughts were waiting there that he couldn't bear sober.

So the only option left was: the corner store. As always. Like a magnet that won't let go, even though the paint has long since worn off.

As he turned the corner, the standing table was there, just as it always was – like a poorly paid bouncer of reality. On the tabletop: ash, beer stains, a few etched messages of nonsense that you only understand if you wrote them yourself.

Murat was in the store, head over the cash register, receipts like confetti, only without the celebration.

"Well," he said, as Kuddel came in. "The prodigal son of Neukölln."

"Lost night," Kuddel corrected. "I'm just bycatch."

Murat raised an eyebrow.

"So," he said. "Neukölln spat you out, you don't have an arrest warrant on your ass, no charges filed, no hospital – I call that success."

"If this is what success looks like, I don't even want to know what failure looks like," Kuddel muttered.

Murat silently placed two Sterni beers on the counter. One for now, one for later. He knew how it worked.

"Timo was already here," he said casually. "Asked if you were alive."

"The sociologist," Kuddel growled. "He saw us yesterday. In the park."

"I know," said Murat. "He told me. Thought you might want to hear it. Or maybe not."

"I've already received the summary," Kuddel said. "We kept someone company while they cried. Nobel Prize theater."

"It could have been worse," Murat said. "You could have robbed him."

Kuddel shrugged.

"What else did Timo say?" he asked, somewhat casually.

"That you looked like two characters from a movie nobody wants to make yesterday," Murat said. "But that you weren't quite as wrecked as you like to pretend. And that he briefly thought he'd have to include you in his doctoral thesis, but then realized you were too unwieldy for footnotes."

"Hehehe," Heckenpisser said behind him – he had arrived silently. "We are the footnotes that blow up the work."

Eventually, they were standing at the high table again. The world in its place: Starni, cigarette butt, neon lights, Murat's annoyed, basic friendliness.

The box labeled "FOR THOSE WHO ARE STILL THERE" was still there, containing a few new coins, a bent five-euro note, and a children's toy car that someone had thrown in out of boredom.

"Well," said Jana, as she came around the corner, in civilian clothes, backpack on her shoulder, hair still damp from showering after her shift. "Haven't digested your Neukölln vacation yet?"

"It was more of an educational trip," Kuddel muttered. "We learned that we are superfluous in other places too."

"Hehehe," added Hecke, "but with a different road surface."

Jana put down her backpack and reached for her cigarette.

"Timo intercepted me at the hospital," she said. "He really runs back and forth between your worlds like God's intern."

"What did he want?" Kuddel asked suspiciously.

"Ask if you're okay," she said. "And find out if it helps you when he tells you that you weren't completely useless yesterday."

"He was already with me," said Kuddel.

"And?", Jana asked.

"I now know that yesterday I was sitting on some steps next to a sad, vodka-addled zombie and told him that dying in a sewer isn't any better," said Kuddel. "Maybe I was right. Maybe I just wanted to hear how clever I am when I'm completely drunk."

"What's wrong with distracting someone from jumping?" Jana asked. "Whether it's clever or not."

"Maybe he didn't even want to jump," said Kuddel. "Maybe he just didn't want to cry alone."

"Then you delivered," she said. "Free service from the drunks."

Hedge pisser took a deep gulp and licked the foam from his beard.

"You know what I find funny?" he said. "We call it a 'lost night' because we don't remember everything. But maybe..." he grinned crookedly, "...the lost nights are the ones we remember too well. The ones with the train station toilet, the hospital, the police. This one...at least didn't arrest us."

"She has only shown us that our level of destruction is now taking place more internally than externally," Kuddel muttered.

Later, the corner store got busier. People came, bought beer, chips, cigarettes, and disappeared again. A few lingered at the table, but tonight was one of those evenings where no new story wanted to unfold. Only echoes.

"How are you, Karl?" Heckenpisser asked Jana at some point.

"He's still alive," she said. "He got his confirmation for rehab yesterday. In two weeks he's leaving Berlin and going to Brandenburg. Trees, group discussions, filter coffee."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Rehab in Brandenburg – it's like summer camp for failed adults."

"He's nervous," Jana continued. "But he stands by his signature. He said, 'If I'm going to die, I might as well do it properly.'"

Kuddel nodded slowly.

"We had a lost night too," he said. "Only his will probably last longer."

"Maybe," Jana said, "that's exactly the difference: You go to Neukölln, lose a night and find yourselves at a standing table. He goes to rehab, loses a few months – and hopefully finds something that's more than just the next bottle."

"Or he finds out that without a bottle there's nothing left," said Kuddel.

"At least he'll know," she replied.

They continued drinking, but it was different than usual. Not so forced. Not that "We have to escalate, otherwise the evening was for nothing" kind of thing.

It was more like this:

We're still here.

And that alone was exhausting enough.

Eventually, Timo was actually standing there again. Jute bag, glasses, posture like someone who had resolved not to make a complete fool of himself again.

"Moin," he said cautiously.

"Hey, field study," Heckenpisser greeted him. "Hehehe. It's your fault we now know we were nice yesterday. I feel manipulated."

Timo approached the table and placed a bottle of beer on it. Not craft beer, not organic. Just a regular, cheap pilsner.

"I thought I would adapt," he said. "Integration from above."

"Okay," said Murat. "You'll learn."

There were four of them standing there: Kuddel, Hecke, Jana, and Timo. Four people, four versions of the same city.

"So," Timo began, "about yesterday..."

"We know," Kuddel interrupted. "You saw us, we kept someone company while they were crying, we were briefly almost socially competent. Case closed."

Timo smiled crookedly.

"I just wanted to say," he continued, "that maybe it wasn't a problem for him. He'd been sitting there alone for ages. I saw him before you came. And I didn't do anything. Just watched. Because I thought, 'It's not my responsibility.'"

He looked at his hands, at the neck of the bottle he was holding.

"Then you came," he said. "Drunk, tired, loud. I thought:
Now it's getting embarrassing.

And then you just sat down next to him. You didn't ask if he wanted therapy. You didn't ask what his childhood was like. You just sat next to him. Smoked. Swears with him. That was... somehow the most honest thing I've seen in months.

"Hehehe...", Hecke said. "We are minimal therapy without a completion."

"We haven't solved anything," said Kuddel. "He'll have the same mind and the same bottle the next day."

"Yes," Timo agreed. "But at least he had one night where two idiots shared with him how much it hurts."

I know this isn't a groundbreaking achievement. But nobody in my studies says:
Sometimes that's enough."

"Because your studies thrive on promising solutions," Jana murmured. "But most of them only offer sequels."

It was a strange evening. No riot, no train station, no hospital. Simply: talking, drinking, silence, talking again.

They talked about Neukölln as if it were an ex they'd drunkenly called too often. About the lost night, gaps in their memory, unfamiliar toilets, and familiar fears.

"I used to think," Timo said at one point, "that lost nights were romantic. Like, 'We were young, wild, we forgot each other, we danced, we found each other again somewhere.' You're showing me the version right now:

We were no longer young, no longer wild, we had forgotten ourselves and only just barely found each other again.“

“Hehehe...”, Hecke nodded. “Welcome to season 9 of ‘Life That Didn’t Go As Planned’.”

“And yet...”, Timo continued, “you are here today. At the same table. With the same jokes. With more pain than glory, but... you are here.”

“Because we have nothing else,” said Kuddel. “That’s the whole trick.”

Later, after Timo had left and Jana had said goodbye because she was "again responsible for people on IV drips tomorrow," Kuddel, Heckenpisser, and Murat remained.

The usual setup. Boss set from the corner store.

“You know,” Murat began, “I’ve seen many wasted nights. Some were loud, some bloody, some on the verge of drama. Most were simply... pointlessly crowded.”

He wiped the counter without looking.

“But every now and then,” he continued, “there are evenings when you narrowly escape disaster and still manage to do something meaningful without realizing it. Sit down with someone. Take a taxi for Karl.”

Setting up a box. These aren't the big revolutions. But without those few moments, I would have closed down here long ago.

"Because otherwise everything just keeps spinning," Kuddel said.

“Exactly,” said Murat. “Because otherwise it would all just be consumption. Alcohol in, money out, shut up. You annoy me, sure. But you also remind me that this isn’t just a gas station for getting drunk, but also a waiting room for people who have no lobby.”

“Hehehe...”, said Hecke, “we’re lobby noise in the basement.”

Later, at home, Kuddel sat again at his rickety kitchen table. A notepad in front of him, pen in his hand, his head full of half-finished sentences.

He wrote at the top:

The Lost Night in Neukölln

He began below, letting the words come out, however crooked they might be:

"We drive away, to other neighborhoods, to other lights, because we believe that we are different somewhere else."

But we always take ourselves with us: our organs, our debts, our jokes.

Neukölln wasn't to blame. Neither was Schöneberg. We just fell through the night like loose screws in a city that's been rattling for a long time.

He paused, took a sip of water – not beer this time – and continued writing:

"The night wasn't lost because we found nothing, but because we briefly..."
have stopped looking for us.

On a staircase in the park, a man sat with vodka in his hand and snot in his face, thinking there were no more witnesses to his misery.

Suddenly, two broken people were sitting next to him and didn't tell him what to do. They only said to him: 'We don't feel any better. We've just been drinking longer.'

Perhaps that was the moment that saved the night from utter meaninglessness.

He put down the pen and rubbed his eyes.

Outside, the city glowed like an unputted cigarette. Neukölln, Schöneberg, Kreuzberg – all the same system, just different stations.

*Lost Night*the thought.
Just as lost as we are.

But then another thought came along, quiet but persistent:

Lost doesn't mean gone. Just... hard to find again.

He picked up the pen again and added one last sentence:

"Perhaps the nights in which we remember ourselves the least are precisely the nights in which we remember ourselves the most."
were there for others.

And perhaps this is the only thing that will remain of us if Neukölln, Schöneberg, the hospital and the late-night convenience store eventually continue without us."

He closed the notebook, laid his forehead on his arms, and let the city continue on without him.

Hedge pisser falls in love for three beers

It was one of those evenings where absolutely nothing was supposed to happen. Nothing big. Nothing dramatic. Just the usual cycle of beer, cigarettes, late-night shopping, and self-pity.

The air was cold enough that the smoke was visible, but not cold enough to really send people running home. Schöneberg breathed heavily; the standing table stood in its usual place, as if welded to the asphalt.

Kuddel was already standing there, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, jacket open, Stern beer in his hand. He looked like a broken landmark.

The cardboard box "FOR THOSE WHO ARE STILL HERE" was still on the table, slightly inset, as if it had become a regular customer.

Heckenpisser shuffled out of the darkness, but of course still impeccably dressed: shirt, coat, briefcase, bow tie in his jacket pocket, side parting, glasses crooked. A mama's boy who acted as if he'd accidentally fallen out of an office furniture catalog.

"Well, there you are, you old fossil," he said. "Starting shift again already? Hehehe."

"I'm on permanent shift," Kuddel muttered. "I don't have any other shifts anymore."

Murat silently placed two Sterni in front of them. The ritual needed no words.

"How's it going with Karl?" asked Hecke after the first sip.

"The Brandenburg package is on its way," said Kuddel. "Rehab confirmed. Admission date set. He sounds on the phone like someone who voluntarily goes to a boarding school for failed adults."

"Hehehe," said Heckenpisser. "Maybe he'll come back with a fruit basket. And a permanent headache."

They drank, smoked, and talked about nothing because no one wanted to talk about what really mattered. The evening was one of those gray areas on which life sometimes simply refuses to write anything.

Until she came.

It was immediately obvious that it didn't fit into the usual corner store catalog.

Not your typical convenience store customer in sweatpants, headphones, and an annoyed look. Not a stumbling office worker in a suit, clutching a wine bottle out of embarrassment. Not a partygoer with mixed drinks and a "Where's the after-party?" attitude.

She came around the corner like someone who was going out for the first time in a long time because there was no other option.

A black coat, not expensive, but decent. A shoulder bag, worn but well-organized. Black tights, a skirt, Doc Martens that had seen miles. Dark hair, somewhere between undone and intentionally so. A face... not a picture-perfect face from a catalog, more one with stories to tell: dark circles under the eyes, but clear eyes. Tired corners of the mouth, but not abandoned.

She walked past them towards the entrance, and it was as if someone had briefly turned up the saturation in the image.

"Wow," said Heckenpisser quietly. "Hehehe."

"Get a grip," Kuddel muttered. "She probably just wants cigarettes. Or your organs. And neither of those are available."

Murat saw her coming through the window and involuntarily straightened up a little. Not in love, but respectful. You could tell she wasn't one of those who mumble "Marlboro Gold and a Red Bull" and then disappear again.

She entered the shop, and through the crack in the door they heard her voice, clear, not too high-pitched, not too friendly.

"Hi. A pack of Gauloises blue, unfiltered. And... two Astras, please."

"Gauloises," Hecke murmured. "That's a statement. Hehehe."

"Astra too," added Kuddel. "She's either moved three times already or broken up with the same guy three times."

"I'm in love," Heckenpisser said simply.

"You're drunk," said Kuddel. "You've had one and a half Sterni beers."

"That's enough for me," grinned Hecke. "Hehehe. I can do anything for three beers."

When she came back out, she was carrying the beer-shy Astra bottles around her neck, cigarette butts in her coat pocket, and glanced briefly towards the standing table. Just briefly. But long enough for Heckenpisser to straighten up like a training dummy in a self-control club.

"Don't say anything now," Kuddel hissed. "Not your usual routine. No jokes about Gauloises cigarettes, no life advice, no 'hehehe' in her direction. She's seen too much for that kind of thing."

But fate hated Kuddel, and Heckenpisser hated boring evenings. So it was clear what would happen.

She actually stopped. Just for a moment.

"Is this seat free?" she asked, pointing to the corner of the standing table that wasn't completely cluttered with bottles, ash, and cardboard boxes.

"If you don't steal our securities, then yes," said Kuddel.

She looked at the box with the inscription, read it, and raised an eyebrow.

"For those who are still here," she read. "Good target group. Many deaths, stable demand."

"Hehehe," said Heckenpisser. "Limited Edition."

She grinned. Not a big laugh, more of a brief flash.

"I'm Lea," she said. "Before you all secretly call me 'the one with the Gauloises'."

"Hedge pisser," said Hecke automatically. "Well... actually Ulf. But everyone calls me hedge pisser. Long story."

She looked at him, sideways, slightly amused.

"Your last name really is Schröder, isn't it?" she asked. "You look like it. Schröder with a bow tie."

"Hehehe," he straightened up. "Bullseye. And this is Kuddel. Kurt Scholz. Mascot of the neighborhood."

"A retired corner store icon," Kuddel muttered. "What brings you to this corner, Lea? Shattered dreams, exorbitant rents, or just thirst?"

"Thirst and rent are linked," she said. "I live just around the corner. And if I stay inside, I'll go crazy. If I go out, at least it'll be later."

She placed her Astra down, opened it with a lighter that had seen better days, and took a drag on her Gauloises cigarette.

The smoke smelled of past nights that hadn't ended as planned.

It didn't take five minutes before Heckenpisser was completely in mode.

Normally he was the know-it-all in the background, commenting on everything and taking no risks. Today... something was different. Maybe it was the tiredness, maybe the lingering hangover from the night in Neukölln, maybe simply the fact that Lea looked like someone who doesn't flaunt her neuroses on Instagram.

"What do you do for a living, Lea?" he asked, and the "you" came automatically, as always when he got nervous.

"I push people around," she said dryly. "Nursing. A ward for everything life throws at you."

Jana spontaneously thought of Kuddel. Another caregiver. Berlin was full of people who were paid to manage the leftovers.

"Oh," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe. My condolences – in both senses of the word."

"It's okay," said Lea. "I've done worse. Call center."

She took a sip of Astra.

"And you?" she asked. "You don't look like you've had a typical career path."

"We work in the field of research," Hecke said seriously. "Sociology of failed biographies. Empirical. Field study."

"We are both guinea pigs and researchers," Kuddel added. "Evaluating the data ourselves. Very efficient. But it doesn't help anyone."

"Hehehe," Lea laughed briefly. "I work in a hospital. I know the concept."

The longer she stood there, the more the scene shifted. The corner store was suddenly no longer just dirt, neon lights, and a standing table. It was as if someone had brought in a new color that wasn't on the palette before.

Heckenpisser noticed his heart beat a little faster, his hands wanting to do a little too much. He wasn't head over heels in love. Not the big drama. More like: for three beers. Just enough for the world to become briefly kitschily bright for a moment.

"What kind of music do you listen to?" he asked, as if he had the right to ask this teenage question.

"It depends on the shift," Lea said. "After a twelve-hour day in intensive care: silence. Before that: anything that doesn't sound like a radio playlist. Why? Are you testing me?"

"Hehehe," he raised his hands defensively. "No, no. I just wanted to make sure you didn't say Schlager music. I have a weak heart."

"My ex was a DJ," she said. "I'm immune to genre discussions. I've been to weddings where fifty-year-old men cried to Helene Fischer and belted out AC/DC. After that, nothing else matters."

"Then you're tougher than us," Kuddel said. "We get a rash just from someone singing 'Wonderwall'."

Lea pulled the collar of her coat up a little higher.

"Last night, someone was standing in a pub in Neukölln with a guitar," she said. "He started with 'Today is gonna be the day...' And I swear, I briefly prayed that some drunk would interrupt him. Maybe it was even her."

Kuddel grimaced.

"We are not commenting on that," he said. "For protection reasons."

Hecke giggled. "Hehehe."

Murat observed the whole thing from inside the shop. You didn't need to know him to see that he noticed when the atmosphere changed. His look said: Aha. Schröder's got flames in his head.

Jana eventually came around the corner after her shift ended and saw the picture: Lea, Heckenpisser, Kuddel, standing table.

She stayed in the shade, lit a cigarette, and grinned.

"Well, look at that," she murmured softly to Murat. "Ulf has butterflies in his stomach. Or heartburn. Hard to say."

"Three-beer love," said Murat. "Lasts until you're almost ready to throw up."

Heckenpisser noticed nothing. For him, the cone of neon light above the standing table had suddenly become a stage.

Normally, he was the type for ironic detachment, quips with "Hehehe," a shield of words. Now... he let something slip. Not everything, but enough to see behind it.

"You know, Lea," he said, "I admire people like you."

"Because I'm still functioning?" she asked.

"Because you function and still buy beer," he said. "Hehehe. Most of your kind pretend they do yoga, meditate, detox after their shift. You stand here, smoking Gauloises, drinking Astra, and openly admitting you work in a hospital without trying to put on a halo."

She shrugged.

"Today I watched a man die who believed he'd be fit enough to climb stairs again in two weeks," she said. "I don't need a smoothie bowl when I go out anymore. I need something that doesn't remind me of green vitamins."

"Hehehe," Hecke nodded. "I understand."

"And you?" she asked. "What do you admire so much?"

Kuddel started to say something cynical, then stopped.

"People who don't immediately run away when they see us at the standing table," he said seriously. "Whoever doesn't just walk past us thinking, 'Oh, those guys again.' It's almost... romantic now."

Lea looked at him, then at the hedge.

"I'm not running," she said. "I'm standing still very well, thank you."

As the evening progressed, the world seemed to shift slightly to the side. The traffic, the streets, the other people – everything continued, but for the three at the standing table, it was as if they had briefly found a different frequency.

Heckenpisser was in his element and out of it at the same time.

He told her about the "boarding school", about Moped-Manni, about the ghost in the toilet, about Karl, who had now signed up for rehab, about the peep show in his mind's eye, about the box "FOR THOSE WHO ARE STILL THERE". Of course, all with "Hihihi" parentheses, but not out of mockery – more out of self-protection.

Lea listened. Really. Not with that "I'm just waiting until I can talk about myself again" look, but with genuine interest.

She laughed occasionally. Sometimes she frowned. Once she shook her head when he told her about the Babylon train station toilet.

“You’re finished,” she said then. “But you’re done.”

"That's the only thing we have," said Kuddel. "Consistency in doing things wrong."

Heckenpisser was long gone. Not drunk – his blood alcohol level was okay – but emotionally overwhelmed. In love in his own way: for the length of three beers. Just enough to briefly imagine that things could be different.

And of course, the moment came when he went too far.

It had to be this way. Hecke couldn't just have a somewhat magical evening and then quietly go home. The universe would have complained.

“You know, Lea,” he said, already on his fourth “Hehehe” in five minutes, “if things were fair in this world, you wouldn’t be at the corner store with Gauloises and Astra, but in a bar with people who are annoying you with red wine and asking how your inner child feels.”

"I've been there," she said. "It was worse."

"Hehehe..." he leaned forward a bit too far. "Now let me tell you something: If I weren't me, and you weren't you, and the world weren't completely screwed up, I'd invite you for a better beer right now. Somewhere where the glasses are polished, and the toilet doesn't look like the ghost of the loo just finished his shift."

She looked at him. Long enough that he counted every second like a court-ordered protocol.

"And what's stopping you?" she asked calmly.

He looked down at himself – shirt that was no longer quite white. Bow tie that had become outdated in his coat pocket. Old shoes, old soul. Corner store behind him, crate on the table.

“Me,” he said. “Hehehe. Me and my three beers of losing touch with reality.”

Lea didn't smile, but her eyes softened a little.

"That's the most honest thing I've heard today," she said.

Jana stepped into the light and lit another cigarette.

"I need to sleep," she said. "Tomorrow someone else will walk past me with an IV drip and hope. Lea, it was nice meeting you. Boys... behave yourselves. Or at least try to."

“Hehehe,” Hecke said. “We’re behaving within our means.”

Murat was putting away the last of the things inside; the roller shutter was already half down.

"Last round," he shouted. "Then the party's over."

Lea finished her Astra and put out her cigarette.

“I have to do it too,” she said. “Early shift tomorrow. Washing people who still think they’re kings. And those who realized long ago that they never were.”

She reached for her bag and looked at Hecke.

“Thank you for... the stories,” she said. “And for not pretending everything is okay here.”

“Thank you for not acting like we were just material for a book,” he replied. “Hehehe.”

“Who says I won’t write one?” she replied.

She turned to Kuddel.

"And you?" she asked. "What will you do if you continue like this?"

“Either hospital beer next year,” he said. “Or eventually just a crate on the table. For those who are still here when I’m gone.”

She nodded, as if that were an answer she could live with.

"Take care of yourselves," she said. "As best you can."

"You too," replied Heckenpisser.

She left. Not dramatically, no music, no slow-motion exit. Simply: coat zipped up, footsteps in the night, corner, gone.

Hecke stood there, watching her until she disappeared into the darkness.

"In love," he said quietly. "For the duration of three beers."

“Only two came out,” Kuddel corrected. “That’s progress. So you’re only two-thirds in love.”

"Hehehe," he smiled wryly. "That's enough. I couldn't negotiate any more anyway."

Murat came out, wearing a cardigan over his shirt.

"So," he said. "Lights out, you bums. Go home, Schröder. Before you get the idea of following her to the hospital tomorrow."

“Would you do that?” asked Kuddel.

Heckenpisser thought for longer than usual.

"No," he said. "Hehehe. Do you know why?"

"Why?" asked Kuddel.

“Because it was exactly right the way it was,” Hecke replied. “For three beers, we were allowed to pretend that something was still possible. If I show up tomorrow with flowers from

the discount store, everything will be ruined. So it'll stay one night. That's how legends are made."

Kuddel grinned wearily.

"You're getting old, Hecke," he said. "You're learning not to follow every impulse."

"No," he objected. "I just realized that some things are better left undone."

Later, at home, Heckenpisser actually wrote something down. Not much. Just a note on a shopping list:

"League, Gauloises, Astra, hospital. For three beers, everything was briefly not completely lost."

He put the note in his jacket, among old tickets, torn corners of notebooks, and his mother's telephone number, which he never deleted as a matter of principle.

In love for the duration of three beers. No more. No less.

And somewhere, two streets further on,

Lea was perhaps sitting by the window, looking down at Berlin,

took a drag on her last cigarette, drank lukewarm Astra from the bottle,

and perhaps thought:

There are worse things than an evening with two drunkards who at least know that they are drunkards.

The next morning, the love was gone.

Not completely, not as a feeling – but as an acute syndrome. What remained was what always remained: headaches, dry mouth, cigarette fog in the brain, and that underlying pulling sensation in the stomach, as if someone had silently stapled memories into it during the night.

Hedge Pisser stood in the bathroom in front of the mirror. His shirt was still half over the chair back, his bow tie in his jacket pocket, his hair flattened on one side, on the other side heading towards disaster. He looked like someone who had tried to outsmart the night and had been caught.

"Great," he muttered. "I look like I've been beaten with a printer and a hole punch at the same time. Hehehe."

He looked into his eyes. Blood vessels like fine cracks in a cheap glass bottle.

Lea, he thought. Gauloises, Astra, dark coat, tired laughter.

For three beers. In the neon light, it almost looked like hope.

Now, in the bathroom light, it looked like a beautiful accident that was already over.

He dressed as always: a freshly ironed shirt – his mother had taught him how to do it once, and since then it was the only thing he'd never messed up. Pleated trousers. Patent leather shoes that had seen too many curbs over the years. A jacket with slightly stretched elbows. Bow tie. Glasses.

The whole appearance is that of "bourgeois remnants," carefully pulled over the inside like a too-thin coat over an open wound.

His mother sat at the kitchen table as she did every morning, mustache shadow, apron, mushroom haircut. She was the kind of woman who looked as if she had been born a pensioner.

"Well, Ulf," she said without looking up. "You were late again."

"I was... conducting a social field study," he murmured, taking a cup.

"So that's what you call drinking now," she snapped. "Back then it was called 'you're hanging around with that bum'."

"Kuddel isn't a bum," he automatically defended himself. "He's... a cost-of-living optimizer."

"Hehehe," he added quietly.

She snorted.

"You're over 40, Ulf," she said. "You're still hanging around the corner store with guys in robes and you're proud of it."

"I'm not proud," he said. "I'm just being consistent."

She glanced at him briefly, that look honed over decades: resignation wrapped in worry.

"Did you at least have fun?" she asked.

He thought of Lea. Of the Gauloises cigarettes. Of the sentence: If I weren't me...

"Yes," he said. "For three beers."

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing, Mother," he murmured. "I'm leaving now."

The way to the corner store was the same as always. Same road damage, same garbage containers, same pensioners with dogs, same teenagers with headphones, carrying their boredom around.

But Heckenpisser heard everything a little louder today. Every voice, every car, every siren sound. As if Lea had turned up the volume yesterday.

Kuddel was already standing at the corner store, looking as if he'd spent the night there. He had a cigarette in his hand and that typical "I'm pretending the hangover is just a stylistic device" look.

"Well, Romeo," he greeted him. "How's your three-beer love affair going? Still in your heart or already in your liver?"

"Shut up," said Hedge-Pisser, but without venom. "Hehehe. I'm feeling sensitive today."

"I noticed," Kuddel grinned. "Yesterday you walked home as if you had to artificially keep your heart upright so it wouldn't collapse in the park."

Murat silently placed two bottles down. He had this look on his face that said: I'm saying nothing, but I know everything.

"She's not coming back, you know?" said Kuddel after the first sip.

"Who?" asked Hecke, although he knew exactly who he meant.

"Lea," Kuddel replied. "That was a one-off delivery. She had exactly the level of intoxication, tiredness, and nerve for ONE evening with us. Not for a series."

"I don't expect her to tattoo my phone number on her heart," Hecke muttered. "Hehehe. All I know is... the evening was different."

He looked at his bottle, turning it between his fingers.

"I told her things," he said, "that I usually only tell when I'm as drunk as a bat out of hell. And she didn't laugh. Well... not at me. Just with me."

"Yes," said Kuddel. "Because she's too tired for pity porn."

Jana came around the corner, still in shift mode: backpack, hoodie, hair in a braid, eyes with the typical hospital look – awake and tired at the same time.

"Well, Ulf," she said, winking. "In love again already? I heard you had a... subject study yesterday."

"Hehehe..." he feigned offense. "Can't one even enjoy three beers in peace without it immediately ending up in the autopsy room?"

"Yes," she said. "But not at this table. This table is like a surveillance camera. Everything is being recorded."

She pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

"Lea is cool," she said. "I know her casually. Hospital industry. Good colleague, good nurse, too little money, too much death, too many night shifts. Classic Berlin package."

"You see," said Hecke. "My type of woman. Emotionally battered, but not completely broken down yet."

“She’s not your type of woman,” Kuddel countered. “She’s your type of illusion. You like to fall in love with women who keep walking even when you stop.”

"Hehehe," he nodded. "Of course. If she stayed, it would be serious. And I can't be serious."

It was one of those afternoons that pretended to turn into evening, but far too slowly.

Jana had to leave later; shift start, blood pressure, and alarm. Murat had orders and suppliers. Kuddel was doing his usual thing: not leaving, not arriving.

Lea had "Heckenpisser" in mind.

Every little detail. How she held the bottle. How she had stubbed out the cigarette. How she had said, "You're finished, but consistent," without judgment in her tone.

“I should have asked her if we would see each other again,” he said at one point, more to himself than to the others.

“Yes,” said Kuddel. “You could have. But you didn’t. And you know what? That’s a good thing.”

"Hehehe, thanks for nothing."

“Listen to me,” Kuddel continued. “There are two kinds of encounters: those you pursue and those you leave as they are. If you had asked her, you would have had three scenarios: She says yes – and realizes the second time that you really are the same as yesterday. She says no – and you spend the next three months hanging around a standing table with a bruised ego. Or she says ‘we’ll see’ – which is hell on a silver platter.”

“And so,” Jana interjected, “you had an evening where you could be someone else for a short time, without a job interview.”

Heckenpisser took a deep gulp.

"I still have her in my mind," he said quietly.

“Sure,” Jana said. “The head is the only organ in which love stories work for you.”

"Hehehe," commented Hecke. "You're cruel, Jana. But accurate."

Later, when Jana had to go to work and Murat disappeared into the back room to falsify the inventory, Kuddel and Hecke were left alone at the table.

“It’s not the first time,” Heckenpisser began, “that I’ve fallen in love for three beers. But it’s the first time in a long time that it didn’t feel completely ridiculous.”

“Because she was real,” Kuddel said. “Not Instagram, not a party, not a Tinder filter. Just... real.”

"I used to think," said Hecke, "that love always had something to do with drama and fireworks. Today I realize: Sometimes love happens in the moment when someone is standing next to you and has the same kind of tiredness on their face."

"Now you're going deep," Kuddel murmured. "Careful, a podcast is about to grow on you."

"Hehehe," he grinned. "'Love, liver values and a slatted bed frame – with a hedge pisser'."

"I'd listen," said Kuddel. "But only if there's beer involved."

Their conversations drifted off, as always. From Lea to Karl, from Karl to rehab, from rehab to "What if we were sober?" A topic that kept flashing up briefly like a blue light in the distance, only to disappear again.

"Do you think we could do that?" Heckenpisser asked at some point. "Get dry? Really dry. With water and club membership."

"I could," said Kuddel. "Theoretically. I could throw away my cigarette butts, burn my vest, stop telling my stories. I could do anything. But I won't."

"Hehehe. Honestly."

"Do you know why?" Kuddel continued. "Because I'm afraid that then there will only be emptiness. No Lea, no Karl, no late-night shop, no lost nights. Just... a guy in a small apartment who gets tired at 8 p.m."

Heckenpisser thought for a moment.

"Perhaps," he said then, "it's not as bad as we think. But we're too cowardly to find out."

"Or too addictive," said Kuddel.

"Or both," Hecke concluded. "Hehehe."

By evening it was clear: Lea would not be coming.

Of course not. She had worked the early shift and would go to bed early. Or she had a different shop, a different area, different people.

But that didn't stop Kuddel from teasing hedge pissers.

"Look, you're going to be standing here for the next three weeks and anyone who even remotely wears black Doc Martens and a coat is going to get heart palpitations from you," he said. "You're going to be the corner store stalker."

"I'm not stalking," said Hecke. "I'm... observing lovingly. Hehehe."

"So that's what they call it these days," Kuddel remarked. "Back then it was called 'creepy'."

Murat came out, leaned into the door frame, and took a drag on his cigarette.

"Should I tell you something?" he said. "You're like teenagers, only with worse values. Ulf falls in love for the duration of three beers, Kuddel analyzes it, and I'm left standing there wondering whether I should charge admission."

"Open a cash register," said Heckenpisser. "'Love, Suffering & Lung Cancer - Live at the standing table.'"

"Hehehe," Kuddel shook his head. "If you ever lose your sense of humor, I'm ending our friendship."

Later that night, when the late-night shop was closed and Kuddel was already halfway home, Heckenpisser stayed alone at the table for a few more minutes.

The street had become emptier, the sounds softer, the streetlights yellower.

He placed his hand on the edge of the table, the way one sometimes places one's hand on an old scar made of glass.

Lea, He thought again. Not in a melancholic, kitschy way. More like: It was good that you were there.

For a moment he imagined what it would have been like if he had actually asked her: "Do you want to see each other again?" Somewhere without neon lights, without the box, without the mess, without Murat, without Jana.

Maybe she would have said yes. Maybe not. Maybe the second time would have felt worse than the first, because then everything would have come to light that could have been kept in the shadows the first time.

"For three beers," he murmured, "it was perfect."

He smiled at the thought, not sadly, but rather... relieved.

If it's good for a short time He thought, "It doesn't necessarily have to get bad afterwards. It could just end."

He stepped back and lit one last cigarette for the road.

"Good night, Lea," he said softly, into the street. "Wherever you are smoking Gauloises right now."

Then he set off for home, his hands in his pockets, his head full of noise,

and somewhere way in the back, in a small corner of the brain,

in which a woman stood wearing a dark coat, holding Astra in her hand and with a sentence on her lips:

"You are finished – but consistent."

It wasn't a great love. Not one you'd tell your children about later.

It was a three-beer love affair. And for someone like Heckenpisser, that was sometimes almost too much feeling all at once.

The following days initially continued as if nothing had happened.

Monday: Job center letters unread in the corner, mother complaining, shirt ironed, standing table, Sterni beer.

Tuesday: Woke up too early, left too late, same subway full of people pretending they had something better to do. Evening back to the same corner, same late-night shop, same mess, same box.

Wednesday: A call from rehab in Brandenburg: Karl answered, with a bad connection and even worse coffee stuck in his throat. "Here," he gasped, "everyone talks about inner strength. I talk about inner trembling."

"Hehehe..." Heckenpisser said into the phone. "Then you've come to the right place."

They laughed, briefly recaptured that old rhythm, and yet something was off. A new distance: Karl with his water bottle and group therapy, she with Sterni beer and a late-night shop.

Thursday: Rain. Drizzle that only made everything wetter and nothing cleaner. Hedgepisser stood in the office where he was officially employed and pretended to understand spreadsheets.

In reality, he was staring at cells with numbers and saw only a black coat, a Gauloises cigarette, a sentence:
You're finished – but you're consistent.

Then in the evening: standing table again.

Kuddel was already there, because he usually was. Jana stopped by briefly, a quick stop between the end of her shift and the sofa. Murat wiped the counter with the same rag as the day before, as if the stains were always the same.

"You still look like you've had a liter of digestion in your head," Kuddel said to Hecke. "Is that three-beer love affair still going strong, or has it already left the store?"

"Hehehe," replied Hedge Pisser. "I'm not in love. I'm just... irritated."

"It's the same for you," Jana said, taking a drag on her cigarette. "When you start laughing at yourself less and thinking more, it becomes dangerous."

"I just realized," said Hecke, "how little it takes to briefly believe that something else might be possible. One evening, one woman, two Astra beers, three beers, the feeling that I'm not just a backdrop."

"That's the annoying thing," said Jana. "Our head is like an old cinema where suddenly a trailer for a film that will never be made plays."

"Hehehe...", Hecke nodded. "Yes. And I'm sitting in row 5 and still clapping."

Two weeks passed. Lea didn't show up. Not at the corner store, not by chance on the corner, not in the stories Jana told at the hospital, but always only like this: "Lea was on duty today too." Never: "She's asking about you."

The three-beer love didn't grow. But it became... denser. More like a stain that won't wash out of your t-shirt, even though you've long since stopped paying attention to it.

Heckenpisser noticed it in little things. When a woman stood at the checkout buying Gauloises cigarettes, he flinched slightly. When Astra beer was on sale at the supermarket, he thought of dark coats. When any female colleague in the office said "hospital," something twitched in the back of his neck.

"You've become soft," his mother observed one Sunday when he came home late again and was quieter than usual. "You used to constantly criticize everyone. Now you sometimes look as if you're really thinking about what you're saying."

