

The Entrepreneur

Valerie Bonham

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Entrepreneur

A short story

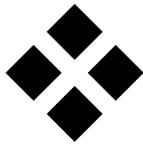
Valerie Bonham

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Karlheinz stared out the kitchen window of his fifth-floor apartment as he took a drag on his cigarette. The rain poured onto the steep orange-tiled roofs of Munich making the tiles glisten. Karlheinz exhaled the smoke as he absentmindedly ran his hand over his thinning blond hair. His hat covered what his hair didn't. Arriving early at the florist meant he'd be able to choose a good selection of the perpetual lamps and pot plants to sell at the cemetery gate. At this time of the year his most popular decorations were chrysanthemums, cut blossoms, and pine wreaths. The traffic, even at this early hour on a Saturday, was often snarled. Each impatient driver hurled

abuse at the others for their presence on the road and for the added annoyance of rain.

Florida, Karlheinz's Chihuahua, yapped at his feet. She sported her tiny red dog-jacket, frayed at the edges, but still more protection from the cold than her thin fur. Florida knew that when she was dressed, they were going places.

The local church bell pealed three-quarters of an hour. He'd better get moving. Holding the cigarette under the faucet, he extinguished it and dropped the soggy butt into the plastic bag lining the small garbage can. The ashes washed away as he rinsed his mug in the sink. In the drainer, he placed the dried cup upside-down. In the entry hall, he pulled on his jacket and fedora, then opened the apartment's front door to let Florida prance into the hallway. She shivered, he assumed, from the sudden chill and from the excitement of going out.

Karlheinz took his umbrella from the stand, bent towards Florida and commanded, "Hup!" She jumped. He caught the little dog in the crook of his arm, pulled the door closed and then trotted downstairs to the entrance of the building.

Rolf, a man always on the lookout for odd jobs, would arrive soon. Karlheinz had to be punctual because, God

forbid, if Rolf didn't see Karlheinz waiting at the curb he'd blow his van's horn. Rolf's impatience and impetuosity could be wearing, even in such an easy-going fellow. The last time Rolf had arrived, Frau Moos, Karlheinz's landlady who lived on the ground-floor, warned him she did not have to put up with that honking. There were laws! Karlheinz had cocked his head and smiled, winsomely he thought. Yes, he would speak to Rolf. She wouldn't punish him for someone else's bad manners, would she?

Frau Moos huffed, lowered her eyes for a moment, and then glanced at him from under her raised eyebrows as if to say she knew that naughty scamps such as he, conned old ladies.

To stay on Frau Moos's good side, Karlheinz did his best to arrive on the street before Rolf. Apartments, as well as rentable vans, were scarce; at least at the rates Karlheinz could afford, so he shouldn't irritate either Frau Moos or Rolf. Someday, though, he wouldn't have to endure all this. He'd return to his proper station in life, calling the shots instead of putting up with other people's arbitrary nonsense.

The collapse of his magazine after that disastrous lawsuit had surprised Karlheinz. Despite having the libel suit

dismissed for lack of evidence, and a jail term avoided since the prosecutor hadn't proved Karlheinz knew that he'd printed lies, his advertisers had canceled their ads, his creditors had withdrawn their support, and he'd gone out of business. Karlheinz had known that taking on a popular government official with iffy evidence would be a gamble, but the stakes had been high, with political favors as the payoff. The risk had seemed worth it. He felt no shame, even now, about having run the stories because he knew those politicians were crooked. What did it matter if the story was more fiction than fact? They were all guilty of something.

Manuela, his adored wife, had not weathered the humiliation well, especially after her relatives had refused to invite him to family gatherings. Her then-tenuous hold on life had slipped, the cancer too strong, and she had died not long after the magazine dissolved. Now, Karlheinz had only Florida, Manuela's beloved pet, and his desire to work his way back up.

