

Stevan Paul, *The Great Glander*

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Chapter 1

“Oh good eeeeevening, Mrs Möninghaus! You simply muuuuust try our house aperitif,” Gerd Möninghaus trilled, mimicking the waiter who had just disappeared with their order. Silke Möninghaus impassively studied the legs of the chairs at the next table. “Can we tempt your husband to an aperitif too, Mrs Mööninghaus?” continued her husband, still rather unaccustomed to playing the role of escort to his wife.

“Gerd. I’ve been looking forward to this evening for ages.”

Möninghaus sat up straight and reassumed his normal voice. “It’s true, though. Such affected carry-on – it’s insufferable.” Sulking, he looked up at the sparkling chandeliers and studied the heavy Gobelin tapestries hanging on the walls. “Christ, just looking around is enough to trigger a dust allergy. Everything is ancient.”

“Well Gerd, you’re the expert on old things. But the head chef is new, and that’s why we’re sitting here. Because my readers are interested in him. And don’t forget the magazine is paying for your meal too, so give the world your best smile. It’s been good to you.”

The waiter reappeared with the aperitif. “Mrs Möninghaus, here is our mandarin foam with vodka and wakame algae topped with malossol ossetra caviar and mandarin pulp. *Santé.*”

Grinning at her husband, Silke Möninghaus raised her cocktail glass and leaned towards him. “Now you know how I feel when I have to accompany the great art expert Gerd Möninghaus to his terribly important, mind-numbingly boring exhibition openings, with their warm prosecco and their loud, annoying, thumping disco music,” she hissed. “And don’t get me

started on their half-a-canapé per guest made of oversalted cut-price smoked salmon served up on flimsy paper napkins, the top layer of which is always glued to the mayonnaise. Whenever I accompany you to your openings, Gerd, I have to eat paper napkins – paper napkins!” No longer smiling, Silke Möninghaus nodded and brought the glass to her mouth, whereupon the algae membranes and caviar pearls disappeared between her pillar-box red lips. “We could use this evening to actually talk to each other. About your daughter, for instance.”

“What’s she been up to, then?” Möninghaus asked in a tired voice.

His wife fished around in her bag and, to Möninghaus’s surprise, produced the current issue of the women’s magazine of which she was editor-in-chief. She flicked through the pages, stopped when she got to the travel section, and passed her husband the open magazine, her red fingernail pointing to a small photo at the end of an article entitled “Young Ibiza: The Most Stunning Luxury Resorts”. Möninghaus gaped at the photo, reading its caption over and over again: “DJ Mika serves up chilled-out tunes to accompany the beach bar’s sundowners.” The photo was of a young woman standing behind a bar, on top of which there were two record players. She was wearing oversized earphones and looking earnestly at the mixer stationed between the turntables, a record sleeve clamped under her right arm. Möninghaus brought his face up close to the photo and, narrowing his eyes, managed to make out the words on the album cover: “Facing the Sun,” it said.

He gave his wife a perplexed look. “But Michaela’s name is Michaela.” He emptied his cocktail glass in one gulp, shuddered and absent-mindedly brushed his hand across his lips. “And why in God’s name is her hair blue?” But it was definitely her, no doubt about it. Michaela Möninghaus. Supposed to be working as a trainee hotel manager at the luxury Aguas de Ibiza resort, but apparently now a DJ at a beach bar. Möninghaus bent his head down to the photo and article once more. “One of Ibiza’s best sunset bars,” it said. With blue hair. “Couldn’t you have stopped this from being published?”

“I thought if I said nothing, no one in the office would notice. Sleeping dogs and all that ... and luckily I was right. No one noticed.” With an abrupt, artificial laugh, Silke Mönninghaus reached for her cocktail glass and, discovering it needed a refill, looked around for the waiter.

“Where did we go wrong?” Gerd Mönninghaus asked the empty glasses in front of him.

