

Boom! You're Smithereens

by Jürgen Fauth

Bruno Hackmann and I hung out all summer, and then Joe came back from Persia. We weren't really good friends, Bruno and I, not the kind that would sit up on rooftops all night and talk about being afraid, but friends enough to ride the bus to school together or come over to play. I went over to Bruno's apartment a lot because he had an Atari. The Atari had been a gift from his Dad, who didn't live with them any more. My parents didn't like me going there. My Dad said the Hackmanns were gypsies. He said that over dinner one night, how Bruno's Mom was a gypsy and anti-social. "What's anti-social?" I asked them, and he said, "That's when people leave their wives and make fires on the living room carpet," but then Mom gave him this look, without saying anything, just looking, so he shut up and I shut up too.

We spent whole days playing River Raid, kneeling in front of the TV in our shorts, wobbling the joysticks with mouths open. We drank a lot of Coca Cola from heavy glass bottles. Bruno wasn't any good at River Raid, but I was careful not beat him because it was his game, and also because he was mean. That was the problem with Bruno: he was mean. At least once a week, he picked out someone from the sixth grade and started shoving him, and everybody turned away because they knew what was coming. Bruno waited until his victim turned around, and then he jumped on him, dove into him head-first to knock him off his feet. When the kid hit the ground, Bruno was already on top, ramming his fists into his sides. A crowd gathered around, everyone so damn happy to be standing, hands in their pockets. Bruno forced his knees over the poor bastard's biceps and started to rock back and forth over them, pressing into the muscles with all his weight. He'd start grunting while the victim screamed and whined and dripped saliva and tears onto the school yard. Bruno would slowly raise a flat hand and bring it down on the flushed face, and again, and again, smack, smack, smack smack, with everybody still staring, on and on, until Mr. Faust came and

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dragged Bruno away by his ear, leaving the other kid to curl up on the ground.

He seemed to like me all right. I could make him laugh, and I think he liked me for that. When his plane exploded, I'd say, "Boom! You're smithereens!" and he'd laugh. Then he said it too, when I died: "Boom! You're smithereens!" If you didn't get him angry, he was a nice guy, a little slow, dense, as if all his muscles and his weight pressed on him hard, took up all the resources, ate all the brainpower just for maintenance and upkeep. I, on the other hand, was weak, with sagging shoulders and a pale flat tummy. I figured, though, that I could get by on my smarts, even without muscles, like Vickie from "Vickie and the Vikings". So that's why I let Bruno win: I knew I was better than him anyway, and I didn't want to risk making him angry.

And then Joe came back from Persia, where his Dad had been working for the Shah. His Mom brought him over one afternoon, and he waved at me from behind her and winked. "Hey, remember me?"

"No," I said.

"I'm Joe. We were good friends before I went to Persia. You don't remember? Well, we'll always have Paris. Did you see *The Cat From Outer Space*?"

Joe was fun to be around. He acted a lot like the gangsters in *Bugsy Malone*, and he liked Han Solo better than Luke. I asked Bruno if I could bring him along. "O.K.," Bruno said, but Joe told me, "Three is a bad number. It always leads to deception and betrayal, in short: trouble." He also told me he was good at River Raid, so we went.

Bruno and Joe got along all right. Joe talked too much, making odd jokes that Bruno didn't understand, and honestly, I didn't get many of them either. Joe wasn't as good at River Raid as he said, and Bruno beat him easily. I was better than both of them. Their aim wasn't as good as mine. I could shoot down the helicopters from way down, when they first appeared--that was how I did it. Or I would sit back, leaning against the coffee table, watching the two of them play. Once, when Bruno lost his first plane by running into the shore

immediately, he hit the restart lever without looking up at Joe and started over. A helicopter shot him from the right, and he hit the restart lever again. Joe turned around to me with a quizzical look, but I just shrugged. Bruno kept hitting the fire button, leaning left and right, as if that helped the plane on the screen move.

Joe said, "If you just leave your finger on the button, it will keep firing. It's called autofire."

"I know that," Bruno said and rested his thumb on the button. The plane kept shooting just the same. No one said anything.

Later, Bruno brought out some Snickers bars he found in the kitchen, and we were eating in silence, staring at our fingers, when Bruno's mom came in, in a hurry. She was tall, with dark, curly hair and a tiny nose. She wore a wide tasseled skirt and a huge smile, the kind aunts have when they want you to kiss them. "Hello Tim," she said, and I said, "Hello Ms. Hackmann." Bruno was looking at the screen, where the Atari played against itself. His Mom asked Joe, "And who are you?"

"I am Jochen Crabchick," he said. "I used to live in Persia."

"Great," she said. Then she turned to Bruno. "Bruno. I forgot my scarf. Where is it?"