Most jobs requiring an interview were closed to him because of his notoriety. The headlines had been vicious. After his many visits to Manuela's grave, he decided to become a freelance vendor of memorial flowers. There was

no bar to entering this profession. Not surprisingly, selling flowers lacked the intensity of publishing as well as its prestige and influence, but in this job Karlheinz remained anonymous and could move around as he liked. Nobody wanted to bother a flower vendor. Desperation also figured in. He had no income and his savings were all but gone. Through the business, he planned to regain financial security, bring on someone like Rolf to buy him out, and re-invest. He'd come from nothing before, he could do it again, but damn the bastards for killing Manuela by not accepting his offer of a printed retraction and apology. They'd wanted him; they'd gotten her instead.

So now, he waited in the nearly freezing drizzle for that amiable lump Rolf and his van. Karlheinz protected Florida in his arms under the good side of the umbrella.

An hour later Karlheinz and Rolf unloaded the van in front of the main entrance to Munich's south cemetery, the Südfriedhof. The rain had slackened. Karlheinz placed Florida on the top tier of the bleacher-type flower stand to keep her out of the way. Rolf always brought her bits of *wurst* so Florida seemed to consider him her best friend. She often hopped down onto the sidewalk and pranced next to Rolf's feet, almost tripping him as he carried the

flats of flowers. Her attentions to Rolf didn't bother him, but they annoyed Karlheinz. If Rolf tripped, all that would happen to him is that he would fall down. Karlheinz, though, would have to pay to replace the spoiled flowers.

“What’cha doing tonight?” Rolf asked chattily around his cigarette as he manhandled a carton of yellow chrysanthemums. He brushed the mums against the van's door and a heavy-headed flower bent in half on its stem.

“Be careful!” Karlheinz snapped. He laid out one green wreath after another on the scrap wood platform he’d used as his workplace for the last three years. “Already you’ve broken off two flowers. No one wants to buy damaged goods.”

Chastened, Rolf straightened the stem, but it stayed buckled under the weight of the fat blossom. He tried coaxing the bloom into staying upright, glancing with a sheepish smile at Karlheinz, but then the ash of his cigarette fell into another flower.

“Idiot,” grumbled Karlheinz. He pulled the carton away from Rolf and blew the ash out of the orangey-yellow cluster of petals. Rolf walked back to the van to pull out another batch of blooms as Karlheinz hoisted the flat of fat daisy-like flowers. Karlheinz turned to step across the

bike path between the street and the sidewalk to his stand, but the frantic tinging of a bicycle bell caused him to step back off the curb. Bicyclists in Munich are as insistent on their right of way as any Mercedes driver in the passing lane on the autobahn. Someday, thought Karlheinz, someday I will be back in a proper business and not have to endure this mess.

Half an hour later Karlheinz sat under his small canopy awaiting the day's first customers. Florida nestled in his lap, her head swiveling as she watched the pedestrians passing the flower stand. He relaxed, happy to be ready for the customers, but stopped. The sag of the metal brought his attention to another thin patch on his folding chair. Soon the entire bottom would be rust. That movement in the seat meant another day of searching dumpsters for a replacement. Mortification always flooded Karlheinz when he needed to pick through other peoples' trash, but what choice did he have? Meager savings, no credit, and no prospects other than his own desire to regain affluence meant beggars couldn't be choosers.

The customers who bought flowers and lamps from him were mostly old people. The young didn't worry about graves yet, but the older ones could all but hear the Grim

Reaper's footsteps following them. Out of love and a sense of duty, they served those who were gone and they could only hope their children followed their example.

Karlheinz's stand was small compared to the other vendors, but he had improved his selling spot by degrees. Flower-selling didn't seem to be a young person's game so, like his customers, his competitors tended to be older rather than young. Three months before, old Frau So-and-so who'd had the kiosk next to the cemetery gate joined the silent residents inside the cemetery walls. Now Karlheinz's kiosk was the one directly next to the gate. You had to make your own luck. In the rain people didn't comparison shop among the vendors, but briskly chose flowers and moved along to pay their respects to their dearly departed.

Medical progress had been a disturbing trend in recent times, at least from Karlheinz's point of view. People didn't die off the way they used to, but business did. Fewer funerals meant fewer plants sold, even to people devoted to the care of their loved ones' graves. German cemeteries reflect the seasons displaying the pride many people had in their homes. Crocuses and daffodils bloomed in the spring, followed by tulips and pansies. Daisies, roses, and ivy would be in season until dedicated gardeners planted the winter

heather and strewed fir branches to shield the earth until the crocuses and daffodils appeared again. To augment the perennials that family members constantly tended, mended or replaced, friends and relatives bought cut blooms to place in plastic vases full of water and stuck into the ground on their spikes. Here, cemetery decoration was art.

