

Sample translation from

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The Stutterer

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For the Padre

Okay. Of course I'll do it. I'd be stupid not to.

Let's stick to our agreement: you make sure I get the post in the library, and I promise to write down stories from my life for you. Because, you know – in your own words – I have a gift for writing. A talent I mustn't waste. So you say.

Believe me, Padre: I haven't wasted my talents up to now, either. The one piece of bad luck that landed me in here was a twist of fate that could not have been foreseen.

It's a fair deal. Win-win. You want a success story for your work and you think that in me, you've found the right subject. "I've made him a better person," is what you want to be able to say. Accepted. That's your job, and the attempt is no crime.

For my part, I need a more interesting workplace. Stamping vehicle number-plates from morning til night is enough to make a thinking person stupid. Twelve Euros sixty-three a day, and you only receive half of that. "To give you a foundation to build on after your release." Sure. A foundation for that night in a brothel you need when you get out of here. "Going to the juicer," they call it. I hadn't heard the expression before.

I love words. I love reading and I love writing. I don't stutter when I write. Win-win.

One small condition: if you read something you don't like in these notes, you mustn't have a fit of moral outrage. Because I can tell you straight off: there are going to be a lot of things you won't like. Agreed?

Agreed.

But I promise you, you won't get bored. I can't guarantee that what you get to read will be the truth in every case – but you'll sense the difference. "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John, Chapter 8, Verse 32. The freedom thing is relative, of course. Even if my conduct is impeccable, I've still got another two and a half years to serve. I am determined to display exemplary conduct. Go to chapel every Sunday.

And to your discussion group on a Thursday, where you intend to wean us off crime like Alcoholics Anonymous weans its clients off the booze. Isn't it true, Padre, that I'm the most interesting participant you've ever had? I know how to portray regret convincingly, and a few of the experiences I've told you about are things that actually happened.

Sometimes I've sent you a message after the group sessions, because my stutter meant I wasn't able to express myself properly. It fascinated you that I know the Bible so well. I haven't yet told you where this expert knowledge comes from, and you've taken my quote-sliding for piety. But it has nothing to do with that – on the contrary. Explanation as follows: Luke, Chapter 21, Verse 19. Look it up if you don't know it by heart.

My stutter was another thing that helped make me interesting to you. You've got to make the most of the cards you've been dealt. I really do stutter. A lot. And no one can do anything to change that.

Stuttering, also known as disfluency, is a speech disorder in which...

Whatever. Look it up on Wikipedia. Keywords: "clonic stuttering".

My speech has been chopped up into little pieces ever since I can remember. It was only as a baby that I will have screamed like all other babies. I had the kind of childhood that gives you a reason to scream.

Don't worry, this isn't going to be a sob story about my difficult upbringing and how that was the only reason I strayed from the path of virtue. I'm sure you can't bear to listen to that song any more, people have sung it to you so many times. I didn't blubber in court, and I'm not going to blubber to you, either. Although your profession would actually oblige you to fall for it.

Isn't that right, Padre?

As a little boy I dreamed of becoming a priest myself. Can you imagine? A stutterer at the pulpit? "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Gu... Gu...Gu..."? Lewis Carroll, the *Alice in Wonderland* guy, wanted to be a pastor too, but his stutter meant there was no question of that. I can name a whole list of famous people with the same quirk. Winston Churchill. Marilyn Monroe. I'm in good company. Writers, politicians, actors. All jobs of which lying is an essential part. An underrated artform.

I'd have made a good pastor; after all, it doesn't require faith. You just have to be able to put yourself in other people's shoes. A professional skill that clergymen and conmen have in common.

Are you offended? Take it as proof of my honesty.

Where shall I begin? In my youth, I assume. My family was as square as a crossword puzzle. One across, seven letters: "Natural enemy of every child."

PARENTS

My father combed his hair across his bald patch. There's nothing more to say about his character. He was convinced no one would notice. But God, who looks down on humanity from above, sees everything. Including bald patches. Although the God that my father had cobbled together was always on his side. A higher authority who decided every trial in his favour. "I am a sinner," he liked to say, expecting people to contradict him. Because what he meant was: "I am actually a saint." He was a fastidious bookkeeper of his own virtuous deeds. And an actual bookkeeper, too.

If you want to imagine him...

It's better not to imagine him. He was not a man who made an unforgettable impression. Except on my skin.

My mother wore an apron with sleeves. And that is also a comprehensive description of her.

