

The Disinformation Correspondent

by Sue Hitchcock

Warnemunde was not where I wanted to live, a dogend of a place, freezing in winter and stinging sand making the beach a torture. It was the job, so I was stuck with it. It would change in the summer, with cruise ships calling in and the long, sandy beach bathed in sunshine with lines of korb seats, not made of basket anymore, but cosy and private.

Aside from the climate, the population was dismal too, dependent on alcohol to obliterate any hopes they might have had for the future. Nevertheless, there was something going on, at least the Chief Inspector thought so. I needed to blend in, so I rented a cheap flat over a shop - a newsagent/phone shop - where a variety of brain destroying substances could be purchased night or day. I could observe the habitués, but better still the owner was grateful to employ me at odd hours, when his usual assistants failed him. In the darkest hours, the clientele were needy, not just for chemical solace, but for human sympathy too.

Unemployment was the cause in the winter misery. Tourists provided lots of opportunities in the summer, but long, cold nights drove solitaries to drink, drugs and the internet.

“Over in Gdansk, they’re inundated with Ukrainians. I might go and see if I can find a bird, pretty girls, you know.”

“No pretty girls here, then?”

“None who’d look at me.”

“You speak Ukrainian, then?”

“Oh, Russian is nearly the same. Like Polish, you just have to say it a bit differently. I used to fish all along the coast. I speak Baltic.”

The brawny, tanned bloke was probably younger than his weathered skin suggested.

“You watch Russian television, do you?”

“Christ, no. It bores you to death. I do Tictoc or WhatsApp, anything for a laugh.”

“Let’s hope the war will end soon.”

“What? All those girls will go home. Anyway, it belongs to Russia really.”

The first regular after daybreak was an old girl, called Lily,

“Bleeding cold, ain’t it, mate?”

“Warm enough in here.”

“Lucky you! My house is freezing. I’ll have to stop smoking to pay for the heating. My youngest boy works for the power station in Rostock. He was mad when those protesters tried to block the coal deliveries last week. He says we need the coal, or we’ll have no electricity.”

“If the war ended, we could buy Russian gas again.”

“Oh, no. I remember how it was when we were communist. Not again! Keep the coal, I say.”

The discontent, not a novelty, but intensified by the war in Ukraine, made my investigations harder. Any of these ten thousand inhabitants could be plotting, but to what end? I would have to investigate other, more salubrious parts of town. Prices in the almost empty hotels were cheap, so I booked a week at the Hotel Neptun and told my landlord I was taking a holiday. I brushed off my suit and slipped out the back door.

It’s always the barman you talk to first, but they’re pretty noncommittal, bored and dreaming of elsewhere, when it’s not busy. Besides, I had to find out about those in power. First stop, the receptionist, a smart, young woman, with a tattoo trying to emerge from her neckline over her right breast. I tried to keep my eyes on her face, while she pulled up her deviant neckline.

“Do you have Ukrainian refugees here?”

“Yes, there are some, but they like to be nearer Berlin.”

“All women and children, I suppose?”

“Some grandparents, too. There’s a blind guy, no use for fighting, I guess. He keeps himself to himself, mostly.”

“Does the manager keep an eye on things?”

“Of course. The government pays for them. He reports most days, I think. It’s nothing to bother you, is it?”

What could I report? There was nothing happening, but it felt like a balancing act. Might someone jump? The locals seemed to resent the government, the war, but had no power to change things.

Then one morning, back at the shop, it seemed unusually busy. There was whispering and nudging. Alert eyes scanned for strangers, of which I might be one. News travels fast in places where nothing happens. The news? The Russian gas pipe line had been broken, causing irreparable damage, north of them in the Baltic.

I had just fallen asleep after an early morning session in the shop, when my phone rang. It was the Chief Inspector. What the hell could he want. I was reporting in every day.

“We’re sending you an assistant. This thing is obviously more serious than we thought.”

I sighed, “I’ve got it in hand, sir. Is it really necessary?”

“She’s a higher grade than you, so you’ll have to put up with it. She’ll phone you with the arrival time of her train, so you’ll have to meet her.”

My bed was irresistible and I slept. The phone must have been ringing for a while, when I finally surfaced.

“Martens?”

“yes?”

“Stipp here. My train arrives at eleven fifty. You’ll meet me, I understand.”

There was no time for coffee, and I looked a shambles, but the car was parked a block away and I had no idea what she looked like, so I had to get a move on. I was late and a handful of people were dragging trollies to the ferry terminal, travelling on to Copenhagen. Only one figure stood waiting, but surely it wasn’t her. Huddled in an oversized anorak “he” was taller than me and broad-shouldered with it. Cautiously, I approached,

“Stipp?”

“Hi, call me Didi, short for Heidi.” she offered a hand, “Show the way.”

In the warmth of the car, she shook off her hood and I found a handsome woman. Her blonde hair was clipped so short, her scalp showed through pink, but with her fine head and cheek bones, it was sculptural, and her eyes were the palest blue.

“Where to? You can’t come to mine, I’m undercover.”

“Well, the police station, obviously. I must liaise.”

