

CARLO
SCHÄFER

THE DEATH
OF
THREE MEN.
NOVEL

CB|LONGPLAYER

About this Edition

Karl Karst anticipates the end of his life with airy nonchalance. No, he is not in the least at odds with the swelling-up of his not-incon-siderable girth, which is now ballooning on a daily basis. In the end, he bursts.

Carlo Schäfer takes up the pen where Nikolai Gogol, Franz Kafka und Daniil Charms put theirs down. He writes about our mad, grotesque world: the work is by turns concise, precise, bizarre, humorous and hard-hitting. We have here a novel which subtly weaves miniatures into a real firecracker.

»The Death Of Three Men: Concerning the going home of Karl Karst, of Fat Herr Konrad, and of the one calling himself David; also medicine, Protestant lay missionary work, pest control and theodicy« – to give it its full title – is a roman noir without any apparent crimes, yet rooted in the illicit depths of the human soul.

Like a Hall of Mirrors at the fairground, this book is a piece of grotesquerie which takes ignorance, repressed rage and self-centredness to absurd extremes

»Carlo Schäfer has succeeded in creating a perfectly wonderful literary gem!« Anne Kuhlmeier, *Wort & Tat*

About the Author

Carlo Schäfer, born 1964, lives and works in Heidelberg. Five of his detective stories have been published by Rowohlt (four have been translated into Russian). Rowohlt have also published a lexicon, written by Carlo Schäfer under a pseudonym (our lips remain sealed!) Edition Nautilus also published one his crime novels. Der Verlag an der Ruhr has published two of his young adult detective stories. In CULTurMAG/CrimeMag Carlo Schäfer writes the »Carlos« column, which tackles an eclectic range of topics. He is a frequent contributor to anthologies from a variety of publishing houses and was nominated for the Glausur Debut Award for the best first work by a German-language crime writer.

Carlo Schäfer

The Death of Three Men

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Novel

Translated by Roger Savage

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Chapter 1

The last ten days of Karl Karst's life prior to his death by bursting

Karl Karst spent the morning of the tenth day before his bursting in a very relaxed, happy frame of mind. He ate ham and eggs, a white bread roll, a wholemeal one, and his coffee had turned out particularly well. He prepared his coffee himself, by hand, and was proud of his ability to do so. For some time he had been aware that he was becoming slightly more rotund – in a peculiar sort of way: his weight remained constant. This didn't bother him in the slightest. He had grown very easygoing and even-tempered as the years went by.

After breakfast Karl Karst went to the bus stop. Apart from him there was only one old lady waiting, with a mangy poodle.

“It's getting worse and worse,” said the old lady, shaking her head.

“What?” asked Karl Karst. “What is getting worse and worse?”

“The buses are late, then they’re early, then they just don’t turn up at all,” said the lady. “Who knows how long we’ll be waiting!”

Karl Karst turned it over in his mind. He hadn’t noticed anything unusual about the public transport lately. The lady went on and on; he wasn’t listening. He was cogitating about the weather: grey sky, a light wind – hardly noticeable – the temperature outside the same as just now inside his flat. He couldn’t prove it of course, but that was how it seemed to him. He decided that there wasn’t really any weather that day, so to speak. The bus came.

There were people sitting in the bus: a blind chap with a white stick who was kneading his private parts, two pale youths, the lady with the poodle had already sat down. Karl was still standing, undecided about where to sit. The bus set off. He almost fell over. At the station he dismounted, took a deep breath, and realised that right now, nothing – absolutely nothing – interested him.

Once he’d arrived at the station pub, *The Station*, he sat as usual at the small round table by the window. From here he had a good view of the glass frontage opposite and could keep an eye on

things happening in the station concourse. People were walking to and fro. The pub landlord, Fred Geist, nodded to him. Karl Karst nodded back.

“That’s half the day gone again!” said Geist and held up a pils glass to the light for inspection, then polished it one more time. “Crazy how time flies! What’s the family up to, Karl?”

