

KARL MICHAEL ARMER

On the Inside Track

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WITH KARL MICHAEL ARMER

Science fiction in German has a rich and long tradition developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but many years passed before it took hold again after World War II. When it did, it assumed the lowest commercial form, the clichéd biweekly series adventure, the Perry Rhodan novellas, starting in 1961 and continuing today. Although many English-language works are translated into German, there are few truly ambitious contemporary German SF writers, and of those, only Herbert Franke and, recently, Wolfgang Jeschke have had much work translated into English. A recent sign of hope is this story by Karl Michael Armer, a businessman, magazine writer, and photographer. "On the Inside Track" shows a command of the conventions of SF storytelling and offers, in a European setting, a pleasant twist on the old idea of possession by an alien consciousness. But like the Scandinavian story in this volume, this story is more a reflection of English-language SF than a harbinger of a new German consciousness.

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July 9, 6:00 P.M. As always on beautiful summer days, Robert Förster's heart was burdened with bitterness. Colors were too bright. People were too carefree. On days like this he felt the weight of his seventy years painfully bearing down. New layers of depression and brooding anger

formed on the shell that separated him from the outside world.

Today it was worse than ever. The weather and scenery had the unreal perfection of a picture postcard that you get in the mail just when you do not want it. The sky was so high, the blue so deep that life seemed to hold nothing but promise. Every hope, no matter how elusive, seemed to be within the realm of possibility. If you were young enough. White yachts were leisurely skimming over the waters of the Chiemsee under an afternoon breeze, almost as weightlessly as clouds scudding across the sky. The multihued sails of wind surfers, vivid specks reminiscent of impressionist paintings, slipped in and out between the yachts. Cattle were grazing on a peninsula jutting out into the lake. The tinny tinkling of cowbells provided an unobtrusive but constant score for the travelogue unfolding before Förster's eyes. In the background, snow-capped peaks crowning the Bavarian Alps glistened beneath the sun in bold relief. That was the kind of day it was.

"Shit," Förster said.

He liked the way it sounded so much that he repeated it, "What a load of Goddamned shit."

The young woman sitting next to him on the lakeside bench looked at him askance. He glared back at her. Why should he care what she thought? To her he was nothing but an eccentric old coot, anyway.

"Don't you like people talking to themselves?" He chuckled. "I do. At least that way I'm talking to someone I like."

She got up and left. She had good-looking legs and a nice little ass. Like Barbara, when they were young, oh, so many, many years ago. They had been in a tiny cove on one of those secluded Greek islands. She came out of the turquoise-colored water of the Aegean sea, her svelte body covered with beads of water sparkling in the sun, Aphrodite reborn, goddess of love, priestess of their secret honeymoon rites. She seemed immortal in her glorious youth. Thirty years later she committed suicide. What had gone wrong? And why, for heaven's sake, why?

Förster's hand tightened around his cane while he tried to blink away the mist from his eyes. Look at yourself. What a sentimental old fool you have become. No style or dignity. Just lounging around insulting other people.

He was wrenched from his reverie by Samson's deep-throated growling. The big St. Bernard had woken up and was looking around bleary-eyed. He seemed to be confused. After a couple of seconds he let out a startlingly human sigh and put his head back down on his paws.

"Well, big fella, dreaming of the good old days again?" He patted the dog on the back, surprised at the degree of affection welling up in him. How thin Samson's coat had gotten. And his face was almost white. The St. Bernard

was more than eleven years old, which was tantamount to seventy-seven human years. *The poor guy is even older than I am*, Förster thought. They were two oldsters in a world filled with smart young people who never gave a thought to the fact that they too would one day be stooped and tired.

“Relics, that’s what we are, Samson,” he said. “Relics of the worst type. Of no interest to historians or learned biographers, only something for file thirteen. Let’s go before they sweep us up and away.”

When he reached for the leash he had wrapped around a metal leg on the bench, the St. Bernard suddenly jumped up and started barking as if possessed. With legs trembling, he stood in front of Förster as if confronting a dangerous enemy, his bloodshot eyes wide-open.

Förster staggered to his feet, frightened and thoroughly confused. All of a sudden he felt seasick. It was weird. What was going on here? Something was pulling and tugging at his body as if forces were operating on him without anesthesia. So this is what it is like when you die! How strange! His knees gave way. He sank back down on the bench.

Suddenly, everything was as before.

“Easy,” Förster told the dog automatically, “easy”—he hesitated for a fraction of a second, trying to remember—“Samson.”

A spastically bent hand moved across his field of vision. He experienced a moment of pure, intense horror when he realized that it was his own hand moving of its own accord. He watched his hand perform strangely intricate gestures as if doing some Thai temple dance. It seemed to him that this was not real, he was merely watching it on a monitor. Watching it with detached scientific interest.

Have I lost my mind? Förster wondered in the unnatural calm accompanying a state of shock.

“No,” answered an alien voice inside his head.