"I'm getting old, Mother," he said. "Even cynicism rusts with age."

"Or you've finally realized that other people have lives too," she growled.

Hehehe, he thought. If she only knew.

The chance encounter, of course, didn't happen when he was prepared for it.

Not in the evenings at the corner store, where he constantly glanced half-tentiously towards the corner, not on weekends when people with jute bags and a latte-macchiato attitude thronged the street, not on a romantically idealized summer evening with sunset.

But on a Tuesday afternoon in the damn subway.

U7 towards Spandau. Heckenpisser was on his way to some "important appointment" that was only important because his boss liked to use the word. The train was crowded, smelly, and tired. He stood with his briefcase wedged between his legs, his glasses slightly fogged up.

The door opened at the Kleistpark stop – and suddenly she got on.

No slow motion, no music, just: Lea. In jeans, without a coat, backpack on her shoulder, hair in a messy bun, headphones around her neck, not in her ears. Name on the ID badge attached to her hoodie: "Lea M. – Nursing – Internal Medicine".

She didn't see him right away. She was busy with the usual subway survival program: standing, not falling, not breathing if someone coughed too close.

He swallowed.

Now, he thought.

Now you can go there. Say: "Hey. Späti. Gauloises. Astra. Three beers." Ask: "How are you?" It doesn't hurt. Just a little.

His hands became sweaty. He noticed how he was beginning to internally sort through his sentences.

"Hello, Lea, do you remember..."
Sounds like bad dating.

"Well, hospital angels, still saving lives?"
Sounds like a cheap joke during a smoke break.

"I've been thinking about you the whole time."
Sounds like a stalker with a past.

"Hehehe," it whispered in his head. Of course, right when he least needed it.

Lea briefly looked up, scanned the carriage, and her gaze lingered on it. It took a second, maybe two.

Then something twitched at the corners of her mouth.

"Well," she said, quietly enough to reach him. "The one with the sociology hobby."

"And you're the one with the Gauloises," he replied automatically.

The train jerked, it came a step closer, positioned itself near him because there happened to be 20 centimeters of space.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked.

"I'm pretending to have a job," he said. "Hehehe. Area: pointless administration."

"Ah," she said. "I'm on my way back from a training course. Topic: 'Communication with difficult relatives'."

"How convenient," he said. "You'll meet me right there in the field."

She laughed briefly.

"So?" she asked after a moment. "Everything the same at the standing table?"

He could have revealed everything now. That he'd been thinking about her more often since then.

That Kuddel had teased him. That Jana had said that the three-beer romance was what she would have wished for him.

But something held him back. Perhaps the clock above the door. Perhaps the fact that it really looked like it was from "training," not a "romantic waiting session."

"Yes," he said. "Everything's the same. Kuddel's drinking, Murat's swearing, Jana's rescuing, Karl's trying not to die in Brandenburg. And the cardboard box's still there."

"Which box?" she asked.

"For those who are still here," he reminded her.

She nodded.

“Ah,” she said. “I liked that. Better than: ‘For those who deserve it.’”

The train bell rang, and the next stop was announced.

Heckenpisser felt the moment thinning. Like paper about to tear.

“By the way,” she began, “a colleague of yours told me about you recently at the ward.”

"From us?" he asked.

“She said there were these two guys at the corner store who always act like they’re just jokes, but secretly remember a lot,” said Lea. “I said, ‘Yes. I know at least one of them.’”

“Hehehe...”, he glanced down at his shoes. “It’s not our fault. We just happened to notice.”

She looked at him appraisingly.

“Tell me, Ulf,” she said. “If you weren’t you – would you ask me if we could go for a coffee sometime?”

Bam. There it was. The question he’d been avoiding all this time. Not asked by him – by her.

Kuddel would have said something clever. Jana would have said something honest. Murat would have said, "Do it. Or shut up."

Heckenpisser was Heckenpisser. With all his three-beer dreams and sober anxieties.

“If I weren’t me,” he answered slowly, “and you weren’t you, you would say: ‘Come on, let’s do it, it’ll be bad, but interesting.’ Then we would drink coffee, pretend we had prospects, and eventually we would watch each other fail.”

"And because you are you?" she asked.

He took a breath.

“Well...,” he said, “I’m glad we had an evening that wasn’t awful. And that I can see you now on the subway without feeling ashamed. And I don’t want to ruin that.”

She looked at him, longer than she had last time at the corner store. No romance, no spark, just... understanding.

“Good answer,” she finally said. “Cowardly, but good.”

"Hehehe," he grinned, a little crookedly. "Welcome to my life."

She smiled.

“If you change your mind,” she said, fishing something out of her bag, “I haven’t disappeared off the face of the earth.”

She pressed something into his hand. A business card. Hospital. Name, ward, extension. Scribbled on it in ballpoint pen: "Lea – private: 015..."

The announcement came, her station. She tapped him briefly on the chest with two fingers, where his shirt was already sitting crooked.

"Just in case," she said. "Not for three beers. For afterwards."

Then she was outside. Door closed. Train started rolling.

Heckenpisser stood there, card in hand, heart somewhere between throat and briefcase.

He had to laugh. Not loudly, but genuinely.

"Hehehe..." he murmured. "She just..."
into the future
invited."

Later, at the standing table, Kuddel was of course immediately next.

"Well, you look like you've bribed someone or won the lottery," he said. "Spit it out."

The hedge pisser placed the business card on the table. Slided it in the middle, like a joker.

Kuddel whistled softly.

"Well, look at that," he said. "Lea. With a number. You're officially out of the three-beer fantasy. This is real."

"Hehehe," Hecke put down the bottle. "Not yet. A card isn't a date. It's... an option."

Jana joined them, looked at the map, and raised an eyebrow.

"Oh," she said. "Look at that. The nursing profession is networking."

Murat also came out and happened to be wiping something right near the table.

"If you don't call her," he said, "I'll lose a little respect for you."

"If I call her and it goes badly, I'll lose everything," replied Heckenpisser.

"That's life," Jana interjected. "You have to choose whether you want to respect the risk or respect your own cowardice."

Heckenpisser took the card and turned it between his fingers.

"I need time," he said. "Hehehe. I'm not like you. I don't make spontaneous, healthy decisions."

"Who says that's healthy?" asked Kuddel. "It's just... stupid in a different way than usual."

In the days that followed, the card was always in his breast pocket. At work, at the corner store, in the bathroom, in bed. Like a small foreign object right over his heart.

Sometimes he reached out, just to make sure it was still there. Sometimes he took it out, read the name, the number, the scribbled addition. Sometimes he laid it next to him when he drank Sterni beer and stared at it.

He didn't call. Not yet.

"I don't want to be remembered as some three-beer-drunk idiot," he said to Kuddel. "And at the same time, I'm afraid I'll be even worse when I'm sober."

"You're bad in a different way when you're sober," said Kuddel. "Hehehe. But maybe that's exactly what she needs. Someone who's so honestly bad that she doesn't have to have any illusions."

"This isn't an advertisement, man," Hecke muttered.

One evening, when the evening was once again more routine than risky, when the box "FOR THOSE STILL HERE" had received some change from some guy with trembling fingers, when Karl from Brandenburg texted: "Therapy group has less of a sense of humor than you. Send jokes,"

Heckenpisser was sitting at home at the kitchen table.

His mother was already in the living room, the television so loud you could hear the news through the wall. He had the map in front of him, next to it a half-empty beer, next to it an ashtray that was three times full.

He took a drag, took a sip, and stared at the number.

Three beers"Love was simple," he thought.
After that, she became math.

Do I want that?

He reached for his mobile phone. There was Karl's number. There was Jana. There was Murat. There was "Unknown," the sociologist Timo. There was no one else he would consider a possibility.

He typed another number. Slowly. Digit by digit.

Did not press "Call".

He put down his phone. Took a sip. "Hehehe," he said in the kitchen, even though no one was there.

Then he laughed at himself and deleted the half-typed number.
and placed the card on his chest as if it were a plaster.

*Not yet, he thought.
But maybe someday.*

And that was the funny thing:

For the first time in his life, "maybe someday" didn't feel like cowardice.

but rather as an opportunity that didn't have to be immediately drunk up, destroyed, or talked to death.

He was still a hedge peeper.

Mama's boy, know-it-all, late-night intellectual in a tailored suit, four-eyed disaster with a "hihihi" tic.

But deep somewhere between a damaged heart muscle, a worn-out sense of humor, and a liver that had long been allowed to be offended,

There was a small, ridiculously cautious, tiny "things-might-turn-different" spot.

Not because of Lea. Not because of a three-beer romance. But because of someone like her.

had given him a card that said:

You can call me if you want.

And he for the first time in forty-plus years

didn't have to say "no" immediately –

but was allowed to say:

I'm still thinking about it.

In a world where almost everything for him always took place between the cash register, coma and hospital,

That was almost a revolution.

Kuddel against the fitness society

The day started badly before anyone could even say "Good morning".

Not because Kuddel was particularly hungover – he always was anyway – but because the first thing he did when he woke up was stare at his phone. And that's when the world kicked him in the face.

"Your screen time today is 27% less than last week," read some system message. Below it: "Keep it up! Just a few more steps to a healthier lifestyle."

Steps. Healthier. Keep it up.

"Fuck you," he muttered into the room, put his phone down again, and reached for the cigarette that was waiting in the ashtray for its comeback. He wasn't even sure if he had put it out last night or just left it there.

Steps. Since when did telephones have legs? A telephone used to be a thing with a cord that hung in the hallway and remained silent when you wanted to leave it alone. Today it's a fitness coach with an inferiority complex.

He sat up, his bones protesting, his back too, his liver said nothing – it had been silently offended for years.

In the stairwell, you could already hear the first fitness fanatics. Someone in a functional jacket and breathable shoes was running down the stairs as if the devil were after him.

"Morning!" shouted some overly enthusiastic voice through the stairwell. "Nice day for a little run, eh?"

Kuddel just grunted and looked for his robe. He was the type who, at that time of day, would at most manage a "little vomit".

Outside, Berlin was in that state that influencers call a "perfect autumn morning" and everyone else simply considers "too early".

Grey light that made everything look real. Cars driving too fast because everyone had to go somewhere they didn't want to be. And on the sidewalk: joggers.

People jogging everywhere. As if some invisible personal trainer had sent a "Run" signal through the air.

They were all the same, even though they tried to look different: tight leggings or shorts, shirts with motivational slogans ("No excuses", "Push your limits", "Stronger every day"), headphones in their ears, eyes turned inwards, pulse racing.

Kuddel dragged himself towards the corner store, hood half up, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, posture like a refrigerator at half-mast.

A blonde jogger in colorful running shoes ran past him, giving him that look – that mixture of pity and moral superiority.

She looked at his cigarette butt, at his robe, at the dark circles under his eyes, and you could almost hear what she was thinking:

He's lost.

Kuddel grinned crookedly and called after her: "Hey! I've taken steps too! See?" He demonstratively took two or three wobbly steps. "Only without the app!"

She accelerated. Of course.

At the corner store, Murat was heaving the crates of drinks outside. His face said "Monday," even though it wasn't Monday. For Murat, it was always Monday.

"You look like the answer to a question no one asked," said Murat when Kuddel appeared.

"The question is: 'What happens if you ignore the fitness industry?'" Kuddel growled.
"Answer: Me, yeah."

He took a Sterni bottle from the crate and twisted it open before the labels were properly aligned.

"Wait," said Murat. "You're too early. First come the yoga mothers, then the students with oat milk, then you."

"The yoga moms are already out and about," grumbled Kuddel. "But outside. In running shoes. Everywhere. It's like an invasion from a jogging spot."

He took a deep gulp.

"Since when is jogging in the morning normal?" he asked, looking up into the air. "It used to be a symptom. Now it's a lifestyle."

Murat laughed. "Back then, jogging in the morning was only for police drills," he said. "Now they run voluntarily."

Heckenpisser arrived shortly afterwards, of course overdressed as always for a standing table: shirt, coat, briefcase, bow tie crooked, but present.

"Well, what a sporty day today," he said. "Hehehe. People everywhere are sweating with expensive watches."

"I have the feeling," Kuddel muttered, "that the city wants to make me feel bad. Everywhere there are steps, fitness trackers, protein shakes and 'detox'. I'm doing a retox and I get looked at as if I'm planning an attack on smoothies."

Jana came around the corner, coffee-to-go cup in hand, hair in a messy braid, eyes in the "seen too much at night" category.

"Good morning, problem cases," she said. "Who's complaining about what today?"

“About the fitness dictatorship,” Kuddel said immediately. “Joggers everywhere. These ‘I’m doing something for myself’ faces everywhere. You walk around with an honest beer bottle and you get looks like you’re kicking babies.”

“Hehehe,” Hecke said. “That’s the new class society: here are those with the gym, there are those with the beverage store.”

Jana did not sit down, but leaned against the frame.

“In the clinic,” she said, “I see both types. Those who have never done any sport and whose circulatory system eventually says: ‘Goodbye, I’m out.’”
And those who tracked everything, optimized everything, and then end up in bed with a heart attack during a marathon.”

“You see,” said Kuddel, “nature wants us all dead. Whether muscle or minced meat.”

“Fitness isn’t the problem,” Jana said. “The problem is when it becomes religion. Just like with you guys and drinking.”

“We are not a religion,” Kuddel protested indignantly. “We are a... traditional event.”

"Hehehe," came the reply from Heckenpisser's corner. "Drunkenness is intangible cultural heritage."

A group of three guys in tight sportswear walked by, all wearing the same functional jackets, all wearing the same watches, all with the same physique: overtrained, under-relaxed.

One of them glanced briefly towards the corner store, made a face as if he were saying to himself:

Yuck, alcohol.

Kuddel used this as an opportunity to deliver a sermon.

“There you have them,” he said. “The new upper class: the fitness gang. Before, you saw suits and knew: those guys think they’re something special. Now you recognize them by their compression socks and that ‘I have a resting heart rate of 52’ attitude.”

“At least,” said Heckenpisser, “they’re moving. We’re just raising our liver values. Hehehe.”

“We’re moving around too,” Kuddel countered. “From the corner store to the toilet, from the toilet to the train station toilet, from the train station toilet to the hospital. It’s an obstacle course, man.”

Jana rolled her eyes.

“Do you know why the fitness crowd is so annoying?” she asked. “Not because they exercise. But because they think they’ve understood life if they can control their heart rate.”

"I have my pulse under control," said Kuddel. "I'm simply not listening to it."

He took a sip of Sterni beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“The other day,” he began, “I was standing in front of a gym. Big windows, inside everything bright, everything clean, equipment everywhere. Outside – lamppost, dog poop, trash. Inside on the treadmill: people running, while the street next to it is empty.”

"Hehehe," chuckled Hecke. "Energy waste with a premium subscription."

“They’re sweating in a room that’s 19 degrees Celsius, with a towel and a water bottle,” Kuddel continued. “And they’re staring at screens that tell them: ‘Only 500 more calories until enlightenment.’ I was standing outside, drinking a beer and thinking: You pay money to escape. I drink to stay put.”

Jana looked at him, a mixture of pity and respect.

"And then?" she asked.

“Then this female trainer came out,” he recounted. “Blonde braids, biceps like a pit bull, smile like an advertisement. She looked at me, my beer, my cigarette, my face – and said: ‘Have you ever thought about doing something for your health?’”

“Oh no,” said Jana.

“Oh yes,” said Kuddel. “I looked at her and said, ‘I do something for my health every day. I tested her limits.’”

Hedge-pisser snorted. "Hehehe!"

“She didn’t find it funny,” Kuddel said. “She said, ‘You know that’ll make you die sooner.’ I said, ‘Sooner than whom? Than you? I visited Karl in the hospital. He did physical labor his whole life, hardly drank, but was exposed to stress, noise, and dirt. Now he’s lying there with tubes. The fitness industry didn’t help him either.’”

Jana sighed.

"You're using Karl as an excuse," she said. "He'd punch you if he heard you."

“Yes,” Kuddel admitted. “But he’s in Brandenburg and I’m not.”

A woman in leggings pushed a stroller past, drinking from a huge plastic bottle labeled "INFUSED WATER". Cucumber slices and mint leaves could be seen floating in it.

“Infused water,” Kuddel read aloud. “What is that? Water that has been exposed to chemicals?”

“Hehehe,” Hecke said. “We’re drinking ‘infused beer’. It’s also water, but with problems.”

“The worst part is,” Kuddel continued, “in this fitness society, it’s no longer about not dying. It’s about living as optimized a life as possible until you die. You’re not allowed to just exist. You have to count your steps, track your calories, analyze your sleep. If you’re lying in bed and just sleeping, you’re already suspect.”

Jana grinned crookedly.

"I have patients," she said, "who have smartwatches that tell them at night how badly they slept. Then they come to us and say, 'My sleep index is in the basement.' I say, 'Maybe you should just take that thing off.'"

"I'm not wearing anything more than necessary," Kuddel grumbled. "I saw a fitness video on YouTube this morning. No sound. That was enough. An old woman in her living room, all white, in leggings, saying something to the camera, doing lunges. I needed a beer immediately."

He straightened up a little, as if he needed to briefly demonstrate that he could still stand.

"You know," he said, "they act like they're afraid of death. But they're afraid of growing old without having been Instagram-worthy along the way."

"And you?" asked Jana. "What are you afraid of?"

He hesitated. Only briefly.

"Nothing," he began reflexively. "Except maybe gyms. And drafts."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "And with feelings, brother."

Jana raised her eyebrows.

"And in front of room 317," she added, more quietly.

Kuddel fell silent.

Room 317. Karl. Hospital beer. Oxygen goggles.

The image returned instantly, sharper than any fitness video.

He took a deep swig of Sterni beer, as if he could wash away the memory.

"I'm not afraid of death," he finally said. "I'm afraid of what comes before. Of the moment when some doctor says to me, 'Mr. Scholz, you could have changed things earlier.' And I have to reply, 'I didn't have time, I was busy surviving.'"

"That's exactly," Jana said calmly, "what a fitness society is: the people with time. The others manage at most from shift to shift – or from bottle to bottle."

A woman with a yoga mat under her arm walked by, colorful scarf, latte cup, face somewhere between esoteric and burnout.

She paused briefly, examining the corner store table with the three old items.

"You could do something for your bodies," she said, without introduction.

Kuddel looked at her as if she had just said "Heil Hitler".

"Let's do it," he replied. "We're building tolerance."

“Hehehe,” added Hecke. “We’re training our livers and our ability to navigate a downward social spiral.”

Jana snorted.

“Ms. Yoga,” she said, “leave the three of them alone. They are my nursing reserve. If they start jogging, I will eventually have no patients left who know how to fail honestly.”

The woman frowned.

“Cynicism is also unhealthy,” she said.

“Yes,” said Jana. “But at least he doesn’t make so many push-up videos.”

She left. Of course. Without saying goodbye, just with that noise people make when they think they’ve won morally.

Once she was out of earshot, Kuddel leaned against the standing table and looked at his hands. They weren’t young anymore. Not as fast. Not as stupid anymore, but stupid enough.

"You know," he said, "I have nothing against sports. Let them run, pump iron, stretch, stand on their heads. But I don't want to be told by their world that I'm only worth something if my body is a project."

“Hehehe,” Hecke nodded. “My body isn’t a project. It’s a damage case.”

“My body,” said Kuddel, “is an archive. It contains everything: train station toilets, Mofa-Manni, Karl, hospital beer, Neukölln, Lea, peep shows in my head. If I switch it to ‘clean eating’ now, it will definitely have an identity crisis.”

Jana shook her head, but she smiled.

"And what if you can't do it anymore at some point?" she asked.

“Then they’ll carry me,” said Kuddel. “On the last stretcher of my life. Until then,” he raised the bottle, “I’ll indulge in the luxury of not seeing my subscription renewal in every movement.”

A jogger passed by again. He was on the same route as before, only in the opposite direction. Sweat, breath, an app on his wrist that probably told him: "Great job! Keep going!"

Kuddel raised his bottle in greeting.

"Hey, brother," he shouted. "We're both at our limit. You're running away from your heart attack, I'm drinking mine away. Let's see who gets to the emergency room first."

The jogger pretended he hadn't heard it.

Hedge pisser laughed. "Hehehe."

Jana sighed. Murat came out and put down a new box.

“You could be sold,” Murat said. “As an alternative to gyms. ‘Instead of the treadmill: live reality bullshit. Only 2.50 a bottle.’”

“We are the anti-gym,” said Kuddel. “There’s no mirror here, only a reflection in the glass. And whoever sees themselves there at least knows where they stand.”

“Hehehe,” said Heckenpisser. “Slogan: ‘No six-pack – but stories.’”

Kuddel grinned crookedly, took a drag on his cigarette, and took a sip of Sterni beer.

“Kuddel versus the fitness society,” he muttered. “No one wins round one. They run, we stand still. In the end, we’re all lying down.”

Jana nodded slowly.

"The difference is," she said, "a few of them at least tried not to hate themselves."

“And we,” Kuddel replied, “have at least stopped pretending to love each other.”

He clinked glasses with hedge pissers.

Berlin passed them by – with joggers, yoga mats, fitness watches, bicycle helmets, detox juices, protein bars –

And there they stood, two drunkards and a nurse.

at the standing table, with a box for "those who are still here",

and the vague feeling that

that in a world where everything is screaming for extension,

also had the right to simply be there.

The whole fitness society thing could have remained a simple rant at the standing table. Kuddel rants, Heckenpisser "Hehehe," Jana says something clever, Murat sells beer – the end.

But life loves to ridicule people who make grand pronouncements. So, two days later, the letter arrived.

Not yellow, not red – a white one. Doctor's office, sender in professional blue. "Preventive check-up for those over 40 – Invitation" it read.

Kuddel had managed to squeeze it into the mailbox, sandwiched between advertisements for gyms, pizza, and yoga classes. He took it upstairs, left it lying on the kitchen table, and stared at it like a strange-looking spider.

"Preventive check-up," he muttered. "As if I could still prevent anything. I'm real-time aftercare."

He opened the envelope, half out of curiosity, half out of masochistic habit. Inside: Standard text. "Dear patient..." Blah blah... "Important: Recognize risks early..." Blah blah... "Cardiovascular system, liver function, blood lipids..." Blah blah... "We strongly recommend..."

"Of course," he said to the empty room. "You always give urgent recommendations."

He threw the letter to the others. But it stayed on top, like a flat, threatening letter on A4 paper.

He mentioned it rather casually at the corner store.

"I got mail from the doctor," he said, taking a deep drag on his cigarette. "They want to give me a check-up. Over-40 inspection. MOT for messed-up drunks."

"Hehehe," said Heckenpisser. "Maybe you'll get a new exhaust pipe."

"You should go," Jana said immediately. "Seriously."

"I'm not going to any doctor's office," Kuddel protested. "You're not allowed to smoke or drink there, and everyone acts like they want to save you. I hate that."

"You were with Karl in the hospital," she reminded him.

"That was different," he growled. "The hospital is the final boss. The doctor's office is tutorial level. I skipped the tutorial."

"It shows," Murat said dryly.

Jana crossed her arms.

"Be careful," she said. "Between 'I'm doing great' and room 317 there's a narrow corridor called 'family doctor'. If you skip that completely, you'll eventually end up straight in the emergency room. And believe me, the people there aren't any more relaxed."

Kuddel thought of Karl. Of tubes, of monitor beeps, of hospital beer.

"I'm not going," he said. "I know the drill: You go in, they take your blood sugar, say 'You have to stop drinking, Mr. Scholz' – as if that were a revolutionary idea. Then they give you a slip of paper with nutritional advice that you never read, and look at you as if you were personally responsible for the downfall of the healthcare system."

"Well, you kind of are too," Heckenpisser chimed in. "Hehehe. We all are."

Jana took a deep breath.

"You know what," she said. "I'm giving you a deadline. If you're still not there in two weeks, I'll drag you there myself. In your robes."

"Are you all becoming fitness Nazis now?" Kuddel asked.

“No,” she said. “I’m a realist. I just don’t want to be standing in a hospital corridor one day and hear: ‘Oh, that’s Karl’s buddy, the one nobody beat into going to the doctor.’”

That stung. More than he would have liked.

Two days later he was at the doctor's office.

Not because he had suddenly become sensible. But because it had rained, the late-night shop was still closed, and he hadn't found an excuse why he shouldn't go.

Waiting room. This sad final destination for all illnesses that aren't yet serious enough for the emergency room.

Chairs in rows, magazines that had already outlived three governments. A television on the wall, silently showing something about healthy eating, with subtitles: "Whole grain products are important for..." Kuddel mentally muted himself.

Next to him: A woman with a cough, a man with a briefcase who was tapping his foot so nervously that you thought his leg might fall off, a pensioner with a shopping trolley who looked as if she was only there because she was lonely.

On the wall: posters. "Smoking is harmful to your health." "Exercise regularly!" "Check-up 35 – Your chance!"

All these healthy bodies in the pictures. Laughing couples with bike helmets, teenagers holding fruit up to the camera as if they had just found a treasure.

Kuddel looked down at himself. His robe, belly, and hands were stained with nicotine. He looked like the "before" picture that never makes it onto the poster.

The receptionist called his name.

"Mr. Scholz?"

He stood up and walked down the hallway. It smelled of disinfectant and old fears.

Dr. Hoffmann was the kind of guy who'd seen it all. Mid-fifties, slight double chin, but a clear gaze. Not a fitness model, more like "tired of the system".

"Well, Mr. Scholz," he said, glancing briefly at the file, then over the rim of his glasses. "It's almost a miracle to see you again."

“I was busy,” Kuddel said. “With dying by installments.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow. "Self-irony," he said. "That's a good start."

He did the usual things: asked questions, checked blood pressure, listened to the lungs, and felt the area.

"Smoking?" he asked.

"Yes," said Kuddel.

"How much?"

"Yes."

"Alcohol?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Enough," said Kuddel. "Let's put it this way: The liver knows it's not there for decoration."

The doctor sighed.

"Mr. Scholz," he said. "We can save ourselves the time if you don't want to tell me anything."

"I'll tell you everything," Kuddel replied. "I just don't feel like thinking in terms of calories and units. I've been drinking since I was sixteen. I've had phases where it was less, phases where it was more. On average, it's enough that my body knows what's going on."

The doctor nodded slowly.

"Listen," he said. "I'm under no illusion that I'm going to turn you into a teetotal marathon runner. But I have a duty to tell you what's what. So we'll do some blood work, an EKG, a few measurements – and then we'll talk."

Two days later he was back. Waiting room, same faces, same posters, same awful background music.

Dr. Hoffmann had printouts in front of him.

"So," he began. "I'll keep it short. Blood pressure too high. Liver values significantly elevated. Cholesterol at the limit. Blood sugar bordering on pre-diabetes. Heart is cooperating, but not a fan."

"Sounds like me," said Kuddel. "Team Unmotivated Organs."

"With your lifestyle," the doctor continued, "some people live for another ten years, others drop dead next week. Statistics are a whore. But: If you continue like this, there's a good chance we'll see each other again soon under different circumstances – in the hospital."

Kuddel remained silent.

"All that fitness talk out there," the doctor said, "gets on my nerves too, if that's what you're thinking. I know that not everyone has the time, the money, the patience to run to the gym five times a week and stuff themselves with quinoa. But there's a middle ground between 'gym influencer' and 'starfish for breakfast'."

"I'm going to have a heart attack because I don't go to the gym," Kuddel muttered. "Not because I work like an idiot, in shifts, in dust and cold – but because I get drunk in the evenings. I get it."

"Both," Hoffmann corrected. "Her body isn't messed up because of one thing. It's a collaboration."

He leaned back.

"I'm not telling you, 'Get well,'" he said. "I'm telling you, if you don't change a few things, things are going to get very ugly very soon."

"What would 'a few things' be?" asked Kuddel, even though he knew the answer.

"Less alcohol," the doctor began. "Reduce smoking, quit eventually. A little exercise – and by that I mean: ten, fifteen minutes of brisk walking every day. Not jogging, not triathlons. And maybe: eat something other than cheap meat and frozen pizza now and then."

Kuddel grimaced.

"That's the standard speech, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes," said Hoffmann. "But it's not wrong just because it's standard."

"And what if I don't do it?" asked Kuddel.

"Then we'll see each other again," said the doctor. "In a police car. Or maybe not at all. It depends on how lucky you are."

"Happiness," Kuddel repeated. "My favorite concept."

At the late-night convenience store in the evening, the standing table once again became the court of last resort.

"Well?" asked Heckenpisser. "Acquitted or sentenced to life? Hehehe."

"The doctor looked at me like I was a half-hit hedgehog," said Kuddel. "He said I'm a result of bad luck, bad decisions, and a society that pretends you can optimize your health."

Jana listened, cigarettes in one hand, coffee in the other.

"Is he right?" she asked.

"Of course," said Kuddel. "Everyone's right. The fitness idiots, the doctors, you, Karl, Murat, my ex, my mother – everyone. I'm screwed. Wow. Breaking news."

"So?" Jana asked again. "Are you doing anything?"

He looked at the bottle. It shone in the late-night shop neon, harmless and deadly at the same time.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm just not the gym type. I'd make a complete fool of myself standing on the treadmill in my leathers next to some guy who looks like an advertisement for protein shakes."

"Who says you have to go to the studio?" she asked. "You have two legs. You have roads. You theoretically have a heart that would be happy to race for reasons other than Sterni."

"Hehehe," Heckenpisser chimed in. "Kuddel in walking mode. Berlin would be confused."

Murat intervened, exceptionally without being asked.

"You know," he said, "back in Turkey, in my village, there were no gyms. People ran, they hauled things, they worked – not because some trainer said, 'Come on, three more reps,' but because they had nothing else to eat. Today they pay money to artificially recreate what used to be everyday life. And you..." he pointed at Kuddel, "...just move between the bed, the corner store, and the toilet."

"That's a very efficient route," Kuddel murmured.

"Your body won't find that," Murat countered.

"Okay," Kuddel finally said, putting down the bottle. "I'll make a deal."

Everyone was staring.

"I'm not going to become a fitness fanatic," he declared. "I'm not going to buy a performance jacket, I'm not going to download an app, I'm not going to wear a watch that tells me I'm rubbish. But—" he raised a finger—"I'm going to try to walk consciously once a day. One stop on foot, not by bus. A quick stroll around the block before I get stuck at the corner store. No jogging."

Just walk. Like a normal person, not like an escape attempt.

"Hehehe," said Heckenpisser. "That's Kuddel's anti-fitness program: exercise without motivation."

Jana nodded.

"That's more than you've done before," she said. "I'll take it."

"And what about drinking?" asked Murat.

Kuddel reached for the bottle, looked at it like an old friend who had betrayed him many times, but still stood at his door when things went badly.

"I don't know if I'm drinking less," he said honestly. "But I've stopped pretending it has absolutely no consequences. I drink knowing that I'm jeopardizing my future. Maybe..." he paused briefly, "...that will eventually help me to just leave a bottle untouched."

"Hehehe," Hecke murmured. "Meta-drinking."

The next day, Kuddel was really out and about. Not just to the corner store – somewhere else.

He had walked past his usual bus stop. Just like that. His joints had creaked like old wooden floorboards, but he walked.

One station. Two.

The city looked different when you walked through it. More dirt, more noise, more faces. You could see the pain in people's shoulders, in their backs as they walked carefully, in their eyes as they pretended everything was under control.

A few joggers were coming towards him. He made room, as best he could. One of them nodded at him – a kind of "I see you, bro" nod. Not arrogant. More like: You're moving too. Respect.

That irritated him more than any arrogant glance.

He stopped, needed to catch his breath. Chest tight, knees sore.

"Well," he muttered. "Welcome to the live fitness studio 'I started too late'."

He laughed at himself, coughed, and walked on.

He spoke about it at the standing table as if it were an absurd experiment.

"I ran two stations," he said.

"On foot?" asked Heckenpisser.

"No, on our hands," Kuddel snarled. "Of course on foot, you plum."

"Hehehe," Hecke grinned. "So? Six-pack already?"

"Yes," said Kuddel. "Six packs of cigarettes less."

Jana smiled.

"How did it feel?" she asked.

He thought about it.

"Shitty," he admitted. "But shitty in a different way. Not that 'I'm lying in bed and everything is too much' shitty, but 'my body realizes it still exists' shitty."

"This is the beginning," she said.

"Of what?" he asked.

"From the realization that you're not just a head full of beer," she replied.

He wouldn't love the fitness society for that reason. He would never become one of those people who burpee in the park in matching outfits and drink their protein shake from a logo

shaker. He would never have an app that told him how many "points" he had collected that day.

But maybe...he would stop automatically thinking of every female jogger as an "enemy image".

Making a compromise with one's own body without becoming a prophet of self-optimization – that was almost radical.

In the evenings, when things quieted down, when the joggers had disappeared and the city belonged again to those who preferred to smoke in doorways rather than sweat in studios,

Kuddel stood there at the standing table, with a bottle and a cigarette butt.

and thought:

Perhaps there is something in between.

Between the treadmill and the reclining position. Between the gym and the train station toilet. Between rehab in Brandenburg and room 317.

A small, shaky path where one neither triumphantly shouts "No excuses" nor completely yells "Screw it,"

but simply goes.

Slowly, with creaking knees, but at least in that direction.

in which at least one tries,

not to die today.

A week later, Kuddel knew two things for sure:

1. His body held a grudge more than any ex.
2. Berlin was full of people who voluntarily tortured themselves – and even thought it was cool.

He had continued walking. Not every day, but more often than never. One stop here, two stops there, once even from the doctor's office almost to the corner store, without sitting down.

His knees creaked, his back protested, his lungs formally registered their complaints. But there was also something else: a quiet, persistent feeling that felt like a bad mood – and could only later be identified as pride.

Of course, he would never have called it that. Not in front of hedge pissers. Not in front of Jana. And certainly not in front of Murat.

It was one of those evenings when autumn disguised itself as a harbinger of winter. A cold wind rustled between the rows of houses, streetlights stood like tired sentries, and a tram squealed somewhere in the distance.

Kuddel came on foot. Deliberately. He missed the bus – intentionally. "I'll walk," he'd told himself. "It's just a crappy road. Not a pilgrimage route."

There were already two people at the corner store, living their personal fitness stories.

A guy in workout clothes – but not your average jogger, a real gym physique: upper arms like concrete, chest like a wardrobe, leg muscles that looked like they had their own leases. Next to him, a woman, also toned, sports bra under her jacket, that typical "I've got my body under control" attitude.

They drank non-alcoholic beer.

"Well, that's a solid social study," muttered Heckenpisser as Kuddel joined him. "Hehehe. We see the future."

Murat looked annoyed but businesslike. "They're trying out my new range," he said. "Non-alcoholic IPA, 0.0 shandy, some kind of oat-malt brew. I figured: if the fitness crowd is already here, they should at least pay."

"Non-alcoholic beer is like a rubber doll," Kuddel growled. "It looks like it, it feels like it, but in the end it's missing the one thing that makes it meaningful."

The muscular guy turned towards him.

"Alcohol-free is the better alternative, brother," he said. "It gives you flavor without the harm."

"I'm into damage," Kuddel replied. "Character building."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "He means his liver."

The woman scrutinized Kuddel from head to toe. Robe, belly, cigarette, dark circles under his eyes. That look: a case study.

"You could do something too," she said. "It's clear you used to be a strong guy."

"I never was," said Kuddel. "At most, I was less exhausted."

The muscleman swallowed a large gulp of 0.0 beer and placed the bottle down as if it were a trophy.

"We've changed our lives," he explained. "Before, it was alcohol, parties, cigarettes. Then we reached a point where we said: Either we do something now – or we'll end up in the hospital."

"I've already been to the hospital," Kuddel said calmly. "I visited someone there. He hadn't even had any fun before."

"It's not just about fun," the woman said. "It's about responsibility. Towards yourself. Your body. The environment."

"I'm doing my best," said Kuddel. "I drink from glass. Deposit required. Sustainable. If I throw up, it's even biodegradable."

Hecke giggled. "Hehehe."

Jana arrived, initially staying in the background. She immediately recognized the type: freshly reformed ex-alcoholics in a fitness frenzy. They were often the worst – and at the same time the most tragic.

"How old are you?" the man asked.

"Old enough to know that I don't repair anything major anymore," Kuddel replied.

"We started in our mid-thirties," the woman said proudly. "He was 25 kilos heavier, I was on the verge of burnout. Now... no more cigarettes, no alcohol, training three times a week, meal prep, supplements, everything."

"Congratulations," said Kuddel. "You've renovated your prison."

