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ROAD RAGE

by Sascha Reh

Although he speaks better Italian than Vera – a surer grasp of the grammar, a larger vocabulary – she does most of the talking. She’s approachable and warm and almost always gives her cooperation partners and hosts the feeling that they’re old friends. Once the ice has been broken and the conversation is flowing – like now with Andrea, who arranged the flat in Sassi for them – Jonas is easily infected by her vivacity. Ideas that tend not to come to him otherwise suddenly seem important enough to discuss. While Vera says how excited she is to see Matera and lets Andrea present the highlights of their destination – places off the tourist trail, local customs – Jonas chips in with a few facts. He’s usually the one with an overview of their travel dates, keeping tabs on bus and train arrival and departure times, the dates of meetings with sponsors and various functions. He knows the Matera events calendar off by heart – not for the whole year but nonetheless for the duration of their stay. He has the day’s schedule imprinted on his mind, estimates the time needed to cover distances (taking account of two five-year-old children’s short legs) and scans the area for services as soon as they arrive in a new place. Where is there a supermarket or at least a grocery store? Which places are good meeting points if they happen to lose the twins in the crowd? Is there a laundrette? Where can they withdraw cash free of charge? He knows most of this before they arrive after searching for it on tourist websites or Google Maps. Yet he is still more of an assistant to Vera than tour manager. She is the star of the show. She forged the contacts to all these people and she is the main reason they rarely break off after the first cooperation. Everyone likes to be around her because she’s easy-going and open and easily enthused. She takes whatever comes and shows an interest in everything. Rarely does she have a plan, yet she generally makes a relaxed and purposeful impression, as if she has experienced everything she later describes in her travel posts countless times before.

They discover that the cave they will be living in for the next four days has only one room. If it can be called a ‘room’, that is. *Sassi* used to be shelters for the poor, and it was only in the 1960s that some of them modernised and hooked up to the power and water networks. Not theirs, though. The walls are whitewashed, the furnishings tasteful but spartan; for cooking there’s a wood-fired stove. They need to draw water for cooking and cleaning their teeth from a cistern, and the lamps are powered by an

electricity cable that winds its way out through the cave entrance and up the rock to its connection with a south-facing solar panel. Vera shows no disappointment with these meagre fittings. It's no pretence either; he knows she genuinely isn't disappointed. She takes everything as it comes. She never judges, or only if she's excited. This is what continually amazes and charms and overwhelms him: that she regards her experiences as a gift without ever becoming some cliché out of a mindfulness textbook.

Matera is of course incredibly impressive (from a tourist's perspective) even if he does think that the hustle and bustle of such a cultural hotspot is too much for the twins. The exhibitions, concerts and events are designed for adult culture vultures, not nursery children. Schoolchildren, he corrects himself: Mats and Enno start school after these holidays.

Up until now they have lived like nomads. Rural nomads. Canoeing down the Tarn, riding in a donkey-drawn cart through the Alpine foothills (spending the night in huts and barns) or cycling along the southern coast of Ireland. In all these places he felt he was exposing the boys to valuable experiences, things not available in Berlin: authenticity and adventure. Vera says that a cultural trip is simply the next stage in their development, and after all there are other children to play with in Matera too. That's true, but this trip isn't all about their children's development. It's also about the portfolio of their blog LifeIsAJourney.com – they have to expand their repertoire. Not that Vera would put their business interests ahead of their children's well-being, but she is used to combining opposites, finding solutions, making things possible. He's happy to be swept along by her optimism, as always, though he himself is no optimist.

He puts his hand on Vera's tummy and lets his fingers roam. It's early in the morning, but the twins are already awake.

'How's it going, lads?' he asks. 'Feel like fetching a few cornetti?' Guessing his true intentions, Vera smiles.

'Huh? Ice cream? Are we going to eat ice cream now?'

The bakery is down on Piazza Vittorio Veneto. They let the kids plan their operation with military precision.

'We gather stones,' Enno says, excited but earnest. Of the two he is the one responsible for elaborate plans. 'Every two steps or so we put down a stone. Then we'll know exactly how to get back.'

When Jonas asks which one of them is going to push the wheelbarrow full of stones, Mats counters that string is good too; that's how Adriana did it in that story.

'You mean Ariadne? That was Theseus, though.'

