



Weirdness out West

Chapter One

Cause for complaint

'Ripe and Ready Avocados' me backside. Me a buy dem from de store in Middlehampton on Sunday but me no try to eat dem till de Tuesday afternoon, dat de 'Bess Before Date'. Lawd a mercy dem a tuff like two-dollar steak. Bumbaclot, me a nearly buss me teef. Dem a harder dan algebra!

Memphis 'Telephone' Bell proofread his email but hesitated before pressing the send button. Across the office sat his Customer Care Director and second-in-command Alvin Poindexter. The man seemed mesmerised as he stared intently out of the window, his gaze unrelenting. Concentration was etched onto his face like a mythical sentinel peering across the depths of time. From the tilt of his head he appeared to be staring across the platforms of the busy *Hauptbahnhof*, toward the horizon formed by the Vosges mountains in neighbouring France. Despite his stoic pose Memphis knew full-well that Alvin's focus was not grasped by the distant topographic profile but by closer and altogether more corporeal contours. Across the railroad tracks on an apartment balcony lay a comely *fraulein* sunbathing *au naturel*. Her impressive geography was the sole focus of Alvin's intense concentration and Memphis suspected that voyeurism was one of Alvin's primary motivations for spending so much time in the Visitors Office of Texan American Telecom's (TAT) mainland European hub in Knastburg-im-Breisgau in the State of Baden-Battenberg, Germany.

"Hey Alvin, if you stare at her any longer you'll choke on your own saliva and I'll need to perform The Heimlich Manoeuvre. Now, get your lecherous ass over here and help me out with this email please" shouted Memphis.

Snapping out of his reverie Alvin did his best to look affronted "Who me Boss? I'm just sitting quietly and thinking about statistics."

“Quite, Coco Tittisee’s vital statistics to be exact.” Other than being the subject of Alvin’s rapt attention Coco was also a TAT employee working as the lead agent on their German customer service team although apparently she was on the night shift today and was taking the opportunity to top up a tan that already made it hard to believe that come winter her skin would be as white as an albino. She was the yin to Michael Jackson’s yang. Whereas he had been intent on experimenting with all manner of depigmentation unctious, ointments, medicines and surgical procedures to lighten his skin tone Coco tried just as hard to reverse the process and convert from white to black. With her hair sprouting thick, coiled, entangled dreadlocks like some latter-day Medusa had she and ‘The King of Pop’ been aware of each other’s desires it might have been easier to swap epidermises. Such an exchange would have required Michael to invest in extensive ‘nipping and tucking’ around the breast area or acquire a pair of implants.

“Come on Alvin. I need to draw on your knowledge of patois before I send this email.” Being of Jamaican parentage Alvin was frequently called upon to mentor his boss whenever he felt compelled to complain. He knew his boss’ strange penchant for adopting the mien of his avatar Precious McWhorter, a Jamaican lady of ‘a certain age’ to voice his opinions on customer service.

Alvin sauntered across to Memphis’ laptop and scanned the proffered email. “Nice work boss. Very authentic. Are you sure you don’t have a little black in you, or rather maybe your mother did? Just one minor thing, change ‘eat’ to ‘nyam’ then you’re good to go. ‘Nyam’ as in “Mi feel seh mi can nyam sum saltfish an ackee” Alvin demonstrated as he segued smoothly into ‘Dreadtalk’.

Memphis concurred, made the edit and duly launched the missive through the mystical ether of cyberspace onto Sainsbury’s Facebook page. His motive in utilising Precious as his nom de plume was not merely due to his sense of whimsy but also founded on logic borne from experience. Firstly, baby mothers from Jamdown knew how to complain in a colourful but assertive manner. Even a cursory reading of George L. Beckford’s polemic ‘Small Garden...Bitter Weed’ suggested that they had much to complain about and therefore their experience qualified them as Subject Matter Experts. Secondly, during his career Memphis had designed, built and managed nearly fifty call centres for various employers. He therefore understood the stultifying tedium that could constitute the quotidian lot of agents who worked in what was euphemistically called ‘Customer Care’. Customers with legitimate or utterly spurious gripes against their suppliers generated a seemingly endless deluge of calls, texts, emails and social networking posts airing their grievances. Memphis understood

the value of enlivening their ennui by differentiation. Standing out from the crowd commanded attention and improved the odds of a favourable outcome. Precious McWhorter usually achieved those goals. She provided grist to the mill whereas Memphis Bell would merely be run of the mill.

Seconds later a Facebook notification validated his strategy. Neville from Sainsbury's wrote to confirm that it was not their intention to use avocados as a weapon to degrade his dental wellbeing as well as requesting his customer loyalty card number so that his purchase could be refunded and compensation awarded. Memphis noted the achievement of 225% gross profit on his transaction with approval.