I had two siblings, only one of whom is still alive. My elder sister married at eighteen, was a mother of three by the age of twenty-four, and was run over by a tram at twenty-six. An accident, of course; no other explanation would have fitted the world-view. My brother is still alive, if you can call it living. He would have liked to train as a role model, minoring in hypocrisy, but as the university didn't offer that subject combination, he became a teacher instead. German and Religious Education. Every day he's annoyed that he can't teach his classes according to Proverbs 23, 13: "Do not withhold discipline from a child."

That was a favourite quote of my father's. We belonged to a congregation that favoured hard-hitting arguments.

It won't have escaped your notice that I don't use the names of anyone in my family. It's better that way. I've always hated my own doubly Biblical name. Johannes Hosea. It should be against the law to give a child such a name. Johannes Hosea Stärckle.

My parents... Let's say: my progenitors. The people who produced me. Who had no idea about the unedifying film in which I would one day play the leading role. Although from the start they believed me capable of the most awful things. Not just because I stuttered. But that was part of it.

They were keen members of our church. Which wasn't a sect, they always emphasised that. It was THE church, the only one in which the Bible was understood as it had to be understood (in their opinion): literally. Thou shalt have no other books besides me, neither in your houses nor in your heads. And that, Padre, is why I am such a master Bible-quoter. You only started studying this sanctimonious stuff as an old dog, whereas I was just a puppy.

The congregation doesn't exist any longer, I made sure of that. But I'll have to tell you about it some other time. The bell has just rung for Lights Out, and in five minutes it will be dark in here. A nuisance, when it's still light outside. Would be light outside. If we were allowed out.

For the Padre

If the almighty house rules don't permit me a computer, then at least provide me with some decent paper. That should be part of our agreement. Do not muzzle this ox while he is treading out the grain.

I wanted to tell you about my father's methods of child-rearing. I found them painful; he found them just. He used three pieces of equipment, depending on the severity of the sin: a bamboo cane, a belt and a tennis racket. It is still a mystery to me where he got the tennis racket. He was deeply un-sporty. Perhaps he bought it specifically for pedagogical purposes. He was a very thorough person, and I imagine that prior to the purchase he got himself a tennis magazine and learned about the

various models. He never hit us with his bare hands; to him, that would have been too personal.

My mother stayed out of punishments. She had a gift for averting her eyes.

I was chastised as a precaution: that was something I often heard from my father. Out of paternal love. From which I conclude that he must have loved me more than my siblings.

The number of strokes was not announced in advance. My father claimed it was based on the degree of remorse he was able to observe in the malefactor (he actually used this word). I learned early on that the real measure was something else. When beads of sweat began to form on his forehead and he started to breathe heavily, you knew the procedure was drawing to an end.

“This hurts me more than it hurts you,” my father would always say. And for this piece of hypocrisy at least, I was able to take my revenge many years later. He was in hospital, his body filled with metastases, and there were no drugs that would take away the pain – they had tried everything. He screamed for hours, so loudly that, although he was a state health insurance patient, they had given him a room of his own. I stood at his bedside and said: “This hurts me more than it hurts you.” Without stuttering once.

I warned you: the truth is not always pleasant.

Assuming I didn't just invent this scene. You shouldn't put it past me.

Bachofen never hit me. Not himself. But of course, he bore the responsibility for it.

Sorry: I need to explain who Bachofen is. Who Bachofen was. There are people who give you the sense that everyone must know them. Because you grew up in a world where they lorded it over everyone.

Bachofen was the big boss of our church. Its guru. He had founded the congregation and treated it as his private property. He called himself “The Elder” and insisted on being addressed in this manner as well. A desire I can well understand. If my name meant “oven”, I would prefer to sign letters with a title, too. I have always taken great care to think up suitable names for myself.

For my father, the Elder was the highest authority in all questions of faith. He knew no other questions. No one was as good at Biblical exegesis as Bachofen; when it came to parables he was – forgive me, Padre, but sometimes I can't resist these puns – a veritable exeJesus.

When there could no longer be any doubt that my stutter was more than just the linguistic clumsiness of a little boy, it was decided that I must be taken to see Bachofen. My sister later told me that they bought me my first pair of long trousers for the occasion. That may have been the case, I can't remember. But I do recall my mother clamping me between her knees and combing my hair so vigorously that the teeth of the comb dug into my scalp. That was her contribution to the solemnity of the moment. She

wasn't allowed to come to our audience with the Elder. "Let your women keep silence in the churches."