The boys should back that their dad would be better suggesting useful tips instead of making himself unpopular with smart-aleck ideas.

Jonas hopes that this cornetti project is going to give Vera and him twenty minutes, maybe half an hour, of quality time together. But they're barely down to their underwear when Enno's walkie-talkie starts to crackle.

'This is base camp, please come,' Vera says as Jonas pulls his wife's knickers down over her hips.

She listens attentively, more amused than worried. Jonas can hear Mats's agitation.

'That was two boys who've lost their way and want to be picked up,' Vera says, reaching for the bra Jonas is already resignedly holding out to her.

It is over five hours by bus from Matera to Naples. Three hours straight are the absolute limit for Mats and Enno; the outward trip was absolute torture for the two of them. For all of them, in fact. Despite the fantastic pizza and decent enough beds in a cheap Airbnb flat, they didn't manage to recover during their day in Naples. Despite taking the train from Rome to Verona, they're almost at the end of their tethers. Every three minutes the boys want to go to the toilet or drink something and they squabble incessantly. By the time Vera's father picks them up from Verona station (not at Vera's or Jonas's behest, but at Vera's mother's), the boys are on the verge of meltdown.

Vera's father comes without Marlene or there wouldn't have been enough room in the car. He guides the car calmly up the Adige valley towards Bardolino. He's someone whose serenity and patience make Jonas feel as if the older man thinks most people argue over issues that were resolved long ago. He envies him a bit for this. The twins on either side of him fight every minute or so over his smartphone to play Laserbreak. There are two smartphones of course, but Vera's battery gave up the ghost in Naples and his is also on the wane, which is not such a bad thing.

'You're the toad of a nine-tailed cat!' Enno tells his brother. This is obviously the worst insult he can imagine.

The two of them aren't interested in the game but in the quarrel. The greatest injustice of all for them is for the other to be given more game time. It's a matter of dignity or humiliation, honour or disgrace. Jonas tries to focus on his breathing and on the light flickering between the cypresses along the country road.

'What a long journey!' Marlene cries in lieu of a greeting when she sees the two exhausted children. This sets the tone of that evening's conversation: 'Was it such a good idea?'

Jonas would like to retort: Thanks for the nice welcome. But first of all, Marlene isn't his mother, and secondly, she's right. The journey *was* much too long. He knew it from the start but ultimately surrendered to Vera's confidence. Now he feels drained and irritated.

'Matera was great,' Vera says, undeterred.

'We stayed in a real cave,' Mats adds excitedly before they've even sat down at the long dinner table upon which Marlene has readied some cold homemade elderflower lemonade. Mats describes the rough-hewn rock walls, candles in the evening, the lack of windows.

'Cosy,' Marlene says sarcastically and when Mats and Enno are outside in the paddling pool, she asks Vera so Jonas can hear too, 'How long are you intending to carry on doing this?'

Jonas knows the subtext of the question. Marlene doesn't believe that blogging is a proper profession nor a substitute for one. More than once, unbidden, she has made her opinion clear that the two of them are wasting their talents pursuing some naïve conception of freedom.

'Maybe we'll settle down somewhere,' Jonas says, trying to make it sound like a joke. 'On Belle-Île perhaps. Or Elba.'

Marlene picks up the provocation in his words. 'No one's going to sponsor a house for you as they do hotel vouchers.'

'She doesn't really mean it,' Vera says when the twins are asleep and they're sitting by the river on the bench Robert made himself, like most things here. Behind them there is a soft clinking of wine glasses as Vera's parents clear the veranda table. When they turn out the lights behind the large window onto the garden and, soon afterwards, the outdoor lamps as well, a few stars gradually begin to pierce the darkness.

Vera's mother has touched one of Jonas's sore spots. They've been leading this life for quite a while now. As a programmer for either a start-up or an established company he would long since have saved up enough money to give up their tiny flat in central Berlin and live wherever they pleased – perhaps in a house like this one. He's capable of passing off their nomadism to others as personal fulfilment, but for some time now, deep down, it has felt to him like a painful and irreversible failure.

He booked four seats together. Of course he did. His fussiness about these things that it sometimes drives Vera up the wall. She doesn't call him obsessional, though. She fully acknowledges the advantages of the way Jonas organises his world. *Their* world.