"Result, thank you Alvin. I think your 'nyam' made all the difference."

"*Da Nada*" replied Alvin while nonchalantly attempting to return his attention to the recumbent form of Coco but his efforts were rudely interrupted by the piercing shriek of the fire alarm. "Shit, not again. Another bloody false alarm. How's a man supposed to get any work done around here" muttered Alvin as he stirred himself and ambled toward the exit door that connected the Visitors Office with the building's central stairwell and thence to TAT's main office and call centre beyond. His actions gained a sense of greater urgency when he swiped his passcard over the sensor pad pulling the door open to admit billowing clouds of acrid, black smoke into the room. "Fuck my old boots" he yelled "it really is a bloody fire!" he added redundantly. Further superfluity was evident as the call centre door across the landing opened to anguished cries of "*Feur, Feur!*"

By this time Memphis was already on his feet and moving to the stairwell where he was able to peer through the cloying smoke and detect what appeared to be a large pile of rags ablaze. Entering the call centre he was relieved to see that most of the employees had already evacuated the office using the emergency exit and stairs at the building's far end. The sole exception being Mykal Dorfus, a vegan Reggae DJ (known as Jah Ja) and call centre agent who was standing by his cubicle apparently acting as fire warden and was intent on ensuring that the office was fully evacuated before fleeing to safety himself. "The *Feuerwehr* are coming so we should run away now" he said. "Not so fast" replied Memphis grabbing a fire extinguisher off the wall near the door "We can sort this ourselves. Its not a big fire." "But won't the *Feuerwehr* be upset if we put it out before they get here?" asked Mykal with typical Teutonic logic. "Don't worry we'll give them all the credit for averting a holocaust once they arrive" replied Memphis somewhat regretting his historically insensitive choice of words "now, how does this fire extinguisher work?"

Unsurprisingly neither he nor Mykal had ever attempted to extinguish a fire before. Memphis was no Germanophone but possessed a rudimentary grasp of German, sufficient to order food and drink, be reasonably polite and count to one hundred, but none of these skills seemed useful in this instance. Looking at the instructions printed on the red cylinder his mind boggled at the incomprehensibility of a language boasting a compound noun structure that reached an apogee of unintelligibility with *Rindfleischetikettierungsüberwachungsaufgabenübertragungsgesetz*. Instead he contented himself with scrutinising the diagrams which had apparently been drawn by L.S. Lowry and depicted a man playing a set of bagpipes while being incinerated. Meanwhile Mykal, whose English was far from perfect, had made progress translating the complex instructions. "So, basically I think we must bang it on the head and point this tuba at the fireworks." Fearing concussion from banging the heavy object 'on the head' and pondering where he might obtain a tuba, let alone a Roman Candle, at short notice Memphis decided that it was time for action before the conflagration intensified.

The intrepid ersatz firefighters scoured nearby desk drawers for makeshift masks to protect their respiratory systems from the acrid smoke but only succeeded in finding a spare pair of female undergarments. So clad, they cautiously entered the stygian gloom of the stairwell and attempted to activate the fire extinguisher. Their initial efforts proved futile but just as Memphis began to suspect that the bloody thing was defective Mykal succeeded with a thunderous blow that also dislocated his wrist. Unfortunately, Memphis was caught unawares by Mykal's success and had the tuba pointing at himself rather than the fireworks. He was instantly doused with a chemical foam that made it appear as though he had prepared for a total body shave. Recovering a degree of composure, he grabbed the tube that by now was writhing like an angry snake and directed it toward the fire. It is fair to say that neither he nor Mykal were prepared for what happened next.

Rather than extinguish the fire the jet of super-cooled foam merely succeeded in rearranging it. The foam's pressure was such that the burning material flew into the air like detritus from a bonfire and was distributed around the stairwell. Now intent on stalking his prey like a big game hunter Memphis stealthily descended the stairs methodically spraying every scrap of burning material until the fire had been utterly defeated. He and Mykal high-fived each other like conquering heroes which only succeeded in causing Mykal's wrist greater discomfort. Memphis saw Mykal's mouth move in anguish but heard no cry of pain. Only then did they notice that the infernal klaxon of the fire alarm was still squawking away and realised that they could no longer hear themselves speak. To compound their

discomfiture, the smoke gradually cleared from the stairwell as the building's powerful extractor fans did their job only to reveal a group of firefighters on the floor below gesticulating toward them while grasping stomachs convulsed by paroxysms of laughter.