I revved up and took the road alongside the Warnow into town. She might like to stay somewhere nice, if she could charge it to the department, so I slowed outside the Hotel Neptun.

“You could stay here, it’s not too expensive out of season.”

As we approached the police headquarters, which also housed the passport and customs officials, I hesitated.

“Look, I don’t want to be seen inside, so give me your number. I’ll phone you tonight.”

“Right, good idea.”

I watched her walk away, carrying with ease her luggage, an oversized rucksack. I was about to be stipped.

Berthe’s bakery was just bringing out their huge tin of lunch, so I called in for ‘second breakfast’ – lunch – if like me you had missed your first breakfast. There was only one item on the menu, so you had no choice. It didn’t matter. It was always delicious. Today it was pork and vegetables in a thick, white sauce with god-knows-what herbs and spices, cooked all morning in the bread oven. A portion of that and a strong cup of coffee had become the main food of my day, though a pastry in the afternoon could tempt me too.

Berthe complained that before Covid and the Ukraine war, business had been good, with tourists sitting outside at tables with sunshades, but if the cruise ships didn’t come this summer, she would have to shut up shop.

Back at the phone shop, I grabbed a half of vodka and scanned it and my card at the counter. I had planned to sleep, but when I downed my first drink, agitation about Stipp took over. Of course, there was something specific to investigate now, and the local police would flag up some potential perpetrators, but I was here to sort out the disinformation, and it might be well above our pay-grade, both mine and Stipp’s.

As a disinformation correspondent, my talent was doubt and I couldn’t accept the reliability of anyone. Only the regular arrival of my salary gave me any confidence and even then I wasn’t sure what the department wanted me to discover. At the same time, did they trust me? Was that what Stipp was here for? I would have to watch myself.

The Police Station

When the captain announced that a Sergeant Stipp would be working with them for a while, there was a groan around the office. It wasn’t that there was no conflict amongst them, but at least the pecking order was established. The fact that Stipp was confident and friendly actually made it worse. If she had been small or ugly or bossy at least they would have had something on which to focus. Didi didn’t understand why she provoked such hostility, but she was used to it.

Perching herself on at desk, she waited until every last eye was on her before speaking, with Markus Richter having to throw a pen at Axel and Sandra, who were chatting unconcerned.

“I hope not to disturb your normal work, but I am here to find out if you have any suspicions about the explosions which damaged the Nordstream pipelines last week. Have a think, and I’ll come to each of you today.”

Phones were ringing, so thinking time was set aside and a call out, besides interviews and other investigations left the office empty, apart from two, who were studious on their computers.

Didi chose an attractive girl,

“Could you show me where to get a cup of coffee?”

“Oh, forgive me. Of course, come this way.”

The window seat looked over Am Stom, the road beside the river and it made Didi smile.

“My mother came from here, so I used to visit my grandparents when I was a kid. Are you from here?”

“Not too far, over the border, in Poland. You might have guessed. My name is Anna Borowska.”

“That’s helpful. You’re bilingual, then.”

“Trilingual, even. You had to learn Russian at school, before we joined the European Union.”

Didi wanted to hug her, but the girl had her own work, most of which involved domestic disputes or break-ins in Rostock, the more salubrious part of their domain. She offered no suspicions, not having the experience of an old-hand.

“Where’s my coffee then?” The wrinkled, khaki face of Axel was smiling, teasing the newest recruit.

“I was going to bring one, sorry.”

“I’m kidding. You know I need a smoke break.” He had already lit up. “Didi, you can use my computer. I have to go out.”

Anna showed her the desk and offered the department password. “We have our own passwords for restricted stuff, but I don’t know Axel’s anyway. Do you want lunch with me?”

“Maybe, we’ll see.”

Settling down to work, she sighed, “That damned Martens! Why the hell does he have to be so elusive? He is so secretive, it makes him suspect. He hasn’t even got a mention on the Internet, but maybe it’s not his real name. Didi pushed Axel’s clobber aside and logged in. She did, at least have Marten’s phone number and it wasn’t impossible to track his location. She frowned when she located him at a phone shop in a dreary part of town. She’d check again later. An hour spent checking current investigations led her nowhere, so she tried Martens’ phone location again. Surely he wasn’t still shopping. Maybe he actually lived there. The local map showed the shop was owned by a Hassan Xander, a name she had come across in her earlier search. Checking again she found he was suspected of selling smuggled drugs, amongst other things. It was normal in port towns and might be of little importance or worth investigating.

Next stop had to be the customs officials, but not till after lunch with the lovely Anna.

My day (or night) always begins the same way, a quick review of the main news websites. You wouldn't believe the difference between them, the government sponsored ones providing 'bread and circuses' as the Romans said. The basic dough seems to be football and celebrity gossip, with a pinch of spice about naughty citizens, striking workers, demonstrating liberals and criminals, driven by neurosis or psychosis.

More interesting are the independent broadcasters, who mainly show war-torn countries or environmental disasters. All of them have a viewpoint and you can only try to weigh one against another. People are like rats in a box, constantly fighting. At least the anodyne government news includes some sweeteners.

Then I have to begin my serious work, considering the latest blogs of those with a particular agenda, trying to acquire or maintain the power, which is their drug of choice. No wonder my paranoia is increasing.

