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Neubauer's name first came up just after I was thrown out. "Young man," a voice had said next to me beforehand, whilst I hid behind the cardboard stand. The woman was talking to me.

Marlies was sedately passing one product after another over the scanner whilst tapping her foot. People were willing to wait for Marlies; Marlies was friendly.

But standing next to me was an old woman in a brown coat, clutching at her little pouch of a purse and asking about gelatine. I had just stacked baking powder and vanilla sugar on the shelf. She was all but disappearing into the collar of her brown felt coat and was asking about prunes for yet a third time, even though she was standing right in front of the cardboard shelf where the prunes could be found. Old women are always asking about everything so that someone will chat to them. Whilst stacking, I'd actually wondered who needs that many prunes. But old women need prunes as soon as the festive season starts, and they stand right in front of them and they ask. They ask out of sheer sadness and loneliness. For the sole purpose of chatting to someone.

I was tired, I'd been out and about with Wiesner the night before. I wished the woman would go to the till and chat to Marlies. Marlies was happy to chat.

Marlies smiled for everyone. Then she self-consciously played with her piercings again. I rubbed my eyes. There was a man who looked familiar coming through the door. Behind the man was a woman who I vaguely recognised as well, holding the hand of a screaming child. Yesterday! I ducked behind the cardboard stand. They'd been there yesterday! Not the child, just the couple. They mustn't walk past me. They mustn't see me. Wiesner would hear about it otherwise. They would definitely tell Wiesner. I sneaked around the cardboard stand whilst they went through the vegetable section. The old woman shuffled along behind me, her shoes as brown as her coat. "Young man, where can I find the gelatine?" I reached forwards and passed her a packet but didn't come out from behind the cardboard stand; the risk of being seen was too great. The child was still screaming, and the parents

were obviously having trouble concentrating on their shopping. The little family had walked past me. Or rather, the mother had dragged the child past. I didn't move.

The old lady thanked me, then I heard a bell ringing: I put my head down - please, no! But yes: I was being called to the till. I didn't move. Were they friends of Wiesner? Friends of Tarán? We'd had a lot to drink yesterday, and I'd thought them irrelevant. Most people are completely faceless and most people are irrelevant. They were still standing at the checkout. I clutched at the cardboard stand. I was called to the checkout yet again. I held my breath. Then my phone rang. Marlies would recognise my ringtone. I attempted to put it on silent. I should have left it in the locker. It was Wiesner. Wiesner always called at the most inconvenient times. I could still hear from the checkout: "You folded the receipt wrong," then the family left the supermarket. That ringing was the final straw, it was grounds for dismissal. I wouldn't have to come back tomorrow.

That evening, I staggered through the automatic door with a bag full of beer. Technically, we were only allowed to consume out-of-date products on the supermarket premises, but Marlies said: Screw it. Marlies, that kind soul. What are they going to do, she said, throw you out again? Then she smiled. There had already been too many warnings because I'd made phone calls at work. PTSD was no excuse, this isn't uni after all. Here, you get the sack, not a therapy dog and Play-Doh.

In the car park, I also gave away a few of the cans: a little guy in a tracksuit was counting his money, and it wasn't going to be enough. He was meant to take beer to the party. Having no money has never stopped me from partying either.

In my apartment, I put the cans in the desk drawer next to the cheap vodka and the old wine bottle that I'd refilled and resealed, I kept just three cans on the floor, then I prepared the bed, pushed the swivel chair close to the desk, pulled out the squeaking sofa bed. This time, it was over. I'd spent all my money. As always, because making the right impression is the only thing that counts. I owed too much in back rent, and without the job in the supermarket, the landlord wouldn't let me put off paying

any longer. The day after tomorrow was the first of the month. So tomorrow I would start packing. What was to come might be unpleasant, but I'd already been through worse in my life. Worse than Wiesner. I sat on the bed, the metal frame creaking, and opened a can.

