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OSTFRIESENSCHWUR

EAST FRISIAN OATH

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Sample translated by Steven T. Murray

“Gazing at the sea makes everything relative.”

Ubbo Heide, former Chief of Police in East Frisia

“What from the inside looks like a fantastic career ladder is sometimes viewed from the outside as nothing but a sorry hamster wheel.”

Chief Inspector Ann Kathrin Klaasen, Aurich Kripo

“Until ‘Beam me up’ is invented, we’re all a disadvantaged generation.”

Chief Inspector Rupert, Aurich Kripo

Ubbo Heide had spent the night enjoying his favorite pastime: simply sitting and gazing at the sea.

For him this was the most beautiful place on earth. Here, with this view of the natural might of the North Sea, even the wheelchair lost its hold over him.

Ubbo's thoughts took wing. He felt free and content. Suddenly everything seemed all right. Eventually he dozed off, as the candle in the tea warmer flickered and burned out.

Along with the tourists, the early morning ferry brought the mail from the mainland to the island.

Across from the Café Pudding the wind speed was measured at 7 to 8 on the Beaufort scale, which was officially called a Moderate Breeze and regarded by most coastal inhabitants as invigorating.

His wife Carola returned from the island's bakery with *Seelchen*, set the table, and brewed a fresh pot of tea the way Ubbo liked it: black tea with peppermint leaves.

He was snoring quietly. She liked the familiar sound. When he fell asleep in his chair he snored like a seal with asthma. Lying down, especially on his back, he was as loud as a rusty buzz saw.

Carola Heide had brought along the *East Frisia* magazine and was reading an article by Holger Bloem as she stood by the table.

The mailman rang the doorbell. Ubbo gave a start and pretended that he hadn't been asleep, but had been awake for quite a while.

As Carola pushed open the door she said: "They say the new chief of Kripo is one Martin Büscher from Bremerhaven. Do you know him?"

Ubbo smiled. "Oh yeah, I know him. . ."

He rolled his chair over to the breakfast table and grabbed the magazine. Each new issue was more important to him than food.

Carola took cold cuts from the fridge and draped them lovingly on a cutting board.

Holger had written about Ubbo Heide and his book of unsolved criminal cases. Thanks

to him the book was now in its third edition. As a result Ubbo was occasionally invited to give readings and lead discussions. He, the former chief of the East Frisian Criminal Police, called Kripo, was still plagued by his failure to solve a number of cold cases. And murderers and child abusers really belonged behind bars. In a self-tormenting way he enjoyed talking about these cases and the ineptitudes of the justice system as well as his own failure to find the perpetrators.

These events made him feel like he was doing something meaningful by passing on his experiences. He always opened with the words: “If it’s true, ladies and gentlemen, that a person becomes wise from his mistakes, then a wise man sits before you. If not, then I’m simply one of the usual idiots.”

Holger Bloem had quoted this remark and called Ubbo Heide “the genial father figure of the East Frisian Criminal Police.”

In the meantime the mailman came to the door upstairs. Carola opened the door for him and accepted a large package. It was addressed to Ubbo Heide.

“So who’s it from?” Carola asked.

The return address was written with a fountain pen, and the ink was smeared.

She tried to decipher it.

“Do you know a Mr. Ruwsch? Or Rumsch?”

Ubbo shook his head. “Never heard of him.”

The package looked at least as big as a two-layer cake or six bottles of wine.

Carola sawed away at all the packing tape.

“Did you order something?” she asked.

“No, and it’s not my birthday either.”

There were lots of Styrofoam peanuts inside, and a blue trash bag was secured with a bungee cord between a pair of freezer packs.

Carola lifted it out of the box and placed it on the breakfast table. A few of the peanuts rolled onto the cheese boards. One fell into Ubbo’s cup of tea.

Carola cautiously stuck a bread knife into the trash bag. Air hissed out. She still couldn't see what was inside.

Ubbo sliced open a *Seelchen*. Since moving to the island of Wangerooge he'd learned to love this special type of roll, and his favorite toppings were honey or beer sausage.

Then from his angle he caught sight of the hair and the nose. Instinctively he reached to take away the knife from Carola, but at the same moment his wife let out a shriek. There in the middle of their breakfast table was a severed head poking out of the trash bag, its tangled hair oily and plastered with dried blood.

Carola dropped the knife and reached behind her into empty space. The knife clattered on the floor.

She didn't faint, but she backed away from the table as far as she could go, holding her hands away from her body.

