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Time Reclaimed

A Narrative

Translated from the German by
Alex Gabriel

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1

The spacious room is plastered white; its carpeting is dove grey. The empty walls bring to mind a cinema screen, while the carpet is reminiscent of the stone slabs of an ancient Roman forum. The stucco on the ceiling dates from the time the mansion was built. It features intertwined ribbons of flowers, which appear almost as living natural blossoms that have been frozen into the dead plaster by some sort of curse.

In the center of the room is a white glazed oak table, twenty-four feet long. It is surrounded by burgundy-upholstered chairs with chrome-plated tubular steel frames. Several times each year, a group of distinguished men spends the day together at this table, carrying out its established rituals. The men spread papers across the table – papers full of ideas and thoughts – and engage in heated debates. Today is one such day.

Everything in the room seems to fit together perfectly, although the various aspects of its décor were not planned together at any single point in time. The new chairs, for instance, were selected by the current chairman. The table, the carpeting, and the white walls, however, remain from the times of his predecessors. So does the painting – the only one present – that dominates the front of the room. The design seems to have emerged at random, yet, at the same time, it quite clearly has been guided by an established frame of reference.

The room is very bright thanks to a row of high windows, which also provide a panoramic view over the city. It is just as the mansion's builder had envisioned: far from the common people – from the tradesmen and the blue-collar workers and the subsistence-seekers

– avoiding direct contact with the masses, while still being able to keep an eye on everything.

The caretaker has opened the windows early this morning, just as he does each day that a meeting will be held here. The summer morning air, brisk and fresh, now wafts freely through the room. The caretaker has also set out sealed bottles of sparkling water – a local Swiss brand – which stand in formation on the table like soldiers reporting for duty. The sparkling water is accompanied by sparkling-clean glasses, upside-down, their invitingly pristine brims resting against the table.

Three ashtrays have been arranged upon the table as well. Bearing the logo of a major Swiss brewery, they seem somewhat out-of-place here. But there is a story – an earlier ashtray-related misadventure – behind their presence here. There was only one ashtray here at the time, an expensive crystal piece, which Oederlein always used to appropriate for his own use. On one occasion, when Berglass needed to empty the blackened ash from his pipe, Oederlein thrust the ashtray so forcefully in his direction that it careened over the edge of the table and shattered in a million pieces. Brockstätte then ordered Trank to have the caretaker procure sufficient ashtrays so that they could avoid such incidents in the future. But when he first laid his eyes upon the garish advertising pieces, Brockstätte immediately grimaced and blurted out derisively, “What is this place supposed to be, some kind of neighborhood bar?” Right at that very moment, though, Oederlein entered the room and saw the new ashtrays; he took one of them in his hands and, caressing it tenderly with his stubby fingers, praised Brockstätte for his good taste. Oederlein explained that, while he usually preferred red wine, this brewery was simply the finest; he deigned to drink beer from no other.

Gerold Trank, Ph.D., is the first to enter the room today, as usual. With his dove grey suit and his burgundy tie, he seems to comprise an extension of the décor of the room itself. He shivers and heads straight towards the windows, shuts them, and wishes he could just stand there and simply enjoy the view. When the weather is beautiful, it always does a number on him. The cityscapes in the bright morning light... the fertile, yellow-green fields... the blue sea... views like these lead him on, make him believe that there is a beautiful reality hidden somewhere far, far away from his own dreary daily routine. A yearning desire is awakened deep inside him, yet he is simultaneously instilled with an unsettling feeling that, for him, this beautiful reality is simply unattainable.

Everyone, incidentally, heads straight towards those windows when they first enter the room, and declares that the view is absolutely magnificent. Everyone who is not completely blind – even those who never occupy themselves with anything beyond the usual – digestion, money, sexual desire. It's well enough; too much gazing into the distance can make a person lose himself too easily.

Trank is already accustomed to brushing aside his yearning. After all, he has duties to fulfill – every day, including today. He examines the huge tape recorder on the table. Then he tests the powerful overhead projector. Are there enough colored pens? Check. A spare bulb in the drawer? Check again. Good.