The search for hints as to who might have instigated the destruction of the Nordstream gas pipelines was at least something specific. So far there was universal denial. Even Bellingcat seemed uncertain about who might be to blame.

Basically, the Russians blamed the U.S. The Germans, who were suffering most from the deprivation of fuel, thought the Ukrainians were pressuring them to authorise the use of the superior German tanks. The explosions which took place near a Danish island threw some suspicion their way, but they denied it vehemently. The Swedes whose territory was equally close, refused to make any comment, nervous as they were about the delay to their membership of NATO, caused by Turkish objections. Their differences were on the status of Kurdish asylum seekers, which the Turks considered as KPP terrorists. There was silence from the countries profiting from the supply of North Sea gas, the Norwegians particularly.

You could never disregard the trickery of the Russians, of course. They were no longer able to sell the gas, so the redundant pipelines could be used for disinformation, but they left the enemy to point fingers at each other.

There seemed to be no evidence at all and I wondered if Stipp had the right approach, starting from the smallest details. We must talk tonight.

I left it till seven to call Stipp, hoping she wouldn't still be at the Police Station.

"Did you decide to stay at the Hotel Neptun?"

"Yeah, though I had a couple of offers of a sofa, but I need privacy."

“May I suggest we meet in the bar, like a pick-up. They know me there, but not what I do.”

“You’ll find me at the bar, but take your time approaching.”

“Sure, see you later.”

She was sitting at the far end of the bar, when, specially spruced up, I presented myself. I caught her looking at me in the mirror behind the bar, but she didn’t turn. I sat at a table and scrutinized her, as any man looking for company might. She hadn’t made much of an effort, black trousers and a baby blue top with a wide vee neck, which did, in fact, look rather nice. Annoyed at having to leave the safety of the bar, the waiter came to my table.

“I’ll have a coke, please and ask the bird what she’d like – oh, and get one for yourself.”

What made me so generous, I can’t think, but it was a mistake. He’d be sure to remember me now. Stipp accepted the drink and turned with a thank-you smile. She was no fool. She drank then walked out without acknowledging me. Returning my glass to the bar, I chatted with Georg – we had established a familiarity previously when I had stayed there.

“How old do you think she is?”

“I should be able to guess. The youngest girls never cut their hair like that, so maybe thirties? “

“Hmm, no older?”

My phone rang, so I excused myself to answer. Another mistake, if Georg thought about it

“Meet me outside. I’m waiting.”

In her huge anorak, her image was like the first impression I had had of her, a man, tall and strong enough to hold his own.

“I thought you were going to blow your cover for a minute.”

“Yeah, sorry. Let’s walk up to the lighthouse.”

It was desolate, madness with a north-east wind whipping into our faces. Only when we turned back, could we hear each other.

“Do you want me to call you Stipp?”

“I’m known as Didi, short for Heidi.”

“I’m Ricky.”

The wind urged us back towards the hotel.

“Looks like you’re meant to come to my room, just to talk, of course.”

“I think not. You never know who’s looking at you. Anyhow, you can’t have learned much yet.”

“True, but you could tell me what you know.”

“Me? I know nothing. It’s my job to have suspicions, not certainties.”

She looked a bit put out, shrugged, said goodnight and was gone. I was so tired and my bed was nirvana, where I was no longer pushed and pulled by conflicting thoughts. Thankfully Hassan, my landlord, had an assistant for the night.

After a long day searching blogs on my laptop, my shoulders were stiff, so I was doing some weight work, to straighten up my spine, when Stipp phoned the next day

“I didn’t think I had given you my number.”

“Oh, it came up on my phone after you called me.”

Did I call her? I seemed to remember her calling me. Maybe I was wrong.

“Did you find out anything useful?”

“These guys seem to have very good acquaintance with all the local lowlife, but I have permission to get assistance from the customs police tomorrow.”

“That might be useful. It would have to have some marine connection.”

“There is a certain amount of smuggling going on. Your landlord, Hassan Xander seems to have a way of importing Russian vodka.”

I caught my breath. She didn’t even know where I lived. “Who told you where I live?”

“No-one, You must have, yourself.”

Only one thing was possible – she must have searched through my phone location, and more than once. I might have been shopping before going elsewhere. I shivered and raised my defences.

I thought she would phone around six. I waited. I would have liked something to eat, but if I went out, I’d have to talk in public, so I waited. When eight o’clock came I called her,

“Are we going to meet?”

“Oh, sorry. Have you got anything new?”

“Well, no, but isn’t it time we compared notes?”

“Actually, I’ve got a date. Won’t tomorrow do?”

“For Christ’s sake, you don’t know anyone yet. Who on earth have you met?”

“She’s been working with me at Police headquarters. She’s not a problem.”

“If you say so.”

Now I was even less inclined to share what I knew and I could only make a hesitant growl.

“Look, I could meet you at about midnight. Shall I come to yours?”

I let out a horrified, “No!”

“I know where you live,” she threatened

“It’s my cover. You can’t expose me like that. – and what for?”

“O.K. meet me on the beach by my hotel. Midnight, right?”

