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Reality Show
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THE WAY THINGS GO.

This wasn't planned. None of it. Her there, the barrel of the pistol between his teeth, the expression on his face – more than just fear, more than just drops of sweat dripping down his temples like tears falling from a wet hairline.

“Wren,” my voice sounds weak. The voice of a coward speaking from my mouth. How has it come to this? What have I missed? Why is she doing this?

I stare at the monitor. Too far away from everything. Disconnected yet still present, there but inactive and passive. A bud in her ear. The screen has a blue tint. Everything is blue: the man, the gun in his mouth, the second one in her hand, his face and Wren.

I thought I knew her. I thought I knew who she was, how she ticked and what drove her on. But when do you ever really know anyone? I mean really? Not just superficially, not just what they show you, not just slightly under their skin, but deep down in the subcutaneous layers where it hurts. Where we bury our secrets as if they were bodies in a graveyard. We cultivate them with our thoughts, fertilise them with our silence and keep the lid on them so that they never find their way back to the surface from the hollows of our subconscious, of from the chambers of our hearts and our kidneys. We want to suffocate them in us. Silence them. And fail.

I place my palms on the metal table; the surface is rough. My elbows are shaking as I look at the laptop screen, trying to grasp the situation, to understand what is happening right now. A man in an orange prison uniform is kneeling on the floor; his hands are tied behind his back with cable ties. His wife and their two children, a boy and a girl, are huddled together on the huge corner sofa, a light grey island of expensive material. The children are crying while their mother holds her hands over their eyes – and it all leaves me completely cold. Her, her son, her daughter, their begging. Please, don't do it, please. He's a good man. Always the same phrases, the same intonations through the stifled tears. Her nose blocked, eyes swollen. I don't care about all that. But I do care about her.

On the ceiling, the cameras flash black and white as rhythmically as a heart beat. And then I ask myself how is this going to end – me in this godforsaken flat and her in a glass cube about to put a bullet through someone's head. With millions of viewers sitting entranced on their sofas and comfy chairs with baited breath and their hands in a crisp packet.

“Swift?” Silence. “Swift, is this live?”

He doesn't react.

“Wren”, I say again, this time more urgently. But she too does not answer. She is standing with her back half to me. A slender shoulder, a fraction of her profile, the round back of her head. Her whole body is stiff; her arm and her hand stretching out. She pushes the gun barrel further into his mouth. His face looks like a scream, a mirror image of her resolve. He kneels before her as if begging as he tries not gag. His daughter his crying, his son too. His wife is shaking. No more pleading, just the children crying. The moment could be cut with a knife. It is filled with a silence in which something lurks, as if it we were waiting for a spark, for everything to explode.

There must be a reason for what is happening here. There has to be one, some kind of explanation. Think, damn it, think.

Then I remember: Wren naked in the safe room under my bedroom, her expression as she put two and two together, that she wanted to have him in the top ten, that it was her suggestion. Until that moment, he had just been one possible candidate among many. At the time, I didn't think it strange nor did I question it. Looking at it now, I should have done. I remember the expression on her face and the stubbornness in her eyes. Like a row of dominos my thoughts cascade. One after another, they become atrocities in my head and adrenaline in my blood. My fists clench. My chest grows tight; my veins, my muscles and my whole body shrinks. Sweat on my palms, sweat in my arm pits, sweat on my stomach.

Why didn't she tell me? Why didn't I notice?

"How do you know him?" I quietly ask in a voice that is not like my own. "Tell me what he did to you."

Then she finally turns around. She looks directly at the camera as if she is looking at me and not just the lens. Her eyes are hard and empty, not green-grey, but blue-black. Gunmetal blue.

She looks at me for an endless second. Just my heart beat and her inner battle.

And then she points the second gun at me.

And pulls the trigger.

92 MINUTES EARLIER

HEINER VOIGT.

MARCHING ORDERS.

Heiner Voigt stands naked in front of the mirror in his huge master bathroom and conducts the Radetzky March with relish. The piece is playing at a deafening volume, so loudly that the crystals in the chandelier are vibrating in time with music.

