

The Red Cow

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I. THE HOTEL – BELGIUM

Lydia and August

‘We’ll write it like it sounds,’ said Lydia. ‘*Peteetamie*, in pink letters. With love hearts for dots on the *i*. And a cupid on either side, each aiming an arrow at the letters. Graceful and erotic.’

‘They’ll give us nothing but headaches,’ August replied. ‘Two identical cupids, that’s asking for trouble. There’s always someone who shoots first. The first to be left alone again.’

‘They’re aiming for the letters, sweetheart, not each other.’

‘It’ll look like they’re aiming for each other.’

‘The guests won’t notice.’

‘But they will notice the gender-neutral spelling?’

Over a year had passed since they’d moved in. All that time, they’d put off the decision about the lettering on the facade. The previous tenants, the Stoffelsens, had eagerly taken the opportunity of Lydia and August’s hesitation to drag out their move until the very last day. Lydia hoped they’d be out of there this week. This was the time to act boldly, to make choices, not to get mired in never-ending discussions with her husband, for example. Except they each secretly relished winding the other up.

August fished gummy bear after gummy bear from a bag. Every now and then he waved his finger about, as if disentangling an ethical dilemma, but his slow soul and his fatigue were getting the best of him. After a while, he’d start chomping like a fish, as though his lips weren’t producing sounds but snapping them up and swallowing them down.

Sometimes the sounds stuck in his throat. Like the time he was giving Jeremy what-for for wanting to squash the cat’s tail in the waffle iron. Their grandson was very advanced for his age, but not shrewd enough to bring his mischievous plans to a successful conclusion. Yet.

Whenever August was about to yell at him, he was reminded of his daughter, Judith, Jeremy's mother, and his admonishing hand remained suspended in mid-air. The boy had lost his parents. Maybe growing up with his grandparents in this hotel was more than punishment enough.

Yesterday Jeremy had cleared a landing strip down the middle of his scalp with his granddad's shaver. Well, then he should be happy to wear his ridiculous haircut to school, Lydia had said. Jeremy couldn't have cared less. In fact, he looked down more, not less, to show off the top of his head; he dropped his pens on purpose, gave the girls in class princely bows and the headteacher a chivalrous greeting, and every other minute he decided he needed to check whether he'd done up his zipper.

Lydia and August didn't have a clue as to how to deal with him. They'd forgotten how you raised a child. Their own children, Judith and Bill, unlike Jeremy, had always peacefully submitted to the authority of their parents and teachers. It wasn't until puberty that Judith showed some contrariness, with her interest in 1930s politics, when she started reciting entire passages from Mussolini's pamphlets and from *Il principe* by Machiavelli at the dinner table. Bill didn't tend to express his opinions, preferring to bury his nose in books about electromechanics.

As for Jeremy, any reprimands he received slid right off him, like water off a duck's back. Or he took ownership of them like an emperor, as if he knew that his charisma softened his superiors. Good looks are greeted with leniency.

August kept stuffing brightly coloured bears in his mouth. He loudly sucked the sugar off their surface, the gooey mass sticking to his palate.

'If you're writing it like it sounds,' he continued with his mouth full, 'then why add the *e* to *amie*? We might as well write it without the *e*, right? Wouldn't that sound the same?'

Lydia listened to the thumping coming from upstairs. The Stoffelsens. Slow people, the Stoffelsens. Slow, sluggish people.

'Gender equality,' Lydia said, increasing the volume of her voice. 'We've got to keep gender equality in mind when we decide about the spelling. The cupids are asexual, too. It suits the philosophy of our rendezvous hotel. We don't think in boxes. Anything goes, as long as you keep it inside your room. Anyway, why do you care so much? It's my job to develop the business. You have your activities in the basement.'

Maybe there's a way we can connect my political ambitions with your passion for photography, Lydia had said. What she'd proposed was daring, transgressive, horrific, elegant. After they'd purchased the hotel, August had set up his workshop in the basement right away. The plan was born, the basement was ready. Now all they had left to do was wait for the time to ripen.