I parked up on the promenade and ventured into the darkness, the only lights ahead the distant ships. To my left a light from a phone illuminated her face and she whistled to beckon me. Maybe we could have waited for tomorrow. This was going to be a waste of time. She turned away and manhandled one of the strandkorbs so it was face to face with the one behind.

“Get out of the wind!” she offered me a place in the nest she had made. “Got a drink?”

Of course I had my usual comfort bottle, and to my surprise, she slipped off her boots and intruded them by my leg, before taking a slug.

“We used to do this when I was a teenager, but I didn’t feel the cold then. Never again!”

“Let’s keep it short, then. I only know that no country or terrorist group admits any responsibility, so far.”

“That’s a lot of nothing, then. All I suspect is that if anyone around here is involved, the ferry records may list them, and c.c.t.v. will be useful, though a time consuming job. BUT – there are yachts galore, besides fishing boats in the harbour. The coastguard will have to be interviewed. Then there is bribery, which will shut the mouth of anyone complicit.”

“I’ll infiltrate the ferry records and the coastguard, but I think we should start at the other end, where the explosions took place.”

“Yeah, Can we plan the trip the day after tomorrow? I want to visit my grandmother tomorrow. She’s in a nursing home up the coast a bit. Do you want to come? She isn’t well but she’s not gaga.”

Somewhat taken aback, I agreed. Back at my car, I watched till she disappeared into the bright lobby of the Hotel Neptun.

There was no need to start early, visiting at the nursing home wasn’t allowed before lunch, though it was the only thing to look forward to in the routine-ridden existence of the residents. Didi was going to drive and I was to meet her outside the Hotel Neptun

at eleven. It was already twenty minutes past and I was planning to go home, preferring a sleep after minding the shop in the early morning.

A sleek, blue sports car drew up at my elbow and I moved out of the way, till Didi's head poked out.

"You getting in?"

She pushed the door open and I almost fell into the seat, just a kerb height from the road.

"When did you get this?"

"It's only a hire, but I might as well have some fun, with the headquarters footing the bill."

We set out at speed, westwards alongside the sea on the coast road. The beach from the road was uniformly flat, a few shallow dunes sprouting tufts of grass to vary the view of the iron-grey sea.

"If we're going to Bornholm tomorrow, let's hope the sea is as flat as this."

I was a bit surprised she might feel seasick, "It won't make a lot of difference on the ferry – we are going on the ferry, I assume – they're huge and stable. By the way, I don't think we should travel together. You know there are two ferries, one to Denmark, the other to Sweden. We could meet there, at Bornholm."

"O.K. Right, Now what about today? I think there's a village, where we can eat, somewhere inland. Look out for a signpost!"

I began to notice there were buildings to our left, nothing very inviting. Maybe the next turning would lead to a village. Didi made a doubtful, "Hmm." but turned off anyway. Quite substantial buildings began to loom up, all overgrown with ivy. Birch trees, having now shed most of their yellow, diamond-shaped leaves, poked their bare branches into broken windows.

Didi shuddered, "I remember these – they're old barracks and defence emplacements from the war. We were warned not to go there, for fear of explosives. No-one lives nearby." And she stopped and began zigzagging for the turn back to the beach road. Suddenly she stopped, holding her breath, "Did you see that, in the bushes?"

I hadn't, but she was no fantasist, so I peered around, hoping to spot movement. It was probably an animal, a fox, a wolf, possibly a wild boar. But maybe it was a person. Perhaps there was a movement, so I checked the small automatic I always carry and opened the door.

"Don't shoot any animals - most species are protected."

In the silent woods, every sound meant some kind of life. I turned towards each one, eyes of owl returning my gaze, small carnivores, lynx? Mink? scuttling after rodents.

Then suddenly the hefty crushing of some sapling birches revealed a wild boar coming towards me. My shout stopped it, so I jumped back in the car.

“Silly! Let’s hope it doesn’t charge, I don’t want to pay for dents.”

Back out on the road, I felt ashamed of my reaction.

“You should get out more! Anyway, this looks more promising.”

The local speciality, smoked fish roll, with pickles and sauerkraut should have been a delight, were it not for a creepy feeling that someone was watching us. Didi said I was still spooked from the encounter with the wild boar and should get a grip. The back of my neck was crawling, and I swiped to make sure it wasn’t a spider, one of those tiny newly-hatched ones you find in autumn. Nothing. - I whipped round to catch whoever was looking and surely there was, for a brief second. I shivered.

“Were you always like this?”

“I was a total nerd, but I used to compete with a girl, total nerd too. Long story shortened, we married gaming all our spare time, in bed as well as online. Then, then she got pregnant and she turned into mother earth, nursing our son, cooking, cleaning and I was superfluous. So I left.”

“Time to leave, who’s paying?”

“You paid for petrol, so my turn.”

