

GERMAN JOY

by Simon Urban

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I'm going to die hungry.

Roger Ross's last clear thought, even as the flames erupted from the bonnet, had been equal parts banal and existential. Perhaps you only truly got to know yourself at the moment in which the end was more likely than its opposite. It was possible, sure. And from then on, a survivor has to cope forever with knowing who they really are.

Ross opened his eyes. The entire Tesla was burning now, from lurid yellow through to orange. The fire had the vehicle firmly in its clutches; the paintwork blistered; dark smoke billowed into the colourless sky, looking like a medium-grade chemical spill.

Ross was no longer sure how exactly he'd managed to escape from the car. But he seemed to possess instincts and reflexes, archaic automatisms that could take over in an emergency. This was indisputably the good news of the day. The bad was that, along with the end of his career as Chief Growth Officer at Rommel Engineering, the so-called 'pool car' had also been completely destroyed. A total loss, wherever you looked. Ross had no idea about cars and certainly not about electric cars, but there had to be a battery sitting somewhere underneath it all, and earlier on it had without doubt been at more than 80 per cent. Concentrated energy, compressed into a flat metal casing by some kind of incomprehensible laws, now exposed to the flames.

Roger Ross looked around.

The burning car, the rubbernecking bystanders. A sprawling cement wasteland, a series of wood-panelled rubbish bins, street lights that had the look of the GDR about them. Beyond a green wall of nondescript trees, perfectly suited to a motorway rest area named Bretthäger Wisch, stood unemployed wind turbines. In the middle of the paved expanse was a toilet building, which huddled so low it seemed to want to have nothing to do with the place. Ross could understand that toilet building. Although it was a rest area, Bretthäger Wisch didn't present itself as a place that was made for arrival. Bretthäger Wisch was a place you wanted to leave again immediately. Especially when your own car was currently on fire.

The Tesla was blazing ever more fiercely, making crackling noises. A bizarre kind of torch. Could something like that go shooting up into the air? Oughtn't he to know that, as an EV driver? And warn the rubberneckers? For insurance-related reasons? Didn't everything in this country ultimately happen for insurance-related reasons – or, for those very same reasons, didn't happen?

By now, there were more than twenty people filming on their phones, standing in a semicircle around the burning car, their faces displaying excitement, astonishment, the hard-to-conceal joy of bearing witness to a minor sensation. The thick smoke, the stench. Burnt rubber.

Fear was something no one seemed to feel.

A young man wearing a Camp David polo shirt bent deep at the knee in order to film from a more dramatic perspective. Ross

studied the man's phone screen, saw how his zoom-effect made the flames appear to grow until the entire screen was blazing brightly. Not bad at all.

We've become a nation of camera-people, he thought, a country full of recreational Roland Emmerichs. All that was disconcerting enough as it was, but: filming a man's burning car with such focus, in a semi-professional manner, while the owner was standing right there – wasn't that intrusive? Thirty years ago, would people have got out their Sony camcorders to start mercilessly documenting a stranger's car on fire at a rest stop that went by the name of Bretthäger Wisch?

Loony, the lot of them. One of those sentences you were better off thinking than saying out loud.

The guy in the Camp David polo shirt moved even closer to the flames, his arms stretched out in front of him like chubby feelers, his filming smartphone a natural extension of his body. A compact man with sparse remnants of dark-blond hair that had been blowdried over his pate like a half-transparent beanie in order to give the impression of volume to fleeting observers. Another three or four years until he was bald. And then the last vestiges of well-kempt youth would be at an end. Showy silver watch that looked so expensive it could only be cheap, Nike Air Max, ripped jeans. A hairstyle conman. And a cad. Only now did Ross notice that the cad wasn't just filming, he'd been producing a livestream the entire time. Little emojis rose up from the bottom of his screen, the reactions of freaks the world over, ranging from

schadenfreude to horror, on seeing a car burning in the East German boondocks.

Have you actually lost your mind? Ross asked loudly.

Sorry, don't understand, the man answered in an Eastern European accent, without turning around.