So Förster’s first contact with the extraterrestrial was cut extremely short, because he passed out right then and there.

July 9, 6:20 P.M. After a few minutes Förster came to. His eyes were riveted to a small white cloud hanging motionless in the sky, like the enigmatic remains of a smoke signal. There was that thundering stillness in his head that occurs after an explosion, or after the last passionate crescendo of a symphony when so many feelings are competing in your chest that you cannot tell them apart. The shock of being overwhelmed.

He tried to remember everything the voice had said to him in the last few minutes.

“So you’re an extraterrestrial,” he said slowly. “An E. T. in my brain.” He

chuckled in his usual fashion. "That's truly amazing. Science fiction in a live performance, in every sense of the word."

As he got no answer, he shrugged and turned his attention back to the lakeside idyll he hated so. It was an alien landscape populated by young healthy humanoids. He had nothing in common with them—had not had for many years now.

"Well then," he said. "Welcome to the brotherhood of aliens."

He felt a twinge of bewilderment.

"Aren't you an Earth person?" the voice asked.

"I was for many years," Förster replied. "But now I'm old. Old people are the extraterrestrial aliens in this world. We're so isolated that we might as well be living on another planet. Other people know that we are out there somewhere, but they couldn't care less. Life goes on without us. We have no more say about what happens. We're just onlookers, outcasts on our own world. That's why we're both aliens on this planet."

"I see," said the voice after a short pause.

"The only difference between us," said Förster, working himself into a rage, "is this. Meeting up with an extraterrestrial is usually a first-contact story, but growing older is more often than not a last-contact story."

"You are bitter."

"Yeah, that I am. Growing old's no fun."

"But you can get a lot of mileage out of these years. You're well-off, you're educated, you live in beautiful surroundings. You should be happy."

"Yeah, I should be, but I'm not. And that drives me up the wall. I'd like to be happy, but I'm not succeeding. Something's out of whack with me. I'm such an asshole that I can't be happy, even once." He started crying. "Here, look at me," he said in despair while wiping his face with a big blue handkerchief. "I never used to cry, but nowadays I get all watery-eyed whenever I see a young couple with a baby, because they remind me of my younger days." He folded his handkerchief very slowly, very precisely. "I'm sorry."

"That's all right," the alien said.

July 10, 9:30 A.M. Although it was still pretty early in the day, heat was already beating down on the Café Panorama lakeside terrace, where Förster was having breakfast. Every few seconds a refreshing breeze cooled him off. Förster, nevertheless, was sweating. The beach umbrellas were badly arranged, casting shadows on the aisles while tables stood in blazing sunlight.

Förster was sitting alone at his table, as usual. He had tried to push the

umbrella into a better position, but he was too weak. The shade had not budged. Nobody made a move to help him.

When he went to pick up his coffee cup, he noticed his hand violently shaking. He made an effort to steady it. After all, he was being watched.

“Don’t mind me,” the voice said.

Förster thought about it. “But I know you’re there,” he said. “You’re inside me. You’re using my brain like a reference book. You can make a marionette out of my body. No matter what I do, you’re watching me over my shoulder. That’s where your ‘Don’t mind me’ is a bunch of bullshit.”

“I don’t take that kind of crap from some country bumpkin like you!” The voice suddenly got loud and forceful. “Watch what you say.” Förster’s hand shook and sloshed the hot coffee out of the cup and on his other hand. It hurt. “You’re under my control, get it? So behave yourself. Just look at your dog. It knows how to obey.”

You damned bastard! Förster thought, filled with seething hate. *You damned outerspace bastard. I’m not a St. Bernard. I’m not your dog. I won’t be treated like that!*

“Bow-wow,” the alien retorted mockingly and clammed up.

July 10, 9:50 A.M. “All right,” Förster directed his message inward. “I flew off the handle a little. I didn’t mean it. Let’s be on speaking terms again.”

He got no answer.

“Hey, you . . .” Förster suddenly realized that he did not know the name of the entity possessing him. “Come on.”

The alien remained mute.

“Aw, the galactic superbrain’s pouting. How atavistic. I thought you were smarter and more objective than that.”

Förster sensed a weak emotion he could not classify, even though it seemed familiar to him. But that was the only response from the alien.

Förster felt an astonishing touch of regret. He missed the voice of the furious invader. Arguing was still better than no communication whatsoever.

He listened attentively. After several minutes he finally gave up. All alone once again.

“Well, kiss my ass then,” he mumbled. He motioned to the waiter, who seemed not to notice—as usual. Everything was back to normal.

He dropped his hand that had been sticking awkwardly up in the air and laid it on his other hand. It was a very stable position, his hands did not shake that way. He leaned back and looked out over the lake where a swan

was gliding by. The two straight lines forming its V-shaped wake sparkled on the calm green water. The swan acted very proud. It was a young swan.

July 10, 7:30 P.M. Förster was exhausted. All day long he, rather the alien controlling him, had been calling, conferring, wheeling and dealing. Hour after hour, Förster heard himself talking in some foreign language he did not understand. It was frightening. He thought he was schizophrenic.