“Haven’t got one.”

“Ah, that’s right. Sorry!”

“Sorry? Why sorry?”

“Because I ... your family ...”

“It’s not something bad, not to have a family.”

“Of course.”

“And what’s your family up to, Fred?”

“The old girl’s the same as ever. Jaqeline and Piffel, too. Beer, Karl?”

“As ever!”

“Piffel’s real name is Patrick,” said Geist, drawing the beer with great deliberation. “Heaven only knows how we ended up with that nickname.”

“Another of life’s mysteries,” said Karl Karst.

“Anyhow, I don’t know how we ended up with that nickname.”

“Can’t know everything,” said Karl Karst.

The landlord placed the pint on the round table.

“You’ve put a bit of weight on,” said the landlord.

“It only looks that way,” said Karl Karst.

“You’re a right one, you are!” said Fred Geist.

“I am a one!” Karl Karst agreed.

A while later Geist pointed across to the glass frontage.

“Just don’t end up like him, that’s all!”

Karl Karst turned his head. Sure enough, there was a very fat man, leaning on a stick, struggling along, he was dragging a heavy case and wheezing like an old nag.

“I’m not turning into one of those,” said Karl Karst. “I’m only getting rounder, not heavier.” The landlord raised his eyebrows but said nothing. Instead, half an hour later, he said, “He’s neither use nor ornament.”

“Who?” asked Karl Karst.

“Piffel,” said Fred Geist.

An hour later Karl Karst said, “I’ll have another beer.” The landlord nodded. “There’s hardly any trains stopping here now. Don’t get many people in. I’ve been thinking about changing the name

from *The Station* to *The Big Bang*. What do you think?” Karl took a mouthful of beer and said, some time later, “I’m afraid I have absolutely no thoughts either way.”

A few hours later he was back home again and staring at the wall for ages. Ate three pieces of bread with something or other on, and then that was the day over.

The second day of the last ten prior to his death by bursting began like the one before, so there’s no need to go into detail. Just to mention: instead of the lady with the mangy poodle there was a young couple forever kissing, waiting for the bus with Karl Karst.

So, in the bus we had Karl Karst, the young couple, who – now that they were sitting – were kissing likes things possessed, an assortment of Turks, whom Karl Karst had since time immemorial never been able to tell apart (he was the same with Blacks and Asians), a man who was probably addled, with a bent neck, calling for a naked Englishwoman – sometimes demandingly, sometimes pesteringly, sometimes angrily, in desperation, and last of all a curmudgeonly old

bloke who was constantly griping at the driver about accelerating or braking too jerkily, going too slowly round bends and also cutting them, but in general about driving too fast.

Once he'd reached Fred's, Karl Karst ordered a pint. After drawing the beer and fetching it to Karst's round table, Fred Geist said, "You really are putting weight on fast, Karl!"

"I am not putting weight on," Karl Karst countered friendlily. "I am just getting more and more circular."

"How do you know?" asked Fred Geist. "Do you weigh yourself every day?"

"Well," Karl Karst laughed cheerily, "if anyone knows what I weigh, it's got to be me."

Geist shook his head, "Well, you're a right one, you are!"

Karl Karst counted to ten, then said, "I am a right one!" An hour later he said, "I'll have another beer."

"So, what does your wife think about it all?" asked Fred Geist, putting the beer on Karl Karst's little round table. "About all what?" asked Karl Karst. "About the beer?" "No. About ... how did

you put it? About getting more and more circular?”

“But Fred,” Karl Karst shook his head, “we had this” ... he counted briefly ... “twice yesterday. I’ve no wife and I’ve no family.”

“Right!” Fred Geist slapped his forehead. “And you have absolutely no thoughts either way about whether I should change the name of my pub to *The Big Bang*.”

Karl Karst nodded and for the first time noticed that this was getting a little more difficult. His neck was now really quite taut. “But how’s your family doing?” he asked the landlord, Fred Geist, in a friendly tone.

