

Ursula Reist

Peeling and Poker

Nick Baumgarten's First Case

Translated from the German by
Rafaël Newman

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Wednesday, November 7, 2007

It was four in the morning, and Detective-in-Chief Nick Baumgarten was alone on the road. Aarau was still asleep. He had just come from a crime scene and was pretty wound up. Murders were rare in these parts, celebrity victims practically unheard of. He was looking forward to a strong espresso, a long, hot shower, maybe even an hour of shut-eye. As usual he made a detour to Schiffländenstrasse, parked, and looked up – the light was on in Marina’s kitchen, and he punched her number into his phone.

“Make a poor shiftworker a coffee, seeing as you’re still up?”

“Couldn’t sleep with a migraine coming up, and the pills take an hour to work. Come on up.”

He pressed the button and waited for the buzzer. They hadn’t exchanged keys yet, although their relationship was already half a year old. They were both being cautious, in no great hurry to give up their independence. Now, as he took her in his arms in the small hours of the morning, he realized how much he liked this wonderful woman. There was a bowl of cut-up melon on the kitchen table. Marina had been reading the paper and attempting to still her rising nausea with water and fruit.

“What was the call?”

“I’ll tell you when your head is clear, darling,” he said, and drank his espresso. Then he stood behind her and gently massaged her shoulders and neck. How loving he is, she thought, and how well his hands know my body already. I’d like to grow old with him. She could feel the medication beginning to work, and slowly relaxed.

"Come on, I want to know if you were with your girlfriend," she teased him.

"The manager of the casino was stabbed last night. Pretty brutally."

"What, Tom Truninger is dead?"

"Yes. So you knew him?"

"Nick honey, I own the city's premier beauty salon. I know everybody who's anybody. Tom's wife is a client, but I've known him longer. He's a part of my past."

"Not a part you've ever told me about, obviously," said Nick with a hint of jealousy.

"When we were students we were together for a few months, it must have been around 1980. Then he disappeared one day without a word, off to America, I suppose with another woman. I sought solace with a physicist and didn't hear anything more from him until he came here three years ago as manager of the casino. I was president of the trade association at the time and was invited to the re-opening. Tom was cool when he greeted me; he introduced me to his wife as a university acquaintance, so it was obvious he hadn't shared certain details with her. When we meet by chance he is polite and makes small talk, but he pretty clearly has no interest in me."

"And you," he fired back, "are you – were you – still interested in him?"

She grinned. "Look, he was just one of many boy-friends in my wild youth. No, there was nothing going on there anymore, but his death affects me all the same."

"Sorry," said Nick. "Sometimes I get jealous about the part of your life I didn't share with you."

"My past made me what I am today; without it I would be somebody else. And the way I am today

I belong to you and nobody else – you know that, Commissioner.”

“Can you prove that, Ms Beauty-Salon-Owner?”

“Of course, Commissioner. Come have a shower.”

*

At eight o'clock Nick Baumgarten marched into the police department's main office with a hearty "Good morning!"

"You're perky after your long night," grumbled Private Peter Pfister, staring pale and sleepy at his computer screen. "How do you do it?"

"Cold shower and hot coffee," answered Baumgarten.

"Served by a beautiful woman, I suppose," Corporal Angela Kaufmann chimed in from her corner.

"No comment. So, what have we got, Peter?"

"The pathologist is still going over the details, but Truninger died between eleven pm and one am. The night watchman found him at two-thirty am. He was stabbed fatally from behind, two carefully aimed blows of a knife, one of which punctured his heart. The presumed weapon was lying next to the body. Evidence is examining the knife now. Nothing else unusual. Truninger's appointment book showed nothing on for yesterday evening, and he was known to frequently work late into the night."

"Surveillance tapes?"

"Any number of them. We're on it, but I can't do magic," sighed Pfister.

"Okay. Who informed the family?"

"I could only reach his wife by phone at her parents' place in the Engadin. Her father is driving her back this afternoon," said Angela. "She took the news

pretty calmly, but the shock will no doubt catch up with her. She isn't a suspect anyway, because the Julier Pass is snowed out, and the trains aren't running at that time of night."