At that moment, his attention was drawn to the man dining alone at the table for two diagonally opposite. The man, who had just started his main course, was huge; he must have a standing height of over two metres, Mönninghaus guessed. The linen-covered table at which he sat seemed small and fragile in comparison; the wine glass in his hand looked like it belonged in a doll’s house. The giant sniffed his wine intently and, with great elegance and expertise, swirled it around his bulbous glass. He then lowered his imposing nose into the glass once again, took a sip, closed his eyes, chewed, sucked in air through his lips, swallowed, and nodded in recognition. He was wearing sand-coloured corduroy trousers and a marine-blue shirt beneath a dark jacket, a casual elegance which jarred with his bushy, unkempt beard. The giant appeared to have paid equally little attention to his hair, though perhaps little more could have been done to tame his thick salt-and-pepper mane. He looks like a savage who has dressed up for a visit to civilisation, Mönninghaus was thinking, when he was seized by the sense that he knew the giant. The face was strangely familiar – the alert blue eyes under thick eyebrows, the prominent nose – and Mönninghaus tried to remember if and where he had met this man before.

“How’s work going? What’s it like to be a king without a kingdom?” Mönninghaus’s wife interrupted his inconclusive brain-wracking. They never talked about work; the fact that they both worked for the same publishing house had so narrowed the couple’s range of conversation topics in the early days of their relationship that they had made a pact to only share their thoughts on office politics, staff and colleagues in cases of emergency. Such an emergency had arisen over the past few weeks.

“He’s let everyone go. Absolutely everyone. There were twelve editors, and now only Wolfgang and I are left. When we move next week, Wolfgang and I will have to share a tiny office in the annex on Köhler Street where they do the consumer magazines. I’ll have to spend ten fucking minutes trotting over to the main building for every stupid little meeting with our beloved editor-in-chief.” Mönninghaus paused. “It’s my colleagues I feel sorry for. They won’t find anything else at this point – they’re all rapidly approaching 60.”

“What did Braunauer have to say?”

“He said it’s the way of the future. This is how magazines are produced today, he said. A small editorial team – two staffers, an editor-in-chief and a graphic designer – and we’ll outsource the rest. That’s what he said. And then he just got rid of everyone. Must have spent a fortune on redundancy packages – I’m sure my colleagues got nice little pay-offs. But it won’t be enough for them to retire early, they’re still going to need money. They’ve all spent their entire working lives as art magazine staffers. They won’t last five minutes in the free market. Braunauer very generously invited them to continue writing for us as freelancers, but of course they won’t take him up on that offer just yet. They’re pissed off, and rightly so.” Mönninghaus stared at the single shiny black caviar pearl lodged between the tablecloth and his napkin. “I’ve got no staff and no idea how to finish the next issue. How the hell am I supposed to manage? Yes, please, I’ll have a glass of white wine. Lovely, thank you.”

Once the wine glasses had been filled, young waitresses brought the starters and, at the command of the waiter standing behind them, lifted the silver cloches. A dense white fog emitting an intense aroma of spruce needles billowed across the table and hovered stubbornly above the plates. After some time, the fog cleared to reveal a raffia basket. Inside the basket there was a spruce branch, and on top of the spruce branch there lay two prawns sweating in butter.

“Magnificent!” cried Silke Mönninghaus, whipping out her smartphone.

“Our Norwegian prawns with sea-salt butter and spruce smoke,” the waiter announced.
“*Bon appetit!*”

Möninghaus tried to stifle his laughter, not least because his wife was studiously making notes. *Bon appetit*. He sniggered quietly.

Nobody noticed. Möninghaus was relieved he hadn't had to tell his wife what Braunauer had said right at the end of the meeting. He had been standing by the office door, about to leave, when Braunauer stepped uncomfortably close to him, dropping his voice as if he were about to divulge a secret. “You know, Mr Möninghaus, art plays the same role in publishing as it does in real life: you have to be able to afford it. You and Mr Lechner can thank some of our far more successful publications for the fact that you still have jobs with the art magazine. And you can thank the board of management, which still believes – for now – that our portfolio should include an art magazine. But the emphasis is on *for now*, Mr Möninghaus. If it were up to me, well ... So impress me, Mr Möninghaus. We've given you the benefit of the doubt, so don't let us down, ok? Great stories, Mr Möninghaus. Emotions. Rock 'n' roll! Can you do that, Mr Möninghaus?” Without waiting for an answer, the editor-in-chief ushered Möninghaus out of the office.