In her personal world it is completely forgivable – or at any rate no grounds to get in a flap – that a train is cancelled and that no replacement is provided for several hours. In Vera's world this may be

tedious but it is not a reason not to snap another photo of platform chaos to offer her followers a true-to-life insight into the intermittent challenges of sustainable travel with children. Instead of getting worked up, she reads the twins some of *The Little Knight* at the end of the platform, buys them ice creams, referees a skipping competition and does a thousand other things to keep their spirits up.

In Jonas's world, however, a glitch like this is an affront. Worse: it's a humiliation. He is quiet, turned inward, but seething with rage. Given that the four of them with their piles of luggage will never be first into the carriage now at the platform, what is called for is some patient, charming, perhaps even obsequious persuasion to obtain acceptable seating arrangements for them all. Yet while Vera is promising the twins lemonade and chocolate brownies when they get home if they would just stop arguing over the *Ninjago* magazine, Jonas's nerves are too frayed for polite requests.

'Why should I mind standing up less than your children?' the hip Munich-to-Berlin commuter responds without raising his eyes from his iPhone.

'Because you've got fully developed muscles and bones,' Jonas replies. He ought to drop it right there, but snotty upstarts like this really get his goat. 'What the hell kind of idiotic question is that anyway? We've been travelling since eight this morning, and they're kids, dammit!' *Idiotic, dammit:* whatever auto-suggestive techniques he has used so far to try and wean himself off such lapses, they have all been in vain.

'What's your problem?' the man says with an expression as if he is pushing a scrap of charred *antipasto* to the edge of his plate. 'You can see the train's full.'

'But I reserved seats.'

'So? The rail company fucked up. Drive next time.'

'But I don't want to drive, and you can stick your suggestions up your arse!'

Even though he's used to it, his anger still sometimes catches him off guard, the obscene suddenness with which it breaks out, burning for a cue to lay everything around him to waste. The man falls silent. Despite his arrogant ignorance he has realised that their stakes in this game are very different. Battle-weary and sweaty, his face disfigured by rage, Jonas stares the other man out. The energy it takes to control his anger is now greater than venting it. He's going to demand that the man get up and leave. He'll refuse and cast around for potential allies to form a coalition of the just against this aggressor, but Jonas doesn't care. He wants to use this one available valve to let out the pressure that has taken hold of him. He longs for the coming altercation.

Just then Vera calls out from the end of the carriage that she's found four seats together. People get up willingly for Vera. He takes a step back and sees the tension ebb out of the upstart. Jonas turns away

and walks towards his wife. Sometimes, pretty often in fact, he marvels at how lucky he is that she is at his side and wishes to stay there.

Mats and Enno share a pair of headphones to watch *Madagascar 2* on the rail company's portal. Jonas's head is resting on Vera's shoulder. He says, 'I don't know how much longer I can carry on doing this.' They have broached the wide-reaching topics that this sentence abbreviates and condenses a thousand times before without ever coming to a conclusion. His position is that now the children have reached school age they need a more regulated lifestyle, friends, an everyday routine. Vera says that the kids love being on the move and find friends everywhere; travel is the best form of schooling anyone could want and anything travelling doesn't teach them, their parents will. They are both right in their own ways: they have different opinions on the same subject, but that subject is their future life. In the absence of any decision, the status quo prevails. He bites back what he was about to say – that he's sick and tired of this life on the hoof. The constant client acquisitions, the marketing of themselves, the treadmill of repetitive chores like picture editing, web design, billing for their commissions, planning the next trip, the bookkeeping and the guitar lessons he gives to make sure there's enough money to pay their rent, not to mention bringing up two extremely energetic pre-school children in their undeniably small apartment: this whole breakneck stalemate that is their life is wearing him down and saps him of strength at moments like these. He can't say this to Vera, for whom life seems to be a dream that never stops coming true. Jonas is thirty-five and looking back over his life he sees only a work in progress.

As if Vera were capable of reading his mind (and he has no reason to doubt that she can) she puts an arm around him, sticks her hand under his T-shirt and whispers in his ear, 'Don't worry so much. There's still a bottle of Pinot in the fridge.'

