

Robert G. Sherrin / SCHADENFROH

He is at the far peak of St. Lorenzkirche and he is barely visible. If the three men smoking in front of Photo-Porst were to look up they might notice him. But then again they might think him to be a part of the architecture, perhaps a workman, a raised shingle. Perhaps, (with a small puff of smoke and a wink to Schenke the councilman) a petty anarchist bent upon defiling the local church. The sun is from the west and it is entirely possible that this movement upon the peak of St. Lorenzkirche is merely a shadow soon to be wiped away when a man-shaped cloud has moved to completely reveal the sun.

On the other side of the church there is a group of seven men on a street corner. One wears a white hat. Their eyes are trained down the broad street, away from the church, watching the electric tram draw near. If they were to pivot only 180° they would notice, upon elevating their gaze, a small figure duck-walking the high roof of St. Lorenz's. They would notice immediately that it is a man, not a shadow or a cloud. There would be instant speculation on the purpose of the individual's stroll. Alphonse would opt for insanity, tipping his forehead with his fingers while Otto and Werner merely shrug and sniff their Schimmelpennicks. Kurt would push the blond hair off his face and swivel his blue eyes like two howitzers to bear on the lonely, scampering figure and declare him a menace to society and possibly Christian theology as well. He would snicker and notice the girl in the apothecary bending over the shelf to delicately manoeuvre a mortar and pestle on a tray in the front window. Udo, Wilhelm and Ottmar would snort, chuckle and stamp their feet in impatience while the tram draws closer and the twenty-pfennig pieces are rolled back and forth in their pockets. It's a forty-two minute ride to Hummelstein and Würfer's girls.

But in fact, no one sees anything yet. The tram, followed closely by another, begins to arrive at the corner. Its braking squeals are audible even up here and the pawing of its hurried customers indicates that seven twenty-pfennig pieces are held precisely between thumb and forefinger, awaiting only to be dropped into a metal basket and exchanged for a perforated cardboard ticket. Not one, not Alphonse, Otto, Werner, Kurt, Udo, Wilhelm, Ottmar, the girl in the Apothecary Nürnberg, not the tram driver nor the three men in front of Photo-Porst notice the small figure on the roof of the saint's chapel stumble along its steep roof and aim himself at the open space between the twin front spires. It is a drop of perhaps ten metres to the large circular window of leaded glass and an open space of perhaps another twenty-two metres until his thick boots would possibly strike a passerby or the cobblestones. At this moment he is positive that he has only twenty-eight and a half vertical metres to travel.

His smile is not visible but undoubtedly it is broad. His hair is red, left long but spottily so as if whimsically cut by his own hand, without a mirror. His jacket is dark, his short pants dark, his boots dark, feet bare inside them. In his left jacket pocket he carries a small glass bottle, empty, found a week ago in a trash bin. It fits perfectly over his short, narrow thumb and, according to him, can be used to focus the rays of the sun on any object he wishes to do away with. His right jacket pocket has been carefully removed and sutured to the seat of his short pants. Upon his back there is a tidy mound of flesh and gristle that led to his being named, without much vicious originality, the hunchback. He bears a reputation of the neighbourhood freak, dresses to suit the role but wrestles with Goethe and Kierkegaard in his off-hours, the hours when he retires to his room and leaves ferreting through garbage cans and drooling on street corners to the gangs of children who imitate him and pelt him with bits of fruit and candy. He quotes Nietzsche at them and waddles off, rolling his hump prominently, like a squat dromedary in dark wool.

In front of Photo-Porst Schenke is thinking about his thirteen-year-old niece as he toys with his cigar, finally tossing it in an arc to land just beyond a shadow moving over the pavement. He smiles to himself and notices the number 62 above the doorway to the camera shop. Its windows are full of Zeis/Ikon, Billy Record, Wallflex. His niece is

small. Her rounded shoulders fit snugly into the councilman's hands and her ankles are like tiny calluses, almost boyish in their sturdiness. His stomach flutters and he places his right hand over it, noting first the nicotine stains on the index and middle fingers then immediately recalling the scent of his niece's body, a tiny sweating that eased over his fingers and still lingers now as the autumn wind blows smoke from his discarded cigar in the direction of Photo-Porst.

