

Cool Room 3

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Max Gruber first heard of the London bombings from his head gardener, who burst into the potting shed where he was putting together a batch of seedlings for the graves in the eastern corner of Oberkirch cemetery. The news had shocked him, of course - but living in Switzerland and working with the dead on a daily basis, he didn't feel particularly affected, or threatened. Not personally.

Except that next afternoon, when driving out of his private underground garage, he was suddenly blinded by the explosion of summer sunshine and let go of the steering wheel, raising his hands. Moments later his wife Rita hissed something he couldn't quite make out, as usual. Then life flicked back to normal. He'd only been trying to shield his eyes, hadn't he?

His son and daughter stood waiting in the shade of the ginkgo tree up the ramp, rucksacks at their feet, sticky ice cream cornets in even stickier fingers. Max stopped the Mercedes-Benz with a screech.

'Dammit!' he exclaimed as they slid into the polished leather seats, 'Who gave you these?' Neither of them bothered to reply and he glared at Rita for a second, then put on his sunglasses to hide the watery hurt in his eyes. And just so their ice cream wouldn't go into total meltdown, he set the air-conditioning at maximum. Rita hugged herself with both arms, ostentatiously. He stamped on the accelerator. The car lurched forward, still in gear.

20 The woman was a lost cause, Max knew. In the years following the birth of the two children his first wife hadn't been able to produce, Rita had gradually shed her outer layers of youthful brightness and warmth, like a poppy letting go of its petals, and had hardened into something else, something unyielding - a hoarder of terrible seeds. Her skull had begun to show through her skin, constantly reminding him of the bodies in the chapel of rest; her lips had become bloodless and thin, and the morning-glory blue of her eyes that had first attracted him to her now resembled the tempered grey of his gardener's tools. Her teeth alone seemed to have grown more beautiful, brilliant white and gleaming, arranged in perfect rows like tiny gravestones, while she'd whisper in that velvety voice of hers which only the highest setting on his hearing aid could capture: 'You're an asshole, Max. If you don't get your act together, I'll leave you and take the kids.'

Why couldn't at least Peter, his son and eldest, respect his wishes? He didn't ask for much, did he? No ice cream or chocolate, he'd told them, not in *this* car. Peter was nearly fourteen, for pity's sake, yet he aped his mother, talking back at him or, even worse, ignoring him. Today, wearing those knee-hugging jeans, he looked like he was still in potty-training.

'Mm, that was delicious!' His daughter Anna licked her fingers with the exaggerated smacks of a five-

year-old, although she was more than double that. Max tossed her the pack of wet wipes he kept in the glove compartment for emergencies, and she whined: 'I hate these, Dad. They smell like toilet cleaner.'

Rita reached for the bottle of Hennie mineral water in the holder and, turning in her seat so he couldn't see her face, handed it to Anna. Then they both laughed. Peter didn't - his eyes closed, shutting out the world around him, he was wired up to his iPod again. For once, Max was glad.

They were all ganging up against him. And here he was, chauffeuring them to their weekend chalet in the Toggenburg instead of looking after the cemetery garden-centre for another few hours. Late Friday afternoons were worth staying open for, especially at this time of year, just before the summer holidays, when folk wanted to make sure their loved ones would be adequately bedecked while they themselves got ready to bare their all on some exotic beach. Well, his own loved ones were alive and kicking and for the next couple of days would be soaking up the Alpine sun, overdosing on Coca Cola and half-melted slices of *sachertorte* from Meyer's, the local *confiserie* as they lay splayed out amidst a clutter of magazines, mobiles, DVD players, iPods and computer games, like hawkers in some futuristic flea market.

Maybe his problem really was age - at sixty-five he was probably too old to be a father. That's certainly what Rita believed, calling him 'a bloody geriatric' whenever she thought his hearing aid was switched off. Or maybe his brain was going mushy - just like his gut, which was expanding by the day and beginning to hamper his work among the graves.

Max squared his jaws and indicated to join the *autobahn*. The Mercedes-Benz was his pride and joy, done out in burgundy calfskin, with a rosewood-and-leather dashboard, an in-built audio system that boasted eight speakers, and speed-proportional power steering. Driving it felt calming, almost like tending to the flower decorations in the chapel of rest.

