



**Sybille Ruge**

**9mm Cut**

Novel

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Sample translation by Joel Scott

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*This won't work.*  
Cassandra

A severed head. Mouth hanging open. Nose broken. Bulging eyes gazing at the gas station across the road.

“You have a Medusa above your front door.”

“*A what?*”, Karnofsky asked in English.

Other people might have started with the scalped skull in the plastic bag or the shattered iPhone in the other wing of the building.

Not me. I have a penchant for antiquity.

I had seen the Medusa before I left on a pair of Versace boxers, while Ricky was giving me a classic case of the clap. An evening in July, a gaudy Medusa with the scent of Tandil Ocean Breeze. We shagged in front of the mirror in the changeroom. The dim light erased Ricky's

features and licked the oily shimmer from my polyester trousers. We were nearing climax when my phone buzzed.

It was C2.

I picked up.

C2 mumbled an apology for calling so late. It was a Sunday, after all, and in fifteen minutes, all of Germany would be sitting in front of an episode of *Tatort*. His voice was weighed down by a note of gloom, shocked that something was not going as smoothly as usual. A phone call for which it was hard to find the right words. C2 was a man with very clear expectations about how life was supposed to go, but right now, he had clearly reached an impasse, and he wasn't sure which way to turn. He wanted to meet me right away. I suggested Döner Royale and sent him the route.

Affection, tenderness, and emotions all evaporated into the sports clothes.

As a parting gift, I threw Ricky a Botticelli look. A halved smile. I would save the other half for the next morning. You should always set something aside for the next morning, that way you have something to get up for.

C2 was already waiting across from Döner Royale in his Porsche Taycan, which had provoked some anxious glances from the owner of the shop, who was acting more reserved than usual.

“I'll have the combo meal with plenty of onions. And make it spicy, please.”

I grabbed the warm aluminium bundle, waved to C2, and we sat down on a bench. The last sprays of the evening sun were intensifying. Two shreds in the sky, as red as spewed-up tomato spaghetti. The exact same colour as C2's Taycan.

K2 was sipping at a bottle of vitamin-enriched water, made a point of how funny the kebab shop was, and tried to decipher the logo on my T-shirt. Then he tried to piece together a lecture about profit, about how it was just a means to an end. Property comes with obligations and responsibilities, he said. I was happy that he was blathering on, because I was starving.

With him, this kind of prelude could vary in length, depending on the urgency of his problem. His verbiage about sustainable capitalism meant I could work away at my kebab undisturbed. For five years now I had been receiving a modest retainer from him, but then the payments were regular, even came in when there was no work. C2 had a natural distaste for government bodies. Which made it even more important to him to constructively quell conflicts through out-of-court agreements. I was his mediator. This role of go-between demanded high levels of ambiguity tolerance and intercultural skills. My methods follow the concepts of systemic therapy, in the broadest sense of the term. That is, they place an emphasis on the personal responsibility of those involved. I begin my confidential, one-on-one consensus-finding sessions with a single, fundamental question: How do you feel about the prospect of receiving a disability pension? A win-win situation, particularly given the limited paperwork.

I munched along and listened to C2's cryptic sentences. Gradually, I realised he was talking about his foundation.

Sacred objectives that promised tax breaks. Lots of my clients combatted the forces of gravity with brightly coloured clothes, whitewater rafting trips or martial arts. He had gone for a more subtle approach to aging. C2 wore a JPMorgan Chase baseball cap, had bought himself a few honorary appointments and retired racehorses with eating disorders and trauma from their days on the track, sponsored a few loony climate activists, and listened to Franco-Flemish polyphonic vocal music. Music that was at odds with the taste of the masses and at the same time provoked a longing for the respite of death.

It was kind of amazing what C2 was able to accomplish alongside running his international food-manufacturing business. On top of my job, I only just managed to squeeze my training in and then myself under Ricky. My days ended with a frozen meal and the "Sleeping Mediation" on Spotify.

On this summer evening I ate the greasy kebab and concentrated on the nuances of C2's speech. His mouth moved more on the vertical plane than the horizontal. The shifting of

the corner of his mouth up and down lent him the appearance of a nutcracker doll, particularly since his top teeth appeared bigger than the bottom ones. His bulky appearance and sedated expressions exuded an air of dominance. Between the lines, though, I sensed the presence of inner tumult.

