

THE SOUND OF WATER

Stephen Faulds 2014





I noticed them in Amsterdam. They walked to the side of the group and seemed to studiously ignore the tour guide. Walking through the Red Light District didn't amuse them the way it did everyone else. They scowled at the Condomeries and the Koffee Shops. I noticed they stared at some of the girls, which we were asked not to do. I saw one girl pull a horrible face and put up two fingers to them. I am not sure what initiated that reaction.



I stopped at a little Dutch Pub by a canal on the way back to the ship. It was dark inside until your eyes adjusted. The low, yellow light made the big wooden beams shine. They came in after I had ordered a pot of beer. They sat in one of the darker corners and ordered spirits.

Everyone else on the tour acknowledged each other or stopped for chats as they made their way through the city, sharing discoveries and showing each other the bargains and expensive indulgences they had purchased.

I felt the urge to go over and just ask how they were enjoying Amsterdam but there was a tangible barrier in their body language and lack of eye contact. At one point I noticed one of them staring at me but he looked away as soon as I saw him.

When I was returning to the ship I went under the main bridge into Central Station. A train crashed overhead with a rhythmic, deafening sound. I thought I heard a shout and looked back. They were just a few metres behind me.

Back on the ship, I sat in my cabin with the big sliding glass window down, listening to the water lap between the hull and the pier. There is something reassuring about the sound of water. At home in the summer, I kayak most weekends. I love to paddle to quiet stretches of the river where I can hear the water streaming against the sides of the kayak.

During the Captain's briefing they were sitting to the side of the Lounge. Unlike most of the passengers they didn't look enthusiastic. They struck me as a group who had not chosen each other's company, an unfortunate circumstance for a three-week cruise. When the briefing was over, one of them approached the Captain. He spoke quietly in the Captain's native Russian. The Captain seemed studious in his lack of reaction.

The man returned to his group and they left the room. The Captain was somewhat effusive with laughter in his next conversation as if he was shaking off what had just been said to him. The group did not appear at dinner, or at least I didn't see them.

Later, I was surprised to see one of them emerge from the cabin next to mine. He went to the cabin opposite so obviously the other two were in there.

In Cologne the ship docked close to the centre of the city and most passengers went ashore for a tour of the City. I opted for a leisurely stroll around the cobblestone streets.



Feeling a bit like a tourist, I went into the Gothic Cathedral. The massive stained glass works were quite stunning. I watched the Faithful take the lit candles and place them at the chapel altar. It always bemuses me that people find religious rituals so comforting. To me they are no more significant than the daily rituals of brushing your teeth and hanging up your clothes. I'm sure the great religious art works could have been created with craftsmanship rather than faith.

The bustle of activity in the cathedral was anything but religious. Apart from the few kneeling quietly in the chapel, there were tour guides talking to large groups; people taking photographs and videos; there was even someone allowing their children to squeal into the echoing cavern of the nave. It struck me as ironic when I took out my water bottle for a swig and a Priest walked up to tell me, at first in German, then in English that I should not drink inside a church. Don't they all drink wine here on Sundays?



I found a Lowenbrau Pub and ordered a glass of the local Kolsch beer. Someone had told me that if you empty your glass in a German Pub and don't place a coaster over the top, it will be refilled without warning. When I finished my glass I waited. The waiter destroyed the myth by stopping to ask me if I would like another beer.

'Are you enjoying your beer?' I looked up. It was one of my fellow passengers. I assured him I was.

'Is the tour finished?'

'Yes.'

'How was it?'

'Very interesting. The guide was very informative.' I had seen her. She was also very attractive. A classic young Frauline I think.

'I'll see you back at the ship. Don't forget, we leave at five.'

I find it quite annoying how everyone on the cruise keeps repeating information to each other. I'm sure they just do it to reassure themselves that they know what is going on.

I had another beer under the alfresco umbrella of a Pub in a narrow, cobbled street. The legendary insularity of Germans was another myth that fell in my estimation. The service was courteous and the staff was happy to discuss the styles of beer they sold.



Walking back to the ship, I was confident of my bearings so I went down a narrow street to explore the ambience. Looking up through the narrow skyline I could see an ornate fish hanging from an olde world street lamp. Beyond it loomed a church or cathedral. I stopped to consider the symbolism. Then I stepped back to the corner and realized the fish was attached to a Pub call *Sunner Im Walfisch*. I often read too much into things.

Back at the ship it was afternoon teatime. I sat with Karen, a woman of about sixty who was travelling by herself. She had told me that since her husband died of a heart attack she had been on two cruises a year and was going to enjoy life until the money ran out or she was 'called to join' her husband. We helped ourselves to cucumber sandwiches and were served tea.

'The Ukrainians are taking their sandwiches to their cabin.' I looked up to see them with little napkin parcels and cups.

'They're Ukrainians are they?'

'Unsociable lot.'

I couldn't disagree but I thought it was unfair. If they didn't speak English they would find it hard to mix with other passengers.

The wine at dinner was French, a grape I had never heard of. It doesn't compare to the fruity, tannin rich Australian reds but it went well with the fish and a cheese platter. I think French wine is made for lunch time drinkers. In Australia we like something full bodied to drink with dinner.

A couple at the table had discovered that the Ukrainians were apparently seen creating a scene at a Jewish jewelry shop. They didn't know what it was about but the Proprietor was quite angry.



I went up on deck at first light the next morning because we were promised our first views of castles. Apparently those high up above towns were not actually castles built as residences but forts designed for defense. The first one I saw just after dawn was definitely a fort. It was a sombre brown structure with numerous towers and long walls where I imagined archers could stand.

'You know life in those things wouldn't have been very pleasant.' I turned to see a tall American named Walter whom I'd met the day before. 'Medieval life is portrayed as romantic but can you image living in one of those – cold stone walls and floors, no running water or sanitation? To turn these things into hotels they have to do massive renovations.'

'I imagine they didn't know any different in the middle ages.'

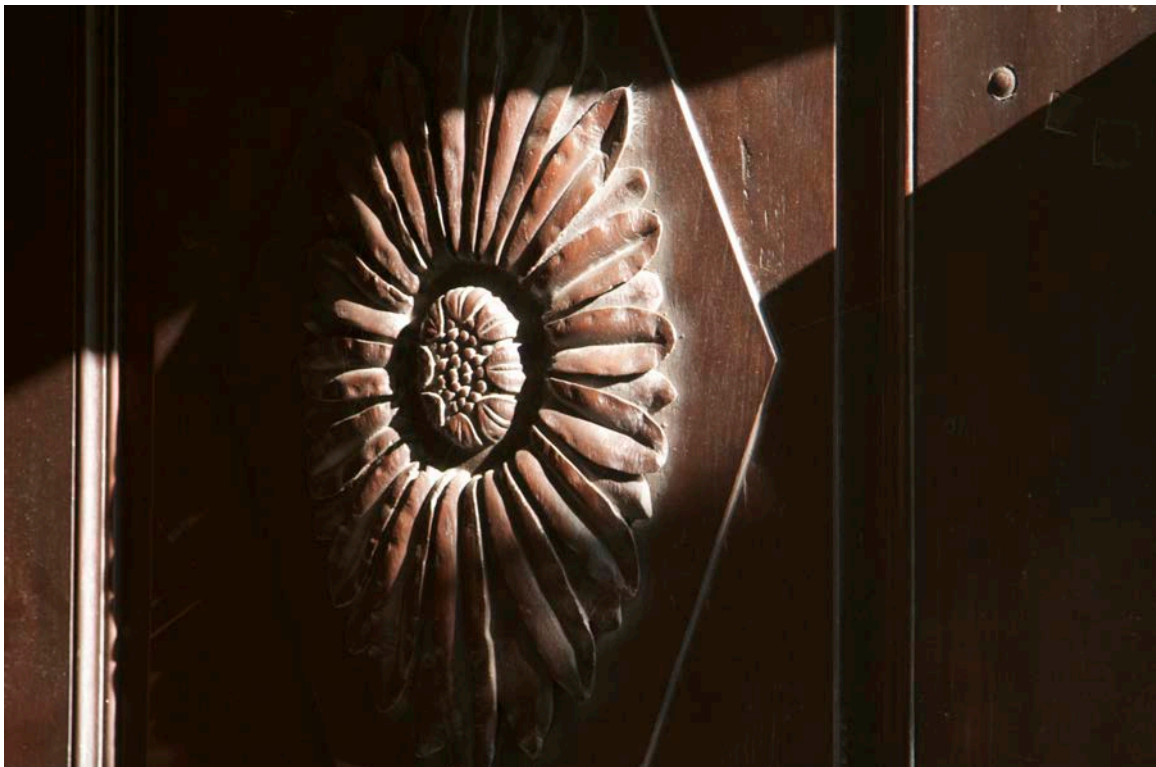
'The life expectancy was about thirty.'