Now he was sitting in his comfortable easy chair by an open window, trying to relax. He felt as if he had undergone major surgery, weak, jittery, old, more dead than alive. The only sounds in the room were those of birds chirping in the garden and the regular ticking of the grandfather clock. How loud it sounded! Förster closed his eyes.

"It was a hard day today," the alien's voice said softly.

Förster did not move a muscle. "Leave me alone," he babbled. "I'm bushed."

"Me too."

Taken aback, Förster blinked. Somehow it had never occurred to him that the extraterrestrial could get tired. He acted so all-powerful. He was certainly young, a thoroughly tested specialist in interstellar contact. And he had no body, he was just a mind. But minds can get tired. Nobody knew that better than Förster.

"Being tired serves you quite right," he said with the last trace of anger he could muster in his exhausted state. "Nobody asked you to come here and make weird deals. Why are you really doing it?"

"Cause it's my duty. There aren't many people on my planet who can bridge big voids between the stars by thought projection. There are only a few of us, and the work's very stressful. But somebody has to do it."

"Doesn't sound very heroic."

For the first time the alien let out something like a laugh, but there was no humor in it. "It's anything but heroic. It's very tiring and duller than dull. What's so special about being a member of an interplanetary field service?"

"Interplanetary field service?" Förster repeated disconcerted. "That's . . . I mean—I hadn't considered it from that angle yet."

"Yeah, I know. To you we're what the mythical white gods were to the Incas—powerful beings from another world, with superior knowledge and astounding devices. But we're only a couple of business people trading a few glass beads for valuable raw materials. And that's your good fortune, because instead of salesmen we could be mercenaries who'd rather rip off than pay."

"But—"

"That caught you off guard, didn't it? You pictured us as outerspace

brains, scientifically and intellectually advanced, didn't you? I doubt we are. We merely came here to do business. And I have to do it as coolly, quickly, and efficiently as possible so that I get high returns. So don't bellyache to me that you're too old and tired, because it just costs me time."

Coolly, quickly, and efficiently, Förster thought. *Strange, this could have come from Berghäuser, his former boss decades ago. Selling's like boxing, Förster. Whoever's faster, more resistant, and more powerful wins. Yes, Mr. Berghäuser. No, Barbara. Not today. I'm too tired. Have fifteen customers I have to call on.*

He noticed that the alien had been quiet for a while.

"I don't want to rub you the wrong way," the alien finally said.

"No, no," Förster said. "That's all right. It was very . . . down to earth." He shook his head and even smiled. "It's unbelievable. You have the salesman's blues. I can spot it a mile away. Too much routine and too far from home. The salesman's blues . . ."

The alien's voice again got hard and authoritarian.

"That'll be enough of that. I'll be in touch tomorrow at seven on the dot. See you then."

"Yep," Förster said. "Good night," he added after a short pause.

July 11, 2:00 P.M. Förster pushed the empty dessert dish aside and belched discreetly.

"That was good." He felt full and satisfied as he had not in a long time. All morning long he had been doing business, partly in the alien's language, partly in German or English. It had been very strenuous, but he had been filled with strange delight. He was busy again, and in a certain way he even had a goal. He had not felt like this in years.

"I'd like a cappuccino," he said to the waiter scurrying past him. He did not say it loudly, but there was a new tone of authority in his voice the waiter responded to.

"Súbito, signore."

"Well, well! Your old self again, old man?"

The overt aggressiveness in the alien's voice shocked Förster so much that he could get out only a feeble, defensive "Well, yes."

"Wow, fantastic!" the extraterrestrial said irritably. Then came a maelstrom of emotion in whose swirling confusion only one feature stood out—hysteria.

Förster paid no attention to it. He was furious. What right did this intruding interloper have to spoil his mood? For the first time in years he had a hint of lust for life, and this bastard was trying to mar it for him!

“Still the salesman’s blues?” he taunted.

“You’re damned right!” the alien exploded. “My God, how I hate it. Lousy planet, lousy business, lousy people. I can’t hack it anymore! Things were never this bad until I teamed up with you. A Sirian neurotic and an Earth neurotic—what a terrific team. Just why do I do it to myself?”

Förster was upset. It was not so much the emotional outburst per se that stirred him up, but rather the vague, almost subliminal knowledge that the alien was a mirror image of his own behavior. The signals were extremely clear—self-pity and aggression. Envious of happy people because you yourself were unhappy. Förster did not like that mirror image.

“It’s already tough enough, but you make me a complete outsider on my own team,” the alien fumed. “Every Earth person who’s been taken over by outerspacers should participate in meetings that are held in their respective countries to coordinate activities. I’m one of the few who couldn’t attend because . . .”

He hesitated for a moment, but Förster knew what was coming anyway and instinctively held his breath.

“Because you’re too old and decrepit. The long trip’s too risky for you to undertake. That’s a bad joke. I’m stranded. Stranded in a dying man.”