August thought back to the photo book he'd published years ago, about the microscopic-level animal kingdom – the result of painstaking research. He'd been approached by an art book publisher after he'd won a science photography competition. Through this focus on minuscule, bacterial life, August wanted to evoke the unfathomable vastness that surrounds and sometimes swallows humanity whole.

He couldn't wait to show Jeremy the book. 'This is the muscle of a freshwater snail's tongue. Here, a cross-section of a mouse's intestine. These are the nerve cells of an embryonic rat. Look, the front paw of a male diving beetle. The tail gill of a damselfly nymph. And these right here are the microscopic ripples caused by an eight-week-old starfish trying to catch swimming algae. A fruit fly's testicle, the stages of sperm development shown in colour. The excrement of a young dairy cow.'

Sadly, their grandson showed no interest whatsoever in books; instead he liked to hole up in his room and draw these unnerving tableaux on the walls.

The publisher's head of PR demanded that August should provide the reader with more information about the origins of the photographs and the methods by which they were obtained. August insisted these should remain secret. For him, art without mystery was just a bland copy of

reality. He didn't want to write a report on microbiological photography, but to give readers impressions that could transport them into a state of enchantment.

In the end, they gave him his way. His work was praised in all the papers. The success encouraged him to start preparations for a second publication. This was what he was going to work on here, in the basement of this building they were soon to turn into a rendezvous hotel. The main idea remained exactly the same. Only his methods changed. This book was not going to be about animals.

Lydia rubbed her thighs, gently kneaded her knees. One rheumatism sunk into the next. Her body kept itself upright by rusty hooks.

'In any case,' August finally insisted, 'I think the gender issue is clearer *without* the *e* at the end. That way it looks masculine but sounds feminine: *petitami*. If you write the *e*, too, then it's exclusively feminine. Which is exactly what you don't want, isn't it?'

His voice sounded muffled, thanks to the tapestries that hung from the walls like enormous slabs of drying meat.

On weekends, when his grandparents slept in a little, Jeremy liked to gambol through the living room, crashing into the tapestries until they'd thrown up an impenetrable curtain of dust for him to hide behind. In those moments, his sparkling eyes didn't shine with the white light of joy, but with the glossy black of a deep, unknowable evil.

Lydia predicted that this would eventually lead to accidents. And sure enough, one of the tapestries proved unable to hold firm amid his frolicking and, with the sound of an iron sheet shaking in the wind, came crashing down on Jeremy's lower body. By some miracle, no vital organs were damaged. He just had a bit of a limp from that day on.

It would be odd for Jeremy, Lydia pondered, to spend his days surrounded by people who were beginning to mummify – starting from the toes, rising inch by inch until the wraps dried up in their throats.

But this wasn't until they'd turned their real estate investment into a profitable business, a business that was also supposed to help preserve their youth. A rendezvous hotel whose guests could, in all anonymity and for a maximum of six consecutive hours, make use of a thrilling assortment of mirror rooms, tantra rooms, BDSM rooms, surveillance rooms and wellness rooms. A discreet sex temple for anybody who wanted to add some spice to their amorous adventures. There was a private car park in the courtyard, out of sight of neighbours, passers-by and commuters.

Muffled thuds came from above. It sounded like the Stoffelsens were beating their rugs. August grabbed the bag of sweets, saw it was empty, and sank back in his chair.

'We're out of gummy bears, sweetheart. I won't buy any more. You've got to think of your weight and your blood values.'

Then, suddenly, Jeremy appeared in the room – naked. His little willy looked like a limp goat's foot. Lydia clapped a hand to her mouth. August jumped up. The cat bolted away.

Then the grandfather clock in the hall struck nine. To the rhythm of the lead pendulum, the Stoffelsens' screaming match grew louder and louder. The neighbourhood held its breath. Even the shrubs in the front garden stopped rustling. Passersby slowed down and turned to look at the hotel. Across the road, the trains fell silent.