"Is that a real head?" she asked breathlessly.

"I'm afraid so," said Ubbo. He could not only see it but smell it too.

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The matter couldn't be sugar-coated. For Büscher the transfer from Bremerhaven to East Frisia was a disciplinary action, regardless of the salary increase. He was supposed to take charge of this suicide mission and serve as boss to the legendary Ann Kathrin Klaasen.

One of the guys wore a red tie, the other a blue. But both men were in agreement. The first would be only too happy to get rid of Büscher, and the other wanted to hire him.

They agreed on what to do, and Büscher looked like a donkey brought to market and being sold to the highest bidder.

"There is a form of authority," said the man with the blue tie, "that is conferred by rank. As of now it's yours, Mr. Büscher. But there is also another type of authority that emanates from the person himself. It's based on recognition of that person's actions. Naturally that's something you must earn. At the moment Ann Kathrin Klaasen possesses that authority. The

whole department in East Frisia has been depicted as a conspiratorial community. From the outside, perhaps, it may seem that they are deadly enemies, but in reality they go together like hops and malt. That's the reason for the failure of your unfortunate predecessor, Ms. Diekmann."

He leafed through his papers and swallowed hard. To Büscher he looked like someone in urgent need of a beer. With a dry mouth he went on:

"Since Ubbo Heide retired, Ann Kathrin Klaasen has pretty much been running the station — although without any official commission. But she enjoys the loyalty of her colleagues. And that cannot be underestimated."

He loosened his blue tie.

"She has apprehended four serial killers, and the journalist named Bloem has turned her into a legend. Not to mention that we in-house have seriously considered appointing Ms. Klaasen as the chief of the Aurich-Wittmund Police Department. There were actually votes in favor of such a move. But in the end it wouldn't work. Her personality is just too abrasive. She's not a good team player. She's constantly at odds with the higher authorities, and extremely eccentric."

His voice turned hoarse and he cleared his throat, but no one offered him anything to drink. He tried to make the best of things.

"All the same, Ms. Klaasen cost an interior minister his job, and two state secretaries were fired. No one who takes political responsibility feels good in her presence, but that doesn't mean they don't like having their picture taken with her. She's very popular with the public."

He could no longer suppress the urge to cough, and fished a throat lozenge from his pants pocket.

"We have two graduates who have completed their studies at the German Police Academy in Hilstrup and have applied for the position."

He waved off the remark, making a face. The lozenge was now stuck to his palate.

“Excellent people, without a doubt, but in this case it would be like handing sheep over to the wolves.”

Büscher later recalled that at this moment he had looked down at his shoes. He noticed that the leather on the toes was worn, and they could use some polish.

The guy with the red tie, his superior from Bremerhaven, said: “Now don’t look so dejected. The head of Central Criminal Investigation — that’s really something! And you will be promoted from Chief Detective Inspector to *First* Chief Detective Inspector.”

The guy with the blue tie glanced at the clock and mentioned an important appointment at the Interior Ministry. He moaned: “We’ve even received an application from the police management in Osnabrück. But what we want here is an outsider who is not entangled or involved with anything or anyone. An assertive colleague with a lot of experience. In short — we want you, Mr. Büscher.”

They had both wished him much success. The guy with the red tie had given him such an odd look, as though he wanted to offer condolences.

Büscher viewed the Aurich station on Fischteichweg as something like Dracula’s castle. Ann Kathrin Klaasen and her husband Frank Weller were still on vacation on Langeoog, so Büscher had three days to prepare for the first meeting. Maybe he could manage to win over a few people or at least understand the group dynamics before the actual witches’ dance got going.

The weather was clear and sunny with a brisk wind from the northwest. On his desk he found a note, as if left behind by mistake, or even as some sort of threat: *Whoever doesn’t move with the times will perish with the times.*

An issue of the East Frisia magazine also lay on his desk. In the hallway a framed article by Holger Bloem about Ann Kathrin Klaasen hung on the wall. In other places something like that might end up on the bulletin board or in a mailbox, and later in the wastebasket. Here it was made into a holy relic.

Büscher genuflected in front of his new desk. His knees creaked unpleasantly.

I need allies here, he thought. I have to build up a network. Find a friend or at least a couple of people I can trust to some extent.

There is something that can tempt every fish; he'd learned that by going fishing. There were predator fish who would snap at flashing, shimmering tin as long as it moved temptingly enough in the water. Others would swallow rotten fish scraps or a piece of meat. He knew that the bait had to be tasty for the fish, not the fisherman.