"I don't have it," he said without looking up.

She looked at him as if she hadn't heard, but the smile was gone.

"What," she said.

"I don't have it, Momma, really," he said, and I felt bad for him.

"What," she said again.

Bruno dropped the Snickers bar on the carpet and ran out of the room. His Mom turned back to us, all smile. "I'm sure Bruno will find it," she said.

"We were playing Atari," Joe said.

"That was a gift from Bruno's Dad," Ms Hackmann said. "I'm sure he would be very pleased to hear that you boys are enjoying it. He is a real screw-up, you know."

I didn't know what that meant, but I nodded, and Joe said, "Yeah, well, there are screw-ups in all walks of life."

Ms. Hackmann lifted an eyebrow and said, "Very true. You are a smart one. Bruno needs more friends like you."

Bruno came back into the living room, head still down, holding out a brown-and-red scarf toward his Mom. She nodded very slowly and reached for the loose end of the scarf, but Bruno held on to his end of it so her arm was jerked back and she had to pull harder and then he let it go and it looked like she whipped herself with it. For a second, nothing moved, the two of them stood very still, Bruno still looking down with his hand extended, his Mom with the scarf hanging from her hand like a dead snake.

"That's a pretty scarf," Joe said, "the kind that fits a lady. It goes very well with your skirt."

Ms. Hackmann's head turned toward him, and then she flicked the scarf around her neck, pulled her black hair out from underneath and said, "I'll see you boys later; I hope you enjoy playing with my blockhead son." After she walked out, we stood for a moment, not knowing what to say.

"You want the rest of your Snickers," Joe asked Bruno, "or can I have it?"

* * *

Joe and I started going out after dinner to sit on Philosophers' Rock, a little stony precipice that we called that because we could smoke cigars and talk about all kinds of things while we looked down on Dotzheim, a suburb that used to be a town of its own, with shingled houses and restaurants that had lit beer signs dangling over their doorways. It was pretty in the evening, with odd orange sunlight casting long, diffuse shadows.

"I bet she does a mean belly dance," Joe said.

"What?"

"She's a gypsy, right? Isn't that what you told me?"

"Yeah," I said, "They're gypsies. You can tell by their hair. It's like thick, black wire. But my Dad said, they're also anti-social."

"Anti-social? Like Marlon Brando?" Joe said.

"I don't know. I think it means they build fires on their carpet."

"Well, I bet she does a belly dance that will make your juices flow. She has passion, you can tell. Maybe her husband does the saber dance, with those wide, baggy red pants, and she reads the tarot."

"You think she flies on brooms?" I asked.

"No," he said, "That's witches."

"What's the ta-rot?"

Joe's cigar had gone out, so he took a moment with the matches, relighting it, puffing and flipping it so he could see if the cherry was burning ok.

"It's like poker, only with wizards and hanged men and such. It's what they play when they drink their vodka and schnapps by the camp fire."

"I'd like to play that," I said. My cigar had gone out a while ago, and I didn't mind.

"No, that's boring. I want to find their crystal ball. It's what they use to tell the future."

"I don't think she can tell the future. She's just a regular gypsy."

"Tim: Even regular gypsies can tell the future. They all have crystal balls. With that, they can see all time rolled into one. She must have one."

"Whoa," I said. I relit my cigar and looked out over Dotzheim, wondering what it might feel like to see all time rolled into one.

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Joe kept getting better at River Raid, but Bruno still died a lot. He always ran out of fuel, too, because he never thought to fly over the tanks. Instead, he just shot them although you really don't get too many points for that.

One time, when Bruno went to the bathroom, Joe followed him and then came back with a grin, twisting a large silver key between his fingers. "Check this out," he said.

I didn't get it. "What's the key for?" I said.

"Hey," Bruno yelled from the bathroom. "Hey!"

Joe grinned. "Let's find the crystal ball," he said.

Then I got it. "You are crazy," I said. "He is going to kill you when you let him out."

"Hey!" Bruno yelled. "I'm locked in!"

"I guess we'll just have to leave him in there," Joe said. "Come on now, time's a-wastin'." He turned, went into the corridor that connected all the rooms and said, "Let's start with this door."

"Kitchen," I said.

He opened the door into a sparse kitchen with light blue tiles and a calendar that advertised for Kuhn's Flower Shop. "Kitchen," Joe said.

"That's what I am telling you," I said. "Look: If we don't let him out immediately, Bruno is going to kill us both. He is mean. He will ..."

"Did you lock me in here?" Bruno yelled. "Did you guys lock me in here?"

Joe opened another door, the closet. Buckets, a vacuum cleaner, a broom.

"A broom," I said. "She has a broom." My voice was a little shaky.

Joe turned to me. "She is not a witch," he said. "You're being silly."

