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Self's Punishment

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Korten summons me

At the beginning I envied him. That was at high school. The Friedrich Wilhelm in Berlin. I was getting the last bit of wear out of my father's old suits, had no friends, and couldn't pull myself up on the horizontal bar. He was top of the class, in P.E. too, was invited to every birthday party, and when the teachers called him Mr Korten in class, they meant it. Sometimes his father's chauffeur collected him in the Mercedes. My father worked for the state railway and in 1934 had just been transferred from Karlsruhe to Berlin.

Korten can't stand inefficiency. In gym, he taught me how to do the upward circle forwards and the full-turn circle. I admired him. He also showed me what makes girls tick. I trotted along dumbly at the side of the little girl who lived on the floor below and attended the Luisen, just opposite the Friedrich Wilhelm, and gazed adoringly at her. Korten kissed her in the cinema.

We became friends – studied together, national economy for him, law for me – and I was in and out of the villa at Wannsee. When his sister Klara and I got married, he was our witness, and presented me with the desk that is still in my office today, heavy oak, with carved detail and brass knobs.

I hardly work there these days. My profession keeps me on the move, and when I drop in to the office briefly in the evenings, my desk isn't piled high with files. Only the answering machine awaits, its small window letting me know how many messages I have. Then I sit in front of the empty surface and, fiddling with a pencil, listen to what I should take on and what I should avoid, what I should sink my teeth into and what I shouldn't lay a finger on. I don't like getting my fingers burnt. But they can just as easily get jammed in the drawer of a desk you haven't looked in for a long time.

The war was over in five weeks for me. A wound that got me home. Three months later they'd patched me together again, and I completed my legal clerkship. In 1942, when Korten started at the Rhineland Chemical Works in Ludwigshafen and I began at the public prosecutor's office in Heidelberg, we shared a hotel room for a few weeks before we found our own apartments. The year 1945 saw the end of my career as a prosecutor in Heidelberg, and he was the one who got me the first cases in the financial world. Then he began his rise, and he didn't have much time, and Klara's death heralded an end to the Christmas and birthday visits. We move in different circles and I read about him more often than I see him. Sometimes we bump into each other at a concert or a play and we get on. Well, we're old friends.

Then . . . I remember the morning clearly. The world was at my feet. My rheumatism was at bay, I had a clear head, and I looked young in my new blue suit – I thought so anyway. The wind wasn't carrying the familiar chemical odour in the direction of Mannheim, but towards the Pfalz. The baker at the corner had chocolate croissants and I was having breakfast on the pavement in the sun. A young woman was walking along Mollstrasse, drew closer and grew prettier, and I put my disposable container on the window sill and followed her. A few steps later, I was in front of my office in the Augusta-Anlage.

I am proud of my office. I've had smoked glass put in the door and windows of this former tobacco shop, and on the door in elegant golden letters:

'*Gerhard Self – Private Investigations*'.

There were two messages on the machine. The company chairman of Goedecke needed a report. I'd proved his brand manager guilty of fraud, but the manager had contested his dismissal before the labour court. The other message was Frau Schlemihl from the Rhineland Chemical Works requesting her call be returned.

'Good morning, Frau Schlemihl. Self here. You wanted to talk to me?'

'Hello, Doctor Self. General Director Korten would like to

see you.' No one apart from Frau Schlemihl addresses me as 'Doctor'. Since I stopped being a public prosecutor, I've not used my title. A private detective with a Ph.D. is ridiculous. But being the good personal assistant Frau Schlemihl is, she's never forgotten Korten's introduction when we first met at the beginning of the 1950s.

'What about?'

'He would like to tell you over lunch at the executive restaurant. Is twelve-thirty convenient?'

2

In the Blue Salon

In Mannheim and Ludwigshafen we live beneath the gaze of the Rhineland Chemical Works. It was founded in 1872, seven years after the Baden Aniline and Soda Factory, by Professor Demel and Entzen, His Excellency, both chemists. The Works have grown since then, and grown and grown. Today they encompass a third of the developed land of Ludwigshafen and boast around a hundred thousand employees. In collaboration with the wind, the rhythm of RCW production determines whether the region, and which part, will reek of chlorine, sulphur, or ammonia.

The executive restaurant is situated outside the grounds of the plant and enjoys its own fine reputation. Besides the large restaurant for middle management, there is a separate area for directors with several salons still decorated in the colours that Demel and Entzen synthesized in their early successes. And a bar.

I was still standing there at one. I'd been informed at reception that the general director would unfortunately be somewhat delayed. I ordered my second Aviateur.

'Campari, grapefruit juice, champagne, a third of each.' The red-haired, freckled girl helping out behind the bar today was happy to learn something new.