"So we'll speak to her this afternoon or tomorrow. How about the employees?"

"Truninger's deputy has informed the holding company," said Pfister. "The board of directors meets with management at nine. Then the staff will be informed, at which point we can begin questioning. Nick, you should attend the management meeting, gain their trust. The gaming industry has more faith in their own security people than in the police."

"All right. What does the press know?"

"Our liaison has already been in contact with the holding company's PR person. They want to hold a joint press conference this evening, and you, my dear boss, will unfortunately have to attend," grinned Angela. "Briefing at five, conference at five-thirty."

"Good. Peter, you go back to Truninger's office and see what you can find, on his computer as well. The accounting department should look over the books, but I'm not holding out much hope there. Angela, get the latest findings from pathology and then help me with questioning the staff. As soon as Mrs Truninger is here you go see her. We need friends, enemies, state of the marriage etc."

"Aye, aye, Chief," the two answered in unison. Nick laughed and set out for the board of directors meeting.

*

Pfister turned up the collar of his coat as he trudged through sleet to the rear entrance of the Grand Casino on Apfelhausenweg. Flu weather, he thought, and

could feel the first symptoms already. And now to top it all off a murder, which meant that he would likely not be getting regular sleep over the next few days. Just a year and a half to go before he and his wife would be packing their bags and moving to Las Rosas, where the sunshine was brighter and the pensions stretched farther. He sneezed.

"Bless you, Mr Pfister," said the uniform at the entrance. "Lousy weather, ain't it?"

"You can say that again," answered Pfister, and entered the revolving door. The casino didn't open to the public until two pm, and Pfister was glad he and his team would have the place to themselves for a bit. He took the elevator to the third floor and walked down the corridor to the corner office, where Truninger had met his murderer sometime the night before. He closed the door behind him and cast his eyes around the place: dark brown hardwood floors, charcoal-coloured modular furniture, a black-leather suite of sofa and chairs, two large modern paintings on the wall. A masculine office, thought Pfister, without warmth – cool and trendy, just the way modern managers like it. He had already noticed the night before that the desk was bare save for computer screen, keyboard, telephone and family portrait. Either an exceptionally tidy fellow, who straightened up before heading home, or the murderer did it for him. Well, thought Pfister, with any luck a look at the surveillance tapes will soon shed some light on what happened here last night. His cell phone rang, and when he heard what his colleague had to report, his hopes were dashed.

"Last night's film contains nothing but shadows. The camera is angled at the seating area, and the desk, door and other half of the office are invisible. We got nothing, not even the time. Looks as if Truninger

himself changed the angle." His colleague sighed. "Typical manager."

"How do you know," interrupted Pfister.

"Talked to the head of security, his name is Schifferli. He wanted it differently, but Truninger took things into his own hands. Seems he didn't want to be watched all the time."

"That's all we needed. Thanks anyway."

Pfister ended the call and swore under his breath. Then he went looking for the head of security.

"In the end I couldn't persuade him," said Schifferli nervously. "His argument was discretion: he held talks with people whose presence in the casino was nobody's business. The holding company's lawyer told me, after much discussion, that I was to let Truninger do his thing. Security was provided by the locking system, he claimed, and I shouldn't get in Truninger's way. A nightmare, as it turns out."

"Who knew about it?"

"The whole executive board, since I put the item on the agenda at a meeting a couple of weeks ago. All of the board members have cameras in their offices, and none of them had a problem being under surveillance. But Truninger wouldn't come around, and insisted on making an exception. Since then my people have been constantly repositioning the camera, and there's always a big fuss about it – I mean, there always was." Schifferli was obviously shaken. "Now I'm kicking myself for not insisting."

"Some people you just can't reason with," Pfister consoled him, thinking about his own bosses. "He was probably a tough customer in general."

"Well, he was hardheaded about the video camera, but I didn't have any problems with him otherwise. He was generally pretty hands off with his people, he let

us do our thing and only asked to be informed regularly of problems and solutions. He was a good director, he took the casino from crisis to success, nothing you can say against that," Schifferli defended his dead boss. "Not that it does him much good now."

*

After the management meeting, at which he vowed to exercise the utmost discretion and asked in return for cooperation from all present, Nick Baumgarten followed the personnel manager, Elena Fuchs, to her office.