Jeremy had the world in his grip. The boy had been to the basement. He'd been in the workshop.

Lydia and August stood suspended in a state of confusion. Then crashing sounds erupted from the hall, like bowling balls being thrown down the stairs.

Irritated, Lydia grabbed her grandson by his upper arms, as if to fold him in half, and slapped him first across his right cheek, then his left. The basement was out of bounds.

‘What did we say about the basement? What did we say about the basement, Jeremy?’
Then to August, sternly: ‘I told you that door needs a lock. Why don’t you lock that door?’
‘You know why I don’t lock the door! The brat has to learn.’
‘The brat,’ Jeremy echoed, ‘the brat, the brat!’ Then he raced to the hall.
‘Should we ...’ August tried.
‘Leave him,’ Lydia said.

Jeremy’s voice came from the hall. ‘Mummy! Mummy!’

Mr and Mrs Stoffelsen lay twisted at the bottom of the stairs. The husband lay face up, his eyes wide open, with his wife on his belly, her arms bent at an odd angle above her head, half draped over her husband. They looked like one body with two heads. A creature of myth with four legs and two heads that had thrown itself from a great height into a gorge. They were bleeding. They’d given each other stab wounds.

Jeremy squatted next to their bodies and repeated, in a whisper, ‘Mummy, Mummy.’

This was the first time he’d called her that, Lydia realised. She felt an urge to push him into her nest like a chick, to shelter him under her wings until he, suddenly a man, would start rutting and poking his little beak into other ladies’ plumage.

Humming, Jeremy drew lines in the blood. ‘Seahorse,’ he said when Lydia came closer. Fascinating, how quickly his panic had dissipated.

‘Go put on some clothes.’ She prodded his lower back, at which he, without looking back, clambered over the Stoffelsens and went up the stairs.

Then she planted her hands in her sides, leaned over, and shook her head. More than the Stoffelsens’ corpses, she was getting worked up about the mess, the never-ending mess that kept dogging you, demanding to be cleaned. The death of their upstairs neighbours had unexpectedly accelerated their plan’s execution. August had to get moving.

‘Sweetheart, take them to the basement. Have them washed and branded.’

Lydia and August were still living in their terraced house in the city centre when two police officers came to take a report about the disappearance of Jeremy’s parents. ‘Coffee?’ Lydia had asked, as nonchalantly as she could.

Then when the officers returned to inform them that it was unlikely that Janus and Judith would be found, she’d asked them again: ‘Coffee?’ And again a few days later, when they came to take her statement and she had the unpleasant feeling that she was being interrogated. They were to be Jeremy’s new guardians. Apparently, their pedagogical capabilities had to be impeccable.

She wore her nicest dress for the meeting. The biscuits were ready, and, although August had knotted it the wrong way around, he wore a tie. Lydia observed that she, unlike her husband, was being addressed in a passive aggressive tone. She did not appreciate this, responding curtly to their insinuations regarding her difficult relationship with Judith.

‘We’re not basing our investigation on any presuppositions or mere hearsay,’ they said, ‘but it has come to our attention that, in the eyes of the neighbourhood, you don’t seem to be entirely innocent.’

‘Not entirely innocent of what?’

The officers didn’t once utter the word *suicide*. They asked about a certain Cassius – ‘about whom we have also heard rumours.’

They suggested that it was peculiar and even unbelievable that Lydia and August hadn’t maintained any contact with Bill. Their son lived on a German peninsula, but why hadn’t he got in touch after his sister’s disappearance? Or wasn’t he told? Wasn’t he Jeremy’s godfather? And what could Lydia tell them about Janus’s and Judith’s affaires? Did they partner swap? Were they swingers? Again, they brought up this ‘Cassius’.

Janus and Judith were last spotted in an amusement park. According to the witness report, they were holding hands at first. Then they went on various rides separately. Judith was seen dragging herself down the gravel paths, while Janus walked with purpose, his head held high. At a certain point, according to an older man who had spent the day with the penguins, they abandoned their child – ‘who looked like a newborn who could already walk, a year old at most’ – on a swing. ‘We watched the penguins together, and his parents never came back.’