The guy grimaced.

"You don't understand, brother," he said. "The pump is better than any high. When you're standing there, shirt wet, muscles at their limit, heart pounding, you know: you're stronger than yesterday. That's real life."

Kuddel looked at him for a long time.

"Real life is when you get up in the morning and don't know if the day will be worth it," he said. "And you go anyway. Whether you run to the gym or to the corner store – in the end, we're all just trying not to go crazy."

"Hehehe," commented Heckenpissner. "Philosophy at the bottle return machine."

Jana stepped forward.

"I work in a hospital," she said, her hands tucked into her hoodie pockets. "I see both patients like him and patients like you on the ward. Those with damaged livers, those with shattered joints. Those with broken hearts because they overate – and those with broken hearts because they burned them out in the Ironman."

The woman looked puzzled.

"Are you saying it doesn't matter?" she asked.

"No," said Jana. "What I mean to say is: you're both sitting on the same bomb. You're trying to defuse it with the gym, he's trying to forget it with Stern beer. The bomb doesn't care about either of your programs."

"Hehehe," Hecke muttered. "That's the most gloomy motivational quote I've ever heard."

The muscle type sought a new line of attack.

"So what exactly are you doing?" he asked Kuddel. "Just complaining won't help."

"I'm leaving," said Kuddel.

"Where to?" he asked.

"On foot," Kuddel replied. "One stop, two. It's not Instagram-worthy, I know. No app, no community, no coach yelling 'Come on!' Just me, my broken back, and kneeling knees."

The woman looked skeptical.

"That's nothing," she said. "You don't even burn a significant number of calories."

"I burn cigarettes while I do it," he replied. "That's more than many people manage."

Jana nodded.

"For him," she said, "that's a lot. This isn't a before-and-after shoot for a self-help book. This is a guy who's just trying not to run headlong into room 317."

The muscular guy took a deep breath, as if he were counting to ten.

"Okay," he said. "I respect that. Honestly. But if you keep drinking like this, your walks won't do you any good."

"Maybe," said Kuddel. "Maybe so. Maybe not for my liver, but for my mind. You think differently when you run. You see what's out there. This whole fitness society that acts like it'll live forever. These other figures who look like they're already dead, but their bodies don't know it yet."

Hedge pisser nodded.

"Hehehe," he said. "Running is like going to a late-night convenience store on a track."

The woman rolled her eyes.

"I get the feeling you just don't want to admit that you're destroying yourselves," she said.

"Yes," Kuddel objected. "We admit it. Every day. Every bottle."

He lifted the bottle and looked at it.

"The difference is," he continued, "you are trying to prove your control. We are trying to prove our surrender. Both have something ridiculous about them. But mine is more honest."

In the end, the two fitness enthusiasts left. Not in anger, not on good terms. But with that "we're not on the same page" feeling you get when you're talking about the same misery in different languages.

"They don't mean any harm," said Jana after they had left. "They're just newly converted."

"Anything that's recently converted is dangerous," Kuddel said. "Religious people, vegans, fitness enthusiasts, non-smokers."

"Hehehe," chuckled Hecke. "You're old, Kuddel. You used to be the newly converted member of the self-destruction cult."

"Yes," said Kuddel. "Now I'm just the old priest who realizes his gods are no good."

Later, as the night grew deeper and the city duller, the fitness talk was gone, and yet not.

"You know what really pisses me off?" asked Kuddel, when only he, Hecke, and Murat were left. "It's not that they're jogging. Let them. What bothers me is this feeling that's everywhere: if you don't train, you're to blame for everything that happens to you."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "And you'd like to say, 'No, I'm just a victim of my genes and society.'"

"I am a victim of society," said Kuddel. "And a perpetrator too. I toiled in factories, on construction sites, in shifts where no one asked if I got enough sleep." Nobody asked if I tracked my steps. It was about the goods being shipped, the concrete being finished, the noise continuing.

He stared into the street as if he were seeing the past.

"Now some apps are telling me I should 'take better care of myself,'" he continued. "Where were you pigs when I was carrying steel for minimum wage in the winter ten years ago? Where were your smartwatches when I was standing on scaffolding at three in the morning? Now that I'm old and broken, you come along, show me colorful graphics, and say, 'If you start now...'"

He stopped and took a deep gulp.

"Maybe I'll start anyway," he said then. "Not to please you. Just so I don't completely hate myself when the time comes."

A few days later, something happened that nobody had planned.

Jana arrived at the late-night shop with a bag. Not from the supermarket, not from a late-night shop – from a discount store with a sports department.

"I have something for you," she said to Kuddel.

"If there's functional clothing in there, I'm leaving," he warned.

She pulled something out. Not leggings. Not shoes. Just a very simple, cheap pedometer. A small plastic thing with a display. No high-tech, no app, just: click, numbers, done.

"Here," she said. "For you. No GPS, no Wi-Fi, no cloud. Just steps."

He stared at the thing as if it were an official summons.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" he asked.

"Count what you're doing anyway," she said. "Not to keep up with anyone. Just so you can see that you're actually moving. Maybe one day it will click in your head."

"Hehehe," commented Hecke. "Fitbit from the ghetto."

"I don't want any numbers," Kuddel muttered. "Numbers are never on my side."

"You don't have to tell anyone how many there are," Jana replied calmly. "Only you."

He picked up the thing. Heavier than it was.

At home, he laid it on the table. Next to it was the doctor's letter. Next to it, an empty bottle. Next to it, the notepad he sometimes wrote in. And somewhere underneath – invisible, but loud – room 317.

The next day he clipped the thing to his belt. No big ritual. No comment. Just: on, and off he went.

He left. As he had the last few days. One station, two.

He checked it in the evening. Number: 4,327.

Not a world record. Not a catastrophe. Just: more than zero.

He laughed. Briefly. Almost tenderly.

"Well, you little bastard," he said to the pedometer. "You and me, eh? Let's see who gives up first."

The topic came up again at the corner store a few days later.

"So?" asked Hecke. "What does your new electronic ankle monitor say? Hehehe."

"She says," Kuddel said, "that I walk more than I thought. And less than I should."

"Welcome to life as a whole," said Murat.

Jana grinned.

"How many steps today?" she asked.

“Five thousand and something,” he muttered. “I don’t know exactly. Enough to know that I’m not completely covered in moss.”

"Hehehe," chuckled Hecke. "Half a marathon for the feeling of still being alive."

“Do you know what the best thing is?” said Kuddel. “I’ve realized that sometimes I go about without a destination.”

Not just to the corner store, not just to the toilet, not just to the government office. Just for the sake of it. Unnecessary movements. Luxury movements.

Jana nodded.

“Other people call that a ‘walk’,” she said.

“A walk,” Kuddel repeated. “That sounds like taking a dog for a walk. I’m only taking my organs out for a walk. They should see what the world looks like before they get completely clogged up.”

At the end of the day, nothing spectacular had happened. Kuddel hadn't won a marathon, hadn't experienced any yoga enlightenment. He hadn't posted a "before and after" picture and hadn't installed an app.

He had simply decided that he would not surrender to the fitness company without a fight.

Not by joining it. But by setting up his own cheap, dirty, honest mini-program:

Drinking – yes. Smoking – yes. But also: walking. Running. Breathing. Sometimes even thinking.

Two worlds that disliked each other – but were able to agree to a brief truce.

Late at night, when the corner store was closed, Kuddel put the bottle in the sink and placed the cigarette butt in the ashtray.

I took the pedometer off and placed it on the doctor's letter.

In addition, he wrote on his pad in scribbled handwriting:

"If I don't die from drinking, then maybe I'll die from running."

But at least I got to see the streets one more time before the ground closed in on me.”

He put down the pen, looked at the plastic device that counted him, without judging him.

“Tomorrow,” he murmured, “I might go one more stop.”

And somewhere in the vast, deceitful fitness cosmos

Some statistic must have gone awry –

but in a dilapidated body in Berlin-Schöneberg

A circuit had closed.

who was called:

I'm not quite finished yet.

Internet scams – Perplex.click and other misconceptions

The evening was one of those when Berlin looked as if it had already closed for the day, but no one had found the switch yet. The sky hung gray over Schöneberg, the air was cold enough for visible smoke, but not cold enough to stop people from drinking their problems to death in front of the late-night shops.

The corner shop stood there as always, as if it had never been built over, but had simply crawled out of a failed kiosk. Neon lights made everything seem more honest than it should have been. In front of the door: the standing table – altar, accident scene, and regulars' table all in one.

Kuddel was already standing at the table like a piece of furniture. His jacket was open, his flat cap askew, a Stern beer in his hand, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, and half a local allotment association looking like he'd been through a row of people in his boots. His eyes looked as if they'd seen it all – and hadn't processed any of it.

Next to him: Heckenpisser, the walking caricature of a middle-class son. Freshly ironed shirt, jacket, bow tie, side parting, glasses. In one hand a bottle, in the other a briefcase, as if he had just finished a meeting with the employment office.

Murat stood behind the glass, his face that typical mix of weariness and concern that only people who have been selling alcohol and stories at night for years can achieve.

Berlin breathed heavily as another figure entered the scene: Michael.

Michael was no tourist, and it wasn't by chance. Schöneberg had been his neighborhood for years; his apartment was not far from the late-night shop, in a backyard, with thin walls, too much past, too little future.

Born in 1977, Commodore generation. Someone who still had the eighties as a scar on his mind, too much partying, too many concerts, too many nights in which he thought life would begin later – and then didn't realize that it had already started.

Officially, he was a DevOps engineer. Unofficially: a guy who spent his nights hunched over a keyboard, trying to squeeze the shit of the world into sentences so he could bear it better.

He had named his little online empire "www.perplex.click". A site without glossy graphics, without advertising, without shouting "Subscribe now!".

eBooks, Freeware Games & Applications, Browser Games, TV Streams & Radio Streams. eBooks about people who were stuck somewhere between a breakdown and daily routine. No coaching, no solutions, just: honest, blunt reality with the smell of beer.

That evening he was not out as an observer, but as one of the thirsty ones.

He stepped up to the counter and nodded to Murat.

“Same as always, Michael?” Murat asked, without asking what “always” meant. He knew.

“Five Sterni,” said Michael. “To wash down the realization that I still live here.”

Murat placed the bottles in front of him.

"It's your decision," he said. "The city warned you."

Michael grinned briefly, paid, opened a bottle with his lighter, and went outside.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser took note of him like a new piece of furniture. No big greeting, no "Hey, how's it going?". At the standing table, the simple rule was: Whoever comes with beer is not an enemy.

"Good evening," said Michael.

“Good evening,” grunted Kuddel, without actually looking up.

Heckenpisser briefly and sharply examined him from behind his glasses.

"You look like you've seen too much and learned too little," he observed. "Hehehe."

"That's fine," said Michael. "Then I guess I'm just like you."

That was sufficient as an application.

The three of them stood silently at the table, while cars drove past on the street, a bus stood coughing at the stop, and somewhere a dog barked as if it had taken being born personally.

It wasn't long before the two drunkards started talking. They only needed a keyword, some remark about the train, the rent, the last hospital stay – and the can was open.

Moped-Manni, the old dirty pig, Babylon train station toilet, Karl with the hospital beer, the lost night in Neukölln, peep show in the mind's eye, hedge pisser's mother with the cooking spoon, Kuddel against the fitness society, pedometer, job center, ghosts in the toilet.

The words flowed like beer from a tapped pipe. Raw, dirty, without drama – and precisely for that reason better than anything any authors learned in writing courses.

Michael listened. He didn't ask many questions. He drank, he nodded, he let them do their thing.

Murat watched the scene unfold in the background. Not for the first time, but today something was different. This guy – this Michael – didn't have that polished "I'm just passing through" vibe. He stood there as if he'd long been part of the inventory.

Jana joined us, as she often did after her shift ended. Hoodie, backpack, eyes filled with the image of a hospital scene.

"Well, you drunken asses," she said. "Who is this?"

"Michael," said Hecke. "Schöneberg's fellow inhabitant of hell. Hehehe."

"Author of a website," Murat added from inside.

"Aha," said Kuddel. "Scribes."

From that moment on, it was clear: if there was anyone who was going to write all this rubbish down, it was him.

Michael leaned against the standing table, took a sip, and looked at the three of them one after the other: Kuddel, Hecke, Jana, and behind them Murat.

In his eyes was that faint glimmer of someone who has found something he wasn't looking for, but needed.

"You do realize," he finally said, "that you are a complete book, don't you?"

Heckenpisser raised an eyebrow.

"Excuse me?" he asked. "Hehehe."

"A book," Michael repeated. "Chapter after chapter of misery. Two drunkards, a nurse, a corner store, Berlin as background radiation. That's more drama than many a screenwriter manages in a lifetime."

Kuddel snorted.

"We are not a book," he said. "We are rejects."

"Exactly," said Michael. "And that's exactly what I want. I have a website – www.perplex.click I collect rejects there. People who don't fit into the career portal or the feel-good columns. Anyone who doesn't want to read you should go back to watching influencers make protein shakes."

"Perplexed," Hecke repeated. "Confused. That makes sense. Hehehe."

"Click," Murat added. "So that you press it and can't get away."

Jana took a drag on her cigarette.

"What exactly are you planning, Michael?" she asked. "Tell me without the author's jargon."

Michael shrugged.

“Relatively simple,” he said. “I’ll sit down and write you down. Not as heroes, not as victims. As what you are. Two drunks who get through their days with Sterni and Boonekamp and still get more out of life than half the laptop geeks out there.”

"And what's in it for us?" Kuddel asked suspiciously. "Besides some nerds on the internet laughing at us?"

“You’ll get absolutely nothing,” Michael said dryly. “No fame, no money, no likes. Maybe at most this: that somewhere in Dortmund, in Bielefeld, in Vienna, in some backwater town, someone will be staring at their phone at night, reading your stories, and thinking: *Okay. I'm not the only one who messed up.*“

Heckenpisser had to laugh. That high-pitched "Hihihi" that always came when something affected him more than he wanted to admit.

"And where do you appear in the story?" he asked. "Just as a typist's slave?"

“I’m the idiot who sorts all this out,” said Michael. “The one who puts your train station toilet sentences into chapters, who makes sure you don’t lose track between Moped Manni and hospital beer. And who writes his name at the bottom of the cover because someone has to do the paperwork.”

"At least they're honest," Jana murmured.

Murat opened two more beers and pushed them over without a comment.

“If someone is going to write about it,” he said, “then it should be someone from here. Not just any journalist who comes by, takes photos and then writes a report about ‘alcohol at the corner store’.”

“Or a Netflix documentary,” Jana added. “‘The Sad Kings of Schöneberg’ – with piano music playing in the background.”

"If the television crew comes, I'll throw the first stone," growled Kuddel.

Michael shook his head.

"Television is dead," he said. "The internet is eating everything. If you're going to end up anywhere, it'll be with me. On Perplex.click. Among all the other lost souls. And later – when there's enough material – I'll make an eBook out of it. 'The Drunkards'. Your corner store, your train station toilets, your hospital corridors. And my name underneath."

Hedge pisser raised his bottle.

"All right," he said. "Official application: We, the drunkards, hereby authorly author allows this old shithouse writer to turn us into something else. Into text, into eBook, into radio play, into wall decal – anything we don't have to type ourselves. Hehehe."

“I want a say if I come across as stupid,” said Jana.

"You come across as you are," said Michael.

"That's good then," she said and drank.

Kuddel remained silent longer than usual.

He stared at the bottle, at the asphalt, at the neon reflection in the shop window.

"So you'll be the one who outlives us," he finally said. "Good, someone has to bear witness."

"Maybe," said Michael. "Maybe I'll die before then. Then only the unfinished chapters will remain."

"Hehehe," Hecke murmured. "Cliffhanger in the morgue."

One after the other, they added their two cents. Murat didn't want to be named, but of course, he wanted to be acknowledged. Jana wanted the hospital stories to be true, not some TV version of pain. Heckenpisser wanted his know-it-all remarks to remain uncensored. Kuddel didn't want anyone trying to make him into a tragic figure who "still has hope" in the end.

"No happy ending," he said. "If you write us down, then without one. Life here has no third act with redemption."

Michael nodded.

"I promise," he said. "If one of you ends up in the hospital drinking hospital beer, then that's the end of the story. No sunset, no rainbow reintegration."

"Good," said Kuddel. "Then let's drink to our literary failure."

They clinked glasses.

Four bottles, a late-night convenience store, neon-bright misery.

From that evening on, Michael was no longer just the guy who lived in Schöneberg and did "something with writing." He was the one who would bring the drunks to justice. Not as a manager, not as a manager of their careers, but as the archivist of their downfall.

Perplex.click suddenly had faces: Kuddel, Heckenpisser, Jana, Murat, the cardboard box "FOR THOSE WHO ARE STILL THERE" – and in the background this city that allowed all this and yet acted as if it were taking place somewhere else.

The internet's drunken arses – from now on, this wasn't just some meme-worthy term, but a plan:

The two of them would keep drinking, keep messing up, keep talking. Michael would sit down in front of his screen at night, a Sterni beer next to his laptop, a cigarette in the ashtray, and force their bullshit into sentences. Chapter by chapter.

And at some point, somewhere on a screen, a cover would appear with the words "The Drunken Asses" at the top.

And anyone who read it would know:

This isn't made up. This is just what happens when you have two guys, a convenience store, and too much time on your hands.

throws into the same street and then has someone from Schöneberg write about it.

It took less than a week for the crazy idea to become a project.

Not because someone had written a business plan. But because the evenings were always the same anyway: late-night shop, standing table, Sterni beer, stories.

The only difference: Now there was often a laptop next to it.

The back room of the corner shop was normally a storage room, a passageway, and occasionally a smoking room for Murat when the people in the front got on his nerves. Boxes, empty bottles, an old refrigerator that hummed like a depressed bear.

One Tuesday evening, an additional resident suddenly appeared: Michael's laptop. Next to it was a power strip, two beers, and an ashtray that would have sent any firefighter into a panic.

Kuddel sat on a rickety chair, his robe thrown over the back, a cigarette in his hand. Heckenpisser squatted on an overturned drinks crate, like a poorly paid analyst. Jana leaned against the wall, arms crossed, backpack beside her. Murat stood in the doorway, looking as if he were about to be caught gambling illegally.

"So," said Michael, opening the device, "we'll begin. The Drunkards – Chapter One. Moped Manni, train station toilet, the whole zoo. I'll write, you talk. Later I'll edit it and put it on www.perplex.click."

"What about spelling?" asked Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

"Spelling is the only thing that can't be flawed here," said Michael. "Everything else can be shaky."

"Hey," Kuddel grumbled, "I don't want to end up looking like I can't tell a story."

"You can tell stories," said Michael. "Too well. The problem is, you forget them afterwards. That's why I'm here."

It started innocently enough. Michael's tattooed fingers clicked across the keyboard while Kuddel talked. Moped-Manni, cat caught with a toenail, LSD trip in Friedrichshain, gas gun, fun and adventure pool, everything. Hedge-pisser interjected "Hehehe" comments, Jana corrected details ("No, that wasn't 2007, that was 2009, I know that because I was still living with my mother then."), Murat provided background noise in the form of clinking bottles.

Michael wrote quickly, but not mechanically. He listened, sorted things out in his head, left sentences as they were, even if they were clunky, and omitted others if they were just repetition.

Every now and then he stopped and read a passage aloud.

"Moped-Manni had feet like in a war zone. Toenails that looked like he used them to peel potatoes. And then he kicked his cat once – not out of malice, but out of stupidity – and the toenail did what evolution never intended..."

Kuddel laughed loudly.

"Yeah, man," he said. "That's how it was. Write: 'This story isn't entirely true, but it feels right.'"

"Hehehe," Hecke interjected. "Based on rumors and bad influence."

Jana shook her head, but couldn't stop herself from grinning.

"You're all crazy," she said. "But it reads well."

The first draft of Chapter 1 was finished before anyone realized how late it was.

Murat pushed from the front. "You're blocking my storage space," he grumbled. "If the delivery guy comes and sees you recording podcasts here on analog equipment, the authorities will be called."

"We're not making a podcast," Michael objected. "We're making a book. Silence."

In the end, they left the back room with a feeling they had never known before: They had drunk, yes – but they had also done something else.

No work done. No optimization. But at least... something left behind.

"Strange feeling," Kuddel muttered in front of the shop as he threw his robe back on.

"What is it?", asked Jana.

"That something comes of all this talk," he said. "Normally it just fizzles out. Today it's been recorded."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Welcome to the 21st century, brother. Everything you say can be used against you."

A few days later, the first real "Saufärsche" text went online.

Michael sat in his kitchen, a can next to the keyboard, a cigarette in the ashtray, the clock clearly past "too late".

He opened Word and began to write.

Headline:

The drunks, Chapter 1: Moped-Manni, the old dirty pig

A short introduction by himself, as author:

"This is the first of many stories about Kuddel and Heckenpisser – two characters from Berlin-Schöneberg whom you either love or want to avoid."

Everything is based on stories, memories, rumors, and residual alcohol. Anyone who recognizes themselves in this has a bad social circle.

Among them: the raw, dirty, revised version of their rambling.

He read it through again, not as a writer, but as a reader. There was the train station atmosphere, there was the LSD trip, there was the fun-bad incident with the piss waterfall on the slide, there was the AIDS-screaming saddlecloth – it was all there.

He took a deep breath and pressed "Publish".

The screen did nothing dramatic. No fireworks, no sound, no "You have just made history."

Just one sober sentence:

"Post published."

"Well, great," he muttered. "At least one of us."

The next evening, he brought the message to the corner store.

"You're online," he said, even before he had opened his first beer.

"Sick," said Kuddel. "The internet is for people with a future."

Hecke was more excited.

"Hehehe," he said. "Show me."

Michael opened the laptop; the light from the screen hit them in the face like a different kind of neon.

The page stated:

"The Drinking Pigs, Chapter 1: Moped-Manni, the old dirty pig"

Including text. Its text form. Not a word-for-word copy, but a distillation.

They read. Each in their own way.

Kuddel spoke slowly, pausing when a sentence touched on points he wouldn't have wanted to address sober. Heckenpisser spoke faster, paying more attention to form and rhythm. Jana spoke sideways, with the inner eye of someone who reads daily reports that dismember lives.

"That's me," Kuddel finally said quietly. "But... different."

"That's you," Michael corrected. "I was just tidying up."

Hecke giggled. "Hehehe," then: "Dude, this reads like we're literary characters. Like Bukowski with a BER airport connection."

"You are literary characters," Michael said. "Unfortunately, you also have to live them."

Nothing happened online for two days. No comments, no emails, no "Wow, awesome".

Then, on the third night, at 2:14 a.m., the first reaction popped up:

"I read this and had to laugh and vomit at the same time. Greetings from Essen. M."

Michael took it like a treasure.

He read it aloud at the standing table.

"See," he said. "Food laughs and vomits with you."

"Now I know what I have in the Ruhr area," Kuddel remarked. "A fan with an upset stomach."

"Hehehe," commented Hecke.

With each additional text – "Babylon train station toilet", "Hospital beer", "The lost night in Neukölln" – the small, idiotic community on Perplex.click grew.

Not in absurd numbers. There weren't hundreds of thousands. But there were some. Always the same misguided greetings:

"I'm currently sitting in a truck bunk somewhere near Kassel reading this. You're scaring me. Keep it up."

"My father was like Kuddel. He's dead. But somehow it's comforting to read this."

"You romanticize drinking, you assholes. My sister drank herself to death. And you're making stories out of it. Fuck you."

When Michael read it aloud, the area around the standing table became silent.

"Aha," said Kuddel. "The other side. He thinks we're doing comedy here."

Hecke didn't say "Hehehe." He remained silent.

Jana slowly blew out the smoke.

"He's not wrong," she said. "You do comedy. But you don't make an advertising poster. It's more like... a documentary with jokes."

"If it were just a documentary, nobody would read it," Michael muttered. "People only put up with the crap if they're allowed to laugh."

Kuddel looked at the street.

"If he only knew," he said quietly, "how unromantic it is when you're actually hanging over the toilet vomiting and realize you're flushing away your own existence. He only reads the final product."

Over time, the errors increased.

Heckenpisser was the first to start mistaking the internet for fame.

"Look," he said one evening, using an expression usually reserved for children seeing their name in a notebook for the first time. "We got 47 emails. 47, Michael! Hehehe. It's practically a mini-festival."

"This is a lousy garage concert," said Michael. "Stay calm."

"Imagine," Hecke continues, "someday a director will read this. Then there'll be a series. 'The Drunkards – Berlin by Night'. With actors who are more beautiful than us."

"If a handsome guy plays me on TV, I'll sue you all," Kuddel growled. "I want people to know how ugly it is."

"Kuddel, dude," said Jana. "We're not in Hollywood here. We're at the corner store. Your best chance of being filmed is that someone films you with their cell phone when you fall off the curb."

Michael remained suspicious.

He had seen it before – people who had gone through the internet as if through a poison cloud: first euphoric, then offended, then broken.

"We'll stay small," he said. "We'll stay dirty. No Instagram, no TikTok, no 'don't forget to like and follow'. Perplex.click, a few crazy people, a few drunks, that's enough."

"And what if an AI steals our crap?" Hecke suddenly asked. "Hehehe. A machine that takes our stories, smooths them over, and then sells them as a 'podcast for the soul'?"

"If a machine irons out your stories," Michael said, "the end result will be a TV movie. And nobody will be able to stand that."

"I've heard of something like that," chimed in Timo, the sociologist, who had of course reappeared. "AIs that could learn from your texts. Imagine if there was a chat machine someday that answered you like Kuddel."

"Wonderful," Kuddel grumbled. "Then I don't need to get up anymore. Then people can type their miserable texts and get slapped down by my digital copy."

"Hehehe," chuckled Hecke. "'You have selected the KUDDEL answer. Do you really want to continue?'"

Amidst all the chatter, the plans, the comments, something happened that no one said aloud:

The drunkards began to sound different.

When Kuddel talked about moped-Manni, Karl, Lea, pedometers and fitness idiots, the thought was always in the background:
This might end up on Perplex.click.

Not like censorship, more like an echo.

"Leave that in," Hecke would sometimes say when Kuddel wanted to retract a sentence.
"Hehehe. That's good stuff."

"I'm not a fabric supplier," Kuddel snapped. "I'm the broken original."

"That's exactly why," replied Michael. "It won't get any better."

Jana began to remember little things:

"Write that Karl always watched the same shitty show in room 317. That afternoon dish. That hurt more than the drip."

Murat provided the marginal notes:

"When you describe how you're standing here, don't forget the smell. Beer, stale smoke, wet jackets, kebabs from the right, piss from the left. The internet has no smell. You have to provide it."

Michael took it all in. Not literally, but through his own filter, but he left the dirt in.

The misconceptions about the internet came in waves.

Some wrote Michael emails with subject lines like:

"Cooperation request – we'll make more of your content!"

He opened one:

"Dear Mr. Lappenbusch, we have your unique page www.perplex.click discovered. Your characters have great potential. With our support, you could increase your reach and monetization – advertising partners, placements, social media presence..."

He didn't finish reading the rest.

At the corner store, he held out the printout to Hecke.

"Read this to yourself," he said.

Hecke cleared his throat exaggeratedly and read in a manager's voice:

“‘Their drinking stories could be optimally positioned as part of an authentic brand strategy...’ Hehehe.”

"If I feel like throwing up while reading, I'll stop," said Kuddel.

Jana grimaced.

“Imagine,” she said, “you’re standing by the hospital bed, Karl is hooked up to an IV drip, and suddenly he says: ‘Before I die, I’d like to quickly recommend this energy drink brand.’”

“If I advertise,” Kuddel growled, “it will only be for painkillers at most.”

“And for Murat’s corner shop,” Murat interjected. “But unpaid.”

Michael threw the email in the trash.

“We remain a flaw in the system,” he said. “Not a brand.”

There were nights when he would read them new chapters before they went online.

They sat in the back again, with a line of smoke, laptop lights, and beer bottles.

“Chapter: Hospital visit with hospital beer,” he once said.

He read. About Karl, about the oxygen goggles, about Jana, about Kuddel, who made jokes to avoid collapsing, about the taste of beer in the hospital mouth.

In the end, there was silence.

“Exactly,” said Jana. “Don’t make it prettier. If someone cries while reading – good. If someone laughs and then feels ashamed – even better.”

Kuddel scratched his face.

“I never thought,” he said, “that anyone who wasn’t there would read this crap.”

"Welcome to the internet," said Hecke. "Hehehe. People read your confession in your undershirt on the sofa."

Sometimes Michael would come to the corner store alone, stand at the table, and listen without unpacking his laptop.

Then he was just a character, not the author.

Only the guy who drank with them, not the one who divided them into chapters.

But regardless of how he saw himself at the moment – as a writer, as a drunkard, as a chronicler – one thing was now clear:

If someone ever asked who had put the drunken arses in the net,

The answer would be:

Not just any editorial team. Not a publisher. Not a platform.

But a guy from Schöneberg, born in '77, with too many stories in his head and a small website called

www.perplex.click,

where everything that would otherwise have just been smoked away at the standing table ended up.

And somewhere in this mixture of reality,
Beer, neon lights, and data packets

Slowly, two little arms became a book,

something no one had ordered, but some could use –

even if they only read it at night, secretly, on their mobile phones,

while they themselves were standing at a kiosk.

At some point, even the best late-night shopping spree needed a clean break.

The neon tube flickered once wearily, as if to say:
Guys, that's enough now.

Murat was already pulling the metal grate halfway down, a slow, admonishing clattering sound. Jana had long since left – next early shift, next round of patching people up. Kuddel lit the famous "last" cigarette, which everyone knew wasn't. Heckenpisser held his bottle as if he were cheating on it with thoughts of tomorrow.

Michael braced himself with both hands against the standing table, feeling the sticky wood, the small dent on the edge, which came from some bottle that had once been set down too hard.

"I have to go," he said.

"Do you need to throw up or do you have to get up early?" asked Kuddel.

"Both eventually," said Michael. "But first, tomorrow: working from home."

"Hehehe," said Heckenpisser. "The only person who voluntarily goes to the computer after five Sterni."

Murat appeared in the doorway, a plastic bag in his hand.

"For you, Michael," he said, tossing them over. "Standard five-pack."

Five Sterni beers in a crinkly blue bag. That had been his unofficial late-night convenience store subscription for months: one on-site, five for the night shift at home.

"If you ever make a career for yourself, I want to be in the foreword," Murat said. "Thanks to the man who helped finance my liver."

“You’ll be in the eBook,” Michael replied, reaching for the bag. “Under: system-relevant position.”

The street swallowed him up as soon as he was away from the neon light.

Schöneberg at night wasn't a romantic postcard scene. It was more like an open ashtray: half-extinguished cigarette butts, sticky edges, a gray coating. But something was still glowing.

Michael took the familiar route home. Five minutes if you were walking. Ten if you were looking in shop windows. Twenty if you didn't like your own thoughts.

He was tired, but the tiredness wasn't just physical. It was a kind of exhaustion that came from two sides: during the day from work, at night from what he called "the rest".

His apartment smelled of an indefinable mix of coffee, stale air, and technology. A desk lamp, two monitors, a keyboard with worn letters, and somewhere a not-quite-empty ashtray.

Left: Work environment. Right monitor: IDE, terminal window, monitoring dashboard with red and green dots. DevOps reality in its purest form: pipelines, deployments, containers, logs.

Right: Writing World.Browser withwww.perplex.clickIn the admin area, a text program with open chapters, a folder called "Saufärsche" (literally "Drunken Asses"), which already contained more documents than was healthy.

He sat down, rubbed his face, and clicked first on the left screen.

A message flashed on the company Slack channel. Some colleague from another time zone – the USA, maybe India, time had long since blurred.

"Hey Michael, FYI: There's an important email stuck in the email filter, could you please release it?"

Among them: "Released."

An alert from a few hours ago, which he had briefly swiped away on his phone while Kuddel had been ranting about fitness Nazis.

He opened a terminal, looked at the logs, adjusted a configuration file. A few commands, a commit, push, the pipeline started. The green bar slowly crept to the right.

He knew all about it: setting up servers, shutting them down, configuring load balancers, calming down Kubernetes clusters, renewing TLS certificates, cursing something or other with DNS. He was good at it. Too good to just leave it alone.

A job where he spent his days ensuring that other people could work smoothly – while his own mental systems had long since stopped scaling.

The pipeline went green with "success".

"Well, at least one," he muttered.

He closed the terminal, muting Slack for once.

On the left, the world that paid him. On the right, the world that made him explainable.

"DevOps by day, a train station toilet in my head by night. Greetings from Hamburg."

He read that and took a sip of cola.

It was absurdly logical: microservices by day, micro-disasters by night. YAML on the left, logging on the left, the idiots as human stack traces on the right.

He opened the document "Saufärsche_im_Internet.docx". The cursor blinked at the top of a blank page.

He had just been a figure at the corner store, now he was back to sorting the figures.

The scene from the evening was fresh: Murat, the five-pack of Sterni beer, Kuddel with the "no happy endings" demand, Heckenpisser with "Hihihi", Jana with the hospital comments, Timo with his sociology, which nobody had ordered.

Michael thought for a moment, then began to type.

As his fingers moved across the keyboard, he detached himself from the story. That was the trick he had taught himself:

He added his name to indicate that someone had seen it. And he removed his name again to make it clear what it was really about: the two drunks at the standing table, who from the outside looked like jokes, but inside carried more truth than many a podcast with a coaching attitude.

He typed sentences like:

"Michael was just another ghost passing by the standing table. One who listened, drank, laughed, was silent – and then disappeared back into his apartment where two screens awaited him: one for the life that paid him, one for the life that devoured him."

He left Kuddel and Heckenpisser where they belonged: under neon light, on the corner, between cigarette butts and empty bottles.

He himself now stood only on the sidelines, as a marginal note, as the one who pressed all of this into text form.

Five Sterni as a time budget: one bottle for returning from the corner store, two for the first draft, one for revision, one in case something came up during the writing process that had nothing to do with humor.

A browser notification popped up on the left intermittently:

"Security update available."

The machine wanted him to restart. He clicked on "Remind me later." That was basically his entire lifestyle in one button.

Remember it later. Drink less later. Make a doctor's appointment later. Think about how much of Karl is left later. Sort out your feelings later.

First things first: text.

He built the bridge in his mind: Perplex.click as a hub between the corner store and the server room. Drunkards as characters who would never know what "DevOps" was, but who knew the downtimes of real life.

He typed:

"If Kuddel and Heckenpisser knew that somewhere two rooms away there was a DevOps engineer writing their stories at night,
While containers are being restarted in the background, they would probably just say:
'Whatever you're doing, the main thing is that the beer doesn't get more expensive.'"

He deleted two sentences, then added another. The stars in the bottles became fewer, the words more.

The text was finished around three o'clock.

He read it through once, stretching his back, which complained like an old dog.

The right screen now showed the finished section about the drunkards on the internet – with Michael as a minor character who disappeared again.

The left screen showed him flickering logs somewhere in the background, but no alerts. For the moment, there was silence in both worlds.

He saved the file, uploaded it to the Perplex.click backend, but didn't put it online yet. "In the morning," he told himself. "When he no longer smelled of Sterni beer. When he'd caught the worst typos."

He closed his laptop, leaving only the monitors in working mode. To anyone looking in from the outside, this would have been a perfectly normal home office corner of an overworked IT professional.

Nobody saw that station-themed texts were being created here at night.

No one except those who would read it later.

Before going to bed, he took another bottle from the row. The fifth. Ritual.

He went to the window and opened it a crack. Schöneberg night air came in – distant wailing of sirens, loud laughter somewhere, the clinking of bottles somewhere, the dull bass of someone's last illusions somewhere.

He thought of Kuddel and Heckenpisser, who by that time had probably either already dozed off or returned to the same standing table as satellites that never completely leave orbit.

He thought about the comments, about Mike from Dortmund, about the truck driver, about the woman with the dead father, about the guy who had written "You romanticize drinking".

He thought briefly of himself, the DevOps engineer who patched workflows by day and turned drunken arses into letters by night.

Then he turned off the light.

The following evening he would reappear as a figure at the corner store, bottle in hand, between his robe and bow tie.

Then disappear again. Then write again.

The drunkards would continue to exist, with him or without him.

Perplex.click would continue to shine, like a small, crooked server in the big, dumb cloud.

And Michael, home office type, DevOps by day, drunken chronicler by night,

would repeatedly withdraw from the story to make it clear who really played the main roles:

Kuddel.Heckenpisser.Der Späti.Berlin.