1

You go into the most high-end bar possible. That's how I found Wiesner. The little turtle. He always looks like he's drawing his head in. If you're lucky, after death, you go to a bar where you don't know anyone. Or more importantly: where you won't be recognised. A bar is essential. Alcohol is essential for someone with my abilities. Anyhow, Wiesner is a turtle. A turtle who ordered an Old Fashioned in a surprisingly soft voice. You can't go wrong talking to someone who orders an Old Fashioned. Wiesner paid, his friends paid, no one noticed that I skipped my round. Even though I wasn't as broke then as I am now. Wiesner is someone who does everything he can to try to be *sophistiqué*. The right nasal tone, the right nonchalance.

In any event, the man was difficult to disappoint, which may well have been because, despite being thirty years old, he was still a pipsqueak who'd want to call an adult if his spaghetti was too hot.

Finding Wiesner should prove to be good luck. Especially in my current situation. This is the first time that I've rung Wiesner's doorbell with an overnight bag in my hand. I haven't called in advance. That's important too. An emergency is only an emergency when you show that conventions don't apply. That you've had to shit on the niceties of the twenty-first century. That's right: had to. Ultimately, it's necessary to sell the situation. No black holes. No gaps in the story. So Wiesner is unprepared. I am too. The door opens, and Wiesner is surprised. Wiesner opens the door fully and draws in his head. Turtle, I tell you. *Quelle surprise!* At first, he looks happy to see me. The little turtle is always happy to see me. Then he glances at the overnight bag. Made of leather, of course. It looks expensive. Everything you have on show has to look expensive and be cheap, and never the other way

around. Head drawn in. Yup, that's Wiesner all right. Can I sleep here? A couple of days? It's an emergency. Wiesner hesitates briefly: What's happened? Don't ask. And with that, we're already done here. I've known Wiesner long enough to be sure that he won't ask any questions. Plus, I didn't have any time to think up a story. That's what you call trust. Wiesner trusts that I must have my reasons. That's enough. I have my reasons. *Voilà*. And after all, I can hardly tell Wiesner that I'm homeless. That's not the world I live in. So that's just *entre nous*. If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear. But also nothing to say. Wiesner steps aside, I enter the apartment.

I didn't even need to lie. Wiesner himself was no good at lying. He always failed straight away because he couldn't help laughing. I had hung my coat on the coat rack. This damn winter is finally coming to an end, he says. The naive fool. Nothing ever "just happens". Yes, yes, of course. I've looked into Wiesner. It's very simple: there are players and there are playthings. Wiesner is a plaything. A wobbly, turtle-necked, fuzzy plaything that's hard to imagine outside a bathtub. At least when it comes to socialising. Wiesner's abilities in other areas are not to be underestimated. Financial embarrassment was a foreign concept to him.

So first of all, Wiesner in the bar. I should explain that. A miserable bunch of Austrian posers, the ridiculous small-town gentry, were standing around him, accusing me of being a Berliner. You have no idea what I'd sound like without my well-practised standard German accent. But you just have to have the right prejudices. All people with a German accent are Nazis, for example. And in arguments, you generally call people who disagree with you Hitler.

"Anyone who drinks an Old Fashioned must be a dreadful person." With that, I had him. He laughed. The reaction was predictable, though I hadn't yet drunk enough to be able to predict everything. It wasn't my first time in that bar. You have to have the patience to wait for the right person. For a group of obnoxious twenty-somethings who consider themselves sophisticated. The bartender asked how I was doing. The devil looks after his own. Wiesner laughed again. I ordered an Old Fashioned. There's

nothing you can say when upper class kids wear their hair in that rat's tail style. Wiesner was the alpha swan. He only looked up to me. I'm a bit taller than him, too. I have a much stronger chin. Wiesner was a grey figure. Grey eyes, ashy hair. My hair was also thicker and changed colour depending on the light, just like my eyes, but without ever looking dull. I could be anyone. Wiesner was just someone. Wiesner's hair had already started to fall out and grow back on his shoulders. Wiesner had waggled his credit card.

