

This Part of the World

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1

In a village with a Latin sounding name Martens shot at two men and in the same moment realised that he had made a mistake. The woman fell down in the dust with her arms moving about unnaturally. Martens closed his eyes. I'm a doctor, he thought. I'm a doctor. In purity and holiness I will guard my life and my art. In purity and holiness. That was the fifth paragraph of the Hippocratic Oath. Martens tried to remember the first one. What was it? Anyone who could remember the fifth one shouldn't have any trouble with the first. 'I swear,' murmured Martens, 'by Asclepius and Hygieia . . . by Apollo the Physician and Asclepius and Hygieia and Panaceaia and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses.' He was a doctor and he was armed because the others had put a price on the heads of foreign doctors. And he was a good shot, but he shouldn't have had to be, as a doctor, and now he was getting what was coming to him. And then, he thought, and then, what comes next, what's the second paragraph? I call the living, I mourn the dead, I break the bolts of lightning. That didn't fit, but he had always liked the epigraph to Schiller's bell poem. Let's see if I can still manage it in Latin, he thought. *Vivos voco, mortuis plango. Flugaro frango.* Was it *mortuis* or *mortuos*? It was hard to work it out, because his head was still throbbing from the bomb which the others had just detonated remotely. They link up Nokia phones to the detonator and then they call the bomb. Because they don't have any friends, thought Martens. The thought threatened to send him off into hysterical laughter. He bit his hand; it shook between his teeth. The detonation had snapped the Fox's front axle like a matchstick. My ambulance, thought Martens. I save lives, if they let me. Martens was lying in the shadow of the demolished vehicle. Its tyres gave off the stench of burning rubber. He could hear someone calling something. He opened his eyes. It was two women. One of

them lay in the dust. The other shouted something at him. She grabbed the injured one by both arms and heaved her with difficulty across the street. None of this could be true. Not three days before the trip home. A sandal was dangling off the injured woman's foot. Shortly before the women disappeared behind a narrow wooden door in a mud-walled house the sandal fell off the foot and was left lying there.

Now everything was like it had been before. A friendly, inconsequential street. To the left a white Toyota Corolla by a mud wall and to the right the house the women had disappeared into. The dust hovered in the hot air; the sandal lay in the middle of the street.

Take your time, thought Martens. It was still not clear whether he had imagined it all or not. He had to think, go over it again. But the constant rattling behind him disturbed him. The others rattled their guns, his own people too – Niehoff, Khalili, Petersen and a few of the new contingent were rattling back.

'Quiet!' screamed Martens, but his own lot were too far away and the others were even further off, and pleas for quiet were never heeded in these situations in any case. He put his hands over his ears. We turn away from the noise of war to listen to the deer grazing. Who was that by? He couldn't remember. In purity and holiness, he thought. I'm a doctor. He found it comforting that he thought this so often. It meant that something was wrong with him, that he was in a state of shock and couldn't trust his senses. Is it any wonder! He thought it to the melody of a rock song: I'm so horny, you're so horny, is it any wonder! The bomb had exploded right underneath him. He had been sitting on the front seat of the Fox and yawning because last night he had been having intercourse with Nina Voigt behind the Bremen barracks. Intercourse, that's what she called it. He had yawned, and one of the few advantages of this part of the world was that a simple yawn at the right moment could prevent the eardrum from bursting. The bomb had exploded and the force of the pressure had pressed Martens' soul from his body. For a moment he had seen himself from the outside: his distorted face, his expression turned numb with horror, almost dumb. It seemed that we lose intelligence when we are near death. He had been exposed to an enormous and hostile force. And then no shock? Unlikely, thought Martens. He must have seen

the sandal earlier. That was the most plausible explanation. But he had only noticed it now, and in the trauma his brain, one big cocktail shaker, had hallucinated a story to go with the sandal. Two men jump out from behind a white Toyota, and of course they were really women, and then in the end only the sandal was left. It was an ever diminishing hallucination. It wouldn't have surprised him if the sandal disappeared soon too.

