

In the Rubble

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Karlheinz stirred slowly into wakefulness, passing through the degrees of consciousness in the same indistinct way the approaching daylight blended from one shade of gray to another without ever being definable. A weight pressed in on his chest that made breathing yet another labor. The source of this constraint could not be felt — it seemed only to surround him on all sides. Whether it was the pull of the earth beneath him or the oppression of the atmosphere from above was not important, and, as with all things that worked against him, it was most likely the conspiring of these forces that immobilized him. The thick, damp air pressed palpable fingers against his eyelids, and the corners of his eyes and mouth seemed to be held fast with the crusty glue of sleep or the beginning of yet another cold. Karlheinz could not tell where he was without seeing where he was, for he could assemble no thoughts of the night before. He hoped only that he was not again on the urine-soaked floor of an overnight cell, for the police took as much delight in evicting him as in dragging him in. And the scabs on his knees and shins had not yet healed from the last visit.

The struggle to open his eyes, his arms still seemingly bound at his sides, was the birth-torture he had learned to endure nearly every day of late. It was not a defiant stoicism that enabled him to bear these daily incarnations — ever into a more degraded state. It was the futility of his opposition. For, as often as he had wished to die, either fadingly or abruptly, another nature worked within, dousing him with consciousness and the unaccountable feeling that his petty efforts of the moment were somehow important. It was an induced labor, after all.

The concrete ceiling of the old warehouse took shape through his viscous tears, swimming like an illusion. How had he made his way there? Had Jakob carried him? He did not even remember seeing Jakob in two days, or three.

The heavy, numbing confinement that seemed to be spun around Karlheinz like a cocoon was nothing more than his usual bed: an oily tarpaulin, layers of tattered newspapers, and flattened cardboard cartons. The sheets of thin plastic taped over the broken windows had been ripped loose, and they fluttered horizontally, driven by a rain-laden October gale. The topmost blanket, the cardboard layered like shingles, was so thoroughly soaked that it could hold no more water, and the rivers streaming away from the flaps formed pools on the warped floorboards. Karlheinz' only means of escape was to roll out from under the soggy burden.

In a corner of the huge room Jakob still slept. He had nothing covering him but his old, thread-bare coat, soon to be called again into winter service, years beyond the time it should have been laid to rest.

Karlheinz crawled away from the blasting rain at the windows and leaned himself against one of the concrete pillars. He had no luck in ever starting their sputtering little alcohol stove, so he did not try. From the almost bleached color of the coffee grounds he knew they had been re-used too many times already. There would be no relief in such coffee, as weak and pale as tea. He or Jakob would have to swallow another sermon at one of the church kitchens in order to get their vacuum-bottle filled with soup or coffee. For Karlheinz, that was too dear a price. He would need the coffee first, just to get through the sermon.

Through the mist in the warehouse — it was almost a winter fog — Karlheinz looked at the words he had inscribed on the far wall in dripping paint. It seemed as shrouded by history as by mist,

for it was from a time when Karlheinz still made statements about his life. Now, there was something almost archaeological about the inscription. It was being slowly effaced, as much by time itself as by the crumbling, saltpetered bricks.

“*Ich hab’ kein Verhältnis dazu!*” it said.

“I have no connection¹ to it!”

His personal motto almost begged for the question, “No connection to what?” No connection to anything, to no one, was the answer. Adrift in a formless sea, drowning in arbitrariness and absurdity. It was the voice given to silence, the impossible echo in a vacuum total and absolute.

But what about Jakob, he sometimes wondered? Though what sort of association was that? Two animals huddling to keep warm. And if not this *Saufbruder*², then another, anybody. No, there was no one to whom Karlheinz felt the slightest relatedness, not even to himself from moment to moment. The scribbler who had made his statement on that blank wall was now as much a stranger to him as anyone else, for now even statements — however bleak or desperate — were another thing in which he could not see the slightest significance.

When Jakob awoke, he and Karlheinz argued for some time as to whose turn it was to sit through the lecturing and sermonizing in order to get a little coffee. At least the argument kept them warm. It was decided they would both go, and they would begin keeping a tally of turns all over again.