What an evening! An evening just to Heiner's taste. He hates Christmas, this intoxicated commercialism that people call Christmas, absolutely laughable. For years he has celebrated this festival of love alone. This year, Heiner had surprised himself with a full body massage – he had ordered the Asian girl spontaneously on the internet, just like you would with a take-away. A hour later, she was there. Mai-Jin, Mai-Li, Mai-Tong? Who cares? His trapezius muscle is as soft as butter, as is his neck. Mai-Jin, Mai-Li, Mai-Tong had astoundingly strong hands. And exquisite body oil with wild hazel and lavender. Heiner has already had a few massages in his time; he knows his stuff. After today's session he was so slippery he felt like a Greek antipasti.

Heiner had given the Asian girl a generous tip and sent her on her way. Then he had got into the bath, spent a hour dozing in the whirlpool and followed it with the financial news. An evening exactly to his taste, Heiner thought again. A celebration of love for himself.

Heiner feels his stomach grumble. Perfect timing. While he has been conducting up here, a meal is being prepared for him in the kitchen. Isn't it good to be rich? thinks Heiner. He need not do anything, can pay for everything and buy everyone. A system winner of the first order.

As he smells the food, a very salty and tangy aroma rising from the ground floor, his mouth waters. Heiner had no desire for goose, nor turkey or duck, the obligatory Christmas menu. Instead he opted for Shanghai street food – an alternative to all this sappy nonsense to which half the population annually succumbs in the same way as they love new-borns and puppies. Christmas songs, Christmas trees, Christmas decorations, Heiner has no time for them. Nor for this bout of consumerism that can barely be beaten in terms of kitsch and camouflages itself with traditions and Christian values. The immaculate conception - a virgin who gave birth to the son of God in stable. Of course, that happened...

Nevertheless, Heiner is making the best of it. In good humour, he marches through the bathroom, plays an imaginary trombone, bobs his head from side to side and royally amuses himself. Heiner parades back and forth, immerses himself in the music and smiles as he sees himself in the mirror; so naked and well-

nourished. This wealth belly has been years in the making and he has well and truly earned it. Heiner stamps over the heated tiles; his layer of fat vibrates every time his heel makes contact with the ground, and so do the crystals in the chandelier. And so the circle closes thinks Heiner. At this thought, he laughs. He laughs out loud but nobody hears him since the Radetzky March is louder. As it gains speed for the final time, Heiner gives it his all. His sparse hair bobs up and down in time with it. He raises his arm in triumph, fully at ease with himself and the world. At the end of the piece, Heiner turns one last time and bows low to his own reflection. In the next moment, when he stands back up, someone is holding a gun to his temple.

WALTER EMHOFF.

HOME SWEET HOME.