He closed his eyes and then looked again: the sandal was still there, but no doubt not for much longer. The fact that his gun's barrel was hot – and the heat didn't come from the sun – and that his gun smelt of gunpowder, which to Martens was always such a robust, pleasant smell, didn't mean anything. His father had, in the later stages of his wine consumption, one evening shot a plate-sized hole in the Persian rug in front of the television with his pump action gun. It was a hole the size of which the police in Furtwangen had never seen before. His father had claimed in his statement that two burglars had got in. But there had never been any proof of that. Of course I saw something, thought Martens, and I shot, is it any wonder? \$ 15,000 bounty for foreign doctors. Every doctor in the German base went around with this figure in his head. The actual amount might be no more than a rumour, but even 5,000 was reason enough to shoot if you saw figures or nobody jumping out from behind a car. First the others blow up ambulance vehicles, then they try to get the doctor's head. It was completely logical to do what I did, thought Martens. I saw two men, who weren't there, he thought, but they could well have been there.

He looked over there again and the sandal was stubbornly sitting where it had been before.

'I'm a doctor,' said Martens when Khalili lay down next to him. Khalili smelt like Martens' weapon, just stronger. It did Martens good to have his friend next to him. Now things could only get better.

'Oh, you're a doctor?' said Khalili. 'Nice. I'm an interpreter from Kreuzberg. Do you know who I am?'

Martens nodded.

'Look at me,' said Khalili.

Martens looked at him. It felt good. He liked Khalili. He really did. Khalili was the best thing about this part of the world. Khalili was a find for life. If I had stayed at home, thought Martens, I would never have got to know him, and that would have been a loss.

'You're cross-eyed,' said Khalili. 'Might be concussion.'

All the better, thought Martens. *Commotio cerebri*, a slight traumatic brain injury. Now he remembered the name of the village they were in: Quatlum. A name that wouldn't be out of place in a line of Latin verse: *Quatlum esse delendam*.

'Doctors shouldn't be armed,' said Martens. 'It's cynical.'

'Yes,' said Khalili. 'I agree with you. We've got a lot of philosophical issues here. And our brothers over there just don't want to talk. So that's why we're going to leave them here.'

From behind the mud wall which separated the others from their own people, a thin column shot up like a fountain whose jet of water has turned to dust. The wind fanned out the dust. Tiny crystalline particles glistened in the sun.

Khalili waved his hand back and forth in front of Martens' face. 'Hello?' he said.

'Did you hear me? We're going. Today's not our lucky day.'

'Yes,' said Martens.

He dragged his eyes away from the glistening fountain of dust and looked down the street.

The sandal had gone.

Blood pounded in his ears. He could hear how his heartbeat had quickened.

He looked into the leaves of a thin tree, which rose above one of the mud houses.

Green refreshes the eyes. Martens wanted to be sure.

He looked back again.

The sandal was no longer there.

He trembled all over with relief.

'Wait!' he said to Khalili, who was about to stand up. 'Can you see a sandal there?'

In that street. Is there a sandal there?'

Khalili glanced over.

'No, no sandal there. Why? Can you see one?' Khalili's concerned look warmed Martens. You could rely on Khalili. A wave of euphoria flooded through him and he felt a tingling sensation all over. 'No, it's nothing,' he said.

He grasped Khalili's arm. Khalili lifted him up.

'I'm fine,' said Martens. Between his feet and the floor there was soft rubber.

Martens swayed, but Khalili gave him sturdy support.

'It's OK,' said Martens. And everything really was cleared up now. First two men, then two women, then a sandal, and now no longer even a sandal. His self-diagnosis was: shock, slight concussion. But things were looking up. His soul was already on the mend. It was not about the brain, although a neurologist would have disagreed. No, his soul, pressed out of his body by the force of the explosion had returned to its home, and now that his senses and his mind had regained their harmony once again, a hallucinated sandal was no longer appropriate.

There was no sandal there, which meant that nothing had happened in reality, except that Martens had been shooting at illusions.

It runs in the family, he thought.

