



## Vanity's Sting

*By Constance McCutcheon*

Herr Hoffman came on like a man ready to kill pigeons, which inspired my confidence in him. If only he had killed them. But he disappointed us time after time, those closest to him bitterly. Disappointing others was not his failure, however, but his revenge.

And yet, the man did ultimately fail. Prematurely. At 69. Kicked the bucket. As I look down at his window from my terrace even now, the thought of his absence fills me with dispiriting surprise, a sense that he left us twisting in the wind after all, followed by disdain, both promptly expunged by his real legacy, disappointment, which

only betrays how high my regard for him had been. His death affected us all the same way. To that degree he was successful.

He really did throw in the towel. I never thought he would. I expected him to rise, at least to hang on as he had these past ten years, stoked by the astounding rage that enabled him to persist as the most annoying pest his family could imagine and one of the most expensive healthcare cases German society ever had to endure. All of which, as was said above, he did on purpose.

He was an alcoholic and a pill-popper only to vex that unhappy fraction of the world pressed to populate the narrow strip bordering his hellish vortex—that is to say, everyone who came into contact with him—to the utmost degree he possibly could. He fell down and broke his hip, okay, that was not planned; and during the operation the doctors made some sort of mistake and left something in his hip, which was also not planned. For a year, I watched him diligently, patiently, cheerfully creep around the courtyard with his walker in an attempt to regain his strength. He even quit drinking. During that time, he showed stubborn determination—the kind of determination I always expected from him—and it was an inspiration to see. His determination was the more impressive when, after a year of pain and no improvement, it was discovered that his hip had come undone and that he required another operation. It was during the performance of that second operation that the mistake made by the first surgeon or someone on the team was discovered, which meant the past year of long-suffering attempts at rehabilitation had been for nothing.

The problem is—every one of us being a wick of only finite length—that was it for Herr Hoffmann. The last straw. The final blow. He guttered. His energy furling into a furious resolve to commit suicide by the whiskey teacup. Thereafter, he became as helpless an invalid as it was possible to be, when it was convenient for him, that is.

Looking down towards his window one evening after that second operation, my eye dwelled first, as always, on the shock of exuberant growth that filled the small cavity of his balcony. For all

his misanthropy, his plants always thrived. Beyond that fringed screen, all was dim. He used to keep a light on evenings; hell, he kept it on all night just to spike someone's electricity bill was my suspicion. But now, early evening though it was, the dark room behind the plants seemed deserted. He wouldn't be in bed at this hour, would he?

As I reflected, I quickened. There was movement. Someone was in there. On directing my focus, I made it out more clearly: a single, modest movement, slow but constant. I discerned more: an arm, his arm, conveying something to his lips and returning it to the tabletop, up to his lips, down to the tabletop. His cup of whiskey tea. Perhaps in between a drag on a cigarette, the reason, by the way, I kept an eye on the place: I was convinced that one fine night he was going ignite his apartment and set the whole building on fire, and on purpose. I was afraid of that. I believed him capable of that. I believed it was something he would like to do.

Herr Hoffman succeeded in worsening his state to win ever higher levels of home care from the insurance company in order to be as expensive a burden on society as possible: that was how the man's mind worked. Towards the end, he had healthcare workers coming in three times a day who doubled as housekeepers and cooks, fixing him an evening meal, doing his shopping, tidying his single-room apartment as cursorily as possible to get out of there because, man, even the air between the heavy glass doors that encapsulated his segment of the apartment building hallway reeked from his stench. I know because I had to go through it every day to get to my hobby room where I keep my bike, which was and is my principal means of transportation. Whenever he left his apartment door open, which was most of the time because the smoke and stink in his room were so bad even he couldn't stand it, the air in that segment of hallway became intolerable if you weren't hurrying through it of necessity to get somewhere else, and I do not understand why his neighbor—there was just one other apartment that opened onto that miasmic joint—didn't threaten to notify the health authorities if the man continued to keep his door open, and then do so. In the summer, when it got very hot, he kept his door open all night long as well,

then complained when someone reached in and stole his wallet. Ask me why he would keep his wallet by the open door, and then ask what there could have been in it to steal. His complaint rang of pure, bitter, rancorous spite, nothing more.