Förster said nothing for a long time. “Why,” he finally whispered, “do you say such things? That’s malicious and cruel.” Acting on a whim, he ordered a bottle of red wine. The alien did not interfere.

When Förster left the restaurant about an hour later, he was pretty drunk and left too big a tip.

July 11, 3:30 P.M. When Förster opened the door, Samson was lying in front of him. There was so much pain in the animal’s eyes that it had an effect like ecstasy.

“Samson!” Förster yelled. “What’s the matter with you, boy?”

He got on his knees and put his hand on the dog’s head. At the same instant, as if the St. Bernard had expended his last ounce of energy to experience one last touch from his master, Samson died.

“This is too much,” Förster wheezed. “It can’t be true.”

Mulling over the next few minutes the following day, he wondered how many tears there were in a wrinkled old man like him.

July 11, 6:00 P.M. The pen jerked across the paper and drew a wavy line resembling mountains with sharp peaks and deep valleys. Another device emitted beeping sounds which were pretty regular, but not completely so.

One of the pieces of adhesive tape holding the electrodes to Förster's body itched. An analyzing device in the corner hummed and shook a test tube of Förster's blood, an efficient new-generation Dracula.

Förster submitted to the monthly checkup with stoic indifference. He hardly noticed the humiliating procedures, the poking at and probing in his body. He lay on his back wearing only his underwear. The plastic cover on the examining table sticking to his body seemed to be clutching him tightly like a hungry octopus.

Nobody but Förster was in the room. No doctor or nurse stood watch over routine procedures these days unless something went wrong. You were connected to a multitude of machines, and Dr. Electronix performed the examination.

Everything in the room was white, bright, and clean. If the reports of people who were clinically dead and then revived were true, you seemed to float up at the moment of death and move toward a dazzlingly bright light. From that aspect the examining room with its humming, featureless brightness seemed to be a simulator for death candidates. An anteroom to death.

The thought passed quickly. Förster again stared at the ceiling impassively. He had nothing on his mind, he was just waiting for something. The E.T. did likewise. They were two aliens on Earth, isolated together. Two black holes into which all the sadness and depression in the universe poured.

July 11, 11:00 P.M. It was one of the few privileges of age, Förster thought as he poured himself a second glass of Drambuie, that you require little sleep. Too bad that you could not start on any new enterprises with all your free time.

He was sitting in the living room in his favorite easy chair. He was looking through the window at the trees, swaying silhouettes with silver leaves shimmering in the chalk-white light of a full moon. He was wide-awake, slightly drunk, and up to his knees in memories.

Acting on a whim, he put a record on. Debussy's "Claire de Lune." While the romantic piano sounds permeated the room, Förster's thoughts began to wander. Scenes from his life flashed before his mind's eye and went out again.

A joyless youth in a strict, loveless home. During his school days a long series of puzzling diseases—psychosomatic, as he now knew. An irascible father. Failure, weakling. The first year at college. Complete disorientation, which gradually gave way to a feeling of freedom. Then the outbreak of

World War II. Out of the lecture hall and up to the front. Six years in which he stopped thinking. Nothing but fight, advance, retreat. He did not hate anybody, but he killed other men to keep them from killing him. Somehow he stayed alive. He was the only one of his company of 120 men to survive the war.

Sometimes he still dreamed about shells hitting and blowing up foxholes and hurling broken bodies through the air. Bodies without faces, without limbs, but still alive. Cannon fodder for insatiable warlords. He dreamed about the icy cold of the Russian steppes, snow red with blood for kilometers, the leather belts they chewed on because they had nothing to eat. He dreamed about the Siberian POW camp where he spent four years. The Russians treated them badly, but he could not blame them for it at all. When he was finally released and after ten years returned to civilian life, a shadow lay over him. He was not neurotic or psychotic, no, but he seldom laughed and seemed singularly distant. He acted like someone who had been subjected to electroshock therapy too often and who was now waiting for the next jolt with tense anticipation.

Förster's flow of memories was interrupted when the music stopped. He flinched, drifting between reality and memories for an instant. Then he found himself back in reality.

There was a thundering silence in the room—and in his thoughts. The alien was keeping quiet. Nevertheless, Förster was sure that he was listening intently.

"Well, have you obtained any interesting information about life on Earth?" he asked sarcastically.

"Yeah, that I have," the extraterrestrial said. He seemed to want to add something, even though he then fell silent again. "Maybe you should put on another record," he said after a while. "That'll do us some good. That music was very lovely."

Förster nodded. He got up and put on Frederic Chopin's Nocturne No. 2 in E-flat Major. With music came memories. At the beginning of the fifties he got acquainted with Barbara. They got married, and she made him very happy. His climb up the corporate ladder began. He made a good deal of money. The big break kept eluding him, though. He lacked charisma, his bosses said. That did not bother Förster. He was leading a wonderful life with Barbara and the kids. But the shadow still followed him and never left. He was happy, but it was a second-hand happiness because it came from the circumstances and not from the heart. He kept telling himself: You have everything you want. You should be happy. But it did not work. He finally resigned himself to that. At least he was contented.

