



Dirk Schmidt

Final Show

Thriller

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YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE

How many times had Micky died, anyway? If cats had nine lives, he must have just started on his third cat. Micky had fallen off concert stages, fallen off motorcycles, been shot in a duel, rammed by an elephant, and once got off the tour bus at full speed. Add the electric shock and the incident in Bergamo, when Rain or Keith or both of them together accidentally set him on fire, and that already makes seven; the other eight to eighteen deaths can be filed under “overdose.” With someone who lived every day as if it were his last, the end was always easy to see coming, but when it finally did, his death was still as unexpected as Werner Vogelberg’s half-bar drum fill on *Someone Ever*.

When Schreiner gets the news, he drags himself into his library, opens a bottle of Micky’s favourite whiskey and raises it toward the wall. The wall with the pictures: Schreiner and Axl Rose, Schreiner with Angus Young, Schreiner next to Keith Richards, Mick Jagger and Thom Yorke. And of course: Schreiner and Crrowl. Schreiner takes a sip and starts coughing. Once it passes, he looks at the label on the bottle.

Tennessee. Close enough. Somewhere down there in the Deep South, the blues was invented. Because conditions were ideal. And because Robert Johnson had sold his soul to the devil in order to become the greatest blues guitarist of all time. Over the years the whole thing changed. It became electric and danceable and white. Sometimes it was little more than the mating call of sexually frustrated teenagers, sometimes it even became art. In any case, it was remarkably effective at separating young people from their money and decades later, guitar-oriented popular music is a wonderfully rich landscape that, depending on where you stand, can inspire nostalgia or hope for the future.

Except in Germany. That's the Sahara of rock 'n' roll.

That's how Schreiner would put it, anyway, if anyone asked him. He should know. He's spent his life in that desert. But no one asks Schreiner, and at least there was Crrowl.

Crrowl. What a terrible name for a rock band. No one can pronounce it. Outside the deepest south of Germany and perhaps a few pockets of the Balkans, hardly anyone can roll the r's properly. Crrowl means nothing, and if it did nothing particularly good. But perhaps that's the first secret right there - if it means nothing, it can mean anything, and God knows Crrowl has more secrets to offer. More than enough.

"Here's to you, Micky. You asshole."

Schreiner only knows the story of Micky's first overdose second-hand. How Micky, with his usual knack for cutting it close, had scraped past death – shortly before the two of them first met, at that community centre on the edge of town.

Schreiner had gone there to see the *Danny Krohl Band*. Not that he'd had particularly high hopes, but at the time people were looking desperately for something, anything, they could in good conscience promote as a rock band. And do it without their colleagues in the English-speaking world laughing them out of the room.

Then some guy who wrote for a local music magazine had said the sentence. The sentence that, if the desperation was great enough, would send Schreiner - and everyone before and after him in every record company and concert promoter everywhere - out on the road:

They've got something.

So Schreiner got into his Jaguar, tore through two hundred and thirty kilometres to somewhere in Westphalia and hoped and dreamed and perhaps there was even a brief prayer in there somewhere ...

Please let them have something. Anything.

And behold: prayers were answered.

They had something.

For example, that gaunt, deathly pale rhythm guitarist who only made it through the gig on bad cocaine and the even worse drumming of a slightly chubby wannabe drummer. As mentioned, Schreiner only found out later that just minutes before, Micky had been lying backstage without a heartbeat. Rain told him the whole story years later, down to the last detail.

They had all stood up to head for the stage, and Micky had stayed where he was. The drop of spit at the corner of his mouth was the only thing about him that moved. Keith, the chubby drummer, yelled something along the lines of "Oh shit, Micky, oh shit," while Danny Krohl came out with something like "Tonight of all nights?"

Quick break – two still missing from the line-up.

First, there was the bassist at the time, remembered only by people who genuinely have nothing better to do with their lives than trace the deepest roots of rock-band family trees. Fired long ago, now a high-school teacher. And last but not least, Rain, already the dark god of German rock. Rain, who watched without moving as Keith pressed his beer-wet lips to Micky's and Danny Krohl deigned to massage the general area of Micky's heart.

“See if he’s still breathing,” Rain had said.

“How am I supposed to see that?” Keith had said, and started slapping Micky’s face. It was the best he could come up with, but at least there was a first sign of hope.

“I think he took a breath.” That was Danny, but Danny had a habit of seeing things that weren’t there.

Around this point Keith became convinced that he was the only one with anything resembling control of the situation, while at the same time deciding to suspend all attempts at resuscitation for the moment.

“We need an ambulance. There’s a phone down the hall.”

Since neither Danny nor Rain showed any sign of reacting, Keith set off. Just before he left the room, Danny called after him.

“Keith! Wait...”

“What?”

“If the cops show up now, maybe the gig gets called off.”

“Why would it?”

“How should I know? You know what cops are like.”

Keith lost it. “And what if he croaks? What do you think happens then? Then we’ll really have the cops on our asses.”

Danny stayed cool. As always. “We’ve got the gig of our lives and the asshole chooses to die now.”

