

Autumn in Europe

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They drove slowly, carefully through the mist, he in front of his wife, she closely behind the kayak he towed. In the rear mirror, which he installed when he turned 67 and had a stiff neck episode, he could barely make out the faint glimmer of the front light of her bicycle. Then suddenly he saw four much stronger headlights burning themselves through the mist behind them; he quickly swerved to the side of the road and stopped in the grass. The car passed them, its electric motor softly humming; he was ready to continue cycling, but the car's braking lights flared, billowing halos in the mist, and it swerved to block their path. In the corner of his eye he saw his wife halting her bike next to him. A man got out of the car and slowly walked towards them. "The Kommissar" his wife whispered. Indeed, he recognised the portly figure and the ridiculous gold-tressed red uniform that indicated the senior rank of the police officer. In addition to leading the regional police force, the Kommissar was also the Chief Brother of the local chapter of the New European Socialists, NES -or Nezi's as he silently thought-, the leading political party in Europe since decades.

It appeared rather unlikely that this was a chance encounter; the Kommissar must have traced their identity cards' electronic signatures through the ubiquitous sensor grid.

"Bit of a strange day to go kayaking, isn't it?" the Kommissar said almost jovially.

"Not at all" he answered cheerfully "It's lovely to be on the water in the mist."

The Kommissar slowly shook his head, as if his duty made him sad "Won't do, Mr. van Damme. I'll have to turn you in to the police office to make an official statement explaining your strange behaviour. It does not help that you are a known antisocialist."

He considered his options. Strangely, the Kommissar was alone, without a colleague to back him up. The official was about thirty years younger and thirty kilos heavier than he was; but most of the extra weight was fat and the Kommissar appeared to be in poor shape, whereas he did at least twenty pushups every day.

As if he could read his mind, the Kommissar frowned and put his hand on the pistol holstered at his right side "Don't even think about it, old man".

His wife, who appeared to understand why the Kommissar was alone, said "Would it help if we made a donation to the Party?"

The Kommissar gratefully accepted the package she gave him, keeping a hand on his pistol all the time. There went half of their savings in Old Euros, more valuable on the black market than the official New Euros.

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to turn you in anyhow" he said. Victor was not surprised; the grid followed the Kommissar as well as them, and if he would

let them go, he would have to explain why. His wife started to protest, but he signalled her to be silent and put his bike on its side stand.

"I'm sure we can arrange this at the police office" Victor said. He opened the back door of the car for his wife who went in, a desperate look on her face. He wanted to signal his intentions to her but did not dare to. The Kommissar followed his every move and kept a safe distance, keeping his hand on the pistol. Victor moved to the other side of the car, opened the back door and proceeded to get in. Being an old man, he moved slowly and carefully but nevertheless managed to hit his head on the car, standing dazedly for a moment. When he felt an impatient hand on his right shoulder, he slowly descended again, then gripped the Kommissar's hand and quickly dropped to the ground. The Kommissar's head crashed against the side of the car, and the official's weight almost crushed Victor. He pushed him aside with difficulty, slammed his elbow against the Kommissar's temple, and took his pistol and handcuffs. He considered slitting the official's throat with the razor sharp fishing knife he carried in his pocket, but he knew his wife would not approve and didn't think it was needed. Instead, he rolled the man on his belly, put his arms behind his back, and handcuffed him. It would have been better to secure him to the car, but he was too heavy to lift. Almost as an afterthought, he retrieved the New Euros from the Kommissar's pocket. He tossed his identity card as far as he could into the field, and told his wife to do the same. They quickly continued their journey and reached the beach soon. The lack of wind made it easy to pass the surf, and the mist hid them from view just a few dozen metres from the beach.

He hadn't used his kayak for months and was not used to the additional weight of his wife so they moved slowly. While following the whispered directions of this wife, who sat behind him and held the gps, his mind went back to the events that had brought them here.

It had been the warmest and driest autumn in his long memory, but in the second half of November the sun's inclination was so low that finally the day-long mists arrived that made the Low Country infamous. Only then had the email arrived, posted anonymously through what he suspected was an illegal satellite link to Euronet, reading only "Tomorrow 12:00". The email's arrival was announced months earlier, with the usual monthly package. As always they had unwrapped it eagerly, sliding their fingers over the smooth colourful surfaces of the two Buddhas, imagining how the hands of their daughter would have caressed them before packing them for shipment. The two figures were identical in shape and weight except for a tiny small dot on the underside. Leaving one for his wife to put in her collection, he'd taken the dotted Buddha to his workshop, wrapped it in an old towel, and carefully hit it with a hammer. He'd expected to find the usual letter and Alzheimer prevention drugs, which were illegal in Europe as they were developed and tested for safety on rodents in China after the Animal Experiment Directive forbade development and import of such drugs. Instead, the Buddha had contained four AA-sized batteries -illegal because they left toxic waste- and a note that mentioned only "Wait for email" and a set of gps coordinates. With shaking hands he'd put the batteries in his waterproof handheld gps, dusty from years of disuse, and keyed in the coordinates to find that they referred to a location in the North

Sea about a kilometre from the shore close to where they lived, where he -illegally since the Animal Cruelty Directive forbade use of animals for food- fished for mackerel and sea bass from his kayak in summer, using a hand line instead of fishing rod to deceive the prying eyes of the water police.

When had it all started? He recalled the blog he wrote in 2006 when the Partij voor de Dieren ('Animal Party') was soliciting Parliament votes in the Low Country: "It's not like, decennia after giving women the right to vote, we've done the same for animals. Rather, apparently some people think that humans are so well off in The Netherlands, it's time to give priority to animals", suggesting that they might want to consider to make the animal activist who murdered the politician Pim Fortuyn an honorary member. In the following decade he'd unlearned to make fun about the Animal Party, as first they criminalised fishing and hunting, then animal consumption, then animal-derived food for his dogs, leading to their untimely death due to the forced vegetarian diet that was only alleviated by the rodents he illegally trapped in his garden. His professional life had suffered from the political rise of green activists, antiglobalist boivists and socialists, especially after they joined forces into the NES. Shortly after they won the elections and installed a new Minister of Science, he had been asked to embrace public perception-based risk management and the strict interpretation of the Precautionary Principle, disavowing his previous work on genetic modification and scientific risk assessment. His refusal triggered termination of his contract as director of a European scientific institute. No longer allowed to hold any academic position, he was assigned to a crew of public space gardeners that fortunately included some other antisocialist intellectuals. Like most other people he'd had to give up his car and many other luxuries, as Europe got poorer and became isolationist. He was grateful his daughter was able to leave Europe before the borders closed; she was smart and entrepreneurial, and Europe would have been hell for her. The letters she sent in the Buddhas were mostly about her children and did not reveal much of her professional life, but from what he could glimpse from other sources before Euronet disconnected itself from internet, she was building a large IT business empire in Asia. And now apparently she'd found a way to get them out.

Arriving at the designated coordinates he saw the low-build boat only at the last moment, its grey hull almost indistinguishable from the mist, its shape reminding him of stealth fighter planes. A hard-faced man with Asian features gently helped them aboard, and brought them to a small cabin where they sipped warm coffee and his favourite brand of cognac as the boat silently sped westward to the wide sea expanse between Shetland and the Norwegian coast. Holding his wife's hand, he dozed off and dreamed of hugging his grandchildren for the first time.

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