* * *

This is all extremely important, of course. Once, for example, the projector's bulb flickered out right in the middle of a discourse by Oederlein, a member of the

Swiss National Council, as well as owner and president of a thriving, well-known chemical factory. And there was no spare bulb.

Chairman Biland frowned and leaned back in his chair. Brockstätte promptly dashed across the room and rifled through the drawer. Nope, no spare bulb. "Mr. Chairman, my distinguished gentlemen," Oederlein declared stiffly, "I have put great efforts into preparing my presentation, and I quite simply cannot proceed without the use of the projector."

His speech, as Trank would forever remember, dealt with "the provision of cultural resources to Alpine valley populations with narrow horizons." Oederlein was just about to project, onto the white wall of the room, some slides related to an educational program that had been developed in conjunction with local clergy. And why local clergy, rather than local educational professionals? That is exactly what Oederlein was just getting ready to explain, when the bulb died.

"Mr. Oederlein, I apologize. I deeply regret this situation," said the chairman, who then glanced at Trank, hunched down behind the tape recorder, and demanded: "Get us a spare bulb immediately; you yourself can figure out how. Make it quick, chop-chop."

So Trank sprang to his feet and hurried to find the caretaker, who was not in his quarters. Trank finally found him with a technician in the boiler room, thanks to the clanging noises that rattled up through the stairwell. "Excuse me, it's extremely urgent," gasped Trank.

Not as far as the caretaker was concerned though. "In a minute!" he grunted, then slowly re-lit his cigar and continued fiddling with the boiler, along with the smirking technician.

Trank was already envisioning having to rush over to the adjacent schoolhouse to beg for a bulb, when the

caretaker finally decided to come up from the cellar. He rummaged through a closet in his quarters, and finally emerged with the right box. He determinedly pushed past Trank, and marched on ahead of him towards the meeting room.

The debate there at the moment concerned the question of whether the primary culpability for such mishaps lay in the inadequacies of the equipment or of the staff.

The caretaker replaced the bulb unhurriedly, re-lit his cigar once again, and left the room. The chairman thanked him effusively as he exited; Brockstätte waved in his direction as well.

Trank knew that the question of responsibility would inevitably come back to him now. He saw it coming, and it troubled him. But deep inside, he always felt responsible anyway.

"This is the last time," the chairman said to Trank, "that I will allow such a silly oversight to occur here. Not because 'time is money'; we have chosen to be here of our own accord. But for just that very reason, I expect you to be prudent in this regard. I hold you responsible for making sure that our meetings can take place without such disturbances."

Everyone seated around the table nodded, except Hartmann, who hunched down over his files.

But wasn't the spare bulb a matter for the caretaker? For a brief moment Trank agonized over the idea that it would be tougher to replace someone with practical experience in maintaining boilers and supervising cleaning ladies than it would be to replace a foundation secretary. There were tons of other Ph.D.'s who would simply jump at the chance for a position such as his.

The weather is magnificent this morning, but Gerold Trank is suffering from stomach pain. The cause of the pain is unknown. It may even be his heart, according to what he has read. The pain has taken control over Trank's bowels, just as firmly as life has taken control over Trank himself. In this condition, human contact is the last thing he wants. He craves only a long, lonely coastline with panoramic views of endless, timeless waves. The waves would certainly be able to wash his pain away.

At the moment however, his mind must focus on his duties as second secretary of the Foundation for the Propagation of Humanistic Ideals. The precise nature of the foundation is not obvious from its official name – it is only when Trank states that he works for the “FPHI” that people nod in comprehension.

The first member of the foundation's board to enter the room is Professor Berglass, its representative from the academic world – a hulking six-foot-three, balding, with a fringe of grey hair, a bulbous nose, and a gently flowing full beard. His rimless glasses make him look intelligent; if only they could actually make him intelligent! Berglass is, to be perfectly frank, a blatherer. A man with a seemingly unlimited supply of time. When Berglass holds the floor, he rambles on and on and on – never for less than ten minutes. And when he is finally done, no one has any idea what his point actually was.