The rest was just infrastructure.

Morality? Not served.

It was one of those evenings when the city pretended to have a conscience.

Somewhere, documentaries about poverty were playing, somewhere people were sitting in talk shows discussing "social responsibility", somewhere on Twitter, strangers were bashing each other's heads in because someone had used the wrong word.

Meanwhile, bottles were being opened at the corner store.

Murat wiped the counter with a rag; it had long since given up trying to be clean. The neon light flickered like a bad promise. Outside, the standing table stood there as always: sticky, crooked, more honest than any ethics lecture.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser had already been poured before the discussion even started.

"Do you know what the worst thing is?" Heckenpisser began, gesturing broadly with the bottle, his bow tie slightly askew today, his shirt still from work. "That nowadays everyone talks about morality, but nobody knows what it is anymore. Hehehe."

"Morality is like a bicycle helmet," Kuddel grumbled. "Everyone tells you to wear one, but nobody actually wants to put it on."

Jana just came around the corner, hoodie, backpack, cigarette pack in her hand, the facial expression of someone who has seen people bleeding all day and now doesn't know why she should even try to save any of them anymore.

"Well, philosophy group," she said. "What's the topic today?"

"Morality," Hecke replied. "That thing we don't have."

"We have morals," Kuddel countered. "We just have a different drinks menu."

Murat placed the next round in front of him without asking.

"You and morality," he said. "That's like currywurst and vegan mayo."

"Explain it to me," Kuddel turned to Jana, "you're a nurse, a real angel of care. What is morality? Is it when you rescue someone from alcohol withdrawal so they can continue drinking on the outside? Or when you secretly tell them, 'Slow down so we don't see each other so often'?"

Jana took a drag on the cigarette, slowly letting the smoke out again.

"Morality," she said, "is what's in the guidelines. What happens at the bedside is something else."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Guidelines say: we shouldn't drink. Bett says: we'll do it anyway."

It was at that particular time of day when most of those who were still sober sat in their living rooms staring at screens where other people were debating right and wrong.

A simpler rule applied at the standing table:

Correct: Bottle full. Incorrect: Bottle empty.

But lately, something had crept in. Since Karl, since the hospital beer, since the pedometer, since Lea with the business card, since Michael wrote all that crap down – the word "guilt" had been hovering in the air more often.

"Recently," Heckenpisser began, "a guy in the office told me he no longer drank alcohol because he 'did not want to be part of the problem'."

I asked, 'What problem?' He said, 'Overall societal costs of addiction, health insurance, blah blah.' I looked at him and thought, 'Brother, if you think your three wine spritzers a year are going to be the downfall of the AOK... Hehehe.'

"People overestimate their impact," said Kuddel. "These assholes think that if they carry a tote bag, they'll save the world. If they don't fly, the planet won't end, and if they don't drink booze, the healthcare system will retire."

Jana nodded wearily.

"And you underestimate your impact," she said. "You act as if it's only your business when you drink yourselves into oblivion. But in the end, some nurse is sitting by your bed at night, some doctor is writing a report, some insurance clerk is calculating your hospital stays. You're running circles. It's just that others have to walk them."

"That's the nasty thing about morality," Murat interjected. "No matter what you do, someone will have a problem with it. If I sell alcohol: I'm a dealer. If I don't sell any: people go to the next shop and I go bankrupt."

A guy wearing a bicycle helmet stopped briefly, looked around at the group, saw the bottles, and shook his head. His look: You are part of the problem.

"Look," said Kuddel, "there's moral superiority on two wheels."

"Hehehe," chuckled Hecke. "He definitely has an opinion on everything. And a podcast."

"The world has more opinions than ashtrays," Kuddel growled. "But if you ask, 'Who stays with Karl when he poops in bed?' then the answers suddenly become sparse."

Jana threw the cigarette butt into the waiting ashtray, hitting it with a precision that came not from training, but from too many night shifts.

"Let me tell you this," she said. "If I have another guy coming in soon with liver failure, alone, no one there, no one on the emergency number – then I'll think of you. Not because you're to blame. But because at least you don't act like you're immortal."

"Morality is like a bottle of Boonekamp," said Hecke. "Most people want to pour it for others. Nobody wants to drink it themselves. Hehehe."

Timo the sociologist joined in at some point, of course. Like a character obligatory in a play: someone had to categorize the things that no one else wanted to categorize.

"You are quite interesting," he said, without a greeting. "You live completely contrary to all norms, but you have your own code."

"Our code is simple," said Kuddel. "We don't lie to ourselves. We don't pretend we'll stop tomorrow. We don't pretend we're good people. We just pretend the beer is always cold."

"Hehehe."

Timo nodded.

"That's what morality is all about," he said. "At least it's more honest than all that Instagram drivel. They post their bowl of chia seeds in the morning, their run at lunchtime, and their care work post in the evening. You don't post anything. You're standing here, you stink, you're here. And you know you're cheating yourselves. That's... radical."

"If you say 'radical' again, I'll give you a headbutt," Kuddel growled. "Radical is when you wake up in the emergency room and Jana is hanging over you in a white coat."

"I hate white," Jana muttered. "If I ever die, I want to die in a black hoodie."

There was this thing that no one spoke of, but everyone knew about: the Last Judgment in their mind.

“If God exists,” said Heckenpisser, half jokingly, half out of residual Catholicism, “and we stand before him someday, he won’t ask: ‘Have you recycled enough?’ He’ll ask: ‘At least you weren’t a complete asshole?’”

“Then it’s my turn,” said Kuddel. “Then he says, ‘Have you hurt anyone?’ And I say, ‘Yes, but mostly myself.’ And then he says, ‘Well, go over here to the corner for those with self-destruction. The ones who have broken others are back there.’”

Jana snorted.

“If God exists,” she said, “then he’ll get a list from me first. ‘Explain this to me. And that. And why Karl at 50...’ And if he doesn’t have a good answer, I’m leaving.”

"Hehehe," chuckled Hecke. "Jana quits in the afterlife."

Michael briefly appeared, just to grab a six-pack, gave a fleeting wave, and disappeared into the darkness, into his home office, to his servers and texts.

“He writes everything down,” said Timo. “Your failures, your small moments of decency, your big moments of shit. In twenty years, people will read this and say, ‘Look how they lived back then. Without a mindfulness app.’”

“We are a footnote,” said Kuddel. “Nothing more. ‘In the late stages of capitalism, there was a subgroup in Berlin that used their livers as a canvas for protest.’”

"Hehehe."

The topic of morality came up again when one of the regulars, who had been "dry" for some time, staggered by.

He stopped at a safe distance, holding a plastic bottle of water.

"Hey, guys," he said. "You know you're going to shoot each other, right?"

“We were at your funeral in rehab,” said Kuddel. “Don’t tell us anything. You were drunk for ten years, sober for two, and suddenly you’re the Ministry of Morality.”

The guy grimaced.

"I just don't want you to end up like me," he said. "Without a driver's license, without teeth, with a guardian."

“We might get a book,” said Hecke. “Hehehe. That’s also a form of care.”

Jana tilted her head.

“You’re right,” she said to the dry man. “But you’re standing in front of two people who know how to die. Threatening them won’t do any good. If you try to lecture them about morality, they’ll just throw it away.”

“That’s exactly what I mean by morality,” Timo murmured. “It’s not being used where it’s most needed.”

In the end, the sentence that Murat eventually wrote on the window with a chalk marker was next to the opening hours:

"Morality? Not served."

Jana laughed when she saw it.

"That's perfect," she said. "Everyone can read what's going on in there."

"Does that mean we're in a morally neutral zone here?" asked Hecke. "Hehehe."

“No,” said Murat. “Meaning: What you find here is at your own risk. I’m selling you the bottles. What you do after that is up to you – with yourselves, with Jana, with God, with the job center, or with the cemetery administration.”

Kuddel looked at the sentence for a long time.

“Morality isn’t handed out,” he repeated. “You have to bring it with you. If you don’t have any, you won’t get any here. If you do have some, you might lose some of it. And if you have too much of it, you won’t be able to stand it here anyway.”

The hedge pisser raised the bottle.

“To morality,” he said. “The only liquid we don’t have here today. Hehehe.”

They clinked glasses.

On everything they did wrong.

On everything that she still felt was right.

To a city that championed morality

and yet nowhere

knew how to consistently pour out the contents.

The sentence stuck to the glass.

"Morality? Not served."

The chalk had warped slightly, and rain and fingerprints did the rest, so that the question mark eventually looked more like a tired checkmark. Nevertheless, people read it. Some grinned, some snorted, some photographed it for their "Berlin is so crazy" stories.

For the drunkards, it was simply the most honest set of house rules they had ever seen.

A few days after the big moral discussion at the standing table, a situation arose that made the sentence as practical as a fire extinguisher in the stairwell.

It was early afternoon – the “in-between time”, when the late-night shop actually only had walk-in customers: students secretly buying cigarette butts, pensioners with lottery tickets, parcel drivers with energy drinks.

Kuddel came anyway. Not because he liked to drink early, but because he didn't like being home early.

The kitchen was too quiet, the television too loud, the thoughts too unfriendly.

So there he stood, at half past two, Sterni beer in hand, at the almost empty table. Heckenpisser was still at work, Jana was in the clinic, and Murat was embroiled in an internal cash dispute with his supplier.

Then they appeared: two figures who looked like a poorly cast street worker duo.

They were wearing those “We are socially engaged” jackets, beige with a logo, ID badges on lanyards around their necks. A woman, late thirties, eco-friendly ponytail, serious face. A guy, mid-twenties, beard, backpack, determined smile that smelled of flyers.

“Excuse me,” the woman said, pausing briefly in front of the standing table. “May we ask you a question?”

Kuddel looked at his bottle, then at her.

“It depends,” he said. “If the question is, ‘Do you want to make a donation?’, the answer is no.”

“Hehehe,” Heckenpisser would have said. But he wasn't there.

“We’re from the addiction support organization XY,” the guy began. “We’re running a campaign about alcohol abuse in the neighborhood. We’ve noticed that there’s a lot of drinking going on here...”

“A keen observer,” Kuddel muttered. “That’s why you get money from the Senate, huh?”

The woman was undeterred.

“We want to talk to people who... uh... consume regularly,” she said. “Like you, for example.”

“Oh, come on,” Kuddel said dryly. “You couldn't have guessed it.”

He knew the type. Consultation, flyers, website on the back, phone numbers that nobody called as long as they could still stand.

“Our aim is not to condemn you,” the bearded man quickly added. “It’s about raising awareness. An awareness of risks.”

Kuddel took a drag on his cigarette.

“I have enough awareness,” he said. “That’s the problem. I know I’m ultimately shooting myself in the foot. I know what liver values are. I know the risks. I can even recognize them when I can no longer read them.”

The woman smiled pityingly.

"Denial is part of the addiction," she said gently.

“Denial would be if I said, ‘I’ve got everything under control, I only drink for fun,’” Kuddel retorted. “I’m telling you: It sucks. It’s destroying me. I still do it. Where exactly is the denial in that?”

Murat observed the whole thing half through the window, half through an internal filter. He knew where such conversations usually led: to nowhere.

“We don’t want you...” the young man began.

“Yes,” Kuddel interrupted. “You want to. You have to. Otherwise, you’ll be unemployed. Ideally, you want to lead me to a realization where I say, ‘Yes, you’re right, I’m ruining my life, I need help.’ Then you give me a flyer, a phone number, maybe an appointment. Then you leave. And if I don’t come, you tell yourselves, ‘We tried everything. The rest is up to him.’ That’s how it works. It’s okay, isn’t it? But don’t say you don’t want to.”

The woman swallowed. The young man glanced briefly and uncertainly at the window, as if seeking support from headquarters.

Jana appeared at that moment, still in her scrub pants, with a hoodie over them and a backpack on one shoulder. She stopped, took in the scene, and needed exactly two seconds to understand.

“Oh,” she said. “Is today a specialist consultation day?”

“We’re talking about alcohol abuse,” the woman explained. “We’re conducting a survey for a prevention project.”

Jana pointed at the disc.

"Read this," she said. "It contains everything you need to know."

The two turned around.

"Morality? Not served."

"That's funny," the young man said hesitantly. "But... also problematic."

“Welcome to our lives,” said Jana. “The default state is both funny and problematic.”

The social worker tried again.

“We want to understand,” she said, “why people like you... well... continue to do this despite knowing better.”

Kuddel nodded.

"Good question," he said. "I don't have an answer yet that would print well on a flyer."

“Could you try?” she asked. “It would help us a lot.”

A gust of wind swept through the street, carrying a plastic bag that looked like a discounted metaphor.

Kuddel looked at the bottle and turned it in his hand.

“Because it helps,” he finally said. “Briefly. Not rescue, not cure, not solution. But relief. Because it softens the edges. Because it helps to bear images in one's mind that weigh heavier when sober.”

"For example?" asked the young man. Full of enthusiasm. Wrong course.

"Hospital, room 317," Kuddel said. "Friends with tubes. Job center appointments with case workers who look at you like a broken washing machine: is it even worth repairing? Nights in Neukölln when you realize you're too old for this movie, but too young to kick the bucket. The realization that nothing ever turns out the way you thought it would. Want more examples?"

"You could go to therapy," the woman said quietly. "You could quit."

"And then?" asked Kuddel. "What's on the other end? A recovering alcoholic with memory pain? I know enough of them. They don't drink anymore, but the emptiness keeps drinking."

Jana exhaled audibly.

“He’s right,” she said. “Not about everything, but about the feeling. Alcohol isn’t the problem. The problem is what it protects against. If you don’t understand that, your study will be very weak.”

At that moment, Heckenpisser came down the street, briefcase, bow tie, slightly wrinkled collar.

He saw the scene, accelerated, and sensed the game material.

“Oh,” he said. “Focus group on site. Hehehe.”

“We are currently having an open discussion,” the young man explained.

"That's good," hisses Hecke. "We're currently living an open life."

The woman subtly clenched her hands.

“We are also concerned with responsibility,” she said. “With the question: Do people have the right to harm themselves in this way? At the expense of the general public?”

There it was. The word. The bomb.

"There you have it, Jana," Kuddel murmured. "The classic question: Is a person allowed to own themselves?"

Jana pulled her hood down further.

“I’ve seen people who are ruined by deep-frying oil, by desk jobs, by marriage, by burnout, by loneliness with a Netflix subscription,” she said. “Rarely does anyone ask: ‘Are you allowed to do this at the expense of the general public?’ Strangely enough, with alcohol, it’s always written on the label.”

“Hehehe,” added Hecke. “Morality is selective. Like appointments with the youth welfare office.”

Timo actually showed up too, as if someone had secretly pressed a sociologist buzzer.

"That's interesting," he said, pushing up his glasses. "Many moral concepts have developed historically. Alcohol is ambivalent in our society: socially accepted, but individually vilified as soon as it goes too far."

"Can you explain that in a way that's easy to understand?" asked Kuddel.

“That means,” said Timo, “we drink as a culture, we despise as a society, we consume as an industry, we pathologize as medicine – and we moralize as individuals.”

"Exactly," said Heckenpisser. "We are both preserving tradition and being enemies of the state. Hehehe."

The social worker realized that the ground beneath her feet was becoming thinner.

"It's simply about," she insisted, "trying to reduce suffering."

"Whose suffering?" Kuddel asked. "Mine? You don't know how much suffering I've already reduced by shooting myself up before I snapped. Before I beat someone up. Before I pushed someone onto the tracks on the subway because they were breathing too loudly. Believe me, I have more self-defense than harm on my record."

The woman took a step back.

“This is very... worrying,” she said.

“Yes,” Jana said. “Welcome to the real world. May I ask you something? If Kuddel were sober tomorrow – would you get him a job? An apartment that doesn't have drafts? Therapy that lasts more than twelve hours and then: ‘Good luck!’? Would you answer the phone at night if he panics because all the feelings come flooding back? Or do you only work office hours?”

The two remained silent.

The young man fiddled with his bundle of flyers. One brochure slipped out and landed on the floor, right in front of the convenience store window.

On the front page: “Alcohol – ways out of addiction.”

Subtitle: "With courage, help and the right advice."

Kuddel picked up the brochure and glanced at it.

“Nice paper,” he said. “High gloss. You know what the problem is? You sell hope like a service. We out here are more likely to get discounts.”

Heckenpisser took the flyer from his hand and read it in a low voice:

“‘You are not alone.’ ‘Talk to us.’ ‘Your journey to a new life begins today.’ Hehehe. I translate: ‘You are a cost factor, we are trying to make you cheaper.’”

Murat, who had only half listened the whole time, now came out.

"So," he said. "Either you buy something or you find another field experiment. My boys are broken enough. They don't need morality on prescription."

The social worker took a breath.

“We come with good intentions,” she said. “We just want to...”

“I know,” Murat interrupted. “But many people have had good intentions. Police, public order office, landlords, job center, church. In the end, the boys still ended up here. Maybe this is their new beginning. Maybe this is their final destination. I don’t know. My moral is: I won’t shut the door if they need something – and I won’t make a fuss if they fall.”

The young man frowned.

“But that’s also part of the problem,” he said. “They’re normalizing this.”

“No,” said Murat. “I’m not normalizing anything. I’m selling. You’re moralizing. Jana saves lives. Timo analyzes. Michael writes. And these two here...” – he pointed at Kuddel and Hecke – “...will die eventually. The only question is how long they’ll be allowed to laugh before then.”

Silence.

Then the woman took one of her flyers and placed it wordlessly on the standing table.

"If you ever do..." she began.

“I know where to find you,” said Kuddel. “Between the letter of intent and the annual report.”

They left. Not angry, not convinced. Just... irritated. Perplexed.

Later, when the sun was gone and the light was neon again, the group of four stood there: Kuddel, Hecke, Jana, Murat.

"Was that immoral of us?" asked Heckenpisser at some point. "Hehehe."

"Because we barked the holy prevention people away?" Kuddel asked. "Maybe."

"Maybe not," Jana said. "I've been involved in enough projects with people like that. Good people, bad resources. They want to help, but they underestimate how deep the filth runs. You don't want to help, but you know exactly what it smells like."

Timo, who was still lurking in the background, wrote something in his notebook.

"Morality here isn't a question of right or wrong," he said. "It's a question of perspective. From over there, you're the problem. From in here, they're the scenery."

"And you?" asked Murat. "Where are you watching from?"

Timo closed the book.

"A little bit of everything," he said. "That's why I'm in such a bad mood."

Late in the evening, a new regular customer came to the table. Not a person – just a message.

Michael had photographed the flyer that Murat had found in the shop and uploaded a picture of the record with the label "Morality? Not served" to Perplex.click. Below was his summary of the scene, in his own words.

The comments came quickly:

"You're making fun of the only ones who want to do something. Real jerks."

"I work in an addiction project myself. Much of what you write is painful – but unfortunately, it's not entirely wrong."

"As always, the truth lies somewhere between the bottle and the flyer."

Jana read this on her mobile phone in the smoking area in front of the clinic, during a break that wasn't really a break.

"You see," she said that evening at the standing table. "Morality is a ping-pong game. Everyone throws their definition over, no one really hits the mark, everyone is sweating."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "We're playing without rackets."

Kuddel looked at the Sterni beer in his hand.

"Perhaps," he said slowly, "morality is simply what you have to tell yourself at night to be able to fall asleep. One person says, 'I gave someone a flyer today.' Another says, 'I didn't beat anyone up today.' Jana says, 'I didn't see anyone die today.' Murat says, 'I didn't sell

anyone water, and I didn't hit anyone.' And I say, 'At least I admitted that I'm destroying myself.'"

He took a sip.

"And tomorrow," he added, "everyone starts all over again."

The chalk on the windowpane faded slowly with every rain, every touch. But the sentence remained in people's minds.

Morality continued to be discussed everywhere: on television, in books, on panels, in addiction projects, online at Perplex.click.

Only at the corner store did they stick to this simple instruction manual:

What was served was beer, schnapps, cola, sometimes water. What wasn't served was a ready-made verdict, a promise of salvation, a guide to the right life.

Those who wanted morality had to bring it themselves – or learn to drink without it.

It was clear that the set against the disc would eventually backfire.

At first, it was just the usual reactions: tourists taking photos, hipster couples giggling and posing in front of it as if it were street art and not a description of a situation, some guy saying "haha, totally meta" without knowing what it meant.

But then someone came along who remembered the sentence.

It was a boy. Nineteen, maybe twenty. Too young for the amount of dark circles under his eyes he already had.

He first appeared like a statistic: hoodie, jogging pants, sneakers that were once white, backpack, cheap headphones around his neck. The kind of guy you'd list as a "at-risk youth" in some concept paper.

He stopped in front of the window and read the sentence twice.

"Morality? Not served."

Then he went inside, came back out with a cheap can of beer, and didn't stand at the edge, but right next to the standing table. With the drunks.

"Hey," said Kuddel, who looked him over appraisingly. "You're too young for this table."

"I'm of legal age," the boy said, holding up the can like an ID. "If I'm allowed to drink here, I'm allowed to stand here too."

"Hehehe," commented Heckenpisser. "Legally correct, emotionally defective."

Jana was on her way; she stopped before lighting her cigarette.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Tarek," he said. "I live back here, on the north side, by the bus stop. I see you every day. I read the page."

He looked directly at Michael, who happened to be there too, laptop in his bag, half in the role of author, half in the role of fellow drinker.

"Perplexed," said Tarek. "Assholes. Everything. I read it, man. I binged it."

"Binge-reading," Hecke repeated. "Hehehe. Addictive behavior in modern terms."

It was one of those moments when the air briefly changed. As if someone had removed the invisible sign "For regular idiots only" and stuck on "Open to the public" instead.

"So?" asked Kuddel. "How does it feel when you read about our misery on your phone? Is it funny? Motivating? Deterrent? Fan service?"

Tarek hesitated.

"It's... real," he said. "My mother always tells me not to do drugs, no alcohol, nothing. Everyone at school only talks about careers, internships, semesters abroad. I thought I was going to lose it. And then I read this. And I think to myself: Okay. There are also people who don't function – and they're not dead. Not yet."

Jana inhaled deeply.

"So you're here to get an excuse to start early," she said dryly.

"No," said Tarek. "I'm here because...because I want to know if you regret it."

Silence.

The bus stopped at the corner, the doors opened, people got on, the doors closed, and the bus drove off. The scene at the standing table remained frozen in time.

"Regret," Kuddel said slowly, as if he hadn't used the word in ages. "What a lovely, useless verb."

"Hehehe," Hecke said, his voice quieter than usual.

"I'm serious," Tarek said. "I want to know if you would say: Don't do it. Or if you would say: Go ahead, the world's screwed anyway."

Murat leaned in the doorway, his expression a mixture of curiosity and annoyance. He knew these questions. They always came too late or too early.

Michael remained silent. That was one of those rare moments when he knew that every word spoken later would carry more weight.

Jana was the first to break.

"I'll tell you what I'd say," she said. "I've seen guys who looked like you. And twenty years later they looked like Kuddel. And there wasn't much glittering life in between. So yeah: if you have the choice, don't even start."

"Everyone says that," Tarek replied. "Teachers, parents, doctors, all sorts of prevention types. I'm asking these guys," he pointed at Kuddel and Hecke. "Because they live it."

Heckenpisser pushed his glasses higher and cleared his throat.

"Morality? Not being served," he said. "But you want a free shot. Hehehe."

Kuddel looked at the floor, then at Tarik's tin, then at the disc with the chalk set.

"Listen," he said. "I'm telling you the truth. Not the one on a flyer. The one on my liver."

He put the bottle down, braced himself with his hands on the table, as if he needed to briefly test whether he was still standing firmly.

"When I was your age," he began, "I also thought I was smarter than everyone else. I said, 'I drink, but I'm careful. I don't let myself go. I won't become like those wrecks who already smell of booze in the morning.' In between, I laughed at the old people who hang around in pubs, who have missed out on everything."

He picked up the bottle again, drank, and put it down.

"Spoiler alert: I became exactly one of them," he said. "Not all at once. Not in one day. Sip by sip. Each beer was just a little bit more. Each night was just a little bit longer. Each 'Oh, I'll stop tomorrow' was just another little joke."

Tarek listened, eyes wide, not romantically, more like someone watching an accident in slow motion.

"Do I regret it?" Kuddel repeated. "Yes. And no. I regret the nights I spent hurting people who meant well. I regret not being there for certain things. I regret drinking away opportunities before I even knew they were opportunities."

He took a drag on his cigarette, his voice becoming rougher.

"But I don't regret being honest with myself," he said. "And that wouldn't have happened without alcohol. Sober, I probably would have gotten lost in some job, some family, some facade. Then I would have collapsed from a heart attack in the suburbs at 50, without ever realizing how much none of it was for me."

Jana snorted.

"That's the shittiest self-justification I've ever heard," she said. "And unfortunately, not a complete lie."

Tarek looked from one to the other.

"So?" he stared intently at Kuddel. "What's your answer to me?"

Heckenpisser chimed in, his voice surprisingly clear.

“My answer is,” he said, “you are not us. You may have the same holes in your head, but you still have a choice in what you do with them. If you absorb our stories and think, ‘Wow, I want that too’ – then you’re already lost mentally. If you absorb this and think, ‘Okay, I don’t have to fall that low to realize the world is broken’ – then there’s a chance you’ll grow up without cirrhosis of the liver.”

“Hehehe,” he tried to giggle, but it sounded more like a cough.

"So, should I drink or not?" Tarek asked defiantly.

Murat took a step forward.

“Dude,” he said. “I’m selling you the can. That’s my job. I’m not going to tell you what to do with your life. But I will tell you this: Nobody here is going to recommend an after-work beer as a way of life. Not even those who live by it.”

“Exactly,” said Jana. “If you’re only here to get a blessing for your future drinking – find other poster boys. Kuddel and Hecke aren’t role models. They’re... warning signs who make jokes.”

Tarek glanced at Michael's page, which was still open on his phone. The cover with "The Drunkards," the old stories, the comments.

"Then why is he writing it?" he asked. "If you don't want people to become like that – why make a book out of it? An eBook, a website, everything?"

Michael answered now, quietly but clearly.

“Because it’s going to happen anyway,” he said. “Whether I write it down or not. The difference is: if I write it down, people see how it feels, not just how it looks. Maybe they laugh at first. Maybe they realize then that it sticks in their throat. Maybe they drink less afterward. Maybe more. I don’t control it. I only have the responsibility not to sugarcoat it.”

"Morality isn't served," muttered Heckenpisser. "But stories are. Hehehe."

Tarek took a swig from his can. Too hastily. He grimaced.

"It tastes like shit," he said.

“It does,” Kuddel agreed. “It will get better. That’s the dangerous part.”

"So the moral of the story is... what?" Tarek asked.

Everyone glanced briefly at the disc with the chalk writing.

“There isn’t one,” Jana said. “Not just one. There are only choices. You can stand here, drink, grow old like her. You can never even begin. You can end up somewhere in between. But no choice will completely protect you from pain.”

"Hehehe," Hecke added. "If someone sells you a morality that promises that, he's worse than any drug dealer."

Tarek stayed for a while longer, listening as the conversations slipped back into their usual routines: job center, hospital, some guy from Neukölln who had gotten his ass kicked, the new rent increase, the railway ticket inspectors.

He eventually threw the empty can into the trash can, not on the ground. Jana noticed this and thought it was a good thing, but she didn't say anything.

As he left, he paused once more in front of the glass. "Morality? Not served." He briefly placed his fingers against it, as if testing whether the sediment was warmer than the glass.

Then he disappeared down the side street.

"He'll be back," said Murat.

"Maybe," Jana said. "Maybe not. Maybe he's just continuing to read along."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Lurkers of morality."

Later that night, when the shop was closed and Michael was at home in front of the screen, he wrote down the scene. Not to play the moral authority, but to record how ridiculous and serious it is at the same time when a nineteen-year-old approaches the standing table and asks about "regret".

Perplex.click would eventually display:

"A boy came because he had read our stories and wanted a guide to real life from two little drunks. All he got were half-sentences."
bad jokes and honest hesitation."

Later, people would argue in the comments: "You're bad role models!" "At least you're honest!" "You shouldn't glorify things like that!" "Finally, a book that isn't just polished bullshit!"

At the corner store, the chalk writing would slowly fade until Murat would eventually have to go over it with new chalk.

"Morality? Not served."

And every evening, when the drunkards were at the table,

did they unconsciously spend something after all:

No complete meaning, no clear understanding,

just this one, strikingly simple feeling:

That nobody, absolutely nobody,

has the right to instill a moral code in you,

like a shot glass you didn't order.

Not the street workers, not the parents, not the politicians, not the commenters,

and certainly not the drunken asses themselves.

They could only stand there, bottles in their hands, mistakes in their luggage.

And, if someone asked, answer honestly:

"We don't know either. We're just going under because of you."

The second attempt: Hamburg is calling – and we're not answering.

For years, Hamburg had held the status of a grumpy god in Kuddel's mind.

There was this fixed idea: to get out one more time properly. Not just the train station toilets, not just Neukölln, not just the S-Bahn to Sonnenallee and back. Hamburg. Fish market. St. Pauli. A real peep show, not just in my head.

The first attempt became legendary, even though it never actually happened. They didn't even make it to the right platform. Ticket to nowhere, S-Bahn to nowhere, the station toilets awful – and in the end, back at the corner store.

"That was the dress rehearsal," Kuddel said afterwards. "We'll go through with it the second time."

The second attempt: A few weeks later, a few bottles later, a few less illusions – but still enough imagination to lie to oneself.

It started innocently enough, as always. Evening. Late-night convenience store. Schöneberg, tired, streetlights on, cars in stop-and-go traffic, people with bags, people without hope.

Murat stood behind the cash register, sorting cartons of cigarettes as if they were being sold by color. The glass still bore the chalk inscription: "Morality? Not served."

At the standing table: Kuddel, Heckenpisser, Jana, and – today – also Michael, with laptop backpack and that home office face that looked as if he had spent eight hours drowning virtual problems in real coffee.

"So," said Kuddel, placing the bottle firmly on the table as if it were an official agenda item. "We need to talk."

"About what?" asked Jana. "Liver values, rent prices, or hospital beer?"

"About true love," said Heckenpisser, chuckling. "Hehehe. So, Hamburg."

Michael raised an eyebrow.

"Ah, there it is again," he said. "The long-distance relationship with a city that knows nothing about you."

Kuddel began, in a tone that betrayed he had been working on the story in his own head all day.

"Look," he began. "Life is short, bank balances even shorter, and we're not getting any younger. If we don't go to Hamburg soon, we'll end up being the guys at the bar saying, 'We always wanted to go to St. Pauli, but then my back gave out.' I don't want to be the back argument."

"You're a whole-body argument," Jana murmured.

"Hehehe," added Hecke.

Kuddel ignored that.

"So: Second attempt," he said. "Not just talk. Plan. Be consistent. Be strategic. Set an alarm and all that."

"An alarm clock," Jana repeated. "You set an alarm clock and think that makes you serious travelers?"

"We're going to do it right this time," Kuddel insisted. "No 'We'll see' – but: Buy a ticket. Find a train. Leave early, before the first beer locks us up here."

Michael took a sip, observing like a nature filmmaker who knows that the animals are about to fall into the same trap as every winter.

"You need someone to handle this logistics for you," he finally said. "You can't even manage to ride a commuter train without making a spontaneous detour somewhere."

"We've got you," said Hecke. "You're a DevOps expert. You can deploy anything, even us."

"I'm not a travel agent," Michael replied. "I'm only responsible for making sure servers don't die. People aren't part of my SLA."

"Too late," said Jana. "You've written the first chapter. You're now the project manager for Hamburg."

Murat interfered without leaving the cash register.

"If you're going to Hamburg," he said, "I want the photo beforehand. At the standing table. Otherwise, I won't believe a word you say."

"You can come along," Hecke suggested. "Hehehe. Späti branch in St. Pauli."

"I've had enough gentrification here," said Murat. "I don't need to see a tourist version of it."

Kuddel leaned on the table.

"All right," he ordered, with a seriousness that didn't match his cap. "We'll make a list."

"List," Jana echoed. "Oh God."

Michael pulled out his mobile phone.

"Okay," he said. "If we're going to pretend this is a serious expedition, then you're going to get a serious plan now."

He typed, his DevOps-optimized thumb in a state of flow.

"Tomorrow is Saturday," he noted. "The fish market is on Sunday morning. So: night train or very early train. If you want to experience the fish market, you have to leave by..." – he scrolled through the train app – "...1:46 a.m. at the latest. Or 3:20 a.m. Then you'll be in Hamburg around 6:30 a.m. Fish market, coffee, fish sandwiches, the harbor, St. Pauli from noon onwards, peep show from... well, if you're still standing."

The hedge pisser's eyes widened.

"That sounds painfully structured," he said. "Hehehe."

"Something about it is going to break you anyway," Jana said. "Either the time of day or Hamburg."

"We'll take 3:20," Kuddel decided. "1:46 is for people who can sleep. We'll stay up all night and then drive over. No risk of oversleeping."

"You want to stay up all night, get drunk, then take the train?" Jana asked. "You're truly a UNESCO World Heritage Site of self-sabotage."

Michael booked. It was almost ridiculously easy.

A few clicks, a BahnCard discount, a digital ticket. "Berlin Hbf – Hamburg Hbf" it said, in a matter-of-fact font, as if it were incredibly easy. As if it weren't a metaphor, but simply transportation.

"So," he said, holding up the screen. "You have no more excuses. Second attempt scheduled. Tomorrow morning, 3:20 a.m., platform so-and-so."

Kuddel viewed the ticket as a summons.

"It doesn't say 'Destination missed'," he said. "That's something new."

The hedge pisser grinned.

"Hehehe," he said. "We are officially travelers. Kuddel, we are practically businessmen now."

"Our business areas are failure, drinking, and self-deception," Jana commented.

They actually made a to-do list. On a napkin.

Kuddel dictated, Hecke wrote, Michael corrected the spelling, Jana commented, Murat laughed from inside.

1. **Beer limit before departure**

"A maximum of three Sterni," Jana declared. "Anything more than that and you'll be sleeping in the bicycle compartment."

2. **No Boonekamp in front of the train**

"He'll only arrive in Hamburg," said Michael. "I don't want to read in the news that two guys on the regional train pulled the emergency brake because they thought they were already in St. Pauli."

3. **Alarm setting – redundant**

"Hecke will put his, I'll put mine, and Michael will put one in if necessary," said Jana. "Triple redundancy. If you don't wake up after that, fate simply doesn't want you here."

4. **No "just a quick trip to the toilet" detours at the train station**

"Last time, 'just a quick trip to the toilet' turned into the whole evening," Jana recalled. "When you see the platform, hold onto the railing until the doors open."

5. **No stopover in Neukölln**

"That's a rule for life," Michael murmured.

Heckenpisser added below:

6. **St. Pauli or nothing**

"Hehehe."

There was something ridiculously serious about the way they stood there, with napkins, cell phones, and train apps.

"Look at this," said Murat, who had come over to refill drinks for the next customer. "You're like self-destructing Jehovah's Witnesses. 'May I talk to you about our trip to Hamburg?'"

"We're making history," said Kuddel. "The drunkards on tour. Otherwise, we'll end up writing ten more chapters about how we almost made it."

"That has been your core brand so far," Michael replied. "Almost there. If you actually get there, it breaks my book concept."

"Hehehe."

The later it got, the bigger Hamburg became.

Not as a city, but as a concept. It loomed on the wall of her mind like a VHS trailer:

Neon lights, peep-show signs, fish market, harbor, seagulls, cheap sex shows, tourists with plastic bags. A place where failure was officially allowed, because everyone came there just to fail.

"You know," said Kuddel, already on his third beer, exceeding Jan's limit, "in my head Hamburg has always been a kind of parallel Berlin, only with water. Here you hang out at the

corner store, there you hang out in the red-light district. Here you watch a garbage man smoking, there a stripper taking his clothes off. Same shit, different backdrop.”

"Then what do you need it for?" asked Jana. "If it's the same thing."

"Because you don't want to drown in your own shit," he said. "Every now and then you have to sink somewhere else."

Hedge pisser nodded.

“Hehehe,” he said. “Hamburg – where you can make the same mistakes with a new panorama.”

At some point, of course, it came down to money.

"What are you going to drink?" Jana asked. "Good intentions?"

Kuddel pulled a crumpled bundle of bills from the inside pocket of his robe. The kind of money that looked as if it had lived in too many different wallets.

“I’ve been saving,” he explained. “For ‘special occasions’. For the last few months, no concerts, no games, no festivals – just late-night shops and train stations. Hamburg is my festival.”