Yes, I saw his arm moving evenings, supping incessantly on his whiskey tea, pulling on a cigarette. The rest of him sat inert, facing the source of what dim light there was in that stink hole, the television. It did not brighten my life to know what he did every evening, but it sickened me when I realized that's how his days started. On my way past his door one morning to get my bike, I heard the set. It was already on and, yes, it was as if I could see through the door: him propped erect at that tender hour, staring blasphemously into the glowing screen, transporting the appalling liquid to his lips, his seat of intelligence fecund despite the perpetual alcohol bath and casting a seed of doubt as to whether he should die that particular morning or not. Only doubt could have kept him alive so long: his uncertainty as to whether he could cause greater damage to those who cared and to those who didn't but paid by persisting in the state in which he was now living or by dying. Eventually he chose the latter, but at that point I'm sure he realized there was no choice involved: he was in the grip of something more powerful than even his own volition so that when maybe he did change his mind about dying, or dying just then, there was nothing he could do about it. He had delivered himself over, was sliding down, the low points scorching already, and it terrified him, as it would anyone. The genius of a billion-nerved reticule to resonate pain trumped even the diabolical Herr Hoffmann.

The question is why Herr Hoffmann got this way. I had a chance to speak occasionally to his second wife, separated from him for some years at that point, who came by on her days off from the bakery across town to vacuum, dust, and clean out the coarser rubbish from his room whenever he was due back from one of his intermittent emergency jaunts to the hospital. Those visits to the hospital had become more frequent, which should have meant his room was getting neater, brighter, cleaner all the time because she was there so often to do just that; but such was not the case. Each

time it was as if beginning anew to try to freshen the place at least enough to provide a pleasant and salubrious atmosphere that she hoped would give him incentive to gain strength and in some small way encourage him to quit drinking, which she believed was the main problem. I knew, of course, that his main problem was rage, and what she told me after his death confirmed that. She herself, it turned out, was not unaware. So apparently she knew her efforts were hopeless. The more admirable her repeated housekeeping missions.

Herr Hoffmann, according to Frau Hoffmann, had worked in the real estate department of a large grocery store chain, apparently top dog there, if that's possible in such a position. But he could tell everyone around him what to do, and that was top dog to him, top dog enough, anyway. Then the grocery store chain merged with another grocery store chain, as happens in this globalizing world, and there were two top dogs in one grocery store real estate department. One had to go. That one was Herr Hoffmann, and he never got over it. He was offered another position, a good position, but that did not satisfy. He struck out on his own as an independent real estate agent. On his business card—he gave me one when I first moved into the building, at which time the Hoffmanns were my next-door neighbors and Frau Hoffman number two still with him—it stated *Objectverwaltung*. I never knew what that was, but I thought it was impressive. It must have meant what Frau Hoffman said: real estate agent.

By the time the wall had fallen in Berlin in 1989, Herr Hoffmann was already too inebriated too much of the time to be able to travel the longer distances required of him to manage the properties in former East Germany assigned to him by his onetime employer, the grocery store. Nineteen eighty-nine was only two years after he had set up on his own, so it hadn't taken long for his resentment of being displaced at the grocery store chain to disable him. Nothing had happened after that to stoke his fires, no catastrophe, no extramarital affair on the part of his wife, no family disloyalty, not even terrible lack of success as an independent agent, thanks to the support he received from the villainous grocery store. The

displacement was all it took. His fires burned bright feeding on it. He popped pills. He drank. With a vengeance. And if he couldn't make the grocery store chain care, you better believe he could make his second wife care. And she did, until she left, because something she couldn't take for too long was the meanness. He was mean and bitter and spiteful and dishonest and she was his target because there was no other. To everyone else he was sweet as pie, especially when she was around, just to show her how sweet as pie he could be to make being mean cut that much deeper when he had her to himself.