Berglass is always the first board member to show up; that's the only way he can assure himself of securing his coveted seat. He now sits down ponderously near the head of the table, right beside the seat of the chairman. When Trank approaches him, he stands up just as ponderously and shakes Trank's hand for what

seems like an eternity. He complains about the summer heat that will almost certainly manifest itself over the course of the day, about the sluggish traffic in the city, and about the hassle of finding a parking spot. These days every shopgirl and secretary has her own car, he grumbles; it's no wonder the streets are clogged. For the most part, Berglass does not look Trank in the eye as he is speaking; he is too busy keeping an eye on the door. When Hartmann enters, Berglass breaks off his bitter social commentary and turns to greet him.

Trank heads back towards his usual spot at the foot of the table, a space he shares with the tape recorder.

Hartmann, a trade union secretary by profession, eventually turns away from Berglass to greet Trank. A conspiratorial look briefly flashes across his face in the process; his expression makes it clear that he regards Trank as having a lower social status.

Every trade union secretary seems to be either very fat or very thin, Trank has found – never in between. In Hartmann's case, it is the former. He sits down near Berglass, who has been waiting for him this whole time with an outstretched hand and a somewhat silly grin, and who once again starts going on about the summer weather, the sluggish traffic in the city, and the hassle of finding a parking spot, this time leaving aside his displeasure at the growing number of female commuters whose cars clog up the roads. Still, his diatribe does not inspire even the slightest trace of sympathy in Hartmann; the latter is a former railway official, quite proud of the fact that he does not own a car.

One after another, the other board members arrive. They are all men who are getting on in years, dressed in such a refined manner, on the whole, that Professor Berglass' corduroy suit, originally custom-tailored but now entirely shapeless, and Hartmann's black leather

jacket both seem completely out-of-place. Hands are shaken all around the table – fine, soft hands that have signed many a signature. Chairman Biland enters together with Brockstätte, who asks Trank – loud enough to be heard above the commotion in the room – whether he has, in fact, checked everything out thoroughly. Oederlein is the last to arrive, greeting everyone – everyone besides Trank, that is.

The chairman now pulls a silver pen from his breast pocket, and starts to tap the table with it deliberately. The chatter subsides, and all heads in the room turn towards him as if drawn by some invisible force. Only then does he begin to speak: “Gentlemen, I am notoriously strict when it comes to starting meetings on schedule. When necessary, I have even been known to commence a meeting with no other attendees present; fortunately, thanks to your commendable punctuality, it will not be necessary for me to do so today.” He delivers the same line at every meeting. And every time, the board members respond with the obligatory smiles; Trank finds it absolutely cringe-worthy. “I am glad,” the chairman continues, “that we have all managed to be present today, as we are here to discuss an important matter, namely our contributions to the celebration of the 700-year anniversary of the Swiss Confederation.”

Trank has already pressed all the necessary buttons on the tape recorder. The level indicator's oscillations testify to the fact that the chairman's words are, in fact, being registered and preserved in the chromium dioxide. Out of sheer habit, Trank has also noted the names of those present, using shorthand abbreviations that he came up with himself. B&B stands for Biland and Brockstätte, a B with an apostrophe is for Berglass, and VW is for von Warteck; Oederlein is an O with a line

through it, though he sometimes writes out Oed; he likewise abbreviates Kindlimann as Kind; and while he originally shortened Hartmann to Hart, he later switched to a simple meaningless H.

* * *

Trank remembers how, on his first day of work, Brockstätte had ceremoniously assigned him the responsibility of keeping minutes, solemnly urging him not to take the task lightly. "Always remember that the minutes of each meeting, which will bear your signature for as long as you work at the foundation, are stored in a secure repository and will serve as a valuable resource for future historians." And Brockstätte had further stressed the importance of taking notes despite the presence of the tape recorder – even the best of technologies can malfunction, and you simply never know when it might happen.

