

**Roman Ehrlich**

**Die fürchterlichen Tage des schrecklichen Grauens**

*The Dreadful Days of the Ghastly Horror*

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**A novel about fear as the dominant emotion of our time**

*Week after week, they meet in a pub to tell each other their worst fears – an unusual project which Christoph has invited all of them to join. He is a director, and they are actors, set designers, film editors or just friends. They are afraid of darkness, of love, loneliness, reptiles, madness or mixed-up medical files. Their stories will inspire the screenplay for the horror movie The Ghastly Horror. After months of preparation, they finally begin to shoot the film – and realize that Christoph’s ideas are much more radical than they thought.*

Translation by Isabel Fargo Cole

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And then, walking a bit further down the corridor, I saw at its end, past the cigarette machines and the restroom doors, a door I hadn’t noticed before because a big steel locker was blocking my view. The door was steel too and looked as though it led to a boiler room or a storeroom. Taped to it was a handwritten sign: *STRICTLY No Admittance*.

In retrospect, I think that was the point at which I could still have opted out. But at the time I didn’t even see it as a choice, though possibly it was: I could turn around and go back home to Munich. I looked at the sign, and now I can’t quite say why, but I saw the word *STRICTLY*, all in caps, and knew that it held a message for me. It was as if the exaggerated emphasis cancelled out the meaning of the whole sign. And as if recognizing this word for what it really was – an invitation – were a sort of admission test.

At the time I thought I’d figured out a riddle. And suddenly all the time I’d spent standing around in the bar, gradually succumbing to despair, acquired a meaning and no longer felt awful at all. I pressed down the handle of the steel door – it wasn’t locked – pushed it open and entered the barroom that would host our meetings over the months to come.

It presented a completely different picture than the front rooms of the bar. The light wasn't exactly cozy, white as though from neon tubes, but it came from the corners somehow and from inadequate sources, leaving things murky. A haze filled the room, probably cigarettes, but also dust, and a smell of old wooden furniture and barroom floor. There were maybe twenty or thirty people sitting at battered and worn wooden tables painted black. On the tables stood big ashtrays and little plastic holders filled with beer coasters. There was a handsome bar with a brass beer tap, behind it wooden shelves filled with glasses. Above the wall a sign was mounted on the wall, looking as though it had spent decades hanging outside. It said: *Café Porsche*.

Behind the bar a fat man with a grey beard and a white dishtowel slung over his shoulder was smoking a cigarette. I saw Christoph on the other end of the room, fiddling with a stereo amplifier. He was holding a microphone and looked extremely focused. At the tables people chatted, men and women between thirty and fifty; this, I instantly felt, was the circle I'd been looking for all the while, not just tonight. Some had beer glasses in front of them, some were drinking cola or orange juice or water. There wasn't much smoking. A few other people seemed not to know anyone, sitting and staring at Christoph or into empty space or reading a book or a newspaper.

At the back of the room, where Christoph was fiddling with the amplifier, three steps led up to a little stage. It was framed by a black curtain, and I could make out two windows in its back wall, boarded up and painted black. Someone was starting to set up a few rows of seats in front of the stage; later on people brought over the chairs from their tables and added them to the rows. I saw tall stacks of chairs against another wall and big aluminum kegs with folded-up beer tables stacked on top of them. There was no music playing. If you made an effort, you could dimly hear the noise from *Nach(t)schub*, the bar out front. But it sounded very far away, as though coming from a different building.

Once Christoph looked up from the amplifier and glanced around the room, and our eyes met. He gave me a nod and a smile and motioned with his head in the direction of the bar, evidently telling me to get myself a drink. His gaze and his gestures instantly conveyed the same matter-of-factness as his very first phone call. I could see that he was engaged in mental preparations, probably getting ready to make a speech, and that I shouldn't go up to him now. I'd better wait till later to say hi to him properly and tell him how happy I was that he'd chosen me for this, because it already felt like belonging to a chosen group, though at that point there was no objective sign of such a thing.