Stumbling along the way to one of their customary haunts they discovered a new storefront mission two streets from the Wall. The cramped shop — it smelled still of the baked goods of its

¹Or, “connection,” in the sense of association or relevancy.

²“boozing buddy.”

previous incarnation — was as desolate and utilitarian as anything in that neighborhood of the Kreuzberg district. To the lingering odor of the past was added the pungency of fresh paint. It contributed to their headaches and the queasy insurrections of their stomachs, while at the same time it stirred up their appetites. The feeling was what they imagined as one of seasickness — adrift again on that immeasurably vast ocean.

The other late-morning inhabitants of the mission were all men as well, and all of them Turkish. They wore the same bedraggled, gravity-succumbing expressions as Karlheinz and Jakob. Their faces would have appeared even more furrowed and drawn but for the unkempt beards and weedy stubble that obscured the depths of the ravines and hollows. Except for their rather darker skin and hair there was little to distinguish these Turkish exiles from their German compatriots, for there was a kind of brotherhood of dissolution that erased such distinctions as easily as borders often disappeared and reformed.

“Well, here we are, Charlie,” Jakob said, knowing it would irritate his companion.

“You won’t be satisfied until you’re as American as *der Pferdespieler* or *der Erdnußkönig*³, will you, Jake?” Karlheinz taunted.

Another argument was about to ensue, but Karlheinz slapped his palm on the table and gave it up. What was the use? What was the difference? If not America, then Russia. So what? If not the BRD, then the DDR⁴. If not alive, then dead, now or later. What was the difference? “Ich hab’ kein Verhältnis dazu!”

³Somewhat denigrating references to two former American presidents: “the horse-actor” and “the peanut-king.”

⁴Bundesrepublik Deutschland (West Germany) and Deutsche Demokratische Republik (East Germany).

Jakob and Karlheinz were served up steaming mugs of powerfully strong coffee in the Middle Eastern tradition. The young woman who brought it to their long table had a sullen, secretive beauty, concealed partly by a gray linen shawl and scarf. This appealed to Karlheinz in a way that the screaming, glossy beauty advertised on most women's faces these days never could. The word his mind conjured for her was "Persian."

With the second serving of dark coffee came a platter of a kind of very dense bread and rich cheese. The two Germans set upon and devoured an entire platter by themselves, and in a way that denied every aspect of their polite upbringing. What came to the young woman's mind in quietly watching them was "Romulus and Remus", raised by a she-wolf.

A short time later the woman came out with a package bundled in brown paper for each of them. She did not say a word to them, as if the entire exchange had been someone else's idea. Each package contained a pair of short, but lined winter boots, a knit cap, and a pair of cheaply-made gloves. Jakob and Karlheinz nodded perfunctorily in the young woman's direction, but otherwise spoke not a word of thanks or acknowledgment. Their embarrassment came from a sudden recognition of how they must look to her.

All at once there was a commotion in the small, steamy room. The other men got up as a single entity, it seemed, scraping their benches on the tiled floor and filing out the door as if in a well-practiced drill. Karlheinz and Jakob noticed the rows of bobbing caps, identical to their own, and the shuffling past of pairs of the black boots, all in varying conditions of newness. The young woman motioned to them to sit down again.

Their stupidity dawned on them with a sudden flash. What else but the sermon could be coming up now? Karlheinz felt betrayed by the woman — certainly not the first time he had felt that

prickling emotion — yet he could not bring himself, nor would he allow Jakob to be impolite to her. She was only doing her job, wasn't she, after all.

The man looked like no minister they had ever encountered. He was so ordinary in his clothing, mannerisms, and speech as to seem nearly invisible. All but for the placid intensity of his eyes and the soothing murmur of his voice. They felt glued to their bench. It was too late to leave.

“You are a child of the universe. You have a right to be here,” the man said.

Karlheinz knew there was something familiar in those words — surely it was a quotation from somewhere — but he had never taken it personally before now. Had he said it himself? His past ages were such a muddle to him that he was sure of nothing now.