Winkler is now talking about the man on St. Lorenzkirche. Schenke merely nods and recalls sitting in Porst's studio while the huge lens groped towards him and his niece. The photographs were perfect: she on his lap; him standing, her sitting; them sitting side by side, his hand in her lap enfolding her fingers; her kissing him. The shoulders were bare under the short dress and her scent not too powerful, too masculine. She had scraped her knee the day before. He had bent to kiss it but the photo was of a poor quality.

"How much you remind me of Claus," he'd whispered as Porst called for stillness.

"But uncle, he's dead." And she'd turned away just as the leaves in the camera opened, just as Porst cursed and said her motion had ruined it, just as Schenke the councilman was kissing her knee for a second time.

Hunchback. That's what Winkler is saying, pointing, his left index finger at angle direct to the sun. He's laughing in his piston-like fashion: hunh, hunh, hunh, heaving out essence of sauerkraut with each breath. Schenke turns to look at St. Lorenzkirche and sees instead his thirteen-year-old niece running towards him, dressed in a young man's suit. Her hair is blonde, short. He reaches out for her and feels the heat blossom inside.

Alphonse turns in his seat to follow the line of St. Lorenzkirche. He has one hand in his pocket, searching for his fifty Marks. He has saved them, each DM falling into a used baking-powder tin, each DM

saved for this twice monthly ride to the house in Hummelstein, the warm beer and the wurst, to the one without a name and a mole between her buttocks, to her giant folds and the pliable handles of her flesh. Along the roof of the kirche there is a hump in the structure, a hump without definition, without discernible shape. This is the thirty-seventh time that Alphonse has passed it and it never appears the same. It is his oracle.

It tells him what he will do after he arrives in Hummelstein and walks behind Kurt and Udo, Wilhelm, Ottmar, Otto and Werner, after he checks the buttons of his trousers, after he blows into a cupped hand to test his breath and sucks at his teeth, after he probes the inner edge of his nose for crusted blood and recalls only four knockdowns and one TKO in sixty-eight bouts. The hump on St. Lorenzkirche tells him how the woman without a name will appear to him, how her buttocks will pounce as she moves, how the pocks the size of a DM will shiver as he bites, how breasts and thighs and neck, all portable in their thick dimensions, will lure him away, slowly, over the course of an hour or more, from his tin of money. The hump on the church roof tells him how he will feel when he notices that once more he is ready, that a hundred TKO's could not prevent him, that he is not only a man but a force moving towards an irresistible object, about to conquer her as she conquers him. The hump on the roof of St. Lorenzkirche tells him how to act as they troop up the steps of Würfer's, how to remove his white hat that conceals his folded ears and shadows his bent nose, how to shift his weight from foot to foot so his genitals swing gently and alive, how to smile at the woman who ushers them inside, how to look at everyone and not feel out of place with his body of bulges and hard growths and the peculiar slant of his chin. The hump in the roof of the church makes him feel human, makes him feel happy because he is soon to perform much as other humans do, makes him smile because he knows that he is only forty-one minutes and fifty-eight seconds from a woman without a name who has waited patiently every second week for almost nineteen months.

But today the hump on St. Lorenzkirche is moving.

He was riding the tram only two hours ago, no make that one hour and nine minutes ago. He sat six rows ahead of me and only the side

of his face and the hump on his back was visible above the top of the seats. I had seen him many times in the neighbourhood. I had often followed him and watched as women bent to touch the rise below his shoulder; some would kiss it, others bow to him and give him fruit or pieces of meat. He would thank them by snarling or tossing his red hair from side to side. The adults revered him, feared him, treated him like an icon or a relic, brushed against him, cursed and praised in his name, bargained for objects touched by him. The children chased him and spat at him or threw food at him, tried to trip him or kick at him. He stole their power to amuse each other or battle their parents. He took from them the fascination the old have for the very young, drew away from them the attentions of men who sold watches or manufactured trusses in their back rooms. He left them only grandfathers who whispered of the hunchback, who scooped at their crotches to indicate his power. It is said women longed to have his children and men envied his prowess.