Up until his eleventh meeting, Trank had complied with these directives in an exemplary manner. Today is his twenty-seventh meeting, and he can attest to the fact that the tape recorder, a top-quality Swiss model, has never failed him. And that's not the only fact that renders his note-taking entirely superfluous. By now, he knows every detail of the foundation's dealings better than anyone else. After all, he had prepared the agenda items under the watchful eye of Brockstätte, who had a penchant for rampaging through Trank's drafts, ruthlessly and mercilessly attacking each page with a red pen. Over the years, Trank has gotten to know the minutiae of the board members' tendencies extremely well. At this point, based on past experience, he can accurately predict what each one will say. And when he will say it. And even how he will say it.

Trank could write the minutes of the meeting even if he weren't actually present – or, indeed, even if the meeting itself did not actually take place.

But, oh, what a scandal it would be if the tape recorder were to break down and if he were to find himself without notes. Chairman Biland, who claims to be able to conclusively judge a person's character based on a single test – and who still clearly remembers the projector bulb episode – would write him off forever as a lazy, irresponsible, cynical slacker. And Brockstätte, standing beside the chairman's desk, would exclaim, "Such an incident has never occurred in the entire history of the foundation, since it was founded back in 1833. We must repeat the entire meeting, there is simply no other choice, and I am even afraid that Oederlein and von Warteck may immediately resign. What a shame!"

Trank's eleventh meeting coincided with a bout of pure loathing for the world. Even though he himself did not fully understand where it came from, it allowed him to liberate himself somewhat from his burden. He valiantly decided to no longer dutifully record the details of the minutes during each meeting. Since then, he has just scribbled coded messages about the men present, or other personal notes. Occasionally, when the shopping list that Maria dictated to him that day was once again forgotten on the kitchen table, he attempts to recreate it during the meeting.

It feels good to set himself free through his acts of hidden defiance, despite – or perhaps precisely because of – the fact that such disobedience does not come naturally to him. In fact, it gives him very conflicting emotions, a circumstance that he chalks up to his strict Catholic upbringing. He feels guilty; yet, at the same time, he derives a certain acute pleasure from the rebellious actions.

Chairman Biland opens a bottle of sparkling water, fills his glass, and takes a sip. Trank admires his calculated movements, and watches the bubbles make their way to the surface. Biland stifles a small burp, and inquires as to whether anyone has any comments on the minutes of the previous meeting.

Professor Berglass quickly raises his hand. Far be it from him to be pedantic, he says, but the secretary appears to have made a silly little error in the previous meeting's minutes; unfortunately, this could potentially lead to some misunderstanding, even if only in the distant future. While referencing Mr. Oederlein's enlightening statements, he says, at the bottom of page two, Mr. Trank appears to have accidentally written "National Counsel" instead of "National Council"; in order to avoid confusion, the matter should be corrected.

The chairman nods in Trank's direction. Trank looks down at his papers – not because of anything written on them, but rather to hide the expression of disgust that has surfaced on his face. He jots down his doctor's telephone number, resolving to make a call later today about his stomachache.

The meeting proceeds. Trank sits there, trapped and helpless. Time passes like the beating of his heart – slow, lethargically slow. He has absolutely no interest in what is being said; it is no different from when his parents made him attend mass as a child. Inevitably, his mind wanders away from the meeting, and his thoughts begin to flow, just as they used to flow in the gloomy, incense-filled church long ago.

The constant, pervasive flow of thoughts is a curse; it is like a flood of biblical proportions. He is incapable of suppressing it. He cannot even slow it down. When his body sits still, his mind just gets going. It happens during his agonizingly sleepless nights as well. He is engulfed by a deluge, an overwhelming torrent of thoughts, which surge towards the surface. As if the thoughts have flowed from some inexhaustible spring deep inside him, into an overflowing reservoir.

He has tried to overcome this problem with meditation exercises that Tibetan monks use to completely empty their minds. The exercises didn't work for him; he wasn't surprised. After all, his life could not possibly be more completely different from the life of a Tibetan monk. His thoughts are the thoughts of a thirty-nine-year-old married Swiss man with a Ph.D. in history. A man with two children who are growing up fast, and a townhouse in the countryside, twelve miles from the city limits – it's tiny, but he owns it free and clear. And he also has the car of his dreams, a Saab 900 Turbo, whose completely unnecessary extra horsepower he relishes whenever he drives it.