I ordered a glass of beer from the man with the grey beard and asked him if this was his bar. Yes, said the man with the grey beard, the whole place belonged to him, up front was where he made the money and back here, you could say this was left over from the good old days. This used to be everything, he said, gesturing around the room. *Café Porsche* was all there was. But at some point the building had been renovated and you couldn't afford downtown rents nowadays, not with a place like his. Up front, he pointed through the wall at *Nach(t)schub*, that's the kind of place I'd never go myself. I took a good look at the bars that do good business around here, and kind of from a distance I duplicated a really booming place, and now it's booming itself and making a killing. But I've never tapped a single beer there. This is my new business model: The place I never wanted pays for the place I always wanted. There's something satisfying about it. I see it as a kind of cultural conservation tax. A nature preserve for drinking culture. Who better to pay for it than the people who made everything go to the dogs, don't you think?

It was a few moments before I realized that I was supposed to agree with him, that I was being initiated into a species threatened by extinction and rallying in self-defense. That made me feel uncomfortable. I congratulated the owner of *Café Porsche* – Hubi, as I later learned – and raised my glass to him in a toast to drinking culture or something equally inane, and then came a squeal of feedback, someone cleared his throat, the conversations trailed off and Christoph said: Good evening! So ceremoniously that the prospect of being part of a whole that transcended me instantly seemed appealing again.

We are here, he said, because we want to make a film.

From the very start we want to make this film collectively.

The working title of our film is:

*The Ghastly Horror.*

Other people started laughing, as though he'd made a joke. I didn't understand. I didn't think it was funny. I started to wonder if I was missing some key information. If the others knew more than I did. If there had been previous meetings I hadn't been invited to, and if so, why not.

The genre, Christoph said through the others' ebbing laughter, the genre of our film is horror. And the reason, he said, why we made that choice (now I was positive that some or maybe even all of the people in the room had met before without me), is our society's fundamental problem: fear. Several people nodded. The fear lurking in people's hearts in this country and in their bellies and breathing down their necks (Christoph touched his open hand

to the corresponding body parts as he spoke), that fear is the engine driving the ship of our society across the ocean of suffering, ignorance, brutality and coldheartedness. In this day and age horror is our society's status quo. No one can claim to me that he's capable of walking through an ordinary German housing complex at night and looking into the lighted kitchens and living rooms and seeing anything but sheer horror. Fear is everywhere, and it dictates everything we do. It's the subtext of conversation on the subway, in the supermarket and at the bars. It governs the governments that govern us. It determines the markets and how we raise our children. In this day and age and the country we live in, making a horror film, a film based on people's fundamental fears, has nothing to do with entertainment. It's a document. When we make a horror film today, we're bearing witness to our time. We aren't making a drama or a comedy – we no longer believe that the state we're in can be translated into that kind of story. The theater of our time has grown a shaggy pelt in the full moon, it grunts and snorts and its fingers have long yellow nails. There'll be no dancing at the end, except perhaps a dance on the smoldering remains of our cities, ankle-deep in the guts of its inhabitants, in the shards that are left us.

The style of Christoph's speech clearly held a strong appeal for everyone in the room. He didn't come across as a preacher, more as someone who had come to plead a cause. Not subservient, but without the attitude of a ruler or a leader. I'd be glad if you went along with me, because I need you for this – that would be one possible translation of what resonated between his words in *Café Porsche*. But actually, of course, there was no translation at all. Maybe even back then I was fooling myself.