He rapidly got worse when she moved out, in part to become as great an inconvenience to her as possible. But all that's been said. It's just that at this juncture his problem became obvious to the rest of the world. It was now the janitor he imposed on to bring him whiskey, and then beer when the doctors said they would not send him back home but to a nursing home if he was brought into the hospital one more time as a result of injuries suffered from falling down drunk. He was rationed two bottles of beer a day.

"But who's going to bring him two bottles of beer a day?" Frau Hoffmann asked me. I had been slinking past on my way to get my bike when I ran into her. She had again been called out on her day off, harried and distraught, to do the impossible: freshen Herr Hoffmann's fetid burrow.

"The janitor?" I supplied hopefully. Not being the janitor, I thought that would be a splendid solution.

She shook her head. "He'll bring him anything he wants and as much as he wants."

After a pause I admitted I could do it. "I come by here every day," I thought out loud. "I could easily put two bottles of beer outside his door and pick up two empties. And," I considered it more seriously, "I really wouldn't mind getting a new crate of beer for him every ten days."

"But where would you keep it?"

"In my hobby room. It's just down the hall."

“Let’s go in and ask him about this,” she said, convinced of the idea. Hiding my reluctance, I retraced my steps to push my way behind her into the noxious vapors of Herr Hoffmann’s apartment. There the man sat, in the chair from which he had countless times eerily impressed me with the disembodied motion of what I had assumed was his arm glutting his rage to fatten his vanity. He stared hard at us, his eyes glazed and bulging out of his head. Frau Hoffmann explained the wonderful solution to his problem.

“You have the whole crate right here,” she explained gently to him. Looking down I could see that what she said was true. Herr Hoffmann’s bed was positioned against the wall. Right beside the bed was the chair in which he sat. Positioned on the floor by the head of the bed was the crate of beer.

Herr Hoffmann stared at her wordlessly.

“And Frau McCutcheon said she can come by every day and put two by your door and come in and have a little visit with you and take the empty bottles away. Now wouldn’t that be something to look forward to?”

I realized the error of my offer. I most certainly had not said I would come in and visit with him every day.

Gravely Herr Hoffman looked down to think, but about what, I was not sure. What he was really pondering, I felt, was who these two strange women were and how they had gotten into his room, because about that he seemed not to have a clue in the world. In profile, his eye bulged so far forward that it looked like it would pop out of his head if he sneezed. And that he could pop it right back in again afterwards.

Caringly Frau Hoffmann continued her argument: “You may not remember that you’ve had your two for the day and that you’re not to have any more until tomorrow. This way there will be no mistake. How many have you had so far today?”

A pause as grave as a metaphysician’s followed, then with slurred speech that I could scarcely understand although his answer

consisted of a single syllable, he delivered his testimony, “One.” It was not yet nine in the morning.

“That means that you can have one more today, but what are those?”

I looked to where she indicated. Sure enough, lined up neatly by the side of his chair, right where his hand would hang if he let his arm dangle to the floor, were three bottles of beer and an empty. He readily looked down—dropping his head was easier than raising it—but said nothing.

“You can have one more for today. You have three there. What are those others there for?”

It took another profoundly thoughtful pause on the part of Herr Hoffmann for him to finally inform her, “Tomorrow.”

I was hard put to hide a grin. The man’s logic was impeccable, his powers of repartee never in better form.

“Frau McCutcheon has offered to put two by your door every day, so there’s no mistake. That’s a pretty good deal, wouldn’t you say? What do you say to that?”

Surely this was the most dire threat Herr Hoffmann had been faced with in months, yet he sacrificed neither composure, diplomacy, nor his objective. After awarding the matter deep thought, he looked up, sure of himself. “I’ll think it over,” he slurred.