2

Accompanied by the others' parting shots, the Dingo rumbled over the dusty road. Khalili and Petersen swayed to the rhythm of the bumps. Martens pressed his feet against the floor to absorb something of the jolts from the potholes. His head was sensitive to being shaken. Sunlight fell through the vehicle's top hatch at such an angle that it formed a thin beam. There was something hopeful about the beam, it seemed to Martens. The beam lit up the muzzle of Felder's gun, making it gleam. Felder's hands were those of a butcher. But as the vehicle went round a bend and the sunlight fell from the muzzle to Felder's hands they became the hands of a butcher who plays the mandolin in his free time.

'Do you play the mandolin?' asked Martens.

'What?' It was noisy in the vehicle. Martens repeated his question.

'Drums!' shouted Felder. 'Why?'

Martens raised his hands. It would have been difficult to explain.

Khalili's worried gaze. So what, thought Martens, I just asked him if he plays the mandolin. The sick bay, Khalili's gaze said. I'm taking you straight there when we get back to base. No need, thought Martens. Khalili shook his head and looked away.

'As an exception: smoking allowed!' Niehoff called back. Niehoff was in charge of the patrol. Niehoff said of himself, 'Big dick, small brains.' Niehoff loved life. If you were out with him, you would come back uninjured, and if not – well, then it was fate. Niehoff wasn't a danger to the others or his own lot. They all loved him. Khalili, Petersen, Felder pulled out cigarettes from under their flak jackets. Martens had smoked his last one before they left base, left for this village in which the bomb had exploded. Thinking about it made him nauseous. Explosion wasn't the right word. It wasn't the word for a feeling as if you were being squashed between two steel plates. He had done nothing to deserve this radical violence from the others. It was a damn injustice.

Khalili sat down next to him and offered him a cigarette.

Martens took one from the packet. Khalili got a flame on the lighter. Martens watched the flame, flickering, jumping from side to side; the damn thing couldn't stay still. Khalili held Martens' hand still and now the lighter was fine.

'Seriously now, Moritz. I don't like this.'

'What?' Martens inhaled the smoke deeper than he did at home in Berlin. In this part of the world no one died of smoking.

'How you lit the cigarette. You couldn't get the end of the cigarette to touch the flame.'

Good, thought Martens. Motor function disorder. Another symptom of concussion.

'Perhaps you're right,' he said. 'I'll go to the hospital. As soon as we get back to base. I'll get myself checked out.'

'But not by Nina.'

'Not by Nina.'

'I won't treat anyone I love. That's what my father always says. Although maybe he just says it because his private patients pay better.'

'Your father's right. I'll get Loeck to do it.'

'Not a good idea. Loeck's in love with Nina. Even if you had a bullet in your head he'd probably say: everything's fine, my friend. Just keep your finger on the hole and you'll live to a hundred.'

'Everyone's in love with Nina. I haven't got much choice, Tim.'

'Then I'll do it! I'm not in love with Nina. The only passion I have is the fight against terrorism. And I studied medicine for two semesters.'

'Yup, and German literature for about fifty.'

'So what? Then I'll heal you with verses, like Sayyid. I'll make you invulnerable.'

He pulled the amulet out from under his shirt. He had bought it from a wandering holy man. It was a verse from the Koran and a chilli wrapped in leather. Khalili kissed the amulet.

'It was worth its price again today,' he said.

The journey to the base dragged on. It was only three miles, but they were dotted with potholes and inhabited by goats. Martens felt every yard of the journey in his body. Every bump sent a jolt of pain up behind one eye. It felt like a nail boring through his pupil. With tears in his eyes, Martens saw the outlying houses of the friendly town in which they had their base. The town was friendly to them because the base brought some money and protection to the townsfolk. It was the kind of friendliness that is offered with gritted teeth and when the Dingo suddenly came to a halt, Khalili, Petersen and everyone inside felt uneasy. Stopping was not advisable in this part of the world. You had to act like the shrew: scurry behind cover, quick glances to the left and right, then set your sights on the next hiding place and rush over to it, and you had to do that all day long, and eat a lot, because you burn a lot of calories in this kind of life.