Hecke also pulled out his wallet, thin but not completely empty.

“I still have some money left over from my last tax bill,” he said. “Tax refund for a bad life. We’ll invest it in St. Pauli.”

Michael looked at the two of them and briefly thought that the state probably never planned for its repayments to end up in peep shows.

“I’ll pay for your coffee at the fish market,” he said. “I can’t offer any more moral support than that.”

"You're not coming with us?" asked Hecke.

“I have to work,” Michael said. “DevOps never sleeps. Besides, someone has to stay here and write down how you’re failing.”

“Optimist,” Jana said.

The plan was finalized around midnight:

No sleep. Staying up all night at the corner store, but in a controlled way. Not completely drunk, but drunk enough to find the train. Jana would pick them up around two, accompany them to the station, and give them a kick if necessary. Michael had the ticket, the route, the time. Murat promised to kick them out in time if they wanted to stay glued to the table.

Hamburg was calling. It was already so loud in their heads that they hardly heard the tinnitus in everyday life.

“This is going to be big,” said Kuddel, more to himself than to the others.

“Something will happen,” Jana corrected. “Whether it’s big or small depends on reality.”

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "And she's never liked us."

When they finally separated for a few hours – each in their own corner, each with a vague idea of the departure – a mobile phone rang somewhere.

One of those standard ringtones that sound like a mixture of alarm clock and threat.

Nobody answered.

"Hamburg is calling," said Michael, putting his phone away again. "Can wait a few more hours."

The city was still far away. The plan was still new. The potential for a fall was perfect.

The second attempt was booked.

Whether anyone would take off was another question.

The plan was written on a napkin – and like everything written on napkins, it lasted exactly until the first beer.

Jana called it "controlled staying up" when she reappeared at the corner store shortly before midnight. Controlled like a house fire where someone only sets fire to the curtains "to make it cozier".

Murat had switched the shop to nighttime operation. The shutter was half down, the door could only be opened by ringing the bell, dim neon lights inside, the usual suspects outside. The sign on the window read: "Morality? Not served." Next to it, added in thinner chalk: "Hamburg neither."

“To get in the mood,” Murat had said.

Kuddel was in top form.

The "three-star-until-the-train" plan had already gone awry by bottle number four.

"That doesn't count," he explained. "The first two are primer. We'll start counting from now on."

“Hehehe,” Hecke said. “Mathematical early distortion. Very professional.”

Jana grabbed the napkin with the to-do list and placed it demonstratively next to the bottles.

“Three Sterni,” she said. “Then there’ll be water. And something to eat, not just cigarettes.”

“But I am eating,” Kuddel defended himself. “I always bite the filter side when I’m nervous.”

Michael stood next to him with a bottle of Club Mate, as if he were only there for the record.

"I swear to you," he said, "if you miss this train, I'll write it down so brutally that you won't be able to read yourselves anymore."

"You'll write everything down anyway," Kuddel muttered. "Then at least do it with a Hamburg flair."

Timo the sociologist also appeared, as if someone had summoned him from offstage.

"Ah," he said, sensing the mood at the table, "the great escape fantasy is on again? Hamburg, fish market, St. Pauli, symbol for everything you are not?"

"Hehehe," chuckled Hecke. "We are highly mobile. International waters tomorrow."

"St. Pauli isn't international," Timo corrected. "It's thematically limited despair with a proximity to the sea."

Kuddel gave him the middle finger with the elegance of a man who knows his limits.

"You're not coming with me," he said. "You would spend the whole way explaining to us why we have false desires. I want to have my desires in peace and be wrong."

Jana prevailed.

She forced Murat to fish frankfurters out of the warming water.

"Protein-based," she said. "At least pretend you have a body."

"That's not food, that's decoration," Kuddel complained, but bit into the limp thing anyway. The mustard dripped onto his robe, leaving yellow wanted posters on black.

"I'm taking before-and-after photos," Michael announced. "Before the departure, after the failure. For Perplex.click."

"Why fail?" asked Hecke. "Hehehe. Maybe it will work out."

Silence. Everyone looked at him as if he had blasphemously belched.

"We are the drunkards," Murat reminded everyone. "Our unique selling point is predictable failure."

Shortly after one o'clock, the air in front of the late-night shop was heavy, like an alibi sentence.

Bus service became less frequent, faces more tired, the neon light more merciless.

"We should get going," Jana said at some point. "You want to go home again, don't you? Pack your backpacks, brush your teeth, pretend you're normal people traveling?"

“Brushing your teeth is a luxury,” Kuddel growled. “So is a backpack. I have everything with me.” He tapped his robe as if it were a portable disaster alarm system.

"I have to at least empty my briefcase," said Hecke. "Hehehe. The report from the last team meeting is still in there. If it spills out on me in Hamburg, I'll have two kinds of misery at once."

Michael looked at his watch.

"If we leave at two, that'll be plenty of time," he said. "Berlin Central Station isn't on the other side of the galaxy. I'll walk with you to the S-Bahn station, after that you're on your own."

"You're our human GPS," said Hecke. "Hehehe."

"That's the saddest thing anyone has ever said about me," said Michael.

Saying goodbye to the corner store suddenly seemed bigger than necessary.

Murat shook hands with both of them.

"I expect souvenirs," he said. "Not postcards. Stories. If you only eat fish sandwiches and come back again, I'll cancel your loyalty card."

“We’ll bring you a neighborhood trip with a mole,” promised Kuddel.

Jana took a photo: Kuddel, Hecke, Michael, the standing table, the window with the chalk writing. Schöneberg in one frame.

"If you don't come back," she said, "I'll need something for the memorial album."

“Hehehe,” said Hecke. “Very encouraging.”

They set off at a leisurely pace. Not wavering, but rather at that slightly slower pace of people who know things are getting serious, but don't want to take it seriously.

On the way to the S-Bahn, Berlin was in this intermediate phase: The clubs were spitting out their first broken-down patrons, the night-shift taxis were becoming more frequent, garbage trucks were rehearsing for the morning.

On a street corner, two drunks were discussing politics, failing to get a single detail right, but with the fervor of news anchors. A delivery driver in a yellow backpack was secretly smoking in the doorway, as if he were blocking his own lungs.

“Look,” said Kuddel, “everyone is on the move, and we’re the only ones pretending we have a destination.”

“Hehehe,” said Hecke. “Our goal is: not to be here anymore.”

Michael took a half step ahead, the instinct of a man still sober enough to take traffic lights seriously.

"You know this isn't going to be a reset, right?" he asked. "You don't go to Hamburg and come back as different people. You're the same idiots, just with new anecdotes."

"That's okay," said Kuddel. "I prefer to tolerate myself with new anecdotes."

The S-Bahn station was a known enemy.

They had ended or missed so many nights here that the concrete knew their voices.

Down in the tunnel, it smelled of urine, cold, and cheap perfume that tried to cover up something that was already embedded in the brickwork.

"No toilets at the train station today," Jana warned. "We already have a chapter about that."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Sequels are rarely better."

They stood on the platform; the wind rushed through the shaft like offended breath.

A few nightshades stood scattered about: club-goers on their way home, a guy in a suit who looked like he'd lost the night at the office, two girls with glitter on their faces that now looked more like sweat.

Michael checked the time again.

"S-Bahn in six minutes," he said. "That gives you plenty of time at the main station. I'll take you to Südkreuz, then I have to go back. Deploy tomorrow."

"DevOps is the only reason anything still works anywhere," Jana commented. "The rest is fueled by idiots like you."

"We are the end consumers," Kuddel said proudly.

The S-Bahn arrived, the doors opened, and there was this artificially friendly announcement that promised you didn't have to get lost in a big city, but that you very well could.

They boarded and sat down in a four-person compartment that smelled as if too many people had already regretted their decisions there.

Berlin flew by outside, first houses, then darkness, then lights again.

"If we just stay seated until the last stop without getting off," said Hecke, "we might not notice it later. Hehehe."

"The final destination here is usually one's own life," Kuddel muttered.

Michael rested his elbow against the window, feeling the train shake.

"You'll check your alarms again later, okay?" he asked. "Triple redundancy, or you'll still be lying somewhere in Schöneberg tomorrow."

"I'll set five," said Hecke. "Hehehe. One at 2:30, one at 2:40, one at 2:50, one at 3:00, one at 3:10."

"That sounds like panic in tense," Jana said.

Südkreuz.

They got out, went up the stairs, and walked towards the exit.

That was the point at which their paths would diverge for a few hours.

"Okay," said Michael, stopping. "From here on you are... ready for production. Now go home, pack your things, maybe lie down for half an hour – with an alarm clock. Then meet back here shortly after two, or directly at the main train station."

"Sleeping at home is a disguised form of failure," Jana pointed out. "Neither of you are known for your early morning habits."

"Hehehe," confirmed Hecke. "I once overslept three alarms and the DHL delivery man."

"We have to brush our teeth," he insisted. "I don't want the peep-show girls to think we have mice in our mouths later."

"As if you'll get that far," Jana muttered.

The four of them stood in this drafty square, which was neither really a train station nor really a town. Trains in the background, taxis, a bakery with nighttime lighting, a few lost souls.

"We can do it," said Kuddel. "This time. No train station toilets, no Neukölln, no late-night convenience stores. Straight line: apartment, train, Hamburg."

"I'll take a screenshot of the ticket and send it to you," Michael said. "So you have something to stare at on the way there, something to remind you of reality."

"We're old enough to get something done," said Hecke. "Hehehe."

"You're old enough to know better than to realize you can't do it," Jana corrected.

Nevertheless, for a tiny moment, there was something like hope. Not the big Hollywood thing, more like a small, annoying light in my gut that said:
Maybe this one time...

They broke up.

Hedge urinator heading towards the side exit, briefcase in hand, bow tie slightly loosened.
Kuddel heading towards the bus stop, robe pulled up against the cold.

Jana had announced that she would stop by both of them again later.

"I'm like a very unmotivated angel service," she had said. "If I have to kick you out of bed, don't forget who did it."

Michael drove back towards Schöneberg, construction site sign on the train, tired faces in the mirror.

The text was already starting to take shape in his mind. The second attempt. The same city. New excuses.

He knew something would go wrong. It wasn't cynicism. It was experience.

Kuddel's apartment was quiet, like a museum of people forgetting to live.

He switched on the light, threw his robe over a chair that didn't deserve it, and stared briefly at the table.

There lay the doctor's letter from last week, half-covered by a discount store flyer. Next to it was an empty ashtray, a full glass of stale water, and somewhere underneath it his pedometer.

"Hamburg," he murmured. "I'd cheat on you, Berlin."

He placed his mobile phone on the table and looked at the clock: 01:17.

Alarm clock. 02:30. 02:40. 02:50. 03:00.

He hesitated briefly, then, just to be safe, he also set it to 03:10, in case the universe had a sense of humor.

"If I miss this," he said to the empty space, "it was intentional."

He sat on the bed, just for a moment. Just to take off his shoes. Just to lie down for a short while.

The mattress embraced him like an old addiction.

At Heckenpisser's place, things looked more orderly, but not healthier.

File folders, books, a plant that looked as if it had started to die when the last hope for a "normal career" had moved out of the apartment.

He put down his briefcase, took off his shirt, hung it neatly over a chair, and laid down his bow tie as if it were something sacred.

Then he set alarms. Not just on his mobile phone. Also on the old radio alarm clock that had both saved and ruined his mornings in his youth.

02:20.02:30.02:45.03:00.

"Triple redundancy," he muttered. "DevOps principle for idiots. Hehehe."

There was an open bottle of water in the kitchen. He drank directly from it, as if he had briefly regained his senses.

Then he lay down, glasses on the dresser, looking up at the ceiling.

"Hamburg," he whispered. "Please at least be as filthy as we think it is."

His eyes closed faster than he could spell the word "peep show" in his head.

Jana's timer ran differently.

She sat briefly on the edge of the bed at home, shoes still on, uniform already off, hoodie over it, and stared at her phone.

She set two alarms: 02:15 and 02:25.

Not for himself. For her.

"I don't believe it," she wrote to Michael. "But I'll try."

"Deploy also runs at 3," he wrote back. "We all live in strange time windows."

Outside, Berlin was black with scattered points of light. Someone was smoking on a balcony. A television flickered in a window. In another, someone paced back and forth as if trapped inside their own head.

Hamburg was just a line in an app. "Departure 3:20 a.m."

In Michael's apartment, the monitoring client beeped softly because a CPU value somewhere had slipped into the yellow zone. He clicked, adjusted something, and watched as the bars stabilized.

Then he moved on to the document "The Second Attempt - Hamburg".

He finished writing the last sentences of the chapter, already sketching out the fail in his head.

Between two typing motions, he looked at his watch: 02:03.

"Now they're falling asleep," he thought. And somewhere inside him, a small, spiteful part of him hoped that's exactly how it would turn out. Not because he begrudged them Hamburg – but because this kind of failure was as much a part of them as Sterni and Späti.

He didn't set an alarm. He wasn't the one who had to catch the train. He was just the one who later wrote down who didn't.

02:20.

The first alarm clock rang in Kuddel's room.

Some electronic beeping sound that someone in an office in China had approved as "friendly and motivating".

Kuddel turned onto his other side and, half asleep, slapped the spot from which the noise had come.

The alarm clock fell silent. The clock continued to run.

02:30.

Heckenpisser's phone vibrated, the radio alarm clock clicked. He banged on it blindly, mumbling something about "five more minutes".

The display briefly flashed: "Repeat alarm in 10 minutes".

02:25.

Jana's mobile phone rang.

She stood up, cursed softly, and put her shoes back on.

"I'm not your mother," she muttered, grabbing her jacket. "But someone has to taste this shit."

She walked out into the night, towards the bus stop.

Hamburg was still just a word.

But now it was one that blinked on their mobile phones, was entered into railway servers, programmed onto departure displays, entered into the tables of a database that hummed away somewhere in a data center.

"Departure 03:20, Berlin Hbf. Arrival 06:xx, Hamburg Hbf."

The city called. With bits, timetable data, digital tickets, pre-made promises.

Two men were sleeping in two apartments in Schöneberg, their cell phone lights illuminated, alarms activated.

The napkin laws next to the beds, alcohol in the blood, Hamburg in the head.

Alarm clocks rang. Vibrations ran through bedside tables. Displays flickered.

And no one answered yet.

Apocalypse in the parking lot behind the corner store

The parking lot behind the corner store wasn't really a parking lot.

Just a tattered patch of crumbling asphalt, a few crooked markings, a forgotten loading ramp, and three concrete blocks whose purpose was lost on everyone. When cars did come, they were always just for a short while: delivery vans, taxis, guys too lazy to park at the front. The rest of the time, the area was a kind of no-man's-land.

No official meeting point, no playground, no backyard romance – more like the place where the city says:

I'm not in the mood to clean up here anymore.

That's exactly why it was perfect for what Kuddel called "a mini-apocalypse".

It was an evening that was wrong from the very beginning.

The sky darkened like a grumpy forehead; it was drizzling, but not really, just that sticky Berlin feeling on your shoulders. The street ahead was louder than usual—some demonstration, some traffic jam, some delivery chaos—Schöneberg in business as usual.

Murat had left the rear door to the loading ramp open. Because it was warm. Because he wanted to smoke. Because he was fed up with the noise from the front.

"Today it's the back," he had said. "Anyone who wants to get seriously drunk should go around the corner."

And so they stood there:

Kuddel, Heckenpisser, Jana – and two or three other satellites that had been orbiting the corner store universe for some time. Plus a loose inventory:

A shopping cart without a rear wheel, a stack of empty crates, two Euro pallets half-conquered by moss, and a rusty shopping cart token on a chain that no longer secured anything.

In the middle: a rickety beer table that Murat had put out at the back. On it: bottles, an ashtray, a pack of filters, a lighter with a half-scratched-off "I ♥ Berlin" imprint.

"If the world ends," Kuddel muttered, "then it will be right here. Not in front of the Brandenburg Gate, not at Alexanderplatz – here. In this shitty spot, behind a late-night shop, in the third row of life."

"Hehehe," chuckled Hedge Pisser. "Apocalypse with pallet furniture."

It had been a long day.

Jana had undergone two resuscitations, one narrowly successful, the other fatal. One had left, one had stayed – neither had felt like a victory.

Heckenpisser had been in some meeting where they had said "future strategy" as if it were a product you could order. He had drunk too much coffee and not enough air.

Kuddel had somehow gotten through the day. Something about taking away bottles for the deposit, ignoring the letter from the authorities, and arguing with the neighbor in the stairwell who thought that Sterni bottles in the hallway were "not urban flair, but antisocial".

Now they stood there, gathered like trash against a fence, which the wind used as a collection point.

Murat came out with a box and placed it next to the table.

"Special camp," he said. "If everything goes wrong today, I don't want you to say I let you die sober."

“Good man,” said Kuddel. “When the last trumpet sounds, I want to have a Sterni in my hand.”

"Hehehe," chuckled Hecke. "Wasn't there a cult that waited sober for the end of the world? Imagine: You have no fun your whole life – and then the meteorite really does come."

They drank – but it wasn't party drinking. It was that slow, heavy pulling on the bottle, where each sip felt more like a punctuation mark in their own story.

"Did you hear about this?" asked Timo, the sociologist, who of course had reappeared, in his ever-present jute bag, with a notepad, which he denied carrying when asked about it. "New study: Climate change is making people more depressed, aggressive, and hopeless."

“No study needed,” Kuddel grumbled. “Look at us. We are the carbon footprint of resignation.”

“Hehehe,” said Hecke. “We’re practically climate debt with nicotine.”

Jana lit a cigarette and looked up at the sky.

"The world isn't ending," she said. "The world will remain. We are going under. With or without rising temperatures."

A truck was rumbling in the back of the parking lot. It was parked somewhat illegally, the driver was asleep somewhere, and the engine was still warm.

An empty plastic bottle rolled across the asphalt in the wind, bumped against the shopping cart, and made a sound like a too-small round of applause.

“Sometimes I get the feeling,” said Heckenpisser, “that we are extras in a film where nobody is operating the cameras anymore. Everyone keeps acting, but the credits don’t roll.”

“The film is called ‘Berlin, somewhere between then and never again’,” Kuddel murmured.

"Hehehe."

The end of the world was not an abstract concept for her.

Real apocalypse looked like room 317 with Karl in bed and the beeping monitor. Like the train station toilet just before the police arrived. Like the faces at the job center when you walked out the back with the notification in your hand. Like the moment when the doctor puts down his pen and says, "We're doing what we can."

And yet, today was different. Poetry and reality met in the parking lot behind the corner store.

“Do you know that feeling,” Timo asked, “when you watch the news, they talk about crises, wars, disasters – and you know it’s all real...but the only thing that really gets to you is that your rent is going up another 80 euros next year?”

“The global catastrophe is always abstract,” said Jana. “The individual hurts. Nobody really cries because of one degree more. People cry because the fridge is empty, their partner is gone, or they receive a bad diagnosis.”

"So the apocalypse in the parking lot is more honest than the one on TV," concluded Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

There was a sudden crash, somewhere in front, a dull roar of engine, then voices, a curse, a bottle breaking.

"What was that?" asked Tarek – the boy who had recently shown up with the "Do you regret that?" question. He was back, in a hoodie and with eyes that were too alert.

“Berlin,” Murat said. “Exhale.”

Nobody moved.

They stood in the semi-darkness, among pallets, empty bottles, and graffiti. The parking lot was their bubble, their piece of the apocalypse, which no official disaster management had yet dared to access.

“Imagine,” Kuddel began, “tonight everything really goes to hell. Nuclear explosion, power outage, internet dead, boom. No news, no push notifications, no emergency apps.”

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "The first thing to die is the live ticker."

“Exactly,” Kuddel nodded. “And us? We’re standing here, behind the corner store, with our bottles – and we only realize it much later than the others. Because we always have bad reception anyway.”

Timo began to unpack his standard disaster theory.

“There are two kinds of apocalypse,” he said. “The real, material one – climate change, war, pandemic, blackout. And the internal, personal one: burnout, addiction, loss. Most of the time, the internal one happens first.”

“Mine doesn’t have a first and second part,” said Kuddel. “It’s been running in parallel for twenty years.”

Jana flicked ash into a beer bottle.

“Apocalypse, by the way, translates to ‘revelation’,” she said. “It’s not about the end. It’s about becoming visible.”

"Hehehe," chuckled Hecke. "So we're practically walk-in revelations."

A blue and white police car slowly crept along the street, at the front corner, rolling slowly as if it were scanning the corner store.

“If the cops knew what was going on back here,” Murat said quietly, “they would drive even slower up front.”

"Nothing's happening back here," said Kuddel. "That's the joke. The end of the world without a special unit. No SWAT team, no crime scene investigation team, no drama. Just us."

"Maybe that's the worst part," said Jana. "That the world is ending, and nobody's doing a special report about it. No special broadcast. Just a parking lot where people are slowly giving up."

Tarek took a sip and grimaced.

"I always thought," he said, "that when the world ends, it will be with a bang. Explosions, sirens, lightning, everything. Here it is... quiet."

"The big bang only happens on TV," Timo replied. "The real world collapses in installments. Back pain, a reminder notice, termination, diagnosis, another message, another bill. Small blows until you realize: That's it."

Kuddel lifted the bottle.

"The small impacts," he said. "The big bomb comes too late."

"Hehehe."

Then it started to rain. Really rain. No longer a fine mist, but drops so heavy they beat dust out of the cracks.

Janer's hoodie got darker, Heckenpisser's jacket got stains, Kuddel pulled his robe tighter.

"Now all we need is a thunderstorm," Tarek said. "Then we'll have some visual effects."

The sky did them no favors. No thunder, no lightning – just a dull, steady downpour.

"That's how it will end," said Jana. "Not spectacularly. It will just get a little... less and less."

For a while they said nothing.

The parking lot behind the corner store became the stage for a final, small, insignificant end-of-the-world atmosphere. Empty bottles, rain, neon lights, somewhere in the back a rat peering out of the trash can as if checking whether the stage belonged to it.

"Do you know what's really getting to me?" Kuddel said at one point. "Not that I'm going to die someday. I've been expecting that for years. What's getting to me is the feeling that when the time comes, the world will just carry on as if nothing had happened."

The corner store opens, the garbage is collected, someone buys a Club Mate, someone doesn't even hang my picture up anywhere.

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "You want an obituary."

"I at least want someone to say: 'He was there. And he was annoying.'" Kuddel grumbled.

Jana looked at him, tired, but not cold.

"I won't forget you," she said. "Neither will your liver. And besides: Michael writes to you. You'll remain as a book when you're gone as people."

"Even worse," muttered Kuddel. "Immortality as a warning."

A car drove into the parking lot, a somewhat battered station wagon. A guy got out, looked around, hesitated, probably wondering if he was "in the right place".

"I just wanted to... uh... make a quick phone call," he said, holding up his mobile phone as if it were a pass.

"Doomsday zone," said Murat. "Phone calls allowed. Hope forbidden."

The guy laughed uncertainly, walked a few meters away, tapped on the screen, started talking, quietly, hurriedly. Something like "Yes, I know, but..." Standard.

"Look at him," said Timo. "He's got his own little apocalypse going on too. Maybe a breakup, maybe debts, maybe just a bad day. The end of the world is scalable."

"The difference is," said Hecke, "we don't hide it. Hehehe."

It wasn't long before the rain had soaked through her clothes, but nobody moved to go inside. Inside there was light, music, a snack shelf, and a television.

There was nothing out here. And that felt strangely right.

"Maybe," Jana said after a while, "this isn't the end of the world at all. Maybe we're just the smoke after some huge fire. Someone drove everything into the ground years ago – politics, the economy, the system, I don't know – and now we're standing here drinking in the rubble."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Society's smoked beer."

"If this is the epilogue," said Kuddel, "it would have been nice if I had seen the main film beforehand."

Timo closed the notebook, which he claimed he didn't keep.

"You saw the main feature," he said. "You just didn't recognize it as such."

A gust of wind made the beer table table vibrate. A bottle tipped over, rolled over the edge, hit the asphalt, and remained intact.

"Symbolic image," said Michael, who had also appeared in the meantime without anyone noticing exactly when. "Bottle falls, doesn't break. The rest does."

"Look," said Kuddel, holding up the bottle. "Apocalypse on a Berlin level: You fall, you don't break anything – but nobody picks you up."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "There's no donation account for that."

Behind them, on the loading ramp, Murat leaned against the door, smoking, watching the scene as if it were his own little theater.

"You guys are so messed up," he said at one point, "that it's almost art. If this is the parking lot of the end, then at least it's a beautiful backdrop: late beer, wet asphalt, bad jokes."

"At least we're here," said Jana.

"Exactly," Kuddel murmured. "If the world is going to end anyway – at least I don't want to be late."

The rain continued. The city was buzzing. The parking lot behind the late-night shop looked as if it could handle a thousand more such evenings.

The great apocalypse never happened. As always.

But for each and every one of them, a small piece of the world quietly crumbled away again this evening.

and seeps away in the rain.

The rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun. No grand gesture, no rainbow, just: dripping, dripping... nothing.

All that remained was wet asphalt, glistening puddles, cigarette butts floating in small ditches like stranded boats.

"See," said Kuddel, "the apocalypse has been cancelled. The director has changed his plans."

"Hehehe," giggled Hedge Pisser. "Budget cut."

Murat flicked his cigarette butt into a puddle, where it sank with a hissing sound.

"If the world ends," he said, "nobody will make a clean break. Rather: trying again and again, stopping, continuing. Just like us."

Tarek stood a little way off, hands in his pockets, hood pulled low over his face.

"I feel like I'm in the tutorial level of the apocalypse," he said. "Except nobody explains which button to press."

"There are no buttons," Jana said. "Only options. Drink, work, do nothing, freak out, carry on. None of them lead to the high score list."

"Hehehe," Hecke added. "And there's no 'New Game' either."

At the back, on the wall bordering the neighboring property, hung an old piece of graffiti, half painted over, half ignored:

"NO FUTURE"

Someone had scribbled on it later, in thin black ink:

“...was unfortunately correct.”

Kuddel stared at it for a while.

“Back then,” he said, “it was an attitude. No Future on patches, on jackets, at demos. A ‘fuck you, we’re not playing along’ attitude. Today... it’s more like a delivery note.”

“Lower-class philosophy,” Timo commented. “The elite say ‘shaping the future’ – you say: ‘The future is already over, we’re managing the remaining damage.’”

“Hehehe,” said Hecke. “We are insolvency administrators of the future.”

A gust of wind blew the smell of wet cardboard and deep fryer fumes across the parking lot.

A snack bar nearby was still open; you could hear a muffled murmur of voices, the clatter of tin plates, the whirring of a range hood.

“Sometimes,” said Jana, “I stand here and think to myself: If someone were looking down at us from above, they would only see a few people behind a corner store. Nothing special. Nothing important. But in our heads, crazy movies are playing out.”
Hospital, death, missed opportunities, apocalypse, everything. And nobody outside this place notices.

"That's the problem with inner workings," Michael said. "They're difficult to stream."

"Hehehe."

Tarek rummaged in his backpack, pulled out a mobile phone, screen shattered.

“Look at this,” he said, holding it up for everyone to see. “My newsfeed: ‘Climate report: Tipping points closer than thought.’ ‘New war looms.’ ‘Rent continues to rise.’ ‘Inflation eats away at savings.’ And underneath, an ad: ‘Secure your dream kitchen now in just 36 installments!’”

“That’s the point,” said Timo. “The system says: ‘Everything’s on fire. But treat yourself to a kitchen island anyway.’”

“If the world really does end,” Hecke muses, “there will surely be some final push notifications: ‘Last chance: Secure your premium subscription for the apocalypse now! Hehehe.’”

“Apocalypse clearance sale,” Kuddel added. “Recently discontinued items reduced by 80% because there won’t be any left tomorrow.”

A dull rumble somewhere in the distance briefly made everyone sit up and take notice.

Was it thunder? Was it a truck? Was it just the bang of some teenager setting off a firecracker in the summer because he's bored?

It remained unclear. No flashes of light, no alarm, just that one short, nervous noise, which in Berlin was simply categorized as "It must have been something."

"If something really big were to happen," said Jana, "we would probably just file it away like that. 'It must have been something.' Until the water comes through the electrical sockets."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Or until the doctor says, 'You don't have to drink – but if you keep going, it'll soon be over.' And you say, 'There must have been something wrong with you.'"

The guy in the station wagon was still on the phone. You could hear snatches of conversation.

"...yes, I know... I can't do magic... everyone wants something... yes, but... you never listen to me..."

The words drifted over, vague, yet painfully familiar. It sounded like every argument everyone had had before.

"The end of the world begins with sentences like this," Timo muttered. "Wormbone. Always the same words, different people."

"I once had a husband," said Jana, "who was sitting next to his father in the emergency room, who was bleeding internally. The whole time he was looking at his phone and arguing with his wife about some nonsense. I thought: If you look back on it later, you'll know: At that moment, a world collapsed, and you were busy with WhatsApp."

"Hehehe," Hecke said. "Multitasking while sinking."

Kuddel looked around as if he were inspecting the scenery.

"What reassures me," he said, "is that nobody here pretends we have everything under control. When the world outside is falling apart, everyone talks about 'solution strategies,' 'catalogs of measures,' 'reforms.' Back here, we're honest: there's a fire, we've got a beer bottle in our hand, and no idea how to operate hoses."

"You used to drive a fire engine yourself," Jana reminded him.

"That was a long time ago," said Kuddel. "Back then I put out fires. Now I only light conversations."

"Hehehe."

Murat disappeared briefly inside, returned with a Bluetooth speaker, and placed it on a pallet.

"If it's going to be the end of the world, then it should have a soundtrack," he said.

It took less than two seconds for the first discussion to begin.

"No techno," demanded Jana. "I don't want a kick drum during Apocalypse."

"No German pop," said Kuddel. "If I have to hear about 'traveling light' when I die, I'll leave voluntarily beforehand."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "No pop music. Otherwise it's hell, not the apocalypse."

Murat sighed, scrolled through a list, and pressed play.

An old Metallica song blared from the speaker, tinny but determined.

"That fits," said Michael. "Apocalyptic with a youth soundtrack. As if we've learned anything."

"We've learned how loud you can turn it up before the neighbors ring the doorbell," Kuddel corrected.

The music settled over the parking lot like a second air. Guitars, drums, a voice that was dissatisfied before Instagram was invented.

"Do you know what really scares me?" Tarek suddenly asked during a pause. "Not climate change, not war, not illness. It's that I'll be as old as you someday – and have the constant feeling that I've only experienced everything secondhand."

"You're 19," Jana said. "You still have plenty of time to screw things up firsthand."

"Hehehe," added Hecke. "We're the deluxe version of screwed up."

Tarek shook his head.

"I mean it differently," he said. "My generation... we experience everything through screens. Pandemic via streaming, war in clips, emotions in memes. Even you landed on a website before I saw you live. I read about you first, then met you. Everything is... filtered."

Michael took a sip and nodded slowly.

"That's the real end of the world," he said. "When you no longer realize whether you're actually living your life or just commenting on it."

"Welcome to the club," said Kuddel. "I've been commenting on my life for years, long before you had the word 'story' for anything other than books."

A siren wailed in the distance. Not a blaring siren, more of a tired, drawn-out sound. It could have been an ambulance or a police car.

Jana automatically perked up, like a dog at the doorbell.

"I sometimes wonder," she said, "if there's a point somewhere where someone says, 'Okay, that's it. We're turning off the lights.' No war, no catastrophe, just: Stop. Collective shutdown."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "The admin of the universe is pressing 'shutdown'."

"I rather think," said Timo, "there will be no 'stop'. It will continue, on and on, with patches and workarounds, until the code becomes so unreadable that nobody knows what's going on anymore."

“Just like at your work,” Jana said to Michael.

He raised the bottle.

"I'm just turning the clusters back on," he said. "You do the rest."

Kuddel leaned against a concrete block, feeling the cold through his jeans.

"I used to imagine that the end of the world would be the ultimate justice," he said. "Like a reset button. No more rich people, no more poor people, everyone equally screwed. Today I don't believe that anymore. If the world ends, they'll probably have bunkers, generators, canned goods – and we'll have: a parking lot behind the corner store."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "And a Bluetooth speaker."

"That's not a bad record," Jana murmured. "There are people who don't even have music when they go down."

For a while, they just did stupid things, out of habit.

Hecke tried to balance a cigarette butt on three people at once and failed. Kuddel showed Tarek how to open beer bottles with lighters without ruining his fingertip. Murat briefly juggled three empty cans until one hit the shopping cart and the thing rattled and broke.

Nothing significant. But it was precisely this small, ridiculous stuff that prevented someone from simply looking into the puddle and crying.

“If the world ends,” Tarek said at one point, half serious, half drunk, “I’d rather be standing here with you than somewhere on a mountain with people who think they’re the chosen ones.”

“We are chosen,” Hecke corrected. “Chosen by bad luck. Hehehe.”

“I don’t want you to have to stand here,” Jana said. “But if you’re already here – better with us than alone.”

Michael eventually pulled out his mobile phone and checked the time.

"I should go home," he muttered. "Tomorrow morning, back to my usual double life: Deploy by day, disaster documentary by night."

“Are you writing this here too?” Tarek asked, pointing to the parking lot.

“Of course,” said Michael. “Chapter: ‘Apocalypse in the parking lot behind the corner store’. With supporting actor Tarek, 19, whom I saw online beforehand.”

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Meta-apocalypse."

“Write,” said Kuddel, “that we missed the end of the world because we were busy listening to each other. And write that it was the best thing we could do.”

Michael looked at him, briefly, seriously.

"I will," he said.

Before he left, he paused for a moment, taking in the scene.

Wet asphalt. Empty crates. Graffiti. Night creatures with bottles.

It didn't look particularly special. No director would have filmed that as a "big moment".

But somewhere in there was what they all felt:

That everyone carried their own little end within them. That this parking lot was a kind of gathering place for all these mini-apocalypses.

Karl in the hospital. Moped-Manni on my mind. Neukölln nights. Job center notices. Family argument. Broken plans to move to Hamburg. Unwritten applications. Unheld interviews. Unreturned calls.

Everything here was compressed, like rainwater standing at the lowest point of the street.

"Take care of yourselves," he said.

"Too late," said Kuddel.

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "But thank you."

As Michael walked forward through the store, Murat briefly stopped him.

"Tell me," he asked, "when you later publish your book about the drunken asses – will you include this parking lot in it?"

"Sure," said Michael. "He's the main character."

"Good," said Murat. "Then he has a better future than we do."

Outside in the parking lot, a bottle clinked somewhere. Someone laughed. Someone was silent.

The world didn't end. Not yet.

But in every sip, in every sentence, in every postponed decision

There was a small crack in the surface.

And if things should ever come to a head – a really big, final blow-up –

Then it wouldn't feel much different back here in the parking lot behind the corner store than it does now:

A little too wet, a little too late, a little too honest,

and accompanied by the dull sound of a bottle,

which refuses to break on the first fall.

After Michael left, the parking lot briefly seemed larger.

As if he'd just lost someone who had subtly held him together. Only Kuddel, Heckenpisser, Jana, Tarek, Timo, and Murat remained in the doorway. And the wet asphalt, swallowing everything that fell – rain, cigarette butts, sentences.

"So," said Murat, flicking his next cigarette. "The documentary filmmaker is gone. From now on, there are no more witnesses. Only perpetrators."

"Hehehe," chuckled Hedge-Pisser. "Apocalypse without a protocol."

For a while, nobody said anything.

The music from the Bluetooth speaker was playing on shuffle. Something old, something new, something nobody knew, but it fit because it was simply there.

Tarek tipped the rest of his bottle into a puddle and watched the beer mix with the rainwater.

"It's strange," he murmured. "Out there – I mean, on the internet – you see you guys and think: Crazy, messed up, cool. Then you stand here... and realize: the only crazy thing is how little protection you have."

"Protection is for people with liability insurance," said Kuddel. "At most, we have a deposit receipt."

"Hehehe."

Timo took a step away from the group, as if he needed to see the picture from a distance.

"This," he said, "is actually a perfect place for a study. 'Subjective experience of the apocalypse in precarious urban environments.' I would just need a dictaphone."

"What you really need is a slap," Kuddel grumbled. "We're not test subjects, we're collateral damage."

"One could argue," Timo lectured undeterred, "that you are representing an entire generation..."

"You could also be asked to shut up," Jana interrupted. "We've had enough official disasters today."