"I still can't believe it," she said softly. "He was so full of energy, he worked so hard, he motivated us to give our all – I don't know how we can go on without him, I really don't."

"You really liked him, didn't you," said Baumgarten.

"He was a rousing, creative boss who knew how to get his people behind him and use them to make the company a success. He liked making decisions, he was quick on his feet, he wasn't easily swayed. A real leader, in other words. You know, for us personnel folk it's so important to have the right sort of CEO to work with, because that makes or breaks our own work and influence. Without the support of the top people we're just administrators."

"Are you a member of the executive board, Ms Fuchs?"

"No, I'm part of the management staff, that's typical for our sector. The executive board is responsible for strategy, while my work is more about operations." She smiled. "I don't have a problem with it, Mr Baumgarten. You know, I hate long meetings, and I get the information I need directly from the members of the executive board."

"What did the employees think of him?"

Baumgarten saw her hesitate.

"Not all of them felt the same way. There are some who call him unscrupulous, but those are mostly personal feelings. He just makes quick decisions when he doesn't like something."

"Such as?"

"Oh, there were a few summary dismissals, and people usually don't like those much."

"I would like a list of people fired in the last two years. They are all potential suspects, you understand that, don't you?"

"Yes of course. We even had a death threat by phone once, but the boss didn't take it seriously at all. He wasn't afraid of anything, our Tom."

*

"What have we got?" Nick asked his team when they gathered around the meeting table at five o'clock. "You first, Peter."

"I've already told you about the disappointment with the surveillance. I'm going to look at the tapes from the period in question anyway, maybe they'll yield something. Truninger's secretary is on vacation, that's why he made his appointments himself. No one knows if he had everything entered in his agenda, or whether he met other people. He seems to have been well organized, at any rate he always tidied up in the evening and locked his current files away in a drawer. Nothing peculiar in his papers, no coded appointments in his agenda – in other words, nothing we can use."

"Thanks, Peter. Angela?"

"The pathologist has confirmed the time of the crime. Truninger was murdered by someone who

knew exactly what he was doing: either of the two stab wounds would have been fatal. One went directly into his heart, the other tore his lung in half. The doctor says you wouldn't need to be especially strong, you would just have to have the right know-how – and a sharp knife. It could have been one of those Japanese kitchen knives that are so popular these days, he says, expensive precision work, exceptionally well honed. He loves sushi and says the knife he uses to cut his fish could probably have done the job. His knife, by the way, is still parked in its block in his kitchen."

"Ha ha," mumbled Pfister. "What does he say about the doer's size?"

"Nothing of any use to us, I'm afraid. The perp is likely between five-five and six feet tall, judging by the angle of the stab wounds. Which rules out only dwarves and giants – unfortunately. At any rate it didn't take Truninger long to die, and that makes it a bit easier for the family." Except, thought Angela, easy is all relative in this context. "I spoke to Mrs Truninger on the phone: she can't imagine who would do such a thing, but she also says she doesn't know much about the gaming business. I don't think she had much to do with it at all. Happy marriage, relatively exclusive private life, small circle of friends – nothing fishy. We're paying her a call tomorrow. She gave us the name of a friend from the US who knows her husband well and might be able to give us a hand. I'm looking for him now, but he's constantly travelling. And you, boss, what did you learn at the casino?"

"Nothing solid there either. The personnel manager was full of praise for him as a leader, but I got the impression there's more to it. She used a lot of managementese without saying much about what she thought of him personally. There were a couple of firings over

the years, which probably didn't always have people cheering. She's sending me a list of the people let go, which we need to check up on as soon as possible. Will you take that over please, Angela? Oh and the white-collar crime unit haven't found anything either. Everything is transparent and well documented, which doesn't surprise me. After all, there's probably no sector under as close scrutiny as this one. At most there may have been irregularities with Truninger's private account, and we'll have that information tomorrow. Has evidence had a look at the knife yet, Peter?"

"It's a Japanese kitchen knife all right, but a model you can buy at any proper household goods store. The blood is definitely Truninger's, and I'm afraid that's just about it: the technicians did identify two smeared fingerprints and are trying to evaluate them, but they aren't holding out much hope. In other words," grumbled Pfister, "we've all worked all day and haven't got one step further. What's your feeling about the business?"