My grin broke through. I knew full well that my beer duty could begin only after that lengthy process had been completed.

“Will you get in touch with her when you decide? You will let her know, won’t you, when you know?”

He replied gravely that he would.

He never did. The next and last time I saw him was unexpected and emotional for me. I don’t know how it was for him, but the whole incident has caused me to wonder about him even now.

It was Saturday dinnertime when my doorbell rang. On answering, I found Herr Hoffmann in the hallway his back turned toward his



walker and sitting on the seat designed for the purpose. He looked pretty good and didn't stink. In fact, he seemed shining and chipper and bright.

He slurred a few words that I had trouble making out, but I got the gist of it: he needed money, money for groceries. I wondered briefly what groceries he could possibly need or get at seven on a Saturday evening, but I asked how much he required. Between ten and thirty Euros was the answer. I asked him to wait a moment, and in short order was able to hand him thirty Euros. He thanked me warmly, said I would have it back within three days, and bid me good night.

He didn't pay me back in three days or in four or in five, and, to tell the truth, I was disappointed. Not that I felt I had been made a chump of. Without doing Herr Hoffmann a disservice, I have to admit I never realistically expected to see the money again. Yet his promise had been so clear, so definite, so sober. His fulfillment of that promise would have confirmed my best feelings about the man, that he was a reliable, cunning fighter for the less able, a champion for the naïve, a killer of pigeons when pigeons became, as they had for us in this apartment house, a veritable plague. I shrugged it off. It was unlikely he even remembered borrowing the money.

The following Saturday, on returning home from a late afternoon out, I saw to my wonderment that I had mail although I had already emptied my mailbox that day. What I pulled out was a crumpled envelope that bore no address or stamp, just the words *Danke Schön* scrawled in spindly letters across it. Puzzled, I looked inside. There lay three ten-Euro bills. Marveling, I climbed the stairs and rang at his door. There was no answer. I listened. All was silent.

On my way to my hobby room the following Wednesday I spied Frau Hoffman coming towards me and the elevator, which was just behind me at that moment. "It's dead," I heard her say, then cursed to myself that the elevator was once again not working. It's hard lugging that bike up and down three flights of steps. I don't really need to go swimming after getting that kind of exercise.

But she continued to call out, making me realize my mistake: “Pardon me, I shouldn’t be yelling at you like that. On Monday. He died Monday.”

Now the sense soaked in. “Herr Hoffmann ... died?” I hung my head.

She was on her way out with two bags of ripe garbage and had to keep going, she said.

As I made my way past the open door of the deceased Herr Hoffmann’s apartment, I spied a head, a figure, sitting in Herr Hoffmann’s chair. I had misunderstood after all. He wasn’t dead; the lift—which is masculine in German—was not working; Frau Hoffmann had to lug those bags of garbage down three flights of steps.

I knocked timidly and entered a few steps. The figure rose and turned, resolving itself into Boris, Herr Hoffmann’s burly, blond, orange-skinned, putatively gay son. For the third time within moments, I felt myself unpleasantly twisted. Taken off guard, I expressed very awkwardly to the approaching man my condolences for what I now realized was in fact true after all: Herr Hoffmann had died.

Boris retreated and deliberately and I feel very knowingly reseated himself in the chair his father always sat in. I seated myself in a flimsy director’s chair, and we talked teary-eyed. Frau Hoffmann returned, sank down on the bed, and joined in. We talked and talked and talked, tears coming unexpectedly and quickly drying only to come again. It was at this time that I learned the story of Mr. Hoffmann’s displacement at the grocery store. Then out of the blue Boris asked: “The thirty Euros. Did you get them?”

“The thirty Euros?” I echoed, nonplussed. “Yes.” Then guiltily: “How do you know anything about them?”