Trank has left the car at home today; there are simply too few parking spots behind the mansion where the meeting is taking place. And, of course, they are reserved for the board members who are deemed to most warrant them. One is for Oederlein, of course, as a member of the National Council. And another one for von Warteck, CEO and President of the General Life Insurance Company. And another for Major General Kindlimann. But there is none for Professor Berglass; he would have loved to be able to park here, but could

not convince Brockstätte. And there would be none for Hartmann even if he had a car.

But none of this matters to Gerold Trank right now. He floats aimlessly in his web of thoughts, not knowing what he really wants. He knows only that something, something, is tormenting him deep inside, and that he needs to finally figure out what on earth it is. He is confident that the compass of his soul will guide him, and will show him the right path.

For now, he is comforted by the thought that he is not the only one who hangs in this sort of limbo. On this very summer morning, with the sun shining brightly, there must be hundreds of people out there in the city thinking about how miserable they are and wondering how they might turn their lives around. Probably some of them have stomachaches as well, just like him. They may have already tried some sort of cure, which likely didn't help much; maybe baking soda, or a glass of Alpenbitter. His own doctor, on the other hand, had advised him, "Just breathe deeply twenty times, and focus on the pain."

Instead, he allows his mind to wander. The painting hanging behind the chairman, directly across from Trank, is quite colorful and extremely large – he guesses about eight feet by twelve feet. It covers almost an entire wall of the bright room. Trank is constantly transfixed by the painting. A nude woman traipses from the left of the scene towards the right, in lush, verdant natural surroundings; she has a cornucopia in her arms, a triumphant expression on her face, and a swelling in her womb. The very depiction of motherhood, flush with fertility. The image strikes Trank as the embodiment of a sort of moral plea, and yet this morning, without knowing why, he feels strangely repulsed by the sober, unerotic, humorless scene.

But is there really nothing he can do about this? There is something he can do, of course. A warm, feminine body emerges from his imagination, lolling on the table in front of him. She is a blend of some women he has known (including his wife Maria and his occasional mistress Elisabeth), with others that he has only seen. He contemplates the creature's radiant, shimmering, satiny skin... the smiling curve of her upper lip against her teeth... the contour of her knee... and all those other little details that inevitably cause him to immediately fall passionately in love with her whole being. The delectable bulge of her two full breasts when she lies on her back, their perkiness when she sits up. Her delicately curved hips, framing a neatly trimmed triangle, the holy grail.

"This is real," he thinks, "and the meeting is illusory. It is taking place in an imaginary world, a world in which I would likely perish from a lack of eroticism and humor."

And where have the humor and eroticism in his life gone? He thinks back to ten or twelve years ago, the intense attraction between himself and Maria, which manifested itself not only in their sizzling sex life, but also in their playful and witty banter. All that is no more now. His entire existence has become oppressively dull. Even his adventures with Elisabeth have now become solemn affairs. Deep down, he believes that humor and eroticism are true art forms, that they are what make life liveable – and with a combination of the two, even more so. Many medieval tales were essentially based on an interconnection between humor and eroticism – and no one knows this better than Trank, a specialist in medieval history.

Wait a second, stop. That's all in the past, a different lifetime. He has long ago abandoned that career path.

Dr. Gerold Trank is no longer a historian these days, he is a secretary – a secretary in a morbidly serious institution that could not possibly incorporate any less humor or eroticism.

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Meanwhile, the board is busy discussing the new application form. The chairman's youngest daughter, a bright young woman, has designed it on her computer. She studies art history, and thus has the final say with regard to layout as far as the chairman is concerned. The foundation has paid her handsomely for her work. Trank knows this because Brockstätte, generally cautious with regard to such matters, instructed Trank to sign the check instead of himself.

The FPHI logo is emblazoned across the top of the form. Beneath it, in bold letters, is one sentence: "Every Swissman in possession of civil rights may request assistance from the Foundation for any purposes that are consistent with humanistic ideals."

The female secretaries at the foundation put up a big fuss. They were united in their demand that Swisswomen be specifically mentioned as well. Brockstätte dismissed the idea. "In this context, it is quite clear that the word 'Swissman' covers women as well," he asserted. "We're lucky there aren't any women on the board," he later cackled to Trank when they were alone, "or else we'd all have to sit through a huge debate about this."