Micky had spent the conversation slowly turning blue. Keith put a hand on his forehead.

“Shit, he’s already stone cold. I’m calling an ambulance.”

Danny raised his voice.

“Yeah, go ahead. I’ll tell the guy from the record company ... he can come back another time. When we’ve got a rhythm guitarist with a pulse.”

“Don’t you get it? This is life and death.”

Danny tapped Keith twice on the chest with his index fingers.

“Exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you. Today or never.”

Pause. Stalemate. A moment of silence. Then Keith again.

“Can you say something for once?”

“Right,” Danny added. “Say something, Rain.”

What was Rain supposed to say? He had watched the whole scene like a film, or like anything else that had nothing to do with him. The solution was obvious, and he couldn’t understand why Danny and Keith couldn’t see it.

“Well...” Rain gave them a little more time.

“Yeah?” Keith asked.

“I can play his part. I know both guitar parts. And when I play a solo, we just bring the bass up. Power trio. The Who, Led Zep, The Jam...”

Danny Krohl was satisfied.

“Could work.”

Musically, then, the problem was solved. Micky-wise, things remained a little more complicated for a while, at least until Micky unexpectedly started coughing, without any help from anyone. Danny, always the first when there was something to celebrate, slapped him on the back, while Keith - *Hey, man, you really scared us there* - gave him some water.

It didn’t take long for the blue to drain from Micky’s face and give way to the unhealthy yellowish complexion everyone knew. Rain had long since disappeared. Before the show, he wanted to be alone with his Fender. Even then, Rain was one step ahead of the rest. He looked forward and saw nothing that could get in his way. It had taken him a while to decide to stake everything on his talent, but now that the decision was made, nothing was going to stop him. Least of all someone like Micky.

No question, Micky was good. Very good. Probably without knowing it. Sometimes they talked to each other onstage. Without words. Micky could fold the sentence *Your solo is shit tonight* into a chord, then

moments later weave a carpet Rain could fly on. He could slow the band down or speed it up whenever he pleased. That was supposed to be the job of the rhythm section, but the bassist was an idiot and on his way out, and Keith was happy if he could manage to hit the drums and every now and then keep the beat steady. When Rain heard Micky stop coughing long enough to light a cigarette, he knew it was going to be a good night.

Bring on Schreiner!

Lucy wasn't even born the first time Micky died.

She has the driver stop at a service station and gets out. It isn't far to the venue now, and she wants to freshen up first. Lucy goes into the shop and grabs some chewing gum, chocolate and a bag of peanuts. She puts everything on the counter and points at the toilet door. The woman behind the counter hands her the key. When Lucy comes out again a little later, she has changed. She now looks like a cross between Lara Croft and a biker gang, the leather creaking as she walks. Lucy hasn't had much time to prepare for the job with Crrawl, and everything she has ever heard about the band came from her father. But the way she sees it, the use of black eyeliner ranks among the key innovations in the history of rock music. Before leaving, Lucy catches her reflection in the glass of the snack counter and is satisfied. She looks okay. More than okay. She'd marry herself.

The way to the venue takes her across a parking lot that, at least for tonight's event, seems absurdly large. Lucy is nervous, the way people get nervous when something new and unpredictable lies ahead. Not that there's anything new about this place. The arena crouches against the dark Estonian skyline, ugly as hell, and the flickering 8-bit strip of lights only makes it look that much worse.

CRRoWL WoRLD ToUR, it says.

They'd run out of capital O's.

Crrawl. Apart from her father, the internet is of course Lucy's most important source of information, and by now she can almost recite the most useful quote she has found.

Crrowl's fame dates back to that blink-and-you-miss-it period when German rock music had at least a theoretical chance of being noticed internationally, because a handful of musicians came along with enough virtuosity to make people overlook their lead singers' inadequate command of the English language. Keyword Rain. Keyword Keith.

According to her phone, Rain can hold his own with anyone when it comes to six guitar strings. Which is more than can be said for Keith's singing. Then there's his fairly mediocre English, delivered with a Dutch accent. As for bassists, Crrowl seems to change them like underwear, and the drummer is a mystery all his own. Unfortunately, the rest of the more than twenty-year-old *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* article is behind a paywall. It probably goes on to mention that Crrowl once had a female lead singer. A woman who wrote pretty much every good song the band ever had, and after whose death nothing comparable ever came along again.

Lucy has no idea what to expect. She doesn't yet know that over the course of the relatively short tour she will travel more than six thousand kilometres, cross seven national borders and spend nights in ten different places. Those places will have populations ranging from 150 to half a million, and Lucy won't get to know a single one of them or come into contact with more than five locals. Her life will take place on a bus, in the backstage areas of various concert halls, in the parking lots surrounding them, and in the zones behind and around the stage she is allowed to enter during the shows. She will sleep in hotels that don't deserve the name, and in others she will be delighted to find a working television. The delight will come from having grown tired of staring at her phone and longing for bigger pictures. On the other hand, it won't be long before Lucy starts judging towns, squares and entire regions by the quality of their mobile coverage and sorting her memories by Wi-Fi names.