Timo shrugged and put the notebook away. He was smart enough to know when he had to be alone with his intelligence.

The parking lot slowly acquired that special late-night look.

The rain had stopped, replaced by a light fog that seemed to come not from the temperature, but from the time of day. Behind the late-night shop, only a single neon light shone, flickering as if deciding whether it was worth continuing.

Light shone briefly from a bathroom window in the back of the building, then that too went dark. A delivery van in the corner briefly started its engine, moved forward two meters, and then switched it off again – as if the driver had changed position in his sleep.

“Is there actually a time when it would be more responsible to go home?” Tarek asked.

“Yes,” Jana replied. “Yesterday.”

"Hehehe."

Kuddel sat down on a pallet, crunching scraps of wood beneath him, his robe heavy with rain.

“You know what I’ve never understood?” he began. “People who say, ‘I’ve got my life under control.’ What does that mean? You’re not in the air, you’re in a system. Rent, job, obligations. They call that ‘under control.’ To me, it’s: chained up with a better light.”

Tarek nodded, although he probably didn't know all the chains yet.

"And what about us?" he asked. "We have nothing under control."

“At least we have the truth under control,” Kuddel replied. “We don’t sit in SUVs talking about conscious living. We stand in a parking lot behind a corner store and say, ‘We’re screwed.’ That’s more than most people dare to say.”

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Radical honesty with a deposit value."

It was that phase of the evening when everyone had drunk too much to make good jokes, but too little to simply fall over.

Thoughts slowed down, but they didn't become quieter. One realized that the world wasn't going to end – at least not right now – and that was both a disappointment and a relief.

“Sometimes,” said Jana, “I really wish there was a button like that. Just like that. Over. For everyone. Not out of malice, but out of mercy. No more hospitals, no more paperwork, no more therapy waiting lists, no more reminders. Just: silence.”

“Hehehe,” Hecke tried, “you mean a global cardiac arrest.”

“I mean,” she corrected, “that it might be fairer if there were no longer a difference between those who have too much and those who have too little.”

Kuddel shook his head.

“That’s the oldest end-of-the-world joke,” he said. “The idea that it’s fair. Believe me: when the bomb comes, it’ll hit the wrong person first. As always.”

From the corner store came the murmur of a television. Murat had the sound turned down, but the structure was recognizable: someone was talking a lot, someone else was nodding, bar graphs were displayed, keywords like "crisis", "demands", "perspectives".

"What's up?" Jana called out.

"Talk show," Murat replied. "They're discussing how to save the world."

"Will they ask someone who isn't sitting in a studio?" asked Kuddel.

"Only if he's made up beforehand," Murat said.

"Hehehe," added Hecke. "Today with us: a real loser – with powder."

Tarek sat down on the cold concrete block and held his hands between his knees to warm them up.

"I'm scared," he said suddenly, so bluntly that it briefly startled everyone. "Not of the end of the world. Of what's left. Of a life where you wake up every day and feel like: That's it. I missed the train before it left the station."

Kuddel looked at him, with a look that was briefly sober.

"You're nineteen, man," he said. "At most, you missed the tram. The trains are still coming."

"But I can already see how it goes," Tarek protested. "Everyone says: 'Get an apprenticeship, go to university, build a career, then you're safe.' At the same time, I read that the earth is burning, jobs are disappearing, algorithms decide whether you're worth anything. And then I see you all. And I think: Maybe nothing is worth it after all."

"Nothing is worth it," said Timo. "And yet everything is. That's the cruel thing."

"Hehehe," Hecke nodded. "Existential philosophy in a hoodie."

Jana took a step forward and put her hands in her jacket pockets.

"Listen," she said to Tarek. "I've been on the ward for years. I've seen people die who did everything right. Didn't smoke, didn't drink, exercised, ate organic food, had a pension plan, did continuing education, everything. And yet: stroke at 52, tumor at 38, car accident at 29. I've also seen idiots die who did everything wrong—and old people who made so many mistakes that they're nothing but a collection of bad decisions. And you know what? In the end, everyone asks the same question: 'Was it worth it?'"

Tarek swallowed.

"And?" he asked. "What do you tell them?"

"I'm not saying anything," she replied. "That's not my job. I'm just holding hands and making sure the alarm doesn't keep beeping. Morality isn't handed out, I told you. Especially not on a deathbed."

“Hehehe,” Hecke whispered, almost reverently.

The air grew colder. You could feel the night turning into morning. That window of time when the city pauses for a second before the first delivery vans head to the bakery.

“What would you do,” Tarek asked, “if you really knew it would all be over tomorrow? Real information. No speculation. Last day. 24 hours.”

“Drink,” Kuddel said automatically.

“Hehehe,” confirmed Hecke.

“Not funny,” Tarek thought.

Kuddel thought for a moment.

“Okay,” he said then. “If it were really certain – no maybe, no ‘could be’, but guaranteed bombs, comet, whatever – tomorrow – then I would stay sober today.”

Everyone looked at him.

"Hehehe," Hecke said uncertainly. "Now it's getting creepy."

“I’m serious,” said Kuddel. “I’d really like to see what everything feels like, unfiltered. How the wind feels, how the asphalt stinks, what people look like when they know. I’d visit Jana in the clinic, Murat at the corner store, I’d stand here and not drink anything. Because then it would all be over, without me having to do anything to make it happen.”

Silence.

Jana nodded very slightly.

"That's the most honest thing I've heard from you," she said.

“I would,” said Heckenpisser after a moment’s thought, “write one last, serious letter to my mother. No cynicism, no hehehe. I would tell her that she got on my nerves, but kept me alive. Then I would throw it in the mailbox – and hope that the end of the world is faster than the post office.”

“Hehehe,” he tried to add, but it wasn’t working as well as usual.

Timo said: "I would delete all my research. So that no one after me tries to make a career out of our downfall."

Murat said: “I would keep the shop open until the lights go out. Not because I want to make money – because no one should die alone if it can be avoided.”

Jana thought for a moment.

"I would steal medication," she said. "No syringes, no action. Just enough stuff so that the people I like won't find out if it happens."

Tarek looked at her wide-eyed.

"And you?" he asked Michael reflexively – and then realized that he was already gone.

"He's writing about it," said Kuddel. "What else would you expect?"

It was as if that small, idiotic end-times question had sucked out the last bit of air that was still in the parking lot.

After that, it was just: cold. Breathing. Bottle, hand, asphalt.

"The funny thing is," said Timo, "that there will never be this guaranteed date for the end of the world."

There will always only be probabilities, risks, and statistics. You will never know for sure how much time you have, only in hindsight.

"This isn't a statistic," Jana muttered. "This is torture."

From the front, from the corner shop, you could hear Murat quietly locking up. The front was now officially closed. The back was unofficially still open.

"I'm shutting down right now," he shouted. "I need to sleep too. The apocalypse can wait another two or three days as far as I'm concerned – I'm on the early shift."

Tarek laughed briefly, strainedly.

"And what about us?" he asked.

"You go home," said Murat. "Or wherever you go when you're not here. The parking lot has seen enough of you for today."

They stayed for a few more minutes anyway. That typical "we're leaving in a minute" standing around, where nobody wants to make the first move because it always looks like betrayal.

Kuddel stretched his back and heard a cracking sound.

"You know," he said to Tarek, "the end of the world isn't an event you buy tickets for. It's something you notice in stages. The first time is when you realize at school that you can't get out of here unscathed. The next time is when you realize your parents aren't immortal. Then, when your first friends are gone. Then, when you wake up in the morning and think, 'Ugh, this crap again.' And so on. Until eventually, there's nothing left."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "We're in the season finale."

"The trick might not be to prevent it," Jana added. "But to have someone there when it happens."

Tarek looked at them one after the other – Kuddel, Hecke, Jana, Timo, Murat in the doorway.

"Then," he said, "I'm quite happy to be here today."

Nobody made a joke.

When they finally left, the parking lot was back to what it always was during the day: a too large, too empty space behind a shop that nobody pays any attention to as long as it is open.

Kuddel trudged off first, his robe heavy, his steps heavy. Heckenpisser trotted beside him, hands in his coat pockets, glasses slightly fogged. Jana dropped back a bit, Tarek next to her, both silent. Timo said a quick goodbye, wordlessly, just with a nod. Murat switched off the neon light and closed the back door.

The apocalypse was cancelled. Again.

Instead, there were: wet shoes, cold fingers, residual alcohol, too little sleep, and tomorrow the same parking lot, the same ramp, the same pallets.

Perhaps just a new bottle, a new set of words, a new small crack in the surface.

And somewhere, in a kitchen in Schöneberg, a DevOps engineer would be sitting in front of a glowing screen, fingers over the keyboard,

Type "Apocalypse in the parking lot behind the corner store" as a headline

and try to predict the end of the world that never came,

to put into words that hurt just as much as the fact itself,

that they would all wake up again the next day.

Two bar stools and no home

The pub was called "Zur Kippe" (At the Tipping Point), as if someone hadn't even bothered to be original.

It had no neon sign, just a yellowed illuminated sign where only "KIP" was permanently lit. The E at the end flickered, the E at the beginning had been out for years. So it usually just said: "KIP".

"That fits," Kuddel had once said. "It's the sound my life makes when I wake up in the morning."

The "cigarette" was only two blocks away from the corner store, but felt like it was in a different climate zone: less neon, more nicotine. The windows were so clouded with decades of smoke that you could only see shadows from the outside. Inside, it smelled of beer, cleaning products, cold sweat, and that sweet note of stale liquor that had clung to the curtains like bad memories.

It was a Tuesday, so officially not a day for drama. Tuesdays are days for perseverance, for "just a quick drink", for half-empty pubs with people pretending they have a life outside of it.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser sat in their seat as if they had rented it.

Two bar stools, on the far left of the counter, half in shadow, half in view. Not too close to the door, not too close to the toilet, far enough away from the jukebox that one could talk, close enough that one could still recognize the songs as noise.

“Look at this,” said Kuddel, rubbing his sleeve over the worn faux leather of his stool. “This is my longest tenancy. I’ve never kept an apartment for more than three years straight. But this stool here – it’s got a permanent spot.”

Heckenpisser sat next to him, back straight, hands around the beer glass, as if trying to warm it politely.

"Hehehe," he said. "Imagine the stool was registered at your address. 'Main residence: pub, left at the bar, second stool from the wall.'"

Behind the counter stood Rita. Early sixties, hair a color found in nature only in ornamental fish, upper arms like concrete, laughter like filter coffee. She wiped glasses and listened without looking.

“You have spent more time on these things,” she said, “than on every sofa, every therapist’s couch and every office chair combined.”

"If the city ever wants to evict you, you'll actually have to list the bar stools as your life partners."

"Partners get more rights than we do," Kuddel grumbled. "Our stools don't even get new faux leather."

He patted the seat.

"Hang in there, my friend," he murmured. "We're going down together."

In the "Kippe" there were two kinds of world:

Those who clung to the bar – regulars, swamp dwellers, lost souls. And those who sat at the tables – couples, pool players who were “just popping in for a quick drink”, tourists gone astray, colleagues who had one last drink after their shift before going home and pretending they had never been there.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser were part of the bar's inventory.

They hadn't chosen their two bar stools – they had simply stayed seated longer than others.

“Do you remember,” asked Heckenpisser, “when we were here for the first time? We just wanted to go to the toilet because there was a queue at the train station again. Hehehe.”

“I still remember,” said Kuddel, “that I swore to myself: ‘You won’t come here regularly, otherwise you’ll get stuck here.’ We can see how that turned out.”

Rita placed two new beers on the table. She didn't collect payment immediately. With regulars, she settled up at the end – or the next day – or not at all, if the week had once again been faster than retirement.

“You’re like the stools,” she said. “If I ever give up the shop, I’ll have to sell you along with it.”

“You can include us as a bonus in the exposé,” Hecke suggested. “Walking customers included: two drunken retards, happy to give free life warnings. Hehehe.”

There were pubs where you could have some peace and quiet. Where you could drink alone without causing any trouble.

The "Kippe" was different. It was so small that loneliness only functioned as an illusion here.

In the end, everyone heard what you said. In the end, everyone knew your face, even if you thought you'd only been here once.

Today, at the other end of the bar sat a guy in a suit, tie half open, laptop bag on the floor, two fingers' width of whisky in his glass.

He was the classic "I've got my life under control until I've ordered my third glass" type. The tie-wearing crowd, as Kuddel called them.

Next to him, at the entrance to the tables, a couple was sitting. She was dressed in that "I'm just staying for a minute" style, he had the "I've been trying to look cool for years" beard. They laughed too loudly when it got quiet and looked away too quickly when someone looked at them.

“Two bar stools and no home,” Kuddel muttered. “Look at them. They’ll be going back to their clean beds later. We have our stools.”

"I've slept on less before," said Heckenpisser. "Hehehe."

Rita laughed briefly, but took it seriously.

“You’ve slept on everything,” she said. “Train stations, hospitals, people’s couches whose names you don’t remember. But here you’re awake. That’s the difference.”

Kuddel looked at the ceiling.

Nicotine yellowing, cracks in the plaster, an old fan that looked as if it might fall down at any moment and symbolically kill someone.

"Do you know what's really getting to me?" he asked after a while. "That I feel more at home here than in my own apartment."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Your apartment is mostly filled with chaos."

“My apartment is home to cardboard boxes, laundry, empty bottles, and the mailbox,” said Kuddel. “The mailbox screams at me, the rest is silent. Here... people talk. Here I know who hates me. That’s clearer.”

Timo, who was sitting at one of the tables and pretending not to listen, briefly raised his glass.

“From a sociological point of view,” he called over, “this is your surrogate family. Bar stools as parents, Rita as mother, Murat as uncle, Jana as big sister, Michael as strange cousin who writes everything down.”

"And you're the distant relative who only comes at Christmas and tells everyone what they're doing wrong," Rita retorted.

"Hehehe," Hecke applauded softly.

The guy in the suit kept checking his phone. Push notifications, emails, something about "status updates." He was ghosting his life in real time.

"Do you recognize yourself?" asked hedge-pisser Michael in his thoughts, even though he wasn't there at the moment.

“I see that guy every other day in a different pub,” said Kuddel. “That’s what happens when you don’t start burning everything down early enough. Then it burns you down.”

Rita placed the third glass in front of the man in the suit.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

“Yes,” he lied.

She left him alone. He was still in the phase where you say "everything's okay" even though your face is already saying "help".

“Two bar stools and no home,” Hecke repeated, as if rehearsing the title of a film aloud. “Actually a good name for a series. Season one: Späti (corner store). Season two: this pub. Season three: hospital.”

"Season four: cemetery," Kuddel added. "Season five: nobody watches anymore."

"Hehehe."

Jana suddenly appeared in the doorway, inhaling deeply as if she could physically feel the pub creeping into her.

"I knew I'd find you here," she said, sitting not on the stool but on the radiator against the wall. "If you're not in front of the corner store, you're on your thrones."

"Those aren't thrones," Kuddel corrected. "Those are lifeboats. If you're sitting here, at least you have a surface beneath you."

"You're the only people who screw their life jackets to the counter," Jana muttered.

Rita put a Coke in front of her without asking.

"I have to leave again right away," said Jana. "Just to quickly check if you're still alive."

"How's it going on the ward?" asked Hecke. "Hehehe. Is the world still going to hell in a handbasket?"

"Always," she said. "But right now I have a ten-minute break from the global dying."

The door opened, a draft hit. A drunk guy was arguing with a woman in the doorway about whether it was still a good idea to "just quickly have a beer". She pulled him back outside.

"They're still in the negotiating zone," Timo said from the table. "We're long since on the side of surrender."

"Hehehe."

Jana looked from Kuddel to Heckenpisser, from her bar stools to the door, to the counter, to Rita, who was routinely washing glasses.

"You know," she said, "that this is going to kill you. Not today, not tomorrow, but... this is your living room, your office, and your coffin lid."

"We know," said Kuddel. "We've known for years. But do you know how shitty it is to sit in a real apartment where nobody knows your name?"

"The mold in your apartment knows your name," Hecke remarked.

"Hehehe."

"I used to have an apartment," Kuddel began after a while, without anyone having asked him. "Not a dump like this. Two rooms, a balcony, a bakery downstairs, peace and quiet upstairs. I even had a carpet that didn't look like it had escaped from a rough neighborhood."

"Wow," said Jana. "What happened?"

"I have become me," said Kuddel. "That's what happened."

He took a long draught from the glass.

"First came the parties," he said. "Friends, music, bottles everywhere. Then the parties turned into drunken bouts. Friends dwindled, bottles multiplied. Eventually... there was only me and the carpet. And the carpet was more honest."

"Hehehe," Hecke whispered.

"At some point, the landlord asked if I still intended to pay rent or if we should just leave it as is," Kuddel continued. "I said, 'It's my turn.' I wasn't. After three months, the eviction notice was in the mailbox, after six months the bailiff was at the door, after eight months I was standing on the street with garbage bags. Since then," he patted the stool, "this is the only thing that hasn't kicked me out."

Rita glanced over briefly but said nothing. She had already heard the story – in different versions, on other nights, with more or fewer tears.

Jana breathed in slowly.

“That’s the problem,” she said. “At home, someone will kick you out if you overdo it. Here... someone will refill your drink.”

“Welcome to the service desert,” Timo muttered.

Heckenpisser stroked his thigh as if to make sure the stool was still there.

“My story is more boring,” he said. “I never really had a home. We moved three times before I was six. My mother furnished every apartment as if we were about to be visited by the Pope. Nothing to leave lying around, no trace that we were alive.”

“Hehehe,” he began, but this time without laughter behind it.

“I was never allowed to paint on the walls, not even posters. It was always, ‘We don’t leave any damage,’” he continued. “Not even in my own room. When I moved out, I did exactly what she taught me: I rented apartments, kept them tidy, paid the rent on time—and felt like I was living in a museum. Here...”—he gestured to the stool, to the counter, to Rita—“...here things are allowed to break. Glasses, nerves, people. And you’re still allowed to come back.”

"It's no different in the hospital," said Jana. "Only more sterile."

The two bar stools creaked softly when they moved. They knew Kuddel and Heckenpisser's every move. Those very specific shifts in weight, that little twitch before someone searched for words, that leaning forward when a joke came, that slumping backward when the sentence became longer than planned.

“If these things could talk,” Rita said, “they would say: ‘We’ve carried more backs than any therapist.’”

"And less money was collected," added Hecke. "Hehehe."

“For now,” said Timo. “Wait until the startup scene discovers this: ‘TheraBar – with empathetic stools. Only 79 euros per session.’”

It had gotten later than anyone had intended.

The guy in the suit had by now reached that zombie-like state of drunkenness where you're not really drinking anymore, but just glued to your glass. The couple had disappeared. Two new figures had sat down at the tables and were quietly playing cards.

“Do you know what’s really getting to me?” Jana asked, laying her head against the wall. “That you’re the only ones I know who aren’t pretending they have a home. Everyone else... it’s all Instagram pictures of sofas, plants, coffee in bed, ‘home sweet home’ crap. With you, I see: you’re sitting here because there’s no door waiting for you outside.”

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "The door is already waiting. Only nobody's behind it."

Kuddel looked at his glass, then at the counter, then at Rita.

“Maybe,” he said slowly, “this is enough. Two bar stools, a counter, a late-night shop, a parking lot. Our version of home.”

“Home,” Rita repeated thoughtfully. “It’s where people get on your nerves – and you still come back.”

"Then I feel very much at home here," Jana murmured.

Kuddel glanced at the clock above the liquor shelf.

The hands of the clock had stopped. Sometime in the past, years ago. Nobody had reset them.

"Look," he said. "It's pub time. Here it's always just before something. Just before closing time, just before the crash, just before the last round. Outside time flies, here it stands still – and we only notice it when we leave the place."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Two bar stools in the freezer of time."

"That's not funny," said Jana. "That's pretty much the diagnosis."

Kuddel drank the rest and put the glass down.

“If I die tomorrow,” he said, “I don’t want any collection to say: ‘He had no address.’ I want them to say: ‘He had two bar stools, a convenience store, a parking space, a nurse, and a DevOps engineer as his chronicler. And that didn’t save him either—but at least he wasn’t alone while he screwed up.’”

Rita nodded.

"Write this down when you go home," she said to Jana.

“I’m not writing anything,” she replied. “Michael is writing. I’m saving lives.”

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "And we're drinking."

The two bar stools creaked in agreement. They knew they would be sitting here again tomorrow.

With the same bodies, the same stories, the same lack of a home,

and perhaps another small scratch in the faux leather

which nobody would repair – just like the people who sat on it.

Later, when Rita were to tell the story, she would say:

"That was the evening you first realized that your home stood on only four thin metal legs."

But at that moment it was simply: another beer, another sentence, another bit of avoidance.

The pub had slipped into this intermediate state where one could no longer tell whether it was late or early.

The clock on the wall stopped, the world outside kept turning, and inside, in the "Kippe", time had pulled the chair away and simply left.

The front door opened, cold air came in, a woman in work clothes came in – nursing, but not like Jana, more like a nursing home: these wine-red synthetic trousers, top with patches, tired face.

She took a seat two stools away, ordered a small beer, and held it in both hands as if it were a hot water bottle.

Kuddel glanced over.

"Late shift?" he asked.

"Always," she said, taking a drink. "Too late, too early – somehow it's never the right time."

"Hehehe," Hecke muttered. "We have the same problem, only without work."

Rita nodded at her, that "I know" nod among people who don't bother each other with small talk.

It was one of those moments when one could have remained silent. Instead, Kuddel did what he always did when something got too close: he spoke.

"Do you know what the worst thing about apartments is?" he began, his gaze half on the glass, half on his reflection in it. "That they pretend to be forever. You sign a contract, furnish it, put up pictures, toothbrush holder, shower curtain, everything – and think: 'Now. Now I've arrived.'"

"Hehehe," Hecke interjected. "And then reality hits, like a landlord banning you from the property."

"I once had a girlfriend," Kuddel continued, ignoring him. "I mean, a real one, with a key, clothes at my place, toothbrush in a cup. We had an apartment that smelled of parties and frying oil, but it was ours. Two rooms, mold in the bathroom, but we had a wall calendar. With a pen attached. Birthdays, appointments, weekend trips we never went on."

"What was her name?" asked Jana.

"Who cares?" said Kuddel. "Just call it 'Attempt Number 7'."

Rita grimaced, but she said nothing.

"We had these two bar stools in the kitchen," Kuddel recalled aloud. "Not like these – no soul, just IKEA particleboard. We sat on them, smoked, ate, argued, had sex, were silent. Sometimes I thought: If I don't fall off here, we'll be stuck here forever."

"Hehehe," Hecke said. "Incorrect statics."

"Then the usual thing happened," said Kuddel. "Too much drinking, too little rent. Too much drama, too little future. At some point she said: 'You spend more time in pubs than here. If you keep going like this, you might as well live there.' I laughed. Back then."

He looked at himself in the mirror behind the bar. Two stools, a counter, his face, which refused to look honestly old and instead looked tired.

"She left," he concluded. "The bar stools remained. I later gave them to a friend. I lost the apartment."

All that remained was this cigarette butt. And the stool I'm sitting on right now.

The woman in the nursing uniform listened without looking.

"I also have two stools in the kitchen," she said after a while. "But I sit on them alone. The second one is... for visitors who never come. Because you tell yourself, 'You never know.' And then you do know."

"Cheers to Ghost Stools," said Jana, raising her cola.

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Ghost stools, ghost rent, ghost future."

Timo mentally noted down another title. He knew when to keep his mouth shut – sometimes.

Rita cleared away glasses as if she were dismantling a stage.

"You do understand," she said, "that this isn't a substitute for a home, right? Pubs are transit points. You come, you stay, you decide: 'Okay, it's rubbish, but I'm leaving again.' If you put your luggage down and say: 'This is my living room now,' you're finished."

"Too late," said Kuddel. "I've stored my biography here."

"And I mean, what's left of my dignity, hehehe," said Hecke.

"I would have preferred to see you fight for a proper apartment," Rita continued. "Not perfection – something with a broken sink and annoying neighbors. But still: your mess, your cups, your glasses on the nightstand."

"My glasses are usually under the bar stool," Hecke explained. "That's a place too."

That night there was no major incident, no fight, no large police presence.

It was much worse: there was this slow seepage of understanding.

"I once had a consultant at the job center," Hecke suddenly interjected. "She wore a blazer and a pendant that looked like mindfulness in metal form. Hehehe. At one point, she said: 'Mr. Schröder, you have to ask yourself: What does home mean to you? What gives you support?'"

He took a sip.

"I said, 'Bar stools and cigarette machine.' She laughed. And then realized I wasn't laughing."

"What did she say then?" Tarek asked.

"“We’ll get you out of there,”” Hecke imitated her voice. ““You mustn’t get attached to the wrong places.’ I didn’t tell her that the only place I ever really felt attached to was the bar. Not even my apartment kept me willingly.”

“Hehehe,” he tried, but his voice broke briefly.

Jana pushed her back away from the radiator.

“You don’t know the feeling,” she said, “after a twelve-hour shift, taking off your shoes, couch, blanket, peace and quiet. You come in, throw down your bag, you know: ‘Nobody asks anything here. Here I can be ugly.’”

“We have a late-night convenience store,” Kuddel replied. “We can be ugly there. If we were beautiful for too long, Murat would show us the door.”

"Hehehe."

“I only half know the feeling of coming home,” Hecke admitted. “I come into an apartment that is clean, empty, quiet. I sit on the bed, see my bookshelf, my shirts on hangers, and I feel... like a visitor. Like someone who’s about to leave again.”

"Then you're more of a patient than I am," said Jana.

The caregiver quenched her beer and pushed the glass forward.

“I’m going home,” she said. “I do have one, but you’re not the only ones without a home.”

"What do you mean?" asked Timo.

She shrugged.

“If you’re in a job where you’re wiping other people’s asses while they die,” she said, “you eventually realize that in the evenings you’re just going into a room where you’re horizontal instead of vertical. I have a bed, a kitchen, a bathroom. But home? For me, that’s also the hallways of the nursing home, the sounds, the smells. Sometimes I don’t know where I’d rather sleep.”

“Hih,” said Hecke, without adding a “hi” afterward.

Rita looked at her, briefly and softly.

"Take care of yourself," she said. "Otherwise, you'll end up sitting on those stools. And believe me: the way back is harder than the paths you're taking now."

The woman nodded, put on her jacket, and disappeared through the door. The "KIP" sign flickered briefly behind her.

The pub emptied further. Two card players stayed, Timo stayed, Jana stayed because she couldn't go home – "too loud in her head" – Kuddel and Hecke stayed because they had nothing without these stools.

"It's like this," said Timo. "An apartment means: 'I have things somewhere that belong only to me.' But home means: 'I have a version of myself that I only am there.'"

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "And what if both versions are crap?"

"Then you'll be sitting here," said Rita.

"Or you could work in IT," Michael interjected in his absence, like a voice from off-screen into Michael's head, where he would later put it all together.

Kuddel stared at his hands.

"I don't have a key ring," he said suddenly. "I just noticed it recently. Most people have a metal ring with clanking tokens proving they're welcome somewhere: front door, mailbox, bike lock, office, maybe car. I have: front door. And most of the time I treat it more as a suggestion."

"I have too many keys," said Hecke. "Apartment, hallway, basement, bicycle, office, server room, filing cabinet. And I don't feel like I can put my feet up anywhere."

"Hehehe," he added weakly.

"I only have two keys," said Jana. "My apartment and the hospital. Both have bad lighting."

Rita polished a spot on the counter that hadn't been really clean since '92.

"You're lucky," she said. "At least you have one place you can always come back to. Here. As long as I don't close it down."

"Are you going to close down at some point?" asked Kuddel.

"Everyone closes eventually," she replied. "The only question is who leaves first: guests or owners."

"If you close the door," said Hecke, "we'll be sitting on air stools outside. Hehehe."

"Then Michael can write a chapter about two guys sitting in front of a locked pub and pretending they're inside," Timo said.

"He already has," Jana murmured. "Metaphorically."

It was long past the "last lap" time, but Rita said nothing. There was no bell, no "That's it now." Just a slow, silent wind-up.

"They always say," Hecke began, "'Home is where the Wi-Fi connects automatically.' Hehehe."

“Then my home is the corner store,” said Kuddel. “Michael has already saved his hotspot password there.”

“For me, home is where I can walk around in jogging pants,” said Jana. “So... that’s not in any of my apartments so far.”

Rita snorted.

“Home is where you know where the light switch is,” she said. “Dark or not.”

Tarek said nothing at all. He just listened, absorbing every word as if he were consuming real-time anxiety about the future.

The guy in the suit finally paid. Too polite, too exhausted, too preoccupied with keeping the knot in his tie his only control.

"See you soon," said Rita.

“Hopefully not,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong. If I get back here, something won’t have improved.”

"Then I hope," she said, "that we will still see each other again."

The door slammed shut. The "KIP" lighting continued to struggle.

“He has a home,” Hecke observed.

"Does he have one?" Jana asked. "Or does he just have an address?"

"Hehehe... yes," said Hecke. "That's right. The address is where you get your mail." Home is where you can be yourself. I'm starting to fear that we only have that here.

The bar became the table for the great, lost class reunion of all non-locals.

"I sometimes have fantasies," Kuddel said thoughtfully. "Not about Hamburg or peep shows or any of that stuff. But: about a small apartment, upstairs, under the roof. A slanted window, a radiator, an old carpet, not enough electrical outlets. A shelf, a bed, a worn-out couch. No luxury. But: there's an ashtray I recognize. There are shoes that belong only to me. There's a towel hanging there that smells like me. No visitors, no check-ups. Just: my filth."

"Why don't you do that?" Tarek asked impulsively. "Why don't you look for something like that?"

Kuddel looked at him. There was a brief look in his eyes that wasn't just fueled by alcohol.

“Because I don’t believe in it,” he finally said. “Because I’ve learned too often: As soon as you get comfortable, someone knocks and says, ‘Get out of here.’ Or you don’t have enough money. Or you mess it up yourself.”

He patted the stool again.

"He won't throw me out," he said. "He'll hold up as long as my bones don't crumble him."

"Hehehe," Hecke murmured. "And even then it only wobbles slightly."

Night was falling.

Rita made her rounds: emptying ashtrays, wiping tables, one last bottle here, one last "Okay, but then it's time to call it a day" there.

"You two," she said to Kuddel and Hecke, "drink up. That's enough for today. The bar stools need to sleep too."

"Our stools sleep when we are dead," said Kuddel.

"No," she corrected. "They're getting new butts. You're not."

That hit home. More than any warning letter, any doctor's word, any prevention campaign.

"Hehehe," Hecke said, but this time it sounded more like hiccups.

When they went outside, the air was considerably colder than it had been that morning. The street was as usual: taxis, a few people, trash, lights. The "KIP" neon sign hummed, then the "I" went out. Now it only read: "KP".

"KP," said Hecke. "No plan. Hehehe."

Kuddel put his hands in the pockets of his robe, feeling the one, lonely key.

"Two bar stools," he said. "And no home."

Jana looked at him.

"You have something," she said quietly. "It's not enough, it's not fair, it's not healthy – but you have something. Worse are those who sit in expensive apartments and still feel like you do here."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "At least we're cheap tragedies."

They walked together for a while until their paths diverged. Jana headed towards the clinic, Tarek towards the bus stop, Timo into some side street he claimed was "field research," and Rita stayed behind with neon lights, glasses, and a glass basket.

Kuddel and Hecke walked side by side.

"Are you coming upstairs with me?" Hecke asked half-heartedly. "Hehehe. I've got a couch."

"No," said Kuddel. "I'm going back to my hole. Alone. Otherwise, the place might think it's some kind of home."

He stopped at the intersection, glanced briefly upwards at all the windows behind which life was taking place that he did not recognize.

“Perhaps,” he said, “that’s the real problem: We are always guests, never hosts.”

Hecke nodded.

“We’re the guys,” he said, “who sit on the barstool even when no one’s serving drinks anymore. Two seats that belong to us – and no room behind them that bears our name. Hehehe.”

They broke up.

The night swallowed her, as it had swallowed many before her.

Inside the "Kippe" bar, the left bar stool was leaning slightly crooked, as was the right one, as if they were waiting for someone.

who comes back the next evening, sits down on it, and pretends,

as if that were enough for a few hours,

to avoid thinking that there is a world somewhere,

where “home” means more than a counter edge and two wobbly metal legs.

Kuddel only realized how drunk he was once he was in the stairwell.

The light had a motion sensor, but it reacted so late today, as if it were also a bit off its rocker. The steps were familiar – concrete, worn edges, graffiti at knee height, a smell of piss, cleaning fluid and old grease that triggered different memories depending on the time of day.

“Second floor, old building, prospect of surrender,” he muttered, grabbing the railing, which wobbled as if it wanted to protest.

He paused briefly in front of his door.

Only one key. One lock.

No nameplate. No "Family XY". No "Bell broken, please knock".

He turned the key, that semi-dry click that tells you: You may go in. Whether you should, nobody tells you.

The apartment didn't welcome him. At most, it registered him.

One room at the front, one room at the back, with a kitchen and bathroom in between – all in what he called "functioning decay".

In the kitchen, the light on the old microwave was flashing: 00:00. It had long since given up on knowing the time since the last power outage in the house.

On the table: three empty cans of ravioli, an ashtray, an old, long since cold pan that looked as if it had been marked "later" on the calendar for weeks.

"Home sweet shit," said Kuddel, taking off his robe and hanging it over the back of the chair. The chair creaked as if it were complaining.

He collapsed onto the bed in the front room. The mattress smelled of smoke, sweat, and a mixture of cheap detergent and empty promises. Above him: the bare ceiling lamp, without a shade for months, direct light that was rarely used.

The silence in the apartment wasn't an "Ah, finally peace and quiet" kind of silence. It was a dull emptiness where every sound from outside – footsteps in the hallway, a car driving by, a neighbor's television – sounded more like life than what was happening inside.

He automatically reached into the inside pocket of his robe, pulled out a half-used pack of cigarettes, and found a lighter under the pillow. Flame, draft, smoke.

The first puff at home always tasted different than the first puff at the corner store. Outside, nicotine was an excuse. Inside, it was background music.

On the small shelf opposite were a few remnants of what had once been "possessions":

A few CDs with worn covers, an empty DVD box, an old band shirt, folded up. A framed photo, turned upside down, with the back facing the apartment.

He had decided at some point that he no longer wanted to see the face on it. He still knew what it looked like. Brains don't need frames.

On the windowsill: two plants, dead. He hadn't thrown them away. Not out of sentimentality, but out of laziness.

"You were once a project too," he said quietly. "Just like me."

He stretched, heard again the cracking of his shoulder that had been telling him for years that his bones had more miles on them than his shoes.

The two bar stools in the "Kippe" and the standing table in front of the late-night shop flashed briefly in his mind, like a different kind of furniture. These things supported him. This bed... rather held him down.

"I have two bar stools and a mattress," he muttered. "Guess where I feel more alive."

One floor away, two streets and one subway stop away, Heckenpisser sat on the edge of the bed, staring at his neatly folded shirts.

His room looked like the apartment of someone who had survived job interviews: a shelf with books (some even read), a clean desk, laptop closed, pen lying next to it. A wardrobe whose doors closed in time with his perfectionism. A pendant lamp with a fabric shade that looked as if it would say "Scandinavian design" if it could speak.

On the bedside table: alarm clock, water, glasses, a book that had been lying on the same page as a bookmark for four weeks.

He had neatly placed his shoes against the wall, laid his shirt on the chair, and draped his trousers over the back, like something out of a catalog for "Real Men Over 40", except that he didn't feel like one.

He sat down and rested his feet on the carpet. It was the softest floor he knew – and yet it felt strange.

"Two bar stools and no home," he repeated under his breath, grinning crookedly. "Hehehe. Good title, bad truth."

He got up again and went into the kitchen. Everything was tidy: plates in the cupboard, cutlery sorted, sink spotless. The chair at the small kitchen table was empty.

He stood in front of him, looked at him as if there was someone sitting there whom he had missed.

"We miss you, ghost guest," he said. "We even saved a stool for you."

He laughed briefly, that thin, manic laugh that came more from a nervous ache than from a joke.

Then he reached into the cupboard, took out a glass, placed it down, and filled it with water.

He sat down on the opposite chair and bumped into it with the empty stool.

"Cheers, you imaginary roommate," he muttered. "Hehehe."

The stool leg creaked as if it were saying: Leave me alone.

Jana sat on the night bus, half asleep, half lost in thought. She knew this feeling: being surrounded by people whose lives she helped, only to arrive at an apartment where no one knew what she had done all day.