The other flower vendors also complained among themselves about the shrinking number of burials. The larger florists provided stiff competition to them not only with their plants and flowers but also because of their contract-services to maintain the beauty of the graves. The thought of a reduced clientele didn't sit well with Karlheinz. His savings wouldn't accumulate if all his earnings only covered keeping together body and soul with nothing extra for investment.

In the winter, Karlheinz's customers, especially those with relations who would mourn them, appreciated a spontaneously offered cup of hot coffee from a Thermos, one of Karlheinz's additional services. While drinking his own coffee as he mulled over the grim tidings of fewer customers, Karlheinz conceived a plan to increase business. The proximity of the yew plants, the big bushes guarding those enjoying their final rest from daily disturbances, gave

him the idea. Unfortunately for some customers, the coffee in one of Karlheinz's Thermoses occasionally had disagreeably poisonous yew added to it.

Karlheinz had first thought that it was a pity that the most devoted family members were his easiest opportunities. Then again, he was reuniting them with those whom they tended with love. Reunions between devoted family members are generally joyful events, so could arranged reunions be entirely bad?

Even though he justified these permanent reunions to himself, Karlheinz wasn't foolish enough as to arrange them often, and he was careful to vary both timing and execution. No, not execution--method of facilitation. That sounded better. To add to Karlheinz's caution he wondered about one of the recent "reunion attendees," Herr Echtler. Did Herr Echtler remind him of the state's chief prosecuting attorney whom Karlheinz had seen in the district court during his own trial? Something about the eyes and the shape of the nose? The prosecuting attorney and Herr Echtler might have been close cousins. By the time Karlheinz pinned down this resemblance, though, it was too late. The "reunion" itself had worked well, but the newspapers carried an article about another case of taxine

poisoning which the authorities were trying to trace. Karlheinz had developed a successful “business plan” but, as with everything, it needed fine tuning.

Karlheinz’s next assignment as Reunion Coordinator, as he now called himself, was more direct. This time he needed his victim be a “regular,” not someone who splurged only every so often in an orgy of guilt for having neglected Oma, Opa, or Onkel Fritz. No, this person should be a regular so that Karlheinz could engage him or her in conversation to learn that person’s routine so he could fit his plan to it. He would do field reconnaissance to make sure of details because he'd overused the taxine ploy and he didn't want a repeat of the Herr Echtler business. A better choice was from among the widows or widowers, specifically those with grown children living nearby.



The next Thursday before he went out, Karlheinz convinced Frau Moos to keep Florida at home for the day because the little dog “seemed to have a bit of a cold.” At the wholesaler, Karlheinz bought only a small selection of

flowers. He closed his stand early to shadow his next candidate, Herr Nussbaum, having learned earlier in conversation with the old man the general neighborhood where his customer lived. He followed Herr Nussbaum to the *Gasthaus zum Eichbaum*, the Oak Tree Inn.

At Karlheinz's flower kiosk, Herr Nussbaum often didn't seem able to make up his mind. He would repeatedly say that Karlheinz hadn't picked up the pot of flowers he, Herr Nussbaum, had chosen. Karlheinz would go through a drill of pointing at different pots. "This one, Herr Nussbaum? That one? This next row over?" Herr Nussbaum would huff into his luxuriant white mustache and contradict Karlheinz at every turn, the skinny old man seeming to fidget in a suit at least a size too big. The old guy would never see Karlheinz tailing him.

That Thursday when Karlheinz arrived at the *Gasthaus*, Herr Nussbaum had apparently been in the company of the other regulars for several hours. The old man spied Karlheinz as he came in and stood up from his spot on the banquette that horseshoed the table. Herr Nussbaum waved vigorously and made two other old men scoot off the banquette so he could get out.

Karlheinz thought his plan was finished even before it

began. How did the old man, blind as an owl in the daylight, see him?

With high, good cheer, Herr Nussbaum was adamant about Karlheinz joining them, “You must have a drink.”