"If you guys locked me in here, I'll kill you!" Bruno shouted.

"Come on, hurry," Joe said, "we have to be quick."

"When school starts again, I will kill you every morning in the first break, and during the second break, I'll kill you all over again!" He was banging at the door now, and that was much scarier than the yelling.

The next room was a bedroom, dark, purple walls, a big unmade bed, a wardrobe lining the wall, small tables on either side of the bed. The windows were hung with heavy, velvety material that hardly let any light in at all. Joe flicked the light switch, and the room shone in red and black, everything glowing in an unreal way, dazzling, as if we had just stepped inside of a movie, into the negative of a film, everything red and black.

"Ha," Joe said, "she has colored light bulbs. Blacklight. You know what that means."

It hadn't been a question, but I said, "What?"

Joe snorted. "Let's search this thoroughly. Here, take these."

He got two pairs of gloves out of his pocket and gave me one. "Because of the fingerprints," he said. "They're leather."

Bruno was still banging at the bathroom door, pounding out a rhythm that we seemed to move smoothly to in the red and black glow, turning things over, opening drawers full of socks and stockings, turning around differently than we usually did, looking everything over again and again. Joe was working his way through a dresser when I noticed the mirror, part of a make-up ensemble with tiny drawers for lipstick and ear rings. It was held up by a frame that could be adjusted up or down. Something in the mirror was strange, although I didn't quite know what so I looked again and the way it was aimed, I could see Joe in it, leaning into a drawer, grabbing at things frantically, moving them back and forth, shoving it shut, opening another one, and then I looked at myself, pale and red faced and scared, and suddenly the thumps of Bruno beating the bathroom door seemed to slow down and the world in the mirror did a disappearing trick, like water in a bathtub, everything got sucked out of it but was still there, something moved quickly toward me, or swirled away in two connected spirals, and I looked at Joe's image, and it seemed tighter and bitter, and I saw myself again but couldn't recognize what had changed. I said, "Whoa" and Joe looked up from his drawer and our eyes met in the mirror.

"Are you still searching?" he said.

"Sure," I said, "Sure." I turned from the mirror, looked under the bed. I felt shaky, as if I had been drinking beer or smoking one of the cigars.

"I guess it's not here," Joe said. "Maybe she doesn't have one after all. Maybe her husband took it, or bartered it for alcohol and women."

Dazed, I pulled on the drawer beneath the mirror. It didn't open, maybe something was wedged in it, or maybe it was locked.

"You don't know what you're talking about," I said. The banging on the bathroom door had stopped, and my words sounded loud and

then they just hung there in the air between us, the red and black light reflecting off their edges.

"I know very well what I am talking about," Joe said. "It's time to get the hell out of here. This place is stupid, and there's nothing here." He turned, but I held him by the shoulder.

"Check this out," I said, pointing to the shut drawer. He pulled at it, pulled harder, leaned down, pushed it in, jiggled it sideways with both hands.

"Doesn't open," he said.

"Maybe we can pry it open," I said.

"It's too small for a crystal ball anyway."

"If it's locked, there's something important in it," I said.

Joe cramped his brows together, a face that meant "I'm thinking".

Bruno yelled, "I will break all your legs, and then I'll break your necks and dump you in the garbage!"

"Hang on," I said, still dizzy, still confused, and I swung my right elbow back and into the drawer. Pain shot into my fingertips and up my shoulder. The drawer was cracked.

"Shit," Joe said.

I pulled on the drawer, and the plywood front came off in my hand. Joe swept his hand in the opening and brought a handful of condoms out with it.

"Condoms!" he said.

We looked at the black plastic packages in Joe's hand. "BILLY BOY", the packages read, and a penis with a grinning cartoon face waved at us.

"Holy shit," I said.

"Let's try one on," Joe said.

There was the scratching sound of a key in the front door lock, the click when it turned, the swoosh when the door opened.

"Oh God," Joe said.

"Mom! Mom!" Bruno yelled.

Joe leapt on his belly and rolled under the bed, so for a moment I stood all alone in the room, feeling light and clear and sharp, and then I got down and rolled under the bed too. Joe's eyes were wide

open and he was pressing both hands on his mouth. The Billy Boys were lying next to his face. I took a deep breath.

"What the hell is up in here?" I heard Ms. Hackmann say, and then someone else spoke, a man. Bruno yelled something. Ms. Hackmann and the man laughed, there was some noise of glasses and bottles from the kitchen, and then I could see their feet as they came into the bedroom. The man wore cowboy boots with metal caps, Ms. Hackmann was barefoot, her patterned skirt down to her ankles.

"He'll come out eventually," she was saying.

"Yeah, but I need to piss," the man said. He sat down on the bed, springs above my head lowering.