'That young?'

'Oh yeah.'

Walter proceeded to give me an unsolicited potted history of medieval Europe. I had an uncharitable thought that he could get off the ship and take a job as a tour guide. I managed to escape when a Canadian couple picked up on something he said and I made my way down to stern deck for a swim.

Mildenberg is a pretty town. The cobblestone street leading up toward the castle on the hillside is lined with wood frame buildings and flowering window boxes. I wandered past the tourist shops to find a small Pub selling local wheat beer. It had been raining. The waiter squeegeed water from the wooden tables and benches. I sat on my folded poncho and waited for my beer. It was cloudy with sweet hops. I wondered why it was named after Faust who made a pact with the Devil.



Departure time was delayed because a passenger had failed to hand in his boarding card. Several announcements failed to locate the passenger, a Mr Ian Prendergast and a final call informed all and sundry that he would be responsible for traveling to our next port of call if he wished to rejoin the ship.

There was a lot of discussion and conjecture at dinner. I heard someone who seemed to know Mr Prendergast say that he was the kind of person who would lose track of time and place and that he would have the nous to catch a train to the next port of call and rejoin the ship. Unfortunately that was Wertheim, which was not far away and where we would stay only a couple of hours. He would probably have to go on to Wurzburg.

In Wertheim I looked for the little brass plaques in the cobblestones I had been told about. They had the names and places of death for the Jews who had lived in each house or above each shop. Like many German towns there were no living Jews. The German people have embraced their guilt. It is illegal to show Nazi symbols or raise the Nazi salute here.



When we arrived in Wurzburg there was no sign of Mr Prendergast. An hour after we docked some policemen came aboard. An announcement requested anyone who knew him or had spoken to him attend an interview with the police. He had been found dead in a back street of Mildenberg.

The news went around the ship like a ricochet. Everyone of course had an opinion. His demise was attributed variously to a drug deal gone wrong, a black market money sale, a visit to a brothel, a drunken argument in a bar and a random mugging.

I was most interested in the opinion of the man who seemed to know him. His name, I learned was Randell Klimt. Naturally everyone wanted to talk to him. I found him alone on the sun deck, late in the afternoon.

'It was a shock to learn about your friend,' I said.

Klimt responded sharply. 'He was not my friend.'

'You met him here on the ship?'

'Only days ago. I told the Police.'

'How do you think he died?'

'The Police told me it was a blow to the head. Several in fact.'

'Was there any significance to the street?'

'Just a street, little frequented at night, which is when he died.'

'That means he had already missed boat when he was killed.'

'What is your point?'

'His death wasn't the reason he didn't return that day.'

'You are right.'

'The reason is probably something we will never know.'

'Probably never.'

I pondered Klimt's reticence. I was sure he knew more than he was revealing. I had seen him talking to Prendergast on the first day of the cruise and my impression was that they were developing a friendship.

When we reached Wertheim the Police came aboard again. This time they just wanted to interview Klimt. They took him to the Captain's cabin. I waited in the main lounge, hoping to see what developed. When he came through the foyer on the way to his own cabin he looked agitated.

I collected my day pack and my boarding pass and headed into Wertheim. The guided tour had already left. I was content to wander around by myself. Guided tours often give you an interesting perspective, especially when they describe what life was like in medieval times but after a few tours you get information overload.

One of my fellow passengers was a forty something woman called Karen who wore a lot of make up and tight slacks. She had told me she was recently, acrimoniously divorced. She hinted it had been to her financial advantage and she was consoling herself traveling around the world on the money her ex-husband had made in real estate. I heard her tell another woman she was now looking for love rather than money. I also heard her say in a sotto voice she would like someone at least ten years younger than herself. That made me a little nervous.

'Well hello there.' She hurried across the cobble stones looking slightly precarious in a way that was designed to attract attention. 'Are you just wandering, like me?' she asked.

'Yeah. I didn't feel like a tour this morning.'

'Isn't that the truth? It's much more exciting to explore on your own. Have you found anything interesting?'

'Not so far.' I hoped she understood the implication included herself.

'Why don't we explore together?' she said. It was a direct question that required a clear response. Damn. I shrugged.

'Okay.'

She was attracted to gift and souvenir shops. At one, she insisted on buying me a hip flask with a coat of arms. A useless souvenir for someone who doesn't drink spirits.

We stopped for lunch at an alfresco Pub. We ordered beers.

'I don't actually know your name,' I said.

'Penelope.'

'I'm Peter.'

'Lovely to meet you Peter,' she said, holding out her hand. Her handshake was like a little caress. I realized I was probably going to be amenable to seduction.

We spent the afternoon wandering the town. Penelope's body language became increasingly intimate. She touched my arm or hand on any pretext and eventually I found we were walking hand in hand. When we sat at a little table in the corner of a coffee shop she stroked my leg with her foot. Dinner tonight was going to be a simple ritual.

As we boarded the ship and we crossed the lobby to hand in our boarding passes. There was no one in attendance.

'We'll have to hand them in later, I guess.'

'You know that's one thing I don't like about this ship. The security doesn't seem very good,' Penelope said.

'Anyone could walk on board.'

'I haven't thought about it. I suppose you're right.'

'Well, I'm going to freshen up for dinner. Would you call at my cabin?'

'Okay.'

When she had gone I realized I didn't know her cabin number. I went to mine and showered.

I waited in the lobby. Fifteen minutes. I hadn't expected to be stood up. I went to reception.

'The lady I came on board with, have you seen her?' Negative. I asked what her room number was and realized immediately it was considered an inappropriate question. 'Don't worry.'

I went in to dinner and scanned the dining room between courses. Obviously she had changed her mind and couldn't even tell me to my face. As I was leaving the dining room, I saw some people I had seen talking to Penelope several times. On an impulse I steered in their direction.

'Have you seen Penelope this evening?'

They were surprised by the question then said they hadn't.

'It's just that she said she would meet me for dinner?'

This didn't seem to surprise them.

'I don't think she is back on board. We knocked on her door as we came to dinner. She didn't answer.'

'Oh she's definitely on board,' I said. 'She came on with me.' I grimaced inwardly, hoping they didn't detect any double entendre.

'Well, maybe she went ashore again.'

'I guess so.'

I dismissed the matter and consoled myself with the fact that I wasn't particularly attracted to Penelope. I was just being opportunistic.

I heard some earnest conversation in the lobby and the cabin passageway later in the evening just before the ship left port but couldn't make out what it was about.

The next morning at breakfast one of Penelope's friends approached me looking very earnest.

'Penelope missed the ship last night. Are you sure she came aboard with you?'

'Yes. It was about five thirty.'

'Well they checked her cabin last night and we sailed without her. She isn't answering her phone.'

In Wurzburg we had the Police on board again. I saw Penelope's friends go forward voluntarily to be interviewed. I was surprised to see they summoned Klimt. Perhaps it was just a coincidence that he had talked to her like I had. I wondered if his conversation had ended up the way mine would have.

I wasn't really surprised when the Police called me to the interview room. No doubt Penelope's friends had mentioned my contact with her. I didn't feel I had much to tell them. They grilled me on what she had done ashore, whether she had spoken to anyone else. They were also interested in the precise time of our return to the ship. I told them what was the simple truth. We had gone to our respective cabins at about six thirty - I knew that because I remember it was about half an hour before dinner at seven. We had arranged to meet for dinner but Penelope didn't appear before I left the dining room at about seven forty five.

They went through their questions a second time and uncovered a fact I hadn't thought to mention, that there had been no one at reception to collect our boarding passes. This interested them greatly. I imagine it led to a closer interrogation of reception staff. I felt like I was ratting on them for being slack at their jobs.

By now I was beginning to develop a conspiracy theory of my own. It centred on Klimt. He had to be connected to both murders in some way - because now I presumed Penelope had met such a fate. I conjectured that he was involved in something illicit, some kind of trade along the cruise route. I didn't think he was responsible for the murders. Something was going wrong, something out of his control.

