

Delinquent Dick by Tom Zürcher
Sample translation by Sarah Rimmington

Translator's note

This is the story of Dick Meier, who lives in Zurich. As you'll discover, Dick is not a common name in Switzerland, but Dick's parents have a particular reason for giving him that name. Dick is a hard name to have if your friends speak English and are prone to innuendo, but if you speak German it has the added disadvantage of also meaning 'fat'. Dick himself is not fat, but he has what you might call an interesting relationship with food. And there's a lot of food in his story.

It's also worth knowing that if Dick's close colleague, Frau Koch, were English, she would be known as Mrs Cook.

Bon appétit!

There are no bad people.
Just people who do bad things.
Under the right kind of pressure.

1

To begin with, Dick only has it in for his arm. He bites into it until he has to go to the doctor, who looks at him over the top of his glasses and says:

What did that?

A dog?

No, that's not a dog.

No.

Dick likes the doctor, but he can't tell him anything, because he's also his parents' doctor. The wound looks disgusting and he's ashamed that the doctor has to touch it. He puts some ointment on it.

Does it hurt?

It's ok.

Does anything else hurt?

The ointment smells of chamomile and playgrounds and Dick starts to explain after all. About studying law, and how it's getting drier and drier. About his parents' little terraced house, and how it's getting smaller and smaller. About his father listening to the news in the kitchen and his mother washing underpants in the basement.

I can't breathe, he says.

And the biting helps?

The doctor puts a bandage on his arm and asks what he would do if he could live his own life. Dick doesn't have to think too long. He'd stop studying, find a job and move out. Perhaps he should do that, the doctor says. If only for the sake of his arm.

A few days later, Dick is sitting with an HR woman in her office. Her hair's tied back in a tight ponytail and she wants to know why he's called Dick, she's never met any other Swiss people with that name. He's too embarrassed to tell her the truth, so he says it's because he was a big boy when he was born.

Your poor mother!

She's doing all right.

The HR woman brushes a long, black hair from her desk and asks why he's dropping out from his law course.

For health reasons.

What?

He goes to show her the bite mark, but she's already on to the next question. Why he wants to work here. Because his mother used to work here.

Before she gave birth to such a big boy, you mean?

Exactly.

You know what? I don't believe a word of it.

But she really did use to work here.

The HR woman leafs through her papers. Can he tell her about his strengths. Is there anything he's particularly good at? Eating. I'm sorry? He's good at eating. He can eat as much as he likes and not put on weight.

So size is never an issue for you?

Exactly.

But that isn't a strength. We're a bank, not a restaurant.

She sighs.

Let's talk about your weaknesses. Do you have any?

Yes – a sweet tooth.

For heavens' sake! Haven't you ever had a job interview before?

She gets up and walks him to the door, where she returns to her first topic.

Will you tell me how you really got your name?

If I do, will I get the job?

2

The tiny kitchen smells of rosemary. Mother takes a chicken out of the oven and dismembers it. Father folds up the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and puts it away so that Mother can lay out the plates. She asks how it went at the bank and Dick says the HR woman thought his name was funny.

Meier?

My first name.

Funny how?

Shhh! says Father, because the news is coming on the radio. Funnily enough, there's an item about Dick Cheney. He's supposed to have shot a friend in the face while he was out hunting. The poor man, says Mother, while Father sorrowfully salts his chicken. Dick knows their sympathy will be with the shooter rather than the victim. Dick Cheney is a hero to his parents. He was a hero before he became Vice President of the United States of America and still is, even if the only time he appears in the media these days is when he has a heart attack or a hunting accident. Dick's parents admire his ambition and his spunk. He's a man who knows how to knuckle down; he doesn't let anything get in his way. Not even his friend's face.

After the meal, his father asks how much Dick would earn at the bank. Big banks pay well, he's heard, even for people who've dropped out. Mother makes a face like a piece of torn kitchen roll. She still hasn't got over the fact that her son isn't going to be a respectable

doctor or lawyer. But maybe he'll make it to Vice President, or Senior Vice President, even. Her former boss was a Senior Vice President. A man she still raves about, because he looked and acted just like Dick Cheney and was full of courage and energy. Like that hot summer, when the thermometer reached 35 degrees and all the men in the office were practically suffocating. Until the Senior Vice President trotted through with a bright red face, shouting, *ties off, now!* Mother still gets goosebumps today when she talks about it.