The men are, in fact, in the middle of a huge debate right now. Should an applicant be required to state his military grade and rank, as Major General Kindlimann insists? And identify his employer, as von Warteck, the corporate executive, contends? And list two references

from public figures, as National Council member Oederlein feels is absolutely essential?

* * *

Trank dreads the very idea of documenting these details in the meeting minutes. And what for anyway? After a hundred and sixty years of shrewd adaptation, the foundation serves only one purpose: it basically acts as a bank. When Trank joined FPHI, Brockstätte explained the process. "Our state's coffers are overflowing, you see. Of course the big companies don't want to cram them even more full, so they try to avoid paying taxes whenever possible. But still, they continue to have patriotic mindsets, so they donate large sums of money to us, and we use this money to finance youth sports camps, archery contests, traditional wrestling tournaments, traveling exhibitions about our heroic ancestors, musical events, local history reports that duly honor our past, etcetera."

All things that fall nicely in line with the established order, thinks Trank. He has almost resigned himself to accepting the power of the established order – yet as a historian, he also recognizes that change is simply inherent in this world.

And that things only change when the course of history dictates it – never before such time. He believes that people are fundamentally wrong when they think that they have control over historical developments, and that they can effect change all by themselves. Rather, it is the historical developments themselves, in fact, that have far more control over people. The most that people can do is compliantly go along the predetermined path like ants following a trail, rather than trying to resist. Everything happens

as it does thanks to the mechanisms of historical developments.

Unfortunately, historical developments determine not only the fate of mankind, but also the fate of individual men such as himself, Gerold Trank. Still, he draws hope from an analogy to the world of physics, in which a single molecule has more leeway than the object of which it is a part.

But how much leeway does he actually have?

The forces that shape people's lives operate in obscure and incomprehensible ways. These forces have made him second secretary at FPHI, probably forever, while they have made Brockstätte first secretary – clearly a good place to start, there could be no debate about that. The careers of Biland, von Warteck, and Oederlein all started in a similar fashion.

There was a time when Trank tried to understand these things from a historical perspective. Secretly researching in the Historical and Biographical Dictionary of Switzerland, he discovered that Biland, the foundation's chairman, came from a prestigious Swiss dynastic family. He found a Federal Councilor Biland, high ranking military personnel, three generations of businessmen, and even a few clergymen.

With an indulgent smile on his face, he quickly rejected the notion of a firm oligarchical grip on the country that thwarted the rise of any outsiders. He had encountered an army of social climbers that repudiated this theory. Some of them, in fact, sat on the foundation's board.

Professor Berglass, for example. At first he treated Trank with a sort of careful deference. Later he realized that the status of the second secretary was far below his own, and suddenly a nasty tone crept into his voice whenever it was directed at Trank.

Even Oederlein, now member of the National Council, had to climb to get there. A country boy from humble roots, who used to spend two hours each morning, even in the dead of winter, walking to his school up the next valley. His difficult past sometimes echoes in his voice when the board engages in critical discussions of the current prosperity.

This was not the case, though, for Major General Kindlimann, descendant of one of Napoleon's own lieutenant-generals. And even less so for von Warteck, who comes from a long line of nobility.

Had the mysterious forces of life spun differently, Trank could have been a social climber as well. Professor Gerold Trank, Ph.D. – sounds nice, doesn't it? Some acquaintances who are familiar with Trank's case, and who know the workings of the academic community quite well, believe that it had not been far from becoming a reality.

For several years, while working as an assistant to the famous medieval researcher Professor Wickler, Trank had felt himself above the mundane. He had faithfully compiled bibliographies, drafted correspondence, reviewed tedious publications, and tutored foul-smelling students on behalf of his mentor. He had proudly led Wickler's seminars, and had been fortunate enough to publish thirty-one scholarly articles together with the renowned expert.

Two years before Wickler's retirement, while merry with wine at the Institute for Medieval History's Christmas party, the old man had declared Trank his likely successor, laying his greasy fur hat on Trank's head as a sort of coronation.