“It was the last thing he did before we took him in. He insisted on it. He insisted on writing that note on the envelope himself, too.”

“Saturday?”

“Saturday.”

“It was exactly the Saturday before that he rang at my door, looking chipper, energetic—well, optimistic,” I amended. “Just great. All spruced up to go out and borrow some money, I guess. He said he would pay me back in three days.” I hesitated, not wanting to be petty, but needing to air my perplexity. “He didn’t.”

The censure rang harsh in the ensuing silence. Frau Hoffmann and Boris, who had no idea what I was driving at, were deflated enough not to be affected by, or even notice, the lapse in conversation. But to me, Mr. Hoffmann’s petty failure loomed large in the quiet room.

“Three days,” I persisted. “He said three days. He was sure about it.”

They only waited for me to go on, so it appeared I was rambling.

“What was supposed to happen in three days? Does he get money on Tuesdays or ... Wednesdays? Was he expecting a visitor with money? Why did he say three days?”

Boris and Frau Hoffmann continued to listen with the heavy-eyed, wordless attentiveness of fatigued grief.

“Why would he lie about that?” I griped. “Why would he even say it?” My pause perfected the silence. I stubbornly continued to spoil it: “That last appearance he made was smashing. He knew it, too. It added to his glow, I’m sure. He radiated charm. He didn’t have to ruin it with some feeble promise of paying back in three days. It was unnecessary ... unless he meant it.” Another pause, more consummate silence. Another jab at it: “The guy was champion material. Champion material. Someone people could depend on to stand up for them. Someone who would fight for the underdog. Someone who *could* fight. Someone who knew how. That’s valuable. The world needs people like that. Someone who can stand up and fight and protect people who need protecting. A warrior.” Frau Hoffmann and Boris smiled sadly. Boy, was he. “Well, he had no need to tax his might to get the money out of me he needed to get his little boat and paddle embarked down the Styx to enter that last, bad stretch,” I mused darkly. “But maybe three days pass faster in

the suicide chute than even he thought, if he meant what he said, which I continue to believe he did.”

“He was pretty bad when we got to him,” Boris remarked.

“Saturday.”

“Yes. Saturday.”

“So it took a week.”

“Let’s just say we got to him in a week,” Boris corrected laconically.

I reddened. “He said he needed money for groceries. I couldn’t call him a liar and slam the door in his face. I couldn’t do that.”

“Well, he never got the chance to buy any.”

“Of course not. He loaded up on booze and pills.”

“Apparently not.” Boris produced a lopsided smile.

“No?” I lifted my head in cautious wonder.

“There’s nothing much more anonymous than money but—you didn’t recognize those bills, did you? They may have been a little grubbier than they were a week ago, but I think he returned the very same bills you gave him. He had them lined up there.” He pointed to the one piece of furniture in Mr. Hoffmann’s room worthy of notice, a lustrous table of rich pumpkin-colored wood standing just in front of the picture window that looked out onto the balcony and its superabundant thicket of healthy plants. “Quite firmly secured under the base of that lamp. One. Two. Three.” His index finger stroked the air with each count. The lamp, too, with its elaborate, masculine wrought-iron stand, was an unusual piece. “Along with a page of advertising from Plus.” Plus was the cheapest grocery store in the neighborhood.

“So whatever he intended to get, he never got.”

“Whatever he intended to get, no one got for him,” Boris refined.

“A whole page of ads?”

“Yes.”

“Anything circled? Like Jim Beam?”

“Nothing so expensive.”

“Bananas?”

“Nothing so cheap.”

“But that means I didn’t finance his suicide rush?”

“It wasn’t suicide.”

“He said he needed groceries.”

“He was dying.”

“I couldn’t refuse.”

“Never mind,” Frau Hoffmann interjected with pained generosity.

“He had been doing it to all of us. You were no exception.”

“But he paid me back.”

“Better that,” Boris supplied indifferently, “than letting someone snatch the money.”