“I’m used to getting my hands dirty. The foundation is my creation.”

This was the first I had heard of his foundation. It was apparently a transnational NGO based in Frankfurt, with the operational headquarters in Zurich. The foundation looked after young people who were absolutely impossible to send to other institutions, as C2 put it. His father had been given a wartime diploma and then headed to the frontlines. Which is why he devoted a large portion of his wealth to fostering occupational opportunities for young people. Worldwide. Everything has to be worldwide with Germans.

“Tomorrow is our Social Day, when our sponsors give their employees a day off to take part in a social event. You can get a good sense of things there. Here is the address. Be there at nine. Do you have a classic skirt suit?”

“Is this a job, then?”, I asked him, though I was wondering what he meant by classic.

Symmetrical creases appeared on his face to the left and right of his glasses. Every month he had a new pair of designer glasses, I could never keep up.

“We’re all about social skills, but the performance has to be right. Now back to your question: yes, it’s a job.” I delved into my döner. The sickle-shaped mass reached around and up to my ears. The yoghurt sauce was running down my chin in white rivulets, and the cabbage was cooling my face. C2 was blabbing on in great detail, but without getting to the heart of the matter. I’d finished my kebab and was staring at him with a look that cried for concrete engagement. He cleared his throat nervously, dusted off an assertive tone of voice and tried his hand at a compliment.

“Do you know what I like about you? You’re empathetic. You know how to assert yourself. You don’t try to stick out. People trust people like you.”

C2 didn't give a damn about underlying facts. I had a more productive view of trust; the less of it there is, the more intently you observe your surroundings. What he was referring to as empathy was actually client analysis, and what he saw as assertiveness was the certificate from the German Academy of Sports above my desk. The A Licence as a Bootcamp Instructor. A worthless piece of paper when compared to my titles in the European Muai-Thai Championships. The instructor licence was my fallback, in case I ever got tired of doing other people's dirty work.

C2's taut face looked as if it were falling apart. I know my clients better than they would like. You can see into offices with glass walls, but they don't offer any insight. He needed me more urgently than ever before. Which is why it didn't surprise me at all when he asked if he could call me by my first name as soon as the sun had disappeared. I twitched my shoulders to convey my consent. A professional always behaves discreetly in the presence of a client. C2 stood for Client 2, not for Chum 2. I swallowed the forced intimacy like a shitty clause in a contract.

When he mentioned smuggling cash across the border, I laughed.

"Yeah, of course, I'm 38, it's about time I take some time off. What better place than the slammer? The only thing is the internet access is limited. But it's also a good place for self-improvement."

"I've organised the whole thing. If you get caught, you just act naïve."

"Naïve? So I put on some frilly socks and plait my hair in pigtails?"

The silence this led to must have looked profound. Business resembles a crossword puzzle where you mechanically fill in the gaps after endless repetitions. I scrunched the foil from the kebab into a ball and dispatched it into the nearby bin with a single fluid motion. C2 looked around to check if anyone was listening in.

"You switch the bags in the duty-free shop."

"Holy shit, sir. Is there no other way you can get rid of me?"

“Come on, enough of the sir stuff.”

He had the chummy air of an insurance broker who flogs refunds that can be cashed in when the apocalypse comes.

“You buy a box of chocolates, you chat, and then he takes your bag and you take his. The cash is a side job, so to speak, okay? The main thing is the foundation.”

The sapphire glass of his Hentschel Hamburg Hafenmeister watch flashed beneath the streetlight when he looked at the time. I had a go at mimicking his chummy tone.

“Your watches look expensive. Say, do taxes make you pensive? *Knittelvers*, a folksy, bawdy form, ranging from dowdy to conservative.”

C2 shot me a bemused look, but quickly hauled himself in, toying with dopy for a second before settling on a question mark. We can't talk to each other like friends, I thought. Chewing the fat like best buddies and then asking me to smuggle cash. Sometimes I did feel underpaid after all. The streetlight was doing a lousy job of illuminating his face. His wooden features now looked recalcitrant.

“Which airport are we talking about?”

C2 slapped a tattered little newspaper on my lap. *20 Minuten CH*. He tapped his index finger on a brief article. *Exorbitant Cleaning Costs: Is There Something Dirty About the Interni Foundation?* An anonymous text of some five lines describing the nebulous cleaning costs at the Swiss branch of Interni. The article ended with the line: Are things really so dirty there that they need this much cleaning? I looked at him quizzically.