Little by little, the bus she initially hates – on a good day it smells of air freshener, and its plush velour is something Lucy knows only from government offices, arthouse cinemas and old television shows – will become her favourite place. The only place that never changes and where, almost inevitably, she will

begin to feel at home. The place from whose windows she will look out at landscapes that are sometimes inviting, sometimes bleak, sometimes disfigured, while raindrops sliding down the glass provide a welcome diversion. Another diversion, and often the highlights of days that seem frozen in time, will be the roughly sixty service stations whose selection Lucy will study with increasing and increasingly comparative interest.

Lucy keeps walking, and just before she reaches the door to the venue, she hears a loud bang and flinches. It takes her a moment to connect the noise with the metal gate she is heading towards. The explanation is simple: a band like Crrowl has roadies, and as Lucy will soon discover, roadies are a tight-knit, self-sufficient community united by an irreconcilable dislike of everyone else on the tour. Apparently, the gate had looked half open when the nameless roadie tried to haul the flight case back to the truck. Lucy gets moving again and walks through the now wide-open gate and a stream of incomprehensible swearing into the hall.

There is a lot more going on than she expected.

Roadies of the lugging-and-hauling variety cross paths with stage roadies higher up the hierarchy, set-up roadies and roadies apparently trusted to touch musical instruments. Lighting roadies bark orders, junior lighting roadies carry them out, and in between, as on every construction site in the history of the world, there are one or two dudes whose only job seems to be standing around and making sure everyone else is getting on with theirs.

After Lucy is nearly flattened by a mixing-console roadie with a flatbed trolley, she retreats to a wall and spends a while watching the sweaty choreography of people doing their jobs, interrupted only occasionally by collisions involving hand trucks or a hammer coming down on someone's hand. Lucy could now reflect on the beauty inherent in all this smooth efficiency, or surrender to the intense interplay of sight, sound and smell, but her thoughts are elsewhere. Roadies, plus roadies, then more roadies, a

sound guy, a lighting guy, a stage-music guy, the two guys standing around, and finally the band – Lucy is, fuck me, the only woman. And as she hangs back, unsure what to do with her temporary uniqueness, one of the guys standing around notices her and waves. She has no idea how to respond and settles on a reasonably friendly nod.

The man who waved at her looks strange.

Not quite real.

He is wearing badly fitting jeans with the obligatory wallet chain and an unflatteringly tight T-shirt commemorating some long-gone tour of some rock band. On the front, a logo with wings, flames and letters carved from stone. On the back, the tour dates, all from a year beginning with a 19. The T-shirt isn't just tight and old. It also has a hole in it. Right where his considerable belly is putting the fabric under maximum strain. Conveniently, he is now scratching himself through the hole. Maybe he made it on purpose because that particular spot is always itching.

What doesn't add up? What's not real?

The man has nice hair.

Too nice.

Perfectly gelled, slightly greying curls fall onto the shaved back of his neck, his beard is elaborate and trimmed to the millimetre, and on his wrist is a watch that probably costs more than a roadie earns in a year.

The holey T-shirt is a costume.

All he'd have to do is put on a suit and he could host a New Year's Eve gala. He wouldn't even have to clean his manicured fingernails, untouched by physical labour.

Now he's coming closer.

“Lucy?”

“That’s me.”

“I’m Roger.”

“Sure. We spoke on the phone.”

“What?”

Roger is right, it’s too loud in here. Lucy follows him into the green-tiled backstage area, and they drop onto a brown faux-leather sofa that has survived both decades and regimes.

People are rushing around here too, but at least they can talk.

“If you’re hungry or thirsty, there’s a buffet back there. It’s okay. The roadies have their own food. This one’s just for the band and the inner circle.”

“Thanks, I’m good for now.”

“Okay, good...” Roger doesn’t seem entirely sure how to break the ice.

And he checks out Lucy’s tits.

He makes it look as though he’s gazing absent-mindedly into nowhere while he checks out Lucy’s tits.

It’s the best tit-checking technique Lucy has seen in a long time.

“Anyway, it’s good that you’re here. To be honest...”

“Yeah?”

Roger looks at Lucy’s face. Progress, at least. And then suddenly he’s gone again. Guys like him have probably taken so many drugs in their lives that even sober they can teleport away whenever they feel like it.

The silence lasts another few seconds before Lucy breaks it.

“You were going to say something.”

Roger gives a little start, as if Lucy has woken him up.

“Right. I was going to say ... I was surprised you took the job.”

“Why?”

“If your résumé is anywhere close to accurate, you’re already past this. Money-wise too.”

“Yeah, okay.” At least Lucy has prepared the right answer. “A few things happened in my personal life and I wanted some time out. Maybe I’ll tell you about it when we know each other better.”

Roger seems satisfied. He manages to scratch his stomach while putting on his friendliest smooth-operator smile.

“Then I can hardly wait to get to know you better.”

“Me neither,” Lucy lies. “Speaking of which ... when do I get to meet the band? Rain, Keith, Micky, Werner and the others?”

That went pretty well. Didn’t sound at all like something she’d pulled off the internet three days ago and memorised.