After a moment he turned to look at me then swung away only to vault from his seat and approach me in the empty tram.

"Know how much rope you need to hang a man?" he said, lurching from side to side against the motion of the car. He was smiling. His blue eyes gleamed.

I shook my head. I didn't like him. I didn't like looking at him. I didn't like staring at his hump. I didn't want to smile or say a word. I felt my groin tighten. I squeezed my legs together and whistled once, a single note, meaning nothing except my fascination with what moved before me. I whispered to myself: I don't like you, I don't like, I don't like you.

"You don't know," he said, jumping up and into my lap. "You don't know how much rope is needed to hang a man." I shook my head. I placed my hands on the seat, palms down, flexing the fingers, feeling them pull away from the leather with little sucking noises, like tiny mouths pulling on the flesh. His hair shone like amber: I leaned toward it and smelled the odour of moss. His eyes were darting over my features. His teeth were chewing at nothing, just their perfect white going up and down. He settled into my lap as if it were a rocking chair. He moved back and forth.

"Three and a half metres," he whispered to me and winked. He nodded his head and flashed the last three fingers on his right hand. "Not a centimetre more or off comes the head, parted below the medulla like a squash by a knife." He pointed a finger at me. "And not a millimetre less or he dances like a fish on a string."

He jumped from my lap and sat beside me. His coat was dark, well worn over the hump.

"How do you know?" I asked softly.

"My business. I read. I go places. I do things others can't do. My little mountain is a passport." He giggled, looking over his shoulder at the hump. He eyed it as carefully as he could. "Only he that wears it makes the costume." Then he raised a finger to me. "Understand?"

"No."

"This is yours," he said, pulling from his pocket a postcard. It showed a view of St. Lorenzkirche.

I smiled. "No. It is one of many. I did the original."

He pulled his glass vial from his pocket. "This is *my* light box and it tells me everything. Shows me everything. Where is yours?"

"In my shop."

"Here?" He stabbed at the postcard.

"Yes."

"Come."

And I did.

He asked me to carry him. So I did. He straddled my back and directed me like a horse. The children spat at him and struck me. They jumped at him with their fists and hit me. They threw their toffees at him but bounced them off my face and chest. He sang out to them. He wailed poetry and philosopher's words and he held his glass vial up like a cross to ward off spirits. I trotted through the

children and listened only briefly to the adults calling out to me. I can't remember what they said. They were laughing. They stepped back from me and stared up at the hunchback whipping at me with one hand and swaying his glass about with the other. I couldn't see very far ahead. I concentrated on running. I concentrated on breathing hard. I concentrated on holding his thighs firmly in my hands and keeping my back as straight as possible. He called out and sang to me, he urged me on and turned me round a corner and pointed to a flight of stairs. His red hair was in my face and I tried to taste it as if I were a horse and it was hay.

In his room the books were piled everywhere. He was standing at the window, staring at the church. He turned to me, the vial held to his eye.

"I'm going to disappear."

"How?"

"With this. See?"

I took it and stepped to the window. I put the glass to my eye and the church did disappear. I lowered it and St. Lorenz's came back into view. I turned to face him. He was looking up at me, stroking my boot. He pulled at my coat. I crouched and he climbed into my arms.

"As an expert in cameras you'll appreciate the power of the glass," he said, removing it from my fingers. I nodded my agreement.

He climbed to my back and I stood, turning to the window. I held him there as he surveyed the city.

"The children won't miss me." And he chuckled, shaking his head from side to side. Spitte flowed. He slapped at me but I stood my ground. He hissed in my face and his breath smelled of juniper. He bounced in the seat I'd fashioned with my arms and he whispered into my ear as I moved my hands back and forth along his legs to balance him.

"I must go now. And you must watch me."

He jumped from my back to the small balcony outside the window. "Three and a half metres is all," he said, winking. Then he swung over the railing and shinnied down a pipe to the roof of an adjoining building.

The tram is still rounding the corner by the Commerzbank. Kurt is looking at a woman across the aisle. Otto and Werner are sitting side by side, saying nothing, thinking of the girl they will share. Udo, Wilhelm and Ottmar are gathered together at the rear playing a game with five-pfennig pieces. Alphonse is staring at the roof of St. Lorenzkirche. His mouth is moving up and down, his jaws grinding over something too large for words.