The record player shut off with a soft click.

“How beautiful,” the alien said. “How wonderfully beautiful. I believe music is the best thing this planet has to offer. Please play me some more of it.”

The extraterrestrial's voice was so soft and urgent that Förster unhesitatingly pulled another record off the shelf.

“Lonely, huh?” he said.

“Who isn't?” the alien replied.

Förster looked across the dark room to the corner Samson always used to sleep in. “Yeah, who isn't?”

The needle was put on the record. “Strangers in the Night.” Barbara had loved that melody. How many times had they danced to its sounds! Förster could not dance, but when he and Barbara were together, he could. “Midnight Cowboy.” He had heard this tune for the first time late one night in his hotel room. Oh, those lonely nights in a hotel while he was on the road. Being the last person at the bar. Undecidedly shaking the empty glass in his hand. One more! Sorry, sir, we're closing now. Oh, yeah, well then, good evening. Good evening, sir. Then lying on the bed sweaty and restless in his dark room. Outside it is quiet. Everybody is asleep. But not you. Soft music purred from the radio, comforting all who had no other consolation. Help me make it through the night. Lying in the dark listening to music is nice. Thoughts flow quietly. There is a bitter sweetness in your loneliness. While you are thinking over your life, you slowly fall asleep.

Förster now felt the presence of the extraterrestrial quite clearly. It seemed as if the alien had moved closer.

“Moonlight Serenade.” Also one of Barbara's favorite melodies. She had requested it from every hotel orchestra. She was a good dancer. The way she did the tango drove men crazy. Förster enjoyed it the best he could. But that was all in the past now. Barbara was dead and gone. And it takes two to tango.

He felt miserable. And the extraterrestrial felt exactly the same way. Uncertain quaking emotions struck Förster, quite obviously the telepathic equivalent of passionate crying.

Förster did not know what to do. “Now it wasn't all that bad,” he said helplessly. No, not really. “Moonlight Serenade” reminded him of his tenth wedding anniversary. They were dancing on the terrace of a luxury hotel on the Côte d'Azur. Stars twinkled in their Mediterranean splendor. The sea was a dark mirror that a phosphorescent wave crest sometimes rippled across. A colorfully illuminated fountain splashed nearby. In the background, the palatial hotel was shimmering in the darkness like a fairy-tale castle. Up there little Sandra was sleeping happily and contentedly in their room. And he danced with Barbara on and on and on. His feet hardly seemed to touch

the floor. Tonight he was Cary Grant, and Barbara was Grace Kelly.

Yes.

"It wasn't really all that bad," Förster muttered. "No, not that bad at all," he repeated, rather surprised, and fell asleep.

The ghost of a smile was outlined on his lips.

July 12, 3:00 P.M. The air-conditioning unit in the conference room was set on high. Cold. White walls, white leather and chrome furniture. Cold. A smartly dressed guy in a pinstripe suit with eyes like marbles. Cold.

The negotiations with Dr. Hellman—the name of the smiling businessman enjoying himself—had reached an impasse. Förster had not understood a word of the conversation he had been carrying on in some foreign language, but it was also unmistakably clear to him that it had stopped dead.

He felt anger and desperation rising in him, emotions that were not his own but radiated from the otherwise hermetically sealed mind of the extraterrestrial.

At first, Förster was amused by the helplessness of the all-powerful alien. But then the echo of the alien's frustration got so loud and so similar to his own depression that spontaneous solidarity germinated in him. He wanted to help his extraterrestrial tenant somehow. Nobody should be so humbled.

When the alien lost control over Förster during his emotional crisis, Förster acted without thinking. He simply got up and went to the door.

Two separate things happened.

He heard a kind of hysterical laughter in his head linked to a feeling of release.

Dr. Hellman jumped up and rushed after him, spewing out a stream of words. Obviously, his bargaining position was not so good as he made it appear.

It so happened that the alien was then able to close the deal to his satisfaction. When they left the office building and went into the heat on the street, the extraterrestrial said quite calmly, "Thanks, Robert."

That was the first time the alien had called Förster by name.

July 12, 11:30 P.M. That night, too, Förster played whatever came to mind—Tchaikovsky, Gershwin, medieval madrigals, African tribal chants, and lots of Mozart. The room was almost dark, the problems of the world far away. Everything was pleasant.

As Förster was looking for a new piece of music, he caught sight of a stack

of records that were off to one side on the shelf, separate from the others. He smiled.

“Here, this was something different at one time,” he said. “The Rolling Stones. ‘2,000 Light-Years from Home.’ That’s for you. And there, the Beatles. ‘When I’m 64.’ That’s for me.”

Yet when he picked up the record, his hand began trembling, and he realized he had made a bad mistake. Sudden grief flooded out his thoughts. Nothing was pleasant anymore.