“I couldn’t interrupt your evening,” said Karlheinz.

“I insist,” Herr Nussbaum said. He turned to his tablemates with a grand gesture, “All businessmen should be like this man. He is thoughtful. He is reliable. He is efficient.” He clapped Karlheinz on the back. “We shall have a round of schnapps.” Herr Nussbaum seemed to be at the point in his drinking where anything would call for a round of schnapps.

The *Gasthaus* owner himself brought out a tray with an array of the small glasses used for downing the ice-cold, ice-clear, liquor.

“To good businessmen!” announced Herr Nussbaum, tipping his glass first towards the Gasthaus owner and then to Karlheinz.

Karlheinz raised his glass, nodded to the owner and then to the assembly, and knocked back the shot.

Later, Karlheinz decided, he couldn’t kill the fellow after he’d paid Karlheinz a compliment like that. It wouldn’t be polite. And, of course, there was the matter of the

witnesses who could place Karlheinz in the neighborhood.

Herr Nussbaum's spotting of Karlheinz in the Gasthaus caused Frau Merkur to be next.



Frau Merkur was tall, thin, and garrulous. In response to Karlheinz's cheery greeting of "*Gruss Gott*," Frau Merkur always responded with an avalanche of detail about whatever occupied her mind.

"*Gruss Gott*," she'd respond and then launch into her latest gardening adventure concerning Herr Merkur's grave. "I need three more pots of Erica. It's a tough plant. You know, something has been getting at my flowers. All the other plants I bought earlier are doing just fine, but in one area something kills the plants. This thing doesn't go to plants on the other graves, only mine. I have to wonder if that woman with the husband who is next to mine isn't sabotaging my efforts."

Karlheinz moved over to the small pots. Erica, the pink heather, was a favorite cold weather decoration. "Which do you like best today, Frau Merkur?" he asked, gesturing

across the pots.

“I think this one, that one, and that one. No, maybe not that one. The one behind it.” Frau Merkur pointed and after Karlheinz handed her the plants, she examined them carefully. “You know,” she said, “I bought two pots of Erica one year for the balcony flower boxes. I knocked a plant out of the pot and there was a colony of ants living in the bottom. Ants! Gave me such a fright. My heart, you know. Took me years before I could buy Erica again, but, you know, it does so well in the colder months. What else can you put out that will look well and not die? Well, you know, they don't all die. Your plants don't contain ants, now, do they?” Frau Merkur gave Karlheinz a sharp look.

"No, no, Frau Merkur. No ants." Karlheinz pulled a small heather plant out of its pot hoping there were no ants.

That day was slow. Frau Merkur was the only customer so Karlheinz wasn't inhibited about pumping her for details that usually weren't a concern of a flower vendor. Frau Merkur didn't mind. She continued with her cemetery tales and Karlheinz had no problem turning the conversation to where she lived, her transportation routes, when she went to the store, and who she visited when. "Such a pleasant conversation, today," Frau Merkur said when she paid.

Karlheinz made his plan. Frau Merkur had been so detailed that Karlheinz decided that a reconnaissance wasn't needed. Late-winter darkness still came early, and he was not detected as he carried out Frau Merkur's "reunion" with Herr Merkur. Karlheinz told himself that, for the talkative old woman, the quick shove from somewhere in the crowd of homeward-bound workers and shoppers onto the tracks in front of a suburban commuter train was too fast for her to realize what was happening. Far better for her than a lingering illness.

Four days later, Frau Merkur was resting next to her late husband. It later annoyed Karlheinz that the Merkurs' daughter proved not as attentive to her parents as Frau Merkur had been to Herr Merkur. That young woman ought to show more respect. Still, for three months after the burial, Frau Merkur's three sisters made up the difference, assiduously tending the new grave. From conversation with them, though, Karlheinz determined that two were spinsters and the third was a widow. Her late husband was buried in the *Nordfriedhof*, the north cemetery at the other end of the city. The remainder of the Merkur family would, for now, be spared any further grief.

