

Thomas

Marta Riniker-Radich

2021

The mat is too thin. The floor hard. Cheap vinyl tile that gathers dust just by looking at it and despite his best efforts is constantly grimy from the daily commute of thousands of workers flocking into the city. Thomas Werner sleeps in the back of the shop, far from the street, but is still woken up by the rush of cars every morning.

The traffic starts. Slowly at first; a few delivery trucks, blue-collar workers. Then the flow of commuters steadily picks up and the air begins to smell. The first ambulance, bringing with it the inevitability of death and disaster, wails past his front window.

His back feels like a board. A sharp pain is lodged under his left shoulder blade. He gets up and rummages in his gym bag for the Blackroll Duoball, sticks it between his back and the wall and rubs up and down against it at a slight angle. His skepticism towards gadgets and health paraphernalia has taken a back seat to the vagaries of aging. The targeted pressure brings a gasp of relief and he slowly starts breathing easily again.

The little foam device, weighing only 72 grams, might be the best thing he had ever bought. Werner had always had trouble spending money; each purchase required months of research and endless hemming and hawing before he came to a decision he could live with. He wasn't cheap or anything. Buying quality always works out in the long wrong; he was just afraid of getting the wrong thing and regretting it. Ultimately, there was not much he needed, and each need had to stand up to intense examination.

Werner heads into the storefront and begins to rearrange the high-backed green velvet chairs with black lacquered legs that face the piano. Yesterday evening there had been a recital by a pair of young classical musicians from the Conservatory,

a flute and violin duo. He takes great pride in providing a platform for up and coming talent, and last night's performance had been enchanting. Alina Andrukh, the flutist, had transported the audience of 5 to dewy woodlands tinged with dawn-ing light, the whistling notes calling to mind simpler times spent etching names into age-old oaks and ambling along dis-used train tracks. Werner himself had been transfixed by her elf-like fingers lightly drumming up and down the instrument as her body swayed back and forth in tune to her breath.

The Vitalia Art and Music Lounge, which Werner had tentatively started up ten months ago out of his IT service shop, was slowly growing in following. It started out with a few exhibitions by local artists he had scouted, and his programming now spans classical music soirées, poetry readings, and open mic piano nights. Almost every evening, he sits at the piano himself, leaving the door open for curious passersby, though no one ever does come in spontaneously, despite the gaily-colored posters he puts up beckoning people in.

Nonetheless, he has a few loyal followers, and brims with happiness at finally being in his element. As a child, he had always loved the idea of owning a bar. All the workers in the village would come to HIM at day's end for their Feierabendbier. "Let's go to Werner's", they would say. They would appreciate without even knowing it the choice of music he put on, the bar snacks he laid out in little ceramic bowls and the always clean but never obsessively immaculate toilets.

Werner's career as an IT service provider had left much to be desired as far as human interaction went. He had set up his own business when he was twenty-two years old, in the days when no one asked for a degree and you could get by on skill

and determination. Back then it was still an open market and he did it all: network and server setups, data management and database development, disaster recovery, software and hardware sales, general maintenance and employee training for companies.

In the IT boom of the early 2000s, he had worked as a contractor for several large corporations, and the office culture he encountered in the business world left him disillusioned and depressed. The techies resented him, the finance people looked upon him with suspicion and the managers with a most dismissive form of condescension. Werner also did desktop support, so he would come into direct contact with the employees. The worst kind were the ones who clearly needed his help yet presented right away with a cagey, resistant attitude, as they had been trained to never show weakness or need of any kind.

For six months or so, he had been on contract at one of the larger accounting firms. He would try to engage with people on his coffee breaks and was dismayed to butt up against a wall of mediocrity and disinterest. Thomas Werner was, by all accounts, a worldly, curious man with interests that went beyond his work and status-underlining activities such as travel and shopping. To people with no cultural aspirations, he came across as annoyingly quirky and philosophical.

After the initial set up, which often required him to be on site for months at a time, he worked on retainer or on break/fix contract terms. This allowed him to maintain a large pool of clients and always have money coming in. As time went on though, companies' IT needs became ever more complex. They wanted preemptive troubleshooting, 24/7 monitoring and live helpdesk support. Managed service providers, made up of teams of specialists

across all areas, offered the kind of support and availability that he could never provide as a one-man operation.

Werner saw the writing on the wall and began to seek out smaller clients, architectural firms or local accountants who just needed someone to set up their office networks and to come in for troubleshooting every now and again. Working with small businesses was much more to his liking. He relished closeness, intimacy, the feeling of community that he himself had never had. He also preferred dealing with business owners directly, as opposed to these uptight procurement officers who watched every penny and had to justify any fuckups or extra costs to the higher-ups.