Only on returning to the office and heading for the bathroom to clean up did the mirror reveal the source of the firemen's merriment. Both he and Mykal were coated with foam from head to toe, fragments of the airborne particulate had adhered to the lather so that they appeared to be clad in rags, any skin not hidden by foam had been blackened by the billowing smoke so that both appeared to be white boys blacked up for a grotesque minstrel show and...worst of all both were wearing masks comprised of 'SpongeBob Squarepants' themed ladies' underwear. Mykal sported a DD bra cupped across the lower half of his face whereas Memphis was modelling a gaudy thong.

The firefighters soon discovered their sanctuary and told them that they still had to evacuate the building while they checked to ensure that the fire had been fully extinguished and the risk had passed. So the heroes of the hour descended four flights of stairs emerging onto the main shopping concourse of the *Hauptbahnhof* before exiting onto the plaza where their displaced colleagues greeted them with a ribald reception before Elke Schweinpool recognised her smoke-stained undergarments and ran forward to retrieve them. Colleagues and passers-by lined up to take selfies with the politically incorrect ragamuffins and Memphis knew that social media would be awash with unflattering reportage. He'd better alert his daughters to expect some ribbing at work.

It seemed to Memphis that the firefighters took their own sweet time but, after an hour which seemed more like three, they were informed that the emergency was over and that people could safely re-enter the building. Predictably the announcement was greeted by a chorus of jeers from all except Alvin who seemed to be unusually eager to re-enter the workplace and had apparently taken advantage of the unexpected break to dash into town and acquire a pair of binoculars.

After finally getting the opportunity to attend to his appearance Memphis thought he'd better report the fire to his boss back in TAT's Houston, TX headquarters. He moved into the Conference Room and video-called Silas Marshall only to be greeted by a screen full of familiar, smiling faces gathered around the meeting table in Silas' office. "Wa'll if it ain't ol' Fireman Sam hisself" greeted Silas as the other members of his International Team

sycophantically slapped their thighs and hooted and hollered at their boss's witticism. "Muss be hotter than a whore's ass in Knastburg today judging by the state of your tan." It was true that his bathroom ministrations had failed to remove all the soot and grime and had she been in the office Coco Tittisee would have been envious of his skin tone. "The boys and I are just admiring your firefighting abilities, you are some hot sheeit Memphis" drawled Silas. Memphis had forgotten that Mister Smith had saturated the Knastburg office with CCTV cameras so that he could maintain an eye over every facet of activity even when he was back home in Houston. Mister Smith had, however, not set foot in Knastburg, or even the Houston Mothership for that matter, for six months since being rescued by Silas, Memphis and a heavily-armed team of cowboys from TAT's 'Aching Butt Ranch' from a Cosa Nostra torture chamber deep in the caves beneath Sperlinga Castle in Sicily. During his brief confinement Mister Smith had grown in stature, literally, as a consequence of being stretched on a Medieval torture rack. Rumour had it that he was now three inches taller and had been hospitalised several times for operations to strengthen his spine, tibiae and fibulae. He had yet to return to work and some doubted that he ever would. Silas and his team though had obviously not forgotten Mister Smith's surveillance technology and had been relishing Memphis' and Mykal's antics and absurd appearance for the past hour. Still not sated they insisted on endlessly replaying the stairwell sequence for Memphis' benefit to the accompaniment of loud Texan guffaws. Rather than endure the performance for a third time Memphis excused himself, bowed low with an ironic Mock-Shakespearean flourish toward the room's CCTV camera before disconnecting the link, and leaving his colleagues to savour their entertainment.

Only now that his memory had been jogged by the CCTV footage did Memphis become aware of Mister Smith's absence. Previously the mysterious gun-addicted Texan with a secretive prior career in military intelligence and law-enforcement skulduggery, that was rarely-discussed, had seemed to be omnipresent in Knastburg. Despite his ubiquity no one else in TAT's European management had the slightest idea what role Smith was supposed to undertake. Memphis, however, was in no doubt – Mister Smith was Silas' spy. His role was to ensure that TAT's considerable investment was not being squandered by lax European management. In that sole capacity Smith had been spectacularly ineffective. TAT's European Headquarters in Middlehampton, England was no more an acme of moral rectitude than 'The Mothership' in Houston. Both had more than their fair share of sin, intrigue, conflict and sensation but in comparison the Knastburg office made Sodom and Gomorrah appear as tranquil as Trappist retreats.

At least Mister Smith remained on the TAT payroll despite his protracted absence from work unlike his former colleague and sidekick George Custer. Custer had previously been a spy in

real life, working for NATO behind the Iron Curtain before the Iron rusted and the Curtain fabric rotted. Like Mister Smith Custer had also been held hostage by the Cosa Nostra and tortured in the Sperlinga caves but there the similarities ended. Custer had been discovered in a state of flagrante delicto that remained the stuff of legend in TAT until this very day. Unfortunately, he had also been discovered to be adulterous which was regrettable for him as he was married to Silas' sister. Consequently, he had been stripped of his job, his paycheck, his wife, his home, his assets and what little remained of his dignity as Silas prosecuted one of the most punitive divorce cases in Texas' legal history on behalf of his beloved sister Amelia.