Suddenly, a loud splintering of glass, and almost simultaneously a rattling sound. The fire swelled instantaneously, became more intense, as though someone had poured on petrol by the can-full. Bright flashes burst from the underbelly of the Tesla; a couple of people screamed in fright; a baby started wailing in the background. Now even babies were being brought up to be rubberneckers. They were all loony. The heat burned their skin, drove the film-makers back a couple of metres. Deep-black smoke forced its way out from under the bonnet; fluid spilled from the vehicle's underside; a biting metallic smell filled the air. Ross could taste it clearly on his tongue. As though he'd licked a battery. *Bretthäger Wisch*, thought Ross, the wish to be somewhere else and—

Kurva! cried the cad, now also taking two steps back – the last person to do so, reluctantly, without adjusting his hold on the camera.

A phone ringtone; Ross reached into his trouser pocket. How fortunate that his phone wasn't in the car, otherwise—

Katja Bormann calling, alongside a photo of a wombat looking down the camera with human-like solemnity. It had an absurd effect, the way that incoming WhatsApp calls now featured full-screen profile pictures of your saved contacts. Since this had

started, Katja from HR at Rommel had ceased to be a woman to him; now she was a marsupial. Mrs Marsupial. Now, Ross couldn't help but see that profile picture in his mind's eye whenever Katja crossed his mind; and since he'd been fired from Rommel with immediate effect, there had been countless wombat calls. Termination of contract, change-of-control clauses, non-disclosure agreements, signatures missing from countless documents. It seemed that the end of employment was when the work really started. Now the marsupial was probably ringing about compensation arrangements. Even as the seventy-thousand-euro company car turned to charcoal before his eyes.

Fugit irreparabile tesla.

Ross let his phone ring, watching the wombat. He'd been fired, now his car was burning – was there some kind of link there? The past few days still felt far-fetched. Being fired didn't suit him, just as little as an STI or a bank robbery would. And yet now he had to deal with this situation that didn't suit him. In the office, he'd been able to cover up the shock, had endured the past week and then taken all his remaining annual leave. Other people went off sick in a situation like this; Ross had shown up to work. Punctually at half seven every morning. During those last five days as CGO at Rommel, he had smiled the entire time – in meetings, in the lift, in the canteen. Even when he'd been sitting alone in his office, because every single wall in that office was made of glass; people had been able to see him smiling from the corridor. A smile could mean anything. Happiness, irony, superiority. Dreams of a better world. Anyone who saw him sitting in his office smiling

must have thought this man was happy to have finally been sacked with immediate effect. And happy was how he wanted to look, for himself and for all his colleagues, because being happy – that suited him.

Everything OK? An older man with a goatee and leather waistcoat came up beside him; he was the only one not filming.

S'all right, Ross said and set his phone to silent.

You look as though you'd like to get out of here. I'm a taxi driver.

Sounds good. We can get going right away.

Luggage?

Burned.

The man nodded as though he was always encountering this at Bretthäger Wisch, and pushed his way through the crowd with a determined gait. Ross followed him without looking back at the wreck of his car. Nobody seemed interested in the fact that he was walking away from the scene of an accident. Wasn't everyone indifferent to everything these days anyway? Rubbernecking seemed to be the last kind of participation left open to anyone in this country.

E-class, said the taxi driver proudly, indicating a polished Mercedes from the latest production series. But not an EV!

Reassuring! Ross got into the back; he knew the address off by heart. The driver pressed the start button and they pulled out of the car park. Light rain began to fall. Ross suppressed the reflex to reach for his phone in his trouser pocket. A drive like this wasn't

to be spoiled with reading the news, and most likely there would be no signal anyway.

The meadows and fields that were sliced straight through by the four-lane motorway glowed an almost unnatural green. Mecklenburg seemed to be a lush part of the country, although there had been little rain in the last weeks of June and the stricken agricultural sector had been talked about near-constantly on the radio. The view from the window now showed a completely different world. No sign of parched fields or dry pastures. Just nature bursting with energy: towering corn, rampant rapeseed, exuberant meadows. Small raindrops beaded the side window and were blown off towards the hedge as the car sped on.

Fortunately, the driver left the radio off, set the cruise control to 130 and didn't speak a word. Inside the car, it was completely silent. Ross was suddenly bone-tired, leaned his heavy head back, closed his eyes and, when he opened them again, was surprised to see that they were already leaving the A19. He blinked. The sun hung low in the sky; on the verge was a group of hunters, four large black cadavers lying in the grass at their feet. The hunters' heads turned in sync, eyes following the taxi.