In the months following, Herr Hohmeier, Herr Beck,

and Frau Leibnitz all respectively joined their spouses in eternal rest, and their families mourned. With the growing daylight, though, streetcar and subway accidents were less easy to manufacture. Another wrinkle for Karlheinz was the announcements in the newspaper to elderly mass transit patrons warning them to be careful. Officials were stationed near the tracks, especially at the larger stations.

As the year moved away from the cold, damp months, the yew bushes weren't a replacement for winter accidents. All that publicity about the earlier deaths made grubbing near the bushes look suspicious. A patch of foxgloves, though, held promise. Karlheinz found the plants flanking a sign by one of the city's *Kleingärten*, those meticulously maintained garden-villages in which the town rented plots of land to urban ploughboys.

This time, Karlheinz had two prospective targets, Frau Pestalozzi and Frau Untermeyer.

Frau Pestalozzi was dedicated to her late parents and always arrived in style. Fortnightly, on Thursday mornings, she visited her parents' graves accompanied by her own canine companion, an elegant black poodle called Chichi. When Frau Pestalozzi's maroon BMW purred up to the curb, Karlheinz could almost smell her perfume even

before the car's door opened. The driver, who incarcerated Chichi in the car, waited for his employer to make her choice, then carried the newest floral offering into the cemetery as Frau Pestalozzi strode ahead of him, her high heels making little crunches in the gravel. The driver would then return to the car to keep the frantic Chichi company until her mistress returned. Often, after her visit, the lady enjoyed a small cup of the coffee that Karlheinz often had available.

Herr Pestalozzi, tall with silver-shot hair, and a cravat in cold weather, had visited the cemetery only twice since Karlheinz had worked his flower stand. These were, coincidentally, the only times Chichi was absent.

While accompanying his wife, Herr Pestalozzi offered his opinions about the bouquet that would adorn the graves of his late parents-in-law: pansies or petunias?, white chrysanthemums or yellow? The moment his wife turned her back to him, though, the façade dropped. There was no indication that relations between them were anything but pleasant, but Karlheinz was sure that if Frau Pestalozzi were to become the Dearly Departed, Herr Pestalozzi's grief would be short-lived. Karlheinz didn't see any large amount of money being spent on pansies, chrysanthemums

or heather. Perhaps it was Frau Pestalozzi who owned the family checkbook, not her husband.

There was also the driver. On her previous visit, Karlheinz had felt the prickling that indicates someone, somewhere was watching. After handing Frau Pestalozzi her coffee, he looked up to see her driver, waiting outside the car rather than in it with Chichi, and staring at him. The driver then moved forward to hand her into the car. He seemed to be like a guard dog that bristles for no obvious reason. Between the suspicious driver and the hysterical Chichi, with no help from Herr Pestalozzi, the lady was more lucrative alive than dead. Karlheinz was safer for leaving her alone.

Frau Untermeyer was another story.



Frau Untermeyer visited the late Herr Untermeyer each week and a different Untermeyer offspring accompanied her at least once a month. There must have been seven of them living in town. A good Catholic family, thought Karlheinz.

Frau Untermeyer's own purchases were modest--small pots of posies or a simple seasonal decoration. The children, though, seemed to feel they should spare no expense for Papa. When they came along, Karlheinz always did well by them. The children, all adults now, obviously had been well-educated and were apparently generously paid in their chosen professions. One daughter in particular only shed her knee-length seal coat in warm weather, and even then she stretched the season. If Frau Untermeyer joined her beloved Herr Untermeyer, Karlheinz was sure a new Untermeyer clientele with deep feelings as well as deep pockets would become regular purchasers of his offerings.

So, during the third week in May, Karlheinz collected this and that from the foxgloves that grew by the *Kleingärten* sign. He had already practiced tending to the clump and, if asked, he was making a bouquet. The day after his "shopping trip," digitalis was a component of Karlheinz's coffee. Frau Untermeyer and Herr Untermeyer were to be reunited.

On the day he expected Frau Untermeyer, Karlheinz prepared the two Thermoses of coffee. The blue Thermos held plain coffee. The color of the red Thermos was a warning: this coffee was not so plain. Coffee is a treatment

for digitalis poisoning, so Karlheinz presumed it would slow down the onset of symptoms until the coffee-drinker was some distance away from the cemetery.