“Soon. But right now it’s difficult. Crrowl haven’t toured in a while and things are a bit of a mess. And Keith and Rain are seriously busy. Always coming up with new ideas and all that. Standing still is death.”

“Standing still is what?”

“Death.”

“Sure.” Lucy nods. “I feel that. Standing still is death, and who wants to be dead? But...”

“But what?”

“I mean, if you look at it from the outside, without any preconceptions, you kind of get the feeling nothing around here has moved in decades. Sorry if that sounds harsh.”

Roger looks at her, apparently surprised. Then he raises a finger.

“See? That’s why I hired you. Because you say what you think and don’t tell people what they want to hear. Truth to power, baby. Although, when you meet Keith and Rain, it might be smart if you just, you know...”

“Watch what I say?” Lucy cuts in.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” Roger says. “Have you come up with anything yet to move Crrowl forward?”

Lucy doesn’t have to answer because a young man interrupts them. He is wearing the official rock-star uniform: jeans, heeled boots, a brightly patterned shirt, plus a necklace, bracelet and steel earrings.

“Sorry, Roger. Quick question...” the young man begins.

“Yeah?”

“There are oranges. And there’s a juicer. So why isn’t there any orange juice?”

Two possibilities: the bro really is too stupid to cut a couple of oranges in half and squeeze them, or he couldn’t think of anything better to get Lucy’s attention.

Then again, maybe Lucy is overdoing it. Maybe he hasn’t noticed her at all and is genuinely concerned about his vitamin intake.

Sure, she is obviously the only woman within a hundred metres, but that’ll change soon. Plenty of women will come to the show, many of them ready for absolutely anything, and the strange feeling in Lucy’s stomach will go away.

“That’s Rufus,” Roger says. “Rufus is Crrowl’s thirty-seventh bassist, give or take. And he likes orange juice before a show. Then Rufus can shit properly. Because if Rufus hasn’t taken a shit, his mojo’s gone.”

Roger points at Lucy.

“And this is Lucy.”

“Hey, Lucy.”

“Hey, Rufus.”

Roger gets to his feet.

“I’ve got to go to the light check in a minute. And since you two are sitting here so nicely together –

Lucy is our new social-media manager. Or, strictly speaking, our very first social-media manager.

Welcome to the twenty-first century.”

“I’m on Facebook and Insta,” Rufus says.

“Not anymore,” Lucy says. “As of today, all private accounts are being shut down. Everything goes through me.”

“What about my followers?”

“Your followers?” Lucy asks.

“Sorry, may I?” Roger cuts in.

“Sure,” Lucy says.

“Listen, you play in one of the most famous rock bands on the planet. Okay, if the planet consisted of Germany, Austria and parts of the Baltics. But there are guys sitting in their basements talking about tropical fish who have more followers than you. And Lucy here is a legend. She ... should I tell him the story?”

“Go on.”

“Lucy took a stinking, bland, tasteless yoghurt-curd thing from the Faroe Islands and turned it into a worldwide phenomenon.”

“More like cream cheese,” Lucy adds. “And that’s not quite how it went. I was just in the room when it happened.”

But Roger is unstoppable.

“People slap the stuff on bread, mix it into their granola and guacamole and – best of all – smear it on their faces. Little girls think it helps with spots. Because one very clever girl started a Faroe-Face-Curd Challenge. That, my friend, is social fucking media.”

“Curd,” Rufus says. “Right, then...”

“If she can do curd, she can do Crrowl,” Roger says. “From now on, Lucy handles everything. Understood?”

“Understood,” Rufus says without enthusiasm.

Before heading towards the stage, Roger again raises a finger and this time points it at Rufus. “And one more thing: Lucy is off limits. Don’t even think about it. And if you already did, forget it.”

They are surrounded by a cascade of noise. Someone onstage is hitting a drum, over and over, always the same way. Someone else is tuning an electric guitar and somebody is shouting. Right behind them, espresso is being ground and, lo and behold, orange juice is being squeezed. Crockery clatters and the room is filling up with people.

Meanwhile Lucy and Rufus sit on their sofa in an island of silence.

Eventually Lucy has had enough.

“Right. Let’s start again. Your name’s Rufus.”

Rufus has rolled himself a cigarette.

“My parents love music. I was actually supposed to be called Sting, but that didn’t work out.”

“And how long have you been with the band?”

“Three years.”

“So that makes you the newest member, right?”

“Right.”

Finally – two flying thumbs dancing across her phone screen – Lucy has found something about Rufus online. An obscure fan blog with more spelling mistakes than useful information.

“And you studied bass.”

“Two semesters. But I basically got kicked out and went on tour with a band.”

“Arsicle...?” Lucy can’t believe she actually used the word.

“Yeah, exactly. Arsicle was the name. Sort of fun punk. Not really my thing.”

Rufus rolls another cigarette and offers it to Lucy. Could be a nice gesture. Could be some kind of initiation ritual. Or he's mixed something into it and she wakes up in Kazakhstan without her left kidney. Jesus, girl's unusually paranoid today.