“Even the world of particle physics — a discipline far removed from what concerns you or me — shows us that everything is in how you see it. The world exists only as you see it. But, change your outlook, and you will have created a new world.”

Karlheinz grew uncomfortable with the notion that these ideas had somewhere — perhaps in a deep long-ago — been his own.

“We might even say that matter itself is just a convenient way of finding our way around, that all that truly exists is energy, the life and blood of the universe. Well, but you have things to do, I am sure. I ask you to give this some thought, that is all — for all our sakes, really. The energy of the universe is in you, it's just that it has entered a sort of cul-de-sac. Break down the walls and disperse the fog you are in. Let it flow — flow through you. Just once, try it. That is all I ask.”

The man halted his speech so abruptly that Karlheinz and Jakob were convinced he was only gathering a second breath, and that they would be returned to the programme after a brief intermission. But that was all. The young woman began gathering the mugs from the tables and

switching off lights. She barely noticed them now except for a brief and canny sort of smile. They collected their caps and gloves and boots, and wandered out into the dismal, drizzle-smeared Kreuzberg.

Just one street away Karlheinz began ranting. No one was going to tell him what to do or how to look at things! No one and nothing. It had taken him too long to get where he was — alone and free — to give it up, ever. No one told him what to do. The universe could go to hell!

With a kind of inevitability to it that was nearly mechanical, Karlheinz and Jakob managed to sell their new winter gear at a second-hand shop. The sidewalk sloped just as surely to one of the state-run liquor stores. None of that slow poison to which they had become accustomed — well, nearly. They had more money than they required for once. They each latched onto a liter bottle of Yugoslavian plum brandy. To the devil with American whiskey!

They returned “home” along the slender walkway beside the Wall, trying to keep out of the wind and the cold drizzle. Even there in the western half of Berlin it was a desolate passage and, here, too narrow for autos. But this was not a day they were likely to encounter any strollers or ball-tossing children. To their right were the brown and wind-flattened vegetable gardens the Turkish denizens had planted to recall a bit of home. To the left, the Wall, grim and seemingly endless, dividing the world from itself. Even the colorful smears and strokes of graffiti could not mask its essential nature, its grayness and silence.

The two *Saufbrüder* paused for breath beside one of the old-style lampposts, curling their arms around it for support. Their resolve to keep their bottles of Schnapps unopened until they returned to the old warehouse began wavering. Karlheinz broke the seal on his bottle and pulled out the cork with his teeth. In putting it to his lips, the sickeningly sweet aroma blew into his nostrils.

He was overcome by a very sharp nausea, quite unlike the usual overall gelatinous feeling. It struck his stomach and head simultaneously. His sense of hopeless contentment was overthrown. He did not want to have a drink just then, but how could he not?

Jakob had kept to his own determination and so, watched his companion with a kind of condescension, revealed in his smirking and the tilted wagging of his head.

Karlheinz desperately wanted not to have a drink. Peace had begun to reign again in his head and stomach — due, no doubt, to the warm and substantial breakfast — and he did not want so soon to destroy that vague sense of well-being. He lowered the bottle from his lips, but it exerted a physical force over him — the drunkard's only attachment to gravity, since he defied it in all other ways. As in the English satire, the bottle of *Slivovic*⁵ may as well have been imprinted with the label “Drink Me!”, and the gentle whisper of its enticement may as well have become a shout.

“Nobody tells me what to do!” Karlheinz screamed.

A flutter of birds went up from one of the gardens, up and beyond the Wall. Karlheinz began trembling. The prospect became truly frightening. What if he should actually become a consistent tangle of philosophy — if his opposition to being manipulated was honest and universal? What then?

He flung the bottle against the Wall, nearly toppling himself with the effort, and repeated his sole commandment “Nobody and nothing tells me what to do!”

Always one to get into the spirit of the moment, Jakob shattered his bottle too. At heart, ritual of any sort would appeal to him. Karlheinz slumped to the base of the lamppost and Jakob crouched down beside him. They stared at the punctuation their smashed bottles had made against the mottos

⁵Yugoslavian plum brandy.

and graffito. They read aloud the lines they had thus marked: “*Lebe einzeln und frei, wie ein Baum . . . aber bruderlich wie ein Wald*⁶.”