“You know, this is art too,” said Silke Möninghaus, the vigorous rapping of her knife on the edge of his plate bringing Möninghaus's thoughts back to Restaurant Belvédère.

“My scallop is still in its packaging,” Möninghaus declared after the next course had been served and the waiters had withdrawn.

His wife sighed into her glass of white wine. “That's lardo, an Italian speciality. It's the white backfat of pigs rubbed down with salt and herbs and cured between Carrara marble slabs. In this particular dish, a wafer-thin slice envelops a perfectly seared scallop. The heat has made this delicate little sheath translucent, almost transparent, and now, as it melts, it lends the scallop a rich, herby flavour. The dill flower foam with roasted fennel seeds provides the perfect

complement, and the fresh yet subtle sharpness of the grilled spring onions adds a smoky note. Congratulations darling, you have before you a flawlessly executed dish.”

Möninghaus laughed, partly at his own expense, and carefully spooned the first morsel into his mouth. He ate attentively, crushing the tender scallop flesh against his palate, tasting the sweetness of the sauce, the saltiness of the backfat as it melted in his mouth, how everything melded together exquisitely – and he understood. It’s the same with art, he thought. Some things have to be explained to you before you can really appreciate them. As usual, he cleared his plate quicker than his wife, who paused again and again to place her cutlery back on her plate, chew slowly, and pick up her stubby pencil to make yet another note in the little Moleskine notebook she kept hidden beneath her napkin. When Möninghaus stood up, she looked up at him in surprise. “I just have to ... er ... I’ll be right back.”

“Can’t you wait until I’m ...?” Silke asked, but Möninghaus had no time to lose, as the giant had left his table and was striding across the restaurant towards the toilets. Möninghaus followed him, ignoring his wife’s protests; this was his chance to get a better look at the man.

Möninghaus opened the door and squinted. The toilets must have been created by a disgruntled interior designer who had just been told his services wouldn’t be required in the listed restaurant itself. The dazzlingly white seamless walls were coated in a shimmering bluish-pink layer of pearlescent paint, and instead of a washbasin and taps, a wide stream of water gurgled down a long black stone basin filled with gravel. The urinals took the form of egg-shaped hollows in the opposite wall. Möninghaus went to stand right beside the giant, who was loudly relieving himself. One needed a pretty good aim – the hollows were no bigger than ostrich eggs – but Möninghaus had a bigger problem: he didn’t need to piss. Listening to the lush, seemingly never-ending jet gushing from the giant beside him, he looked down with an agonised smile at the non-functioning penis clasped between his own thumb and index finger. After the giant had pulled up his zipper and walked over to the washbasin, Möninghaus let a few moments pass to give the impression that he too had eventually managed to produce

something. He then zipped himself back up again and joined the giant by the artificial stream. The wide mirror ahead provided him with a direct view of the giant's face. The feeling from earlier, the feeling that he was looking at a familiar face, returned. He knew the giant. "Hello," he said to the man's reflection, doing his best to invest the word with a hint of pleasant surprise, a suggestion of "We've met before, haven't we?"

The giant gave a brief nod, pointed to the edge of the basin and said, "That yellow gravel is soap."

Möninghaus stared at the fake yellow pebbles, which in this setting seemed to him to be more reminiscent of urinal cakes, before turning to face the giant. No more prevaricating. "We've met before, haven't we?" he said with conviction, just as the giant found the button for the hand-dryer. The roar of the fan drowned out Möninghaus's words, and by the time the air stopped blasting, the giant had left the toilets.

Just in time for the main course, Möninghaus returned to his table, where he was met by his wife's reproachful glare. On his plate there was a boiled slice of rump from a cow that had been reared in Japan, where it has been fed beer and treated to daily massages, according to Möninghaus's wife, who urged him to savour in particular the flavours of the bittersweet plum and cranberry compote. This dish encapsulated the head chef's philosophy, she explained, as it combined a regional approach heavily indebted to the principles of Nordic cooking with carefully selected ingredients, recipes and techniques from all over the world, in which regard it was a logical continuation of the fusion cuisine of the 1990s. It was a true privilege, she added, to witness a brilliant chef like Matthiesen, who had for so many years worked within the rigorous constraints of New Nordic Cuisine, rediscover the world's culinary diversity. While still paying homage to local, homegrown traditions, of course. Mechanically nodding his head in agreement throughout his wife's commentary, Möninghaus continued to observe the giant, who had just gulped down an espresso and was now getting ready to pay the bill; the maître d' already had the leather bill holder in his hand.