“Please wear a suit!”

C2 didn't say anything else. He grabbed the free newspaper, stood up abruptly, and said goodbye. Me, dizzy with the partiality of the information, him high on optimism. He gave me an amicable hug. His belt buckle stamped my stomach.

A jerky embrace that had the feel of desperation to it. Intense, as if it were the last one. My thoracic vertebrae shifted, and for four hours, I breathed more freely.

Then his Taycan rolled off into the darkness. He'd had a special noise generator added on for a premium. The system imitated a traditional combustion engine with a dash of futurism. A soothing sound installation.

The scent particles from his shaving cream were still clinging to my face.

C2 left me with a vague feeling of fluffy waves struggling their way from the stomach to the head.

I went back to the kebab joint.

“Hey, I didn't get my drink.”

The owner handed me a lukewarm Fanta. I travelled to Ricky's place, and we finished what we'd started.

[...]

I flew to Zurich on the Friday.

The Medusa above the entrance was made of porous stone with pigeon poop in the hair of snakes. Time had done a number on her face. She looked exhausted, just like the rest of the lakeside house.

Karnofsky's house.

Beneath the Medusa a tall oak door with a tarnished iron ring. Six Northrop F-5E Tiger IIs from the Patrouille Suisse were flying a cross in the sky that seemed to be sinking. A miserable heat. The mountains were piled up in the east. The longer I looked at them, the closer they came. There was a warm Foehn wind coming down the slopes. I was taking ceftriaxone to get rid of the clap. Five days, morning and night.

I had landed in Zurich two hours earlier. The box of cash was in a sealed, duty-free plastic bag, which I had carried in plain sight next to my duffle bag. While I was standing in

front of the passport control, a headache announced its arrival. The guy sitting next to me on the flight was to blame. He had tried to hit on me with a sleazy pick-up line. My answer to the annoyance had been vodka. Now I choked down a painkiller without any water. Home-brand paracetamol versus cheap grog.

All around me, displays were promising banking without bullshit. The officer had looked at me intently, and I offered him a progressive Swiss *gruezi*. Everything went smoothly till I turned on my phone. Two messages. One from Ricky and one from C2.

*Tadić is dead ??????*

He had adorned the message with five question marks. I tried to reach C2, but he wouldn't pick up, god dammit. When I got to the main station, I jumped into a taxi for the last leg.

The traffic in the suburbs was endless. A stream of cars rolling like lava toward the weekend.

Flawless houses. Discreet, functional, precise. A restrained poetry of exposed concrete. Overlaid layers of stone that housed whole lives and crowded around the lake. The concrete blocks pushed each other down the slopes and into the lake like an avalanche. Housing complexes that used up every speck of space. A paradise bursting at the seams. Certainly not a country for anybody who feels uncomfortable in tunnels and elevators. Efforts at moral edification were evinced in ubiquitous speed-camera traps. The taxi crawled through the overloaded landscape, which was sold to tourists in a frozen friendliness. The driver hadn't said a word during the entire trip. Not even when he was issuing me the receipt. A passive-aggressive populace that keeps communication to a minimum. I listened intently to the cheerful voice on Radio Zürisee optimistically delivering a feature on ruptures in everyday



life. Traffic updates hacked up the call for witnesses related to a person who had been found injured in the parking lot of a supercentre and later declared dead in hospital.

Anybody who could provide information about the accident was asked to get in touch with the local Zurich police. That was it. Fossilised music from the sixties rounded off the transmission. I had asked the driver to drop me off at the gas station, as instructed.

The taxi driver gave me the receipt and we nodded mutely to each other as the money changed hands. It was early in the evening and the air pressure had reached its nadir. Ascetics on road bikes whistled passed me as if they were all on some kind of urgent mission. A clean form of existence, so clean that it made you want to unpack your sandwich and dine on the footpath. A country invented by Schiller to teach the Germans about patriotism. A liquid-crystal display was frozen on a message set against a sky-blue background. Be not afraid! The Bible. New buildings swaddled in plastic shutters resembled plastic-wrapped cardboard boxes.