Penelope's friends told me the police were treating her disappearance as a homicide. They apparently had some evidence to this effect but were not revealing it to anyone. I tried several times to talk to Klimt but he was evasive and became a virtual recluse in his cabin. One of the ship staff indiscreetly told me that he was puzzled by the fact that Klimt was paying for meals to be delivered to his room when all dining room meals were included in the fare.

I had been looking forward to Bamberg. Amongst some beer drinkers it is considered the Beer Capital of the world. I particularly wanted to taste the famous smoky beer.



It wasn't hard to find the Tavern Schlenkerla where this delicacy originated when someone burned the malt and didn't want to waste a whole brew. It was a typical Bavarian Pub with a low beamed ceiling and big wooden benches for the patrons.

A German once told me that 'In Germany we queue for beer. It's what we do'. That's literally what happens in Tavern Schlenkerla. It is quite spacious with lots a seating and an adjacent eating servery but to get a pint of the famous black beer you

have to queue at a tiny little window where it is poured from a small wooden barrel. The queue went out to the street and moved slowly. When the barrel ran dry the queue waited until someone wheeled another one up from the cellar. With your pint you got a red plastic token to redeem the two euro deposit on your glass, twice the cost of the drink.

Some people can't stand it - others say it is an acquired taste. I loved it at first gulp. I endured the queue two more times to savour it. Something else they say in Germany - Beer isn't alcohol, it's food. By the time I left the Tavern I was well nourished. It might be food but on an empty stomach it does go to your head.

It seemed quite bizarre after maybe an hour imbibing, as I stepped out onto the street, I bumped into one of the Ukrainians.

He didn't seem to recognize me until I said hello and then he looked at me more closely and asked abruptly 'You are trying the beer?'

'Yes,' I said.

'It is good?'

'Yes. I recommend it.'

'That is good,' he said. He nodded and walked on. I watched to see if he was with his friends but he seemed to be alone. I was bemused by the interaction. It was comparatively friendly, deliberately so.

I wandered through the town. I must have had a tipsy grin on my face because everyone seemed to smile at me. I stopped at a souvenir shop and inspected a shelf of beer steins. A rather attractive Fraulein asked me if I needed help and she talked to me about the tradition of steins. She told me the hinged lids were invented in the Middle Ages to prevent fleas carrying the Black Plague from getting into the beer.

'Do you like Bamberg?' she asked.

'Yes. It seems to be a very lively place. I like the beer.'

'This is your first day?'

'Yes.'

'At night will be very lively and lots of beer. This area has many breweries and bars. We have over thirty different beers made here, in the city.'

'That's impressive. I'd love to try a few more of them but my ship sails to Nuremberg tonight.'

'That is too bad.' I couldn't help but agree especially with the smile she gave me as I walked away.

Back at the ship I went to the sun deck to enjoy my last view of Bamberg with something of a resolve to return to this town of good cheer.

'Guten Aben.' An American accent made the greeting ironic. It was an overweight American in his forties I hadn't previously spoken to. I knew his name was Mike. I had noticed him being obnoxiously pedantic about tour itinerary details with the Tour Manager. 'Nice view.'

'Great city,' I said as he seated himself voluminously in the deck chair next to mine. Some sort of joke about the Titanic might work here, I thought.

'Oh it's a great city all right. I lived here for eighteen months.'

'Is that so?'

'I worked for the Consular Agency here out of the American Embassy in Berlin.'

'That would be interesting.'

'You better believe it. That was near the end of the Cold War. Before the Wall came down.'

Like a true diplomat, he veered the conversation into small talk with the practiced art of avoiding indiscreet revelations of consular gossip that might be linked to national security.

'Haven't seen that friend of yours around much.' My blank look prompted him to elucidate. 'What his name? Klint?'

'You mean Klimt? He's not exactly a friend of mind.'

'Keeps to himself since Wertheim.' I mentally credited him with acute powers of observation. I guess it goes with Consular work. 'Can't help thinking he's got something to hide.'

'The Police have interviewed him about Prendergast's disappearance.'

'And the murder.'

'Murder?'

'That blonde. She was murdered in Wortheim.'

'I think it was suspected.'

'German email contact of mine told me someone identified as a blonde tourist was found with her throat cut in a hotel room. That was her all right.'

'Have the Police charged anyone?'

'Not to date. Seems the hotel room wasn't actually booked by anyone. There were a dozen other people staying there. The room may have been left unlocked by domestic staff.'

'Have you told anyone else on board?'

'Oh sure.' I wondered if Klimt had heard.

'Do you have any theories about all of this, Mike?'

'Someone's mixed up with the local Mafia for sure. Some kind of wheeling and dealing gone wrong. I'd say the blonde was in the wrong place at the wrong time.'



Nuremberg. Home of the Zeppelin Field where the excesses of Hitler still echo, where the sounds of the Nazi Rallies drowned out even Wagner. I skipped the organized tour and went straight to the rally ground. En route, I was surprised to see how much of the old city has been restored since the Allied bombings of World War II.

The stadium looks suitably unkempt. The Nazi symbols have gone. Only the wind can recall the strident voices that once rang out here. Big vans circle in front of the high dais, insensitive to the historical drama of the place. They are bringing in equipment for some event, perhaps a rock concert or a car race. That's what its main function is now. It is as if noise is needed to erase the echoes of history.

I spent over an hour in the Documentation Centre, retracing the history of Hitler's rise to power, the Holocaust, the Nazi defeat and the trials. At the end of the exhibit I walked out onto the platform that overlooks the empty shell of Hitler's Colosseum. There are cars parked in the centre and a small group of people are training dogs on littered ground and makeshift platforms. There has been no attempt to maintain or develop the space once envisioned as the centre of a Nazi-ruled world.

I make my way back through the centre of the city and find an Irish Pub where a young German barmaid tells me the picturesque old stone building was once a Cloisters then a stable. This after pouring a fine Guinness.

I return to the ship for lunch and Mike, the American sits next to me with an overflowing plate of food he has shoveled from the buffet.

'Well, new developments my friend.'

'What's that?'

'One of the Ukrainians has been arrested by the local constabulary. They took him away just before the tour this morning.'

'Which one?'

'The little nuggety one.' It was not the one I had encountered at the smoky beer pub. I didn't know why I should be relieved to learn that.

That evening the Captain attended the tour briefing to make a special announcement. He said he wished to inform us that a passenger had indeed been arrested by the Nuremberg Police. No information about the arrest was available except that it was part of an ongoing investigation at a number of locations in Germany and need not be construed as having particular relevance to the population of the cruise.

I was sitting next to Mike and his comment was directed at me. 'Yeah, so why is our friend Klimt not here? Skulking in his cabin, I'm sure. He knows more about this than any of us.' I didn't believe so. I resolved to confront Klimt, even if it meant knocking on his cabin door until he was forced to answer.

He answered the door, looking worried.

'You weren't at the briefing. I wondered if you'd heard the news.'

'What news?'

'One of the Ukrainians has been arrested.'

'It is nothing to do with me. Why do you think it concerns me?' His tone was become shrill.

'I'm not saying that. I just thought ...'

'I want to be left alone.'

'I need to know something.'

'What? I don't know anything.'

'What are you afraid of? Something is going on and you know enough to be afraid. What is it? Are you in danger?'

'I am in danger if people keep bringing me into this.'

'Danger from whom? Two people have been murdered. Is this ship safe for anyone?'

'It is safe if you mind your own business.'

'Is the danger from someone on board?'

'No ... Yes ... It might be. I don't know.'

I knew I was not going to get any more from him now. I told him if he needed help to let me know. I was not at all sure what kind of help that might be. It seemed to me that someone had threatened him. Perhaps he had simply been an unwitting witness to something.

We were now sailing through a canal that connects the Main River to the Danube. I decided to follow the tour itinerary and go with the main group into Weltenburg then take the sightseeing ferry through the Danube Gorge to meet our ship further on. I wondered if Klimt would take the option to simply stay on the ship all day as it went through a series of locks to the higher Danube water.

Weltenburg was a tourist delight. The Abbey has a statue of St George on horseback towering over the altar and amazing artwork on the walls and ceilings. A German Guide with a big, booming voice talked on and on about the history of the building until finally we were taken to a restaurant decorated with passable copies of Impressionist paintings. Here we were served big, salty pretzels and tall glasses of Bock. It was only ten o'clock in the morning but the beer went down well, knowing it

had been brewed in the monastery since 1050 and is actually drunk by the Monks and the Abbott himself.