At about 10 pm, after a fifteen-hour journey, they arrive at Alexanderplatz. It's the last weekend of the summer holidays. The homeless have turned up for the night shift and one of them is playing 'Here Comes The Sun' – not badly and without even asking for money. It's warm. After all the sitting on the train they walk the rest of the way, as it's only a few hundred metres to their home. It may be down to the music or the mild evening that Jonas suddenly feels that all the pending problems are less pressing and he even feels good as he walks along, free at least of the burden of travelling. This is their home. It is only small, just a base camp, but even having a home should be regarded as something precious when you're only a guest everywhere else.

‘Good old Berlin,’ he says, looking forward to putting the dog-tired boys to bed and then drinking a glass of wine with Vera out on the balcony, happy to breathe in the muggy Berlin air and hear the boisterous party-goers, and then . . . Maybe they’ll go to bed and sleep in the nude, maybe one thing might lead to another, definitely would in fact, and that would be a fitting coda to this trip.

He notices a car at the end of the street. The low sun is in his eyes, but he spots a black SUV jaggling around the corner from Holzmarktstrasse, swerving and then almost stopping before revving its engine, leaping forward and accelerating. Although the car isn’t yet part of Jonas’s life or his family’s, has no impact on it, barely touching its edges, he finds the driving disturbing and threatening. It can only be a drunk driver; hopefully he’ll soon lose his licence. Jonas hates these flashy cars and their drivers.

He has almost reached the far side of the birch-dotted lawn outside the estate and is now walking backwards, looking at Enno, who’s trying to catch up. On the edge of the lawn Vera is using all her powers of persuasion to get Mats to cover the last few metres. They’ll be home soon. Only a short distance to go.

The supermarket in the Alexa shopping mall opposite is still open. There aren’t many pedestrians out and about on Alexanderstrasse and those that are aren’t shoppers at this time but revellers, youngsters taking up their starting positions for the night in places like Pampa timber market before heading on to the Kater Blau or the KitKatClub later.

‘Hey, don’t fall asleep back there,’ Jonas calls out.

The roar of the engine, much closer now, makes him look over in that direction again. To his amazement it is much closer now and still accelerating. The strangely jerky steering with which the driver seems to toy with the right lane rather than keep to it only emphasizes the power of the bulky, oversized car as it races away from the sun, dark and heavy. Jonas opens his mouth to vent some of his rising anger with a swearword, an insult. He stops moving. From Vera’s pale smile he can tell that she too is out of energy. He takes a step in her direction, then another. Enno walks towards him by himself, while Vera turns around and goes back a few metres to pick up Mats and give a piggyback.

‘Not far now!’ he calls out to them as encouragement.

The car accelerates even more, but the swerving has abruptly ceased. It’s just going hell for leather now. A race? Jonas can’t see any other cars. Should he warn Vera? But she and Mats, like Enno, have reached the front lawn and are a safe distance away from the road. It looks as if the car is still gathering speed. It must be doing 80, 90, 100 kilometres per hour now. A speed merchant. A reckless chav. Jonas is about to voice his indignation, but the uncontrolled example he set in the train holds him back.

He doesn't yell. He will ruminate on this a great deal later. The next moment the car veers sharply to the right and sheers off the road towards the pavement.

'Behind you!' he shouts at last, but it's too late.

Vera spins round. The SUV ramps off the kerb like an attacking predator and, apparently still accelerating, strikes her and Mats.

That is what he reads in the paper later: 'The car left the road and struck two people.' But right now its significance doesn't really strike Jonas and later he won't even remember what he actually saw. It all happens so incredibly quickly that the image is erased in the very instant of its creation. All he hears – in fact he feels it with his whole body – is the massive crash with which the car comes to a standstill a second later against a birch tree that splinters but withstands its assault.

When he wakes up, the noises have fallen silent. It's quiet, but 'quiet' isn't the right word. There is now a regular beeping where before there were exploding grenades and human screams. A dream?

This isn't his bed. The light is cold and impersonal; he isn't at home. And yet there's no question of 'Where am I?': this has to be a hospital. It's more of a sensation than a memory: something bad has happened.

He raises his hand. There's a cannula in his arm. He can feel a ventilation tube in his nose. Something's wrong with his chest. He tugs the sheet down a bit and tries to lift his head. Has he ever felt heavier than this?

'Radomir.' Theresia's voice. 'You're awake.'