Behind Walter Emhoff, the garage door closes like a metal curtain. As if it were the rampart to fortress. And then, it is dark apart from the reddish ambient lighting of his car. Walter waits for the light in the garage to switch on. He has grown used to delayed reaction of the movement sensors even though he'd expected better from a smart home. As he turns the motor off and opens the driver's side door, there is a faint click and the strip lights flicker on. A stark, naked light, which makes the room appear large and barren. Concrete walls and four cars: one to the left of him, two to his right and Walter in his Mercedes in the middle. He is running late. His wife had asked him to come home earlier but the flight was delayed and Walter had not been in a particular hurry to see her – neither her nor the children. He and Eva have spoiled them by giving them too much of everything except their attention, which is usually diverted elsewhere. Eva's in her father's law firm, and his in upcoming sporting events. And it soothes their guilty consciences, a material balance of sorts at least for a little while. The result: children's shiny eyes, gratitude and peace. Walter sits there for a few moments, starrng ahead of himself. Then he resignedly takes his wedding ring from his wallet and slides it on his finger. He can never wear it when he cheating on his wife, he could never do it. As if removing the ring means he is not an adulterer. He used to be able to swap from one life to next at a flick of switch, just like changing the station on TV. Now it is a huge effort, as if it eats away at him a little more each time. The wear and tear of his own lies is grinding him down. Walter opens the last e-mail from his assistant and reminds himself of the presents he has bought for his wife and children. Once again, this year he has been generous. He gets out of the car, walks round to the boot and opens it. Two large paper bags. Walter casts a glance inside them. The wrapping paper is tastefully Christmassy, a cinnamon stick is attached one of the ribbons and on another hangs a bauble. Anyone who knows him, would see that the gifts were never wrapped by him. It is so obvious in an way that would have made him laugh, had it not been so sad. Walter hates the Christmas holidays with its insincere displays and pretence. He takes a deep breath, pulls his shoulders back and steps back. The paper handles cuts into his fingers. He presses the long button on the remote control of his car and the boot closes as if moved by unseen hands. Walter likes its precise and even movement. So technical and mechanical. Walking towards the door, he glances at the camera on the ceiling. It is pointing at him like a spotlight. Walter looks directly into it and smiles to an imaginary audience like a theatre actor about to go on stage. The security door opens automatically, Walter goes into the house and it closes behind him. Shortly after, the lights go out.

THE SAME TIME, SOMEWHERE ELSE.

WELL THEN ...

The monitor shows ten small tiles. Living rooms, kitchens, Christmas trees, presents, open fires, older children, younger children, men in suits, women dress up, girls wearing frills and boys in patterned jumpers. Ten small black and white worlds with a blueish tint. Like one of those filters that for fight scenes in films. Colour grading. Dark and threatening. Emhoff is standing with two bags in his garage and smiling insincerely at the camera. Then he goes into the house.

“He’s inside,” says Swift.

Finch comes over to his desk, rests his palms on its top. “What about the others?” he asks.

“They’re in too. Emhoff was the last one.”

“Good,” says Finch, “Now batten down the hatches.”

WALTER EMHOFF.

PAYBACK.

Once again, she is playing Ave Maria. She plays it every year, and every year Walter wants to turn it off for it is beautiful and gruesome in equal measure. Opus 52 No. 6, B839, Franz Schubert. Walter does not know why but this piece makes him feel as if his sins are being exposed. As if the soprano knows everything that he has ever done and is the embodiment of all the suffering he has caused.

Walter had given all that up three years ago. Since then he has satisfied his addiction in a different way and is doing his best to forget and to nip his guilty conscience in the bud. It is a race that increasingly tires him. As if the lies weigh too heavy for just one pair of shoulders. One day the past will catch up with him. Of that he is sure; it will most likely be when he least expects it.

Walter feels something touch his waist and winces. Eva puts her arms around him.

“Are you ok?” she asks.

“It was a long day” Walter answers evasively.

“It’s always a long day,” Eva answers. Half a head shorter than him, she stands in front of him and looks at him, “We are a long day.”

Walter knows what she means and nods.

“For the sake of the children, it would be nice if you could pretend that you wanted be here. You know how sensitive they are. Antonia in particular.”

“But I do want to be here,” he answers.

“Yes,” say his wife.

Walter takes hold of her hand. “I do,” he says.

“I think that could be a more convincing.” Eva smiles. And Ave Maria starts again. The strains of a harp playing to itself. It makes Walter feel sick.

He doesn’t move, just stands there and observes his wife. She is beautiful, she always has been. Blond, shoulder-length hair, a face that reflects her intelligence, grey-blue eyes, expensive earrings and a sternness around her mouth that reveals she frets more than she laughs. One day, his daughters will look very similar to her. Pretty at first glance, disappointed at the second.

Eva fixes her eyes on him, as if trying to look inside him. The soprano continues to sing; it sounds like a lament. The choir joins in and Walter’s pulse increases. He fantasises about smashing everything around him into tiny little pieces, grabbing the poker beside the open fire to attack the Christmas tree, hitting it from the left, then the right, left, right, from above and from below, from all sides. Walter imagines the baubles shattering into in red and yellow smithereens, the lovingly arranged gifts flying through the living room with the wrapping paper ripping, boxes covered in tiny Santas hitting against the walls before landing on the floor

in a bashed heap. Walter sees himself screaming from the top of his lungs, like he has never screamed before – and Walter has screamed often.