The morning was clear and bright as Karlheinz and Rolf loaded the vans. Rolf had picked up Karlheinz early and blew the horn. Of course, Frau Moos stuck her head out into the stairwell. Rolf had driven them to the rental agency and Karlheinz rented the additional van to handle the increased business. His minor successes had improved his standing and that success had attracted customers.

The weather had warmed and pansies were now the flowers of choice. Rolf had loaded the usual purple-and-yellow monkey-faced variety into his van along with purple-and-white pansies. Flats of plain yellow, deep purple, and plain white pansies were behind these. Karlheinz carried his own favorite, periwinkle-colored pansies. As the business had grown, so had the family plots in the *Südfriedhof*. Karlheinz felt an obligation to provide only the best flowers in honor of those whose passing afforded him a better living. It also conveyed to the families Karlheinz's concern for their grief and encouraged their patronage of his stand. In his opinion the loveliest flowers were the periwinkle pansies, delicate pale blue blossoms with the

faintest deepening of hue at each petal rim. Along with the flowers, Karlheinz now supplied candles in red glass holders, the perpetual lights for the graves.

Karlheinz drove the rental van through the twisting streets of the old part of the city, following Rolf's van. The two vehicles emerged onto the almost highway-sized boulevard leading to the suburbs. In Karlheinz's van, Florida perched on a box by the door window, chastising each car they passed for whatever offense she imagined it committed. At the cemetery, Karlheinz and Rolf pulled their vehicles up to the curb by the main gate and parked. The clock tower in the graveyard chimed eight. Karlheinz was just in time to see a large Airedale terrier generously sprinkle the corner of his stand. "*Verdammtter hund!*," he cursed. Why couldn't these dog owners watch their damned dogs? Idiots, doping off, staring into space as their pooches piddled on anything standing still. Oh well, it could have been worse.

Rolf's van's rear doors squealed as he forced them open. "Where do you want these?" he shouted to Karlheinz.

Karlheinz motioned at Rolf to wait until he was out of the van. Couldn't the dummy just hold on a moment? At least let him get Florida settled on the flower stand. Rolf's

loyalty was heartwarming, but his associate's thickheaded behavior irritated Karlheinz more and more. The €20 per week increase that Karlheinz had given Rolf surely entitled Karlheinz to more deference than being shouted at as if he were a menial himself. He hoped by next month to have a driver with more brains than Rolf.

Karlheinz situated Florida on the stand's topmost tier and then returned to the rental van. He looked over the day's stock and evaluated the colors for placement. The monkey-faced pansies must be far back. Their color was strong enough to carry past the others. The perpetual lights should be off to one side. He would light the two he kept for this reason. Sell the sparkle.

Karlheinz returned to the rental to get the first lot of flowers. He hoisted the flats and then straightened under the load. As he stood, he saw that Rolf had placed the yellow, purple, and white pansies willy-nilly in front of the monkey-faces. That man didn't have the brains God gave an acorn. "Put the colors together!" snapped Karlheinz.

"That's boring," called back Rolf, "This way it has more pizzazz."

"I pay you for your van, not your artistic ability."

Karlheinz could feel his voice rising. The morning of a planned “reunion” always had him on edge. He worked to control his voice. “Put the colors together.”

As Karlheinz berated Rolf, Florida took that as her cue concerning an approaching German shepherd being pulled along by an old lady so short that the hem of her dark green loden coat barely cleared her ankles--no customer of Karlheinz's. Florida trotted to the end of the top tier and growled at the trespasser. She must have felt her warning was inadequate as she then hopped nimbly down the tiers and directed a stream of what sounded like canine cussing at the hapless shepherd.

Rolf moved to pick up the little dog. He was good that way. Florida dodged him and continued her shrill barking.

The old lady steamed onward pulling on the shepherd's leash. The larger dog, which must have come from a long line of cowards, wheeled around his mistress to avoid Florida, his tail clamped between his legs.

Karlheinz, his mind on the color arrangement of the flowers, started across the bicycle path, his arms loaded with a flat of the periwinkle pansies. He realized Florida was the one making a ruckus and, after spying her on the sidewalk, he shouted at her to go back to the flower stand.