'Just an accident!' Niehoff called back. But sometimes that is how it starts: a car blocking the road, no way past it, you're trapped, and a second car approaching from behind, or a man running away suddenly, or running towards you screaming.

'It's just a donkey cart,' clarified Niehoff. Khalili looked up ahead with concern. Petersen made the sign of the cross. Felder looked at the gun between his knees. 'Out of the way, out of the way!' Vogel, the driver, shouted out of his window. Martens threw open his door and jumped out of the vehicle. He fell to his knees.

He couldn't breathe. He was choking with panic. He retched up a bitter phlegm through an infinitely small opening and threw up at the feet of the children. So many children. They always appeared out of nowhere. Sometimes right in the middle of deserted country as if the stones had given birth to them. Children were a good sign. As long as they were there, the others wouldn't shoot, or let's say, would prefer not to shoot. The little ones came right up to Martens. They stretched out their hands and touched his golden hair. Then they giggled, proud of having touched a foreigner's hair. He rubs paint in his hair, the older ones said – no, no, he comes from a country where the sun doesn't shine, that's why it's so light. Khalili had translated what they said about his hair often enough.

'Everything's OK,' said Khalili, helping Martens back onto his feet.

'I'm sorry,' said Martens, snot running from his nose. 'I just couldn't control it.'

'It's just a donkey cart that tipped over. Come and have a look. There's no bomb. I want you to see for yourself. It's just a shoe-seller. Two young guys drove into the side of his cart. Now shoes are lying everywhere, look at them!'

Khalili led Martens over to the scene. The donkey cart lay on its side. One wheel was still turning. The street was covered in sandals. Two men in white, Western trousers were arguing with the shoe-seller. Niehoff, with his gun at the ready, signalled for Khalili to come over. 'They have to clear the road. Tell them that, but keep it friendly!'

Martens had a ringing in his ear and white transparent flakes were dancing in front of his eyes. They were dancing in front of the sandals covering the ground, sandals tied in pairs. He looked at all the sandals, and each one held the image of that woman falling to the dust and the little clouds that rose and hovered above the woman's body. The sandals made sounds too. Martens could hear the other woman shout something at him. He could remember a word. She had repeated it many times.

Khuuree, the word turned faster and faster in his head. *Khuuree!*

Khalili was negotiating with the men who had been involved in the accident. But Martens couldn't wait. He drew Khalili away from the others. He had to know if there was still some hope.

'*Khuuree*,' said Martens. 'Is that a word? Does it mean anything?'

'What made you think of that? By the way, you're white as a sheet.'

'Does it mean something?'

'You're saying it wrong. It's *khooree*. It means sister. Why?'

'Nothing' said Martens. 'Nothing at all.' He stumbled over to the Dingo, sitting down next to Petersen and Felder. For a moment he had the feeling that only his head existed and he had lost all connection to his body. His whole energy was concentrated between his temples where that word pounded: *khooree, khooree*. You couldn't imagine a word you didn't know. I heard the word, he thought. If I hadn't heard it, I wouldn't know it. I heard it. And if the word exists, then so does the woman, and if the woman does, then so does the injured woman.

'She's my sister!' the woman had shouted at him. 'My sister!'

3

The gates to the base were opened for the Dingo. For the others the base was an abscess in the friendly town. For their own lot it was an alpine chalet. Here they were safe from storms and the weather and when the beer cans fizzed in the evenings they told stories which were true. Nothing was made up here. This part of the world offered even bad storytellers enough material for good stories. Some of them left the chalet in the morning with no notches on their guns and when they returned home in the evening they rubbed their thumbs over one or two fresh and roughly cut notches, their souls catching like candyfloss on the little wooden splinters.