He nodded to himself as he pictured the latest arrival there, in Cool Room 3, a silver-haired lady with soft, peaceful features, whose relatives had ordered several bouquets of roses, lilies and irises, and a posy of marigolds for her chest. The lady looked so much like his own mother, dead now for ten years, that he'd felt compelled to add a gift of his own, a small pot of gentians - his mother's favourites.

60 Max blinked. He was changing gears when something slithery-warm hit his hand.

'Oh,' Anna retched. 'Oh, oh.'

'Max!'

He swerved to an abrupt halt on the hard shoulder, too angry for words.

Rita rushed to help Anna from the car, then clasped the girl round her waist as she threw up in long, shuddering spurts into the weeds by the safety fence. Max turned away and reached for the wipes and paper hankies. Most of the vomit had landed between the front seats, on the centre armrest, the

handbrake casing and in the folds around the gear stick.

'Forgot to take her travel-sickness tablets again, I bet,' Peter commented from behind and with a 'Ugh, what a stink!' climbed out, plugged his earphones back in and waddle-walked over to the verge, the seat of his trousers midway down his legs.

Maybe the time had come to teach them all a lesson.

For a moment Max remained completely still. Then he pulled shut the passenger doors. Opened his own. Grabbed Rita's handbag, dumped it on the asphalt. Grabbed the rucksacks, dumped them, too. And flung out the soiled tissues in a final act of defiance. When he started up the engine, only Rita glanced round, assuming no doubt he wanted to keep the air conditioning running to reduce the smell.

In the rear view mirror he saw Peter struggling to catch up with the car, saw his mouth open and close in unheard shouts, saw him flail his hands - and give him the finger.

'And you,' Max said, quite unperturbed.

80 Shortly afterwards his mobile went. He let it ring for a while, then switched it off. Even a 'bloody geriatric' could pull off a stunt on occasion. 'Stuntman Max,' he muttered in his best American accent, grinning to himself. 'Stuntman Max.'

On the radio he found some New Orleans jazz and hummed along to it, upping the volume until his whole body seemed to vibrate. He hadn't felt so pleased with himself in years. Tapping the steering wheel in time, he decided to take the next exit and drive straight back home. He could do some more work in the nursery - the roses needed spraying again - or he could help Michael, his head gardener, to finish the replanting job in the cemetery's eastern corner. And if he didn't want to get his hands dirty, he could always re-open the flower shop for a couple of hours. Or - his fingers stopped drumming and he drew in his breath sharply - he could go up to the chapel of rest, unlock its doors, and visit Cool Room 3 with the old lady. Paying his respects, as it were.

The more his second marriage was falling apart, the more he missed his mother. Rita had become distant towards him, distant and spiteful, her initial playfulness replaced by a pent-up rage so intense it seemed to him that one day soon the force of it would crack her skull apart, letting her anger come spilling out like the black seeds from a poppy head.

But he would fight her - he'd never agree to her taking the kids away from him. Never!

He speeded up. He enjoyed driving fast for a change, weaving in and out of the lanes - a bit like slaloming down a mountainside. Rita would have complained, of course.

100 Who the hell did she think she was, anyway? The youngest of a houseful of starving immigrant kids, a lowly chef by training! And she knew she'd never been a looker, so why pretend otherwise? In the old days, when he and Rita still had dinner guests, he used to joke that men got married for all sorts of reasons, for beauty, money, children or good cooking, and that he, not being greedy, had restricted himself to only two of them. This usually earned him a few laughs, even from Rita. His most

risque jest, about the advantages of having an ugly wife, he'd reserved for special company, once he'd offered round the cigars and poured the Courvoisier.

Damn, he'd just missed the exit; his hearing may be going, but he'd better not lose his grip on reality. Not that his sense of smell seemed to be affected, unfortunately. Max wrinkled his nose at the lingering whiff of sick, and suddenly became aware of how hot he was feeling - as if he was having an attack of those menopausal flushes women were supposed to suffer from. He had a sip of the Henneiz. It tasted tepid. Then he noticed that the flow of cool air had ceased and there was a little light on next to the AC symbol on the dashboard. A malfunction. He'd have to swap the Mercedes for a courtesy car at his dealership. With a sigh he zapped open the windows and sunroof. The whooshes of sultry summer air ripped the jazz into gasping shrieks of saxophone and trumpet until, sighing again, he tuned in to some talk-show station where voices rose and fell in soothing waves.