Do you think you'll get the job, sweetie?

The washing machine calls to her from the basement. Mother goes down the narrow staircase and Father asks what Dick's going to do when he's earning the big money. Live, says Dick, and Father smiles with mustard in the corners of his mouth and says Dick has caused his mother a lot of pain.

I only hope that you'll spare her any more trouble.

Dick helps himself to the remaining chicken and roast potatoes and Father says that moving out would be the worst thing he could do now. Mother couldn't bear it.

Why not?

Are you already looking for somewhere?

Dick stuffs his mouth full, so he doesn't have to talk, and Father explains that they'd have to give up the house if Dick upped and left. The house is owned by an association whose statutes say there have to be three of you for you to be allowed to live there.

Your mother couldn't live without this house, he says. She has so many memories tied up in it.

Rubbish, Dick thinks. Mother would love to move to the city, she's always saying so. It's Father who's attached to the house, because it's so affordable and has woods all round it for his Sunday strolls.

But you're happy here with us, aren't you?

No.

What?

Yes, of course. Only joking.

Mother comes back and Father says Dick has just assured him that he likes living with them and she doesn't have to worry. She's not worrying, she says, and then notices that the pans are empty. She doesn't know where Dick puts it all. It's no wonder she never has any housekeeping money left.

They probably won't take me, he says.

Why not?

Because not everyone likes Dick Cheney.

You didn't tell them that...?

I couldn't very well lie to the HR woman.

HR woman's office and watches her ponytail bobbing excitedly as she tells him about Swiss banking secrecy. She says that banking secrecy has been largely abolished but he still shouldn't say anything to anyone, OK? If he does he could be fined, go to prison and never work again. Speaking of the jobs market, he's lucky things are so tight at the moment and they can't afford to be too choosy. Any questions? Good.

Once he has signed a pile of paperwork, she hands him an ID card and says, welcome to the Swiss Bank. He opens his box, takes out a cream slice and holds it out to her, but she waves it away and he puts it back. Then a young man comes into the office and the HR woman introduces him as Herr Bachmann, saying this is his boss.

Herr Bachmann is wearing a shirt and tie. His shirt is hanging outside his trousers, which gives him an air of helplessness, as if he hasn't finished getting dressed. He offers Dick his hand, but Dick can't offer his in return because it's all sugary from the cream slice. He goes back into the box to take one out and the HR woman says, will you stop it with the sweet things.

I can't eat it anyway, says Herr Bachmann. I'm diabetic.

You're diabetic? But we don't have that on file, says the HR woman.

Herr Bachmann leads Dick up to the third floor. They stride along a corridor and arrive at a small office with two desks. The rest of the space is taken up by a gun-metal grey filing cabinet.

I am delighted that you have joined us, Herr Meier, says Herr Bachmann, we have a very great deal to do.

He scratches his head and Dick thinks, why are we being so formal with each other, we're almost the same age after all. Then the telephone rings and Herr Bachmann runs out of the office. Dick sits down at his desk and starts up the computer. It asks for a password and he tries 1 2 3, at which point the screen goes blank and the keyboard is blocked.

He looks out of the window down to Paradeplatz. The most expensive land in the world, they used to say at home. You can see as far as the Confiserie Sprüngli, where he bought the really very pricey cream slices. He polishes them all off. He looks at the ceiling, which is far too high for the small office. Two fluorescent lights hang there, incredibly high up.

He tries to restart the computer, but it still won't work. I hope I didn't break anything, he thinks. At noon he puts on his jacket and goes to lunch.

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When Dick comes back, Herr Bachmann is at his desk, working.

My computer's frozen, says Dick.

I know, says Herr Bachmann and scratches his head. Then his phone rings and he runs out. Soon afterwards a man from IT appears. He's wearing a pair of stiff jeans and

sits down in Dick's seat.

Never do that again.

What?

You know what.

He unfreezes the computer and tells Dick his password. It is complicated and he has to learn it by heart. You can't make a note of it, says the man, under no circumstances, it's as sacrosanct as banking secrecy, or what's left of it.

But I don't have to learn banking secrecy by heart, says Dick.

Bit of a joker, eh? What are those crumbs?

Cream slices.

Have you got another one?