As they drove past, Martens looked at the butts filled with gravel that secured the entrance corridor on either side. The Dingo's shadow brushed across the butts. The play of shadows was nothing. Everything Martens saw or heard was nothing. He found he had no connection to things any more. Shooting at the woman had separated him from everything. He sat knee-to-knee with Petersen and Khalili in the Dingo. He heard them talking, but that was just functional. The ear can hear, the knee can feel, the body carries on like a worker on an assembly line who carries on with the same hand movements even when there's nothing on the conveyor belt. Eat, sleep, shit – all of that would carry on functioning, it's just that I'm no longer here, thought Martens. He was in the village. He had

forgotten its name again. He was in the village and nowhere else. I stayed there, he thought. What was here was a ghost.

They clambered out of the Dingo in the base's parking zone. The flags of the nations fluttered in the wind. There was a smell of roast chicken. Niehoff said a few words, then: 'Dismissed.'

Khalili put his arm around Martens' shoulder.

'Our last time out,' he said. 'They won't send out us again.'

Saturday, thought Martens. Three more days and that was it. On Saturday they were flying back to Berlin. On Sunday they were going to meet up, Khalili and he.

'You're white as a sheet,' said Khalili. 'I can't let people in Berlin see us with you looking like that. We want to go to Manzoni, you haven't forgotten, have you?'

Sunday, 8 pm, Manzoni. The veterans' night.'

'Manzini,' said Martens. Saying the name he felt better. It called up warm images of evenings with Anja in Manzini, and her cold green eyes. Her love was in her hands. Her skin carried her feelings. She used her eyes just for seeing. Like Nina. Oddly, it was only now that he became aware of this similarity between the two of them. Neither of them was a visual person. Manzini, what a wonderful name, but it was nothing he could hold onto now. Manzini didn't really exist. The village existed.

'What's it called?' he asked.

'What?'

'The village. Where we were.'

'Quatlum.'

'Right. Quatlum.' Quatlum, he thought. He could connect things to that. It was the only real place, and that's where he would find himself again. He had to go there, because he was still there. Someone had to fetch him.

'But I can't do it without you,' he said.

'What can't you do without me?'

Martens didn't say anything. His feet were on unstable ground. It tilted. Like a drunk, he wobbled around looking for a place to sit down. He simply had to sit down, over there on that wall in front of Sesame Street Café. Martens liked the name. The first bunch to come out here had called it that and sung the Sesame

Street song: Holidays, Everything's A-OK, Friendly neighbours there, That's where we meet . . . Back then the others got close enough to Sesame Street to shoot a rocket into the café, but it didn't explode and the disappointment of the others still hung in the air.

'But just one cigarette,' said Khalili, sitting down next to Martens. 'Then I'm taking you to the sick bay.'

They lit up and Martens said, 'In the village. Quatlum.'

Quatlum, he thought. What a name, and such a non-descript village. And yet it had become the centre of his life. 'I saw something there,' he said.

In the mountains, the wind picked up in the evenings. It tore down the valley, roared over the potato fields, grabbed the children's kites, descended on the town, went over the base's butts and defensive walls and blew dust and heat through the streets. The wind caught in the camouflage netting, sent the nations' flags into a flap, and made the tips of cigarettes glow. Khalili put his sunglasses on to protect his eyes from the dust and Martens said what he had seen in Quatlum. He didn't say: I shot at the woman. He didn't want to bear the full burden of responsibility. He wanted to share it with fate, with unknown forces, with crossfire which had hit the woman. There had been so many stray bullets in the air. It was of no importance to the woman whether he was telling the truth or not. What mattered for her was receiving help quickly. Of course Khalili would have understood if Martens had said: I shot at her. Everyone at the base would have. Who in the world would, if not them? But understanding wasn't enough. They would have understood and thought: thank God it didn't happen to me. It's not leprosy or the plague, thought Martens. I'm not sick. It's just something that's happened to me, and just to me, and I'll sort it out on my own. It was his right to keep it to himself. He didn't need to admit anything, he needed to do something. 'I know Thieke has a Fox in the garage,' he said. The cigarette between his fingers had burnt down. It singed his skin and he threw it away. 'Thieke is one of your customers. And you've got four bottles left. He'd give us the Fox for two.'