Fear's object, said Christoph after a pause for reflection, possibly artificial, but quite authentic-seeming, is the Other. The biggest fear of all is the fear of the Other within us. Recently I read the words: Fear is the anticipation of pain. More than anything else, it is the pain we fear that transforms our own body into something alien, hostile, unpredictable. But we'll come back to that later. At any rate, the very first step toward making our film is to explore the Other we fear, inside ourselves. As you know, we don't have adequate funding for this film. That's not a problem, though. No film ever had adequate funding. But what this means, for us and for you, is that you aren't just the scenographers, camera operators, costume designers, runners, set guards, drivers, cooks, stylists, sound engineers, script supervisors, musicians and actors. More than that, you're the plot, the protagonists and the scene of the action. More than any film before it, this film will be the product of a collective effort. Because first, before we even start production, we'll meet here every week for as long as we need to and analyze our collective experience. I'm convinced that at this point in history the

enemy our art is still capable of confronting is not something outside us, whatever form that might take. It's not the USA or IS or the secret service. It's somewhere hidden away inside us, beneath the shame and the rituals and the narratives of success and individuality. I'm not asking you, I'm challenging you to spend the coming weeks digging down in this place, together with all the others, to excavate what will ultimately form the raw material for our film. I expect nothing less than this: that together we will tap into the productive power of fear and learn to grasp what it ideally can be: the threshold to the Other, the truly new.

A fat man sitting in one of the front rows raised his hand. At first I thought he was raising a table tennis paddle, but then I saw it was his hand, encased by a plaster cast or a thick bandage and fixed to a dark plastic splint. Christoph gave him the floor and the man asked, his voice unamplified but clearly audible, whether there was even a schedule yet. That was something people here might be interested in hearing. To know what they'd be getting into, mid- to long-term. Christoph said that wasn't up to him and anyway it was too soon to say. He asked the fat man if he was planning to go on vacation. Again a few people laughed, and again I didn't understand why. Addressing everyone now, Christoph spoke into the microphone and said that the terms still had to be worked out. For the time being we were trying to find out who was interested in joining the project. He was sure there were a number of open questions, and tonight and in the evenings to come he'd collect them and answer them as soon as he could. For him, to start with, it was important that we start talking to each other. I'm sure everyone knows how this microphone works. It's right here, and there's a stage back there, if anyone feels they need the proper setting. A murmur swelled, Christoph set aside the microphone and leaned over to a woman sitting at a table who showed him a notebook with something I couldn't make out from the bar.

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On my second evening in Ulm, the launch of the fear sessions, a small, stout, short-haired woman mounted the stage in *Café Porsche*, holding the mike. The audience applauded as she came onstage, as they did nearly every time to come; I thought it seemed quite fitting, especially for the person with the courage to be first. She introduced herself as Marlies and said she was really a costume designer. At least, that was what she'd studied to be. But in the past she'd done both costume and set design in the theater. She'd often worked for small

theaters, where it was completely normal to have just one person for both jobs, costumes and sets, to save money. That's the way it is, she said, sadly enough.

Marlies said: To be able to stand here and say that something is the way it is, that's something I can't take for granted. Then she apologized for putting things in such a roundabout way, I'm sorry, she said, I wasn't sure quite where to start, and I thought that would be a good opening. But now I'm actually pretty nervous. Down in the barroom I think we were all making a big effort to smile at her encouragingly. And she went right on, saying she'd spent several weeks in a psychiatric clinic this year. It was her first time; she'd been treated for an anxiety disorder. Early this year, she said, I was dismissed from an extremely stressful production because the director fell out with the theater's artistic director and the play was cancelled. I had put a huge amount of energy into it, like all the other people involved, for weeks we'd had massive pressure put on us, with crying and screaming, and it made me furious to think that it had all been for nothing, just because two people couldn't manage to communicate or because they had to play some stupid power game with each other. But at the time I didn't really complain to anyone. I took all my anger and frustration home with me and carried it around with me for days, until it made my heart sick.

First I started crying right out on the street, something that had never happened to me before. A little later, at the shopping center I always go to, I yelled at a man who kept sticking a bottle into the opening of the bottle return machine even though each time the machine beeped at him and said the supermarket didn't take that kind of bottle. He didn't get it somehow or maybe he couldn't understand the language the machine was using. I shouted at him, and right after that I thought: *Holy shit, now you're losing it*. And those words haunted me. I kept thinking: *Holy shit, now you're losing it*. In an endless loop. Now I couldn't give back my empties and I couldn't do my shopping, all I could do was go home, walking half crouched over the whole time, ducking my head because I had the feeling that any moment someone behind me would crack a whip, somewhere behind my neck, and then I'd lose my mind.