We children passed the door to Bachofen's private sanctum with a little shudder, just as the dark corners of the ghost train still frighten you even on your third ride. It had been drilled into us that we were forbidden to enter without permission in the same way that we were forbidden to stop at the newspaper kiosk opposite our prayer hall. And there was no justification given for that, either.

(I later discovered where the kiosk-taboo came from: it sold magazines with naked women in them.)

My first encounter with Bachofen must have come when I was really very small, otherwise his study wouldn't have seemed like a gigantic hall to me. On later visits, the space shrank little by little, until eventually it was a perfectly normal room. The stage set was always the same: a mighty desk, on which there was nothing but a crucifix, so that you couldn't help but think of it as an altar. Contrasting with this, a chair of theatrical modesty. A bookcase, stuffed full of editions of the Bible in all manner of different languages. Not that Bachofen spoke them all. But such was his international fame – this was what he was trying to signal – that it was entirely possible a Fin would come knocking at his door one day to ask for advice, or a Spaniard or a Masai tribesman, and he had to be prepared to look up the correct passage for each one of them.

For once, the door was not forbidden to me. We went in and my father bowed his head. Then he grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and pushed my head down, too. Or perhaps this detail was only later added to my memory, because I witnessed that form of greeting so often. One bowed to the Elder, that was the rule, and if you had a sin to confess, you knelt. There were a lot of sins in Bachofen's church. A lot of kneeling.

Bachofen laid a hand on my father's head in blessing and asked, "What brings you to me, my son?" Am I just imagining things when I claim that the sentence sounded odd to me even then? My father was significantly older than the Elder. Bachofen, if you will permit me this bad joke, must have been the youngest elder in the land.

In order to illustrate the reason for our visit, I had to recite the Lord's Prayer. With the stress of the situation, I couldn't get further than "Our Father, who art in huh... huh... huh...", which in this congregation must have sounded like a particularly devilish blasphemy. Bachofen nodded, as I would often observe him nodding in the years to come, whenever someone came to him with a question. It was meant to show that he not only understood the problem; he had also already found a solution to it. He only had two solutions: repentance or beating.

In my case, he didn't opt for repentance.

There had been a boy in the congregation, a few years older than me, who'd had the homosexuality beaten out of his body. Or out of his soul. Depending on whether loving men is caused by a virus or by demons. It was a success story that they were keen to repeat on me.

Now it's your turn, Padre. A little quiz: where in the Bible does it say anything about stutterers, except for when Moses wants to get out of going to speak to Pharaoh because of his heavy tongue? Well?

I am imagining you now, sitting in your office (which won't be much bigger than our cells), and thinking.

In that other boy's case, you would no doubt have performed better. I'm sure you learn the Bible passages that promise gay people they're going to hell in the first semester of theology. Third Book of Moses, Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, very good, Padre. A+. But where are stutterers threatened with the wrath of God? And where is the promise that their speech defect is curable? Those two verses left me with more bruises than everything else put together.

Can't recall them? Weak, Padre, very weak. But then, you only studied theology at university, and not with Bachofen.

Let me propose a little game to you: I'll give you a few days to think about it, and you'll get the answer in my next instalment. Assuming I like the writing paper you get me.

For the Padre

Five hundred sheets. All-purpose paper, suitable for all printers and copiers. Neither lined nor squared. A good choice, Padre. I've never liked to be hemmed in.

You slipped a note in the package that said "Isiah 32,4". Bravo, you've found half the answer. "The stammering tongue will be fluent and clear." The other half, the one you didn't find, was more painful for me. Proverbs 18,6: "The lips of fools bring them strife, and their mouths invite a beating."

They invite a beating. When Bachofen interpreted the Bible, that was often the conclusion. In my case, his prescription was: one stutter – one blow on the hand. Aversion therapy dressed up in religion. "The single blow does not need to be hard," he said, making his severe face benevolent. He practised such transformations in front of the mirror. I never saw him do it, but it can hardly have been otherwise.

Bachofen's verdict must have been pretty painful for my father – after all, every blow hurt him more than it hurt me.

If it were really possible to wean someone off stuttering in this way, I would be grateful to Bachofen today. But the method didn't work. Not with me. And yet the principle had been proven so well in that other case, which was still a source of pride for the congregation.

It's easier to hide your homosexuality than it is to pretend you don't stutter.

Did you know that bamboo canes sometimes splinter when they strike you, and that the splinters get...