The hump on St. Lorenzkirche is alive. It tells him that he will always go to the woman without a name and bury himself in her. It tells him that the slackness in his groin is a pain greater than that which curled his ears into little cabbages or twisted his nose like a root. It tells him that his woman does have a name that she hides from him and whispers to others who pay less than he and twice as often. It tells him that he carries his body like baggage and that his only gift is the one in his pocket or his fists. The hump moving across the kirche tells him the truth: that he is an old man, with little life left; that he is an old man with an old man's body; that his body may please no one, not even the woman without a name whose body to him is attractive only for its enormity and its subsequent anonymity, its hand holds and twists, its pliability, its inability to remind him of younger women he thinks he once enjoyed.

The hump on the roof of St. Lorenz's disappears for a moment between the twin spires then reappears, sailing, drifting downward, sun flashing red and silver. It tells him that fifty Marks is too much but that he will pay it. It tells him that she will never divulge her name. It tells him nothing more because it has disappeared. Alphonse turns in his seat. He bangs at the window. He screams once, high-pitched, like a woman, or a man in extreme pain; the scream of someone falling from grace, from the weight of half-kilo gloves, from the smell of canvas, from the vision of moving flesh and the false promise of a final round.

Schenke has just scooped his niece into his arms and the warmth moves across his chest. He drops his head to her neck and smells her, the sweat. He sees for a moment a young boy, about her age, about her height, about her scent. He sees the boy reach out and touch him, move him slowly. He sees the boy perform in mirror image, the same movements upon himself. The word is uncle uncle uncle and the little blond boy whispers it slowly, hands moving evenly, reflecting the man and his nephew.

Schenke moves forward and tastes her neck, is startled to find himself on his knees. His lips move along towards her shoulder blade and he draws the taste of her slowly as if through a straw or from a great distance. His hands seem to float over her yet press her to him and he feels the tight buttocks like those of a boy nearly her age, nearly her height. The boy who would have moved around him slowly, curling tightly like a burrowing animal, pressing close like something seeking warmth yet creating a greater heat with its touch. Schenke sees his nephew naked, feels his nephew naked all around him, senses his nephew naked and in motion, knows his nephew lies quiet in a suit, in a granite box at St. Lorenz's, lying near a side altar, alone and untouched for almost three years.

The councilman feels his hand grip his niece's thigh and squeeze it only hard enough to appreciate its youth. He feels her hand moving down his chest, plunging into his shirt, his coat flapping wide like wings to take them away. He feels her pressed against him whispering uncle uncle uncle as he strokes her calf and looks up to see someone falling off the roof of St. Lorenzkirche, someone dressed like a young boy, someone tumbling through the air, light flashing all around him.

Schenke falls forward, mouth sliding off the back of his niece, hand trapped between her legs. The other two men step back from the spectacle and stare at the man straddling his niece while she thrashes away underneath. They try to turn away. They try to make a joke of it: Porst should have a postcard of this, one says. They envy the sexual bravado of councilman Schenke, who has been dead less than three seconds now, and his niece who is quickly entering a state of hysterical trauma.

The hunchback is still falling through the air. He said he would quote Nietzsche before he left, a few words for his children, for his lovers, for his patrons and his worshippers. He said he would fly as he had in dreams. He said that his hump was the source of his power and the glass the way to invisibility.

He sails quietly through the air. He has aimed himself at the people passing through Königstrasse. His arms are outstretched and the sunlight flashes through the glass in his hand. He tumbles like a bird and twists from side to side. His red hair streams out behind him. Eight metres, twelve metres. He must be whispering his last phrases. He must be straining to bring the glass to his eye.

At a certain point, no doubt three and a half metres from his projected place of impact, a roof cuts him off from view. A tram is turning past the bank on the corner, brakes shrieking. In front of my shop a man has collapsed. There is a flash in front of St. Lorenzkirche. The hunchback is gone.

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(Schadenfrohe — the joy of looking down on people.)