“Have you been listening to anything I’ve said?”

Suddenly the head chef was standing in the restaurant. Without so much as glancing at the other diners, he walked straight up to giant’s table. The giant got to his feet, the men laughed, and, after exchanging a few words, they shook hands. Before disappearing back into the kitchen, the chef laid a gentle, almost tender, hand on the giant’s shoulder. Then, with the same hand, he touched the giant’s upper arm, nodded and, with a smile on his face, turned to leave. The giant glanced at the chef as he walked away, and the maître d’ reappeared. After walking his customer to the cloakroom, the waiter held open one of the high double-doors and bid the giant one last farewell.

“And then I flew to the moon,” Silke Möninghaus said.

“Oh really?” said Möninghaus as he got up. “That’s fascinating, Silke. I’ll be back in a second, ok?” Without any further explanation he started making his way towards the bar, behind which there were automatic sliding doors leading to the kitchen. Just before he got there, the maître d’ blocked his way.

“Just a minute, monsieur, the toilets are downstairs on the left.”

“The kitchen, I’d like to go into the kitchen, Mr ...?”

“Adam. My name’s Adam. Was there a problem with your meal, monsieur?”

Möninghaus paused, at a loss.

“No, no, I’d just like to speak to the head chef. I mean I’d like to give him my compliments. Yes, that’s it.”

Mr Adam the maître d’ examined his customer. This was the husband of Mrs Möninghaus, editor-in-chief of *Woman’s World* and a renowned, highly experienced restaurant critic. Why was she sending her husband into the kitchen? Poor guy. Mr Adam flashed his most disarming smile. “Mr Möninghaus, we’re about to send out your dessert, and Mr Matthiesen

has a lot to do right now. So why don't you enjoy your dessert, and I'll send Mr Matthiesen out to you while you're having your coffee."

"You know my name?"

"But of course, Mr Möninghaus!"

Möninghaus did not walk so much as float back to his table. Loyal readers of his magazine were liable to pop up in the unlikeliest of places; it was astonishing, really. Not even his wife's irritation could dampen his spirits as he took his seat again.

"What on earth is wrong with you today? Have you been struck by ADHD or something? Bit old for that, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry." Mr. Möninghaus took his wife's hand and leaned across the table. "Believe it or not, that waiter, the maître d' who runs this place, reads *ArtWorks!*"

Silke Möninghaus started looking around for a waiter as soon as she had finished dessert. "Let's go, darling, I have a little surprise for you."

"Now?" Möninghaus looked at his watch. It was already after eleven.

"Yes, now, I just need to get the ... Oh my goodness, here comes Matthiesen. Is he coming over this way? What does he want to talk to us for?"

"Mrs Möninghaus!"

"Mr Matthiesen. What a fantastic meal, absolutely superb. Thank you!"

The head chef squirmed and nodded with a humble, deferent smile. "I must say I'm surprised to see you here, Mr Matthiesen. Don't you usually avoid going into the restaurant?"

"Yes, Mrs Möninghaus, I do. I believe that by the end of the night I've already given my guests everything I have to offer – my cooking, my team's outstanding service – so what's the

point in skulking around the restaurant? But tonight's an exception. Mr Adam tells me that your husband would like a word with me." The two turned to Gerd Mönninghaus, his wife looking bewildered, Matthiesen expectant.

"Yes, that's right," Mönninghaus said. "There's something I wanted to ask you, Mr Matthiesen. You were out here earlier this evening. You were at that table over there where a very tall gentleman was sitting. You saw him off."

Matthiesen furrowed his brow. "Um, no, I didn't, actually ... no."

"But I saw you, Mr Matthiesen. You took the man by the arm – you seemed to know him very well."