Karnofsky's house was different. Free-standing. Framed by old trees. The stuff of nightmares, pieced together out of mismatched elements, and grotesquely large. I crossed the street and walked up the open driveway, past a Jaguar XJR coupé, which bore traces on the boot and back door of being rustically shunted about.

The weathered sandstone façade blurred the contours of the house. Its pretentious architecture was intimidating. Lead-glass windows on both sides. The head of Medusa above the entrance. An amorphous patch of new shingles like a splotch of oil on the mossy roof. Walls being worked on by decay. No doorbell. No name on the door.

Beneath the Medusa, the number 1.

The heavy front door was broken up by coffering with the surface appearance of chestnuts. In the middle of the door was a knocker in the shape of a snake biting its own tail. Its scales glistened menacingly. This antiquated way of knocking felt like an affront. An

oppressive heat glued my clothes to my skin. Total silence. Only the lawn sprinklers were at work.

A man stepped out of a hallway, eyebrows like a glued-on fur toupee, his hair shaved bald. The aviator sunglasses were presumably supposed to lend him a dashing air. His tanned face was polished to a sheen and shone like a freshly cleaned brass vase. Dark trousers from the brand Zeitloch, red polo shirt with an embroidered horse in a size for the shortsighted, his chest underneath clearly outlined quadratically like that of a Ken doll. Boat shoes, no socks. He had a springy gait and hurled himself into the black Jaguar without even saying hello. The gravel crunched under the tires, and he was off.

Finally, I found the doorbell, which was overgrown with ivy, but there was no noise from inside the house. I went to the gas station across the road and bought myself a coffee. Desperate optimists place their hope in lotto tickets. The wheel of fortune offered what the gods permitted: a chance of 0.0000064 per cent.

“You new here?”

I nodded.

The guy behind the counter was wearing fake Balenciaga clothes. The T-shirt was bulging with mountains of muscle. He tried to interest me in some gloopy pastries and a can of pepper spray. I twigged immediately that he didn't actually want to sell me anything and was just looking to amuse himself.

“The pepper sprays are top-notch. Guaranteed respiratory distress, *oder*, tacking that classic Swiss tic onto the end of his sentence. You need something like that around these parts. Two dead in two days.”

He shot me a pregnant look and slammed a tabloid paper on the counter. *Twist in Aligro Murder: Exclusive Details*. The article was short and soap-like, mentioned a victim of a shooting in the parking lot of an Aligro supercentre, contained no details, and ended with the line that a host of questions remained unanswered. Locals tend to make the place they live

more interesting than it actually is. I chased my coffee with a frothy coke. The muscleman pointed at a notice between the motor oil and the cigarettes. A grimy scrap of paper on which an unclean printer had left behind grey stripes. Jaco, please get in touch. A phone number underneath.

“His girlfriend’s handwriting. The guy is nowhere to be found.”

“When it’s over, it’s over,” I said.

The guy arranged his arms on the counter.

“Let me teach you something about life, *oder*. When a healthy young guy with a job, a girlfriend, and a Mazda coupé just disappears into thin air, then he’s not sitting at his grandma’s house eating cake, *oder*. I know him. He waddle along behind his girlfriend wagging his tail like a good little boy. Jaco looks like a killer, but he’s dumber than a loaf of bread. I’m telling ya, lady, this backwater town only looks sleepy. Like I say, you should take a few precautions, *oder*.

He nudged the pepper spray toward me.

“You the new nanny? Of the Karnofsky twins?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, you’ve got no car, you look just like the last three who always used to come here for coffee, and the only thing out there is a boat ramp, miss mermaid. But if you’re part of the waterskiing team that always gets petrol here, I’ll give you a coffee on the house. There’s still some left.”

“I work for a charity.”

He made a face as if he was about to cross himself.

“That refugee thing? I’ll let you in on a little secret about that joint. They’re all drug dealers. Our dog goes to obedience school at that place. They send guys there to learn some discipline. So I’m sitting in the car with my kids waiting for my wife, and two guys walk out and knock on my window. They look like they’re straight out of a wanted poster, *oder*. So one

of them's knocking on the window with his greasy little mitts and tries to tell me that the parking spots are reserved. I get out, and I'll tell you something, it wasn't pretty, I shove him against the kerb and say to the other one, who's gawking at me like a dope, aren't you ashamed, just standing there and watching, and to the guy on the ground I say, listen here, buddy, you're damn lucky that it was my car you knocked on and not somebody else's, *oder*."