'Moritz,' said Khalili. 'We're meeting up on Sunday. What's the place called?'

'Manzini.'

'Manzini. This whole thing with the woman. I can understand that it's doing your head in. But I don't think you're thinking straight right now. What's this idea with Thieke? Are you really thinking of driving out to that village on your own in a Fox? Think for a minute. You know that's a stupid idea, otherwise you'd ask Seegemann for permission. But you won't. Because you know that Seegemann might be a lousy commanding officer, but even he wouldn't come up with the idea of sending medics into that village right now. We've retreated and they've taken the village. It's theirs now. You wouldn't get out alive . . .'

Martens was no longer listening. He was looking at a bird which, beating its wings against the wind, was barely moving. It was dancing on the eddies, a little blue bird. There were so few birds here. Not enough trees, not enough to eat, some cats and lots of fighting dogs almost a metre tall. Suddenly the bird gave up resisting the wind. It let the wind seize it and throw it away like something lifeless. That's not metaphorical, thought Martens, it's just a bird.

'Are you still here?' asked Khalili. He waved his hand back and forth in front of Martens' face.

'Let's go get the bottles,' said Martens. He stood up. He was dog tired. 'We have to get the Fox.' His mouth was dry and tasted of iron, as it would from blood. 'We'll get the woman and bring her to the hospital.'

Khalili put his arm around Martens' shoulder.

'Come, let's take a walk,' he said. He turned Martens around ninety degrees until he was facing the hospital. Martens resisted, turning to face Frankfurt, Khalili's barracks. Khalili hid in his locker the vodka bottles he had got off an uncle from Tajikistan five months ago and smuggled into the base. There had been a hundred back then – now there were only four. Khalili supplied people who were thirsty. He was popular in the base.

'Not the hospital,' said Martens. 'To your dorm. I'll only go to the hospital when we've got the woman. It's not urgent in my case. It is in hers.'

'I've got to disagree. If someone tells me that he wants to steal a Fox to get a Pashtun woman out of a village where ten or twenty fighters have holed up, then I'd say that the person had better go for a check-up in the hospital. Especially if a bomb has blown up right underneath him a few hours earlier.' Martens was

bored. Bored, and shattered. He didn't want to argue it any more. Maybe the others had taken over the village, maybe not. To Martens, there was no point in thinking about it.

'I have to go there,' he said. Two women walked towards them. They had tied colourful cloths over their faces against the dust and were wearing sunglasses. Their hair bands looked sporty.

'Hi Tim!' said the smaller of the two; the other one smiled in a sporty way. Everything about the two of them was sporty. They wore their uniforms like some extravagant tracksuit.

'Hi Sabine,' said Khalili. From his tone of voice Martens guessed that Khalili had slept with her, but that he didn't want to do it again. The wind whisked the women past them. The evening sun swelled above the mountains.

'Come on,' said Martens.

Khalili put his hand on Martens' shoulder.

'Give me one good reason why you want to risk your life three days before we fly home. And don't say it's your duty as a doctor. When I studied medicine my dad said to me: a doctor's best friend is Death. You know you can't help everyone, that people will die in your care. So why this woman? Why do you want to put your life and mine on the line for her? Give me one credible reason and I'll come.'

Martens looked into Khalili's eyes. And he knew that Khalili wouldn't understand. It wasn't about guilt. There was no guilt without intention. And it didn't matter who had shot the woman. I have to go back to the village because I'm still there, thought Martens. And he was there, because he was here in this country. The credible reason would have been: I'm doing what I'm doing because I'm in this country. But that wouldn't have convinced Khalili, and he needed Khalili as an interpreter and as a friend with whom he could share his fear.

'I shot at the woman,' he said.

Khalili looked away.

'That's a good reason,' he said. He gave Martens a short, powerful hug and let him go again immediately. 'Then we'll go and get the bottles,' said Khalili, rubbing something out of his eye.

'Yes,' said Martens. They walked to Frankfurt barracks like two people who don't know each other. And with three days to go until his departure Martens realised, after five months, what it meant to be here.