Custer's unlikely paramour, paralegal Savannah Portly, was also no longer a TAT employee. Instead her gargantuan frame languished in a German prison awaiting a trial date for the murder of Herr Tod, a former Deutsche Telekom (DTAG) executive, whom she allegedly had smothered with her capacious vagina over a simple linguistic and cultural misunderstanding. Even in life Herr Tod had never revealed much of an appetite for oral sex and in death less so. As a consequence of Savannah's murderous muff, Custer also now lacked a viable girlfriend.

To Memphis it seemed barely credible that all these incidents had occurred over half a year ago. Since then he had heard nothing from Ricardo D'Agostino aka Dicto Phones, the menacing Mafia head of Omertà Telecom who had last called Memphis' mobile as his Jeep was precariously balanced on the cusp of Lookout Point on the company's Texas ranch with his twin daughters Marie and Jane perched high on the vehicles observation seats behind him. On that occasion 'Dicto' had given him an ominous warning, threatening his daughters in retaliation for the death of two of his Cosa Nostra henchmen during TAT's memorable assault on Sperlinga. Memphis recalled the conversation verbatim:

"Signore, isa Dicto Phones. I hope that you enjoyed your visit to my island. Just don't relax too much. Remember that you owe me two good men. Maybe two men equate to two daughters? We shall see. You and I have unfinished business. It is a matter of Omertà. Please give my regards to your lovely twins."

Since that time TAT had continued to carry Omertà's felonious voice and data traffic as per their verbal agreement, Memphis had also continued to monitor the Mafia traffic and compile evidence of the numerous crimes being planned or committed each day. He also

banked the €1 million in fees that Omertà continued to pay TAT in cash each month in lieu of termination and interconnection charges. At least he continued to bank precisely half of that sum on behalf of TAT but he retained the balance of €3 million in cash following his inexplicable deceit to Silas of the full amount paid by Omertà each month. The volume of retained cash was such that it had become impossible to conceal at TAT's rented house at #5 Proximus Close in Middlehampton so once a month Memphis had adopted the habit of travelling to the Isle of Man for the weekend. Once in Douglas, the island's capital and financial hub, he deposited €500,000 per month into an offshore account held in the ultra-discreet vaults of the Bank of Mammon International that now held €3 million, £25,000 together with a smidgeon of interest. All in all it was a tidy sum of illicit income yet still the cash flowed in. What should he do with it? Transfer it to TAT's account and explain to Silas that he had been befuddled when he stated that Omertà was only paying €500,000 a month? ONLY €500,000 a month, what was he thinking that's €6 million a year, each. That's a fortune. Surely he'd be mad to disclose its existence? A conscience was a luxury that he couldn't afford, even with all that cash at his disposal. Perhaps he should invest it? Maybe he should retire and go live in the sun? The cash pile offered plenty of food for thought but there was no need to dash into a decision. First, he should learn more about the Mafia's intentions for 'their partnership' and the risks that would pose. Then he would understand the best way to utilise the illicit insurance nest-egg that he'd accumulated.

Carrying his moral dilemma with him Memphis returned to the Visitors Office where he found Alvin with his binoculars still sheathed in their carrying case. He sauntered across to the window and noticed that Coco was absent from her sun trap. Looking across the valley he noted the onset of cloud from the mountains to the West that had presumably curtailed her tanning and obscured Alvin's appreciation of the female form.

"Storm in a teacup" mumbled Alvin apparently not in reference to either Coco or the change in weather.

"Pardon?" enquired Memphis.

"The fire, it was a storm in a teacup. I spoke to the Fire Chief and he said some vagrant had apparently been dosing down undetected in the stairwell. He claimed the guy was a Syrian immigrant and was feeling a bit chilly in the European summer so he started a fire using rags and waste paper that he'd collected and it all got a bit out of hand."

“I see” acknowledged Memphis. At least he could take some consolation that the fire had not been sparked by a Mafia revenge attack as had been his initial fear. He’d merely have to attempt to develop some patience, a quality quite alien to him, and await the Mob’s next contact. After all he had no means of contacting them so worry would serve no purpose other than inducing paranoia. Not even Precious McWhorter could intercede on his behalf in this dispute, although the prospect of a showdown between her and the macho Sicilians did hold a strange allure.