Suitably cheered, we made our way down into the Danube Gorge and a ferry with a bar serving bottles of the Bock for a mere one euro. The party went on as we sailed past the tall cliffs and craned our necks to see the steel rings in the rock walls that punt masters once used to pull their loads of cargo upstream. The sounds of the water against the ferry hull seemed to whisper stories of a river life that was long gone.

As we were leaving the ferry to board a bus that would take us to our ship, I overheard our Tour Manager talking to the one of the ferry crew. I am sure she was talking about Klimt when she said 'We think he's a bit of a Jonah. We don't know what will happen next.'

As we boarded the bus I surreptitiously watched the other passengers. They were a typical tourist group of all shapes and sizes, mostly middle aged or older, the kind of people who are content to be led around, spoon fed culture and history and placed in front of sumptuous buffets three times a day. I couldn't imagine any of them being part of any further subterfuge or mysterious murders.

On the way into lunch, I noticed Mike quizzing Maya the Hungarian receptionist. She seemed to be reluctant or unable to tell him what he wanted to know. When he came into the dining room he made a beeline for me. He sat down and took the napkin from the table.

'More news my friend.' I was already curious.

'What now?'

'I couldn't get a lot of information out of Maya but there was some kind of

disturbance on board while we were ashore. The upshot is that one of the crew has left the ship. I think it was one of the cabin boys. Not sure if he went of his own accord or if he was kicked off.'

'I wonder if this is his home country.'

'Some of the cabin boys are Asian. I know mine is from Indonesia.'

'You wouldn't think an Asian would want to be left in the middle of Germany.'

'It just gets mysteriouiser and mysteriouiser.'

Perhaps, I thought. But perhaps it is completely unrelated to the other developments that were piquing our interest. Klimt had been on the ship all morning. Perhaps he knew something more.

The note read 'Nine PM on the sun deck.' It was from someone who had a key to my room or had arranged for it to be placed there. There had been two murders. I had no way of knowing who wanted to speak to me or why.

I decided I didn't know enough to be a target for murder. This person must need help. It must either be Klimt or someone I wasn't yet aware of. It wouldn't be Mike. He talked to me about his suspicions whenever and wherever he felt inclined.

I took the precaution of stopping to chat to Maya in reception and casually mentioning I was going up to the sun deck for some night air.

I looked cautiously around from the top of the stairway. At first there didn't seem to be anyone there. Then I saw a shadow in a deck chair near the mini golf course. I made my way along.

It was Mike. I was totally flummoxed. I had been expecting Klimt, a crew member or a stranger.

'Sit down my friend.' He had some kind of cocktail in his hand. It seemed bizarrely theatrical. What he said next was even more so. 'I am going to tell you something that may put your life in danger but I have no choice.'

It occurred to me that the choice was mine. I could leave without hearing it.

'There are two CIA Operatives on board. I can't tell you who they are. They are on a hunt and kill mission.'

'How do you know this?'

'I have contacts in the diplomatic service as you would realize. Sometimes they get wind of these things. The point is if they think anyone, including me suspects them they will not hesitate to kill. They have a high level of clearance.'

'You mean 007?'

'Something similar. I think Prendergast and the blonde were examples of what can happen to innocent bystanders.'

'What about Klimt?'

'He knows something but it seems the Operatives haven't realized.' That made sense. The question was now begging.

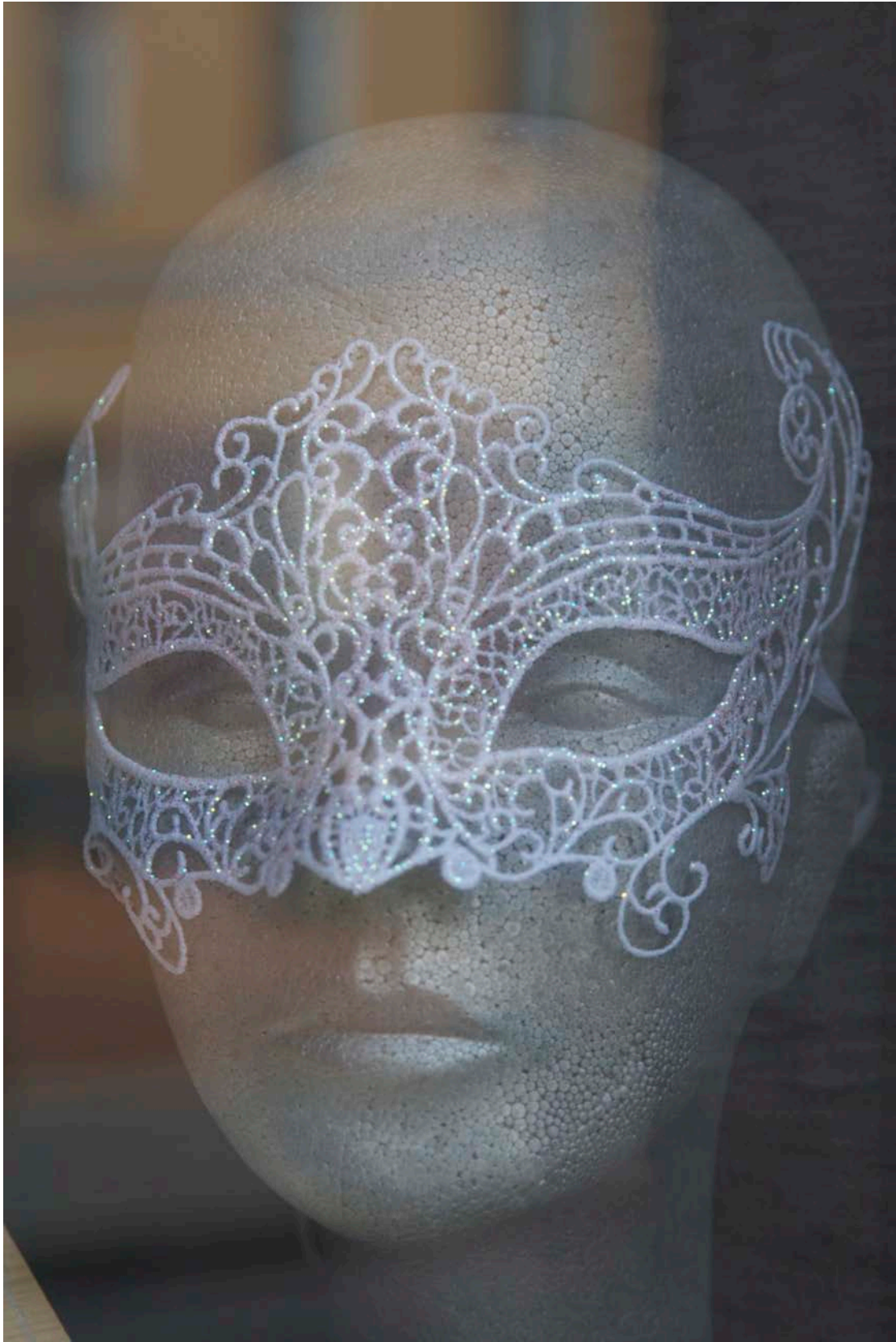
'Why are you telling me?'

'You're curious. I think it is just a matter of time before you find out too much and then it would be too late.' That also made sense.

'Now walls, my friend have ears. I am planning to disseminate some tactical impressions of ignorance. I will, in my usual loud Yank style be mouthing off some erroneous theories about recent events. I would like you to feign agreement if you are in the vicinity.'

Mike's description of himself as a loud Yank amused me. You had to trust someone who satirized himself.

In Regensburg I left the ship early and walked by myself. I had a vague intention of going to the Gothic Cathedral in the centre of town but I wandered through side streets catching glimpses of its ornate, towering spires and portal sculptures.



I stopped at a series of windows to look at some theatrical masks. The building was closed and there was no signage so I wasn't sure if it was a shop or a private residence. The pastel colours and glitter decorations gave them an ethereal beauty haunted with the lifeless eyes of expressionless mannikins.

Further down the street there was a vacant block surrounded by a high wire fence. Inside was an excavation site that had turned into an archeological dig. A medieval dwelling was emerging from the brown clay. When you scratch the surface here you find history.

Still skirting the city centre I found a picturesque alfresco jutting out from an old building into the cobblestone street. It was just after ten in the morning but there were Germans sitting drinking beer. I decided to join them. They sat studiously smoking and quaffing the dark bock while I watched the morning crowds beginning to grow.