'You're doing a great job,' I said.

She looked at me sympathetically. 'The general director's keeping you waiting?'

I'd waited in worse places, in cars, doorways, corridors, hotel lobbies, and railway stations. Here I stood beneath gilded stucco and a gallery of oil portraits where Korten's face would hang one day.

'My dear Self,' he said, approaching. Small and wiry, with alert blue eyes, grey crew-cut, and the leathery brown skin you

get from too much sport in the sun. In a band with Richard von Weizsäcker, Yul Brynner, and Herbert von Karajan he could take the Badenweiler, Hitler's favourite march, play it in swing, and he'd have a worldwide hit.

'Sorry to be so late. You're still at it, the smoking and the drinking?' He frowned at my pack of Sweet Aftons. 'Bring me an Apollinaris! How are you?'

'Fine. I'm taking it a little slower these days, not surprising at sixty-eight. I don't take every job any more and in a couple of weeks I'll be sailing the Aegean. And you're not relinquishing the helm yet?'

'I'd like to. But it'll take another year or two before anyone can replace me. We're going through a sticky patch.'

'Should I sell?' I was thinking of my ten RCW shares deposited at the Baden Civil Servants' Bank.

'No, my dear Self,' he laughed. 'In the end these difficult phases always turn out to be a blessing for us. But still there are things that worry us, long term and short term. It's a short-term problem I wanted to see you about today and then put you together with Firner. You remember him?'

I remembered him well. A couple of years ago Firner had been made director, but for me he'd always remain Korten's bright-eyed assistant. 'Is he still wearing Harvard Business School ties?'

Korten didn't respond. He looked reflective, as though considering whether to introduce a company tie. He took my arm. 'Let's go to the Blue Salon. It's ready.'

The Blue Salon is the best the RCW has to offer its guests. An art-deco room, with table and chairs by van de Velde, a Mackintosh lamp, and on the wall an industrial landscape by Kokoschka. Two places were set. When we were seated a waiter brought a fresh salad.

'I'll stick to my Apollinaris. I've ordered a Château de Sannes for you. You like that, don't you? And after the salad a *Tafelspitz*?'

My favourite dish. How nice of Korten to think of it. The meat was tender, the horseradish sauce without a heavy roux, but rich with cream. Korten's lunch ended with the crunchy salad. While I was eating, he got down to business.

'I'm not going to get well acquainted with computers at this

point. When I see the young people sent to us from university these days, who take no responsibility and are incapable of making decisions without consulting the oracle I think of the poem about the sorcerer's apprentice. I was almost glad to hear the system was acting up. We have one of the best management and business information systems in the world. I've no idea who'd want to know, but you could find out on the terminal that we're having *Tafelspitz* and salad in the Blue Salon today, which employees are currently training on the tennis court, which marriages among the staff are intact and which are floundering, and at what intervals which flowers are planted in the flowerbeds in front of the restaurant. And of course the computer has a record of everything that was previously housed in the files of payroll, personnel, and so on.'

'And how can I help you with this?'

'Patience, my dear Self. We were promised one of the safest possible systems. That means passwords, entry codes, data locks, Doomsday effects, and what have you. All of this is supposed to ensure no one can tamper with our system. But what's happened is just that.'

'My dear Korten . . .' Addressing each other by our surname, a habit from schooldays, is something we'd held on to, even as best friends. But 'my dear Self' annoys me, and he knows it. 'My dear Korten, as a boy even the abacus overwhelmed me. And now I'm supposed to tinker about with passwords, entry codes, and data what-do-you-call-them?'

'No. All the computer business is sorted out. If I understand Firner correctly, there's a list of people who could have created the mess in our system. Our sole concern is finding the right one. That's exactly where you come into it. Investigate, observe, shadow, ask pertinent questions – the usual.'

I wanted to know more, but he fended me off.

'I'm none the wiser myself. Firner will go into it with you. Let's not spend all of lunch talking about this miserable situation – there's been so little opportunity to meet since Klara's death.'

So we talked about the old days: 'Do you remember?' I don't like the old times, I've packed them away and put a lid on them. I should have sat up and paid attention when Korten was

talking about the sacrifices we'd had to make and ask for. But it didn't occur to me until much later.

So far as the current day went we had little to say to each other. I wasn't surprised his son had become a member of parliament – he had always seemed precocious. Korten seemed to hold him in contempt but was all the prouder of his grandchildren. Marion had been accepted into the Student Foundation of the German People, Ulrich had won a 'Young Research' prize with an essay about the twinning of prime numbers. I could have told him about my tomcat, Turbo, but let it go.

I drained my mocha, and Korten officially ended the meal. The restaurant supervisor bid us farewell. We set off for the Works.