After closing, the park was combed through twice over. They abandoned the search there. It wasn’t until they went looking for a few escaped penguins that they discovered the hole in the fence.

‘Janus and Judith lived in mortal fear of the end of the world,’ August told the officers. ‘Perhaps their disappearance had to do with an unbearable fear of some calamity, or with an incapacity to protect Jeremy from disaster. Perhaps it was some final act of resistance. Or maybe they just couldn’t see any other way out?’

‘We’re investigating every possible scenario,’ one of the officers said without much conviction. ‘For now, we’re not assuming that they died.’

‘But you’re giving up the search?’

‘That’s correct.’

‘Are you going to arrest us?’

‘At this point in time there’s no reason to.’

Lydia threw a sideways glance at August, who was about to ask the officer where in God’s name she found the courage to insinuate that he, a proud father and grandfather, who always paid his taxes, and invested – and ate! – in an environmentally responsible way, who hardly ever drove anywhere and never travelled by plane, would be the kind of person to wipe his own flesh and blood from the face of the earth. His mouth was getting ready to repeat the officer’s words – *At this point in time there’s no reason to* – when Lydia coughed, and he swallowed his reply. From the very beginning of their relationship, over forty years ago, he’d been able to read Lydia’s signals and had managed to temper his impulsiveness. He was the only man she’d ever explicitly asked to touch her body; not one of the others had waited for her permission.

‘Then how will we ever find out whether they’ve died or not?’

‘Without any signs of life, they’ll be declared dead in five years.’

That was when Jeremy appeared in the room, as if the stage manager had sent him up through a trapdoor in the floor. He still had the head of a baby, but had started walking at a surprisingly young age. His belly peeped out between his tight T-shirt and the waistband of his shorts. Somehow he’d climbed out of the police car, which the officers were positive they’d locked.

Laboriously, August dragged the Stoffelsens by their ankles to the basement. Jeremy made a square in front of his eyes with his fingers and pressed an imaginary button. ‘Click!’ he yelled.

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Diane

Cooper, the temperature is mild, but snow is falling fast. The clouds are filled to bursting, the sky is the yellow of tobacco. In this strange climate, connections pop up all over the place. They lie draped over the landscape like cobwebs.

I've moved to Ptitami's street for the duration of the assignment. My daughter's fourteen now, but I prefer not to leave her home alone. That's why I took her with me. Fjorgyn and I are renting a run-down flat about two hundred metres from the hotel in question.

When I talk, wisps of cloud come from my mouth. My nose has turned red. Sweat's dripping from my armpits. Grandma Edda's woolly hat is keeping my head warm, with its sheepskin inner lining. It still smells of the hearth of her house in Norway, on the outcrop they called the Needle.

I was about eight years old when my father and I first visited. I was the key asset in an attempt at reconciliation. All those years, my father had gone along in the stigmatisation of my grandma as a 'Hun's whore'. My Grandpa Klaus, as you may know, was an officer in the German occupying army.

Edda put the way oversized hat on my eight-year-old head and said in her broken English, 'Now you are a little dog' – the leather flaps on the sides look like a cocker spaniel's ears. We walked along the old corpse road and disappeared in the mist, while Grandma told me story after story from mythology. About Odin and his eight-legged stallion Sleipnir. About Fjorgyn, Odin's wife, the Earth goddess who bore the fierce Thor. About the Midgard snake who curls around the world and causes earthquakes when she bites her own tail. About the cubs of Fenrir the wolf, who chase the sun and moon across the sky, bringing about day and night. About Hel, waiting to receive those who have died.

When we got back, the house on the Needle welcomed us with open arms, with its bright-red planks and the broad portico which in the back became a terrace with a view over Nærøy Valley. In my memory, the Needle was always friendly, despite its barbed name.

Ever since I was given her hat to take home, the woman who went through life as a 'Hun's whore' always remained close to me, no matter the distance.