Wild boar, said the driver, we've more than enough of them here. In the GDR, they were almost exterminated, the beasts. But the Greens, you know, the Greens—

Ross had never thought about wild boar before, but he instantly felt sympathetic towards the animals. They were culled just like that because there were too many of them for someone's liking. They didn't do much for the bottom line, and so they had

to go. Like him. Recently, and with increasing regularity, he'd found himself remembering colleagues who had been sacked. Most of them hadn't succeeded in finding a new job; they'd sent off hundreds of applications, but their age was their age and that was where flexibility ended. A few had accepted considerably less money; several did occasional work, constantly switching jobs; a few were on benefits. Ross was now irrevocably one of them. He was no longer a Chief Growth Officer. He was a fifty-year-old boar who'd been set free to be shot.

Five minutes, said the taxi driver, as though he was talking about the end of the world.

Ross watched the linden trees flying past on the freshly tarmacked avenue down which they were now barrelling at considerably exaggerated speed, and had to smile. The idea that every individual was fighting their own futile battle against the world's relentless changes momentarily amused him. It was a battle that couldn't be won – of course not. It had made Ross himself despair, too; capitulation was the only option left. He'd spent long enough labouring under the illusion that things could be made to stop if only you expended enough energy and decisiveness. Like ramming a crowbar with all your might into the smallest cog in a mountain-sized machine, slowing it down with much grunting and groaning, until the whole enormous apparatus started shaking, quaking, and finally ground to a halt from which it would never start up again.

It had taken him a while to understand that crowbars like that didn't exist, and that, even if they had done, it was better to

keep your hands off them. Instead of running away – of this he was convinced – you needed to turn the tables, to keep up with the rapid pace of transformation and, if possible, overtake it. Because it wouldn't be banking on that, change wouldn't: the idea that someone might be even quicker than it. Wasn't it exactly this that he'd been trying to do his whole life? And wasn't now the time – after being sacked, after his access cards had been blocked, his company email address deleted, his photo removed from the website – to finally slough off his old skin, take change by surprise, leave it in the dust once and for all? The status quo only ever represented one moment among countless, and moments passed. The present quickly became the past; now became then. Soon he would be a different man from the one who used to sit on the ninth floor at Rommel Engineering, who was thrown out on luxurious terms, who nearly went up in flames with his car and immediately afterwards went on a holiday, booked long ago, at a wellness hotel in Mecklenburg. The question, thought Ross, is less who you are, and much more who you want to be.

The taxi drew up at a pair of curved wrought-iron gates which began opening as though in slow motion. The driver's fingers drummed on the steering wheel. Ross noticed that he was sweating, despite the air-conditioning. Blooming rhododendrons on either side, and a gleaming brass plaque affixed to one of the gateposts:

EDEN Sealand Resort ***** Superior

The gates by now had almost finished opening; the driver made a noise of contentment and drove on. After they had wound their way to the top of the hill, avoiding several pedestrians en route, the stud-farm-like panorama that Ross recognised from the booking platform appeared in front of them. A gravel drive, straight as an arrow and lined with young birch trees, which led downhill to the grand manor house that served as the main building for the hotel complex; beyond it, the dark-blue plateau of Fleesensee. White sails dotted the windswept surface of the lake; golfers crossed the carpet-like lawns on foot or in futuristic electric carts; waiting staff hurried across the waterside terrace, balancing trays of thickly clustered, luminous Aperol glasses with all the skill of circus artistes.

This is going to be good, said Roger Ross.

This is going to be expensive, said the taxi driver, and the E-class set off at a walking pace, downhill over the gravel.

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Herculeses! cried Regina Seidel. She shouted this often, and it rarely signified anything good.

How many? asked Caroline Bedford.

Not a single one. Well, no one I'd consider.

No one at all? Oh, come on, you can't be serious.

Caroline felt her stomach ache return abruptly. A nasty little ember of pain deep inside her belly. Like a miniature sun, roughly the size of a pea. She'd spent half the day trying to appease the mini-sun with fennel tea; to sweet-talk it; to drown it, if need be, in the greenish-yellow stuff; or perhaps best of all to simply wash it out of herself so that the pain would finally cease. It hadn't helped at all. Fennel was clearly overrated.