The IT man gives him a quick introduction to the computer system. It's not hard, only the password is difficult and Dick asks what happens if you forget it.

That would be bad. Very bad.

Afterwards his chair is all warm, but at least Dick knows how to view accounts. First of all he looks up how much Herr Bachmann earns. But he can't, you're not allowed to call up colleagues' accounts. Maybe his parents have money with the bank? Yes, they do, actually, but only Father, a savings account. Dick is tempted to click on it and see how much his old man has to burn, but suddenly feels like he is being watched. He looks at the ceiling. Is there a hidden camera up there? No, surely not. Or is there?

At five o'clock sharp he puts on his jacket and leaves. In the corridor he meets Herr Bachmann coming towards him with two bulging files. He reminds Dick that he's not allowed to talk about what they do here.

What do we do here?

Asset management.

Rich customers, that sort of thing?

Not so loud.

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On Sunday he has to go to Witikon for lunch. Mother says he looks pale, is he getting ill? No, everything's great. He goes upstairs and takes a look at his room. Wilhelm is squatting on the carpet strangling a toy duck. This is his domain now. Amy comes out of her room and tells Dick he looks old. Was he out on the lash yesterday?

Then they sit in the small kitchen and eat roast pork with brown onion gravy. Dick makes sure that he doesn't touch Father's feet under the table and Mother looks sideways at him and says he doesn't look well.

Are you eating enough?

I'm doing great, Ma.

Did you find out who those two strange characters were at your door last Sunday?

Father switches on the news. In America they're demonstrating against Trump's candidacy for President.

What an awful man, says Mother.

Father lifts his head and looks at her.

I thought we agreed on this.

No, I don't trust him. And then there's his hair.

You've been listening to Amy, says Father.

No, says Amy, Ma can think for herself. Trump is a modern-day Nero who will torch the world.

But he's a Republican, says Father. And Republicans are good for the economy.

You want to give the nuclear codes to a loose cannon just so that your chemist's shop will do better?

Take it easy, sweetie, Mother says to Amy. Father says, Hillary is just as dangerous, she's a woman.

Dad!

Mother asks Dick who the Americans at his bank are going to vote for, do they know yet?

Frau Koch, says Dick.

You see, Dad, they're not averse to a woman.

Father rolls his eyes. He says he knows plenty of women who are pro-Trump.

For instance? asks Amy. Fräulein Bodmer, says Father.

She's not a woman, Amy says.

That's outrageous, says Father. He won't hear a word said against his colleague. She runs the shop and the post office counter practically single-handed and has never once been ill in twenty-five years.

You're exploiting her, says Amy.

What?

You heard me.

Now Amy, don't let's argue, says Mother.

He's exploiting you too, Ma. You wash his underpants and you're always having to beg for money.

Father smacks the flat of his hand down on the table. Mother always had enough housekeeping money, until Amy and her son showed up, eating them out of house and home.

Ma is entitled to her own money, says Amy. She could take you to court.

Yes, Frau Welti said that too, says Mother.

What? Are you talking about our private affairs out there?

Only with Frau Welti.

But otherwise you're OK? Well, that's just...! No, please, have it your way, you'll get your money, no problem.

Father takes a deep breath and turns to Dick.

Dick, give your mother the money you deposited.

Deposited? I used it to buy stocks.

Sell them again and give it all to her, the whole... How much was it again? 6,000?

The market's dropped.

I read that it had. But naturally, Mother is entitled to the whole amount.

That's not possible.

What's not possible?

Well, the stocks aren't worth as much as they were.

But that's not your Mother's fault.

What are you talking about? asks Amy.

Dick invested some money for us. But it's all going into the housekeeping now, so that you'll give me some peace.

I can't sell the stocks, says Dick.

Why not?

It would be imprudent. It would turn an accounting loss into a real loss.

Accounting loss, real loss, your Mother doesn't understand any of that. Just take the money out of your account and bring it with you next Sunday. Or even better, transfer it to my post office account, otherwise they'll just steal it again.

Dick puts down his knife and fork on his plate, which is still full.

What's the matter with you? asks Father.

Nothing.

He's not right, is he, says Mother. He's so pale.

Dick stands up and goes to the toilet. He splashes water on his face, looks in the bathroom mirror and rubs his cheeks to bring a bit of colour into them. His parents' toothbrushes have turned their backs on each other in the toothbrush glass. He'd like to take them out, fill the glass with vodka and water, drink it slowly and then go into the kitchen and explain to Mother and his sister about Father's bank account. Then no-one would be telling him to sell anything any more.