‘Yuh a ah bad mon. Mi bet yuh drive ah BMW. Dat stands fah Baaad Maaan Wagon yuh nuh. Rapin’, lootin’ an a pillagin’. Puttin de horse’s head inna innocent people’s beds. Shame pon u bredda. Yuh nuh care fi di poa an di likkle pickney. Yuh a duppy parasite an a vampire.’

“Whadda da fuck dis nigga biatch talkin' 'bout? Any you fellas capiche?”

Memphis reluctantly abandoned his fantasy and returned his attention to Alvin. He reflected that he could easily have been sitting alone in the office as his travelling companion nearly hadn’t completed the journey to Knastburg. The previous evening, they had left Middlehampton together and driven to Heathrow airport in Memphis’ BMW M3. There they had had boarded a Crosshairs flight to Basel EuroAirport. Alvin was unfamiliar with their destination despite being a frequent visitor to Knastburg. Ordinarily he preferred to fly from Birmingham to Frankfurt from where he took a train directly to Knastburg. He was therefore unaware that Basel was unique amongst airports in that it provided access to two countries – France where it was geographically located and Switzerland with which it shared a border. As Memphis was awaiting the arrival of his checked bag he noticed the unmistakable figure of Poindexter disappearing through Swiss passport control which was unfortunate as their hire car awaited them in France. Alvin was unmistakable being a black midget which, other than him, were in short supply in Basel airport at that time. Apparently one of the advantages of being short was that his Lilliputian clothes took up little storage space and Alvin was able to undertake lengthy trips with hand baggage only, hence his swift departure to have a smoke while Memphis was stuck waiting by the luggage carousel. Memphis dug his mobile out of his computer bag.

“You’re in the wrong country buddy.”

“What d’ya mean?” replied Alvin.

“Let me put it this way, you are standing in the land of FIFA corruption, Toblerone, Heidi, William Tell and gnomic bankers whereas we are going to the country famous for smelly cheese, garlic, Napoleon Bonaparte and Chateauneuf du Pape to collect a rental car en route to the home of Brätwurst, Dachsunds, Lederhosen, Nazism, Angela ‘Mutti’ Merkel and Glühwein. Capiche?

“How the bloody hell did I do that? I just walked through the Passport Control. Did I step on a crack in the spatio-temporal continuum and get teleported into another realm? Bloody excellent, Poindexter – a man unconstrained by national boundaries. I like it.”

“All right bighead, rein in your vast ego. Just go and have your smoke then get yourself deported. I don’t care how you do it and I’ll see you in France at the Bitchin’ Ride rental car lot in thirty minutes.”

Reunited the incident now seemed like an ill omen for a trip with a solitary, mundane objective. They were negotiating the expansion of their office space in Knastburg. When they signed the current lease agreement two years earlier they took a five-year option on the adjacent, unoccupied half of the fourth floor. Now that the business was going gangbusters (an apposite description given their adventures in Sicily) they needed the space and were intent on exercising their option.

“When’s our meeting with the landlord?” enquired Memphis.

“We have a site meeting tomorrow at ten followed by lunch at the Schlossbergrestaurant Dattler, presumably to celebrate the inking of a deal. If Herr Gewohnheitstrinker’s appetite for the local ale is on a par with normal I wouldn’t count on doing anything productive during the afternoon.”

Memphis reflected on TAT's launch event when they had celebrated the opening of the German market and their Knastburg office with a two-day party. Their usual local hotel and hostelry the Grandhotel Amöbenruhr had been block-booked for the TAT entourage and their guests, the Kongresshalle had been hired to host the ceremony and the kitchens and chefs at the Dattler had been reserved to create the gastronomy. Copious supplies of strong German Altbier, Schnapps, wine and every other conceivable tippel had been procured. Musically the bases were covered with German Oompah, Polka and Faux-American Country & Western bands booked to perform at the post-ceremonial after-party. With a mash-up Teutonic Texan theme it was all set to be the most significant cultural event in Knastburg since the infamous fifteenth century witch trials.

TAT's founders, Chad and Skyler Diggins together with Silas Marshall, the Board of Directors and US and European Executives attended the celebration and were joined by local dignitaries including Chuck Wagon, the US Consul, his wife Tippa; Knastburg's Mayor Herr Verehrung; The Head of the Chamber of Commerce Herr Doktor Verschwender; the Baden-Battenberg Deutsch-Amerikanische Vereine and, of course, their new landlord Herr Gewohnheitstrinker.