A new exit was approaching. When Max slowed down, the heat began to press in on him once more, pawing him like a child's sticky hands. He zapped the sunroof and windows shut. Abruptly the waves of voices separated into individual words and phrases, in English and German, their meaning anything but soothing:

'...was too loud for our ears to hear even. For a while there was nothing. Blackness. No sound. Then the screaming started. Smoke everywhere. People coughed and moaned. Cried. I found myself stumbling along the rails, blindly, away from the horror of it all...'

120 Max was about to switch back to music when an elderly man said, 'The worst of it is that we never had the chance to say goodbye. Never had the chance to make amends. Never had the chance...'. The speaker began to sob, in between sobs repeating brokenly, 'We never ... had the chance, never had ... the chance, never -' before he was cut off by a mournful piece of classical music.

All of a sudden, travelling in the opposite direction now on the *autobahn*, Max heard what could only be his own voice reverberating inside his head, accusing him: 'What if something's happened to Rita and the kids?' As he listened, more and more stricken, he pictured terrifying scenarios: abductions at knife point, drunk drivers, drugged drivers, maniac drivers, crashes involving lorries, tankers. Until he almost burst into tears. And realised with a jolt that he was feeling sorry for himself - not for them. That he'd been hoping something *had* happened to his family in order to reproach himself, making a feast of his own failings. Adding spice to his empty existence. And wasn't that what he was going to do anyway, by returning to the old lady in Cool Room 3? Wasn't he trying to salvage something long dead and gone? Glorifying it? His mother had died ten years ago. Why the hell couldn't he live with the living? Even if he hated them -why couldn't he at least accept them?

He was beginning to feel hot again; the sweat was pouring off him. He had another drink of mineral water. Christ, was he going mad? He'd never believed in this kind of psycho-babble.

All that soul-searching stuff was for the crazies. He'd always been the proactive type, a man of action who did what he did, and knew what he did was right. Passing the spot where he had abandoned Rita and the kids, he strained to see them, but his view was blocked by several lorries engaged in one of their lethal chase games.

He knew he would take the next exit. Knew he would go back to pick them up. He would apologise. Grovel if necessary, though not too much.

The balls of tissue paper were still there, blown across the two lanes of the *autobahn* like the start and finish of a trail, the nightmare version of 'Hansel and Gretel'.

Max drew up on the hard shoulder, stepped into the sweltering heat and went over to the safety fence, as if to check Rita hadn't used a wire-cutter to escape down the embankment with the kids.

So they had climbed into someone else's car. Had trusted a stranger. A stranger, for God's sake! Max began to roar. He roared along with the traffic noise. Roared until he could feel his head going purple, ready to burst - when, out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a flash of brightest crimson: wild poppies, a whole cluster of them. Their flimsy petals were fluttering and waving in the continuous air stream. Beckoning. He approached cautiously, as though they might explode and spit their black seeds at him. Then he pounced. And yanked out every single one of them.

After getting back into the car he drove more slowly, his shirt limp with sweat and clinging to his belly, the bunch of poppies on the passenger seat starting to look ragged, the mountains rearing up larger than life. Every so often, he took a swig of Henniez.

Even before he rounded the last hairpin bend, towards early evening, Max could tell there was no-one at the chalet. The outside shutters were closed, the garden chairs stacked and sheathed on the long balcony, the window boxes of geraniums laid out on the picnic table like a dusky pink and white tablecloth awaiting the neighbour's watering can. Everything had that feeling of suspended animation, that quivering, holding-one's-breath stillness he always sensed on opening the door after a week's absence.

He pulled into the neatly paved drive. He could have saved himself the trip, goddammit! Could have saved himself the anguish. Rita and the kids must have hitched a lift back home. By now they'd be all stoked up, spoiling for a fight, wondering where the hell he was. He seized the poppies next to him and began to tear off their petals, dropping them out of the car window by the fistful. When he had finished, he stuck the stalks with their skull heads into the empty Henniez bottle, like trophies. He U-turned and drove off without a backward glance, down the hairpin bends, through the Toggenburg roadside villages, back along the *autobahn*.

He reached Oberkirch just after nightfall.

Coasting towards his house, Max noticed there were no lights on, despite the darkness. What the hell were they playing at? They were sure to be home. Where else would they be? But already, in the pit

of his stomach, he could feel the stone-heavy weight of dread. And as he drove past the ginkgo tree, down the ramp into the underground garage, he suddenly understood the elderly man on the radio, sobbing so hard - and he felt blinded now not by an explosion of summer sunshine but by a never-ending, tunnelling blackness.