No. I don't want to bore you with gruesome tales. Although in my experience, most people are attracted to stories of others' suffering. Which is why martyrs are so popular. Isn't that right, Padre?

In these notes, I feel duty-bound to offer you a certain amount of entertainment, if only to make sure that you stick to your side of the bargain. What I am about to tell you will amuse you, I hope. A man in your profession is sure to like the story.

It was my tenth birthday – an age, then, at which you can still convince yourself that reality will conform to the plans you make for it. At which you still believe you can think up some ruse and it will actually work out as you want it to. The plan I came up with then was naïve and it backfired, but for a few days it really did seem to have the desired effect.

Magical days.

In our family, we would always hear a Biblical quotation before dinner, to be contemplated during the meal, which was taken in silence. The reasoning behind this was that it was also the custom in monasteries, and our striving for holiness should be no less than that of a monk. It was usually my father's privilege to choose the verse. Early on I realised that his choice most often served to support a decision he'd already made. With a little searching, you can find evidence for almost anything in scripture. For the question of whether we children should participate in our school's carnival celebrations, for instance (the Bible was against it).

But on their birthdays, other members of the family were given the honour of performing this office. It was a substitute for the presents we didn't get. So I knew in advance when it would be my turn, and had enough time to consider how I should make use of the opportunity. Other boys of that age fantasise about being the centre-forward in the final of the World Cup, or an astronaut on a distant planet. I didn't have the necessary role models for that. There are only two superheroes in the Bible: Goliath and Samson. One is defeated by a simple slingshot, and the other is blinded. They aren't roles that it's fun to imagine yourself in. But I also knew that prophets were people who were listened to, important people, and so I decided to become one myself.

Truly, I say unto you, the Bible verse that I commended to my family that evening went: "I will come upon you and punish all ye who cheat the blind and laugh at him whose tongue is heavy." You'll know the passage, I'm sure.

What, you don't? Very good, Padre, another A+. The verse doesn't exist. But it sounds genuine. A stylistically faultless copy of Luther. I was a precocious wordsmith. You were correct when you recognised my talent.

Today I can no longer swear that as a ten-year-old, I actually believed I'd get away with this deception. But at least I was smart enough to ascribe the verse to the Prophet Malachi, who comes at the end of the Old Testament and is never quoted. In the prophet pecking order, he's as insignificant as an inmate who has only three months to serve and brings nothing with him, neither money nor an attractive body. You register the fact that he exists, but no one bothers with him.

“I will punish all ye who laugh at him whose tongue is heavy.” I probably said “Tu...tu...tongue”.

The others chewed in silence. Baked potatoes, if I remember rightly. (I don't remember at all. But we were always having baked potatoes.)

No one even considered that I might have invented the passage. Such a thing was inconceivable. And so my father saw no need to look it up. Before bed, he stroked my hair in acknowledgement, which he never usually did. And my mother was also clearly proud of how precociously well-versed I was.

The next day I was allowed to stutter as much as I liked without being punished. And it was the same the day after. In my childish optimism I believed that life would go on like this indefinitely. I thought I'd changed reality with the power of my imagination, and felt superior to the whole world. A wonderful feeling, a feeling that can become addictive. To which I became addicted. Just as a gambler keeps going back to the casino because he was lucky once.

Of course, I had told lies before, when necessary. I'd claimed I didn't know who had stolen the apple or broken the plate. But that isn't the same. Anyone can twist the truth in self-defence; you don't need any special gift for it. But doing the same thing creatively, making something new – only a few manage that. The moment I discovered this ability in myself was a turning-point for me. My road-to-Damascus experience, to put it in your jargon. It's how Picasso must have felt the first time he held a brush. Mozart, the first time he sat on a piano stool. Al Capone with his first revolver.

One shouldn't put oneself on the couch, but when I recall that time, I think I can see that those few days after my tenth birthday determined my later profession. Although you will object that what I did for all those years wasn't a profession. Let's agree on “calling”. Because that's certainly what it was. I was called to it. Even though there was no burning bush.

My happiness lasted for two days. Maybe three. Then came the Sunday.

After the morning service, my father proudly told the Elder about his well-versed son. In the congregation, people said that Bachofen knew the whole Bible by heart, word for word, but that might just have been hype. Perhaps in the case of Malachi he secretly looked it up in the concordance. Either way, my forgery was exposed.

This time, I got the tennis racket.