Lucy takes it and lets him light it for her.

"But Crrowl is your thing."

"Absolutely. You know, Crrowl is the last real rock band. Or one of the last. Like, totally into it."

Lucy takes a drag, inhales ... and survives.

"Totally into it ... that sounds a little nineties, doesn't it?"

"Don't care."

Now they are interrupted by a loud noise. Days later, Lucy will still be wondering where the hell it came from. The noise makes every conversation stop at once, along with the espresso machine and the juicer. Into the silence stomps an older man dressed entirely in black. Black except for the red piping on his shirt and the silvery, vaguely Mexican-looking ornamental buttons running down the legs of his leather trousers. His grey hair is tied back in a ponytail. He sways for a moment, catches himself, then starts yelling into the room without addressing anyone in particular.

"WHEN IT SMELLS OF BEER..."

He has to stop for breath. At this volume, a few words at a time are probably all he has in him. When he starts yelling again, the whites of his eyes are visible.

"AND WHEN IT SMELLS OF SWEAT..."

Lucy looks at Rufus, but apparently he has also mastered Roger's technique: staring into empty space on command.

"AND WHEN IT SMELLS OF PUSSY..."

Suddenly the man spins around as if someone has tapped him on the shoulder.

No one has.

Nobody in the room moves. Most of them are probably holding their breath.

“THEN IT’S ROCK AND ROLL!”

And that’s it. He turns away, wheels around and disappears the way he came. A moment later, life in the backstage area resumes as if it had never been interrupted, and the noise level returns to exactly what it was before.

“And that was?”

Rufus opens a bottle of beer.

“Who do you think?” He takes a sip. “That was Micky.”

Lucy might have guessed that herself. But who needs powers of deduction when she has a phone and two thumbs? Micky. Rhythm guitar. Founding member of Crrowl. Enfant terrible, living legend and Germany’s answer to all those guys who trash hotel rooms, drive their Rolls-Royces into swimming pools and are banned from entering several countries. Micky even made it into the *New York Times*; not many German rock musicians manage so much as a line in there. The piece dates from Crrowl’s heyday, when they had come close to cracking even the US. *Micky is not someone you meet. You collide with him.* Lucy puts her phone away and takes a moment to look around. The buffet is open, Roger is back and in command. Roadies are being ruthlessly driven away while a group of genuine and supposed members of the press are fussed over like newborns. Lucy is about to get herself a beer and something to eat when – there’s another noise. Maybe it was too loud to hear it before, or maybe Lucy’s brain had simply filtered it out, but now it’s there. Clear and distinct. It’s coming from the hall, and it’s the sound of people. Lots of people. Lucy gets up and walks behind the stage. The hall is only half full and the lights are still on. But even though this random collection of people hasn’t quite become an audience yet, even though people are still coming and going, looking for better seats, cold drinks and toilets, they generate an electricity Lucy can feel in her stomach.

Or maybe she hasn’t eaten enough.

Lucy goes back, and pretty much the moment she reaches the backstage area, the place falls dead silent.

Another man has entered the room.

Another older white man. Another one who apparently came out of the womb already wearing black leather trousers, though in this case Mum was kind enough to give birth to a pair of cowboy boots for him too. Add an ink-black shirt and a dark coat and there's your rock star. Don't forget the long grey-blond hair and the expressionless eyes, with small but deep creases cascading beside them. On closer inspection, Lucy begins to suspect that the hair has been more or less skilfully padded out on the back of the head. But even without looking closely, the man would seem familiar. If you spend any time looking into the history of Crrowl, there's no avoiding him.

Still, Lucy is beginning to find the silence a little too reverential.

The man seems to notice it too. He speaks fairly quietly. So everyone has to listen.

"What? Never seen God before?"

Okay. That had something.

Because no one can be entirely sure whether he means it or not. Which allows the silence to dissolve into friendly laughter, and Lucy once again finds herself, without meaning to, sitting next to Rufus the young bassist.

"That's him?"

"Who else? The man himself."

Lucy looks at the man and Rufus looks at Lucy.

"What?"

"What, what?"

"You can't stop staring at him."

"Shit... My dad worshipped him. He always said Rain was the best guitarist Germany ever produced."

"He's on the *Rolling Stone* top two hundred."

“Yeah, okay ... at 189.”

“So?” Rufus lights another cigarette. “Out of everyone who ever existed. Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Eddie Van Halen, Prince ... Duane Allman, Angus Young, Stevie Ray Vaughan and on and on. Rain is number 189. That’s immortality. What does your dad think about you working for Crrowl now?”

“My dad’s dead,” Lucy says.

“Sorry. I’m sorry.”

“You couldn’t have known.”

“Okay, listen,” Rufus says. “I’ll tell you what happens next. In a few seconds, a small, nondescript bald guy is going to show up. His name’s Toby, and he’ll tell everyone the show starts in twenty minutes. And feel very important doing it. Then the band will start showing up one by one, except for Micky. Then Keith comes in and annoys everyone with his fake vocal exercises and the information that, unlike guitars, basses and drums, his precious vocal cords are absolutely irreplaceable. And eventually it’ll just be Roger and the band left. That’s how it goes. Anyway ... Werner just arrived.”