“What’s wrong?” the alien asked.

“My kids,” Förster said. “I must’ve been thinking about my kids. I bought these records for them back then. My God, how long ago that was. Almost twenty years, Sandra and Richard . . .”

Sandra was their first child. How he had doted on that tiny tot! When her miniature hand closed around his outstretched finger for the first time, that was possibly the loveliest moment in his whole life. Her faint gurgling sounds, which had filled the house with magic harmony. Her first words, her first clumsy steps undeniably ending in a plop on her diaper-cushioned behind. And how fascinating it had been to watch that little kid exploring her world. How she laughed and marveled at things he himself no longer noticed. In those days he had learned a lot from Sandra, a new unpretentiousness, a new openness to the many small wonders in life. How uncomplicated it was to be happy.

In time, Sandra had kids herself. She had married a guy Förster could not stand, who lived in Berlin. I can’t come, Dad. Heinz has so much to do. And with the kids it’s so hard to get away, and it’s such a long trip. Some other time, perhaps. Yeah, some other time, Sandra. Click. I would not mind your telling me lies as long as you were at least happy. But you are not. Oh, Sandra. So much love that will never be returned.

And Richard was stranger still. As a kid, he had always been a bit chubby and awkward, but unbelievably friendly and eventempered, a chubby-faced angel nobody could say no to. Most of all, Förster recalled two episodes that for some reason had stayed in his mind. They were at the zoo. Richard was three years old. For the first time in his life he had gotten an ice cream cone and paid for it with the money his father had counted out beforehand. He was so proud of his accomplishment that he forgot to eat his ice cream. He stared and stared at it—his very own first ice cream—and the colored balls were melting and dripping and smearing his hands and his blissfully smiling face. A year later, on a bitterly cold Sunday in December, Richard came into his study with his broken toy truck and said, “Put it back together, Daddy. You can do it. You can do anything.” Förster saw the blind trust in the boy’s face, and sweat broke out on him because he knew he could not fix

the toy. It was a moment of both such intense pride and pain that it still moved him deeply after all these years.

Richard was now a successful dental surgeon, slim, suntanned, dynamic. He had a perfect house and a perfect wife. Everything he did was perfect. He was even perfectly unhappy. His birthday and Christmas cards always arrived punctually.

Förster noticed that he was still standing in front of the record player and was holding the album in his hand. "When I'm 64." Life is guaranteed to take the worst of all possible turns. Förster's law of autobiographical flashbacks.

With a hopeless gesture he sat down. A life filled with struggle and striving—for this wretched result? That was a cruel joke.

Suddenly, the alien's voice, which he had completely forgotten about, was in his head again. It was tender and filled with sympathy such as Förster had not experienced for an eternity.

"You're a good man, Robert Förster. I like you a lot." The alien thought for a moment. "Your memories always surprise me over and over. Our lives have so many parallels. Battling against the worst odds, giving your best, and ending up as a winner with a feeling of loss. I'm familiar with that." A kaleidoscope of incomprehensible alien scenes flashed through Förster's mind, memories of a distant planet. "Funny how life in the universe follows universal rules."

Förster felt the sincere warmth in the words of the alien, who did not seem to him as strange now as he once had. The extraterrestrial's concern was as startling as a surprise visit to someone sick in bed and just as comforting.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks, uh . . ."

"Sassacan," the alien said. "Sassacan's the name."

July 13, 7:00 A.M. An early-morning peace still lay over the land. The sun had just risen over the treetops. Its down-sloping light cast grotesquely long shadows and made dewdrops sparkle. The lake was calm; only a couple of fishermen were rowing across the water through the haze. In the cool, fresh air wafting across the balcony, the rattling of Förster's breakfast dishes sounded louder and happier than usual.

"Now we're friends," Sassacan said. "That happens very rarely on my missions. Generally speaking, I'm regarded as an oppressor, an occupation force. Here on earth it seems to be just the same way. But you're an exception."

"I am?"

"Yeah. Despite your personal problems you've been unusually open-minded. Most people react hysterically when I . . . come to them. From the first second on, you were completely cool, calm, and collected."

"Maybe because I'm old. I've seen a lot in my day. I know nothing's impossible. What could still surprise me?" Förster took another sip of coffee. "You made it easy for me. You respected me—after a while. Most of you outerspace types seem to be very aggressive. Why do you act differently?"

"We're not all cast from the same mold. We come from different planets, so we behave in different ways. You know, we Sirians had a horrible war not too long ago. That experience has made us more peaceful than other races."

"I see. Yes, war changes one." For a moment, Förster's thoughts started wandering. Dying men writhing in blood and mud. Dead children in ruins, their arms torn off like discarded dolls. Small, unimportant bodies, which did not count in the larger scheme of things. Oh, God.

"You dwell a lot on those things, Robert."

"Yeah. They've changed my life."

"You also think about Barbara frequently," Sassacan said, changing the subject.