“Are you sure that you are ok?” Eva asks.

Walter nods.

“Ok.” She pauses. “If that’s the case, I’ll go fetch the children.”

Her statement did not sound like a question, so Walter says, “yes.” And smiles.

Eva hesitates for a brief moment, then she turns and crosses the generously sized living area. Walter notices her lithe feline gait, the way she barely touches the floor. She heads up to the first floor. Walter watches as her head disappears from his view, followed by her back, her bottom and her legs. Once he can no longer see her, he can breathe more easily.

Walter stands there without moving, a lost man who to the rest of the world appears to have everything, a picture-perfect life. A picture-perfect marriage, a picture-perfect family, a picture-perfect career. It is like one of these photos that has been retouched to death. Too smooth, too happy, too good to be true. His life is a bespoke suit but for someone else.

Sometimes, Walter just wants to rip down the façade. To use the truth to free himself from the lies. But he won’t tell the truth. Because there are things that are too big to confess. You take those to the grave with you.

Lost in thought, Walter hears steps on the stairs. The sound of them is his command to put on a happy face. A starting pistol. Ready, steady, go. Walter looks up, his smile like a mask covering his face. But in the same moment, he senses that something isn’t right. How one liar notices another. He cannot put his finger on it, just that it is so. The corners of his mouth drop and a deep crease forms between Walter’s eyebrows. And then he understands. That there are too many feet: the small feet of his children and between them those of his wife, but behind them a pair of black boots, two pairs, three pairs. They are marching in step.

Walter stares at the stairs. At the legs that become visible, at the bodies and at the faces. First the faces of his children and then of his wife; all three of them with identical blank expressions. The people following them are wearing masks and black overalls. Walter knows what it means. He knows it, just like you simply know some things.

“Good evening, Mr Emhoff,” says a male voice that Walter does not recognise. “We are sorry to drop in on you and your family like this at Christmas. However, I fear that cannot be avoided when taking hostages.”

V FOR VENDETTA.

Being in the same room as him is surreal. As if her life had been paused at a particular place and is now, many years later, being continued as a completely different one. The last time she saw him, she was sixteen. A dull Sunday evening in April after a competition. The windscreen wipers were whizzing across the windscreen at full pelt – left, right, left, right. She still remembers how strained they sounded. As if the wipers were wheezing. The radio played in the background; some song that she no longer remembered. He was driving and she was sitting with her head bowed in the passenger seat, her sports bag on her lap. They did not speak. When they arrived at the boarding school, he let her out as usual in front of the main building and bade her farewell with a see you tomorrow. She never saw him again.

Until now. Until this very moment.

He stands in the huge living room in a suit and tie, strangely out of place like a toy figure. On seeing him, a process in her sets in motion. Old images rise to the surface and compete for her attention. A smouldering fire becomes an explosive flame.

As she approaches him, she becomes aware that she had suppressed the memory of him much better than she

had thought. He legs carry her, moving step for step towards him, while behind her mask the façade begins to crumble. She had forgotten how big he is. But not how small he had made her feel. Remembering is like a balloon bursting inside her. She starts crying but nobody can see because the Guy Fawkes mask continues to smile for her.

According to the dictionary revenge is the act of retaliating for wrongs or injury received.

Back then she was the mouse and he the cat. Now the tables have turned.

Only he does not know it.

FERDINAND LITTEN.

SERVES YOU RIGHT.