And Trank had believed in it.

In his incredible naiveté, he was just begging to be disappointed. The events that followed were like the

end of a pregnancy. He was extricated from the warm, protective womb of his historical texts, and was thrust into the wilderness of the working world, entirely unprepared to handle the struggle for survival ahead of him.

Trank knew about much of what was happening at the time, though not the finer details. Looking back, though, it all seems so clear. Wickler, generally despised at the university, moved nearer and nearer to his end, and no longer had much of a say in matters. He made one last attempt to promote Trank's candidacy, then ditched him. He knocked on the doors of the people who mattered, and recommended a former student who was then at the Sorbonne. The nadir of it all came when he called Trank into his office, stood up behind his desk, and urged his befuddled assistant, "For the very sake of medieval history studies, just give up your candidacy for this chair and support your former colleague, or else we'll end up losing the chair to one of those damned modern historians."

Trank decided to do something beyond that. It was the only correct thing to do – as he is still convinced to this day. At the end of the semester, he simply refused to renew his semiannual contract. The dean's secretary summoned her boss, who reacted as if the world had been turned upside down. The university was besieged by scholarly applicants who lusted after its warm confines. The university always decided when one's employment there would terminate.

But Trank just left the rapidly aging, half-a-year-from-retirement Wickler sitting there helplessly, trembling from the indignity, and finally turned his back on the university.

Maria had shared in his disappointments, and now shared in his defiance. She had some savings of her

own, which she had set aside for an emergency. They decided to take advantage of their unexpected new freedom to travel with the children for as long as the money would allow.

They spent a few months relaxing on the island of Belle-Île, off the rugged coast of Brittany. Trank fell in love with the island's reddish rocks and the deep green of the sea.

Maria, one-quarter Breton, had relatives on the island. It was their second stay there; the first had been on their honeymoon, among the throngs of summer vacationers.

Now they were visiting during the windy days of April, with dazzling white cloud formations drifting across the luscious blue sky, and the high season rush still far away. Maria's relatives had left them a seafront cottage with two small, bright, salty-smelling rooms, in which they lived somewhat primitively while spending practically nothing. It seemed like they would stay there forever. Time drifted onward like the clouds through the sky.

Trank sometimes got the feeling that, even now, he was still living off the vitality of those months.

One breezy summer day, when he popped into the town of Le Palais to pick up the mail that Maria's mother had forwarded, he found that he was being drawn back into the clutches of the working world. His application for employment in the position of second secretary at the renowned Foundation for the Propagation of Humanistic Ideals – an application that had been prepared and dispatched on the exact same day that he left the university behind, without any particular expectations – had been answered.

When the envelope with FPHI's insignia had arrived, Maria's anxious mother, full of respect for

everything institutional, had forwarded it via express mail. In a surprisingly warm tone, the letter said that the foundation considered itself fortunate that such a noted young historian was interested in the position. He was welcome to present himself for an interview whenever it would be convenient for him, ideally as soon as possible. It was signed by the foundation's chairman.

Trank's wounded heart was moved. The chairman was specifically welcoming him as a historian, which showed a certain regard for the field, a respect similar to that which Trank himself still harbored. Standing there at the post office, he started dreaming. Maybe he could at least partially make up for the loss of his academic position, and continue to pursue some amount of research. In his mind, he saw himself boldly approaching the chairman and offering to write a comprehensive history of the foundation.

He was unaware, at the time, that all such correspondence was actually written by the chairman's secretary, who understood people remarkably well, as only a woman in her position could. And she managed to write exactly what she knew they would want to hear, yet without it sounding forced. The perfect way to lure them in.

Trank, nevertheless, was feeling glum when he returned to the cottage. He found Maria there in old jeans and a baggy sweater, her black hair pulled back in a ponytail, standing at the stove and preparing a soup. In that moment, he found her especially lovely. He paused in the doorway, feeling thousands of invisible threads binding him to this woman. She turned around and smiled at him. Just like when they had first met, at a campground on Lake Biel.