He heard footsteps in the hall, opened the door a crack, and peered out. It was Rupert.

Büscher sauntered the few steps over to the coffee vending machine. Rupert hadn't reckoned on meeting the new chief like this in the hallway. He had imagined a ceremonious official introduction with some big shot from the Ministry of the Interior, with speeches and definitely a modest toast. Perhaps not with champagne and caviar hors d'oeuvres, but beer and knackwurst at least.

At the moment Rupert was busy trying to come up with some ad copy for the new membership campaign of the rifle club, and that was occupying him completely.

Rupert mistook Büscher for the long-awaited "technician" who was going to repair the coffee vending machine, because it tended to spew out vegetable soup when you pressed the button for a *latte macchiato*, and hot chocolate if you wanted a *caffè crema*. Under no circumstances would it produce a plain black coffee. The machine had already been replaced three times. It was big, noisy, and basically just took up space.

"It's about time you bums got this thing working right!" Rupert yelled, kicking the machine where the metal was already dented.

Büscher gave Rupert a quizzical look.

"Hey, don't give me such a stupid look! This is the third machine that doesn't work. How dumb can you be? Does anybody work here who can fix this piece of shit? If not, send it back for a replacement. We've got enough idiots here."

"I don't know a thing about coffee machines."

Rupert grimaced. "Yeah, I thought as much. But this time you picked the wrong guy."

All you boys should be thrown in the slammer!”

Büscher cleared his throat. “My name is Büscher.” He pointed to his name on the door. “And this is my new office.”

Rupert had no idea how foolish he looked with his mouth hanging open. As if he were playing charades and trying to look like a human vacuum cleaner.

“You are . . . I mean, you going to be . . .”

Büscher held out his hand. “Head of Central Criminal Investigation.”

Rupert shook his hand. “Chief Detective Inspector Rupert. Please excuse me. I thought you were —”

“An idiot. I got that.”

Trying to backtrack, Rupert said: “I’m sorry, I was lost in thought. We’re supposed to be thinking up an ad campaign to entice new members to join the rifle club . . . I’m working on a catchy slogan . . .”

“Very interesting,” Büscher said, feigning interest. Rupert swallowed the bait gratefully, and Büscher could feel him twitching on the hook.

“What do you think of this? – *Join up! Learn to shoot! Make new friends!*”

Büscher nodded. “Learn to shoot! Make new friends!” – Not bad. It puts sociability and camaraderie in the foreground.”

Sylvia Hoppe came storming up the stairs. She looked as if she’d hardly slept a wink and had overeaten at dinner. She was completely out of breath.

“Either, everyone on Wangerooge has lost their minds,” she panted, “or some nut has just sent Ubbo Heide a severed head in the mail.”

Rupert smiled with relief. This disastrous news was just what he needed to get out of the embarrassing situation with the new chief. A severed head was just the ticket.

Rupert blustered, “Okay, so what we’re going to need is everybody on deck. Evidence Response! Forensic Medicine! A helicopter and —” He glanced at Büscher. “Sorry. Nice to meet you. I’d like to chat, but right now we’ve got a case to handle, as you’ve just heard.”

Rupert was about to take off with Sylvia Hoppe, when Büscher shouted: “Hold on a minute! I’m in charge here. Is Wangerooge even in our jurisdiction? Isn’t it in the Jever administrative district?”

Sylvia Hoppe pursed her lips and made a gesture as if right now she really didn’t have time for such nit-picking. “It’s in Friesland County!”

“Exactly. That’s a job for our colleagues in –”

Rupert enunciated very slowly and carefully, as if Büscher were a bit thick: “This is about Ubbo Heide! Our boss!”

Sylvia Hoppe grabbed Rupert. They had no time to waste.

“But I’m your boss now,” Büscher countered meekly. He wasn’t sure whether those two even heard him. They were already heading downstairs.

Ubbo Heide, he thought. It would have to be Ubbo Heide. And then he realized that as chief he wasn’t second in command behind Ann Kathrin Klaasen as he’d feared, but actually third. They were still calling Ubbo Heide their boss. There was a hierarchy here that had nothing to do with the official flow chart.

He would have liked most of all to return home and go fishing for pike in the Geeste River using a spinner, instead of hunting down criminals here in East Frisia.

It was the end of June. The season for pike was over. And apparently his time was over too.

Ann Kathrin looked at him as though she’d just woken up from a deep sleep. “What did you say?”

Weller waved it off. “Nothing.”