Following the sober and dignified welcoming ceremony, speeches and exchange of gifts, during which TAT's representatives were surprised to be presented with a solid metal manhole cover bearing the company's logo intertwined with Knastburg's coat of arms - to be ceremonially installed outside their office entrance, the after-party came as a complete contrast. It was a bacchanalian excess that would have delighted Caligula. As the beer, wine and spirits flowed German-American cultural understanding developed to a level unprecedented since before the Great War. Five hours of genial fraternisation had passed and those less accustomed to the strength of German beer, especially when augmented by Schnapps chasers, were staggering unsteadily toward their rooms when Herr Gewohnheitstrinker decided that it was time to demonstrate his newly-found fondness for America and all things Texan by getting the party started.

Gewohnheitstrinker's exposure to German-American culture was somewhat limited. In fact, it began and ended with Bob Fosse's movie of the musical 'Cabaret'. Herr Gewohnheitstrinker had a discreet word with the leader of the Oompah band, downed yet another stein of his favourite local gargle Ganter Altbier - which by now meant that he was well into his second barrel, as well as his cups - and swayed merrily into the backstage changing area. Here he located the costume bag and cosmetics that he had secreted into a

storage locker earlier in anticipation of his personal allocation of Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame.

Bedecked in a diaphanous black basque, suspender belt and fishnet tights, adorned with enough metallic chains to make a Gay Bear salivate, coated with deposits of mascara and lipstick deeper than Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the entire ensemble crowned with a black bowler hat the perverse apparition slid onto the stage in a manner that the performer perceived to be sensual, erotic and captivating but to the astonished spectators merely appeared to be equally debased and inebriated. Looking like a fifth-rate, down-and-out drag artiste who had barely survived a heinous facial assault Herr *Gewohnheitstrinker* suggestively straddled a chair which audibly and visibly protested against its burden and launched into his uniquely-stylised tribute to Sally Bowles with a rendition of 'Mein Herr' that rendered the onlookers speechless.

Herr *Gewohnheitstrinker* was no longer the lithe, svelte Adonis that he imagined. Instead his physique reminded his dumb-struck audience more of John Merrick – The Elephant Man – than of any Greek God. The enormous 'moobs' projecting from the inadequate encasement of his flimsy basque began to gyrate like blancmanges on a potters' wheel as he strode into an ill-judged version of 'Tomorrow Belongs to Me' which left the US military veterans in his audience apoplectic and their German hosts mortified with embarrassment. Barely had he commenced this paean to National Socialism when his chair finally gave up the ghost and crumpled beneath his bulk. Unfortunately, this dislocation caused Herr *Gewohnheitstrinker's* fishnets to rip around his crotch to reveal that, like Coco Tittisee, he was no devotee of undergarments. Worse yet the act of singing in public had evidently caused him a measure of excitement. Chuck Wagon sought to cover Tippa's eyes with both hands but, as he was clutching a full glass of chilled *Gewürztraminer*, merely succeeded in providing her with an unexpected and unwanted cold shower. Skyler Diggins had apparently been exposed to German sausage before and merely exclaimed "Oh my Gaawd, what a schlong". Mayor Verehrung apparently thought that Herr *Gewohnheitstrinker's* exhibition was part of the scheduled entertainment and sought to enter into the spirit of the occasion by attempting to loop a bagel over the public, and pubic, protuberance. Perhaps he thought that he'd win a goldfish in a plastic bag had he succeeded. Fortunately, even at this late stage, one of the TAT Events Staff had the presence of mind to draw a veil over the proceedings by lowering the safety curtain. It was some time before Herr *Gewohnheitstrinker* thought it advisable to show his face, or any other part of his anatomy, in Knastburg-im-Breisgau again.

“Good” thought Memphis. TAT had no dealings with Gewohnheitstrinker since the Launch Event and he figured that, even two years later, his mortification should be worth at least a Euro or two per square metre off the market rental rate. Tomorrow should make for an interesting meeting particularly as Memphis had some revealing video clips of the landlord’s performance stored on his laptop should the man’s memory have faded. In the event that logical argument, disputation, reason or abject pleading fail during a negotiation, flagrant blackmail usually prevails.

Belatedly Memphis remembered that he had intended to contact his daughters to warn them about the anticipated social media storm arising from his earlier firefighting antics. He texted both of them. Like most of their generation Marie and Jane rarely deigned to use their mobiles for conversation preferring instead to use Facebook, instant messaging or text as their communication media of choice. Seconds later his media selection was vindicated as a reply flashed in from Jane. “Too late. Love your new look. LOL.” Within a minute Marie reinforced the view that he had been too tardy to counter the near-instantaneous nature of global communications. “You should be on reality TV. Hilarious. LMAO. BTW we’re going to Malta on vac nxt wk.”