When you ask someone for a favour, you're suggesting that you have a close relationship. What true friendship is supposed to be. You're suggesting that such favours would also be possible if things were the other way around, that they could ask you for something, or much more than that, that they could count on you. So it was good to be sitting on Wiesner's sofa. The clearly expensive specimen of a weekend bag next to me. There was a problem. And he, Wiesner, would be awfully helpful. Wiesner liked the impression that we'd made in public together in the two years that we'd known each other. *Oh you glorious shitlords!* The little turtle wanted to maintain this impression at any cost. So there was a problem. Wiesner looked worried, and I hoped for whisky so I could find out what was going on in his head. It was better for Wiesner if he didn't know what was wrong. Anyway, I needed to lie low for a while. You see, little turtle - don't I look out for you? No danger will come your way. Just your destiny. Nothing else. Wiesner nodded slowly. Are you hungry? A nod from me. I put my trusty old wine bottle on the table. Wiesner looked at the label. Put it on a shelf.

Wiesner left me sitting alone in the living room. How are you otherwise? Aside from what you don't want to talk about? Even though he couldn't see me, I made the same dismissive gesture as always: The devil looks after his own. The gesture was a habit. Habits like that have to be cultivated. You look tired. That was the polite way of saying: You look like shit.

I already know this living room all too well from parties. The pictures on the walls and the sculptures were bought for Wiesner by his parents. There was even a medieval Virgin Mary on a pedestal. A

downright disgusting piece. Cracked wood. Doesn't go with the modern, austere style of the rest of the apartment at all. Neither does the decorative glass dildo. Apparently they wanted to support a local artist with the purchase. An investment. That's what Wiesner had said. He didn't make any decisions about such things himself.

Wiesner was the typical doctor's kid. Back when doctors still earned too much. Wiesner always claimed that he could get prescription drugs for everyone. But he had never proven that ability. His parents paid for the apartment. Not the rent though, the mortgage. They definitely owned other apartments too. They lived in the penthouse apartment of a building in the city centre, big enough for them and for Wiesner, the only child. He also showed the egoism typical of only children. It hadn't really been necessary to move out for his studies. The penthouse apartment was no further from the Faculty of Humanities than this one was. Initially I had given Wiesner credit for the apartment's furnishings, he certainly dressed well, but I increasingly suspected that it was all his mother's doing.

The bright apartment had a weird layout. At the end of the wall on the far side of the living room, there was a way through to the bedroom, since both rooms were on the side of the apartment that had a glass front, and both had a door to the bathroom. So you had to lock both bathroom doors if you weren't alone in the apartment and didn't want to be disturbed whilst taking a shit. Wiesner came back into the room with two plates. Needless to say, he had never developed a waiter's ability to carry both plates in one hand. He put a plate in front of me on the living room table. With just a fork, no napkin. Pasta bake. Yellow, cheesy pasta bake. At Wiesner's parties, there were always cheese plates with different wines. And now: pasta bake, obviously heated up in the microwave. His mother had brought it round, Wiesner said, and I dimly remembered that at one of those parties, I'd taken vodka out of Wiesner's freezer and seen that the compartments were filled with Tupperware containers. Wiesner's mother took good care of him. Her housekeeper did the cooking. Wiesner jumped up and left the room, he came back with a bottle of schnapps. Some over-the-top organic thing. But the

schnapps would do its job and make things easier for me. I couldn't stand most people whilst sober.

There wasn't really any need to find out what Wiesner was thinking, I just wanted to make sure that he wasn't dwelling on the "threatening situation" too much, that he simply accepted that I needed his help and that I was such a good friend to him that he wouldn't ask any questions. I had to count on Wiesner being so egocentric that, being a typical arsehole of his generation, he was only interested in his own problems. Those problems were all rooted in his simple First World perspective, à la: *I had absolutely no time to organise my photos between my trips abroad.* I just couldn't settle in with him for too long. The situation couldn't drag on.