But I'm rambling, Cooper, I'm sorry.

Besides Grandma Edda's hat, I'm wearing a polo-neck jumper, a bodywarmer, the fur-lined leather jacket my ex-husband Bruller once gave me, my thermal underwear and a brand-new pair of brown, laced-up boots, all shiny in the snow. My temples are pounding with excitement.

There's a little greengrocer's on the corner to the left. It rubs elbows with the rendezvous hotel to its right, with its pink letters and brightly lit cupids. The hotel is about five standard houses wide. On the ground floor, where the greengrocer's fluorescent lights end, there's a large window with yellow lamps stood right behind it. Through the thin white curtains I can see a bent silhouette moving about. That must be Lydia.

To the right of the living room, there's a gaping hole in the facade, a missing tooth, the roof of the mouth continuing above, three storeys of rooms that look over a gated car park. On the other side of the gap is the elevated main entrance. The steps are covered in snow.

Lydia and her husband turned the building into a hotel. Since the opening, a number of elite guests have entered and never come out. I was hired by a private client. As a private investigator, I'm a lot quicker to track down the truth. We work in grey areas, and we can get away with a lot more. Undoubtedly Lydia receives protection from her political connections, but that kind of untouchability doesn't impress our kind.

To my left, the train station rises from the ground like an army tank from the future, a brightly lit cube that doesn't blend in with its environment at all. Like a bright-pink vibrator dropped in an antiques shop. I know erotic allusions make you uncomfortable, Cooper. But I'm investigating a 'rendezvous hotel', so what were you expecting? You asked for a detailed report, and a detailed report is what I will deliver. Of course I can't guarantee any clarity; I can only keep on striving towards it.

I hope it won't take me too long to gain the neighbours' trust. Until I do, I can't develop my plan, determine whether I need to go undercover and rent a room, or whether it will be enough to

sneak in and sniff around to find the people who have disappeared. Their dead bodies, perhaps, their remains. Until I do, I can't estimate how much time Operation Red Cow will require.

I'm looking forward to the next time I can spend some time at home, although my husband has left for good. In the past, when I returned home, I used to find Bruller stirring a delicious stew – until he dove back into the stew of his past. I had no idea what he got up to during my absence, but every time again, at the very moment of my arrival, there he was, stirring his stew. That domesticity was what kept our relationship going, where for most it spells the beginning of the end. Of course, the end was coming for us, too, inevitably.

Apart from Bruller's personal demons, of course it was my damned passion for my job that ruined yet another good thing, a good thing that resulted in my daughter, my enigmatic daughter. My Fjorgyn, my inscrutable teen. Who knows, she might just prove herself useful out here.

From the car park, the gap in Ptitami's teeth, a figure walks onto the street and looks my way. Sometimes I forget I'm talking out loud into a recorder. I need to watch myself. In the exploratory phase, it's best to remain invisible.

I've found a new base behind the hedge of the next drive. It's five o'clock. The temperature's rising above freezing and the snow's starting to melt. In the cold evening, people emerge from the train station and make their way to the bicycle parking. I feel an urge to approach them, to go and ask questions, but I contain myself. Rumours and suspicions could confuse me. I need to gather information first. The objective facts.

As per your instructions, of course. Our client, who is anonymous to me, gave me one name: Jeremy, the boy who lost his parents and is growing up in the hotel with his grandparents. He was born in the same year as Fjorgyn. He's the one I need to find. This is how our client described him: 'He is at the start and at the tail. He is the tale's beginning and its end.'

Fjorgyn doesn't look at me when I enter the flat. She's lying on the couch, scrolling on her phone. She hasn't moved an inch all day. When I ask why she hasn't unpacked the boxes with our books, she shrugs.

'You've filled me up with all that Norse mythology of yours. You think I still feel like reading?'

'When I—'

'Yes, when you were eight years old, your grandma, who lived on the Needle. I know the whole story.'

A little yapper barks from her phone.

'Can I get a dog?' she asks.

I need to set her to work as soon as possible.