“Where?”

“There.”

“Where?”

“Right in front of you,” Rufus whispers.

“He is ungodly old,” Lucy whispers back.

“That’s Werner Vogelberg. Best German drummer who ever lived. And don’t worry, he can’t hear us. Werner always takes his hearing aids out before a show.”

“Werner Vogelberg,” Lucy repeats, turning slightly away in case the old man can lip-read.

Gaunt, eagle-nosed, thinning long hair, deep hollows in his cheeks, bent over and leaning on a walking stick: Werner Vogelberg. Not just any walking stick, either. More the kind of thing you buy in an

antiques shop where the dealer tells you it once belonged to a Nepalese holy man or an eccentric Baronet before somehow finding its way beneath Werner Vogelberg's left hand.

Now he shuffle-limps over to the buffet and takes a glass of orange juice.

Let's see how that goes.

At least Rufus walks over and helps him to a table. Almost tenderly, he places the glass on a napkin before returning to Lucy on the sofa.

"You asked for the orange juice ... for Werner Vogelberg?"

"He's the reason I'm in the band. You can play the same song with him a hundred times and learn something every time. We're still one of the best rhythm sections in the business. Eighty percent of that is Werner."

Before Rufus can go on, another man makes his entrance.

Unlike Werner Vogelberg, who appeared like a ghost, Keith barrels into the room, overweight and noisy, blasting out *mamamamamas* and *mimimimimis* and announcing himself with:

"Right, the boss is here, we can get started – Roger!"

While Roger takes his time showing up, Lucy gets a chance to look Keith over.

First of all, he's short.

Not just for a man or a rock star. Compared with pretty much anything that walks on two legs. Of course, he wears his hair long too, though unlike Rain he doesn't seem to need any tricks to keep it that way. He does, however, have a slight limp.

"His strut's not exactly factory-fresh either," Lucy whispers, quietly enough for only Rufus to hear.

"New hip," Rufus says.

Lucy nods.

"Sports model," Rufus adds.

Lucy hadn't asked. She nods again.

“Keith had it done in Bangkok. They have to cut half your ass open to do it.”

Lucy really didn’t want to know that much.

“It’s cheaper there. Apparently his insurance only covers standard hips.”

Another piece of information Lucy hadn’t asked for.

She adds a small enough-already gesture to her nodding.

“Didn’t go completely smoothly, though. Complications. Don’t ask me what.”^[L]^[SEP]“I’m not asking.”

Roger is back now and joins Keith and Rain. Then Rufus makes his way over to the group as well.

Werner Vogelberg takes a while to get there, but eventually Crrowl is more or less complete.

Keith turns to Roger. “Say something.”

“Okay, listen up. First night back. It’s been a while. But CRROWL IS BACK ON THE ROAD! ... Hang on. Where’s Micky?”

That sounded a little staged. Everyone in the room had already noticed that Micky wasn’t there.

“TOBY!” Roger yells.

Toby bursts into the room.^[L]^[SEP]“What am I supposed to do? Micky’s dressing room is locked and he won’t open the door.”

Lucy isn’t going to get a better chance to slip away. She edges along the wall and towards a corridor. As luck would have it, the ladies’ is directly opposite Micky’s dressing room. Lucy has barely closed the door when she hears footsteps in the corridor. Two men breathing heavily, two pairs of boots, then knocking on Micky’s door.

“Micky, it’s me. Open up, Micky ... Shit, he’s not answering.”

“Let me.”

Is that Rain or Keith? It definitely isn’t Roger or Rufus. Lucy hears another one, two, three knocks and several Micky!s and hardly dares to breathe.

(...)

Lucy is sitting on the lid with her feet pressed against the cubicle wall. Two people are still hammering like lunatics on Micky's dressing-room door. At least Lucy has worked out—*It's me, Keith. Say something too, Toby!* – that they are Keith and Toby. Now the knocking is getting weaker and less frequent.

“So what do we do now? We've only got five minutes.”

That must be Toby. The bald little busybody whose actual function Lucy still hasn't figured out. But there are guys like that everywhere. Nobody knows what they're for. They're just there.

“What do you mean, what do we do now?” Okay, that must be Keith.

“We do what we always do. Get changed.”

“Fuck you!” So that's definitely Toby. “We talked about this. Either I'm everybody's fucking gofer or I'm in the band. I mean it. I want the recognition I deserve.”

Keith sounds contrite now.

“You're absolutely right. I hadn't thought about that.”

Toby is nowhere near done.

“How many times have I filled in? And on *Love to Death* I rerecorded several of Micky's parts. No credit.”

Keith sounds incredibly contrite now.

“I know. And that was really, really nice of you. You know what there ought to be? Some kind of honorary membership. Did you know the Stones had an honorary member? I read that somewhere. Piano player. Whenever you hear piano on a Stones song, that's him. Did it for twenty, thirty years. Never complained. And nobody has a fucking clue what his name was. The spotlight isn't for everyone.”