When he gets back to the table, they're all silent, even Wilhelm. It's a reproachful silence and Amy's silence is the loudest of all. She's heard what Dick invested in. How can he of all people, who is always hungry, be betting on hunger and misery?

Are you sure you're eating enough? asks Mother.

Father says, Amy's right, the fund is not sound. Dick must cancel the purchase so that the family can enjoy Mother's Sunday roast again with a clear conscience.

Will you do that for us?

I can't, says Dick. The market has to go up first.

I don't like it, says Father.

Me neither, dear.

The fund stinks, says Amy.
 Maybe you bought bad grain, says Father.
 Leave me alone, says Dick.
 Something's not right with him, says Father.
 Yes, he looks sick, doesn't he, says Mother.
 The whole world is sick, says Amy.
 Wilhelm farts.

64

The bank is on fire. You can't tell from the outside, but on the inside the ceiling lights are melting and the paint is dripping off the walls. Top Management are working flat out to implement the new strategy. They are passing off foreign customers overseas and stealing Swiss clients from other departments.

Dick spends more time in the compartment behind the partition wall in the meeting room than in his flat. Whenever he thinks he can't take it any more, more work comes in. He's amazed how much he can bear. At one point he says to Remo, this inhuman workload is turning me into a superman, but Remo doesn't answer, he went home hours ago.

At night Dick sits in his office and writes memos for the archive. Every night he hopes to catch the last tram but he rarely does. Once he's home, even though he's dog tired, he can't sleep. The bank is still roiling in his head and the top brass are dictating all kinds of crap. I have to get out of here, he says to himself, the compartment is getting me down. But luckily he has another compartment, in the room behind the wardrobe at home, where he can recharge his batteries. Night after night he sits in the dentist's chair fixed there by the previous tenant, slurping vodka and water. He imagines the foodstuffs fund rising at last and himself selling everything and being able to leave the bank.

As soon as I'm free, I'll eat more. And drink less.

One night, as he's dozing off in the dentist's chair, he hears:

You have to pass the pressure on to someone else.

Right away, HR woman.

I'm not the HR woman.

Who are you then?

A dark *Hellloooo* rises up from deep inside, a sound he didn't know he had in him. Fascinated, he keeps on saying it, *helllooo*, intoning it like a Gregorian monk, feeling a cool vibration gently filling him up.

The next night he sits for an hour in the dentist's chair saying *helllooo, helllooo, helllooo*. Then he finds he wants an audience, throws on the white coat and goes out into the street.

Helllooo, he says into the warm night air.

On Helvetiaplatz he finds a telephone and dials a number he's known since childhood. He has to wait a long time for someone to pick up. It's three o'clock in the morning, but eventually he hears:

Welti?

Helllooo.

Who's this?

It's Delinquent Dick.

I don't understand.

Just as well, he says and hangs up. The *Dick* might have given him away, even though he'd spoken in a different voice. It was a stupid idea. He never wants to make another call like that.

The next night he heads out again, striding through the empty streets, white coat flapping, on the lookout for a telephone box that's not too close to his flat. He finds one and calls Herr Steiner:

Helllooo, you look like a fish but I can't plaice which one.

He calls Frau Koch:

Helllooo, this isn't the wrong number, you picked up the wrong phone.

He calls Herr Leonhard:

Helllooo, did you eat so many hotdogs that you now fear the wurst?

He calls the Vice Director:

Helllooo, your Gold Wing has taken a nosedive.

He calls the HR woman:

Helllooo, you dick-tease.

Two nights later he dares to call his parents. Father picks up and Delinquent Dick says:

Helllooo, I hear it's all going postal in your chemist's shop.

He gargles with neat vodka and inhales filterless cigarettes. His Delinquent Dick voice is getting better and better. The *Helllooo* now rasps so eerily out of his chest that he gets goosebumps every time he makes his calls. Whilst his parents start to take the telephone off the hook at night, the others leave their mobiles on. Dick suspects that the new Vice President and any clients have to be able to reach them even if they're asleep.

One night, after he's smoked and gargled too much, his nightly excursion takes him to Paradeplatz. He stands in front of the entrance, looks up at the new red, white and blue neon lettering proclaiming *Swiss American Bank*, and says:

Hell...