He was as little able to beat the lying out of me as he was the stuttering. Which means, Padre, that you will never know whether something I tell you here is something I really experienced. Maybe when we've known each other a little longer.

For the Padre

No, Padre. No. No. No. NO. Not with me. A deal is a deal.

You couldn't persuade the director, you said. He has doubts regarding my suitability, you said. Who else is he going to put in charge of the library? One of the illiterates this place is crawling with? People who can't even spell the words tattooed on their biceps?

Or does he want to wait and see whether the man who looked after the books these past few years gets locked up again? But he's done his time, and it would be very optimistic to rely on him beating another man half to death in a drunken rage. §224 of the criminal code. I've learned the paragraphs as thoroughly as the Bible verses.

Does it really have to be the post in the library, you asked. Yes, Padre, it does. The job in the kitchen you offered as an alternative isn't the same. Although you would make some people in here happy with such a cushy job. Peeling potatoes isn't the intellectual stimulus I need. We have an agreement, you and I, and I expect you to stick to it. But let your communication be: Yea, yea; nay, nay.

You promised me the post as if it would be no problem for you to arrange it for me. "The governor listens to me on these matters," you told me. Because the library was set up at your request. Your jurisdiction. Your personal patch. You claimed you'd just have to click your fingers and I could start rearranging the shelves. And now? That click was in vain. Empty promises.

You are a con artist, Padre. A spiritual trickster. You promised me something that wasn't in your power. You shouldn't have done that. If you can't keep your word, you should at least keep your mouth shut.

Did you even try? Or are you just saying that? Were you too shy when it came down to it? That would be in keeping with your feeble character. Maybe – people in your trade are experts in symbolic acts – you waited until the governor was away on business, then crept into his empty office and whispered my name. Soundlessly.

Or did you really ask him and had no success? Put your tail back between your legs because he didn't throw his arms around you in gratitude for the suggestion? You don't want to get on the wrong side of the Big Boss. And I am now to be fobbed off with a position as soup-stirrer.

Thank you, Padre. Undying thanks for your generous offer. But now that I really think about it, my work on the stamping machine is great fun. Ka-chong, ka-chong, ka-chong.

I know I'm burning my bridges with you, here. You want me to make the sign of the cross, and instead I say: "I'll give you a sign of just how cross I am." I sing *Highway to Hell* when you want to hear *Kumbaya*. That isn't the kind of customer you want, as a chaplain. But that's the advantage to having been ripped off. You don't have to be considerate to others any more. From now on, I can be indifferent to what you want or don't want. I no longer have to try and make a good impression on you. I don't have to suck up like all the others who come to your discussion group on a Thursday, acting so mild you'd think they had camomile tea running through their veins. All that pretend piety, as if they could imagine nothing better than changing the baby Jesus' shitty

nappies. Believe me, Padre: people don't come to your talking-shops because they've stirred the milk of human kindness into their morning coffee; all it is for them is a change of scene. The people who join in with your soul-purifying theatricals get to leave their cells and are allowed to watch an extra hour of TV.

Or did you really believe you were making the world a better place with your yakking? And now the bad, bad man has shattered your illusion? Well, that's what we hardened criminals are like. Why should I be mindful of your feelings, when I get nothing in return? Why should I stick to my half of the agreement if you're not going to fulfil yours? It's taken me over forty years to amass all the experiences you want me to tell you about – why should I make a gift of my memories to you? This cache merits hard cash. You don't do your job purely out of the goodness of your heart, either.

Believe me, Padre: you're really missing out. There would have been a whole heap of untold stories for you. And now you'll never get to read them. I would have presented you with a menu full of choice specialities, but now the kitchen is closed. Because you've revealed yourself as a man who does a runner before the bill arrives.

I could have told you about the people I ruined, people I conned so thoroughly and completely that death seemed preferable. And now you'll never know how I did it. You can try and work it out, but you don't have the imagination for that. If you were Scheherazade, having to make up stories to avoid being executed, you wouldn't last beyond the first night.

I could also have told you about the people I made happy. I took money from them, and all the same they were grateful to me until their dying day. That is a trick worthy of the circus, believe me. You'd have had a seat in the front row, where you can smell the sawdust and the elephant dung, but you were too stingy to pay the entry fee.

Those five hundred sheets wouldn't have been enough to tell you about all the things I've done. But that's all changed now. It's over already, and I've barely made a dent in the ream. You can come and pick it up. I have no use for it any more. The paper's too shiny to wipe your backside with.