Felicitas is sitting at the grand piano playing The Christmas Song – Ferdinand's favourite at Christmas. In particular, when she plays it. When she does, it sounds so simple as if everyone should be able to play it, even him with his two left hands. Ferdinand is lying on the sofa with his eyes closed. He is enjoying the moment, his growing hunger and the empty feeling in his stomach, which is just waiting to be filled. Ruth has spent the whole day in the kitchen preparing the Christmas meal; roast venison and spaetzle. Its aroma filling the whole house. After that, there will be baked apples in flaky pastry with caramel sauce because Nikolas and Pauline like it so much. The twins are still in their bedrooms, Greta has bathed them and helped them get dressed. Ferdinand hears them laughing upstairs and it makes him smile. Carefree, light-hearted, childish. Julian was once like that. Now he is the opposite.

Once again he has not written this year, neither an e-mail nor a Christmas card. Ferdinand had sent him one. Just a few lines. Merry Christmas, I hope you are doing well – something along those lines. It had overcome him, a sentimental short-circuit just before the Christmas holidays. Otherwise, he did not tend towards emotional outbursts. Life is hard and unfair. A philosophy, with which he has aligned himself. Ferdinand thinks of the last, angry words that he and his son exchanged and of the disdainful expression on Julian's face immediately before he left. This image has burned itself into Ferdinand's memory. Like a photo in his head that he cannot delete.

Ruth is working in the kitchen. Ferdinand hears a cast-iron pan lid being lifted and put back on the pan, the oven humming in the background. Pleasant sounds, cosy. Precisely what he needs right now. The last few years have been hard, this year was particularly difficult. He doesn't want to think about it and concentrates on the sound of the piano but he still drifts away into his memories and reviews the past few months, the highs and lows – above all Felicitas' miscarriage. At nineteen weeks, a girl. The days after exhausted him. Particularly his powerlessness and his anger at being at the mercy of life's caprices. The loss of control and nightmares. At least, business is going well. Litten & Partners are solid. Straight-forward, persevering and reliable Ferdinand hears the advertising slogan of his company. Followed by the kitchen door opening. Its creaking is just a quiet sound, as if the house were whispering.

Yes, Christmas will do him good. The quiet and the time with his family. Wool socks instead of dress shoes. Forgetting about work for a few days, lying in, playing with the children, finally teaching Pauline to ride a bike, a couple of massages, sleeping with his wife, drinking wine with her and going in the sauna with her, sitting in the whirlpool on the patio on an evening and gazing up at the starry sky. Ferdinand feels his forehead relax at the prospect of the coming days and his eyelids grow heavy. He is tired, just about to drop off; the piano music is like a lullaby and the aroma of the Christmas dinner gives him a feeling a warmth and safety. Amongst all the hectic it is a rare feeling that makes him think of the Christmases of his childhood; him as a small boy sitting in his parents' living rooms, the scent of pine needles and candle wicks, the rustling

as the presents were opened.

That is the moment in which he notices that Felicitas has stopped playing – not at the end of the piece, but right in the middle of it. There is smell ... synthetic, metal. There are no longer any pans clattering or children laughing, just the hum of an oven. The atmosphere has changed in a fraction of second. Tension returns to Ferdinand's muscles; to his forehead, his arms and his legs. He opens his eyes and looks down the barrel of a gun. The person behind it is masked.

“Good evening, Mr Litten,” a woman's voice says. “My name is Jay and I'm here to take care of you tonight.”

HARALD LINDEMANN.

TOP GUN.

This is exactly how Harald had imagined this year's Christmas celebrations would be. The right company (Markus, Johannes and Kai), the right atmosphere (merry and hungry) and the right location (his chalet in the mountains). Four of them in a snow globe of comfortable warmth. A crackling open fire, two generously spaced bedrooms with en suites situated far enough away from each other, a living room with a dining area and a big screen, a sprawling relaxation area with pelts and blankets, lit candles on the window sills and the antlers on the walls casting shadows over the polished floorboards. Plus an array of employees catering for their every need.