Trank, after finishing his studies, had been on his

way to the south of France in his Citroën, while Maria had been staying for a few days with her brother and his wife, who were spending their summer vacation by the lake. Sparks flew. Maria packed her bag without a second thought and headed off with him in his car.

That was six years before Brittany – now fourteen years ago.

The time on Belle-Île brought back what they had experienced in Provence, where their lives were permanently intertwined – pine forests, overgrown ruins, the scent of lavender and of their own young bodies, the air shimmering in the heat.

These days, though, they had their children with them as well. Fortunately for Trank, his own kids are generally cheerful and calm – unlike some of the whiny little devils he has encountered elsewhere. They are very close to each other and they love to play together. He gives credit for this to Maria's serene, composed nature – certainly not to his own neurotic and volatile personality.

Maria was thrilled about the potential job at FPHI.

She foresaw a stable future with the organization, and dreamed of prestige and of a higher salary. The children were just as thrilled. Although the island had much to offer them, Trank realized, their life there lacked variety. They wanted to go back to the life they lived before, to their friends, to their grandparents.

Maria's relatives on the island – grumpy, unfamiliar, and with no desire to cater to the children's needs – certainly did not fill any void in their lives. There were scattered visits to their second cousin Berthe in her filthy, messy, and sort of creepy home; the children found these visits awkward. And they also found Berthe's galettes disgusting, the stale, greasy cakes that she shoveled out of a tin canister with her gouty

fingers and shoved in their faces until they finally succumbed and ate.

So, Trank drove back to Le Palais that same day and booked a spot on the next ferry.

The following day, beneath a dramatic red dawn sky, they packed their things into the Citroën, returned the keys of the cottage, and set out for home. They made it as far as the town of Vierzon that day, and stayed in a bleak, musty hotel. That morning, he and Maria woke up full of bites from some sort of critters – fleas, lice, or bedbugs, they didn't know which. Since then, Trank has always recommended anyone traveling through France to avoid stopping in Vierzon.

He nervously imagined himself showing up for the job interview with his head shaved and uncontrollable itching all over his body. But his doctor just laughed, reached for his prescription pad, and told him not to worry. He prescribed an advanced shampoo, which Trank was to use for the next three days, changing the sheets each day as well. I guarantee it'll help, said the doctor.

* * *

Major General Kindlimann ceremoniously takes the floor. He asks the board to finance the publication of a book highlighting the Swiss military leaders of the last 700 years (eighty percent of whom served foreign militaries – what a shame!)

He speaks so loud that Trank is wrenched from his thoughts and cannot help but listen. His booming voice doesn't seem to match his slender frame. According to Brockstätte, the guys in the army used to swear that Kindlimann was so thin that no enemy shooter could ever hit him.

The chairman grabs Brockstätte's elbow and murmurs something to him. Brockstätte then waves Trank over and whispers to him, "Call Mr. Hablützel – you know, the lawyer, Miss Derring has his number – and tell him that Chairman Biland wants to meet him at eleven tomorrow morning."

Trank quietly exits the room.

If the tape recorder were to fail now, there would be no record of the proceedings. What would Biland and Brockstätte say then? Nothing. Because ultimately it really doesn't matter to the two of them. They decide what constitutes a problem and what does not, Trank observes with envy, recognizing that his own place is entirely outside the sphere from which such power can be exercised over other people. Now is exactly the sort of moment in which the meeting minutes can be dispensed with. Kindlimann probably wouldn't make a fuss, even if his name never appeared in the minutes again. Except if there was a discussion of the Swiss cavalry, whose dissolution he still mourns; he had commanded one of the country's last cavalry regiments.

Trank discreetly knocks on the door of Brockstätte's secretary's office and tentatively enters. From the window there is a view of the mossy backyard, where the cars are parked in the shade of hundred-year-old trees. Kindlimann's ancient Mercedes is there, probably the same car he used in the army before scrounging it off them when he retired. There is Oederlein's Maserati, as well as Biland's large, sleek, armored Volvo. The latter seems like it would belong to von Wartek; in fact, though, the insurance company CEO drives an all-terrain jeep.

A strong personal touch is evident in Miss Derring's office. Ikebana-style flower arrangements are distributed all around the room – she clearly appears to have