“All much of a muchness,” said Fred Geist and allowed himself a herbal liqueur, which he occasionally did but not to excess. “Apart from Piffel. Piffel’s neither use nor ornament, which is pretty normal, but now he’s gone and failed his driving test, too. Ran into a nun. Who’s going to pay the compensation, I’m wondering? Piffel’s a complete nutcase.” Karl Karst said nothing.

A few hours later he was back home again and then spent a long time looking at the wall. Ate

three pieces of bread with something or other on, washed the plate from the day before and from that day, which was then over.

The next day, too, began normally. Karl Karst found it a trifle annoying that he was no longer able to use the ancestral kitchen chair because of the arm rests. True, he could just about still squeeze himself into it, but this really lessened his enjoyment of breakfast and so – this calmed him down once again because there was one, after all – that left the corner bench. He ate heartily; as per usual the coffee had turned out well. This new prospect - of that wall of the small kitchen which the green wall units were fixed to - was surprisingly pleasing. It was not long before he stopped missing his customary view of the orange Seventies wallpaper.

Today too there was hardly any weather deserving of that name. As one could not keep doing the same thing, day in and day out, he wondered whether he shouldn't stop by *The Bavarian Snug* instead of Fred's pub. But then he reached the conclusion that, at the end of the day, beer is beer, no matter where, that in fact everything is pretty unceremonious actually. He went to the bus stop.

He had the stop and the bus completely to himself. He liked this, and in no time he was at Fred Geist's.

“Piffel calls himself Pi now,” the landlord growled and let his shoulders sag. “Meant to be more cool, as if that’s going to make any difference. He’s still the same bloody arsehole he always was. He was an arsehole even as a kid. Takes after my brother-in-law: the one who messed up the car horn factory. The whole of my wife’s family are idiots – accidents, every one of them: split condoms. Beer, Karl?”

Karl Karst now suffered the same misfortune as at home: he no longer fitted into the chair. He had to admit it: there was absolutely no way he would. That morning – just now in fact – he had been able to sit in his armchair (the seat of which projected at least as much as on Fred’s comfy seating). It had been a struggle, it had even been uncomfortable and, as mentioned, he had only subjected himself briefly to it. Now there was no way he could get his backside anywhere near the actual seat of the chair. It would seem that his swelling up was gathering pace.

“I’ll stand up for the beer, for a change, Fred,” he said, and debated whether this shift in years of practice actually made any difference. If it did, it wasn’t a lot. He never would have thought that it made so little difference whether he stood or sat. Particularly since – this was odd – he was even feeling lighter by the day. Yes, now it crossed his mind that he had been dreaming the night before that he was a yellow balloon, floating in a cheery blue sky. He hadn’t had any dreams since childhood, and his childhood was now so distant that if in doubt, he’d have said he hadn’t actually had one. Had he, Karl Karst – always comfortable with who he was – been born like that?

He had to stop all this musing: he could barely concentrate on the lovely beer, yet there it stood, at his disposal, so to speak. Geist looked him over. “Karl, the way things are looking, you’re going to need to get new clothes every day. How are you going to pay for them?”

“What?”

“Your clothes.”

“What about them?”

“Your trousers, your shirt, that sweater. How are you going to afford it?”

Now Karl Karst understood and he gave it some thought. Actually it was amazing! Every item of his clothing had undergone the swelling process, too. He thought briefly how difficult everything would be if they didn't do this, then said, "It's fine." To be on the safe side he checked his shoes. They too had swollen to twice their size. He sipped his beer contentedly.

An hour later he said, "I'll have another beer." Another hour after that Fred Geist said, "Piffel."

Otherwise nothing at all happened that day. At home, after looking at his wall for a long time, Karl Karst was feeling pleasantly tired when he realised that he had not eaten, yet was not the least bit hungry. Then he fell asleep. Three days of his last ten had gone.