Harald's eye wanders to the opulently decorated tree in front of the window. Behind it is just snow and somewhere in the darkness is the valley with its villages. Scattered clusters of lights, which from the distance are a reminder there are other people in this world. But they are of no interest to Harald. The petit bourgeois and simpletons who he had never understood. Markus places a loving hand on Harald's shoulders. He is chatting with their friends, they laugh, drink wine and in the background some American Christmas music is playing that simply reeks of kitsch. It is perfect, just like a Christmas film. Cut-off from the rest of the world, they are four kings on his mountain throne.

Nobody had thought him capable of all this. The money, the success, the property and the shares. Perhaps with the exception of his mother; she had always believed in him, may God bless her soul. Harald had always been different. Even as a boy. Today, that is precisely what he likes – the scandal and the oddities that have made his life what it is. Earlier, he had simply been too small, too cynical, too gay. Gay in a small Austrian village. Not a nice way to grow up but he learned a lot from it. About human flaws, the abysses and the mob. Look here come the fatherless nancy boy.

'Cuz his father was gay too, that's why he did a runner.

Yes, to his lover.

Harald had pretended that he didn't care. Most of the time he managed it fairly well but at Christmas it was hard. He had always loved the festive season. The twinkling, the baubles, the snow. Even as a child, as a spoiled little rug rat for whom his mother would do anything. She wanted to make up for what his father had done wrong by refusing to acknowledge him like a disease you hoped would just disappear of its own accord. Instead his father had disappeared. Off to some other woman in some other town. Harald had never met him. Although he had often imagined such a meeting. His father, seeking and finding his lost son, explaining it all to him and Harald forgiving him everything. At some point this fantasy was replaced by reality. Namely that his father had never looked for him because he did not want to find him, that he did not care about him, a past mistake, and that his father was a huge arsehole.

Harald has come far. Sometimes, he wonders if it is because he wanted to impress him, this phantom that he has carried about as an empty hole his whole life long. An attempt to get one over on him, to show him what a great son his has missed out on. Every step on the career ladder was another fuck you in his direction. This



is how he has made right to the top. He, the gay son of a pharmaceutical representative from a small village in Austria, is a millionaire. What a fantastic story. The anti-hero.

Harald smiles at the thought – and at the thought of his little school mates, who at the moment are below in the valley celebrating Christmas in all their mediocrity. With their fat wives and degenerate children, who haven't fallen far from the tree. He fell far from the tree. In retrospect, it had been a blessing.

One of the employees comes to the table and refills the glasses with wine. Harald tries to remember his name but he has forgotten. The young man is working for him for the first time. Normally, Harald is good with names.

“Are you ready for the first course?”

“Are we?” Harald asks his guests.

Markus shrugs his shoulders, “Maybe in 15 minutes or so?”

Johannes and Kai nod, “That sounds good,” they say.

“Very good,” the waiter says and bows slightly, “Then in a quarter of an hour.” As he turns, there is a knock at the door. He pauses, then asks, “Are you expecting more guests, Mr Lindemann?”

“I No,” says Harald and looks at Markus questioningly, “You perhaps?”

He shakes his head.

“Shall I take care of it?” the employee asks.

“No, no, not necessary.” Harald gets out of his chair, “Thank you.”

It is cool in the vestibule; the heavy curtains have kept the cold outside. Harald is tipsy. He had not noticed before at the table but now as he walks, he feels it. He hears the others laughing in the next room and smiles involuntarily. A song by Ella Fitzgerald is playing. Harald catches a glimpse of his lambskin slippers and even they amuse him.

As he looks up again, he sees that the glass in the front door's small window has misted up. He cannot see who is standing on the other side. The situation reminds Harald of an Austrian band, Erste Allegemine Verunsicherung, and their hit Ding Dong. He had not thought of this song for ages. His mind fills with lines from the chorus warning not to open the door, not to let anyone in and to pretend not to be at home. Harald sings quietly as he places his right hand on the door handle and pushes it down.

Then the door is open. Icy wind. Three figures dressed in black with their guns pulled and their faces masked.

“Mr Lindemann,” says the one in the middle, “Please forgive us for inviting ourselves to your party. But tonight, you are part of our show.”