I've been through them three times, said Regina with a shrug. Her eyebrows bucked, the eyes behind her scarlet glasses widened and her lips became a thin line. Regina's 'shit happens' face. It had been appearing often in recent times. Too often.

Caroline, who had just sat upright in anger, slumped back in her leather chair. Up until now she had fully intended to smash it out of the park in the role of confident, self-assured hotel director with British roots – one who maintained her poise, encouraged others, could pull a good idea out of her hat. But from

one moment to the next, she suddenly lost any energy for it. What good would an uplifting speech do now, when neither she nor Regina would believe in it and no one apart from the two of them was there to hear it? And in any case, weren't far too many trivial things said in this world, by far too many people, day after day?

That's not good at all, said Caroline, it's bad.

Regina nodded.

The telephone rang in the outer room; no one answered.

That might be Frankfurt, said Regina. About your call tomorrow, with Forbes's new EA.

Can you tell that from the way it's ringing?

They already tried earlier.

And what's Frankfurt got to do with the new EA calling me?

Regina attempted a sort of smile. I think they're worried. Because they don't know what the guy wants from you either.

Well now, what could it be, said Caroline. Piling on even more pressure, keen to see better numbers and so on. That's his job. What's his name again?

Bennett Reynolds.

Never heard of him. Caroline felt the mini-sun getting hotter. What was going on here? Was she getting stomach ulcers already? In her mid-fifties? It was possible, certainly. This job made it possible. And if Milton Forbes's new executive assistant was personally ringing Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, then a stomach ulcer was probably justified.

Regina flipped through the thin sheaf of papers as though a few more likely-looking applications had just fluttered into her

lap through the open window. One of the attached passport photos escaped the clutches of its paperclip and fell to the floor.

The telephone ringing in the outer room fell silent.

Caroline bent forward curiously and examined the photo that had landed on the parquet floor facing her. It showed an angular, halfway pretty girl with straggly blonde hair, around the age of twenty. Something about her looked daring. Was it her eyes? That disdainful, almost mocking expression?

And this is ...? asked Caroline limply.

Regina skim-read the couple of pieces of paper belonging to the photo: Marie-Sophie Günzel, born in Silz, just around the corner from here, twenty-four years old, mediocre secondary-school results, year of voluntary social work in a care home in Untergöhren, broke off training to be a geriatric nurse after two years due to long Covid, looking for employment ever since, waitresses now and then on a temporary basis in various restaurants. Hasn't provided a CRB. That doesn't look good. Instead, there's a letter of recommendation from her English teacher, Dr Wölki, at the Richard Wossidlo Grammar School.

Aha, said Caroline, because nothing else occurred to her, and thought: mugshot of Marie-Sophie, snapped after the police had caught her in the act. She'd probably mugged a pensioner in his summerhouse in Silz and smashed his head in with a spanner.

Regina looked up. All the same, it is an excellent reference.

And what are they saying on the bush telegraph?

Regina took off her glasses; she always knew the salient points off by heart: Marie grew up without a father, used to run

away from home from time to time, that bit about long Covid prob'ly just an excuse. Regarded as clever, but equally if not more lazy. Wrapped scores of boys round her little finger then used them in every respect, but that's just hearsay. It was fact, on the other hand, that she'd been done on three counts of possessing marijuana, sentenced to community service at Göbel Abbey for all three of them, and—

I thought that stuff was legal now.

Only up to twenty-five grams in public. Dried.

Caroline pulled an impressed face. Regina was full of surprises, and she looked like it, too. Today she was wearing a garish flowered skirt with pink tights, black suede cowboy boots, a white-and-yellow-striped rollneck jumper and her red horn-rimmed glasses à la Gary Larson – a peculiar kind of trademark that was the only constant in her wildly changing style of dress. What Regina didn't know, she found out. How – no one could say for sure. I know mice and men around these parts, was her standard answer. No matter whether it concerned applicants, handymen or delivery people from the local area, if mice and men were asked, helpful and sometimes even strictly confidential background information would come to light.

The telephone took up its ringing again.