“Fuck the Stones.”

“Says Toby the lightbulb changer. Fine. Understood. Got it. I’m with you.”

And suddenly every trace of contrition disappears from Keith’s voice, and if this were some guess-the-sound game, Lucy would bet he has Toby by the collar and pinned against the door.

“You’re going out there. That’s what’s happening.”

“And if I don’t?” Toby croaks.

“Then I’ll punch you in the face,” Keith hisses. His fist is probably somewhere close to Toby’s face right now. “I’ll punch you in the face till you smile. Then I’ll throw you out and you’ll be blacklisted. Don’t kid yourself that there’s no such thing. One or two phone calls – you know how small this business is and how much people talk. Toby? Nah, he’s out at Crrowl. Heard he got out of line, can’t handle his drugs, causes trouble. And that’s it. Done.”

Toby makes one last attempt.

“That’s the thanks I get? After everything I’ve done for you?”

“Ancient history. Snow from three winters ago. You should be grateful we’ve carried you this far. So what’s it going to be?”

“You’re such a fucking asshole.” Toby has given up.

“And you’re a fucking loser. And losers don’t play in bands. Come on. And put on a wig – or at least a hat. Nobody wants to see their reflections in your bald head.”

Lucy hears the two of them move away and switches off the recorder on her phone.

She waits another moment before feeling her way back towards the backstage area. By the time Lucy edges back into the corridor, the boys of the band are forming a circle. Roger has changed out of the holey T-shirt and into a black shirt.

“Right, that’s it. Crrowl on three ... One, two, three...”

“Crrrrrowl,” the others yell, then disappear towards the stage.

Lucy follows at a distance and stops just out of sight in the wings. Roger is the last to go on. He gives the crowd a wave and picks up a microphone.

“Tere õhtust, Eesti ... Good evening, Estonia. And now comes ze moment we all are waiting vor zince so long. THIS ... IS ... CRRRRRRRRROOOOWL!”

The crowd erupts, but the roar is swallowed by a guitar chord as loud as a plane taking off. Rain has started the show. A split second later, the others come in. The first song is nothing more than off-the-rack rock 'n' roll, obviously there to warm up the room. What follows is applause, cheering, shouting and, as far as Lucy is concerned, finger-sized pastry rolls filled with minced meat, spinach or mushrooms. Later, she discovers little potato pancakes and meatballs with lingonberry jam. She could get used to this if it weren't for all the music. Quite possibly the wall of guitars gets certain people seriously worked up and Rain's cutting high notes may delight some ears instead of hurting them. Maybe Werner Vogelberg's wizardry on the drums transports one or two people straight back to their youth in the nineties. But twenty minutes in, Lucy still hasn't heard a single note that made it anywhere near her heart. No chord progression that grabs her, no solo that doesn't seem to be screaming: *Jesus, look at me, all sensual and dark and mysterious and dangerous again.*

Lucy heads towards the stage. A narrow flight of steps leads down into the auditorium, where a security guy gives her a friendly nod of recognition. She has heard the song Ccrowl are playing now before, but this time there is something pleasantly familiar about it. It's called *You're Not the Only One* and, according to Wikipedia, it comes from their first record. That's right: record. LP. Vinyl before vinyl was cool again. The thing with the needle and thirty-three revolutions. Professional lighting bathes the five figures alternately in shifting blue and reddish light. It's so soft even an ogre with facial paralysis would look good in it. Toby is going full throttle while Rain disappears into the nirvana of his solo. Werner Vogelberg keeps things in order, and Keith bounces around the stage in fake ecstasy, dry-humping the crowd.

Lucy heads back. She's seen enough.

When she returns to the backstage area, Roger is waiting for her.

"That's it, babe. That's rock 'n' roll."

"I've got goosebumps. ... Let's talk."

"Good idea. Got a question."

They grab a couple of beers and sit down on the sofa.

"Shoot."

"And you get away with that?"

Roger can't give her his full attention. He also has to keep tapping away at his laptop.

"What do you mean?"

"Just swapping out the guitarist one minute before the show."

"No problem. There are six thousand people out there. Crowl are still seriously big here. Five and a half thousand of those six thousand are young, sweaty, testosterone-driven men. They've been so drunk for hours they can barely stand. Then you've got, say, four hundred women. Hard to believe, I know, but there are women who are just as tattooed, just as crazy and, fortunately, just as drunk. Plus a few girlfriends who only came along to be nice. Micky not being there is almost beside the point."

Lucy takes a sip of her beer.

"Speaking of Micky. Shouldn't we maybe check how he's doing?"

"He's fine. He's always fine."

"Well, then."

It takes Lucy's question another song and a half to sink in. But eventually it does.

"Ah, shit ... I'll go check."

"I'm coming with you."

Roger has found a metal bar. The lock gives way quickly.

For a long time afterwards, Lucy will wonder how fast the nausea came. And how she managed to keep it all down.