Next day he left the house for the last time. People he went past would turn, increasingly so, but it was not in any way bad. At the bus stop stood a man wearing a hat, the old woman with the poodle, a female dwarf and a young man with a green Mohican haircut.

"You are fat!" said the young man to Karl Karst, who made no reply.

“Haven’t I seen you somewhere before?” asked the old woman.

“Not as such,” said Karl Karst.

He could no longer fit into the bus, so he walked to the station. He wasn’t bothered.

Fred Geist looked him over, concerned. “No need to worry!” said Karl Karst.

“What does your wife say about it all?” asked Geist.

“I don’t have a wife.”

“Oh yes, yes! What am I thinking of!”

“A beer, please.”

“Coming up!”

“Everything ok?” asked Karl Karst. “With the family?”

Geist drew the beer grumpily. “As normal as it can be, I suppose. The Old Girl, my wife, is off up the mountains tomorrow with a friend. Jaqueline’s packed in her hairdressing apprenticeship; she’s doing floristry now. The problem is Piffel. Herr Pi. That swine – he’ll be the death of me yet! Now he’s after tennis lessons. I said ... Here’s your beer.”

“You said *Here’s your beer?*”

“No. I said that to you!”

To be sure, there stood a beer. Karl Karst took a mouthful, although he was not thirsty.

“I said,” Fred Geist returned to his theme, “by the time I’m through with you you’ll not be playing tennis. You’ll be playing pocket billiards. Do you get me?”

“Who? Me?”

“No, him.”

For a while nothing happened. Nothing at all because there wasn’t even any weather that day, again. Then a man came in, ordered a beer, smoked cigarettes rather hectically as if though new to it, and began to speak. “I mean – I’ve just got to get this off my chest – I mean, my wife, my daughter, my son ...”

“A family. I don’t have one,” said Karl Karst. The man did not respond to this well-meant observation, not that it mattered.

“I mean, my wife, now she’s after one of those houses there on this island.”

“I’ll have another beer,” said Karl Karst.

“Yes,” said Fred Geist. “Did you notice that I’d changed the name?”

“So you’re not called Fred Geist any more?”

“The name of the pub. Now it’s called *The Big Bang* and we’ve already got double the number of customers.

“That is good,” said Karl Karst.

“I mean,” the man stood up then sat down again, stretched out his legs, then settled them at an angle, “I’m pretty successful professionally, but a house.... I say *Darling – how about an apartment in one of those compounds, with a communal pool?* And then it just gets worse. She says *I’d like a house on this island, one with its own pool!* Do you get why that was even worse?”

“No,” said Karl Karst. Fred Geist polished a beer glass, held it up to the light for inspection, gave it another polish.

“There had been absolutely no mention of a pool until then! Now suddenly – a pool as well! If only I hadn’t said anything about a communal pool... This island!”

“Well, I can’t give you any advice there,” said Karl Karst. “I don’t know the first thing about islands.”

“I was on an island one time with my family,” said Fred Geist.

“You’ve definitely got a family,” Karl Karst confirmed.

“But it was so long ago I can’t remember the name,” Geist continued.

“*The Big Bang !*” said Karl Karst.

“No – the island. Piffel was only young. He nearly drowned. I pulled him out of the water. The biggest mistake I ever made!”

“Who’s Piffel?” the man asked.

“His son,” said Karl Karst. “Have you got any family?”

The man looked at him, at a loss. “But I’ve just been talking about my family... the island ... the house ... the pool!”

“To be honest, I wasn’t really listening and I’ve forgotten it all.”

“Aha,” said the man and turned to Fred Geist. “But your wife won’t have demanded – after one holiday – that you go and buy a house with its own pool there, will she?”

“No, that she didn’t,” said Fred Geist, granting himself one of his rare herbal liqueurs. “But Piffel, Pi, my swine of a son wants tennis lessons. I’ll give you both one guess who’s paying!”