"I simply can't forget her." Förster stared at his coffee spoon as if it were an exotic insect. "Though she's been dead for ten years now."

"Ten years?" Sassacan said. "I didn't think it had been that long ago. She's so . . . present in your thoughts."

"You didn't think so?" Förster was taken aback. "But you did know that. You can read every last one of my thoughts."

"It's not that simple. To me your mind's like a great big library. I can find any piece of information in it. But I have to scrounge around for it first. There are a lot of unread books standing on the shelves."

"So that's the way it is." Förster chuckled in his distant fashion. "So do I still have my own little secrets from you?"

"Yes, of course." Sassacan was now talking very slowly. "I started to like you when I read your thoughts about Barbara. So much love for a sister from Earth has deeply moved me."

"A sister?" Förster sputtered. "You mean, you mean you're a female?"

"Yes, most of the time, that is."

Förster gulped. "That changes the score. Then we're on the way to an interstellar love affair, aren't we?"

They both laughed a little too loudly about that.

July 13, 6:00 P.M. Last night a thunderstorm had blown up and cleaned and cooled the air. Förster enjoyed his constitutional on the lakeside

promenade much more than he had during the last few weeks. The weather was mild, you could see as far as the most distant mountain peaks. And he had a friend.

Förster and Sassacan watched the souvenir vendors dismantle their stands with postcards and silly plastic mementos. Swimmers and surfers were landing on the beach and packing up their things. Handsome young people with well-proportioned bodies so deeply tanned that their lips seemed pale on dark faces. They got into their Broncos, Pajeros, Jeeps, Rabbit convertibles and sped away to some other pressing engagement. Eager hedonists always on the go. To Förster they still seemed more alien than Sassacan, but he did not hate them anymore.

"A beautiful day today," he said.

"Yes," Sassacan said.

Snatches of sound from a carnival drifted across the lake. Förster was listening to the oompahpah of a brass band. "You wanna listen to music again this evening?"

"Oh, yeah," Sassacan said. "Very much."

"How about an organ concert . . ." Förster stopped, irritated somehow. "Anything wrong?"

"I have to go back tomorrow," Sassacan's voice was as emotionless as a vocoder. "The job's finished. The traveling salesman travels on. You know how it is."

"But," Förster stammered, "right now?" He could not talk anymore. Blood roared in his ears. His heart beat like a hammer. Now that I have had a taste of hope!

"Life's a sadist," Sassacan said.

Förster said nothing. He plopped down on a bench, older and lonelier than ever before, shivering in the warm sunlight.

July 14, 3:30 P.M. Förster slammed the telephone receiver down on its cradle with intense satisfaction. He had just canceled his weekly doctor's appointment. "Make your money off of some other old idiot, doctor. I'm still not so infirm that I have to sit around in your consulting room all the time. I'll let you know when I need you."

He sniggered. I'll let you know when I need you. That was a good one. Took that smart-ass authority figure down a peg or two.

In every respect it had been a remarkable day. At breakfast in the Café Panorama a slim young man sat down at his table. He seemed bewildered and distressed. Somehow they got to talking. It turned out that the young man had inherited a company that was highly respected, but with the flood

of cheap imports from the Far East could not compete anymore. With modern production equipment he would again be able to land contracts, but he did not have enough ready cash, and banks would not extend him any credit. In a few weeks the firm would go bankrupt.

"That's simple, young man," Förster said. "What you need is a sale-and-leaseback contract. It goes like this. You sell your expensive factory buildings to a leasing company. You get a lot of money for them. At the same time, you rent the buildings back from the leasing company. That way you can stay in there and continue production, *and* you turn your hidden reserves into ready money. You invest this money and get your firm on its feet again. When you've made enough profit, you buy back the factory buildings after a couple of years."

The young man choked and panted until his face was dark red. "That's incredible!" he gasped. "That's it! How can I ever thank you?"

"That's all right," Förster said offhandedly. "It was a pleasure for me. From now on, perhaps you'll view old people in a little different light. A lot of years means a lot of experience, you see." He passed his business card across the table. "Just give me a call if you run into problems."

"I most certainly will," the young man said happily and hastily got up.

Förster watched him with amusement. So he was not quite a doddering old fool yet. The waiter found that out the hard way, and he paid for it when as usual he ignored Förster's signal. Förster went to the business manager, who fired the waiter on the spot. "That's the fifth or sixth complaint this week, Schulz. That's it for me. You're dismissed."

Nice going. Yes, people, Förster is back in the swing of things. Watch out and don't cross me. I'm not gonna let anything happen to me anymore.

The morning was extremely hectic. Sassacan still had a lot to finish before she left Earth. She seemed pretty mad. "Typical. The others stay here quite a while longer, but we Sirians have to wind up our business in record time again. Always the same old thing."

But that did not bother Förster. On the contrary, he even liked the high level of activity. It was better than merosely sitting on some park bench and watching the party from outside.