An attractive young woman in jeans and a pink singlet approached. She had brown hair streaked with colours and wore jewelry that looked made her look like a sixties hippy. She placed a hat on the cobblestones signifying that she was a busker. She carried a baton adorned with feathers, which she waved about as she went into a seductive dance routine.

The other drinkers ignored her but passers-by paid as much attention as I did. I eventually felt compelled to throw some money into her hat, which prompted others to do the same. The girl flashed me a smile.

A certain stirring made me think of Penelope. I had been trying not to dwell on her fate. If I had gone to her cabin that evening instead of waiting for her in the dining room she might still be alive. I might also be taking less of an interest in this sensual street dancer.

The waiter was approaching. I remembered the local custom and placed a coaster on top of my empty glass, signifying that I wasn't waiting for a refill. If I sat here drinking much longer I would be entertaining too many disturbing thoughts.

I headed toward the Cathedral. It was awe inspiring in a way that only very old things can be. The intricate detail emanated from the minds of artists who must have been completely absorbed in the symbols and metaphors of their faith. There were a lot of people in the precinct around the cathedral, mostly tourists. I saw some locals admiring a vintage car parked in an adjacent street. If you live in the penumbra of great art I suppose you must become a little blasé about it.

Returning to my cabin I noticed the cabin next door was open. As I tagged my key card one of the Ukrainians emerged. He gave me a somewhat mechanical smile and spoke.

'You are enjoying Regensburg?'

'Yes. An interesting town.'

'Now we will be to Austria.'

'After Passau, I believe.'

'There will be many castle.'

'I'm looking forward to it.'

He nodded, 'Good day' and stepped back into his cabin.

I was bemused by his clumsy but deliberate attempt to be sociable. It was quite a development from the curt exchange we had outside the Tavern in Bamberg. I

mentioned it to Mike at dinner. It didn't seem to interest him. I said I was hoping the familiarity developed because I wanted to find out why his friend had been arrested. 'Probably just something that caught up with him from his own country. The Ukraine has extradition here I believe.'



Passau loomed in the early morning mist. Autumn was becoming more than a rumour. Again, I left the ship early and went my own way, not wishing to follow the guided tour. This was the last port of call in Germany. Tomorrow we would be in Austria.



At the corner of a large old building I noticed dated marks on the wall. They went as high as fifteen metres. Each one was dated, though not in chronological order. The oldest date was 1501, the most recent 2013. I stared at them until I realised they were the high water marks of floods.



At an intersection I saw an imposing building, painted freshly white. In large lettering on the wall were the words 'Scharfrichter Haus'. They were positioned across a silhouette of a hooded man holding an axe. It was the old Executioner's building, maintained in immaculate condition as a reminder of harsh justice in earlier times.

History is not always about art and culture. It is often about more troubled times. Today promised to be a walk in the Indian summer. The coolness of autumn had evaporated and by mid morning the air was warm. I bought a pastry and sat on the edge of a fountain enjoying the sunshine.

There was a tour group nearby and I could hear the Guide telling them how the Apothecary and the Bakery had been run by the same family for five hundred years. Generation after generation they had worked side by side in this street, through plagues, wars and depressions. I recalled a guide earlier on the cruise telling us how successful business people in the middle ages were often accused of witchcraft and publicly executed. The business would be taken over by competitors and if they were successful, they eventually met a similar fate. These two families were a study in endurance.

I went to the obligatory cathedral and marveled at the high stained glass panels and vaulted frescoes. This particular building was dedicated to St Stephen, the venerated martyr. It intrigues me how Christianity dwells so much on death. I suppose all religion is based on a fear of death and unknown fate beyond the grave.

That evening Mike kept his promise to obfuscate the mysteries. He was several tables away but I heard him explain why he thought the murders were all related to black market drug deals and how he hoped there was no one left on the ship who was involved. 'Mafia hit men have no compunction about collateral damage,' he

warned ominously.

I dutifully supported him by drawing attention to what my table was overhearing.

'He's probably right,' I said. 'Methamphetamines are rife in most cities. The Mafia and the Motorcycle Gangs make a fortune out of them.'

A somber retired public servant called Terry agreed with me.

'I don't understand why the Police can't just take out all the ringleaders,' he said.

'Because the corruption spreads into most police forces,' said a tall Canadian woman. I nodded in agreement.

Between Passau and Linz it was castle-watching time on the upper deck. Some were very picturesque, such as Ottenheim Castle with its turret and spire, nestled in a wooded hill overlooking a riverside village. From the tour director's commentary I learned that many castles were intended simply as forts to defend the territory and the village below them. They weren't the romantic residences of royalty. Palaces tended to be big chunky structures with imposing rows of windows closer to the river.





In Linz, I again chose not to follow the tour and went exploring on my own. I seemed to be in a mock pilgrimage pattern of shopping malls followed by a Cathedral and then a Pub. In souvenir shop I bought some small bottles of Austrian spirits as gifts for friends and a wooden Pinocchio for my young nephew.

The Cathedral was not as busy as some I had been in. Tourists wandered around and stared and took photographs. Priests went about their daily routines and sometimes stopped to answer questions. A young woman, probably a volunteer gave out leaflets and explained the custom of buying altar candles.

I sat in a side chapel near several confessionals, which resembled little wooden buildings. My attention was caught by someone passing through a small group of tourists and going into a confessional. It was one of the Ukrainians. I kept watch for his re-emergence. I wanted to look for an opportunity to intercept him and engage him in conversation. After ten minutes I was beginning to wonder what litany of sins he was sharing with his confessor. I was not prepared for what I saw next. A figure emerged from the opposite side of the confessional. It was not a Priest. It was Mike. He glanced around and made his way swiftly out of the building.



ALTE STADT BAR

Lebelskummet	€ 1,80
Lebelskummet	€ 1,80
Lebelskummet in Glas	€ 1,80
Lebelskummet in Glas	€ 1,80
Lebelskummet in Glas	€ 1,80

I went out through a different doorway. I did not want either Mike or the Ukrainian to know I had seen them. Not inclined to return to the ship, I went for a self-guided tour through a castle. I had a late afternoon snack at a little table outside a patisserie and by dusk found myself attracted to a small Pub near the river.

Another surprise. Klimt was sitting by himself in a corner. With a beer in hand, I walked toward an adjacent table. He nodded at me indicating I was welcome to sit with him, which I did.

'Just having a quiet beer?' Klimt nodded. 'Not easy these days.'

'I must apologize for my outburst the other day. I was very agitated.'

'It's okay. I realise you are worried about what has been happening.'

'You must understand, this has nothing to do with me.'

'I believe you. The Police have obviously lost interest in you.'

'I met Ian on the boat ...'

'Ian?'

'Ian Prendergast. We were becoming friends, it is true. The night before he died he told me he was involved in something dangerous. He said he would not be returning to the boat in Mildenberg. He said he would travel to Wurzburg and rejoin us there. If I live that long, he said. I thought he was joking.'

'So it was a shock for you when you heard he was found dead.'

'Yes and the police thinking I was somehow connected.'

'You managed to convince them.'

'With some difficulty.'

'They interviewed you again after Penelope died.'

'I had been seen talking to her. That is all. I didn't even know her name.'

'Well, if you have done nothing, there is nothing for you to worry about.'

'True. But there is something else, I will tell you in confidence.' He gulped some beer. 'I have some debt in the United States. A business venture that went bad. I am working on a new venture, which I hope will enable me to repay the debt. In the mean time I am worried the American authorities may think I am running away. I was afraid the local Police would investigate me. You see, I don't know if the Americans are looking for me. I have contacts in Budapest where I will end my journey. I will be able to begin my project there.'

Klimt's behavior certainly made sense now. He seemed very genuine but I wasn't sure why he felt the need to tell me his predicament.

Back at the ship, Klimt went to his room. I went upstairs to the supper buffet. Mike was there, feeding his bulky frame. He gestured to me and I joined him. I was resolved not to let him know I had seen him at the Cathedral or that Klimt had confided in me. I no longer trusted his disingenuous affectation. I was however interested in hearing more of his strategic expressions of opinion. I would regard him as a Magician and try to work out what he might be deflecting attention from.

The ship was moving. We were on our way to Vienna.

'How was your day in Linz my friend? Blissfully uneventful I trust. There have been no reports of missing persons or corpses.'