“He’s paying for them himself,” guessed Karl Karst.

“I’d say you were mistaken there, Sir!” exclaimed the man. “At least, that’s what I think.

The landlord's son, I'm fairly certain, expects his father, the landlord, to pay for everything!"

"Correct, my dear guest!"

"Karst!"

"I wasn't talking to you, Karl."

"All the better!"

"I would ask you two gentlemen not to breathe a word to my wife about these plans of Piffel's, otherwise she's going to want a tennis court, too!"

Thus things continued, back and forth, for a while. Karl Karst was not in the least interested. He just continued to expand away to himself a little, then he drained his glass in a couple of gulps which were, however, not of the greedy order. "I'll have to be off home or else I'm not going to fit through the flat door!"

This proved to be a clever move because even the front door rubbed both his shoulders, and he could only just force his way through into the flat. "That all went well again," he said, addressing the darkness.

It crossed his mind that he actually had a TV set. He turned it on. All the gaudy goings-on which were suddenly taking place on the screen were not

a patch on the simplicity of his dark wall, so he turned the TV back off again. And that was his day.

We have now reached the half-way point in the last ten days of Karl Karst. During the night he had ballooned considerably. This did not concern him in the slightest. Now chained to his flat, he was – as a consequence – severed from all routine and uncertain as to how to spend the day. Once more, he tried watching TV. This time there was a football match on. He only watched the swarm of colours for a short time. He had never been interested in sport and he saw no reason to change this just because he was swelling up. He decided to do nothing that day – nothing apart from swelling up.

In the afternoon he had become so accustomed to doing nothing that he almost regretted not having embarked on this much earlier. He had clearly been over-rating the significance of the bus journeys and visits to Fred Geist's.

Towards evening he had to laugh because his life was so simple. Admittedly the corners of his mouth pinched a little because of his swelling; so

much so that he gave up laughing. He never laughed again and slept like a babe in arms.

The next day he had a visitor. A small nervous man with a featureless forehead and a cheap suit.

“Please leave the front door slightly open,” said Karl Karst. “Not wide open, that’s too much of a risk, but just ajar, because I’ve just realised that that was the last time I’m going to be able to open it.”

“You poor chap!” the little man was jumping around excitedly. “I am here now. People are talking about you, about your swelling up. I am a Home Help from the PLM: the Protestant Lay Missionaries.” Karl Karst nodded; he could still just about manage that. “PLM Huber; that’s me. Here on behalf of – at the request of – the vicar, of your vicar. It doesn’t matter whether or not you know him. A vicar is like a spring, constantly bringing forth its water, even though no-one nearby is thirsting.”

“What is the vicar’s name?” asked Karst.

“It is – he is called – well, people say... What am I saying? It’s Reverend Gas. He has been in office quite some time. He took over from Ezekiel Ramsauter. I was even... even I was his assistant too. PLM Huber, that’s who I am. Herr Gas,

Reverend Gas, Hans Herrmann Ludger Gas, to be accurate, he would have loved to be here himself, but he is indisposed in both senses of the word!”

The small man suddenly dropped to the floor and sat cross-legged and continued – breathing heavily and apparently acutely tormented. “A fall. An accident. Just like that, on his way to the Senior Citizens’ afternoon. The old people: we have to look after them and that’s what he does, Brother Gas. The stairs are steep: steep stony ones. His coccyx – he’s fractured it. He’s lying in bed, face-down. May God protect Brother ..., Reverend Gas, Hans Herrmann Ludger, and – let us never forget – Brother Rammsauter, whom we have sorely missed. Repaying his debt in prison for what he subjected Trudel, the spinster to. AMEN.”

Feeling slightly stunned, Karst wanted to nod again, but he could no longer manage to.