You've failed on a professional level, as well. You wanted to save my soul, and you didn't manage it. Your project failed before it had properly begun. Good intentions aren't enough. Otherwise my father would have managed to wean me off stuttering. You're not that different to Bachofen, Padre. Even if you do walk the corridors in a turtle-neck jumper and present yourself as incredibly open-minded. There mere fact that you've studied theology doesn't mean you're God's gift. Maybe you'd do better to wear full regalia. A soldier without a uniform is just a lone gunman. The apparel doth oft proclaim the man.

But everything has its silver lining. I don't have to join in with any more hypocritical hymns. I don't stutter when I sing. Have you ever noticed that? People say I have a nice baritone. You'll have to do without that in future, too. You're not getting my voice any longer.

That's it, over, done. And we both could have profited from our agreement.

Shame.

As I am putting my anger down on paper, I notice that I really would have liked to write the reports you wanted from me. Maybe something like a book might have come out of it. The evidence of my days on earth captured between two cardboard covers. I would have liked to leave something along those lines to posterity. I've never planted a tree or conceived a son. As far as I know.

It wasn't meant to be. A good title for an autobiography. Suitable for all CVs. *It wasn't meant to be.*

I wasn't meant to become a librarian. Though I would have been well-suited to it. I imagine bringing readers together with the right books as being like matchmaking. You need to have an insight into human nature – and I do.

Or maybe not. I also believed I could count on you to keep your word.

For the Padre

So, you did it after all? Why not straight away?

No, wrong tone. Thank you, Padre. I take back what I said about you. I shouldn't have written that. You didn't deserve it.

On the other hand, when I think about the sequence of events here... First you tell me that I'm not getting the post, then I rail at you, and then I get it after all. It's hard not to suspect a connection there. Post hoc and so on.

Did you really go and see the headmaster a second time after my tirade? What new arguments did you use? Did you appeal to his sense of Christian charity and beseech him to support you in saving my soul by installing me as a book custodian? Or did you blackmail him? In your position you must know a thing or two about his administration, including things he wouldn't want to read about in the paper. Or did he change his mind all on his own?

I don't like having to drive blind.

Perhaps – though it doesn't fit with the character you present to the world – but perhaps there never was a No, and you invented the refusal so that when the Yes followed, I would think: isn't it great, the way he's taking my side! If that's what happened, then you have a Biblical sense of drama. Transforming water into wine after people have made their peace with the idea of a teetotal wedding. Raising the dead. Getting me the post I wanted at the precise moment I stopped believing in it. In order to gain the upper hand in our duel. And don't tell me this single combat doesn't exist. Whenever two people have any kind of interaction, a duel takes place. Sometimes with unequally distributed weapons, but it's single combat, every time. It's in our nature. "The best of all possible worlds comes into being through One destroying the Other," says Schopenhauer. Cain against Abel, father against son, insurance man against

customer. In our case: converter against he who is to be converted. Anyway, you've won this round.

This morning I was depressed. Unfulfilled hopes. It hasn't bothered me all this time, but being escorted to work in the sheet-metal workshop now felt awful. A person works alone in the library, and I would have been allowed to go without an escort, but evidently I hadn't yet been found worthy of promotion from category C to category B. I had been looking forward to manna and was fed dry bread. I had geared myself up for Shakespeare and got Müller IV. (I have no idea what his real name is. But this one guard has such a boring face he cannot be called anything other than Müller IV.) Due to the position of my cell I was always the last to be collected, as with a school bus that takes the same route every morning. I fell into that single-file line like a good boy, but when we reached the workshop, my name wasn't on the list of inmates for the work detail, and Müller IV had to shuffle back to my cell with me. Which he didn't like at all. When feeble people have their routine interrupted, they start throwing their weight around.

At this point my hopes had already been transformed into fears. If the Padre really put me forward for the library job, I was thinking, if he made the application and had it refused, then maybe he's given the governor the idea of transferring me to another work detail. Just when I've got really used to the number-plates. They're boring, of course, but at least there's so much noise in the workshop that you don't have to make conversation. Which suits me, as a stutterer. There are worse places to work. The laundry, for one. You will know all that goes on there, and who's in charge. As I'm sure the prison management also knows, though they prefer to turn a blind eye. Was that what you used to bribe the governor?