Jakob assisted Karlheinz to his feet and they made the rest of their way home in a sauntering, almost aimless manner. Karlheinz wondered why he had not launched into a spitting-mad tirade against the “statement”, but not as much as Jakob puzzled over their nearly serene response to it.

They spent the day in cleaning up their “room” in the warehouse, twice more going out, both times for soup. In passing again by that section of the Wall with the motto, they fell into a kind of reverential silence that neither of them could explain. And though the remainder of their money was hot and nearly burning holes in their pockets, they resisted the temptation to repeat their purchase of brandy or anything else. It was not actually so much a resistance — in that they had failed too many times already — but rather a defiance, and in that they could summon all their strength and allow it to travel its well-worn paths almost effortlessly.

It had not been unusual for them to spend a day in recuperation after a day or two of heavy boozing, but this episode had now stretched to over a week, and neither of them could recall the last time that had occurred. Karlheinz had counted at least ten years — since his simultaneously first and last year at the University.

They had a sort of itch to return to the mission kitchen where this had all begun, but Karlheinz wanted first to recover their caps and gloves, and especially the warm boots. He worked

⁶An actual bit of graffiti on the Wall in the early 1980s: “Live alone and free, like a tree, but in the brotherhood of the forest.” (Not precisely literal.)

two days in the furniture factory where he had sporadically found employment until a massive lay-off. Jakob, more the intellectual, worked at a bookseller's, though in a capacity that left him sweaty and dusty. Fearing what they might do with extra money, they went out and bought an old Grundig radio — it still had tubes — and they found a kind of reassurance in its ember-like glow. They knew that it signified a reattachment to the world. Well, so what? You could never really leave it. Even your atoms remained somehow, as little bundles of energy that connected you in spite of yourself. That is what they had come to realize.

Now well into November, but armed against it with warm clothing for a change, the two *Saufbrüder* — they still called themselves that — prepared to take a room in a *Wrackhaus*⁷. For them it was moving up in the world. Their only arguments of late had centered on the question of whether they might not try to hold out a while longer in the warehouse, weather permitting, and move directly into a dormitory.

They were awakened one night by a tumult outside their patched-up windows. It looked like a spontaneous *Faschingsfest*⁸, except that it was taking place on both sides of the Wall. They felt certain that the police sirens would be commencing any minute, calling the whole festival to an abrupt end. But several of the police could be seen to be taking part. They rubbed their eyes and wiped the windows. There were ladders propped against the Wall and even soldiers from both sides of it had their hands outstretched and they were passing things back and forth. The radio offered no help, for the news announcers seemed to have been gripped by insanity themselves.

⁷Their word for a “flophouse.”

⁸A Mardi gras (Shrove Tuesday) or carnival.

By the next morning their street was no longer a blind alley. There were narrow sections where all that remained of the Wall were piles of gray rubble. People streamed through the openings in both directions, like blood in an artery, somehow sorting themselves in spite of what appeared to be a crazy confusion.

Karlheinz and Jakob suddenly expressed concern for “their” motto at the same time, and went out to have a look. They puffed along in the chilly air like a couple of restored old steam engines. The motto remained, though the top of the Wall looked uneven now, almost nibbled.

They took some breakfast in the Turkish kitchen, which was now in a tumult of its own. The Persian-looking young woman smiled at them and nodded at their feet, asking them how they felt. Of course. She meant the boots. They stammered like teenagers, as if introduced to a woman for the first time.

After putting more of the heavy bread and cheese in a paper napkin for later, Karlheinz and Jakob got up to leave. A hand on each of their shoulders pushed them gently back onto the bench. It was the organizer of the kitchen — the odd minister in his ordinary clothes. He thanked them for their help, nodding towards the crumbling Wall. He said nothing else and then let them leave, almost shooing them out.

The *Saufbrüder* did not think they really believed in such things. But they did admit that the universe had arranged one hell of a coincidence, if nothing else.