"I can make him come out if you want me to."

"No problem," the man said. "I'll make him open the door myself."

"That won't be necessary," I said. Joe's eyes widened even further; he was terrified, inside a nightmare. Before anybody else could say anything, I rolled out from under the bed, my head next to the metal-capped cowboy boots.

The man was small and round, with a big moustache and flushed cheeks. He was as pale as me, and in the strange bedroom light, his skin reflected red and black in layers. He looked confused. Ms. Hackmann's face went through a catalogue of expressions, a fast-forwarded morphing routine that was surprised, angry, amazed in such quick succession that it finally became all these things at the same time. She just said, "Tim."

"Hello Ms. Hackmann," I said. "How are you? Joe is here too, Joe, from Persia."

"Joe from Persia is here too?" the man said. He looked at Ms. Hackmann, who was nodding slowly as if that seemed right to her.

We all stared at the bed, waiting for Joe to appear, and then he finally did, brushing dust off his pants, running a hand over his hair and saying, "Hello," in a voice so low you could hardly hear it. He turned to me and something had happened in his face, it looked haggard and dusty like the floor under the bed. Behind him, the drawers he had searched hung out of the wardrobe in angles, full of

bras and panties and socks. I was careful not to look in the direction of the mirror and the smashed drawer.

"We were just playing," I said. "We pretended you had a crystal ball and we had to find it. See?" I held both hands up to show her the gloves.

"Leather," Joe said.

"Leather?" the man said. "Sorry, but I really should be going." He got up, rubbing his moustache, and waved a hand at Ms. Hackmann as he walked out. From the door, he leaned back to her and stage-whispered, "Can I piss in the sink?"

"Hold it," she said.

He pointed a finger at us and said, "If my wife found out about this, she would die laughing." He shook his head and left.

"Bruno and us were playing Indiana Jones," I said. "We're the good guys, and he's the bad guy. We caught him. That's why he's in the dungeon."

By now, the red and black light had become the way things looked like, not strange anymore at all. Nothing yellow or blue could have been in this room. The three of us looked at each other, and then the screaming in the bathroom started again, and banging louder than ever.

"You locked my son in the bathroom," Ms. Hackmann said.

"In a way," I said.

Joe was just standing there.

"Well," she said. Her hand was playing with the side of her skirt, absentmindedly swinging it back and forth. "Would you like some cognac?" She reached for one of the glasses on the bedside table. She and the man must have brought those in; I hadn't seen them before.

"Could we play the ta-rot?" Joe asked carefully.

"I'd rather just drink," I said.

"I will kill you all and chop you up and eat the pieces on a big Tuna-and-Asshole Sandwich!!" Bruno yelled.

"Shut up," Ms. Hackmann yelled back. "I have company!"

She handed one cognac glass to me, petted my head, ruffling my hair up so it gave me chills, and then saluted with the other glass. "Show me that Atari game," she said and motioned toward the door.

* * *

Ms. Hackmann wasn't any good at River Raid. She didn't know which way to hold the joystick. She never even made it to the first bridge. I didn't know why she even tried. She kept on laughing when she ran into the beach or a tanker, but it wasn't funny at all, not even to her, and we just wanted to leave. Bruno gave up beating and hollering after a while, and we didn't hear another sound from the bathroom. Ms. Hackmann had some more cognac and then some more and she kept on laughing and running into the beach. The sun was gone but it would stay light for another two hours. Then, Joe said he had to be home for dinner or he'd get into trouble, so he gave the bathroom key to me, and then he left. Ms. Hackmann drank some more cognac. I tried to show her how to avoid the beach but she still couldn't do it. Bruno was so quiet he might as well not have there at all. After a while, I said I had to be home, too, and I gave Ms. Hackmann the key to the bathroom. She saw me to the door and gave me a kiss on the cheek, and then I went home.

Joe and I spent the remaining days of the summer sitting on Philosopher's Rock or lying awake in our beds, trying to go to sleep. We never talked about Bruno and his mother, and the day school started again, we rode the bus in silence, clasping our sweaty hands around the straps of our backpacks. Bruno was sitting toward the back of the class, as usual, and when we came in, he pointed a finger at us. When the break came, we ran down to the yard. Bruno was nowhere. We put our hands in our pockets and tried to smile and talk of something, anything, and then Joe went down, Bruno's head slamming into his side. He managed a weak yelp before he hit the asphalt and Bruno started pounding him with his meaty fists. A crowd gathered and I was pushed off into the second or third row, still close enough to watch Bruno pin down Joe's arms with his knees and lean into it hard, close enough to hear the smack, smack smack

and the grunting, and I tried to imagine how it hurt so I wouldn't be surprised later, when it'd be my turn.