The nursing home was away from the beach, but failed to escape the penetrating wind from the north-east, from Siberia. We signed in and were nodded through. Didi knew the way to the lounge, a pinewood lined room with windows over the sea to one side and to a garden on the other. It should have been pleasant, but the radiators were cold, the only heating an old-fashioned, tiled stove with a seating ledge all around. The old folk who could walk had wedged themselves in and were arguing about being squashed. Didi’s grandmother was unfortunately in a wheelchair, unable to benefit from it. Heaven, in the form of cuddled up warmth, was just a word, hell was something she knew and trusted. It wasn’t new to her. She had known hardship in her youth and she knew what to do. She was dressed in a feather-filled anorak, a woolly hat and had a large blanket around her legs, which she continually adjusted.

“Didi! Come here and give me a hug!”

Didi knelt in front of her and lay over her hugging her.

She lifted her face to kiss the old lady, who stopped her,

“Wait, let me wipe my nose. It’s dripping. It’s so cold here.”

After some affectionate kisses, Didi said, “This is disgraceful. What are they planning to do? The Nordsteam gas isn’t going to start again and winter hasn’t even begun.”

“They say they might have to send some of us to the hospital for a while.”

“That’s no good.”

“Your Uncle Ernst was here last week. He said I might be able to live at his house, in Dusseldorf.”

“Uncle Ernst?”

“You remember him.”

“Yes, of course, but is he really my uncle? He isn’t your brother or grandpa’s. I thought grandpa hated him.”

“I should tell you, but it’s a bit complicated. When your mother was just a little girl, I was very political and the group I belonged to was working to get people over to the west. You remember we were in the communist part of Germany. Grandpa was a staunch communist and was frightened I might be imprisoned, if anyone found out. I wanted to go to Berlin with the group - Ernst was in charge - and so I left your mum at home, and grandpa had no idea I would ever come back. I don’t think he ever forgave me, but he was glad when I did come home.”

“Oh, Grandma, did you love Ernst?”

“We were part of a close group. We all loved each other.”

“And does he live alone now?”

“He got married quite late, one of his students, I think. She seems to be quite willing to have me there.”

Maria looked around, at me, “You didn’t introduce us, Didi. Who is this? Is it your boyfriend?”

“Oh, Grandma, you know I like girls. No, this is a colleague of mine, more like Uncle Ernst. We are trying to find out who is responsible for the Nordstream explosions.”

Maria smiled at me, “There’s some hope then.”

I didn’t know if she was referring to our work or our relationship, so I just smiled back and shook her hand, “Pleased to meet you..” I hesitated.

“Oh, call me Maria, everyone does.”

Didi produced a packet of sweets, Maria’s favourites, gave her one and pushed the rest in the old lady’s pocket. Then she pulled off her scarf and added it to her Grandmother’s insulation.

“We have to leave now, but I’ll ask about the heating problem. I’ll come again while I’m working in Warnemunde. I love you, Grandma. Auf Wiedersehen!”

My research into the explosions had been, as my whole life, like a computer game, but to Didi it was personal. It hadn't occurred to me that she might have such an emotional commitment, that she needed an answer.

Our drive home, the sun setting behind us, was silent and thoughtful, till Didi pulled over to the side of the road. "Look at that!" Overhead a flock of cranes almost filled the sky. "This is their stop-off spot, on their way south for the winter."

When I got home Xander was serving a customer, so I had to wait. I needed to forewarn him I would be away for a few days.

"You still got some of that cheap Russian vodka? "

Xander eyed me cautiously, but I was well aware of his illicit trade, having sold the stuff myself and gave him a wink. It made him a small profit, but it hardly seemed worthwhile. It was time consuming, soaking off the labels, before sticking on a new one, photocopied – often by me - from a regular Polish brand. It was all rather amateurish, just for the profit from not paying the tax. He might have been running other scams, but it wasn't worth my while to investigate. I just hoped the regular police were too busy like me.

"Xander, I'm going away for a few days. You've got someone who can fill in?"

"Sure, my father-in-law can do it. It's not busy. Going somewhere nice?"

The seemed no point in lying, so a version of the truth would do. "This girl, Didi, suggested we go to Bornholm for a trip. If it goes well, maybe a week."

Xander's eyes gleamed, "pretty, is she?"

"Not bad at all."

He seemed well satisfied, so I went out for a pizza, before getting back to work on the lies disinforming the world.

About midnight Didi phoned, "We didn't agree our plans."

"No."

"I've been with Anna.."

"I guessed.."

"She says the quickest way to Bornholm is from Sassnitz, you know, at the far end of Rugen island. The thing is, I don't want to go till Friday. Anna wants to come with me."

"oh, fuck. I'm supposed to be undercover. Does she have to?"

"Don't fret! It will be alright. I'll text you the hotel on Friday. Keep your fingers crossed for calm weather! Bye."

The next morning I set out, without any particular plan. Should I take the car. Didi would have hers, so I walked to the bus stop for Rostock and got off at the ferry terminal over the main Warnau bridge.

“Did you book? You’re supposed to book.”

“you’re not overbooked, surely.”

“No.. so is it for Trelleborg or Gedser?”

“Which is better?”

She sighed, “ it depends if you want to go to Denmark or Sweden.”

“I want to go to Bornholm.”

“You’d have been better to go to Sassnitz. You can get a ferry direct. From here you should go to Trelleborg. It’s a long time at sea, but not so far to Ystad for the ferry to Ronne.”

“Right, that’s it. Foot passenger, one way, please.”