“But now,” the little man leapt to his feet, “you, Brother Karst, you are expanding away quite dreadfully. It is tearing my soul apart. I would dearly take your burden upon my own shoulders, well part of it. There is yet hope for you, if not in this your – it has to be said –

ridiculously swollen body, then with regard to your mortal soul, neither swelling nor dwindling but wondrous in its immortality, and at peace. AMEN. Herr Karst, let us pray!”

“What?” asked Karl Karst.

“Pray,” said PLM Huber.

“You’ve not mentioned your first name at all.”

“Saul. Saul Huber.”

“Karl. Karl Karst.”

„Pray, Herr Karst. Time is pressing, believe me. I have accompanied many. More than a few people do say that it is only because of my modesty that I have not striven to achieve the full theological honours of an ordained priest, that I only became a PLM – a Home Help. That’s what I am: a helper. I wish to help in my capacity as PLM. We are part of the Diacronal Mission, which in turn comes from Greek and means “helper”. Wait, though. Why do I say “only” a PLM? AMEN. Is there anything more exalted, more splendid than helping a fellow-human, Karl Karst?”

“That I do not know, Saul Huber,” said Karl Karst. “I have never helped anyone before.”

Huber threw himself to the floor and then, as if catapulted, leapt up once again. “So it is true, as I

feared. You are swelling with sin, Brother Karst. Yours is not the common Original Sin, which each one of us bears and which requires the forgiveness of God, The One. Yours is the cardinal sin of Selfishness, the sin of Onan, which you, Brother Karl, as a symbolic Mark of Cain, will in time have to bear with you both to the market place and to your own Judgement Day. He shall see it, the Prince of Peace. Wonderful. Pray, Karst. Now!”

“What do you mean, pray?”

“Call to God. Call, plead, beg as far as I’m concerned. Father, Son and Holy Ghost.”

“Our Fred?”

“Oh Lord!” deathly pale the little man sat down heavily on the floor, once again; this time his trembling legs were outstretched.

“Karl Karst – my brother in sin – even now Damnation is stretching forth its black claw, Karl! Do not take it!”

PLM Huber heaved himself to his feet – this time with difficulty – and now spoke calmly and with great dignity. “I shall not cease in my struggle for your soul, Karl Karst. May the crop flourish: the seed is planted. May you know grace, Karl,

my beloved. I shall return and wrest your soul from Satan's grip. AMEN."

Without a word of farewell, PLM Saul Huber left Karst's flat.

Karst had no opinion on this visit. Most of all, it had exhausted him. Exhausted at the wrong time because as a rule Karl Karst did not permit himself any daytime sleeping, so as not to jeopardise his cherished nocturnal slumbers. But right now there was nothing else for it. He fell asleep and woke when it had already gone dark. In a state of perfect peace and tranquillity he resolved to add on his night-time sleep without delay, there being nothing further to do. Wonderful, he went back to sleep. Wonderful, he slept right through. No dreams, which meant that this, too, had been the right thing to do.

The seventh day of this continual, in fact exponential swelling was the first one when the process rather nettled him. Personal hygiene had been well-nigh impossible. The bathroom walls gripped him like a vice. A digital examination of his crotch actually scared him: his genitals had gone, to be more precise they had been absorbed

into his body. Yes, it has to be said that on this seventh day of his final ten, Karl Karst was on the point of letting himself go, of completely neglecting himself, were it not for the fact that the force which was inflating him was also accompanied by a force for good.

Resignedly, almost defiantly, Karl Karst urinated and defecated onto his beige wall-to-wall carpeting. But behold! What came squirting from the slit formerly occupied by his genitals: the purest of waters. Furthermore, not in such quantity that one should need to fear any structural damage, let alone inconvenience for the person living beneath: the person whom Karl Karst had never got to know. The bowel movement was also over. Karst, encouraged, inspected this, too. (Not an easy matter: bending over had been out of the question for some time now!) What he excreted was a type of granule, more a powder, which if anything could be said to smell a little of nuts, the aroma being dispersed around the flat by the minimal air currents resulting from the door's being slightly open.