Like his whole entourage of friends, Wiesner was a long-term student who felt he belonged in business or politics and believed that he could find a way in if he only invested enough time in the university's Students' Union. Not that he had ever studied business or politics. Even so, he never missed an opportunity to show off about the supposed success of his father's company. His father had handed over a small subsidiary company to him a little while ago, which, under Wiesner's leadership, had crashed and burned as quickly as possible. That's how you turn a truck into a Mini Cooper. I knocked back the shot. We picked at the pasta bake. It was still frozen in the middle. I had never been so reliant on someone before. Wiesner reached into a compartment under the living room table and then stuck a napkin holder in my face. Usually he successfully ignored his upbringing as soon as I was there. What can I say? The guy loves me. He's taken a shine to me, whatever that means. Mummy had bought the napkin holder for him as well, of course. So, happy, mother? I used the damn thing. You can ask my friends.

We had never been so courteous with each other before. I had another schnapps to make Wiesner's thoughts clearer. Then I heard a key turning in the lock.

2

My thoughts were still focused on Wiesner's mother, but the woman who entered the room was Moni. Moni had been with Wiesner for a few weeks and had obviously managed to wheedle a spare key out of him pretty quickly. No one should have to live with someone else, they'll only end up feeling overshadowed and miserable, but Wiesner was the type of person who, like a child, relied on someone leading him by the hand. Me, for example. Or Moni. I'd drunk with Moni before, too, and had discovered that Moni was a loathsome specimen of a woman. She had no affection for Wiesner at all and she had only got involved with him because her other options were as non-existent as her soul. She needed an apartment, and since her parents didn't live near the city, she had had to look for one herself, and just before her previous rental contract ran out, I had clearly heard: I could just move in with him. He's not attractive, but he has a nice apartment. She wasn't poor, just lazy. Going to view apartments was too much to ask. Moni put up with anything and got luxury in return. Dream job? Trophy wife. Her gaze swept over the decorative dildo as though it had already been up her arse that day. A little insight can be truly nauseating. Even I hadn't come here for such opportunistic reasons. I had turned to Wiesner because, despite all the things that he didn't know about me, he was my closest confidant. Wiesner put his empty plate on the table and left the room again. He was fetching some bedding.

I was alone with Moni. I hadn't reckoned on Moni. Wiesner, you eunuch! I had simply forgotten about her. Moni drank a shot. Did you have a row with her? Of course, Moni, the gossip. She loved a scandal, the bitter bitch. Gossip is much easier than interaction. She sniffed out relationship problems wherever she went. She needed them to amuse herself, after all, she didn't have any herself for the time being. No feelings, no drama. I shook my head. She should drink more. Wiesner laid the bedding on the sofa. It looked new. The couch is all yours. Now nod. His place didn't even have a guest room. Pretty lame. Moni looked at Wiesner questioningly, and he just told her curtly: He's staying for a few

days. She played with the strip of buttons on his shirt: Why? Today is just really bad timing, I had a surprise for you. But I knew: Moni was well aware that Wiesner wouldn't send me away, so she was spared having to have coitus with someone who she found unattractive - and for a woman like Moni, that meant "repulsive". The walls of the apartment weren't up to much. Apparently Wiesner wasn't either. She pouted. She always wore red lipstick. The cliché of the blonde bombshell. Some people work hard to be clichés. Wiesner was by no means ugly, but Moni was such a tarted-up princess that, next to her, people couldn't help but see him as a puffed-up toad. Wiesner drew his head in. To an uninvolved third party, the two of them were a disturbing sight. The man was such an innocent. Moni asked me again: Did you have a row with her? She made a sympathetic face. Hypocrite. She sat down next to me.

But no, this isn't about Tarán. It's not as though I've settled in with her. If Wiesner and the Mademoiselle hadn't constantly called me at all times of the day, I wouldn't even be in this situation, I would still have my job in the supermarket and my apartment instead.

Look, Moni, I'm doing the same thing as you, I'm staying over at Wiesner's. She looked at me: So why are you here? Maybe she didn't want to be alone with her wobbly turtle, but she didn't want to see me either. But if Mademoiselle Tarán knew where the real problem lay, she would have left me a long time ago. Why aren't you at hers? Yes, there are players and playthings, and Moni wanted to play "peekaboo, I see you" with me. The answer to Moni's question had to be: I can't put up with her for three days straight. I should have thought about what I was going to say months ago. Don't leave any black holes. Black holes were always bad. Wiesner didn't have to say a thing. The schnapps was an excellent magic potion. I knew what he was thinking: That's what you said about the last slut as well.