She shrugged, eyed me with screwed up brow and pointed me along to where a seaman was waiting on the ramp, waiting to seal the hull after the last, solitary passenger. So I ran.

At least I didn’t have to wait, but where were the other passengers?

All was revealed in the bar. There was hardly room to sit, every bench accommodating a sleeping hulk. Mostly men, but even a few haggard women, lorry drivers exhausted after all-night driving from the far end of Europe. Sleep was the only thing to do on a long ferry trip. I joined the few drinking at the bar and ordered a toasted sausage sandwich. This was a dead end for information or even disinformation. I’d have to talk to the crew. The fug in the bar, a combination of nicotine, sweat and petrol, drove me out to one of the tiny outside viewing platforms, there being no deck as such. For ten minutes I was happy, eating my sandwich and watching the coastline diminish to a mere line dividing the matching grey of sea and sky. The sun was a ghost low on the horizon, trying hard to peer through the mist. Then the chill started to penetrate, so I dumped my sandwich wrap and went on an exploration.

The lowest deck accommodated fifty or so lorries, with a variety of national number plates. Oranges seem to be transported to every Northern country, but what was exported south? Cars, I supposed, maybe furniture, but even Ikea sold Swedish style furniture, manufactured in the far east. It wouldn’t help me to research it, so I ascended to the next level, which was virtually empty. The few cars belonged to Swedish travellers from work in Germany and beyond. Only one had a kiddy seat. Poor child suffering the boredom of the long journey.

The passenger deck consisted of the bar and a section where the more wakeful passengers congregated, mostly working on their laptops and only a couple of children looking out to sea.

“Have you seen any ships?” I asked, but they looked at their mother, puzzled.

“They don’t understand.” She translated into Swedish for them. They pointed and the older boy replied.

“He says he counted seven.”

What could I do but smile and nod? I moved across to the other side, not to seem like a threat and watched for a while. Identifying ships was not my forte, so it was a worthless activity. It was time to question those in charge.

My police identification badge got me past the stewards and crewmen, but the bridge was out of bounds, at least to a German policeman. This was a Swedish ship. I hung about until a man in official uniform emerged.

“Could I ask you some questions about the day when the Nordstrom pipelines were blown up?”

“You can ask, but, it’s no secret, I saw nothing. There are several sailings a day and I don’t think it was when we were even in the area. To tell the truth, there are Russian ships going down the Baltic all the time. We can’t stop them – it is legal – so we just keep clear. We don’t want trouble.”

“What are they doing?”

“They’re mostly tankers taking crude to destinations unknown. I’ve heard they’re making more money now than before the embargo.”

That shone a different light on the issue. I thanked him and went away to research it on my laptop.

The briny sea air replaced the diesel fug, the gulls shrieked alerting me from the monotonous thrumming of the ferry’s engine, yet the cold did nothing to improve the headache from the eight hours of boredom. I couldn’t face getting on a bus immediately. The bus station was next to the ferry terminal, so I escaped into the town. It was heaven, normal, parents with kids shopping, workmen assembling Christmas lights, middle class ordinariness. A fish and chips takeaway restored my mind and I started to wonder where the unhappy hung out. Where were the druggies, the drunks? Usually a few would occupy benches, in the bus station or along the street, annoying the shoppers. The memory of playing Sim City crept into my mind. It was time to go.

The bus to Ystad was waiting. It was clean, mostly empty and suspiciously unreal. Was it in my mind? I still had a little vodka left. Maybe I’d feel normal after a drink, but the driver delayed departure to warn me that drinking was not allowed. Fortunately the journey was only an hour, as much as I could take for one day. The ferry to Ronne on Bornholm was in dock, but tomorrow would do.

The large workaday hotel was clean, a novelty after the pit Xander and I had made of the Warnemunde shop. Neither of us could be bothered with cleaning and the washing

machine clunked, sulkily refusing sometimes to spin properly. I stripped off and showered luxuriously. Unaccustomed warmth gave me the joy of stretching, naked and untroubled. Then sleep.

Have you ever wakened after a long sleep, feeling disorientated, frightened that the day might be doomed? My clothes, grubby, crumpled but familiar helped a little and a swig of vodka reminded me of my mission. Rye bread with cheese and several coffees completed my preparations. Now there was no excuse to delay my next lap.

The ferry to Ronne on Borgholm was smaller and the journey was shorter. The vehicles on the single lower deck were smaller too, several vans, even hybrid cars for short trips on the island, but quite a lot of bikes. The island was soon in sight, the passengers gathering at the prow. The surreal feeling that this was a game came on me again as I spotted the diminutive houses brightly painted in red, yellow, like the Lego brick constructions I used to make on my bedroom floor.

Regular checks of my phone for Didi's text had been fruitless and I might have to find a bed for the night. If I waited at a cafe near the port, maybe I would see her arrive. I was looking for two women together but they weren't on the last ferry of the day. Then my phone rang,

"Did you make it? Where are you?"

"I'm at the port, waiting for your text."

"Sorry, I forgot.. doing it now .. o.k. see you in ten minutes."

The hotel, another Lego building, was nearby. In such a small town it couldn't be far and Didi came down the stairs as I arrived.

