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The Fan

When he was about fifteen, toward the very end of the sixties, Kastner showed enthusiasm for a barely popular American rock band, especially for their lead singer, who wore his hair extremely long, bright red, and curly. Kastner collected everything that was to be had about the band. At first, there were just a few articles and pictures, which he hung on the walls of his room. He listened on his parents' portable record player to the band's first records. He founded an officially recognized fan club; for a time, he and his best friend were the only members. At school, Kastner was mocked for all this. At home, there were always arguments with his parents, who were not amused by the whole business. Things got particularly bad when Kastner let his hair, which also had a slight reddish tinge, grow out very long.

But then the band made it big. More and more articles appeared in the newspapers and magazines; there were the band's first TV appearances. And for a few years Kastner, as founder of the first fan club here, was a well-known figure even beyond the confines of his hometown, that is, only within the circle of the band's followers. He planned and presided over meetings of the fans; he distributed official promotional material, especially the coveted autographed collector's cards. And once when he, on the occasion of the group playing a concert in the soccer stadium in a nearby city, organized a bus trip there, the local paper interviewed him. Two days later the article appeared, with a picture of him and other leaders of fan clubs, as they posed around the members of the band.

A few years passed. The rock group continued its rise, almost making it to the truly greats. Their Asian tour was an international success. The movie that was made about it played in the smaller of the two movie theaters in Kastner's town, and he even talked the manager into a late-night showing just for him alone so that he could copy the movie with a tripod-mounted Super 8 camera.

Later began a period of scandals and affairs. Members of the group were arrested and charged with drug possession; the lead singer married a young English aristocrat just to divorce her a short time later; during one of their concerts in South Africa there were bloody riots. Finally, the group threatened to split up over their disputes. At that time, there was already talk of serious tax evasions.

Kastner took all this to heart. For a time he wrote in fan magazines to defend the record company's whitewashed press releases, even though it earned him to sharp criticism. Finally, even he joined sides with those who called for an admission of guilt and a fresh start for the group: this was the only way to save the band, he claimed. But to no avail. The breakup happened. The lead singer recorded a solo record that did not make it into the Top 40. Eventually, both he and the group dropped out of sight.

Kastner was barely twenty at the time. He no longer wore his hair as long as the singer, and he had several reasons for it. What he had collected, he took down from the walls of his room little by little and packed it up in folders and boxes. He hung up only two or three special items in his first own apartment, including the newspaper photograph and a certificate recognizing his work with the fan club, signed by all the band members. Occasionally, the lead singer's name did turn up in newspapers or magazines, mostly in connection with some scandal or other. But whenever someone called it to Kastner's attention, he just smiled or shrugged his shoulders.

And so Kastner turned forty-five. He had been forced to change places of on-the-job training and then employment several times, until just a few years ago he had been lucky to get into a line of work that was turning steady profits as a result of the fall of the Iron Curtain. From one day to the next, he had to drop everything. But as a result he now had a relatively secure position. Rather late in life and not until having settled into his new environment, he also married. They had two children, the oldest of whom would soon be starting school.

Then, late one night, as he sat alone watching an English music channel on cable, it occurred to Kastner that he might try to find out what had become of that lead singer. He calculated that the man had to be turning fifty-six next month—assuming that he was still alive, because his obituary, if it even appeared in the press at all,

would now be so small that it could easily be overlooked. By the next morning Kastner had forgotten his intention, but during the following weeks he remembered it once or twice. At last, the first thing he did was to ask a younger co-worker who was interested in rock music.

“Oh yeah, him!” the co-worker said. Yeah, that was quite a guy! Where was he now? He hadn’t the slightest idea, he said, but he’d be glad to get right on it. A few days later he got back to Kastner. “He’s gone missing,” he said. He never had anything like that happen. Nobody vanishes in the Internet, after all. But except for a few historical entries, there wasn’t anything to be found. In any case, it made it pretty certain that he had nothing to do with the industry anymore.

“How about that,” Kastner said. From then on, he thought about the matter more and more. At one point, he imagined the lead singer as a down-and-out drunk in some big American city, in his stupor telling his drinking buddies about his earlier fame and excessive lifestyle; or another time, as a husband and father in a Midwestern suburb playing in the backyard with his kids on a Saturday afternoon, while inside the house his greatest hits were playing.

Another couple of weeks later, Kastner wrote to the record company, and when they couldn’t help him, he wrote to a German rock magazine. Still he had no success. Kastner talked with his co-worker about it, who expressed surprise. People, he said, just don’t vanish completely.