His arms and legs were admittedly on the point of disappearing. He could just about scratch one

itchy spot, then his extremities became things of the past, then part of his biography, then nothing because he forgot about them. Nothing itched any more, either. He forgot the itching after thinking, *That all went fine, again!* This he thought for some time and then all over again on the question of the fortunate transformation of stools and urine. Then the aforementioned total lack of recall kicked in, a sound sleep cradled him within its velvety sheet, he meanwhile swelling, swelling, swelling.

At first nothing happened on the eighth day; for a start, Karl Karst could not move anywhere. His legs had been swallowed up in the inflation of his body. First he tried rolling as a means of getting round the flat. He congratulated himself on living in a one-roomed flat: he would no longer have been able to set foot into another room, rotund as he was.

Rolling made him dizzy. Aha, so – of all things – this one normal sensation of dizziness he did still have, despite the fact that (as he now noticed) hunger, thirst, bowel and bladder pressure were completely absent. Did he still feel pain? He gave himself a good roll into the front right corner of his chest of drawers. A slight hint of what at one time

would have been pain penetrated through to him, devoid of evil, just slightly of this world. After about an hour he repeated the experiment. No more feelings of this nature.

What did remain was the dizziness. He pondered how he might move about and yet avoid it. He briefly considered the supplementary question of whether it might not be better to completely abandon movement. Here, he reached no conclusion but he did discover bouncing. It was pretty simple to do and soon he was so skilled at it that he could avoid bashing his head on the ceiling – anyhow, it was now only a semi-circular protuberance, emerging from his body – but on the odd occasion that this did happen, the complete absence of pain was a great asset, in fact, a guarantee that he could bounce with a perfect sense of well-being.

PLM Huber paid a return visit, tried to bless him but could not really get to grips with anything. He tried to spring onto Karl Karst's stomach. That went wrong. It didn't hurt. "I shall not leave you. Then you'll bless me!" shouted, screamed the skinny one. Karl did not understand this. Who was meant to be blessing whom? It would be

better to turn his mind to something else, i.e. nothing.

The PLM seemed even more worn out today, practically green round the nose. No really, it actually was green. Karl Karst wondered whether he had seen so green a nose before. But then he left the thought to its own devices; these were: to evaporate.

The PLM and helper, Saul Huber, settled down, exhausted, on the floor, lay down on his back, took – from the inside pocket of his dust-covered jacket – a large pair of horn-rimmed spectacles and put them on. From his back trouser pocket he removed a folded document. To do this, he bent himself – light as a feather – into a bridge shape, the extremities of which were the back of his head and the tips of his toes.

“I can’t do that,” thought Karl Karst, “not that it matters.”

The PLM unfolded the sheet of paper before returning to his prone position once more.

“Now then, Brother Karst, time to ask the questions, those questions which have enabled

many to find their path back into the light, even in the final seconds when they were groaning at the stench of the fires of Hell, as it were. I myself,” he was leaping to his feet again, “developed these questions, with Reverend Gas’s blessing, of course. Oh my: it’s touch and go with him. After I had offered you, Karl Karst, my magnanimous help, I did not delay, but ... to him ... my brother, my spiritual leader. He does not have me bend my knee; never would he give me the sense that the helper, the PLM is in any way inferior to the preacher. I found him in a downcast state, you understand, my pitiful Karl. You will know all about answering the call of nature. He had to do it in bed, although he is taken care of most kindly. That spinster, Trudel, violated by Rammsauter himself: in the spiritual sense she remains stainless. She gives her all, even pretended to be spoken for, she gives her all to Brother Rammsauter, who even now – with peace in his heart – is languishing in prison until such time – be it here or in the hereafter – such time as The Light shall fall upon him. Gas is suffering, Oh Lord!”

“Now, on to the questions.”

Karl Karst wanted to nod but could not.

“1. Karl Karst, how would you rate your knowledge of the teachings on salvation?

- a. adequate for redemption
- b. prayers required
- c. damnation.”