"Come on, this way."

"Don't I need to book?"

Didi had a double room, but where was Anna?

"Anna couldn't come, some work thing, so you might as well stay in here."

After two days of other worlds, I had no idea what to expect. Was she gay? Did she expect me to perform? I wanted to run away.

"I should book another room."

But Didi had stripped off and the shower's hiss deafened her.

I slipped into bed while she showered, glad that my pants and tee shirt were clean and that I had showered that morning. I had no idea what she intended and started to shake. It was four years since I had had a woman, since I had left my wife. My exclusive companion for so long had been my laptop, not that it satisfied me on my lap, better on a shelf, the cooker or even on a window sill, grimacing at any passer-by. I know it is

shameful, but needs must. It was alright for Didi, with her easy, friendly nature. She related to complete strangers and they liked her for making them feel special. But what did she really feel?

She emerged naked from the bathroom and after a brief glance at her slim, strong body, I shut my eyes tight. Without a stitch she got in bed and gave me a shove.

“I know you’re not asleep. Have you got a drink?”

A few nips of vodka later and we were like old friends, talking over the evidence we had of the terrorists who had caused the explosions, if any. It all seemed like a waste of time, our own roles possibly a new diversion for another layer of confusion. It all seemed ridiculous and a few drinks later we were giggling.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew was a sharp slap on my cheek.

“You were snoring!”

“Sorry!” I turned away.

“Come on, my little puppy, you know you’d like to snuggle.” And she started to pet me and stroke me, starting with my ears. This was all so unreal. I was so disorientated, not to mention inebriated. There is just so much petting a man can take and I gratefully accepted her straddling me to take control. Whether she was satisfied I could not say – it would seem unlikely. She was nothing if not generous. I wept a few tears before sleeping like a baby. It could be she preferred mothering.

When Ricky insisted on making love to her in the morning, Didi knew it was a mistake. She had let her curiosity about him lead her into an impossible relationship. He had to be on top, of course, watching her face to see her reactions and in the end Didi closed her eyes and tried to imagine the beautiful dentist she had in Berlin, whom she had failed, so far, to catch alone to ask on a date. It worked and Ricky was satisfied. She was free to wash off the smell of their combined fluids and take a painkiller for her headache.

“We’ve got work to do, get up!”

Ricky was luxuriating, longing to spend all day, discovering every nook and cranny of this woman, so different to his wife and the types he browsed on the internet.

She was indeed different, and had reverted to his superior in the Police force, keen to fulfil her duties. She left him to get her breakfast. He was imagining stroking her close-clipped scalp, as soft as velvet, when his phone rang,

“Xander here, is that you, Ricky?”

“Oh, hi Xand, what’s up?”

“The police were here..”

Ricky sat up sharply, “They didn’t find anything?”

“No, it was you they wanted.”

Ricky puzzled.

“You still there?”

“What did they look like?”

“It was just one, a cute little girl, actually. She looked too young, but she said she was Constable Borowska. When I said you weren’t here, she looked annoyed and went away.”

“Oh, she’s probably just being nosey, checking, as they call it. Nothing to worry about. Thanks, Xand.”

But it was a worry. She wasn’t supposed to know where he lived, though Didi may have told her, and that he was going to Bornholm too.

Didi allowed Ricky access to her body one more time. They were halfway across the island, where a small forest grew in the lee of the rocky peak, when she pulled off down a path between the trees. She got out, came round to the passenger side, removed her jeans and ordered him out. She sat, legs splayed and pulled him, kneeling in the footwell. Ricky performed, unhappy about her matter-of-fact invitation. What did it mean? Was he just a puppet, manipulated by her? Or maybe it was a pity fuck, in which case it was probably the last. He climbed out and threw up. He was “Stipped”, used, sickened, angry.

“That’s it, then! No more!”

“I think not. Let’s go!”

We didn’t speak for the rest of the drive to the north-east coast, nearest to where the explosions took place. After throwing up, I needed to drink. I was seething with anger, but violence towards women has always been taboo. What had she done to me? Women often use sex to get things they want. Domestically it may be just a way of getting you to do a small favour, which is acceptable- she probably has done enough favours for you. Other than that, there can be financial transaction, and then she might gift you with some disease or other.

Sometimes a tart might steal your credit card, when you fall asleep but what Didi had done – I’ll call it ‘stipped’- it’s like rape – the malicious seduction of a man, to steal his self esteem. Well, I had no intention of letting her get away with it.

The first task we had planned, was to find someone in authority, maybe a coastguard. There was free parking right next to the beach, which had few other vehicles now the autumnal chill was insistent. Didi strode briskly towards the quay, leaving me trailing behind. A ferry was slowly disappearing towards the eastern horizon and uniformed man, peaked cap shading his wrinkled eyes, was fixing a padlock on the shutters of his office.

“Excuse me, may we ask some questions?”

"I'm sorry, my dear, there's only one trip today. Look, it just left."

I recognised he was treating Didi as a helpless female, "Actually, we are here on official business and you may have important information."

"Yes, sir. How can I help you?"

"This is the nearest place to the Nordstream explosions. Did you see anything or anyone suspicious?"