Instead, Florida advanced with purpose on the larger dog.

The old lady, hanging onto the leash, yelled at Rolf to control Florida and brandished her umbrella at the Chihuahua.

Florida knew a coward when she saw one. She popped forward at the shrinking shepherd, dodged the umbrella, and nipped the big dog's back leg. The shepherd yipped, pulled away from his owner and dashed out into the road, slamming into Karlheinz. He struggled to keep his balance, but he stepped backwards into the traffic. Karlheinz bounced off a car and the periwinkle pansies went flying. The squeal of tires and the sound of crunching metal startled even the dogs as a Porsche slammed to a stop. Florida dashed behind the flower stand and the shepherd high-tailed it back to his owner. The car didn't smash Karlheinz flat but, decorated with pansies, pots, and potting soil, everything was the worse for wear. Then there was the problem that the Porsche now sported a Volkswagen Golf on its rear bumper.

Rolf was beside himself and waving his arms. "Get your stupid dog out of here!" he bellowed at the old lady who'd recovered her dog's leash. "You almost killed my friend!"

The old woman glared at him, pulled her dog to heel and took a swipe at Rolf with her umbrella.

The Porsche driver pulled himself out of his dented auto and, seemingly in response to Rolf's demand that the offending canine be gone, yelled, "You wait until the *Polizei* arrive. Nobody leaves!"

Karlheinz lay in the street, pale, shaken and in tears. Pansies were everywhere, He sat up and found Florida in his lap, front feet planted on his chest as she licked his face. He tried to brush the dirt from his pants. The Porsche driver continued to yell at him for being in the road where he had no business. The owner of the Golf was stabbing at something in his hand, maybe a phone. The old lady declared loudly that if that horrid little dog had been properly on a leash, none of this would have happened.

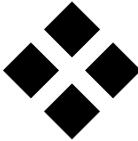
Rolf dove into the front of Karlheinz's van and then appeared at the curb holding a steaming cup of coffee. Karlheinz tremblingly grasped the cup and sipped gratefully at the liquid. His head cleared slowly and then he struggled to his feet. Rolf fetched another cup of the coffee and helped his friend to Karlheinz's newer metal chair, Florida at the ready for comfort. In the meantime the Porsche driver was conferring loudly with the old lady who

waved her umbrella in Florida's direction. The shepherd cringed abjectly at his mistress's feet as if he wanted to hide under her coat. The owner of the Golf had his phone clapped to his ear.

The *Polizei* arrived and took statements. After they left, the nausea and cramps hit Karlheinz. He staggered to the van and saw the red thermos without its lid. The people with the phones, good in emergencies, were gone. By that time it was too late. Shouting at the confused Rolf did no good.

The funeral was well attended. Karlheinz would have made a killing.

End



Acknowledgments

My thanks to a café on Marienplatz in Munich, Germany (see this story's cover) where I spent a few hours sketching out this story on napkins. I regret that I've forgotten the name of the café.

On that day, after walking through the cemetery between where we lived in the American military housing area near Perlacher Forst and the closest streetcar stop, I rode downtown for who-knows-what errands. As I stared out the windows of the streetcar, the flower vendors by the cemetery resonated with me. While dozing off as I rode, one thought led to another. I walked around downtown for a while and then, conveniently overcome by hunger, I dropped into a *Konditorei* (a cross between a café and a pastry shop). Luckily, the *Konditorei* used paper napkins and I spent the time it takes to consume a slice of cake and two or three cups of hot chocolate in scribbling the earliest story onto the napkins. No one disturbed me by asking if I needed anything, nor did anyone question me as to why I was writing on napkins.

After the napkin-draft, I wrote another draft, and then forgot about it. ("Life") More recently, while looking for something else, I saw the story's title and opened the file. I still liked it so I polished it a little and sent it to friends. They pointed out mistakes and, after I fixed the mistakes, I polished it some more. Thanks to my friends, IRL and online, who helped me fix those errors in the earlier drafts.

The cover image is a photo I took from the tower of Munich's City Hall. I then ran the photo through the BrushStroke app. The story's first-page photo of orange roofs in Germany is another of mine, also processed through BrushStroke.