'Yeah. Pretty quiet. I wandered around, went to the Cathedral, tried some local beer.' I watched him as I mentioned the Cathedral. There was no reaction. He is obviously very accomplished at deception. I excused myself. 'Want to be up early

tomorrow when we sail through the Wachau Valley. It's meant to be very beautiful.
'Oh yes,' said Mike. 'It will be snapshot day tomorrow.'



The steep vineyards and the small picturesque towns were certainly a beautiful sight. I sat on the sun deck until breakfast enjoying the scenery and watching for glimpses of local domestic daily life.

After breakfast I went back to the deck. Karen joined me.

'I suppose I'd better take in some of this scenery. I'm paying for it after all.' Well, your husband is, I thought.

'Do you know, the only way you can get property here is to inherit it. No one wants to sell.'

'Yes. The houses and landscape can't be changed because it is on the United Nations Heritage list, so Developers aren't interested.'

'I'd love to live here.'

'It would be a very quiet life. There's not much to do except grow grapes.'

'And drink wine.' She took out a packet of cigarettes. 'You're not a smoker are you?'

'No.'

'I'll go further down.' No doubt smoking was the main reason for Karen's leathery skin and hard-edged voice. I imagined she might once have been attractive. The cigarettes she once lipped so elegantly turned out to be a Trojan horse destroying her youthful beauty. I made no apologies for anyone who felt they couldn't smoke near me. In Australia we are well protected from passive smoking in public places.

Vienna at sunrise. Our ship was moored opposite the modern side of the city. The sky was pink behind the tall buildings. Downstream the main traffic bridge was a

shadow with the flickering car lights of early morning commuters.

When you look at a tourist guidebook for Vienna you don't know where to begin. There is so much of cultural significance. I realized I would need a week to see all the things on my list. I decided to limit myself to the morning bus and walk tour through the old city with its beautiful friezes and sculptures, St Stephen's Cathedral and the famous coffee shops. In the afternoon I would make my own way to the Hundertwasser Museum. I had pre-booked for a Strauss Concert in the evening.

To my surprise, Klimt joined the tour. As we were collecting our boarding passes, Mike nudged my arm. 'Keep an eye on him today. Let's see if he slips off somewhere.' I took this as an indication that perhaps I should keep an eye on Mike himself.



I was entranced by the sculptures adorning the old buildings. I have never seen so many half naked women in public before. These were complemented by lots of scowling old men. I saw billboards for exhibitions by Klimt and Schiele and Miro that I just could not squeeze into my itinerary.



At St Stephen's, I kept an eye on Mike, thinking he might have another confessional rendezvous here. Most of the group disappeared into the building, a few wandered off for coffee and strudel. Mike stood talking to a group of men in dandy period clothing promoting a classical concert. I looked away briefly and moments later saw Mike disappear into a taxi. I felt a little sense of satisfaction at catching him out but frustrated at having no idea where he was going.

I went looking for my own taxi and was surprised to find none in the area. There were no taxi ranks in any of the adjacent streets. Mike must have ordered his. I asked directions and eventually found someone who explained I needed to head toward the railway station.

The taxi driver did not seem certain. I told him I wanted the Hundertwasser House, not the Museum. He seemed to understand 'museum' better than 'house'. I wasn't sure he could differentiate. When he stopped in a crowded street the view was restricted but I could see some colours and curved lines that signaled Hundertwasser's architectural style. The driver assured me this was the House.

It was fascinating. Abstractly shaped windows and doors, curved columns and random patches of colour rose up from undulating tiles between the tall trees in the pedestrian mall like a fantasy dwelling that was almost organic in appearance.



A young woman in a short, cobalt blue dress with black hair, stockings and ankle boots caught my attention. She walked quickly from one vantage point to another, photographing the building from every possible angle. With her energetic focus, she seemed to complement the zaniness of the house in some way. I was curious to know if she was perhaps a student of art or architecture. I resisted the urge to speak to her and risk disturbing her unselfconscious communion with the house.

The Museum was a ten-minute walk away but it took me half an hour to find it because it didn't look like a museum and was hardly differentiated from the other Hundertwasser designed buildings in the vicinity. I spent an hour staring at the artist's intensely coloured compositions. There is magic in his work that engages the imagination and takes you into a world where there are no straight lines, where nature and art are harmoniously linked to create a utopian aesthetic.

Finding a taxi to return me to the city or the ship was an impossible feat. The few that passed in the street were engaged. Eventually I caught a bus going in what I hoped was the direction of the city centre. It took me to a familiar intersection and here I found a taxi. My next challenge was to get the driver to understand where the ship was moored. I had to get help from a nearby shopkeeper who understood where I wanted to go.

I was curious to see if Mike had returned to the ship. He didn't appear at lunch. The Ukrainians did. I sat as close as I could to them, trying not to appear I had actually noticed them. They spoke a little as they ate but only in their own language so I learned nothing.

It was going to be a late evening so I went up to the deck and lay on a sun lounge,

dozing through the afternoon in the soporific sunlight. I woke to the sound of a loud conversation. Karen was telling someone about her first trip to Vienna, how she had met a group of Americans who loved to party and how they had done a bar crawl until the early hours of the morning to end up sleeping in a park.

‘Didn’t the Police move you on?’

‘Oh yes but not until ten in the morning, which I thought was very considerate of them. We started the day with black coffees and strudel then the lovely Americans dropped me back at my hotel. I still keep in contact with them by email. They live in Pennsylvania.’

That was the end of my siesta. I went to my room for my bathers and walked down to the swimming pool to swim a few leisurely laps.

The concert was superb. A small orchestra played Strauss and Mozart in the hall where Strauss gave his first public performance. The Conductor was surprisingly comedic. He amused the audience with his introductions and added ironic drama to his conducting. To me it was high culture from the inside. We were served champagne at interval and the night ended with a standing ovation.

I was fairly certain Mike wasn’t in the group. I looked for him on the way back to the bus. He had definitely told me he would be attending the concert. He had been looking forward to it.

He was in the lounge when we returned to the ship for a nightcap. I asked him why he didn’t go to the concert. He said he had been ill disposed with a stomach problem. I wasn’t convinced. He then proceeded to tell the group that there had been an incident while we were away. A number of shots had been fired along the riverbank. No one could see what was happening but soon after there were a number of police cars in the area and now there were going back and forth across the bridge. We all peered out the windows to see the flashing red and blue lights.

Again I interpreted Mike’s behaviour as sleight of hand. I was sure the incident had no relation to recent events on our ship. It was just Mike taking the opportunity to distract us from wondering why he had missed the concert he had seemed so keen to attend. I noticed something else while we were drinking. Karen seemed to have an aversion to Mike. Her body language when he was talking suggested she loathed him. Perhaps she just disliked loud Americans. I wondered what her friends from Philadelphia were like.

‘You will notice that Slovakia is noticeably less prosperous than Germany and Austria.’ The tour guide was briefing the group before its walk through Bratislava. ‘To some extent the country is still recovering from Soviet rule. The rebuilding after the Second World War was austere and functional. No attempt was made to restore Baroque and Gothic architecture. Some of what remained was mercilessly redeveloped.’

I was still deciding whether or not to go with the tour or make my own way into town.

‘Since the end of the Cold War some of the life has been restored to the streets. The cobblestones and quaint shops here in the main part of town are as attractive as any you will see in Europe. There are some lovely souvenir shops and little hotels selling the famous local beer. You will recognize it by the distinctive golden pheasant on the

label.

I made a personal executive decision and headed off along the marina by myself. I came to a crowded piazza with a large stall selling some kind of local delicacy. I had picked up the little map that was provided daily by the ship for each location. I orientated myself before heading into the main city area. I noticed there was an American Embassy not far from one of the large hotels. I was curious to see what it looked like so I went down a large avenue past a massive hotel.



An American flag hung over the balcony of a stately old building, marred somewhat by a steel mesh fence at street level. There was no other visible presence of security. I wouldn't think Bratislava was a high-risk location but of course American administrators didn't take chances. I was sure any attempt to enter the building would quickly draw personnel.

As I turned to head toward the city centre I saw Mike walking toward the Embassy. I supposed he might be going to catch up with old friends in the diplomatic service.

In a piazza adjacent to the main city square, there was a row of picturesque caravan souvenir stalls with lace work, rag dolls, leather goods, jams, pickles, beer glasses, steins and jewelry. Opposite these were several horses and sulkies waiting to take tourists on sightseeing joyrides.