Perhaps that was why he reacted so quickly to the incident in the Swan Hotel. He had just finished a conversation with one of Sassacan's business associates and was waiting for a taxi in the hotel lobby. Outside, a heavy summer thunderstorm was raging. Rain poured down windows like a waterfall. A woman with a huge Labrador retriever rushed through the door pretty well soaked. At that same moment, lightning struck the office building on the other side of the street. A blinding flash and ear-splitting thunder filled every corner of the room.

The Labrador got loose and ran through the lobby barking and terrified, eyes bulging. He looked as aggressive as a dangerous beast.

Förster was the only one who acted. As the dog sped by him, he grabbed the leash and shouted sharply, "Sit!"

The dog was so well trained that it obeyed instantly in spite of its terror. Förster patted the dog reassuringly. "Easy there, Samson boy, easy. Everything's all right. Take it easy."

Panic gradually faded from the dog's eyes. Meanwhile, his master had walked over beside Förster.

"Thanks," she said calmly.

Förster turned to her and knew at once this was a special moment in his life. Barbara was there again. Of course, it was not Barbara, but she would have looked like that at sixty. Short, silver-gray, almost-metallic-looking hair in a page-boy cut, gray eyes that reacted with amusement to his stare, a beaming face that hid its years, plus a radiating youthful vitality. Plain expensive clothes.

"That was extraordinarily quick thinking on your part," she said. "I really must thank you, Mr. . . ."

Förster kept staring at her. The way she looked, the way she talked. It was a miracle. He suddenly realized that all the years he had been weighed down with anger and depression, he had been waiting for just such a moment as this, as a candle waits for the match to light it.

He realized that he had not answered her question. "Förster," he said. "Robert Förster."

"I'm Katharina Erhard." She smiled. "Are you a reporter? You seem to be quite inquisitive."

"Oh, no, excuse me, I—" With mild astonishment he observed how he put his arm on her shoulder and spontaneously said, "You're dripping wet. Take off your coat, and then let's go to the bar. A little whiskey'll warm you up."

She smiled again and said yes, and then they were sitting in the dark wood-paneled bar and talking and talking. There was a faint smell of wood, leather, and tobacco in the air mixed with the fragrance of her expensive perfume.

Förster was happy.

July 14, 9:00 P.M. From the east, night spread across the sky. In the west, the day took its leave with bizarre-looking cloud sculptures scudding across a horizon festooned in gold, red, and purple.

Förster stood on the terrace of the *Herrenchiemsee* Castle and gazed upon

the splendor of the park as it slowly slipped into twilight. Water in the big fountain created gracefully dancing, regularly changing figures. Bright light fell on the terrace from the hall of mirrors behind Förster. Hundreds of torches were burning inside there, and expectantly cheerful people in evening clothes waited for the castle concert to begin.

And Katharina was waiting for him. He thought about the trip on the paddle steamer which had brought them across the lake to the island where the *Herrenchiemsee* Castle was located. They stood at the railing, quiet, their heads full of thoughts. The evening wind smelled of algae. Förster listened to the asthmatic chugging of the old steamer. How many things he saw, smelled, and felt that he had not noticed in the past few years.

It was the most natural thing in the world for his hand to close over hers and for him to kiss her. Their lips touched with the soft, wonderful tenderness that you could only find in very small children who have just discovered the grace of giving. Then they went back into the passenger room, where they drank a glass of champagne and celebrated the grand reopening of Förster's life.

"I'm very happy," Sassacan said, "that I can end my stay on Earth on such a lovely day and happy note. I'm leaving you now, Robert."

Förster nodded. This moment had to come. It was a sad moment.

"Sassacan," he said. "I'd like to say so much to you, that I hardly know where to—"

"No need to," Sassacan said. "You know I'm looking through you."

"Oh, sure," Förster laughed. "What an unbelievable story. Of all 'people,' an extraterrestrial helps me get back to the land of the living."

"You've helped yourself," Sassacan said. "All I've done is interrupt your routine just as you've interrupted mine. We've learned a lot from each other."

"Yeah. Too bad you have to go now."

"You do have Katharina now."

"Luckily. I don't know if otherwise I could really bear losing you." A thought flashed through Förster's head. "Hey, wait a minute! Katharina . . . the young man with the bankrupt company . . . Katharina looking like Barbara. A whole bunch of coincidences for a single day. And the fact that just after a few minutes I put my arm around Katharina. That's not my way. You arranged everything and pulled the marionette strings a bit. Right?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Sassacan replied. "No matter. You're happy, and it makes my leaving easier."

"You bastard," Förster said. "I like you. Goddamn it, but I do like you."

“I like you, too, Robert. So long. Keep moving.”

“So long, Sassacan. And thanks for everything.”

Then Förster was all alone again. Lost in thought, he stared at the park, which now lay in full darkness. His lips moved, mumbling soundless words. Then he turned around and walked to the brightly illuminated hall of mirrors. At the door he cast one more glance over his shoulder up at the sky.

Good luck, Sassacan, wherever you are.

The stars were slowly coming out.