His gorge rises. He throws up in front of the door, with the cameras watching. Who cares. They can't hurt a Delinquent Dick, he's a superman, Zorro and Mephistopheles all rolled into one, a Darth Vader in white, a beautiful Dick

Cheney, a liberated Dick Meier. He finds a newspaper and covers up the vomit.

65

One Thursday, Frau Koch brings a wary Swiss client into the lounge. He says he doesn't have much time, he doesn't want to get stuck in the evening traffic. Frau Koch informs him that from now on he will be taken care of by the bank's top-performing assets department.

Does that cost extra?

She says he has sufficient assets to take advantage of a special system they have, which is even more secure than banking secrecy.

Even more secure?

He will become an invisible client.

Does that mean that bank employees won't be able to view his account?

Amongst other things.

Even if they become a Senior Vice President or a Director some day?

Exactly. In addition...

I agree, says the client.

That's not all, says Frau Koch. His assets have been handled too defensively so far. If his five million were properly managed, it would generate much better returns than the modest interest he has been receiving to date. What does she mean by managed? Invested. No, these are his savings and are not to be touched. What a shame. Frau Koch knows of a fund that is currently heavily undervalued and...

You have to help me, says the client.

Of course. That's what I'm here for.

It's about my son.

Your son?

He bought the wrong stocks and he won't give me my money back.

I'm not quite following you.

My son works here. His name is Dick Meier.

How lovely. I work closely with Dick.

I know. You have to convince him to give back the money, all of it. It belongs to his mother.

I'm not quite sure if I...

Yes you can, he listens to you. And it was you who recommended he get into foodstuffs. But you don't mess with food, Dick should have known that. Please bring him to his senses.

Wouldn't it be better for you to talk to him?

I've tried, but I'm not getting through to him. We don't know what's wrong with him. He's got so pale. We're worried he's spending all his time partying on Langstrasse.

I understand.

No-one wants to take legal action against their own son. But it's 6,000 francs.

Could we have another quick word about the five million?

And my son cannot know that I was here.

Don't worry, you're invisible now.

Frau Koch shows him how he could double his assets within ten years, but he's not interested. The savings account is off limits, he says. Frau Koch persists. He should at least allow her to invest a small amount, send up a test balloon, so to speak. And while his money is working for him, she will speak to his son.

How small an amount?

You can determine that yourself.

Right then. 500.

500,000?

No, 500. That will have to do.

Frau Koch sighs. She turns to the partition wall and dictates:

For the minutes.

What are you doing?

Oh yes, of course, I forgot to mention it. This is part of our system.

Is there someone sitting there?

A colleague of mine.

Has he been listening to us the whole time?

Don't worry, that's his job.

Who's sitting back there?

As I said, a colleague.

What is his name?

That's not relevant.

Is it my son sitting there?

What makes you think that?

You said you work closely with him.

Your son only deals with overseas clients.

I want to know who is sitting behind this wall.

Just a regular colleague.

I want him to come out, please.

That is not possible. He is not permitted to see you.

I want to know his name, right now.

That really is of no relevance.

It is to me. I want to be sure that the person who has been listening to me this whole time is not my son!

All right, I'll tell you. It's Herr Bachmann. Herr Bachmann works in our back office.

Can he say something, please?

What do you want him to say?

Anything to demonstrate that he's not my son.

Herr Bachmann is not your son.

Do I have your word on that?

You have my word.

Herr Bachmann, can you hear me?

Of course he can hear you.

Then I'd like him to answer, please.

Herr Bachmann, just say hello. Very briefly. – Herr Bachmann?

He's not saying anything. That says it all.

Herr Bachmann? Can you hear me?

Something's not right here.

No, everything's fine, don't be alarmed. Herr Bachmann's just not used to being allowed to speak to a client. Listen Herr Bachmann, you have my permission. Say hello.

You're lying to me. Just like you lied to my son about those stocks. But I'm not as gullible as he is.

Herr Bachmann, just do it.

That's my son, I'm a hundred per cent sure of it. A father can sense these things!

Herr Bachmann, just say a quick hello. Please!

Someone clears their throat behind the little wall. Then he says:

Helllooo.

But... I know that voice, says the client.

S... so do I, says Frau Koch.