She thought of Kuddel and Hecke, of her bar stools, of the "cigarette." Of the difference between a bed you fall into because you're tired, and a bed you fall into because you don't belong anywhere else.

"Home is where you're allowed to be ugly," she had said. But what if you don't even know who you are, if you're not functioning?

She looked out the window: lights, shadows, billboards. Apartments where screens flickered. A balcony where someone was smoking whom she would never meet.

The question burned within her: Is there still such a thing as "home" for people who drift through life in shift work? Or are they simply distributed among beds, cycles, and breaks?

She got off at her station, walked down the street, keys in hand.

Her apartment was neither beautiful nor ugly. It was: neutral. A storage space for laundry, thoughts, bodies.

She unlocked the door, threw her bag into the corner, took off her shoes, and sat down on the bed.

It was quiet.

She thought of Rita's statement: "Bar stools need to sleep sometimes, too."

She laughed softly.

"I'm a stool too," she said to the room. "Only without a counter."

And somewhere in Schöneberg, Michael was sitting in front of two screens.

Left: Monitoring tool, logs, colored bars, running numbers. Right: Text file with the heading: "Two bar stools and no home".

He had the scene in the "Kippe" in his head, the wobbly stool, Rita's voice, Jana by the radiator, the guy in the suit, the caregiver, Tarek with his young, stupid, honest questions.

He initially thought the title was a joke. Now he realized it wasn't.

He took a sip from the Stern beer that was next to the keyboard and puffed on the cigarette butt that was burning in the ashtray.

Then he wrote:

"There are people who have five keys on their ring and still don't feel welcome anywhere. And there are those who only have two stools, and at least they don't throw them out."

He paused, read again, then continued typing.

"Kuddel has an apartment that tolerates him. Heckenpisser has an apartment that quotes him. Neither of them has a place where he can say, 'If I die here, that's okay.'"

He briefly considered whether that was too pathetic. Then he remembered who he was dealing with.

"It's pathetic to pretend you can save this," he muttered. "This is simply about writing it down honestly."

At the same time, Tarek was lying in his room, headphones in his ears, mobile phone over his face.

He scrolled through Perplex.click, through the chapters that were already online.

"Moped-Manni", "Babylon train station toilet", "Apocalypse in the parking lot", "Drunken arses on the internet".

He got stuck on a sentence that Michael had once slipped in somewhere:

"Home is not a place. It is the sum of the people who know you as you are when you're no longer pretending to be okay."

Tarek looked around the dark room.

Two chairs, a desk, a bed, a wardrobe. Posters on the wall, a laptop on the floor, a pile of clothes in the corner.

His phone automatically connected to the Wi-Fi. The famous saying had come true.

But he didn't feel at home. He felt like someone who was stuck in a level where he didn't know what to do next.

He thought of the cigarette butt, the parking lot, the late-night shop. The two wobbly bar stools.

Something inside him was simultaneously attracted and repelled.

"I don't want to end up like that," he thought. And: "I'm dangerously close to doing it anyway."

He put his phone aside, turned onto his back, and stared at his ceiling.

She looked just fine. For now.

Back in Kuddel's apartment.

The Sterni beer from the corner store had taken effect, but sleep wouldn't come. He lay on his back, the cigarette was long out, but the smoke still hung in the air.

He thought about the words they had exchanged in the "Kippe".

Home. Bar stool. Address. Pub. Therapy couch. Carpet with a history.

He sat up again, switched on the bedside lamp, that dreary little light that only made everything more tired.

Then he stood up and went to the window.

Outside: Schöneberg at night. A few streetlights, a few cars, a guy with a dog who stopped on a corner so the animal could mark what didn't belong to it.

Down below, on the other side of the street, he saw another man coming out of a doorway. The guy locked the door, looked around, lit a cigarette, and started walking. He looked like any other: jacket, hood, hands in his pockets.

"He probably has a sofa somewhere," thought Kuddel. "A kitchen. A table where he sits and wonders why all of that still isn't enough."

He closed the window, and the street noise became quieter.

“Home,” he said to the room, “is where your own echo no longer seems so foreign to you.”

There was no response.

The sentence simply fell and stayed there.

Heckenpisser was now lying in bed, on his side, face half in the pillow, half in the shadow.

The apartment was so quiet that he could hear his own heart beating, plus the refrigerator turning on.

He thought of the cigarette butt, the bar stools. Of Rita's saying: "They're getting new asses. You're not."

He looked at the ceiling light, the cupboard, the door. Everything was in its place.

He was the only one who wasn't.

He sat up again, grabbed his phone, wrote a message to Jana, but didn't send it:

"What if you're just a guest in your own home? Is there a diagnosis for that?"

He deleted the lines and put his phone away.

“Two bar stools and no home,” he said quietly. “Maybe we’re not homeless at all. Maybe we’re just...houseless.”

“Hehehe,” came automatically – but it was barely audible.

Michael continued writing.

He described Kuddel, who was lying in his "hole", Hecke, who felt like a stranger in his tidy apartment, Jana on her bed, Tarek with headphones, Murat, who had briefly closed his eyes somewhere in a back room of the corner store, Rita, who was counting the day's takings in a small basement apartment, Timo, who was working on his seminar paper and writing "Precarious Belonging", but actually meant "Two Bar Stools".

He typed:

"Most people believe homelessness begins when you sleep on the street. But for some, it begins as soon as they close the door behind them and realize: This is just a room. Not my place."

He leaned back and rubbed his eyes.

DevOps Alarm was pinging somewhere in the background, but it didn't care whether a container was restarting.

"I can't write a home for them," he thought. "At most, I can record how they cling to anything that doesn't run away."

He saved the text, closed the file, and left it for tomorrow.

It was already dark in the "Kippe".

The bar stools stood empty, stacked on top of each other so the floor could be mopped. Two metal crosses, weightless, without stories.

But there was something in their cushions: the imprint of Kuddel and Heckenpisser, the warmth of their evenings, the cigarette ash that had trickled between the seams.

If someone were to put them down again the next day, they would be standing there just as they always were: ready to bear weight.

Two bar stools. No home.

And yet, a place where a few lost people find each other.

felt less lost for a few hours

than in the rooms for which they paid rent.

The last big plan of the drunkards

It was one of those days when even the corner store looked tired.

Not closed, not empty – just tired. Neon light slightly too bright, doorbell a touch too harsh, the standing table at the front corner battered like an old boxer who has to step back into the ring even though no one is paying admission anymore.

Schöneberg was in late autumn mode: drizzle that didn't dare to be real rain, dripping jackets, lost tourists, dogs that looked just as disgusted as their owners, and somewhere far away a siren that no longer made anyone nervous.

Kuddel stood at the table, his robe heavy with weather and years of wear, his smartphone in his hand as if it were a misunderstood diagnosis. Heckenpisser joined him, briefcase, bow tie slightly askew, glasses fogged up, corners of his mouth in that "I've been working, but it doesn't feel like living" look.

"Well, there you are, muse of the social abyss," Hecke greeted him. "Hehehe. What's new in the world of missed opportunities?"

Kuddel didn't look up.

"We're in," was all he said.

"Where?" asked Heckenpisser. "In the criminal record? In the credit report? On the watch list of the public order office? Hehehe."

Kuddel turned his phone towards him. On the display: Perplexed.click. "The Drunkards - Chapter 27 online".

Among them was a cover that by now had more history than most relationships in the neighborhood.

"Lappenbusch has uploaded again," Kuddel muttered. "Our misery, freshly polished."

Heckenpisser blinked, took the phone from his hand, and scrolled.

"Two bar stools and no home," he read. "Hehehe. The title is an insult and a diagnosis in one sentence."

"That's not the point," said Kuddel. "The point is: people are listening. Not just the garbage collector at Alexanderplatz or the nurses on Jan's ward. This..." – he tapped the screen – "...is being read by some guys in Cologne, Munich, I don't know, Luxembourg, who think: 'Haha, messed-up drunks in Berlin, brilliant.' We are officially content."

Heckenpisser briefly looked at his own face, which Michael had secretly photographed somewhere and blurred in the image. Obscured, but still recognizable to those who knew him.

"We are artifacts," he finally said. "Hehehe. Digital inventory of memorials."

The door of the corner store opened, with a small clatter that sounded like a cut-off sentence. Murat peeked out briefly.

"You're back on the internet!" he shouted. "I just saw the page. Congratulations. Now even more strangers know that you can't get anything right."

"Thanks, Dad," growled Kuddel.

Murat stepped outside and wiped his hands on his apron.

"You do realize that's a point, right?" he asked. "You're characters. If Lappenbusch decides tomorrow that you're going to die, you're dead – at least for those who can read."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "At least we're consistent somewhere."

Jana appeared from the side, her hood wet, carrying a backpack that looked like she too would like to go on vacation.

"What's wrong?" she asked, placing her Coke on the table without a word, as if someone had ordered it. "You look like someone stole your last excuse."

"Michael writes our lives," Kuddel explained, as if he had to restrain himself from laughing at the words. "And people love it."

"Yes," Jana said dryly. "People also think documentaries about serial killers are great. That doesn't mean you want to follow in their footsteps."

It was a strange feeling. They had always known that Michael was taking notes. The DevOps guy with the beer, standing at the high table, listening, laughing, occasionally asking questions, making notes in his head.

"That will end up in the book," he had said repeatedly.

But "in the book" had long been as abstract as "in Hamburg" or "functioning in a relationship".

Now it was real. Chapters, content, comments, emails. There were people who had contacted Michael via a contact form and written sentences like:

"I see myself in Kuddel, but I'm not that far down yet."

or

"Heckenpisser is like my uncle – only more honest."

or

"That's tough, but somehow comforting. Please keep writing."

"We have fans," Heckenpisser said, incredulous. "Hehehe. Fans, dude. Imagine that: someone celebrates you for systematically ruining your life."

"Fans are people who watch when you fall," Jana said. "And at the end they say: 'Wow, that's amazing, he really pulled through.'"

For a while they just stood there, each in their own corner of shared misery.

Murat went back inside, a wave of customers. Two teenagers for beer and chips, a guy for cigarettes, a mother for milk and "something with chocolate, but not too much sugar".

The drunkards stayed outside as always: too exhausted for real plans, too proud for complete surrender.

"You know what pisses me off?" Kuddel broke the silence. "That I feel like our lives no longer belong to us."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "It used to belong to the office."

"I mean it," Kuddel snarled. "Before, we were just two drunks who couldn't get their act together. Now we're: 'The Drunkards'. Brand, stuff, content, entertainment."

He tapped on the phone.

"There are people out there reading this who think, 'Ah, at least I'm not so screwed.' Or, 'I can't let it get that far.' Or they just laugh themselves silly and drink to it. I don't want to become the moral dregs of society."

"And what do you want?" Jana asked. "A Netflix series? Merchandise? Funko Pop figures from you guys?"

"Hehehe," Hecke could just picture it: a plastic figure with a robe, a runny nose, and a Sterni beer in its hand. It was both disgusting and seductive.

Kuddel put down the empty bottle and, with a glance, demanded the next one. Murat suspected this and placed it down before he disappeared back into the front.

"Perhaps," Kuddel began again, "we need our own plan."

"We always have plans," said Jana. "They all fail because of beer and a lack of direction."

"No," he objected. "Not something like Hamburg, a peep show, or world domination at a standing table. I mean: the final grand plan. If they're going to read us, they shouldn't just see us go down, but at least once see us trying to achieve something."

"Hehehe," said Heckenpisser. "Now he's coming at me again with world revolution."

"I'm not talking about world revolution," said Kuddel. "I'm talking about..."

He was looking for a word that didn't sound ridiculous.

"...An announcement," he finally decided. "We're going to make one last, big announcement to the world. Not in the job center office, not in front of a judge, not in the hospital, but here: the corner store, the pub, the parking lot. Our territory."

Jana snorted.

"You can't even manage to catch the S-Bahn on time," she said. "What kind of message are you trying to make?"

"Perhaps precisely because of that," he said. "Everyone expects us to keep stumbling along like this until one of us collapses and the other doesn't have enough money for a decent wreath. I want to write the script myself."

"You want to write the screenplay whose main writer is Michael," Hecke remarked. "Hehehe. Meta-drinking."

Kuddel leaned over the standing table, placed both hands on the sticky surface as if he were swearing.

"Listen, Hecke," he said. "We're now an official memorial. 'This is what you become when you give up.' 'This is what you end up when you drink too much.' 'This is what you look like when you've flipped the bird to the system for too long.' If that's how it is, then I want to actively participate at least once."

"In your downfall?" Jana asked.

"No," he said. "In my last attempt not to be a joke."

The sentence hung between them for a moment like a poorly constructed chandelier.

“Hihihi,” was the only thing Heckenpisser could manage, but it sounded more like a cough.

"And what does this final big plan look like?" Jana then asked. "Don't come at me with: 'We'll stop drinking and start a sports club.'"

Kuddel thought for a moment. He wasn't drunk enough to just talk nonsense. Not yet.

"There are a few possibilities," he said slowly. "All crap, but at least clear."

He counted on his fingers:

“Option one: We actually move to Hamburg, close down the corner store, the pub, everything – new city, new mistakes. Option two: We go to therapy together and seriously try to get sober. Not the way you pretend to the doctor, but for real. Option three: We stay here as we are, but we use this...” – he pointed to his phone again – “...and turn the whole thing into an open stage. More honest than any campaign. Drunken revelry as a live experiment.”

“Option four,” Murat interjected from inside, having apparently listened again briefly. “You leave everything as it is and stop pretending it will ever change.”

"Hehehe," commented Hecke. "Murat, the realism DJ."

Tarek came around the corner at that moment, hood down, backpack on, looking as if he had seen too much for his age.

"Another fundamental debate?" he asked. "I was just popping over to get cigarettes and I heard you all philosophizing all the way to the Hermes shop. What's going on?"

“We’re planning our last big plan,” Hecke explained. “Hehehe. Final season, last season pass, everything must go.”

Tarek joined them, pulled his hands out of his pockets, already halfway into the round of fate.

"Last plan for what?" he asked. "For your lives? For the book? For... I don't know... the morality department?"

"Maybe for everything," Jana said.

The evening was still young, but in their minds it was later than the clock showed.

The plan, which wasn't really a plan at all, began to take shape like a cloud:

Hamburg, therapy, complete escalation, radical honesty, something like that. It was like back then, when they first said "world domination at the standing table" – only with more freckles and less noise.

“Let me tell you how it is,” said Jana, folding her arms. “If you just keep going like this, this book will eventually end with a chapter called ‘Funeral in a Drizzle.’ There are exactly two

alternatives: You die anyway, but you tried something beforehand. Or you die later, and everyone is surprised.”

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Dying with a twist."

“We are an inspiration without having been asked,” Kuddel muttered. “That’s the problem. I don’t want anyone out there saying, ‘Those drunkards made me quit’ – or keep going. I want to be able to say one day: Those drunkards made something of themselves.”

“Oh,” Murat commented dryly, “philosophy on offer. Buy two bottles, get one insight free.”

"What would you do if you could decide everything?" Tarek asked suddenly. "Without fear, without government offices, without rent, without liver function? What would be your last grand plan, Kuddel?"

It was the first time in a long time that someone had asked him so directly, without hiding a form behind the sentence.

Kuddel was silent for a moment, looked at his hands, at the torn fingernails, the yellow tips, the trembling which he could now breathe away quite well.

When he spoke, his voice was quieter than usual.

“I would,” he said, “try, just once, not to run away from myself. Not with Hamburg, not with a peep show, not with a train station toilet, not with Sterni beer. I would try to stand sober at that damn standing table – and survive the night.”

Nobody said anything.

Even the street noise seemed to pause briefly.

“Hehehe,” came from Hecke at some point, but it was more of a reflex than a reaction.

"Is that your big plan?" Jana then asked. "Not drinking?"

"Not just that," said Kuddel. "No drinking, no running away, no lying, no fleeing to the hospital. Just standing. Here. At this corner store. When the night begins and when it ends. And everything that comes up, stays there. No bottle to push it away."

Jana nodded slowly.

"This is more radical than any anti-alcohol pamphlet," she said.

"And you, Hecke?" Tarek asked. "What would be your last big plan?"

Heckenpisser took a deep breath, as if he were sucking on a hose that no one could see.

“I,” he said, “wouldn’t pretend with anyone for a whole day. Not at work, not with my mother, not with myself. No ‘hehehe’, no ironic comments, no ‘I’ve got everything under control’. Just naked truths. And then see who’s still standing.”

“Hih,” he tried, but got stuck halfway through.

Murat looked at them as if they had suddenly stepped out of another movie.

“You’re all so screwed up,” he said. “That your last great plan is to not lie completely for once.”

"That's more than most people ever attempt," said Jana.

It wasn't a decision, no "Starting tomorrow we'll...", no to-do list on a napkin. But suddenly there was a line in the air: thin, shaky, but there.

No peep show, no Reeperbahn, no fish market. Just two broken guys who hatched a plan to not hide their misery behind alcohol and jokes, just once.

The last big plan of the drunkards was not a road trip, not a big project, not a new city.

It was ridiculously small and incredibly heavy:

Don't run away from yourself for one evening.

And that in that very place,

where they could otherwise best forget who they were.

It was remarkable how quickly even the most vehement statements could be put into perspective.

No sooner had Kuddel formulated the plan – to stay sober for one night, here at the corner store, at this cursed standing table – than half the group reflexively wanted to laugh at it, giggle it away, and cover it up.

“You’re forgetting,” said Jana, “that this isn’t TikTok. You can’t just say, ‘We’re going to do something amazing,’ and then get applause even if nothing happens.”

“Hehehe,” said Hecke. “We don’t even have followers, we only have believers.”

“You have readers,” corrected a voice from the side.

Michael.

He was suddenly there, as always – one of those guys who didn't need to be announced because they were already there in the room, in your mind. Laptop backpack, beer in hand, that half-tired look, as if he'd just been wading through server logs and human garbage at the same time.

"Well, look at that," said Kuddel. "The author himself. You're officially the project manager of our downfall now. Tell us something about the final grand plan."

Michael stood next to them, placed his free hand on the standing table, and looked from one face to the other.

"You're serious this time?" he asked. "Or is this another 'We're definitely going to Hamburg' stunt?"

"Hehehe," came automatically from Heckenpisser. "Hamburg is the beta version of our failure."

"I mean it," Kuddel repeated, with that stubborn emphasis he only used when he himself felt uneasy. "One evening. No alcohol. Here. At this table. You can take notes, film, live blog, I don't care. But I'm not drinking."

Michael took a sip. The irony was so thick in the air you could have cut it with a knife.

"From a marketing point of view," he said, "that would of course be complete nonsense. People read you because you drink. 'Drunken asses sober' is about as appealing as 'Strip club with mandatory turtleneck sweaters'."

"Hehehe," chuckled Hecke. "Or like a vegan grill with meat substitutes made of air."

"Nevertheless," Michael continued, "it is probably the most honest thing you have proposed in a long time."

Tarek rested his elbow on the table.

"All right," he said. "Let's get down to specifics. You always talk about plans, but you really mean excuses using the future tense. We're actually going to make a plan now."

Jana looked at him, half skeptical, half impressed.

"Since when have you been moderating lives?" she asked.

"Since I realized you all drag me down otherwise," he replied. "I want this as a warning, not a timetable."

"Hehehe," commented Hecke. "Tarek, our prevention officer."

"First point," said Tarek, pulling out his phone and opening the notes app. "When?"

"Today," Kuddel said spontaneously.

"You're already half drunk today," said Jana. "You're as drunk as a church on Sunday. You want to stay sober today? For the rest of the night? That's like saying, 'I just smoked, I'm quitting now' – and then there are still three packs left."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "I call it reality acrobatics."

Michael looked at his watch.

"It's just after nine," he said. "You've both already had a drink today. That's not sober. If you want to do this seriously, you have to start from scratch."

"So tomorrow?" asked Kuddel.

"Tomorrow is always a terrible day for things like this," said Jana. "It's like Monday: everyone hates it and blames everything on it."

"The day after tomorrow," Tarek suggested. "We'll call it..."

He thought for a moment.

"...the day X of the drunkards."

"That sounds like a bad ARD documentary," Michael said. "'Day X – when the drunks briefly thought they had a chance.'"

"Hehehe."

"Okay," said Kuddel. "The day after tomorrow. Day X. One evening, zero alcohol."

"We need to define what 'zero' means," Timo interjected, having emerged from the shadows like an academic moth. "So, blood alcohol level, breath alcohol level, perceived alcohol level..."

"Shut your mouth," Jana interrupted. "Zero means: Don't add anything new. What's already in there, the body will break down on its own. We're not conducting a lab test here, but a social experiment."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Do you think my body is still deteriorating? I thought it was just stacking things up."

"Second point," Tarek read from his phone, even though nothing was written there yet. "Where?"

They looked at him as if he had just asked how to spell 'water'.

"Here," said Kuddel. "Where else? The corner store, Schöneberg, standing table. This is our Waterloo."

"Hehehe," chuckled Hecke. "Only without Napoleon, only with napalm in the blood."

"How long?" Michael asked. "How long must this... torment last before we can say, 'Okay, experiment passed'?"

"From evening until closing time," said Jana. "You start at 6 p.m. and stay until Murat closes."

"What if nobody wants to do it anymore?" Hecke asked cautiously.

"Then you have the perfect reflection of your capacity for bonding," said Jana. "Hehehe."

Murat came out again, this time with a stack of empty crates in his arms.

"I'm already hearing words like 'plan' and 'Day X' and 'the day after tomorrow' again," he said. "I'm just reminding you: one last free self-deception is enough. What are you planning this time?"

"They want to stay sober," Jana explained. "For the whole evening."

Murat put the boxes down, looked at them first, then at the two drunken arses.

Then he laughed. Not angrily, not mockingly – more like someone choking.

"Sober," he repeated. "You two. Here. In front of my shop."

"Yes," said Kuddel.

"No backup beer in the bush?" he asked.

"Without," said Kuddel.

"Without a quick trip to the train station toilet if things get too much?" Murat probed.

"Without," he repeated.

Murat nodded slowly.

"I want to see that," he said. "I'll even give you free coffee. But if you escalate things after two hours, I'll take a picture and hang a sign next to it: 'Morality not served. Neither is self-control.'"

"Hehehe," commented Hecke. "Sounds fair."

"Third point," Tarek said, and continued typing. "Rules."

"Not a bottle, not a mix, not a sip," Jana listed. "Not here, not secretly, not by accident."

"What about non-alcoholic beer?" asked Hecke.

Everyone turned to him as if he had just suggested "Crystal Meth Light".

"No," said Jana. "We're not doing a Karl Lauterbach version of abstinence here."

"Hehehe."

"Second rule," Michael added. "You can't run away. No 'I have to step out for a minute' and then disappearing for two hours to find a bottle somewhere behind the trash cans. Whoever leaves, leaves. Whoever stays, stays. No ping-pong."

"Third rule," Timo chimed in. "No escaping into the phone, chat, or internet. When you're sober, you have to be able to stand being with yourself, not in a comment section. (You can thank me later if you survive it)."

"You're not going to put us in a digital detox here," Kuddel snapped. "I at least want to be able to turn on my music."

"Music is okay, but self-medication by constantly scrolling is not," Jana negotiated. "Otherwise you'll just be glued to your phone and won't even realize you're sober."

"Hehehe," Hecke interjected. "Sounds like 90% of humanity."

"Fourth rule," said Tarek, now really getting into his stride. "You talk."

"What do you think we do otherwise?" asked Kuddel. "We're not in a monastery of silence."

"I mean, you talk about what's happening," Tarek explained. "No stupid blather about other people, no dodge tactics like, 'Did you hear, someone else crashed over there.' Instead, it's: 'I feel like this right now.' 'I need a drink.' 'I want to run away.' That kind of stuff."

Heckenpisser grimaced as if he had been sucking on an old lemon candy.

"This is worse than therapy," he said. "Hehehe."

"Exactly," said Timo. "Therapy light, without a diploma, with a kiosk."

"And you?" Jana asked suddenly, looking at Michael. "What's your role in this plan? You can't just stand on the sidelines and take notes."

Michael shrugged.

"I'm accompanying," he said. "I'm observing. I'm drinking..."

He paused.

"...I'm drinking at a safe distance," he finished. "Someone has to keep the level up in case you all collapse."

"Cowardly," Jana thought.

"Realistic," he countered. "My job is to document your final plan, not to shoot myself into it. If things go wrong, someone will need some sober statements."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "We're your QA tests."

"I have a rule too," Murat said suddenly. "If you go through with this – completely, not half-heartedly – then you'll get a plaque here at the front."

"A memorial plaque, or what?" Kuddel asked skeptically.

"Something like that," Murat said. "Among all the chewing gum and cigarette price tags. 'Here, on day X, the drunks stood sober for eight hours and didn't fall over.' So everyone can see that it happened. Not as a heroic feat – more like: 'Look, it was possible.'"

"And what if we don't manage it?" asked Hecke.

"Then you won't get anything at all," said Murat. "Except for what you already have: liver values and chapter slots."

"Hehehe."

The plan grew like a bad idea that suddenly gained structure.

Day X. Late-night shopping. 6 p.m. until closing time. No alcohol, no running away, no mask jokes, no complete digital avoidance.

"I want a special rule too," said Jana. "If you really screw up – really fall flat on your face, not just a little bit – then all the whining about 'We could if we wanted to' will stop. Then you'll have to accept yourselves as drunken bastards like it's a profession. No more 'actually', no more 'maybe'. Then you'll officially be what you are."

"And what if we succeed?" asked Kuddel.

"Then," said Jana, "you'll at least have proof that you're not just that. And then we'll have to consider whether we should drag you somewhere where people are starting exactly these kinds of experiments."

"Hehehe," said Hecke suspiciously. "That sounds like a self-help group with filter coffee."

"There's one more thing," Timo replied. "I want to provide scientific support for this."

"You stay away with your notepad," Kuddel warned.

"I don't want to disturb you," said Timo. "I just want to observe. I'm interested in what happens when you leave out, for a few hours, what usually keeps you stable – alcohol, cynicism, escapism. I call it: 'Micro-utopia of abstinence in a precarious environment'."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Why not just call it: 'Two idiots without doping'."

The rain subsided, the air became clearer, as if the city had briefly passed through.

"Okay," Kuddel finally said. "We have a date, time, rules, witnesses, and a shitty feeling in our gut. There's only one thing missing."

"What?", asked Jana.

"Fear," he said. "It will come tomorrow at the latest. Today I still feel strong. Tomorrow... I'll start getting ideas about why this is all a stupid idea."

"Hehehe," Hecke nodded. "I already have at least five."

"Write them down," Tarek said. "So you can't use them on day X."

Hecke looked at him, then he actually started to create a list on his phone.

"Excuses for day X: – Headache – Stress at work – Trouble with mother – Weather" – Remembering Moped-Manni – general world situation."

“Twelve more to go,” Tarek said. “You’re more creative than that.”

The road continued to creep past them. Cars, people, dogs, bicycles, delivery vehicles.

But something had gathered around the standing table that no one wanted to name.

No pathos, no redemption – more like:

Okay. We've now set a point in the future that doesn't just consist of rent, illness, or court dates.

“Remember,” Jana said as she left later, “Day X is no miracle. It’s just one evening. But if you miss it, you won’t miss Hamburg – you’ll miss yourselves.”

“Hehehe,” Hecke said. “Nice starting position.”

Michael stayed behind as the others slowly dispersed.

"You're writing that down, aren't you?" asked Kuddel.

“Sure,” said Michael. “But I’ll decide afterwards whether to sell it as a tragedy or a comedy.”

"Sell it for what it is," Kuddel said. "A joke with a knife."

Michael nodded.

“Day X will be a chapter in itself,” he said. “Perhaps the most important one.”

“Perhaps,” Hecke observed, “it will be what we don’t want to remember.”

"Hehehe."

At some point, Kuddel was standing alone at the table.

The lamppost above him hummed, the window of the corner store reflected his face among advertising stickers.

"Last grand plan," he murmured to his reflection. "An evening without anesthesia. You know you had to choose the very thing you're least good at."

The reflection said nothing.

The door opened, Murat came out, and pushed the ashtrays together.

"The day after tomorrow, 6 p.m.," he said. "I'll put out coffee. And water. And a bowl of peanuts, so you have something to hold onto."

“If I don’t show up there,” Kuddel warned, “then...”

“...you’re exactly the one everyone expects,” Murat interrupted. “That’s the problem.”

He patted him on the shoulder.

"Don't make caricatures of us," he said quietly. "We already have enough caricatures here. You can at least allow yourself one try."

Later, as Kuddel walked along the road towards the hole, he felt something he hadn't felt in a long time:

No pride, no anticipation, no great hope – but a kind of thin, annoying thread between today and the day after tomorrow.

Day X.

The drunkards' last big plan was suddenly more than just a joke at the bar.

It was a date with a version of himself,

whom they had both been avoiding for years.

Day X did not arrive with trumpets.

He arrived with caffeine breath, a delayed BVG (Berlin public transport), and that very specific pressure in your chest that you get when you've promised yourself that you won't completely screw up today – and your own mind then spends the whole day thinking about how to time the sabotage fireworks.

Kuddel woke up too early.

Not because of the alarm clock, not because of appointments – because of nervousness. That was new. Otherwise, his main problem in the morning was simply waking up.

He lay on the mattress, staring at the ceiling, which looked like a poorly plastered alibi, and realized: He had a headache, but not from today. Residual levels. Old baggage.

"Day X," he murmured. "Big plan. Small man."

In the kitchen were two stale rolls from the day before yesterday, half a package of sliced cheese, and a yogurt whose expiration date had seen better days than he had. He drank water. Not because he felt like it, but because he knew that Jana would drill his brains out later if he started the competition dehydrated.

"No Sterni before 6 p.m. today," he said to himself aloud. "Nothing at all."

His body was mocking him. Silently, but clearly.

The hedge pisser was sitting in the office.

Excel spreadsheets, emails, meaningless buzzwords ending in "-strategy" and "-protocol". Normally, he would have been grateful for any excuse to get wasted after work.

Today, the looming threat of Day X hung over him like a badly wound drone.

He intended to "just work normally", but that worked until about 9:12 a.m.

From then on, every glance at the clock was a reminder that tonight, in front of witnesses, he would try not to resort to what had gotten him through exactly such days for years.

His colleague asked in the coffee kitchen if "everything was okay". He said "sure", but his spoon clinked in the cup as if he were sending Morse code.

When his mother called at noon, he let the phone ring twice before answering.

"Ulf, you sound strange," she immediately observed.

"I always sound funny," he said. "Hehehe."

"Have you been drinking again?"

"Not yet," he blurted out. "Uh – I mean... I'm at work, Mom."

She was talking about something—neighbors, rent, hip pain. He barely listened.

He would have liked to say:

Mom, tonight I'm going to try not to fall apart without drinking. I might end up crying more about you, myself, and all the crap than is good for me.

Instead, he said, "I'll call you back later, okay?" and hung up.

Schöneberg was shrouded in that early evening gloom around 5:30 pm, where everything could look like the beginning or the end:

People lugged shopping bags, children were being pulled home, dogs wanted to keep going, delivery vehicles piled up at traffic lights. The rain had paused, the air was humid, not cold, just sticky.

Murat moved the standing table a little to the side outside, and even wiped it down with a cloth.

"Day X, cultural program," he murmured. "If someone were to film that, they could apply for funding."

He didn't put out any beer. Just two large glasses of water. Two paper cups. And a thermos mug of coffee that looked like it could bring tears to your eyes.

On the window he wrote in chalk, under "Morality is not served":

"Today: Experiment. Looking allowed, judging forbidden."

"Self-protection," he said when Jana came and read the writing. "Otherwise, tomorrow three influencers will be standing here asking if they can sponsor your misery."

Jana was there in civilian clothes. No uniform, no lab coat, no name tag. Just a hoodie, jeans, and dark circles under her eyes.

"I took a day off especially," she said. "If you guys mess up today, at least I don't want to have to work too."

She stood at the table and checked the time.

17:55.

"If they don't come," Murat said, "I'll remove the water and write 'Day X cancelled due to cowardice in the face of their own lives' on the door."

"They're coming," said Jana. "They're stupid, but not that stupid."

She hoped so.

Kuddel arrived at 5:58 PM.

No beer, no cigarette, no usual sway in the hips. Just that slightly stiff gait that people have who are trying not to show how much they want to walk upright for once.

His robe looked the same as always. He didn't.

"Well, you surgeons of truth," he said, standing at the table. "Is this the water for my funeral, or is it part of the plan?"

"Sit down... uh, stand up," Jana corrected. "This is all part of the plan. From now on: no excuses."

"I only had coffee today," he defended himself. "And water. And... okay, I had a cigarette. I'm not a monk."

"A cigarette butt isn't the end of the world," said Jana. "Today it's about the bottles."

"Hehehe," a voice was heard from behind.

Hedge pisser, 6:02 PM. Precisely late.

Bow tie crooked, coat open, briefcase that looked as if it were heavier than usual today.

"Day X," he announced, standing there. "The event that nobody believed would happen. At least no ticket sales. Hehehe."

Murat placed glasses of water in front of them both.

"Your welcome drinks, gentlemen," he said. "Homemade disillusionment."

Tarek showed up with a bag of sunflower seeds.

"For your hands," he explained. "So you can crack something open when your blood alcohol level drops. My grandma used to eat them when she quit smoking."

Timo arrived with a notebook. He said nothing, but you could see how much his fingers were itching to document every twitch of the drunken arses.

Michael was holding a coffee from across the street, that hipster stuff in a reusable cup. He looked like a journalist who knew that something might happen today – or nothing at all, and either way would be story material.

"So," said Jana, looking at Kuddel and Hecke. "It's 6:05 PM. You're standing. You're here. You're (more or less) sober. From now on: Day X is underway. If any of you reach for a bottle, the experiment is over."

"What about the toilet?" Hecke asked cautiously. "Hehehe."

"Using the toilet is allowed," said Jana. "Escape is not allowed. We'll smell it if you come back with anything other than urine."

"Very vivid, thank you," he murmured.

The first 30 minutes went surprisingly easily.

It wasn't as if they'd never been to a corner store without beer before. It was just never intentional.

They talked about trivial stuff: the weather, the BVG (Berlin public transport), some guy who had recently fallen asleep in front of the shop, the new neighbor above the corner store who looked like "adult education personified".

Water was drunk. Sunflower seeds flew, shells landed in the ashtray.

Every now and then, one of the ordinary customers would walk through the scene, confused by the coffee and water scene.

"What's going on here?" someone asked.

"Art exhibition," said Murat. "Performance: 'Two idiots trying to stay sober. Free entry, donations in the form of respect are not accepted because nobody tries anyway.'"

The customer laughed, got his beer and disappeared.

Around 7 p.m. the air became thicker.

This familiar time slot: Ordinary citizens went home, sat down at tables, sofas, and televisions. The others appeared. Those who knew that late-night shops weren't just stores, but gatehouses for the night.

Someone from the scene – drunk and bloated – came over and patted Kuddel on the shoulder.

"Hey dude, what's up? Why only water, huh? Are you sick? Or on probation?"

"Experiment," said Kuddel. "No beer today."

The guy laughed, that guttural laugh of someone who already has too much phlegm on their soul.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “I’m also a non-smoker – except when I’m awake.”

He got himself two Sterni beers, one for himself, one "for later," as he said, and waved them in the air, right next to Kuddel.

You could see something contracting in his pupils, like a muscle cramp.

He reached for the bottle – not the beer, but his water glass.

Nervousness made his fingers tremble.

He drank.

It tasted like a burst pipe, but it was wet.

Heckenpisser, of all things, was more stable than expected in the first few hours.

He chattered, commented, and did his "Hihihi" routine on autopilot.

“I once heard,” he began, “that alcoholics take their first drink before they even touch the bottle. In their mind. Thinking, ‘Oh, I deserve it today.’ Hehehe. If that’s true, I’ve already had four rounds today.”

“I don’t know what’s worse,” said Jana. “That you say that or that you’re right.”

He stayed by the water. He hated every second of it.

Around 8 pm it got really disgusting.

The body had realized that something was wrong today.

Normally, this would be the time when Kuddel was "up to operating temperature." His blood so diluted that his thoughts swam in the alcohol like fish in chlorinated water.

Today there was only: coffee, water, nervousness.

His stomach was making itself known. Not with hunger, but with that specific "something's missing" pressure.

Out of nowhere, a memory came flooding back: Moped-Manni. Train station toilet. Karl in room 317. Everything he usually drowned in beer briefly reported for duty.