The chef shook his head.

"Get to the point, Gerd. Maybe it was one of Mr Matthiesen's chefs you saw?"

"Yes, that's probably it," said Matthiesen. Mönninghaus thought he detected a hint of relief.

"Well, I wanted to know who the gentleman is, because I think I've met him before."

"I don't know who he is." Matthiesen looked over at the table where the giant had been sitting. "But maybe Mr Adam can help us. Mr Adam, can you come here for a minute? And bring the reservation book with you."

"When should I pencil you in? When can we expect the pleasure of your company again?" Adam stood by the table and opened the reservation book.

"Mr Mönninghaus would like to know the name of the man who was dining alone at table 16."

Mr Adam banged the book shut. "Oh, I see. I'm terribly sorry, but for reasons of discretion we never give out information about our guests." Adam allowed time for his words to sink in and, after the dramatic pause, leaned down conspiratorially to Mr and Mrs Mönninghaus.

“And in this particular case I wouldn’t be able to disclose the gentleman’s name even if you tortured me. He didn’t make a reservation.”

Matthiesen and Adam saw Silke and Gerd Mönninghaus to the door and waved as their taxi pulled away. Adam slowly exhaled the air from his puffed-up cheeks. “My word, people get their knickers in a twist about the strangest things.”

Matthiesen laughed and nodded, and the two men went back into the restaurant to get ready to close up for the night. In the kitchen, already smelling of cleaning agent, the chefs were messing about, slapping each other’s legs with damp, heavy rags. Pots and pans rattled in the sinks. Between rising towers of plates, dishwashers worked in silence, efficient and sweating in the hot steam coming from the wide-open machines. Matthiesen shut the door of the kitchen office behind him, flopped into the office chair and rolled over to the desk. He enjoyed the silence for a moment, his guys behind the large window like a sweaty white silent film.

The head chef took his mobile phone out of his trouser pocket and tapped to the contact list, finding the name he was looking for right away. “Hi, yeah, it’s me again. No, no, you haven’t forgotten anything. But listen, this oddball customer was just asking about you. I thought you should know.”

The atmosphere in the taxi was frosty as it drove off. Silke Mönninghaus told the driver the address in a low voice which made her subsequent agitation over her husband’s “impossible behaviour” seem even louder. She wanted to know what he had got his “knickers in a twist” about this time, listing all the places where they no longer dared show their faces.

After a profuse apology, Mönninghaus explained the matter of the diner who had seemed so strangely familiar. “You know him too,” he said.

Silke Mönninghaus shook her head.

“I’ve got to find out who he is. It’s driving me crazy.”

After a short journey, the taxi came to a stop. “Where are we?” Gerd Mönninghaus asked, leaning his head out the car window. “Huh! The *Royal Grand*?”

His wife smiled, her features instantly softening. “Come here, you nutter,” she said. She gave him a quick kiss, and for a second he could feel the tip of her tongue between his lips. Then she sat up straight again, sweeping her hair behind her ear. Mönninghaus looked at the fine grey strands that had crept in among the blond and a feeling of love – a feeling he thought lost a long time ago – rushed through him.

“Darling,” Silke said, “this day twenty-two years ago we got married.” Mönninghaus raised his eyebrows. “So I thought we should do something wild to mark it.” She grabbed him by the neck, pulled him towards her and whispered in his ear: “And that’s why I’m treating you to a night with me in the *Royal Grand*.”

Mönninghaus felt the blood shoot into his penis. “Good idea,” he replied hoarsely.

“That’ll be €12.80 please,” the taxi driver barked.

She had thought of every little thing. That morning, she had had pyjamas, toilet bags, her make-up and fresh clothes for the following day delivered to the hotel and brought up to the room, where a bottle of champagne was now chilling in a bucket of ice. Silke Mönninghaus giggled in the lift as she grabbed her husband between the legs and nestled up to him.

“I’m an idiot,” Mönninghaus muttered somewhere between the third and fourth floors. “The man in the restaurant was ...” The lift came to a gentle stop on the sixth floor. The doors opened noiselessly and a clear, clean gong sounded. “Of course. It was the great Glander!”