Memphis stared at the phone display in disbelief. Malta three tiny specks of inhabited islands – smaller than most known dermatological conditions – in the heart of the Mediterranean, but lying only fifty-eight miles South of Sicily. Sicily, the home of Ricardo D’Agostino, Omertà Telecom and the Cosa Nostra. Only fifty-eight measly little miles away. Bloody hell it was virtually the Mafia’s backyard. It was akin to Doctor Walter Palmer sticking his head in cross-eyed Clarence the Lion’s mouth. His sense of sangfroid over the looming property negotiations had evaporated. His blood pressure was building like a volcanic eruption. His heart was pounding like a rutting deer. He was perspiring like a busted fire hydrant. This was not good news.

Summoning what remained of his self-control and desperately seeking to quell the anxiety in his voice he called Marie. To his astonishment she answered after two rings.

“What’s up cupcake. Glad you appreciated my new video” he stammered while attempting an air of studied nonchalance.

“Oh nuttin, yeah you were pretty cool, in a retarded sort of way. So where are you? Kinda looked like Germany from the fire guys’ uniforms?” she replied, totally relaxed.

“Yeah right, I’m in Knastburg but enough about my travelling, what’s all this about Malta?”

“Yeah, wicked isn’t it. We got a great deal. £299 all-inclusive for a week including flights. Five Star hotel. You remember those Euro’s you gave us before we went to the Ranch? You said that we could use what we didn’t spend on our Summer holiday. So, this is it. Jane’s coming too and our boyfriends. We leave Saturday. Can’t wait.”

Memphis bit his tongue, literally, and learned that venting blood into the mouth was not an effective stress-control mechanism. Having withheld any mention of his and TAT’s entanglement with the Cosa Nostra from his daughters all those months ago before dispatching them to the relative safety of ‘The Aching Butt Ranch’ he could hardly put a damper on their vacation plans now. How could he possibly begin to explain that his deceit had been well-intentioned without scaring the living bejesus out of them now and ruining any possibility of a relaxed, fun-filled holiday? He simply couldn’t do it.

“Dad, are you still there?” enquired Marie puzzled by his lengthy silence.

“Sure, cupcake, sure erm I was just wondering why you all decided to go to Malta. Isn’t it a bit staid, a bit dull? Wouldn’t you rather be clubbing on Ibiza, or in Magaluf or Ayia Napa?”

“Oh come on dad, we’re not teens any more. We’re looking forward to visiting the catacombs, the Blue Lagoon, the temples and museums. Cliff’s going to do a diving course as well. Then there’s plenty of bars and places to go clubbing at night in Paceville if we want to.”

Sometimes Memphis thought that his daughters were rebelling against him with their studied conformity, and well – just their bloody-minded normality.

“Sounds great honey. I’m sure you’ll all have a great time. Give me a call before you go. I’ll be back in the UK by Saturday. Gotta dash. Ciao. Love you.”

After disconnecting the call Memphis held his head in his hands and emitted a deep groan, pondering what he could do all the while knowing full-well that he was hoist by his own petard. There was nothing he could do without causing alarm. He became vaguely aware that Alvin was staring at him.

“Bad news?” his colleague enquired viewing his state of despond.

“The girls are going on vacation to Malta next week” he replied.

“Oh come on, its not that bad Memphis. I’ve known some people who’ve actually had quite a good time there. It may not be Monte Carlo or the Bahamas but equally its not bloody Cleethorpes or Skegness. I’m sure they’ll have fun.”

Memphis smiled wanly at his colleagues’ attempt to lift his spirits. Feeling anxious he decided that Sister Nicotine might just provide the medicine that could assuage his concerns. Waving adieu to Poindexter he left the office, crossed the stairwell pausing briefly to admire its newly smoke-stained décor, and entered the call centre. The Smoking Room, or snuff movie audition studio as it was known to non-smokers, lay to his right. Merely by opening the door, he unleashed a smoke-inhalation experience akin to his earlier firefighting antics. Smoking was evidently a very popular pastime in Germany, almost on a par with beer drinking, Schuhplatter (the ass slapping dance) and bailing out the Greek economy. Once the fug had partially cleared Memphis was surprised to perceive the unmistakable profile of Coco Tittisee accompanied by her colleagues Beate Dickov and Karola Weiss-Wänke. All three were puffing away on their cigarettes with an enthusiasm that suggested they were fanning the flames of Hades. Given the atmospheric conditions it seemed entirely otiose to light up as mere respiration would probably guarantee the onset of oncology treatment but equally it seemed rude not to participate in the national sport.

Suddenly he was being addressed through the stygian gloom of the nicotine cumulo-nimbus. From the hybrid Afrikaans-British-German accent he guessed that the disembodied voice emanated from Coco. The content of her greeting confirmed it. "Hey Memphis can you tell that voyeuristic pygmy Poindexter that I can see him leching over me from the office window when I am using my balcony to get a tan. His hot breath causes the whole window to fog with condensation even on a sunny day. It is so bloody obvious what he's doing that he might as well just waggle his little willy out of the window."