Werner had always used the front room of his apartment as a base of operations. As he was mostly on the road, renting an office would have been an unjustifiable extravagance. These days, he tended to spend more and more time in the shop, as clients mostly required his presence for only a few hours at a time. When business was slow, he found the place quite lonely. It was situated on a busy street in a rather upscale neighborhood. His building was the dumpiest on the block; the owner, a cheapskate retired house painter who lived down the road, tended to stop by unannounced several times a week to inspect the premises, yet clearly had no intention of ever doing any work on the place. Werner's neighbors were not particularly to his liking. They were either friendly but dumb, like the older couple on the third floor, or pointedly distant, like the pair of academics who lived right above him. He was not really sure what they did actually. The man had a mournful, bird-like look about him and always looked like he had his nose stuck in a book, even when he left the house. They kept strange hours, like people who can afford to work from home and get up at eleven a.m.

Then there was the couple that lived next to them. Young, late twenties or so, so conventional as to make your teeth ache. The girl worked in Essen? Bochum?, some such dreary place, during the week. For Philipp Morris was it? She didn't even smoke, as far as he could tell. He wondered if they even hired non-smokers, seems like the risk of non-assimilation would be too great. The guy was an air traffic controller, came and went at all hours of the day and night. He mumbled hello, barely making eye contact, as if terrified that Werner would strike up a conversation and invite him in.

The neighbors never came to his soirées, of course. Not one of them had even asked him what he was doing. Werner was not surprised. The reaches of conformity are broad.

He opens the shutters and steps outside to take down last night's poster and put up a new one. When venturing into new territory, slacking is not an option; he tried to organize events every night of the week. Weekends were more tricky, people tended to have more important things to do. Tonight he will host one of his usual "Klimperabende", evenings of communal music-making, listening and exchange.

He peers across the street at the lady who runs the wine shop, sweeping down her front lot with calculated efficiency. He is not a big fan. She caters to the preppy set around the neighborhood, and is clearly deluded about the standing that she has with these people. It is embarrassing to watch her interact with her customers as if they were her friends.

The kiosk next to her has been sitting empty for a few weeks, and Werner is curious to see who will move in, though he doesn't have much hope for anything very exciting. He fears the owners will now seek out a more stable business than the

last couple of failures that occupied the place. He anticipates a) a real estate office, b) architects, c) an insurance franchise.

The kiosk had gone through many iterations. Each tenant had some new idea, tried to stay afloat with lottery tickets, grocery items, a makeshift bar out front. The latest occupants had been a middle-aged couple made up of a sweet, put-upon woman and her grumpy, alcoholic husband who changed mood with the weather. The woman looked persistently pained beneath her welcoming exterior and Werner's heart ached when he went in to buy cigarettes and watched her try to compensate for her husband's sourness. As uncomfortable as they made him feel, he felt guilty buying his smokes from the gas station down the road, so he kept going back.

On such an occasion the man, on a seemingly schizophrenic bent, had told him about his idea for turning the kiosk into a corner store. A "Tante Emma Laden", the nostalgic term used for a convenience store that denotes a first-name basis and a certain reactionary longing. One of the best-stocked supermarkets in town was literally spitting distance from them, but he believed he could lure people in with aggressive pricing, longer opening hours and, most importantly, a personal touch. Werner listened in a mixture of disbelief and pity as the kiosk owner laid out his plans for the store, frantically gesticulating, his excited face belying an inkling of delusion and doubt. As he paid for his packet of cigarettes and began to turn on one heel to go, the man leaned across the counter abruptly and touched his shoulder. "Wait! Let me show you something", he almost implored with round, jumpy eyes.

The owner went into the back of the shop, where they kept the piles of UPS packages that were barely helping them make the rent. He emerged with a long white foil

and attempted to spread it out over the countertop so that Werner could clearly read what was written on it. The man explained how this was the layout for the neon sign he planned on putting up, which read, simply, "Tante Emma Laden". Far from the kind of old-fashioned lettering one would imagine on such a sign, the thing smacked more of what a grow shop would put up. Slanted, sans serif black font on a plain white background.

They were gone before the sign ever went up.

Werner pries open the protective plexiglass sheet from his notice board and lays out tonight's announcement on the backside. Fighting against static electricity, he attempts to straighten the paper out as best as he can without wrinkling it. When reasonably satisfied, he clips the plexiglass back in place and looks down at his flyer. A evening of music and exchange! Come in, all are welcome!