Sometimes Caroline had the feeling that Regina was a private detective she'd hired, rather than a director's assistant. But perhaps it was just that you needed to be both in order to survive today's world of omnipresent deficiencies. Previously, staff had beaten a path to the wrought-iron gates of superior addresses like

the EDEN; now, applications came in from the ex-cons, layabouts and dealers of the Mecklenburg Lake District. An unutterable relegation, from the Champions League to the bottom division.

Over the past twelve months, the term ‘disaster’ had become too small for the situation in the staffing department. Disaster – yes, that was verging on minimisation. There was at least such a thing as disaster prevention to protect against disasters. Caroline, however, received assistance from no one. In actual fact, she realised, she had long since run out of words to describe the deplorable state of affairs she was having to deal with here, like a suicidal circus artiste juggling hand grenades with the pins pulled out. On the other hand, it wasn’t like there wasn’t anyone she could talk to with brutal honesty about the situation. Every single person who theoretically came into question could have used that knowledge against her.

Only Regina knew how serious it really was, at least on the dismal level of acute shortages and positions advertised in vain. She was, however, largely spared the cruel bureaucratic consequences of their plight, and also the sight of the financial abyss which Caroline had permanently before her eyes. A chasm on whose stony floor a smashed body was slowly bleeding out, horribly twisted limbs sticking out at all angles as evidence of an unchecked plunge from above: it was she herself, in an elegant trouser suit, the future worst-case version of herself, having failed fantastically at recruiting inexpensive boys and girls who now looked down at Caroline Bedford lying in smithereens on the rough rocks below.

Fewer staff in Room Service meant fewer available rooms, just as fewer staff in the kitchen led to a reduced à la carte menu in the four-star restaurant while fewer employees in the spa or in Gardening endangered their Superior rating. Increasing the number of hours worked by the staff who were there, however, led to grotesque amounts of overtime, employment law issues, tangible discontent among the already permanently stressed employees, and so to mistakes, discontent among the guests, complaints and finally resignations. Although there were millions of refugees in the country who wanted to work. Apparently. And where were all these refugees who were champing at the bit to get a job – the ones you always read about in the newspaper? Certainly not here. How was anyone supposed to understand it? A hotel full of refugees – that would be it, thought Caroline.

Added to all this, the ultimate foe these days, of course, were the online reviews posted by their guests. The ‘Elegant After-Hours’ and ‘Secrets of the Orient’ sauna infusions had unfortunately had to be cancelled today? The spa was reeking of poor drainage again? Someone’s room wasn’t ready until an hour after check-in time, and it was missing the French rosemary-scented hand soap inscribed with the name of the hotel, which people loved stealing so they could use it to show off back home? Hadn’t caught a thing in the lake yet again, but every day there were well-fed silverfish in the bathroom? The bar is closed, because the barkeeper is currently overseeing the ‘Elegant After-Hours’ sauna infusion, while the sauna attendant himself is back in beautiful Romania?

Only that lunchtime, a guest had been making his fury known at reception as Caroline stood in the back office in front of the pinboard where sick notes were posted; he was drivelling on, something about his ancient mother's ancient bathroom plumbing in Leverkusen, which still functioned better than the plumbing in his room! That would have been the moment for Caroline to make an appearance. Lukasz, who – although not remotely qualified for it – was doing the early shift on the front desk because Ali was apparently in bed with a summer flu, had only come from Poland three years ago. To this day, whenever the Champions League was being shown in the staff room, he shouted, They have to score a goal! and was guaranteed never to have heard of Leverkusen.

The dialogue that had played out between Lukasz and regular guest Dennis Lattko over the minutes that followed had resembled an absurdist play. Two lorries laden with suicide bombers and explosives speeding towards a head-on collision. Caroline, the pillar of salt in front of the pinboard, could have prevented this fatal crash. By means of a spirited, self-assured intervention from a hotel director who knew every trick in the book and over the years had developed sophisticated people-management techniques that could take the wind right out of the sails of a recalcitrant guest like Lattko. She could have spared Lukasz the humiliation, mellowed the guest, informed the maintenance team, rescued the situation. But first she would have needed to find the strength within herself to do all that. And she had looked: within herself. But that strength hadn't even been

there the day before. On the contrary. She'd felt completely weak, lacking all energy, battery empty. Instead, the little ember had made itself known, pulsing rhythmically inside her stomach.