"Now you're getting on to a touchy subject. We don't like to talk about it in case it harms the tourism. It's our main income."

"But did you see or hear anything?" Didi interposed.

"We have more things to worry about than that.."

"Yes?" Didi tilted her head as if in sympathy, another feminine guile.

"There has been trouble, since the war.."

"The Ukraine war?"

"No, my dear, since they dumped all the dangerous chemicals left over from the Second World War."

"Can you explain?"

He turned to me. "It's the mustard gas that's worst. It's getting out. People get burns when they find it on the beach. And the fish are sick with it too. Fishermen get burns and anyway can't get a good catch, so they're giving up."

"Surely this was checked before the pipelines were planned?"

"Yes, of course. It was about ten years ago."

"And they decided it was safe?"

"Stupid, eh? My belief is that an underwater explosion from the chemicals damaged the pipeline."

"Two separate times?"

"Could be!"

Didi revived the questioning, "So you didn't see any unusual ships in the area?"

"Ships come from all around, but the biggest now, since the explosions, is oil tankers from Russia. They've got a huge oil terminal at Primorsk, up by Leningrad. My guess is they're selling it direct, but who's buying it? That's what I want to know."

Thank you, you've been very helpful. Can we buy you a drink?"

And so our lunch was settled, relieving us of our difficult hostility alone together.

“We’ve got a couple of hours till the ferry, so we’re visiting the beach along the south coast. You are travelling back with me, I presume?”

She assumed correctly, though I wasn’t looking forward to it. The alternative, to return by the same route I had used to come, would torment me for another two days. When could I return to my happy isolation?

The beach shone in the afternoon sun, Didi striding ahead and me trailing behind like a pet dog. On close examination, the ripples in the sand were edged with white, with snow. Had the first snow fallen in the night? Didi was kicking at the seaweed at the tideline and I edged closer to see why.

“There might be amber, this place is famous for it.”

I joined her, searching.

“Success!” she shouted and an evil thought came into my mind. I continued searching until I found what I was looking for: a bright yellow crystal, but not amber. It was the deadly mustard gas lump, not smooth like amber. I balled it up in a handful of sand and placed it carefully in an old crisp bag I had in my pocket. I couldn’t risk keeping it on my person – misinformation, disinformation or just ignorance prevailed. It might explode, or burn, or just catch light – so I stashed it in the outer pocket of my rucksack.

“Time to go! You look happier. Was it the fresh air?”

“Yes, yes. It cleared my head.”

We were a little early for the ferry and joined the queue of tourists heading back to their working lives.

“Keep quiet about last night, will you. It was a mistake, but I could report you – I am your superior – my word would be taken, in preference to your account. You don’t want to look foolish, do you?”

I looked her in the eye and shrugged. Revenge might come in a surprising form.

Even the shorter three hour voyage seemed endless, except for a trip to the refreshment kiosk. Didi dithered in deciding on some sweets for her girlfriend, which she disclosed to the assistant. What an inspiration! As she wandered back to our bags, I bought a box of the same sweets, a plan forming. The yellow crystal would replace one of the confections.

As we were coming into port, I exchanged my box for the one in Didi’s bag and my heart began to thump. I took some deep breaths, to calm myself enough so Didi wasn’t alerted.

She threw her bag in the back of the car and it suddenly seemed possible this could be our final journey. We drove slowly down the ramp towards the dock gate, where a police woman was checking the cars. She waved us to stop and Didi smiled,

“Anna! You came.” This was the girlfriend. Now I felt ashamed. The pretty young woman looked harmless. Didi drove out and into a parking space to climb out for a hug, but the police woman had spotted me,

“You went with him! What are you up to? You! Get out!”

She was so commanding, I opened the door and stepped one foot out. How could I explain it had never been my idea? I never had the chance. She drew her gun. Didi was closing in to stop her, but too slow. Somewhere in my leg, pain radiated and foolishly, I screamed.

Solitude can make you very anxious. I’m waiting to find out what my life is to be, without any input by me in the decision. I don’t speak anymore. Why? Because I don’t know. I thought I knew. I had lots of facts, what they told you on the internet, but what was true? I could speak to the guards, but they wouldn’t believe me. “Good day, Mr Martens!” Is it? Maybe yes, maybe no.

My solicitor persuaded me to plead “not guilty, on the grounds of insanity.” I’m not insane, just uncertain. He left a newspaper, before going into court to represent me. There’s a picture in it of Didi and her girlfriend. I haven’t seen them since that day. They look different, both with longer hair. Didi looks well, quite fat, pretty hair. She has her arm round Anna, who has her head turned sideways, hair covering the side of her face. I would like to see her face, see what damage I did. They said that the girl was only reprimanded for shooting me, in consideration of the horrible disfigurement the mustard gas crystal caused. They didn’t give me any allowance for the mash up of my foot. I’ll never walk without pain again. At first the nurses were sweet to me in hospital, but when Didi gave evidence that I must have planted the burning crystal in the sweets, I was treated with horror.

Didi got no blame even though she was the cause of everything. The only thing that makes me laugh is her growing belly. I hope it’s a boy, who looks like me.