He can't smile. His face hurts.

'You had an accident. You were asleep.'

'How long?' he wants to ask, but his voice isn't working and nor are his vocal chords – nothing. He can only just about make out Theresia. Her voice is the only thing telling him that he really is awake, and even that he might be dreaming. His mouth is so dry. He is terribly thirsty. Theresia says something, but it is very far away.

His perception of the road, his surroundings and all reality is blurred and at the same time fully nuanced and accurate. This instant seems to stretch out indefinitely. The car is accelerating like an aeroplane taking off – at least that's how it seems to him – and he has absolutely no influence over it. There is no Not Yet and no No Longer, merely a sense that time does not concern him any more. He has no control over any of this. He's certain he is about to die, but it isn't something to be afraid of. He's veering off to one side and the car is probably going to be smashed to pieces against a wall or a tree, crushing his body. He might burn to death. None of that is of any importance; he feels nothing. Even his death is none of his concern now.

When he wakes up again, more clearly and undeniably this time, Theresia is no longer there. He's incapable of saying how much time has passed, but his mind is more or less back to normal now. He is still in pain – his face hurts and so does his chest – but he can place them now. He needs an operation.

The blind is down and dim light is filtering through it: it's daytime. In spite of the pain he relishes the immediate certainty of still being part of this world.

'Feeling any better?' Theresia asks. She looks unnaturally healthy: lipstick, make-up, bright-red fingernails, blonde hair as well. Her dress is very figure-hugging, actually more for women twenty or thirty years younger.

'What happened?' he asks. His voice is a mere whisper.

'You'll feel better soon, Radi.'

He tries to take a deep breath but can't. The pain is both internal and external, like a wound.

'What's here?'

Theresia sits down beside him and takes his hand, which is creeping incredibly slowly towards the wound.

'The things you get up to!' she says with gentle admonishment.

'How long was I asleep?'

She picks up a glass from his bedside table and half fills it with water. She offers it to him and when he nods, props up his head. He groans and spits out most of it on his gown and the sheet.

'Should I fetch the doctor?'

He shakes his head weakly. 'I had an accident,' he hears himself say.

Theresia strokes his hand. Hers is dry and cool. 'You'll recover,' she says, as if she giving the good news first. 'It'll take some time, but you'll make a full recovery.'

'When?'

She squeezes his hand and smiles confidently. Not confidently – non-committally.

'I feel fine,' he says.

'No, you don't.'

He shuts his eyes. Another scrap of memory comes back to him: the realisation that the terrible conclusion is now inevitable. Then he lets go and accepts the disaster. The whole world dissolves into fog, like a piece of music ending abruptly at the moment of greatest crescendo.

'What about the car?'

'Never mind the car,' Theresia says firmly. 'You need peace and quiet now. That's the main thing. The doctor says—'

He turns his head to the side and tries to look out of the window. 'Can you pull up the blinds?'

She gets up and goes over to the window.

‘What happened?’ he asks again.

‘She freezes with the blind half open. ‘The car’s a write-off, Radi. It’s a miracle you got out alive.’

He has trouble breathing and coughs. The pain tears through his chest. He groans.

Theresa comes back to his bedside and pushes the call button.

‘Have you heard from Gell?’ he asks almost inaudibly.

‘You shouldn’t talk so much, Radi.’

As he tries to answer the doctor’s questions with a nod or shake of the head – ‘Do you feel any pain? Are you getting enough air?’ – suddenly the thought of a missed appointment invades his consciousness, sending a jolt through his body. He was supposed to pick Gell up. Jalayer had given him the address an hour in advance, and everything was meant to move very fast. Radomir had gathered up the files in his office and informed Gell even before he rang Khaled and Sherif to tell them the meeting place too. Bajrami would fly back again early in the morning, and Jalayer was also in town for this one meeting only. Radomir saw in his mind’s eye how they would all have greeted one another in the lobby of the Park Inn: ‘Group Photo with Lawyer’. It didn’t have to be the lobby as far as he was concerned, Gell had said; the multistorey car park would do just as well. The family photo was the main thing. As if it hadn’t been hard enough already just to arrange this meeting.