Micky, or what is left of him, is lying on the worn carpet. He lived for a few moments after the bullet tore through his head. Long enough to piss himself, long enough for the gun to slip from his hand and his body to slide out of an armchair upholstered in the familiar brown faux leather. But not long enough to finish any thoughts. There's too much of his brain scattered around him. Lucy has no idea what to say, but an overwhelming need to say something.

"Oh God."

Roger says nothing. After giving his eyes a thorough rub, he finds his voice again.

"Wouldn't have thought it ... You know, he's died so many times, after a while you start thinking he'll live forever."

"I'm going to be sick."

Roger seems to think it best if they talk past each other.

"Did you know he once got electrocuted? Right in the middle of Rain's twenty-minute solo. I was back at the sound desk ... Rain gets to the climax, drops to his knees, Micky's standing over him. And suddenly this bolt shoots out of one of the lights and hits Micky. Thirty thousand people go completely fucking nuts."

Lucy successfully concentrates on not throwing up. Roger continues.

"He was in a coma. More than seven weeks. Doctors said he'd never be the same again. Three weeks after he woke up, he played a festival."

Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out ...

"Shouldn't we at least get a doctor?"

"A doctor? ... Look at him."

Roger is right. Micky is dead. You don't get any deader.

"Okay. Forget it."

Strangely, it doesn't take Lucy long to get a grip on the situation. She looks at the door. It was locked from the inside. She looks at the windows: narrow transom windows that apparently haven't been opened in years. Roger is silent, but Lucy knows by now that his thoughts are racing. She wonders where his mind has gone now.

"So what do we do?"

"That's what I keep thinking about. What we're supposed to do now. I keep trying to think and I always end up in the same place: I have no idea what to do."

"How about calling the police? Just as a starting point."

"I got that far too. But the tour's only just started. If we call the cops, they'll keep us here. Take our passports. God knows for how long."

"A person died here."

Roger looks her straight in the eyes.

"Because he had to play Russian roulette while completely off his face. With a Colt Peacemaker he bought on the US tour in '98."

"You knew he had a gun?"

"Everybody knew."

Lucy says nothing. She had expected a lot: bad music, bad drugs, bad jokes, poor hygiene, men getting handsy and the possible deployment of her pepper spray. What she hadn't expected was having to make a decision like this less than three hours in.

"I don't know."

"Of course you don't." There is genuine, credible understanding in Roger's voice. "You've got nothing to lose. But if we're not at the next gig tomorrow, that's it for Crrowl. We took out a fucking loan."

Lucy swallows. But what can happen to her, really? She had nothing to do with Micky's departure and, if necessary, she can deny a lot of things. And prisons in the Baltics are probably better than their reputation.

"A fucking ... loan?" Lucy asks.

"Oh yeah ..." Roger says. "Fucking massive."

Lucy exhales.

"You know what? Fuck it. If this gets out, I'll never work in the business again, but at least I'll always have a story to tell ... What are you going to do?"

"Something without the police. I just don't know what yet."

Lucy takes a deep breath, and then exhales again. Slowly, she's getting better at this breathing thing.

"I kind of feel sorry for him."

"Me too. Come on. We need to get out of here."

They close the door carefully. No one is in the corridor. Back in the backstage area, Roger opens a beer and starts pouring. Maybe it helps him think. And Lucy, being Lucy, sees an opening.

"Cooler than being cool – ice-cold."

"The beer?"

"No. You."

Roger pours some more.

"Well, to be honest, this isn't my first dead body in the rock 'n' roll business."

Okay. We're in. Don't fuck it up now. Stay ice-cold and hide the burning curiosity behind a muttered *Sure, sure, safe*. Then put on a face as if Roger has just told her something boring. That he collects electric guitars or once had an ulcer.

Unfortunately, Roger seems prepared to leave it there. Lucy has to push.

"Ross?"

Suddenly it goes quiet. Less than thirty metres away, a rock band is firing 110 decibels at six thousand innocent people, and yet here, where Roger and Lucy are facing each other across a buffet table, the silence is uncomfortable. Roger isn't just looking at Lucy. He's scanning her like hand luggage. Suspicion doesn't begin to cover it. Eventually he relaxes again. Lucy is nothing more than some social-media chick asking stupid questions. She can't be anything more. She couldn't be.

"Danny Krohl," Roger says.

"Danny Krohl?"

"Danny Krohl. The asshole who gave the band its name. The guy who wrote the song they just played. *You're Not the Only One*. I was there when they found him."

Lucy plays dumb. She's quite good at that.

"Sure. Danny Krohl. *You're Not the Only One*."

"Learn the band history."

"I'm working on it. I got a little distracted just now."

Roger's mind is elsewhere again.

"We have to get Micky back to the hotel ... somehow. That buys us time. There are just too many people here."

Lucy lets him talk. Hotel, buying time ... Roger probably knows what he's doing.

"I don't even know how I'm going to tell the band."

He heads towards the stage. Probably to think things through. Lucy follows him. There's one more question she needs to ask.

"Wait. What if it wasn't an accident?"

Roger spins around.

"What else would it be?"

"Right now, all we know is that he's dead. We don't know how it happened."

“It was an accident,” Roger says firmly. “Who’d be stupid enough to kill Micky?”