Angela frowned. "We still don't have an accurate idea of Truninger's character. There has to be a skeleton in the closet somewhere. Why else would anyone murder him?"

"I don't know either yet where this is taking us", said Nick. "Now I'm off to give the press a couple of empty pieces of information, then I'm going to think about it this evening over a nice glass of Bordeaux. Don't stay too late. See you tomorrow."

*

"Shall we share the rest, or do you want to cook with it tomorrow?" asked Nick, waving the 1996 Cissac.

"Shame to cook with it, even if it is just a cru

bourgeois," answered Marina, and held out her glass to Nick. She was wearing black jeans and a long fleecy sweater in warm fall tones, perfectly matched to her auburn hair.

"How well did you know Truninger actually?" He settled back into the sofa.

She snuggled against him and put her feet up.

"What do you want to know?"

"Just tell me, and maybe I'll get a picture of him. I haven't got a handle on him yet, and we're still looking for a discrepancy in his personality, or in his past."

"In those days he had a shy charm that was irresistible. On the other hand he could also kick up a fuss if he felt he'd been treated unfairly."

Marina recalled a professor who had given Truninger a mediocre grade on a term paper, although Truninger himself believed his essay was brilliant, even publishable.

"Tom just about lost it, he cursed and swore, broke a few plates, and we were just barely able to stop him from driving over to the professor's house and setting fire to his toolshed. Youthful foolishness," sighed Marina. "We were all like that once. A little too young for 1968 but full of the same revolutionary ideas. Looking back, of course, we were motivated by something else: after leaving our parents' houses and finishing school we wanted to take over at last, have our say, hand out our own grades, free ourselves from constraints, cut the parental purse-strings. None of us knew at the time how deceptive that freedom was."

Marina took a deep breath; Nick felt her retreating deep inside her thoughts.

"Don't you feel free now? You do run a successful business, after all, and you're your own boss." Nick took a sip of the dark red wine, savoring the flavour.

"There are new pressures to replace the old ones. I am responsible for my employees, I have to satisfy my clients, and there are new cantonal regulations every day, to say nothing of taxes – but you've heard it all before, and my taxes pay your salary." Marina smiled.

Nick was suddenly serious. "But personally, Marina, do you feel free?"

Marina looked at him for a long time. What was he getting at with these questions? "Free with you, you mean?"

"Yes." Quietly.

"You don't fence me in, and I don't feel like I'm in a cage," she said, and rose to load the dishes into the dishwasher. "We spend time together when we both feel like it, and that's just right for us, with our professions."

Another dodge, he thought. I want more from this woman than just two evenings a week, much more. But she could sense it every time he wanted to bring up the topic – it was no good today either.

"Would you mind sleeping at your own place tonight, Nick? I'm really tired, and I'm booked solid tomorrow."

"No problem, sweetheart, it's the same here. Do I get a goodnight kiss?" He took her tenderly in his arms and held her in a long embrace. "Sleep well, darling."

Marina closed the door behind him, cleared away the glasses and went into the bathroom. I threw him out, she thought, but why does he always have to bring up our relationship? She valued her freedom too much to just move in with a man and make herself dependent. She would rather sleep alone every other night than make herself vulnerable like that – she knew how painful it was to be left, and she resisted the desire to abandon herself. Let him wait; and if he can't wait, let him go.

October 2007

"How are you today, Mrs Senn? You look better than four days ago, there's more color in your cheeks," said Dr Viktoria Fischer, as her patient sat down in the chair across from her.

"Oh you know, I haven't looked in the mirror for ages. I don't care how I look, and no one else cares anyway," sighed Sybille mournfully.

"Did it used to be different?"

"That's a stupid question – of course it did," Sybille erupted. "An executive secretary has to be well turned out, properly dressed, and of course good-looking. Suit, silk blouse, stockings, make-up – I wouldn't leave the house without them. I could never have received clients dressed the way you are, in jeans and a sweater, impossible. Are you even qualified to do this therapy? Do you have an MD?"