I heard deep, melodious music. A busker in period costume with a hat resembling that of a pirate was playing an instrument that looked like a didgeridoo with finger holes and a mouthpiece. The deep didgeridoo sound gave way to the high pitch of a flute. I was intrigued. When he finished playing I told him I thought his instrument was a modified didgeridoo. He seemed mildly offended and explained to me that he

knew the didgeridoo but this was a more complex traditional instrument.

After an hour of wandering, I decided it was late enough in the morning to try the local beer. At the end of the piazza there was a dilapidated old building. Someone had written: "Renovate Me!" across the façade. Next to it was a building in somewhat better condition. Incongruously, in its ornately framed windows and Romanesque entry were signs advertising "Thai Massage."



I made my way through an alleyway covered with awnings and lined with alfresco furniture. In the next street I sat down in an outdoor bar. I asked the waiter for the local beer and he told me they only served Budweiser. I declined and went to another street bar where a picture of a pheasant indicated I would get an authentic beer. It was a crisp, refreshing lager served with pretzels.

'Good day my friend.' Mike had found me. 'Mind if I join you?'

'No. Let me shout you one of these. I'm ready for another one.' I signaled the waiter.

'Curious phrase you Aussies have. Shouting a beer.'

'Yeah. I think it comes from having to shout to get the Barmaid's attention.'

When he was downing the beer I asked, 'Did I see you heading toward the Embassy this morning?' His discomfiture was almost imperceptible.

'Were you there?'

'Just went past for a look.'

'I thought the Big M was the only American Embassy you Aussies were interested in.'

'Were you catching up with old friends?'

'You don't have old friends in the diplomatic service. Only former colleagues and

enemies.'

He was stalling. What was his eventual answer going to be? It surprised me.

'The Consul wanted to ask me about Klimt.'

'Klimt? Why?'

'Apparently he has been charged with embezzlement in the States.'

'Really? Are they going to extradite him?'

'Possibly not. There doesn't seem to be a watertight case. Might not warrant the expense.'

When Mike left, saying he wanted to return to the ship for lunch, I sat studying my map. I thought Bratislava Castle might be worth a visit and was trying to work out if it was within walking distance.

'You have the map.'

I looked up. It was one of the Ukrainians, the one with whom I had previously exchanged a few words.

'I am looking, please?'

'Sure.' He walked through the alfresco gate to my table. I held out the map. He studied it for a moment.

'We are here, yes?' He pointed to our location. I confirmed. His finger moved across the page. It seemed to hover over Paulinyho, where the American Embassy was located. He looked up at the street for a few moments taking his bearings then he handed me the map with a curt thank you.

'I'm Peter by the way.' He looked blank for a moment.

'Anton. I am Anton.'

'Nice to meet you.'

'My friend Vitaly,' he added as if his friend was present.

I watched him walk down the street, wondering if the Embassy was indeed his destination and if so, why.



After my third Golden Pheasant, I had lost any sense of tourist purpose. I decided just to wander. I headed back toward the piazza with the caravans. In my slightly inebriated haze, the Thai Massage sign seemed to strobe in my vision. I stopped and stared at the little billboard at the entrance. There were about half a dozen types of massage, all for reasonable prices. 'Why not?' I thought and steered myself toward the glass doors.

Inside a hard faced, middle-aged Thai woman asked me if I would like a massage.

'Yes please.'

'How long?'

'Half an hour please.'

'That is forty euro.' I paid her and she rang a little brass bell. There was a foyer area with cushioned cane chairs and a low table with a vase of flowers. I sat down. A younger Thai woman appeared.

'This is Ploy.'

'Hello Ploy. I'm Peter.'

'Come with me please, Peter.'

She led me through an ornate archway to a row of curtained booths and pulled one of the curtains aside. There was a mattress with a small pillow and a towel in the centre. In the corner was a small wooden dais with bottles of oil.

'Please remove your cloth,' she said. 'I will be in a minute.'

I undressed, wondering if she meant for me to remove all my clothing. I decided to leave my jocks on. I lay face down on the mattress. I could smell sweet incense and in a few moments, Thai music began softly playing.

Ploy returned and kneeled beside me.

'You are comfortable?'

'Yes.'

She put her hands on my shoulders and was still for a moment. Then she ran her fingers down my back and with a swift, deft movement drew my jocks down to my ankles and discarded them. I lay still and listened as she took the top from a bottle and poured oil onto her hands. She spread oil down my back, buttocks and legs, lingering momentarily on my buttocks then began working my shoulders.

'Okay? Not too hard?'

'No, that's good.' It was. So was the anticipation.

Every muscle from my neck to my feet was sinking into the mattress. Her hands were like magic. She asked me several times, 'Is that good?' and I replied with a soft groan.

A loud explosion tore the moment apart. It was from inside the building and I knew it was a gun. I scrambled up, reaching for my clothes. Ploy stared at me, terrified. A second shot drew a long, wailing scream from her. She fell to her knees.

When I was dressed I drew the curtain cautiously. I left Ploy, sobbing on the bed and began to move slowly toward the archway. I wasn't sure how close the shot had been fired.

In the foyer, there was someone lying on the floor. I knew instinctively he was dead. There was a gun on the floor beside him. I ran and kneeled at the body. It was Vitaly.

Anton appeared. Like me, he had dressed hastily.

'Who could do this?' I asked.

Anton stared at me then at the gun. I felt a cold chill when I realized he may suspect me.

'The Austrian. He was here.'

'You mean Klimt?'

'Yes, yes. Klimt.'

'You saw him?'

This made no sense. I ran to the entry. On the far side of the piazza, a man was running. I couldn't be sure. It may have been Klimt. I lurched into a run. Crossing the piazza I nearly collided with several tourists who yelled as I ran on.

The fugitive had disappeared. I stared around, trying to guess. Would he return to the ship? If not, I had no clue. I ran in the direction of the river, taking the shortest route to the pier. Once I looked in the direction of our ship. I could see no one running. If he were smart, he would now be walking inconspicuously amongst the crowds.

I hurried to the ship and went to Klimt's cabin. I knocked. There was no response. I went to reception.

'Where is the Captain?' I asked.

'Upstairs, in the Lounge.'

I took the stairs two at a time. The Captain was sitting in a lounge chair, talking to someone I didn't recognize.

'Excuse me.' The Captain turned. 'One of your passengers has been killed. On shore.' He sat upright. 'Another passenger may have done it. Klimt. You must check if he is in his cabin.'

Thankfully he didn't seem to question my information. I'm sure the urgency in my voice was convincing. He said something to his friend in Russian, then turned to me as he rose. 'We will go.'

I followed him as he summoned crew members and headed toward the cabins.

He knocked on the door.

'This is the Captain. Please open the door.'

There was no response.

'I don't know if he is in there. He may not have returned.'

'Please open the door.' The Captain waited a moment then took a key card from the First Mate and pressed it to the lock. The door opened.

Klimt was sitting on the bed. In his hand was a gun. We all stood very still. Klimt did not point the gun. He seemed to be nursing it.

'Please. Give me the gun.'

Klimt slowly put it in his coat pocket.

'I'm not going to shoot anyone,' he said.

'A gun is forbidden on board.' Klimt did not reply. He was obviously not prepared to debate the issue.

'You have just been at the Thai Massage,' I said.

He looked at me, surprised.

'Yes.'

'One of the Ukrainians has been killed. You have been accused.'

'No. Not me. They wanted me to do it. They offered me money.'

'Who then?'

'The other Ukrainian.'

'No,' I said. 'He couldn't have done it. I was at the body before him.'

Klimt stared at me for a moment.

'No, no. The one who left the ship before.'

'He was arrested in Nuremberg.'

'Detained only. He is back. He is here.'

I looked at the Captain. Like me, he seemed to believe Klimt's bizarre claim.

'I will contact the local Police,' he said. 'Meanwhile you are to stay in this cabin.' He spoke in Russian to the First Mate and walked off.

'You were there. Did you see the murder?'

'Yes. I was talking to Vitaly.'

'The gun was lying beside his body.'

'That was Vitaly's gun. He took it out to defend himself. He was too slow.'

'Is Anton in danger?'

'Yes. They want to kill him too.'

'I must go and warn him. He thinks you are the danger.'

By the time I reached the building, it was an official crime scene. Police were keeping people well clear. I couldn't see the body or Anton.