He had prepared the get-together for months, making phone calls to people he didn’t know, bribing go-betweens, constantly suggesting new possibilities and calculating risks. On the way to the Park Inn thousands of things that could still go wrong had flashed through his mind. None of these scenarios foresaw an accident.

This accident has thrown his life completely off track. His absence stymied the meeting, months of preparations had gone to waste and lots of people would now be disappointed in him. All business partners, but particularly these ones, treat a meeting mishap like this with suspicion. It generally spells the end of business ties. If that happens in this case, it will have consequences – for him, for Theresa and for the rest of their lives. He’s back to square one, a slave to his identity.

He has to get hold of his phone. Right now.

‘You may have trouble sleeping for a while. Bouts of dizziness, troubled dreams. Claustrophobia, anxiety, maybe even panic attacks. This is not unusual after an intervention of this kind.’

He nods to show he has understood. And also to conceal the fact that her predictions are already correct.

‘Need my phone, please,’ he says, slurring his words.

The doctor, very young but ambitious and rigid in her starched white coat, nods and then immediately shakes her head. 'I'm sorry, no. Phones mean excitement and excitement means a quicker pulse. We can't afford that with you. Holding a phone now would kill you.'

The nurse standing next to the doctor gives a barely perceptible start. Theresia also unwillingly gets up from the edge of the bed and is poised to offer some retort, for instance about the appropriate phrasing for a patient who needs to stay calm at all cost.

'Has the psychologist already had a word with you?' the doctor asks.

'He's only just woken up,' Theresia hastens to answer. Radomir is relieved to hear from her tone that she wants to get rid of the doctor.

At the very least he has to call Jalayer. Absolutely has to. And Khaled and Sherif. Explain what happened. Sherif will believe him – of course he will, he has no reason not to. So will Khaled. They can see for themselves that Radomir is in hospital. But what about Gell? he thinks, shocked that it has only occurred to him now. Is he injured?

Radomir must have given the ward doctor a quizzical look because she turns to him and says, 'Sessions with a psychologist are a standard part of the rehabilitation process.'

'Why?' Radomir asks absentmindedly.

'Traumatic guilt can have a negative impact on the recovery process.'

'He still doesn't–' Theresia begins but then breaks off, which isn't normal for her. 'Can't we talk about all of this some other time? First my husband has to get his strength back.'

'What do you mean traumatic guilt?' Radomir asks.

'Oh,' the doctor says, flicking through the medical notes. 'I thought you'd been–' Now her voice breaks off. 'That's a bit . . .'

The three women look at one another in embarrassment and even Radomir can tell there's been some mix-up. 'Did . . . did something happen to Gell?'

'Not to him, no,' the doctor says. 'To his wife.'

'His wife?' Radomir's thoughts tumble over one another in slow motion. He has never seen Gell's wife and is absolutely certain that he will never meet her. She is completely irrelevant to the whole business. 'I don't understand.'

'We'll continue this later,' Theresia says decisively. 'My husband needs to rest. You said so yourself.'

The doctor and the nurse shuffle out sheepishly. When they have left, Radomir repeats quietly, 'My phone.'

He is trying to juggle seven different ideas at the same time. Blowing out the meeting is unfortunate, but he can fix it. If he can just get hold of his phone. Everything else is trivial in comparison. He has to collect his thoughts and explain things to the right people in clear, concise words. He has to begin at the beginning. An accident. There was an accident. He has to breathe slowly. Concentrate. He's got to get his phone.

Theresia sits on the edge of the bed beside him and picks up his hand again. She leans over and kisses him on the forehead. 'Radomir. The right time will come for that. Be patient. Only one thing is important right now . . .'

'Thirsty.'

He drinks and lets his head fall back onto the pillow, exhausted. For a long time there is silence apart from Theresia's breathing and the gentle thrum of some device or other.

'What happened, Theresia?' he tries again. 'I have to know.'

Theresia squeezes his hand again without a word.

'Was someone injured?'

The silence stretches out endlessly until he has almost dozed off again. He wishes he hadn't asked, but then he returns to consciousness with a start.

'Theresia?'

As if taking a run-up for a daring leap she says hurriedly, 'You lost control of the car. It went off the road. You're not to blame for any of it.'

'Any of what?'

'There was a family there. The father and one of the children are fine, but the other child and the mother . . .'

'What?'

'They're dead, Radi. They're both dead.'