Sybille sat up in her chair and raised her voice.

Good, thought Viktoria, and made a note. After weeks of self-pity and generalized misery she's coming out of her shell and beginning to develop aggressive feelings: a sign that the medications are working. She answered the challenges with patience. "Yes, Mrs Senn, I have an MD. After completing medical school I specialized in the treatment of patients in psychological crisis."

"Because there are quacks in the psychiatric profession, everyone knows that," Sybille continued, as if she hadn't heard Viktoria at all. "The sort who talk a lot, charge a pile of money and don't help anyone; on the contrary. They're like most managers by the way. Just a lot of hot air and empty theories, and no idea about human beings."

"You seem to have had some bad experiences with that sort of people, Mrs Senn."

"Yes of course I have, what do you think, are you clueless? Truninger was one of them as well. For years I was good enough for the company, and then he suddenly throws me out, citing indiscretion and poor performance, just like that!" Sybille was agitated. She stood up and began to pace between the window and the door.

Truninger? Viktoria tensed, but remained calmly in her chair and asked Sybille to go on.

"Until Truninger came I was needed in the company, they used me whenever someone couldn't make it in, for example in bookkeeping or legal, at reception or important meetings. I knew all of the employees, had the background on everything and could always give the boss important tips. Everyone liked me, they told me their problems and were happy when I listened to them. I was somebody, until that, that ..." Her whole body shook. "I could kill him, but first I would torture him!"

"Calm down, Mrs Senn, calm down. What did he do to you?"

But Sybille would not be calmed. She shouted that he had never trusted her, never taken her seriously, that he had accused her of indiscretion and was always reproaching her for the tiniest of errors. Suddenly she picked up the vase on Viktoria's desk and smashed it on the ground. She would have caused more damage if Viktoria hadn't rung for an orderly, who seized Sybille and restrained her in a chair. Viktoria administered a sedative, and suddenly the patient's energy was spent; Sybille was a shadow of herself as the orderly escorted her to her room.

Viktoria opened her window and took a deep

breath. The scent of wet leaves streamed into her office from the park, and the cold did her good. She drank down a large glass of water – a whiskey would have been better, but she still had work to do. She called the head physician on the internal line and said, "Stephan, I've just had a pretty agitating session with Sybille Senn. I had to give her a shot to stop her from destroying my office in anger. Can you make sure she's well supervised for the next forty-eight hours, please? – Yes, I have two days off. – No, she isn't really a suicide risk at the moment, her aggression is directed externally. Oh, and by the way, do you happen to know the last place she worked? – At the Grand Casino in Aarau. Thanks, ciao."

So she had been right.

*

"Your skin is a little pale and you have a few infected patches, Ms Fuchs. I'm going to do a very gentle peel and then give you a revitalizing mask, is that okay?"

"Of course, Marina, you know best. I'm especially looking forward to relaxing, as always. The stress at the office is obviously having an effect not only on my sleep, but on my skin as well."

And right on cue, her cell phone began to ring in her handbag; she reached for it instinctively, but Marina held her down on the chair.

"Relax. Leave the outside world behind and enjoy my treatment."

"You're right, I'm a nervous wreck. Hand me my cell, I'll switch it off."

Little by little she was able to forget the casino, and abandon herself to the skilled hands of her

cosmetician. The pleasantly warm steam meant to soften her skin also cleansed her airways and allowed her to breathe deeply. When Marina's smooth fingers began to massage her face, Elena was already snoring softly, and Marina was able to concentrate on her work without distractions. She thought about Diana, her intern. A client had complained about her behavior and demanded to be seen by another cosmetician in future. Marina wanted to speak to Diana today and hear her side of the story, although she knew that the talk would hardly change anything. Diana was eighteen, ravishingly beautiful and very full of herself; she wouldn't take any nonsense and was always free with her opinions. She hadn't grasped yet that clients had to be made to feel beautiful themselves both during and after their visit to the institute, whether they were young or old, good-looking or not.

"That snotgreen blouse makes you look kind of sickly, Mrs Schwerzmann, there's nothing I can do even with make-up": a typical Diana remark – well, she could think things like that, but she should keep her mouth shut. The question was how to teach her that.