I approached a Policeman.

'Excuse me. I am a witness. I was here during the shooting.' He stared at me, obviously not understanding. A man nearby spoke with a German accent.

'You saw ze murder?'

'No but I was here. I was the first to see the body.'

He spoke to the Policeman who suddenly became interested and began questioning me in German. The man tried to help interpret but the Policeman didn't seem to appreciate this. He clearly thought I should understand German, or was not going to trust anyone but an official interpreter.

I could not see Anton. He had fled. No one else seemed to have seen him, or Klimt, let alone the other Ukrainian. I was obviously the key witness. Eventually I was taken to the Police Station. Once an interpreter was found, I was able to give a précis of what I knew. Then there was a lot of discussion.

Eventually the interpreter told me I was to be detained for further questioning. I explained my ship would be leaving early in the evening. I was told that if I missed embarkation I would be taken to meet the ship in Budapest. I wondered if Klimt would be taken into custody. I thought of the gun in his pocket and wondered if he might resist.

I had gone over my account so many times the interpreter must surely know it by heart. I wondered if they were looking for any change in detail that might suggest I was lying. Of course I was lying, by omission. I did not mention Klimt. I knew only by his admission that he had been there. I hadn't seen him and I was prepared to describe only what I had seen.

I wasn't surprised when they brought him in. Nor was he surprised to see me. He would no doubt have presumed I mentioned him. I presumed he had been arrested for refusing to surrender his gun.

When my witness statement was finally complete, another form of interrogation

began. Did I have any reason to believe I was in danger? Was it safe for me to spend the evening in a hotel? As far as I knew, I represented no threat to the assassin. I was prepared to take the risk.

My hotel room was small and drab. It was a three star establishment in contrast with my modern cabin on the ship. There was no room service so I went out in search of a meal.

The streets at night were less dominated by tourists. There were a lot of locals, especially young ones out in bars and restaurants. I kept well clear of the Thai Massage. The alfresco cafes looked inviting but I chose the discretion of dining inside, hidden from passers by.

I told the waiter I would sit at the bar for a drink before ordering my meal. When he brought my beer, he placed a pamphlet beside it. It had a picture of a sexy young woman smiling. It advertised a Kabaret with a topless and striptease show, every night at the Old City Hotel.

I finished my beer and went to a table to order my meal and some wine. I asked the waiter to recommend a local vintage and he obliged. When I had finished eating I asked him for more wine. As he served me, he asked quietly if I was looking for some company tonight. I couldn't resist allowing him to give me some details but I really didn't think I would risk anything but a low profile until this trip was over.

Back in my hotel room, I read the waiter's note. I was very tempted. A knock at my door startled me.

'Who is it?'

'Police.' What now?

I opened the door. There were two Policemen and Klimt. He had been released and would spend the night in the room next to mine. He would return to the ship with me tomorrow.

When the Police had gone, I went in to speak to Klimt. I wanted to know what had transpired. It seems Klimt was not a suspect. They knew about the third Ukrainian. His name was Stas. They believed he had fled the city.

'They don't think you are in any danger?'

'They said not. They gave my gun back to me.'

I didn't know if that was reassuring or not.

I was a long time getting to sleep. I woke an hour later, thinking I had heard someone at my door. I decided I must have been dreaming and dozed again.

I knew the gunshot came from Klimt's room. I sat up desperately trying to create a scenario that best guessed who had been shot. Klimt had a gun. If Stas had come to get him he may have shot first. That was my hope.

I opened my door slightly. Someone downstairs was shouting. There were footsteps on the stairs. The Proprietor appeared in his pyjamas. He stared at me. I pointed to Klimt's door, which was ajar. He nodded, mouthed the word 'Police,' and backed away downstairs.

The wait was interminable. No sound came from Klimt's room. No doubt there was a body in there and either Klimt or Stas had fled.

When the Police arrived there was shouting, the door was kicked open. Less urgent voices indicated everything was under control. I went to the hallway. Klimt emerged from his room, flanked by two Policemen. He looked straight at me.

‘He came to kill me. It was self defense.’

As I watched him go I wondered what the Court would make of his plea. It seemed he was an innocent bystander caught up in some political subterfuge but I couldn’t be sure there was not more to his involvement than that. I certainly didn’t have any knowledge that would support or refute his claim.



The Police got me to Budapest by mid morning. Travelling with someone who can use a blue flashing light to negotiate traffic snarls is invigorating to say the least. Most of the passengers were off on a tour. I went to my cabin, opened the window and lay listening to the water. My single intention was to collar Mike and insist he fill in the missing gaps in my understanding of recent events. I was sure he could see the whole picture.

Unlike some of the other passengers, Mike wasn't surprised to see me. It was general knowledge that I had been detained as a witness. News of last night hadn't filtered through but I sensed Mike knew. When I had the opportunity I said quietly to him, 'I am going to jump the afternoon tour and find a quiet Bar this afternoon. It will be my shout.' He nodded.

Mike chose a street for us to leave the bus. He told the Guide we would make our own way back to the ship. There were several Bars nearby. Mike let me choose one. It had dark corners with good views of the street.

'You had an eventful night last night.'

'You know what happened?' He nodded. 'Will they charge Klimt?'

'They'll have to. With a good lawyer he will get off for self-defense.'

'Was he really just an innocent bystander?'

'Very few are completely innocent my friend.'

'What was his connection with the Ukrainians?'

'Anton was going to help him with some business connections to supply the Ukraine military with boots and socks. They had arranged meetings here in Budapest.'

'Boots and socks?'

'Lucrative contract if you can get it.'

Our beers arrived. Hungarian beer was just as good as German.

'How did that make them a target for assassins?'

'It didn't. There was something else going on with the Ukrainians.'

'And the U.S. Embassy?'

'Yes. Vitaly was providing us with information about Russian activity in the Crimea.'

I noted the royal 'us.'

'Stas was working for the Russians. We didn't know that until Bratislava.' He looked pointedly at me. He knew most of the questions I wanted to ask. 'Anton has asylum there now.' That was comforting.

'The two CIA operatives?'

'I overstated that. There was only one. No license to kill.'

I was willing to wager Mike was with the CIA. Of course no CIA Operative would admit that.

'What about Ian Prendergast? Klimt knew why he didn't board the ship before he was murdered in Mildenberg.'

'There are three kinds of people in the world, my friend. Ordinary people who do their best to survive and make sense of what is going on around them; people who are entirely motivated by money and will do anything to get it and people who want power – whether it be personal or political.'

'Klimt?'

'Klimt is a money person. He is a bankrupt obsessed with regaining his fortune. He was tempted by Prendergast into a drug deal. He managed to extricate himself when he saw the danger signs that Prendergast didn't see.'

'Penelope?'

'What did Penelope want from you?'

'Just sex, I think.'

'Another kind of power. The cabin boy who was dismissed, remember him?'

'Yes.'

'Seen leaving Penelope's cabin late at night. One of her conquests.'

'Not exactly a motivation for murder.'

'She was also seen, by myself in fact, leaving Prendergast's cabin late at night'

'How did that lead to her death?'

'The stuff of classic intrigue, my friend. Money power excites those seeking sexual power. She couldn't resist Prendergast's allure. She went to him at the wrong time in the wrong place. She no doubt saw something she wasn't meant to see.'

'It all seems to fit,' I said.

'Now you know more than anyone else on this ship.'

Except you, Mike, I thought.

Mike held up his empty glass. 'Are we having another of these?' I signaled the waiter.

'I believe you were enjoying a rather sensual pleasure in Bratislava before you were rudely interrupted by all these intrigues.'

I shrugged.

'There is a very good Thai Massage further down here, on the other side. You will see a small Adult shop on the corner. Turn down that street.'

I nodded noncommittally. I knew Mike would never reveal his own hand but there was one thing more I wanted to know.

'Was all this planned before you began the trip?'

'There was a plan but things rarely go according to plan. Klimt was the surprise element. Throw someone who needs money into a plan and it is guaranteed to go awry.'

'So you didn't get the information you wanted from Vitaly?'

'Anton will be of some help but Vitaly was the insider.'

'Where will you go now, Mike?'

'I'll stay with the tour to Prague then I'll go back to the States. And you?'

'I am going to spend a few days here then fly home.'

That night I lay in my cabin listening to the gentle slap of water on the hull as we were rocked by passing vessels. Tomorrow night in my Budapest hotel room I would no longer hear that reassuring sound.