Karl Karst did not think at all and said, “All three.” Saul Huber grimaced painfully, his green nose trembling. “Off to a bad start, just about hopeless Karl. Poor soul!

2. Do you now, you abject reprobate, confess your sins, declare them here, and feel true remorse? If so, speak now!”

This time Karl Karst was confident of the correct answer. He had even understood the question. “I have done no wrong.” The colour of the sermoniser turned to flaming magenta. “You have never mounted a woman, as with dogs?”

“No.”

“Gluttony? Just keep on lying, me lad! Anybody can see for himself.”

“No. I am just swelling up.”

“Have you caused the suffering of any fellow man or child?”

“No.”

“Stolen?”

“No.”

“Arson, or other destructive act? If so, confess, Karl Karst! The Horned One is standing outside the house!”

“Not,” said Karl Karst, by way of a slight change.

PLM, Saul Huber, put his paper and spectacles away. “I can do no more. I shall just have to inform Reverend Gas of the situation. He will be absolutely drowning in tears – his own, and mine. I cannot say *Farewell* because things will not be well, but woe betide you, woe betide you, Karl Karst.

And there he was: gone. Karl fell asleep.

On his next-to-last day Karl Karst was so round and swollen up that could not have managed to roll. He regretted this only briefly because, being *au fait* with the manner of his swelling, he was, despite everything, in good spirits about the fact that the dizziness was now sorted out. He had got over his regret at the presumed loss of ability to roll around with impunity. He was finally in that frame of mind where he felt he lacked for nothing

in the world. It was enough for him – in fact, he found it pleasant – just to have a little bounce now and again. This did not require any strength.

The landlord, Fred Geist, visited him. Fred Geist cursed Piffel but all the same, things were looking up with the rammed nun; however, Piffel had been caught stealing ladies' underwear, a scandal affecting the entire family, which was ruining *The Big Bang* despite the name-change. In tears, he left Karl Karst. Karl just accepted this.

Then PLM Huber came again, smelling strongly of cheap brandy. Admittedly, Karl could no longer smell things. The helper, who was also in tears, implored Karl to finally return to the Lord's fold, there was still time. Actually, there wasn't, but it would not do any harm. Karl would have like to utter a friendly response but found that he could no longer speak – he could not even breathe. Everything had sealed up with the swelling. The PLM threatened to throw himself out of the window, to take Karl's sins with him, to foil Satan, who was already out there on the stairs celebrating. But then he didn't jump after all.

“Can anybody actually sleep in my condition?” Karl Karst was meanwhile wondering unperturbed.

Shaking his head the PLM left, saying something along the lines of *Life has got to change. We cannot go on like this.* He could not tolerate the victories of *The Nameless One*. Karl was wondering whether he referring to himself, or to Karl, then got all mixed up with pronouns and went right back to the beginning, with the thought: *Does the PLM really have to change anything? Does Karl Karst (that's me) have to change anything? The PLM said both – it wasn't me who said it because I can't speak any more. I rest my case.*

He was mercifully spared the knowledge that he had still not woven his thoughts into some kind of acceptable finished product. In fact, the thinking wore him out and he was soon sleeping, contrary to his apprehensions. Splendid: even in his sleep he bounced a little.

On the last day of his life, all access points to the world closed down. He was blind and deaf, and so not at all sure whether it actually was the last day, but there were a lot of indications. Why should he

have slept for two days? Everything had always been bestowed upon him on a very regular basis. Bouncing was another thing he had to forego: now he was just wedged between the walls, ceiling and floor. Being held like this was nothing terrible in his eyes; in fact, it was something pleasant. It almost felt tender.

He was just wondering for the first time how all this swelling was going to end up. It might have been afternoon already: he'd lost track of time. Then he felt something new pressing from the centre of his body. This too was not unpleasant, not at all. It seemed like the very gentle birth of something or other, something new inside him. Now everything would ... Then he burst.

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