"How could you tell? If he did that you would need the Hubble Space Telescope to be able to see that tiny winkie" questioned Karola Weiss-Wänke.

"I'm sorry for his lewd behaviour Coco," apologised Memphis "for a little chap he certainly seems to have an unusually large libido. Anyway, what are you doing here. I had assumed from Alvin's priapic preoccupation that you must be working the night shift."

Having reduced their cigarettes to the point that they would have required roach clips to continue smoking both Karola and Beate crushed the cremated remains into the ashtray and reluctantly returned to work. Coco still had a few millimetres left to consume as she replied "No, not today. I had to go to the Krankenhaus, how do you say, the hospital earlier because of my bad back and they told me to lie flat and relax my muscles. So earlier I was just following Herr Doktor's orders, then the sun vanished so I figured I might as well come into work and see my friends."

Coco's attitude toward attending her workplace neatly epitomised the contemporary German work ethic prevalent in Knastburg. The endeavour that had propelled Krupps, Siemens, Mercedes, BMW and many other German industrial giants to become world-leading brands was sadly lacking in the more laid back environs of Baden-Battenberg. Perhaps Memphis should be grateful that the weather had clouded over although he doubted that Alvin would share that opinion.

"So, here I am" said Coco "I am not on nights and I finish at 17:00. What are your plans tonight? Maybe I should show you some parts of Knastburg that you haven't seen before? You have a car here?"

“Sure” replied Memphis unsure as to whether Coco’s vaguely outré invitation was merely motivated by collegiate good manners or whether he was being propositioned. “A rental Beemer, and no I have no plans for the evening, other than baby-sitting Alvin. Is he invited too?”

“No, I think he’s already seen too many hidden parts for one day. OK, so I’ll meet you at the Amöbenruhr at half seven tonight. *Tschüss.*”

Memphis was left even more puzzled following Coco’s departure than he had been upon his arrival, filled as he was with anxiety about his daughter’s plans for a vacation in Malta. Still, he no longer felt quite so anxious but was instead gripped by a curiosity to learn what the night held in store for him.

Coco Tittisee possessed a certain notoriety around the Knastburg office. Some painted her as a femme fatale, others more of a Black Widow but all agreed that, despite cohabiting with Dolf, a blonde Teutonic giant who worked in TAT’s IT support operation, she was reportedly keen on playing away from home. Additionally, she was widely regarded as a skilled utility player, one fully capable of playing for both sides. She had first appeared on Memphis’ radar two months earlier when Alvin had become embroiled in the investigation of a workplace incident in which Coco had accused a co-worker called Murat Ufuk of sexual harassment who in turn had accused her of theft. As is the case with all unverifiable accusations it was simply a case of ‘he said, she said’ and provided no means of objective substantiation. Alvin’s report concluded that neither accusation could be proven but he had no doubt that Coco was ‘a little cockteaser’. Given Coco’s remarks about Alvin’s miniscule manhood he began to wonder if he had spoken from personal experience.

After the cases were dismissed Coco immediately devoted herself to investigating Murat and collected evidence of every calumny, indiscretion, mistake and provocation that he perpetrated in addition to a wealth of testimony about his sexual harassment from over a dozen female co-workers and duly submitted her dossier to Flora Edelweiss TAT’s German Human Resources Manager. Flora involved Ali Barber TAT Europe’s HR Manager who, in turn, worked for Alvin. The circle was complete. Alvin re-entered the decision-making process and commended Coco’s diligence. Alvin wanted to clean house and dismiss Murat immediately an act almost impossible under the inexplicably toothless German employment laws. It appeared that it would be quite feasible for an employee to arrive at their workplace, take a swift crap on the carpet, wipe their ass on a colleague’s coat, shoot up

with smack at their workstation, fondle the genitalia of their line manager without invitation or permission, set fire to the photocopier, steal the petty cash, incite a strike, refuse to work and assault the office manager with a chair and still reasonably expect to remain in employment at the end of the day.

Memphis felt emotionally conflicted. On the one hand he remained concerned by his daughters' imminent vacation plans but on the other his visit to the smoking room had worked wonders and he emerged into pristine air feeling intrigued. By reputation Coco was vengeful, methodical, intelligent, promiscuous, bi-sexual and a prize bitch. She therefore embodied many of the attributes that Memphis admired most in a woman. He really could hardly wait to see what would unfold that evening. Perhaps he'd even get the opportunity to enhance Knastburg's reputation as a latter day Sodom and Gomorrah.

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