"I feel sick," he said.

"Body or head?" Jana asked.

“Both,” he said.

Timo noted: "Somatized stress."

"Write that I'm about to vomit in your dissertation," Kuddel growled.

The hedge pisser got quieter.

His jokes became thinner, then sparser, then disappeared altogether.

"I'm noticing I'm starting to see everyone in super HD," he said at one point. "Hehehe – or rather, hee-hee..."

He looked towards the street, at the faces, at the hands carrying beer, across the pavement that looked like a stage.

"When I'm drunk," he explained, "everyone's... soft-focused. Now I see pores. Dark circles under the eyes. How mouths twitch when someone's alone. It's like... in a club with the lights on full. Nobody looks cool anymore. Not even us."

"Just look away," Tarek suggested.

"I've been looking away for years," said Hecke. "Maybe that's the problem."

The first real test came at 9 pm.

A guy they knew – a casual friend, the kind of guy you can have a good drink with but can't talk to about anything – arrived, already quite drunk.

"What's going on here?" he asked. "Are you giving an anti-alcohol seminar today or something?"

"Day X," said Tarek. "Drunken asses sober. A once-in-a-lifetime event, probably."

"Sober drunks?" the guy laughed as if he'd just heard "vegan butcher shop." "Guys, are you kidding me?"

He held out a bottle to Kuddel.

"Come on, just one. Who else is going to supply the rag bush with material, huh?"

It was as if someone were pressing the drug directly onto the lower lip of a junkie in withdrawal.

Kuddel stared at the beer. The way you stare at someone who once saved your life and ruined it a hundred times.

You could see the grip of his hand twitch briefly.

Then he pushed the bottle away.

Slowly. With a movement that required more effort than if he had grabbed it and emptied it.

"Not today," he said. "Tomorrow you can save my ass again. Today... you have to stay outside."

The guy shrugged, drank himself, and moved on.

The scene lasted less than ten seconds. For Kuddel, it lasted ten years.

"I want a cigarette," he said afterwards.

"You can have them," said Jana. "It's not Christmas Eve."

He lit a cigarette, took a much too deep drag, and coughed.

"At least it's something I can still break," he muttered.

Around 9:30, the sky over Schöneberg hung like a low ceiling.

The air grew colder, people's breath more visible, the conversations at the standing table more intense.

Nobody made jokes anymore.

"I'm scared," Heckenpisser said suddenly at one point.

Everyone looked at him.

"What are we talking about?" asked Tarek.

"Before I liked it," he said. "Hehe..."

He stopped giggling.

"I know," he continued, "that I couldn't handle this every day. But I'm realizing right now that it's not just painful – that there's also a brief moment of... peace. And if I'm honest, that scares me more than any hangover."

"Because then you know you had a choice," said Jana.

"Yes," whispered Hecke. "Because then I can no longer say: 'I can't do otherwise.' Only: 'I don't want to do otherwise.'"

He looked at his glass of water as if it were a mirror.

Kuddel was on a different kind of trip by then.

His body trembled slightly, his hands were restless, his eyes wandered.

"What time is it?" he asked for the tenth time.

"21:38," Michael said. "You will not die."

"I might not die," Kuddel growled. "But I'm feeling everything all at once, and that's worse."

"What do you feel?" asked Timo, half interested, half professionally eager for authenticity.

"Anger," Kuddel listed. "Sadness. Envy. Shame. Hunger. And... a kind of... loss."

"Loss of what?" Jana asked.

"It's about the feeling that I always know where the off switch is," he said. "I'm standing here, and I know: the bottle could make everything quieter. And I keep saying no. I'm not used to forbidding myself things."

"Welcome to the lives of the people you always call 'ordinary people'," Jana said.

Shortly before ten o'clock, a moment occurred that everyone would later describe differently.

A car stopped at the corner, the music was too loud, two guys got out, one went into the corner store, the other stayed outside and smoked. He glanced over briefly, then said:

"Hey, aren't you the ones from the internet?"

Silence.

"Which ones?" Kuddel asked cautiously.

"Well, this... drink... something," the guy said. "My girlfriend showed it to me. She says I should read it so I can see where I'll end up if I keep going like this. You guys are funny—and really sad. Is this... real?"

Heckenpisser exhaled so deeply that his shoulders drooped.

"Yes," he said. "Unfortunately."

"Hehehe," he added, but it sounded more like a sigh.

"Wow," the guy said. "My girlfriend's going to freak out when I tell her I saw you guys. Hey, but... respect, dude. That you guys managed to go an evening without it. I tried it once, failed after ten minutes in the park."

"It's not over yet," said Kuddel. "Come back in an hour – maybe I'll already be in your version of 'This is what happens when you don't stop'."

The guy laughed, nodded, went inside, got his stuff and disappeared.

What remained was the information: Somewhere out there sat a friend who hoped that her boyfriend wouldn't turn out like her.

"We are warning signs," Kuddel said quietly. "Find the mistake."

When Murat finally looked out, it was after ten.

During this phase of the evening, the place always had something of an emergency room about it: randomly arriving cases, well-worn faces, decisions made every minute.

He saw Kuddel and Hecke.

Still standing. Still sober. Exhausted like two boxers in the twelfth round, but not on the ground.

He came out and put down two cups of coffee.

"Last round," he said. "Don't worry – you're all already caffeine addicts anyway."

They drank. Slowly, as if the black stuff were a sacred liquid.

Then he looked at the clock at the checkout.

"Half past ten," he said. "Half an hour to go. Then I'm closing. If you haven't had a drink by then, I'll write your sign."

"And what if we screw it up right now?" asked Hecke.

"Then," said Murat, "it won't surprise anyone. But you will."

The last half hour was strangely quiet.

It was as if the body had given up trying to maintain a state of alert.

Heckenpisser spoke softly but clearly. No more "Hihihi," but complete sentences that sounded like content, not like a punchline.

Kuddel was only supporting himself with one hand on the table. He seemed... empty. Not in a bad way – more like someone who has been shoveling water out of a cellar for hours and suddenly realizes that the level has dropped slightly.

"I thought I was going to flip out," he said. "But the worst part was... the first two hours. Now... it's more like a sound is missing that I haven't consciously noticed for years."

"Perhaps that's your own thinking," Jana said.

"Maybe," he said. "But maybe it's just tinnitus from all this crap."

At precisely 11:00 PM, Murat turned the key from the inside.

Not a "throw-out style", but rather ritualized.

He came back to the door, knocked on the glass from the inside, and gave a thumbs-up.

"Day X officially over," he shouted through the window. "You're alive. There was nothing more to win today."

Kuddel and Hecke were still standing.

No beer. No liquor. No "Oh come on, it doesn't matter now anyway".

Only: fatigue. Nerves. A little bit of... pride, which neither of them recognized, but everyone else did.

Tarek grinned.

"You did it," he said. "One evening. One time you didn't run away."

Jana didn't make a big show of it.

She just nodded.

"Good," she said. "Now I know you can do it. Next time I don't want to hear you say, 'Impossible.'"

Timo wrote only two words in his notebook:

"Day X: possible."

Michael looked at her, and she registered it.

"This chapter will be disgustingly honest," he said. "Don't worry."

"Hehehe," came another genuine, albeit tired, laugh from Hecke.

They slowly dispersed, as always. Each in their own direction, into their own hole, into their own version of night.

Kuddel stood there for a moment longer, alone.

He looked at the table, at the empty water glasses, at the thermos mug with coffee residue.

Something screamed in his head:

Now. Now a beer. As a reward. As compensation. As... anything.

He heard it. He understood it.

He didn't reach for it.

He turned around and left.

Slow, sluggish, but not wavering.

The hedge pisser, on his way home, faced the same temptation. On every corner, at every kiosk, at every bar.

"You can now," something whispered inside him. "The day is over. Day X is done. You have won. Now you are allowed to lose."

He put his hands deeper into his pockets and walked past three shops without going in.

"Not today," he said. "Tomorrow I'll be the person you know again. Today... I just want to briefly see who else I am."

The next evening they were back at the corner store. With beer. With cigarettes. With all the filth that had accumulated around them.

Epilogue: When the lights go out and only the corner store remains

Eventually you realize that a city never truly sleeps.

It only dims.

Offices switch off their monitors, bars turn down the music, clubs let the last zombies out into the dawn. In apartments, the lights gradually go out – rows of windows surrendering one after the other.

And then there's this one corner in Schöneberg where the neon light above the door is still humming, as if someone had forgotten to find the switch.

The late-night convenience store.

It is late. Later than reasonable, earlier than final.

The traffic has thinned out. Instead of rush hour and delivery services, now only those who have lost their rhythm are on the road: night shift workers, taxi drivers, lost couples, dogs that need to go out one last time, and those who never really find their way in anyway.

Murat has gotten older.

Not old – but his hair is thicker and grayer, the lines on his face deeper, his movements a bit more economical. He now knows every loophole in the city administration's regulations, every night shift, every regular customer's nose.

The sign "Morality is not served" is still hanging on the window. Next to it is a second one, slightly crooked, written in marker:

"Those drunken asses really do exist. Unfortunately."

Michael tacked it on there sometime after an evening. Murat initially wanted to take it down again, but then left it alone.

Kuddel is standing at the standing table as usual.

The robe is the same as before, only the body inside is less immortal. He now wears reading glasses – secretly, for his mobile phone – and pretends it's just a phase, like all the other phases he's been through.

Hedge urinator next to him, bow tie crooked, coat shiny, shoes polished – as if he still needed to prove to the world that he hadn't given up, at least outwardly.

The two look like props from another era. The language on the street has changed, the music on cell phones, the prices in the shops – but they're still there. Like an error message that no one clicks away because it's become part of the home screen.

“Do you remember Day X?” asks Heckenpisser, pushing up his glasses before they slip down on their own.

"Which one?" Kuddel asks. "I spent many days with X. Ex-girlfriend, ex-apartment, ex-liver values..."

"The sober one," says Hecke. "In front of the corner store. With water. With Timo, who was taking notes, with Jana, who was watching to see if we'd collapse, with Michael, who was hammering all of this into the hell of his hard drive. Hehehe."

Kuddel takes a drag on his cigarette, blows the smoke into the air, as if he wanted to resolve an old scene.

“Yes,” he says. “I remember that. Nobody believed we could do it. Not even us.”

"So?" asks Hecke. "What's your verdict?"

"It was awful," says Kuddel. "But interesting."

Some time has passed since day X.

Jana still works at the hospital, but now she's a team leader. More paperwork, fewer patients, more responsibility, less sleep. She doesn't come by every evening anymore, but often enough that Murat grabs a Coke from the fridge when he sees her through the window.

Tarek worked his way up through university, half gritted his teeth, half trembled through it. He no longer lives in the neighborhood, but when he's in town, he sometimes comes by, stands there, and looks at the old guys as if they were a mixture of a warning and a local history museum.

Timo has submitted his dissertation. It's called something like "Subjective Disintegration in the Urban Marginal Environment," but every time he meets the drunkards, he says: "I basically just wrote about you guys, only with footnotes."

And Michael?

He's sitting at the table again today with Sterni, laptop in his backpack, his gaze alternating between documentary and script.

The book is out. Perplex.click is no longer just an insider's address, but a strange mix of cult corner and chamber of horrors.

There are emails, comments, people thanking me, people complaining, people writing:

"I stopped drinking while reading."

and others who:

"I only really started reading."

"We are literature," says Heckenpisser, raising the bottle.

"You're a footnote," Kuddel corrects. "I'm the chapter on 'Don't do it that way.'"

"Hehehe."

The lights go out outside.

Not all at once – Berlin doesn't have a finale, Berlin has gradual scene changes.

The café on the corner is closing, chairs stacked, counter wiped down. The bar two streets away is having its "last call". At the "Kippe" (cigarette), a sign now hangs saying "Closed due to age", the windows are covered with paper, gray shadows behind brown packing paper – the place gave up before its regulars were able to.

"Well," says Kuddel. "Two fewer bar stools on my resume."

"You still have this one," says Hecke, tapping the edge of the tray on the standing table. "Standing room, no seating. Hehehe."

"We're getting older, the chairs are disappearing," Kuddel murmurs. "Good metaphor."

Sometimes strangers stop. Like that guy on day X.

"Hey," says a guy with a travel backpack, probably an Airbnb tourist in his mid-twenties, looking through the window, then at the two of them. "Are you... uh... those guys? Those... drunks? I read the book."

Kuddel grimaces.

"It depends," he says. "Are you from a social work school or just curious?"

"I... well... I study media and I found it totally... uh... authentic," the guy stammers. "I thought you might be fictional. Like... a composite. Like those characters in Netflix series."

The hedge pisser smirks.

"Congratulations," he says. "We're real. Unfortunately, no end credits music."

"Hehehe."

The guy wants to say something profound, but all he manages is a "Wow, that's crazy" and moves on, feeling like he's seen real ruins, before returning to his holiday apartment.

Murat observes the whole thing from the doorway.

“You are a tourist attraction,” he says, after the tourist has left. “Alongside the Brandenburg Gate, the TV tower, and homelessness.”

“We’re more like memory bags,” says Kuddel. “People take us out when they want to feel better for a little while. ‘Look, darling, we have problems too – but at least we’re not as screwed as those drunks.’”

“Hehehe,” Hecke adds. “We are the human embodiment of a push notification: ‘Drink less, or you’ll become content.’”

It will be later.

Inside the corner store, the refrigerator hums, the lights flicker. The shelves aren’t as full as they used to be – inflation, a changing of the guard, everything’s more expensive. People are cutting back on chocolate, but not on cheap beer.

Michael leans his back against the window, a cigarette in his mouth, his mobile phone in his hand.

“We could stop,” he says suddenly.

"With what?" Kuddel asks. "With drinking, with writing, or with living?"

“With everything,” says Michael. “With the book, with the website, with the chapters. Simply: last page, last line, close the lid. From then on, you’re just two guys in front of the corner store again.”

Heckenpisser thinks for a moment.

"And what would be gained?" he asks. "Hehehe. Those who understood something, understood it. Those who didn't get it, kept drinking. And we... are exactly the same as before – only without subtitles."

Jana, who is just arriving and standing at the table, takes a drag on her cigarette.

“You’re acting like you’re prisoners of your own story,” she says. “But look at yourselves: you’d be standing here either way. With or without the book. With or without Michael.”

“Comforting,” says Kuddel. “I’ve always liked being my own destiny.”

The lights in the surrounding windows are fading. Here and there a blue television flicker, a mobile phone light glimmering through a curtain.

The late-night shop remains brightly lit.

Not radiant – this tired neon that says "I must" rather than "I want".

There are cities where they close the shops at ten o'clock, as if the nights were too dangerous. Berlin doesn't do that.

Berlin is letting the late-night convenience store burn down so that someone who has lost their key can at least get a beer and a story to tell.

“Do you think we can make it to a second day X?” asks Tarek, who came out of the darkness at some point, older in face, but with the same alert eyes.

"Today?" asks Kuddel.

“Not today,” says Tarek. “Sometime. Another evening without it. To prove that the first one wasn’t an accident.”

Heckenpisser turns the bottle a centimeter, as if considering whether he could let go of it.

“I don’t know,” he says honestly. “Hehehe. The first one was expensive enough. Maybe... it’s enough that I know I could if I really had to.”

“That’s the most brutal realization,” says Jana. “To know that you’re not just a victim of your addiction, but an accomplice.”

Murat wordlessly places new bottles in front of him.

"The world isn't going to end because you're getting wasted again today," he says. "The world is going to end anyway. Sooner or later. With or without you."

“Are you comforting us right now?” Kuddel asked.

“No,” says Murat. “I’m just putting things into perspective.”

There is a strange peace in the air.

Nobody expects anything big to happen today. No day X, no hospital, no train station toilet, no legendary drunken escapade that will become part of local folklore.

Just: The corner store. The corner shop. A few people who haven't gotten their lives in order, but are at least honest enough not to wrap it up in gift paper.

The city outside is doing its thing. Rents are rising, people are moving away, others are coming. Clubs are closing, new bars are opening, start-ups are going bankrupt, political parties are changing, faces are aging.

The late-night convenience store will remain.

A hole in the system through which light passes.

Michael looks at the two of them, at Jana, at Tarek – and at the reflected version of their little universe in the shop window.

"I could let you die," he says at one point.

It doesn't sound threatening, more matter-of-fact.

"In the book, I mean," he adds. "A heart attack in chapter 32, liver failure in an afterword, an accident in a crosswalk. Symbolic, complete, neat. Readers love that sort of thing. A period at the end."

Kuddel looks at him, then at his Sterni.

"Leave it," he says. "Life will take care of it. Your job isn't to neatly erase us from your record. Your job is to record that we were here."

"Hehehe," says Hecke. "If you're going to use us as a warning, at least leave the outcome open."

Michael nods.

He knows it's true.

Final endings are for fiction. Reality likes open loops.

It's late.

Murat will eventually lock up, lower the blinds halfway, and switch off the neon lights. The last ones, who realized too late that they needed supplies, will stand in front of a locked door, point to their watches, and complain.

Kuddel and Hecke will then be somewhere: perhaps in the "hole", perhaps in a corner of a train station, perhaps on a mattress, perhaps in an emergency room, perhaps just on a park bench in their heads.

Jana will be working some early or late shift. Tarek will be hunched over a text that has too much to do with his own life. Timo will be sorting reports in which they appear as "case studies". Michael will be sitting in the monitor light, fingers over the keyboard, the cursor blinking under a new paragraph.

And the late-night shop?

It reopens the next day.

Because someone always, sometime

passing a shop at night

for whom it is much too late and just early enough.

When the lights go out, perhaps in the end only a place like this will remain:

a neon sign above a door, a standing table with adhesive tape scars, a merchant who knows more stories than any priest, two drunkards who show the city what it looks like when you've lost the fight but kept your sense of humor.

No happy ending. No great moral.

Only the quiet realization:

It could have been worse. You might never have had a late-night convenience store where you could actually go.

It was sometime after three when the city briefly pretended to be tired.

Berlin sometimes does this: It pretends to be about to settle down, then laughs quietly to itself and sends another delivery van, a taxi, a guy with headphones who has forgotten where he wanted to go.

The corner shop was closed. The shutters were half down, the lights inside were off, only the small green light from the card terminal blinked like a faint heartbeat.

For a few hours, the corner belonged only to the ghosts of the last rounds.

The next day at noon, when the city was already acting as if everything was normal again, Kuddel stood in his hole in the kitchen.

The sun came in at an angle through the window, grazing the table, which looked like a crime scene for a lack of intentions.

He didn't have a hangover, he wasn't really drunk, just that flat, unpleasant feeling of "not quite having arrived in life yet." His hands weren't shaking, but they were... nervous. Like a dog that doesn't yet know whether it needs to go for a walk or to the vet.

There was a printout on the windowsill.

Michael had handed it to him at some point, laminated – “so you don’t mess it up if you spill beer on it” – and Kuddel hadn’t looked closely, just said “yes, yes”.

Now he picked the thing up.

The text at the top read:

“The Drinking Pigs – by Michael Lappenbusch (based on the life of Kuddel & Heckenpisser)”

Among them is an excerpt. Some passage where he appeared, half beautiful, half painful.

He read.

Read sentences about himself, about his broken robe, his endless excuses, his missed opportunities, his perverse talent for making a joke and a wound out of every situation.

After three lines he laughed. After five he swallowed hard.

"That's not how you write about people who are still alive," he said to the room. "That's more something you do with the dead and war heroes."

The apartment said nothing. The printout rattled softly in his hand.

Heckenpisser was sitting on the couch in his living room at the same time.

Around him: bookshelves, plants that weren't dead, a reasonably clean carpet. Everything had the feel of a "functioning adult life." Only he didn't quite fit in.

He held the book in his hand. Not as a file, not as a chapter on the website – a real physical thing. Cover, spine, page numbers, imprint.

"That really happened," he murmured. "Hehehe..."

The laughter faded faster than a match flame.

He flipped through the pages, looking for passages where he appeared.

"Hedge pisser, mama's boy in a tailored suit..."

"Hehehe – a laugh like a note that's too high and doesn't know if it's funny or just nervous."

"Someone who knows the right words but still never makes the right decisions in time."

He pushed his glasses up, looking over the edge.

On his coffee table lay a letter from the authorities. Next to it, a letter from his mother. Next to it, a list of his latest blood test results.

Everything looked like props from a life that had gone astray.

"I am a character," he said. "An ugly, semi-funny character in a book that people read to fall asleep because they think, 'Things aren't that bad for me yet.'"

He turned the book over and looked at the blurb.

"A dirty, honest, sad joke about giving up and carrying on in a world that no longer has designated places for people like Kuddel and Heckenpisser."

"We're not even a fringe group anymore," he said, gesturing into the air. "We're a footnote to a footnote."

They met again in the evening. Where else?

A corner shop, a standing table, a microcosm.

Murat had left the door half open, half closed, as usual.

"Ah," he said when he saw the two of them. "The two most famous unemployed anti-moralist preachers of Schöneberg."

"Shut up, Murat," Kuddel said, in a friendly yet unfriendly manner. "I'm troubled."

"Sorrow?" Murat slid a Sterni across the counter. "Applied to you, that means: someone told you the truth earlier than planned."

“Michael threw me into the public eye,” Kuddel explained. “I am now literature.”

“Hehehe,” added Hecke. “Me too. I’m the one with the bow tie and the brain that’s useless.”

"Congratulations," Murat said dryly. "Most people need a degree and a nervous breakdown to end up in books."

They stood at the table, two bottles in front of them, the book in the middle. Like a third person who wasn't invited but couldn't be ignored.

Tarek joined us, stood down with his own beer, and carefully placed his hand on the cover, as if he were stroking a dog he wasn't sure would bite.

“I’ve done it,” he said. “Two nights, and I’ve taken more notes than I did for my studies.”

"What have you learned?" asked Hecke. "Hehehe. If you say now, 'That alcoholism isn't good,' I'll throw a bottle at you."

“I’ve learned,” Tarek replied, “that you are more honest than 90% of the people who pretend they have their lives under control. And that honesty alone won’t save you.”

"Great," muttered Kuddel. "We're a textbook example of disillusionment."

Jana joined later, with this shift fatigue in her shoulders that she couldn't get rid of no matter how much she slept.

She took the book, flipped through it, and pointed to a spot.

"Hospital visit with hospital beer"

“This,” she said, “is what the new people on our ward read when they start. Not officially – passed around informally. ‘Look, this is what it’s like out there, for those who are regular customers of our tour group.’”

"Great," said Kuddel. "We're practically just a case study with gags now."

“It’s more than that,” Jana said. “It’s a reminder that you are human beings. Not just diagnoses and file numbers.”

She looked at him.

"It's awful that we need something like this," she added. "But I'm glad it exists."

The evening passed them by.

People came and went, taking bottles, cigarette butts, sweets, disposable lighters, ugly frozen pizzas. The drunkards stood there as if they were part of the architecture.

“Do you know what’s really getting to me?” Kuddel asked at some point, looking at the book, at the neon, at his hands.

"So your life now has an ISBN code?" Hecke advised.

"That there are people sitting out there," Kuddel continued, "somewhere in Flensburg, Munich, in a village in Saxony, on a sofa in Cologne... they read this and think: 'Oh shit, that's me.' Or: 'Thank God, that's not me yet.' And then they either close down or open up. But we..."

He took a sip.

"...we're still standing here," he finished. "At the corner store. As if nothing had happened."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "Perhaps that's the trick: The stories change the readers – not the characters."

Michael approached from behind, as if someone had called on him.

"I could tell you something comforting now," he said. "Something like: 'You have helped many people.' 'You are not so broken for nothing.' 'You are mirrors for others.'"

He lit a cigarette, took a drag, and blew the smoke up.

"But I'm not in the church," he said. "I haven't signed a consolation agreement."

"Then tell the ugly version," demanded Jana.

Michael looked at Kuddel and Heckenpisser, one after the other.

"The ugly version is," he began, "you would have ended up here one way or another. With or without me. With or without the book. With or without the corner store."

He tapped his finger against the cover.

"The only difference is: now there is a witness. A piece of evidence." Something that shows: You were there. You laughed even though there was nothing to laugh about. You failed even though you knew how it could be different. You at least tried once not to run away. Day X. Train station toilet. Neukölln. It's all in here.

He shrugged.

"Will this make the world a better place? I have no idea. Will it save you? Probably not. But if I'm already hanging around this standing table with you, then at least I don't want to pretend it never happened."

Silence.

The kind of silence that wasn't unpleasant, but also not comfortable. Like the gap between two songs, when you briefly realize you're in a room and not in headphones.

"If you write us down like that," said Hedge Pisser softly, "then... we're alive for a few seconds with every reader. Hehehe. Is that... a kind of immortality? The cheapest version of it?"

“If so, then it’s the most honest one,” Jana replied.

“It’s not immortality,” Tarek corrected. “It’s a backup.”

Everyone looked at him.

"You're like old, broken systems," he tried to explain. "No longer updatable, full of security vulnerabilities, but somehow still running. Michael makes backups of you. So that when you're gone someday, someone can still understand why."

"Hehehe," said Hecke. "DevOps mysticism for the poor."

Night slowly descended upon the street like a film.

The neon did what it always did: hum, flicker, endure.

“Do you think many people will still read this?” asked Kuddel, tapping his finger on the book.

“As long as people are frustrated,” said Michael, “as long as cities earn money from people who fall through the cracks, as long as the job center exists and Stern beer is cheaper than therapy – yes.”

"And what if the world becomes a better place?" asked Hecke. "Hehehe. What if suddenly everyone has decent housing, a sufficient pension, functioning psyches, loving parents, understanding bosses, and organic vegan alcohol substitutes?"

Jana laughed out loud for the first time that evening.

“Then they’ll read you as a dark fairytale character,” she said. “Like the Big Bad Wolf or Rumpelstiltskin. ‘Children, don’t drink so much, or you’ll turn out like Kuddel.’”

"Hehehe," grinned Hecke. "Then I want some merch."

It was one of those moments when nobody pretended there was still a big plot twist to come.

They wouldn't suddenly become rich. They wouldn't suddenly become sober. They wouldn't suddenly emigrate to Hamburg and open a small, honest bistro in St. Pauli that only serves water.

They would continue to stand here. Sometimes more, sometimes less insane, sometimes more, sometimes less sick, sometimes more, sometimes less funny.

Perhaps Kuddel would eventually never arrive. Perhaps Heckenpisser wouldn't go to work one day, wouldn't call, and his mother would say "something's wrong" before the phone rang.

Maybe Jana would move away someday. Or quit. Or be broken by people who are breaking down.

Perhaps Michael would decide overnight to write about others. Or not at all.

But what about the late-night convenience store?

It would be there as long as this city still washes people around at night who have to stop somewhere so they don't disappear completely.

"So," Kuddel finally said, raising his bottle. "How do we end this now?"

"What do you mean?" asked Hecke. "The evening? The book? Our lives? Hehehe."

"The evening," said Kuddel. "The rest... reality will take care of. I mean: What is our official closing statement? For all the people who are reading this, drinking along, thinking along."

They looked around.

Jana took a drag on her cigarette and blew out the smoke.

"Say something that isn't a lie," she said. "That's all it takes."

Heckenpisser thought for a moment.

"I'm no role model," he then said. "Hehehe. But I'm a walking warning."

Kuddel nodded.

"And I," he said, "am proof that you can still laugh even when you're long past it. Not because it's nice. But because you have nothing else left."

Michael took a sip and pushed his phone back into his pocket.

"I'll write it like this," he said. "And leave the last pages open."

"No punchline?" Tarek asked.

"Life will provide plenty of punchlines," Michael replied. "I'm just closing the curtain a crack."

The streetlamp flickered. A gust of wind went around the corner, carrying away a few cigarette butts and making a candy wrapper dance that someone had thrown away without looking.

Inside the late-night shop, the cash register rattled softly as Murat closed it.

"So, you fictional characters," he said, sticking his head out the door. "I'm closing up. You'll have to take your dramas with you into the night."

"As always," said Kuddel.

"Hehehe," added Hecke.

They finished their drinks and placed the bottles on the table. No gesture, no ritual – just habit.

Then the neon lights went out.

It wasn't completely dark, but something was missing:
this small, ugly, honest light over a corner in Schöneberg.

Kuddel and Heckenpisser set off. Jana in a different direction. Tarek in a third. Michael stood still for a moment, looking at the spot where the corner store had been, as if he were memorizing the coordinates.

“When the lights go out,” he thought, “all that remains is what you have written down.”

Then he too turned around, leaving the corner behind, with all the stories, not all of which had ended up in the book.

And somewhere, in some other city, another late-night shop closes, while someone stands in front of it, with a bottle in one hand and a phone in the other, thinking:

Somewhere in Berlin, two drunkards are standing at a table that may no longer exist.

But the story is still there.

*And as long as they exist,
I'm not the only one,
the one here in the neon light
standing around with his life
as if he had forgotten,
where he actually wanted to go.*

A few years later, the book was no longer new.

It had passed its first wave: that phase in which everyone who liked "tough but honest" recommended it, devoured it, and passed it on. It had gone through the hands of people who thought they were like Kuddel, and of those who were happy just to have it sitting on their shelf.

Then it was... simply there. Like one of those records that never leave the collection, even though no one can quite remember when they last played it.

In a second-hand shop in Neukölln, a copy stood on the shelf between "Realistic Literature" and "Social Reportage." The spine was slightly bent, the corners rounded from wear.

A woman in her early thirties took it out at some point.

She was actually there for something else – something to do with feminism, self-improvement, or trauma processing. Then her gaze lingered: “Those drunkards.”

She flipped through the pages. Read a few lines.

“Mofa-Manni, the old dirty pig...”

She grinned, even though she didn't know Moped Manni. Read on:

"Babylon train station toilet..."

“Apocalypse in the parking lot behind the corner store...”

“Two bar stools and no home...”

She took the book with her. Not because she recognized herself in it – but because it sounded like a language in which no one pretended that misery was an aesthetic concept.

At home, in the evening, after work, the subway, and pasta with pesto, she sat down and read a chapter. Then another.

Sometimes she laughed. Sometimes she had to close the book briefly because a sentence felt too close. Not because she lived like Kuddel and Hecke – but because she sensed how thin the wall was between their ordered chaos and its open collapse.

On page 237, somewhere between hospital beer and parking lot apocalypse, someone had written in ballpoint pen:

"I didn't want to become like you. It sort of worked out. – M."

She ran her finger over the initial.

"M," she thought. "Michael? Or someone else who had to write in the crack."

She continued reading.

Michael was still alive.

Not healthy, not enlightened, not rich – simply: still there.

He had written other things. Not all so personal, not all so close to a corner in Schöneberg and two guys with damaged livers.

But no matter what it was about – there was always a trace of dirt creeping in somewhere, a late-night shop, a train station toilet, someone standing at a high table pretending that it was all only temporary.

Perplex.click still existed. No longer as a secret project, but rather as a dusty local pub website in a sea of sleek, optimized pages.

The number of visits had decreased. An email would still occasionally arrive. Some were so bland that they could be ignored. Others were so crude that even a jaded DevOps engineer had to blink.

"I read your crap and for the first time I understood why my father turned out the way he did."

"My uncle is Kuddel, only without the robe. Thank you for making me understand why I hate him and miss him at the same time."

"I stopped drinking while reading. I started again after three weeks. But at least now I know what I'm doing."

There were no Hollywood-style responses. No "Your book saved my life, now I'm a clinic director and I plant trees."

These were messages from people who were somewhere between "not quite lost yet" and "basically already over it".

Michael read them. He answered some. He didn't.

He knew he wasn't a therapist. He was just the idiot who had decided not to make the drunken asses disappear completely.

The late-night convenience store had changed owners.

Murat eventually quit. Not with a dramatic bang, not with bankruptcy, not with flashing blue lights – simply: "I can't work at night anymore." Back pain, nerves, family, paperwork.

The store was now officially called "NachtExpress" and had a new neon sign that looked like a logo from the PowerPoint kit.

Inside there were more energy drinks, more vegan snacks, card payments accepted without any problems, and a self-checkout till in the corner that nobody used.

But for those who knew what used to be here, it remained: the late-night convenience store.

Hanging somewhere in the back, half-hidden, above the new candy shelf, was an old photograph. Not framed, simply stuck to the wall with tape.

The image showed a standing table, two guys, Sterni bottles, neon lights, and a hand lighting a cigarette. Someone had written underneath it with a felt-tip pen:

"The Drunkards - Season 1"

The new owner didn't know exactly who it had been. He only knew that when people came in, paused briefly at the photo, and got that funny smile, they usually bought two beers instead of one.

It was unclear whether Kuddel was still alive.

Jana had lost track of him for a while. She had enough to do tending to people who were much worse off than a "broken corner-shop poet".

There were rumors. Rumors about a guy who supposedly always said "Hihihi" when someone sat next to him on a bench in the Volkspark. Rumors about a man in a robe who suddenly stopped showing up at the usual pubs.

No obituary, no official announcement. Just: less visual contact.

You could still occasionally see hedge uriners.

His tie was a little paler, his eyes a little duller, his knees a little stiffer. He wasn't at the standing table every evening anymore, but often enough that the new corner shop employee knew: He somehow belonged there.

When someone mentioned the book to him, he laughed.

"I'm just a supporting character," he said then. "Hehehe. The main role is played by alcohol. We're all just extras."

Jana had a copy of the book in her locker. It was torn, dog-eared, had coffee stains, and ballpoint pen notes along the edges.

Sometimes, during a break in a crowded common room, she would pass it on.

"Read this," she told new colleagues. "If you want to know what people look like before they end up with us."

Some found it too harsh. Some found it too funny. Some couldn't finish reading it because they recognized someone in chapter 4.

During a night shift, when things were briefly quieter than usual on the ward, she left the book on the table.

An older, quiet cleaning woman, wearing a headscarf and headphones, saw the title, picked it up, leafed through it, and stopped at one point.

She read a few paragraphs, shook her head, and simply said:

"It's the same everywhere. Just different words."

Then she put it down again. She knew what she was talking about.

In one of the many cafes where people pretend to be "working", a student sat down at one point with a laptop and a book next to it.

He wrote something about "Subjective Perspective in the Precariat" and had Kuddel & Hecke provide him with quotes that were supposed to make his work more human.

He read a paragraph in between and got stuck:

"Homelessness doesn't begin when you sleep on the street. Sometimes it begins when you close your apartment door behind you and realize: This is just a shell. Not your place."

He looked around. People at tables, MacBooks, smartphones, porcelain mugs with latte art. Nobody looked homeless.

But he suddenly thought about how empty his own place sometimes felt when he closed the door behind him and the Wi-Fi connected, but nothing else.

"Perhaps," he wrote in his work, "for some, 'home' is more of a myth than a place. The drunkards show what it looks like when the myth breaks down and only the corner store remains."

He had no idea that he was closer than he would have liked.

There are people who say:

"You should tell stories to the end. Anything else is cowardly."

That's usually what people say who believe that life follows dramatic rules.

In truth, stories rarely end when the book ends.

They continue to drip. In other cities, in other convenience stores, in other minds.

Somewhere today someone is sitting on a bar stool, two fingers too many on their glass, and telling a story about a friend who was once called "Moped Manni," or something else, but who had the same fate.

Somewhere someone laughs "Hihihi", unaware that they are quoting a ghost.

Somewhere there's a standing table where two people pretend they're "just having one" drink, and end up making a life out of it.

If you're reading this, you're part of this afterglow.

Perhaps you are currently sitting at your desk, in bed, on a train, on the toilet, or in a kitchen where there are still two empty bottles from yesterday.

Perhaps you live far away from Schöneberg, yet you're closer to these characters than you'd like to admit. Perhaps you know your own corner store, your own train station toilet, your own parking lot where the world briefly ended.

There is no morality. It was not served, as promised.

There is only one small, nasty, honest question that stands in all of this like a jumbled mess at the bar:

Where are you right now?

At the beginning? In the middle? Or already so far past it that you think it's too late?

Those drunkards won't give you an answer.

They can only show you what it looks like if you don't look for one long enough.

Right at the end, when you turn the last page, you'll find Schöneberg, the late-night convenience store, the standing table,
Kuddel, Heckenpisser, Jana, Tarek, Murat, Timo and Michael

back where they belong:

not in a tidy happy ending, but in an open, slightly sticky night scene,

where the neon still flickers, a siren wails somewhere, a cigarette butt burns out on the asphalt

and two drunkards preventing each other from disappearing completely.

The rest is yours.

imprint

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