He tapped on the missing person's notice behind him.

"He was one of them. Officially he worked for the charity, *oder*. He's dumber than my petrol pumps out there but walks around with bulging pockets. I'll give you three guesses where he gets the cash."

The muscleman held the back of his hand to his nose clownishly and pantomimed snorting a line of coke, but looked more like he was wiping away some snot. I pointed at the front page of the paper, which was a slap in the face to any kind of journalistic ethics.

"Who's the dead guy in the parking lot?"

"No idea."

The guy gave me a piercing glare. Sometimes it feels like someone is staring at you, but really the person just needs a pair of glasses, which is why they're gawking at you with that desperate look on their face. We wonder what's making them look at us like that, what do they see? Nothing. They don't see a damn thing.

He pushed the newspaper toward me.

"It's on the house."

I stick the paper with the heavily pixelated picture in my duffle bag.

"You staying at the Swan?"

"I'm staying at the Karnofskys."

"Ah, like I said, you're the new nanny, *oder*. Karnofsky drives that Range Rover Autobiography, the old monarch of the SUVs, 200,000 francs that thing'll set you back.

Absolute dynamite. With one of them, you'd want a boner 24/7 and an American Express with no limit."

He grinned at me, but was abruptly interrupted by another customer.

[...]

The next morning, I said goodbye to Karnofsky, feeling certain that we'd see each other again in court, and headed off to see Harvensteen. There was a whole platoon of police outside her place and a crowd of curious onlookers. I stood off to the side a little and watched as the officers walked out with paintings under their arms.

"With a bag of chips in their hand and shivering with smugness. That's how I describe the joy of the public in crimes."

Tanner had a slightly devious smile on his lips.

"Raids in seven countries, forty-four arrests, but our date with Ms Harvensteen will have to wait. You should know, we had Sanjay ready to give a statement. Well, you know, you saw him. Are you a good shot? Just kidding."

Tanner looked joylessly at the upper windows. The tower was glistening like a green crystal.

"Do you know what they call her in the criminal world?"

He paused for a moment.

"Medusa."

His voice sounded utterly depressed.

"I don't think even she knows about that name. She works independently. What can I say, women are on the up. She rubs out anyone who gets in her way. Now that's what I call art. Are you an art lover?"

"I don't have a clue about art."

He shook my hand silently and walked over to his colleagues.

The sun was shining. I ate the last of the chocolates. Then I went shopping. A Rolex for Ricky, a little way of saying thanks for the clap, baby! Fluffy slippers from Gucci, a pair of pyjamas from Louis Vuitton, clothes that were suited to isolating myself from society, but Ricky had enough social contact through his police work. I burned C2s money in a chain of gratifying escalation. There had been no witnesses when it was exchanged. I was an ex-cop, after all, and I was used to getting about on the darknet for C1, the German customs office. I knew what I was doing. I took Harvensteen's Stanley knife and cut off the price tags. In the airport lounge, I sat down to write my email. C2 wanted facts. Here they were.

*Report on the NGO Interni*

*Organisations are unpredictable systems that create their own principles, which they then fight for. As far as the figures in the balance sheets go, it is clear that the consultation services were never rendered. Nor did the seminars take place. Branko Tadić and Jaco Balushi were using the foundation to sell drugs. The exorbitant commissions were part of the money-laundering activities. The school in Mali was never built. With the death of Nick Sanjay and the attention that this brought from the Swiss police, that business should be over with. However, chain reactions cannot be ruled out. The authorities look kindly upon voluntary admissions of misdeeds. In the event of personal entanglement, turning state's evidence is highly recommendable.*

*The director Max Karnofsky can be accused of possessing a lack of diligence. It is a well-known fact that investment bankers have no eye for details. That certainly applies to Quasar Capital Focus. Karnofsky possesses the requisite pessimism for being a good investment advisor, particularly in his depressive phases. Nevertheless, miscalculations are always to be expected; therefore, it would be advisable to build reserves. A press release should include*

*the words solidarity and empathy, but under no circumstances the word transparency.*

*Transparency is little more than an optimistic delusion held by revolutionaries.*

*PS: Happy ending – this won't work.*

I pressed send.