"Are things going better with your intern?" Elena Fuchs was awake and had probably caught that last sigh of Marina's.

"She listens to me, but she thinks flattery is less important than mercilessness – or as she calls it, honesty. I took your professional advice and appealed to Diana's intelligence, praised her good performance while explaining that I couldn't tolerate certain kinds of behavior. Didn't help much."

"Then you need to show her the consequences as clearly as possible. If she doesn't change her ways she'll lose her internship. Give her one last warning

with the next client who complains, and any complaint after that means the end of her employment. I would put that in writing as well, by the way, and have Diana sign it." Marina could hear years of experience in her words.

"Thank you, Ms Fuchs, I'll do that. Maybe an agreement like that will persuade Diana to hold her peace. Your skin has recovered impeccably, by the way. Can I make you up a bit for the evening?"

"Nothing garish, I still have to go back to the office."

You should be going out rather than working, thought Marina. Your position as personnel manager is eating you up, and life is passing you by. But of course she didn't say anything.

*

"Do we know how Sybille Senn is doing?" asked Tom Truninger at the close of his interview with his personnel manager. He leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, the jacket of his Hugo Boss suit hung in the wardrobe. His white shirt stretched slightly across his midriff when he sat, but otherwise he looked pretty good for fifty: muscular if a bit stocky, a full head of black hair with a few silver threads, an angular face, manicured hands.

Elena knew that he wasn't really interested in Sybille Senn as a person. It was simple curiosity that prompted his question. Nevertheless, she gave him a detailed answer.

"Her husband told me a couple of months ago that she was on the correct dosage of antidepressants and that her anxieties were mostly under control, but there would be no question of her working for some time yet. Now I've heard that her illness took another big

turn for the worse in September and that she had to return to the psychiatric clinic, the poor thing. She ran screaming from her own cat, someone told me. I really hope they can help her in Königsfelden."

"And I have to say I'm glad we definitively ended our relationship. Are we legally exposed in any way?"

"No." At most morally, thought Elena Fuchs, but she knew Truninger hadn't the least interest in that kind of morality.

"Excellent. And how are we getting on with hiring the new croupiers?"

"The last round of skill trials will be held on Monday, and on Tuesday you'll get a short list of candidates. You can then choose who to interview."

"Any nice-looking women among them?"

"Of course." And above all well-qualified ones, which we desperately need, you male chauvinist – Elena was just able to stifle a cutting remark.

"Thanks, Elena, good work. I've got an outside appointment now and would like to see you again around seven, to talk about the gambling addicts workshop. Please make sure you're available."

And that's another flamenco lesson I'll be missing, sighed Elena to herself, all because he expects the same commitment from his management as he does from himself. An attractive, energetic whirlwind, that's what he was – and sometimes an unprincipled shit. Probably have to be, in his position, if you want to be successful, she thought with resignation, and called her dance instructor.

Thursday, November 8, 2007

Detective Nick Baumgarten and Corporal Angela Kaufmann were on their way to Küttigen to talk to Maggie Truninger.

"Kirchbergstrasse, that must be one of those developments on the hill, with the terrific view," said Angela. "When they were built five years ago, the units were already going for a million."

"Truninger could certainly afford it," answered Nick, "as manager he earned around two hundred thousand francs a year, before bonus. The personnel manager told me his share of the profits was about the same again for the last three years; it's pegged to good returns. So he had enough money to get a mortgage from a bank and make the interest payments. He was probably paying off the capital too, even with his cushy lifestyle."

"Almost half a million," sighed Angela. "A lot less than some top managers in this country, but a whole lot more than a cantonal cop..."

She parked at a visitor's spot and rang the bell marked Thomas, Margarete and Selma Truninger. The kid is important, thought Angela, just as a voice asked from the intercom, "Who is it?"

"Aargau police, Mrs Truninger, we spoke on the phone."

"I'll send you the elevator, it's the second from the top, press six."

"Never mind, we'll take the stairs," called Angela, ignoring a quizzical look from her boss. "A bit of exercise'll do you good, then all that fine wine won't give you such a pot." At 55, Baumgarten wasn't exactly unathletic, but he certainly wasn't as fit as he had been