It's rare for me to have my cell all to myself, and strictly speaking I can't call it "my" cell at all. But "our cell" sounds too familiar for someone I didn't choose to spend time with. Ambros (causing death by careless driving is not too unpleasant as a roommate. His long-winded explanations of why he is actually innocent are annoying, it's true – how he couldn't possibly have seen the granny he hit and killed, and wasn't all that drunk, either – but then, I don't really have to listen to him. He's quite content for me to give the occasional "hm" of agreement. Otherwise I have no real cause for complaint, except that he sings to himself constantly, and his nocturnal onanism is accompanied by groans that sound like he's had the orgasm to end all orgasms. They probably put us together because neither of us is in the hardboiled category.

Apologies, I'm digressing. When you have at least another two and a half years for your stories, it's tempting to take the scenic route. And you yourself also have plenty of time to give to my stories. If I'm right about the career opportunities in your profession, you'll probably be stuck here longer than I will. For life. Or until retirement age.

So. I had the cell to myself and was without a schedule for the day. I'd slipped through the administration's net. I wasn't on one list any more, and they hadn't yet

informed me of what my name was down for next. I was a free man, if you can say that in a prison.

First – sorry, Padre – I sat down and took a shit. You have to make use of the rare opportunities to do that without an audience. Before I came here, I didn't truly appreciate the luxury of a private WC. Obviously, it's impossible to equip every cell with its own bathroom, but a curtain would be nice. Although of course it would be used to do all kinds of things you don't want people to see through the slot in the door.

I know this isn't the kind of description you're hoping for, and as a rule I won't burden you with such trivial things. But what happened, happened.

So I was sitting there, longer than necessary, enjoying the peace and quiet, when I spotted the envelope. The brownish-grey recycled paper that the management uses to show how environmentally aware they are. I hadn't noticed the letter before, because it was on the half of the table that belongs to Ambros. We have divided up the areas that we both have to use precisely: my half of the table, your half of the table, my half of the sink, your half of the sink. You train yourself not to see the other person's half, in order at least to maintain the illusion of a private sphere. Ambros, for example, always leaves crossword puzzles lying around. He has such a passion for solving them – or rather, not solving them, because he lacks the necessary general knowledge. If I so much as glanced at one, I wouldn't be able to resist the temptation to fill in the empty squares or correct his mistakes. Once, because he already had three letters in place, he wrote PENIS for “Roman goddess of love”.

He didn't. But I wouldn't put it past him.

The letter was on his half, and I had overlooked it in the literal sense of the word. But now it occurred to me that whoever had deposited the envelope in the empty cell would have had no idea about our divisions. So it was possible that the letter was meant for me. Please take this as a comic detail, rather than vulgarity: I waddled over to the desk bare-buttocked, my ankles fettered by my underpants, as if I was being taken before a judge in an American legal drama.

You know what was in the letter. Thank you, Padre.

For the Padre

My predecessor sorted the books according to the colour of their covers. I swear! *Love and Intrigue* (light green) is next to a coffee-table book about classic cars (dark green). No catalogue exists. The first thing I'm going to do...

No, this isn't the place for that. You want to read stories, not plans for rearranging bookshelves. And I have a lovely big praline of a story for you. You've earned that by getting me this job. Sex and justice. A combination that has earned people a lot of money in Hollywood.

I was thirteen or fourteen, a spotty grammar-school boy who was just discovering that the lower organs could be used for purposes other than peeing. Back then, we were slower to learn these things than kids are today. With all the websites available now, an average schoolboy has seen more sex acts by the age of twelve than the most conscientious of voyeurs once did in a whole lifetime. We were still of that generation who only knew about them from hearsay. Though of course, we'd never have admitted that.

The greatest braggart in this regard was Nils, the king of kings in our class. He had achieved this status in the usual way: through being prepared to flex his muscles at the slightest provocation. Or even without any provocation. Things at our school were not much different to how they are here in prison. And the teachers preferred to turn a blind eye. Also the same as here.

Like the rest of us, Nils was only familiar with the details of the female body from crude drawings on various toilet doors and rumours passed on in secret. What came out of this game of Chinese whispers would have dumbfounded any student of anatomy. But his ignorance didn't stop him playing the great flirt and pick-up artist, and boasting about adventures he hadn't had. When questioned about the details of his invented experiences, he covered all the gaps in his knowledge with the words: "A gentleman never tells." In the way of all semi-educated people, he took the ancient cliché for a brilliant new invention. Originality is mostly just ignorance of sources.