Yesterday was the last time I was with her. Yesterday, when I had decided to temporarily consider Wiesner a solution.

In fact, and I would *not* tell Moni this, Mademoiselle Tarán was useless in this situation, she was too demanding and would ask me endless questions. Women. Without a doubt, it was better to ramp up contact with Wiesner. It was none of Moni's business. And after all, Wiesner wanted to be well and truly used. Otherwise Moni wouldn't be here either. Let's have another sip, Moni. I put my arm around her shoulder, that unnerved her. The schnapps smelt like Nutella, it was a clear distilled one.

Mademoiselle Tarán would just love to cling to me for days on end. She may not have been blonde, but she was certainly a bombshell. But who was I to criticise Mademoiselle Tarán? Ah, the world is a bad place, my little dove. Anyone, and especially Wiesner, could have told her that I'm no good at relationships. But it wasn't about that. It was about being forced into commitment on paper and spending several days in a row together would have made her even more set on the idea. With Tarán, I would have had to behave myself. With Wiesner, I didn't usually have to. Mademoiselle Tarán always did her bit to make people like Moni hope for big drama, too. If there were an angry scene, Moni would describe it to all her friends and extensively analyse it with them. The one pastime she truly enjoyed. Moni made sure there were rumours. Always.

And Mademoiselle Tarán loved to provoke. If she threw my things out of the window, I would be back in her bed again that same day. If she put them tidily in front of the door, it would be over, but that never happened with her. Big drama, baby! It was in her blood.

Vitus and Amadeus are coming over as well. I nodded again. I was no attention whore, like Mademoiselle Tarán, for example. It was good that they were coming here. The topic of conversation, namely me, would be left alone. Vitus and Amadeus. The Kevins of the moneyed world. The two of them were inseparable. Some people really do end up virtually merging into one. A single, amoeboid being. At first, they try to break loose from one another, but ultimately only pull the other one along with them. And just like with deformed children, their skulls look as though one of them has melted into the other. Two blockheads who considered themselves sophisticated but were even impressed

by someone who could say the alphabet backwards, two idiots who had never learned that you shouldn't openly stare. And the alphabet was really easy anyway if you stopped time for a moment after every letter. The booze in this schnapps glass was good for that too. An excellent distraction. Moni would have to shut her mouth. She'd have to pretend that I would have confided in her otherwise. For the sake of her ego. I had wondered once whether the two of them were a couple, but to be honest I didn't give a shit, as long as they didn't want to discuss rainbow politics with me. Vitus was probably the most conservative pink oboe player I'd ever met.

No one here would ever have to earn their money through manual labour. And my own capacity was never put to the test by the members of this entourage either. Certainly not by those two. Wiesner was either an idiot or too intelligent. Either he didn't realise how vile the two of them were, or he knew something I didn't. Wiesner was not to be underestimated. Have another drink, Wiesner. Maybe they'll bring Neubauer with them, Moni thought. Who is Neubauer? I'd never heard of him before. I looked at Wiesner, but his head was silent. Wiesner just snorted with laughter. As though I had asked him about Neubauer.

Moni turned on the stereo. A happy song. Something that got stuck in your head, like "Walking on Sunshine". She didn't dance. I've never seen her dance. Her hips were probably stiff even when she was fucking. Especially with Wiesner. Wiesner looked disgusted. Good man. I certainly wouldn't stop time now. I needed to be let off the hook as quickly as possible.

There it was at last, a "beeeep". The sound of the doorbell was no different from the unbearable noise that it made in prefab buildings. People went to the effort of adding stucco and window facades to an old building, and then kept that awful noise. Moni said: Everything's all right again now, isn't it? She was talking to a potted plant. She truly believed that sort of behaviour was endearing and sweet. Despicable. Look how cute and quirky I am. But I despise everyone, so ultimately no one should feel like they're being treated unfairly. Then came the piercing noise from the apartment door: "Beeeeep."