Later, reports had come to her of a weeping Lukasz who simply couldn't be comforted, of a frustrated regular guest who mustn't be alienated because he paid a lot and always on time, of distraught personnel.

And Caroline? Had, instead of taking the situation in hand, only worried about the security cameras in the back office, which were always filming, twenty-four hours a day, and which could, in their black-and-white footage, expose her as weak, cowardly and passive. As a director who left her people in the lurch when the going got tough. Now her failure was eating away at her; it wouldn't give her a moment's peace. Perhaps—

Regina cleared her throat. Caroline, are you keeping in mind that Frau Beckmann arrived yesterday?

Who?

Sandra Beckmann.

Who's Sandra Beckmann?

The comedy queen. Mrs Mensch.

Mrs Mensch! Yes, Pavel did tell me ... she's meant to be very funny. I don't watch German television, as you know, only the BBC.

Frau Beckmann, said Regina, is classed as an A-star-list celebrity. A personal welcome from yourself would be very good.

I'll do it later, Caroline said and looked out of the window. Botz the Butcher was just driving up, pictures of grinning pigs on

the side of the refrigerated van. Those pigs looked downright high, like they were on drugs ... What were they grinning about? The fact that they were about to end up in their own intestines? She tore herself away from her pig observation. Her stomach had settled again.

Anything else?

Regina went through her notes. The gamekeeper got in touch again, that business of the wild boars ... there were two of them on the golf course yesterday, on the green at the ninth hole, and they scared an old man.

An old man?

Martin von Winterfeld. He's booked the Snipe Suite.

And the gamekeepers? Why aren't they doing anything about it?

Not enough of them.

Them too. Caroline felt the ember firing up again.

Do you know what all those refugees are doing with themselves?

Regina shrugged her shoulders.

Well, they're certainly not doing sauna infusions, and they aren't gamekeepers either.

Beg pardon?

Don't worry. Caroline waved it off. No one knew where these staff shortages were leading. The guests, of course, had zero understanding. Instead, hatred was simmering. At least that's one person still simmering stuff here, Ingulf the head chef always said. They used to be able to laugh at that.

And where did this unfettered fury come from? On the bike paths, white-haired senior citizens in padded gilets hurled abuse at one another like pimps on the Reeperbahn in Hamburg. But prostitutes and protection money weren't the issue here; instead it was Henrike the doctor's wife and Helga the industrialist's wife who hadn't rung their bells before overtaking. And their husbands, red-nosed retired surgeons, CEOs, engineers, tax accountants, went at one another with bicycle pumps and umbrellas like beer-bellied Bravehearts. Escalation 1,000. Seven times this year already the police had come out to prevent Best Agers who had locked horns from spending their final years in a correctional facility. Two hotel guests had had their noses broken; one's cracked ribs had bored into a lung, resulting in a pneumothorax; several front teeth had been lost, including one with a miniature diamond glued on. The whole of society seemed to be losing its head. Abuse, too, had long since attained the Superior level ...

Regina's throat-clearing pulled Caroline out of her thoughts.

Should we invite her for an interview?

Who?

This Marie-Sophie Günzel. Regina herself did not look convinced.

Gladly not, said Caroline.

All right. Regina made herself a note.

Leave the pile here with me; I'll have another look through as well.

The door closed quietly. Regina was gone; her scent remained. Sun by Jil Sander, all year round. At least it goes with the mini-sun in my stomach, thought Caroline as she drank the last of her cold tea and stood up.

The telephone in the outer room rang again, but Regina had already left to have a smoke. Her only vice, and what of it. Could it be Frankfurt again? Caroline decided not to hear the ringing. Eventually the caller gave up.