His bragging about girls wouldn't have bothered me further, but unfortunately he also felt obliged to prove his general superiority by regularly seeking out a victim to beat up in front of his assembled crew.

What better victim could there be than a classmate whose family belonged to a sect? Who couldn't finish a sentence without tripping over his own tongue?

Nils had invented his own word for my speech disorder: instead of "stutterer" he called me the "stututterer", a neologism he was immensely proud of. He loved to twist words like this. Because I was always clean and neat (until I had taken a beating), he also liked to call me Stickler instead of Stärckle.

His favourite game consisted of ambushing me on my way home or in a corner of the playground, and making me recite a tongue-twister: "I switched my Swiss wristwatch," or "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers". He might as well have demanded that I turn into a bird and fly off over the school building. If I couldn't – and of course I couldn't – he would use the same methods on me as my father did, only the punishments that he thought up for me were significantly more inventive. For example, he had a pin badge on his jacket with his football club's emblem on it, and he would take the pin...

You can imagine.

I would love to describe Nils to you as an ugly monster whose external appearance was as dreadful as his character. But unlike most of us, the growth spurt we were all going through hadn't left him out of proportion, nor was he afflicted with acne.

A decidedly good-looking boy. Midfielder in the junior team. And, a particular honour: keeper of the fines box, into which anyone who was late for training or broke the club rules in some other way had to pay. Academically, he was mediocre; it was only his essays that were praised by our German teacher. Nils and I were the best essay-writers in the class, though he was always a touch better. The other way round would have been painful for me; after all, I was the one who wrote his essays. As long as I delivered, I was tormented less.

My challenge as Nils' ghost-writer was to write the essays as he would have written them, if he could write. Well enough for a grade he would be happy with, but not so well as to be implausible. At my first attempt, I made the mistake of having him quote a precocious line from Schopenhauer. (At that time, not yet my favourite philosopher.) The teacher was delighted, but only until it emerged that Nils hadn't the slightest idea who this Schopenhauer was. Nils took it as intentional sabotage, and the mishap landed me with a severe beating. I had been, as he told me to general applause for his wit, "shopped for Schopenhauer".

I was always a fast learner, and it didn't happen a second time. From then on, I avoided all phrases that weren't in his vocabulary, and only used images from his world – mostly football. Once, I remember, I compared the UN to FIFA, and blustered about the necessity of generally binding rules of play, without which there would be no orderly football matches, just punch-ups (wars). Nils received high praise for this vivid image. (From today's perspective, it seems ironic to hold up FIFA as an example of a moral authority.)

Really, I should be grateful to Nils. He forced me to practise something that would become useful in my later career: the ability to write under other people's names, in such a way that no reader would doubt the forged authorship. In those days I only thought up Nils' supposed trains of thought, but later on I invented both the thoughts and the people who thought them. If there were a prize for forgery, I would have won it several times by now. The Beltracchi Prize.

Or does the name Dalton Trumbo mean anything to you? A screen writer who was banned from writing in Hollywood during the McCarthy era. But the addiction to writing is an incurable sickness, and so he went on writing anyway – just under false names. One of his screenplays even won an Oscar, and at the awards ceremony someone else received it on behalf of the invented author. Just as Nils bagged the good grades for my essays. As a teenage Dalton Trumbo, I had to watch with gritted teeth as he was rewarded for my work.

In time, a kind of truce developed between Nils and me. He left me alone because I was useful to him, or perhaps my appeal as a victim had simply worn off. A fairground always needs new attractions.

What didn't change was how much I hated him.

HATE.

A wonderfully precise four-letter word. The aspiration, the expulsion of air that comes with that first consonant sounds exactly how the emotion feels. Hhhate. The sound of a wildcat with its fangs bared. Resentment is the thunder, and hate is the lightning.

I know, Padre, I know. Love your enemies. Especially those who stick a pin in your arm just for fun. It would be nice to have mastered this emotional somersault, but that's a trick not everyone can pull off. The talent for sainthood is a rare one. The rest of us comfort ourselves with our hatred. If you can still hate, you are not completely beaten.

You can still smile while you say "hate". It works very well with "revenge" as well. The act of revenge I came up with for Nils had a wonderful symmetry to it. Poetic justice.

There's the bell again. If I were allowed to take my revenge on the white-collar criminal who came up with this overly early end to the day, I would turn off the light whenever his life got particularly exciting. "We are pleased to inform you that..." Darkness. "The first prize goes to..." short circuit. "Will you marry me?" Blackout.

To be continued.