“It doesn’t surprise me,” Kastner said. He smacked the edge of his desk with the rolled-up newspaper. In the music industry they were practically all young people, and they just didn’t give a damn what happened twenty-five years ago.

“Yeah, could be,” his co-worker said.

The evening of the same day, Kastner went up into the attic, got out the folders and boxes with his collection, and went through it item by item: the newspaper articles he’d pasted on plain white paper or put in plastic sleeves, then filed in binders with spine tags made from hand-copied album covers; his correspondence as president of the fan club, likewise neatly filed; the statistical tables he had drawn himself to track all the song titles in the Top 40; the concert tickets, some torn and carefully reattached; many folders of photographs, the life-size poster cutout from the fan magazine Bravo, and the reel of Super 8 film; sew-on patches and t-shirts. Last of

all, the leather jacket with the name of the group in rivets across the shoulders and arms. And, of course, the records, the cassettes of live recordings and radio interviews. Well into the night Kastner sat looking at the things, with the music playing softly. And as he finally went through it all one more time, he found a picture of the English aristocrat with her full maiden name in the caption. He folded it up and stuck it in his wallet.

A few days later Kastner looked up the British consulate, explained his inquiry to the official on duty, and handed him the photograph.

The official, a middle-aged man, looked at it and shook his head. He was strictly forbidden to give out any information of a private nature.

“And if I asked nicely?” Kastner said. He explained that he’d once been a fan of a group whose lead singer had married this woman. He told him the name of the group.

“Really?” the official said. He smiled and handed back the photograph. “My fellow countrymen are a sedentary people,” he said. “Look into some English telephone books. They always make stimulating reading.” He grinned. Personally, he would recommend the phone book from the Reading area.

Kastner thanked him, drove to the main post office, and requested the telephone books. That same day he wrote and mailed several letters to various addresses that looked promising, but they remained unanswered. So he wrote new letters, assuring the recipients that he was not making any claim whatsoever on anyone, but the only response was a request from an English attorney that he desist from further inquiries.

“It’s crazy,” Kastner said to his wife as they were walking in the backyard one evening. How a person can just vanish! He picked up the toys from the lawn and threw them into the sandbox.

“So many people vanish,” his wife said.

“What do you mean?” Kastner said. In wars maybe, sure! But not today. And under those conditions! After a career like that! He took a couple of paper scraps out of the sandbox and put them in his pocket. “A soccer stadium full of fans,” he said. “Sold out to the last seat!” At the end of the concert everybody had been screaming his name. And by that time he, Kastner, had stood there onstage right next to him.

The next day Kastner placed an ad in several languages in all the music magazines his co-worker could think of, offering a sizeable reward to anyone who could give him concrete information about the lead singer or his whereabouts.

And this time Kastner got results. He received some three dozen letters and phone calls. Performers from the music scene told wild stories; women gave detailed reports of paternity and paternity suits; managers spoke of court trials; and a few old fans claimed to be some of Kastner's former correspondents. But he could not make sense of any of what they wrote or told him. And as for current information, no one knew anything definite. Kastner began by making a list of the hints he had received, but he soon realized that there was no real lead among them. With a heavy heart he gave up. And he had nearly forgotten the whole thing once again when, almost a year had passed, he received yet another letter.

It was a Saturday morning in April. Kastner had gone out early with the children to the back yard to do some cleaning in preparation for summer. Around 9:30 the postman called to him from the street and handed the letter over the fence. Kastner read the handwritten sender's address and stopped dead in his tracks. A city he had never heard of. In America. The children nudged him in the side; he made an annoyed gesture, said something, and they ran into the house. The name in block letters, not like on the autographed collector's cards. Kastner tore open a corner of the envelope. The garden soil on his fingers blackened the paper. He stuck one finger into the corner, then paused.

He looked around. The yards around him were still quiet. Beneath his neighbor's birdhouse sat a large, black cat, and the artificial fish pond reflected the sunlight. On the street the delivery truck of a frozen-food company was just stopping.

In America it's still night, Kastner thought. Maybe only late evening. He took his finger out of the envelope and smoothed out the black, torn corner; then he took the letter into the house. He wrote out a check for the promised amount and placed it in an envelope, which he addressed and had the children take to the post office. Until the afternoon he continued working in the yard. Late that evening he put the letter into a plastic sleeve and filed it, just as it was, all the way at the back of the binder containing the fan club correspondence.

At this moment his wife came into the room. “I can’t sleep,” she said. “What are you doing?”

“I’m finished,” Kastner said. “I’ll be right there.”

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