If the going was this bad, then she'd have to go. Round the hotel. For an hour or two. Along corridors and hallways, from the lobby to the library, from the kitchen to the Fontane fountain and the Eden ash tree in the park. Act as though she had a destination and hardly any time, although the exact opposite was the case. It wasn't as if anyone could check up on her, after all. She was the one who checked up on everything and everyone round here. Caroline passed the spa lounge. Here, Nanami Ayaka, the masseuse who hailed from Tokyo, performed true miracles with her traditional Japanese moon massage. Caroline went up two steps, glanced into the Amber Lounge, inhaled deeply. The most exclusive event room in the entire hotel, designed by her personally to incorporate historic building materials, an open fire and a walnut Steinway. Next door: the snooker room, the library, which she glimpsed on her circuits, straightening several things up. She didn't see the staff shortages, just staff. Uttering artful greetings as soon as they saw the boss approaching, smiling with whitened teeth, holding doors open for her with manicured hands, offering a little refreshment. As though she were a queen

inspecting her palace. Here they were: the personnel she loved. Hard-working, alert, smartly dressed in the Jamboree Group's corporate colour code. Five-star Superior, exactly as it was meant to feel. Life could also be good, then.

Queen Caroline walked down the flight of stairs that led to the hall. Müritz the Mouse was approaching, the hotel mascot beloved of children; right now, it was giving her a little bow. Caroline smiled, stroked its plush arm. Müritz, always dressed in a purple top bearing the hotel logo, was a walking mystery; you could never tell who was inside the cute full-body costume, which actually appeared to be a cross between a squirrel and a hamster. With a wave, the mascot disappeared around the corner in the direction of the bar. Caroline went the other way, passing the high transom windows of the orangery as she headed towards the palm house and, finally, through the historic red-brick archway that gave on to the park. There it stood: the Eden Ash. Not illuminated – it was, after all, broad daylight and electricity unaffordable these days. But nonetheless splendid to behold. A magnificent symbol of endurance. Living proof of the fact that you just had to hold on. How many guests had this tree seen come and go?

I'm just a number to you, said Caroline to the ash tree.

Did you say something, Mrs Bedford?

Caroline whipped round. She'd been sure she was alone. More than sure, in fact; 100 per cent safe. Otherwise she'd never have spoken to a tree. A person who talked to trees was one small step from crossing the threshold into insanity. But now there was a young man standing right in front of her, and although Caroline

recognised him, had even been the person to employ him, his beauty made her all but speechless. Caroline took in his contoured lips, prominent cheekbones, wild dark curls, flawless skin – and those eyes! How on earth was she ever meant to look away from those eyes ...?

Mrs Bedford? Is everything OK?

Caroline realised her mouth was open. She was a carp now. A carp that was talking to a tree.

Are you feeling alright??

She closed her mouth and swallowed.

Everything's fine. I'm just ... dizzy. I needed some fresh air.

Shall I fetch you a glass of water?

No, thank you. That won't be necessary; I'm OK again now.

I'll gladly accompany you back inside.

The young man offered her an arm. This was like something out of Rosamunde Pilcher! What wonderful staff, thought Caroline as she studied that muscular arm – how she would have loved to reach for it. But even the tiniest overstepping of boundaries was a death sentence in her position. The Jamboree Group had imposed the strictest compliance regulations in the entire industry. She saw herself broken and spread-eagled at the bottom of the chasm, a smile on her lips, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth, skirt rucked up. Ice cold, but happy. The young man beside her, beautiful and dead.

You're Lev, aren't you?

Yes, Mrs Bedford, correct. Lev Tkachenko.

From Dnipro.

Exactly. Are you really all right? Do you need anything?

Caroline nodded. There were a lot of things she needed, a lot she would have liked to say. All of it out of the question. At the same time, she was amazed. Of course there were refugees in her hotel – one of them was standing right here in front of her – only there weren't enough, there ought to be a lot more refugees...

Thank you, Lev. Everything's fine.

Of course, Mrs Bedford. There's something wrong with the ash tree, by the way.

I beg your pardon?

Look and see.

Caroline put on her glasses. Indeed. A few of the leaves on the tree looked slightly brown, appeared to be withering at the tips. That wasn't right. So, here was the next disaster. The ember in her stomach made itself known again; she'd forgotten all about it. Boars, trees, refugees – was there nothing around here that functioned?! She'd have to tell the gardener straight away. The Eden Ash was under conservation, was the hallmark of the hotel; unthinkable that it might—

The tree is dying, said Lev sadly.

Caroline felt dizzy. She reached for his arm.

[END OF SAMPLE]