Here Marlies ducked her head, lifted her free hand, the one that wasn't holding the mike, and made the gesture of lashing a whip. It made her look as if she were imitating an old man standing at his garden fence and scolding a passerby.

I spent three days without leaving my apartment, though I hardly had any food in the house, and no toilet paper. But in my apartment I felt safe, at least for the time being. Even at home I got panic attacks, especially when I spent too long brooding over what would happen to me if I could never go outside again. I knew I had a bit more money coming from the

cancelled production, but I really should have started looking for a new gig right away. In my apartment I was always able to calm myself down. I'd lie on my bed for a long time, concentrating on my breathing, or take a bath, much too hot and much too long, and reel around afterwards as if I were stoned, standing naked at the window with my body steaming until the panes were all fogged up.

After those three days I made another attempt to go outside. It was a beautiful day, and I thought how peaceful it looked out there. I made it to the corner, and then that feeling came back, that the whip would crack any moment. I ducked my head again and turned onto a side street, where the residential neighborhood ends and the allotment gardens begin. I managed to walk partway down one of the paths, but then the feeling that it would happen any moment got so strong that I doubled up and made myself very small. Finally I couldn't take it anymore, I started screaming. I stood there hunched over, doubled up on the path between the allotment gardens on a beautiful day in the sun, screaming and shrieking like a crazy person. In retrospect it was probably a good thing I went into the gardens, because the people there always have an eye out. I didn't see a single person. No one came out of their gardens, but after a while, I can't say how long, probably fifteen minutes, no clue, two paramedics came through the gate to the gardens. They took me with them. I remember seeing the two paramedics in their white clothes and orange vests coming through the gate. I was so incredibly afraid of them that I passed out right there on the path. Later I was told that my eyes had been open the whole time, and that I'd reacted to the paramedics, at least by looking at them. But I don't remember a thing. I woke up in the hospital with a tube in the back of my hand and a dinner I wasn't hungry for on my night table. The clinic had a psychiatric ward, so I was able to stay right there.

I'm aware, Marlies said, especially after the time I spent in the psych ward, that there's nothing special about my fate. When you spend enough time with crazy people, craziness becomes normality. Often the people in the therapy groups and painting workshops and knitting lessons try to outdo each other with extreme life stories or disorders. I could tell from the start that I needn't even bother. But this isn't supposed to be about me having the most extreme possible story. The only reason I told all this is because this is supposed to be about our fears. In my case the thing is, now I know what can happen to me. And that it can happen to me over and over again. There are lots of people who get tremendous strength from knowing which way they'll fall when they fall, and that they can get up again afterwards. But that's not my experience. In reality I'm still incredibly afraid of the whip. In part because I realize, looking back, that on that path through the allotment gardens, for one dreadfully long

moment, I was living in a reality that was different from everyone else's. And the idea that at some point that could become a permanent state is terrifying. This is the first production I've joined since my stay in the clinic.

As soon as Marlies had finished her last sentence, Christoph called out a loud, very businesslike and directorial *Thank you*. At that point it wasn't even clear to me whether she was actually finished. Maybe she would have liked to go on. And we certainly would have given her a round of applause for going onstage and being the first to tell her story. At the time that struck me as a power game. With this one word and the way he stressed it, Christoph had taken control of everything she'd said, the entire situation and the potential it might have, and dragged it back into the framework of the film. Of course it was impressive how he could do that, but at the time I just thought it was completely out of line. Especially because then he leaned over to Sarah, sitting next to him, and started discussing something no one could hear. That meant that Marlies had to slink offstage as though in defeat, which made me feel terrible for her, but somehow the right moment to clap had already passed, it would have felt wrong; after all – Christoph probably would have said if someone had complained – that wasn't a performance. And we weren't an audience.