

Sample English translation: *De menseneter* by Tom Hofland
Translator: Nancy Forest-Flier
pp. 7 – 15 and 59 – 70

pp. 7 – 15

Pascal Bonare places his bloodied hand on the desk. The inspector leans forward and studies it: the dark blue sleeve of the suit, the white shirt flecked with red, a cuff link with cracked gold plating.

He sees the hairy hand: the slightly crooked middle finger, once broken. He looks at the dark, almost black blood that has dried on the back of the hand.

“Your blood?” he asks.

“I don’t think so,” Pascal replies, holding up his hand to show that he has no wounds.

The inspector nods and sits down opposite him on the other side of the desk. The leather chair cracks under the weight of his heavy body.

“So, two women, Mr. Bonaire?”

“Bonare.”

“Like the island?”

“Like the island, without the i.”

“Bonare.”

“Right.”

The inspector pulls his keyboard closer.

“So, two women?”

Pascal nods.

“One brunette, the other curly blond.”

The inspector types something into the system, using two fingers.

“They were driving a Fiat coupé? Red?”

“A 1969 Fiat Dino coupé 2400, red. The reason I remember it so well is because my uncle totalled the same car three years ago.”

“The same car or the same model?”

“The same model.”

The old, yellowed keys of the keyboard stick to the inspector's index fingers. He stares at the screen.

"And the gentleman. A friend of yours?"

"A business contact. I had only just met him. Actually I didn't know him at all."

"An Italian?"

"I think so."

"According to the waiter he was German."

"Really?"

The inspector nods.

"As I told you," Pascal says, "in fact, I didn't know him." Only now does he notice that his right hand, the hand with the blood, is shaking. He makes a fist, but the shaking doesn't stop. The inspector sees it, too.

"If there's a problem, sir, we can do this some other time."

Pascal breathes in deeply and barely exhales.

"There's no problem."

The inspector gives him a weak thumbs-up and turns back to the flickering screen.

"So. You're in a restaurant with your German acquaintance. You had arrived earlier and had already had an appetizer. Now you order the seafood, and he... something similar?"

"The *porcheddu*. He was very specific about it. Without salt."

"Right. The *porcheddu* without salt. You eat, you discuss something, a waiter comes up from another table and asks if everything is to your liking, and just then you see the women."

"One woman," Pascal answers. "The brunette. I thought she was the manager because she was nicely dressed. She came from the kitchen."

"She walked right up to you?"

"She came out of the kitchen and walked straight toward us."

"And then?"

"And then? She raised a gun."

"Did she already have the weapon in her hand?"

"I don't know. I think she did."

"You think she did or you know she did?"

"I think she did."

“Okay. How many times did she shoot?”

“Three times. She shot my guest. At point-blank range.”

“Dead?”

“Twice in the chest and once through the left eye. Very precise.”

“And then. You ran out?”

Pascal shakes his head.

“Why not? Weren’t you afraid you’d be next?”

“No, I was sure I wouldn’t be.”

“Now you have to explain to me why you were so sure.”

“I could tell by the way she looked. He was her target. She looked only at him, he was all she saw. Her eyes went right through me and the waiter, who was standing next to us.”

The inspector turns to the screen with a certain skepticism.

“The waiter says she was wearing sunglasses.”

“That’s right,” says Pascal. “So yes, I couldn’t see her eyes. But even so, I knew she wasn’t out for us. I don’t know, maybe it was the cool, casual way that everything happened, but she might just as well have put a pitcher of water on the table. She had that same focused coolness.”

“I don’t follow you,” says the inspector.

“I mean, it almost seemed routine. She walked up until she was standing right next to me, raised her hand, fired three shots, and walked out the front door. It was over just like that. A business transaction. As natural as making change, you might say.”

The inspector drums on the desk with his nails. His eyebrows are fixed in a deep frown.

“Anyway, and then you saw the other woman?”

“The Fiat was outside. I could see it through the window.”

“How long had it been standing there?”

“I don’t know. Maybe an hour, maybe it had just pulled up.”

“And the woman?”

“The curly blond was behind the wheel. The brunette got in. They drove away.”

“With screeching tires?”

“Calmly. Carefully. She used her directional signal.”

“Any other details? Things that stood out? Strange customers in the restaurant?”

“My business associate was driving a big pickup truck. One of those American things. And there was a dog.”

“A dog?”

“A dog.”

“What kind of dog?”

“A black poodle.”

The inspector places his fingers back on the keys.

“You’re sure it was a poodle?” he says as he’s typing.

“Yes. They’re striking animals.”

“That’s true. But we see more labradoodles around here.”

“It was a poodle.”

“Yes, that’s what you said. But couldn’t it have been a labradoodle?”

“Have you ever seen a labradoodle, inspector? They don’t look anything like poodles.”

“Well, a dog anyway,” says the inspector. “And that stood out?”

Pascal shrugs.

“You asked me for details. And that stuck with me.”

The inspector types something else into the system, still with only two fingers, much to Pascal’s irritation.

“Mr. Bonare,” says the inspector suddenly. “Do you know that you remind me very much of my brother?”

“Your brother?”

“Absolutely. Your eyes are the same. Or could it be the eyebrows? Is it the frame or the painting?” The inspector chuckles but quickly regains his composure. “My brother is a good man. Honest. Conscientious. Gentle. He was the kind of kid who wouldn’t steal candy from the corner store, you know what I mean?”

Pascal lets his shoulders drop. He’s not the least bit interested in what the inspector has to say about his brother.

“But his sensitivity also makes him... how can I put this? Vulnerable. He sometimes had the feeling that society was playing games with him. And you know, I can’t say he was entirely wrong. In the beginning some people did give him a hard time, but after awhile it was his own head that set him off.”

With these last words the inspector taps his forehead with his index finger.

Pascal Bonare rubs his hand over the back of his still trembling fist, as if it were an animal that needed to be calmed.

“Inspector, I don’t really understand where you’re going with this.”

“Mr. Bonare, where is your friend now?”

“He’s not my friend. He’s a business acquaintance.”

“I don’t care if he’s your own true love,” says the inspector, suddenly turning brusque, “but we would like to know where he is.”

Pascal leans back in his chair like a child who’s been made to report to the principal.

“How should I know?”

The inspector turns aside, places a pair of small reading glasses on his nose, moistens his thumb with his tongue, and picks up a sheet of paper from the table.

“Once again, I’m going to read the statement you made when my fellow officers found you in the restaurant. I quote: ‘My business acquaintance was hit twice in the chest and once in the left eye. I was temporarily blinded by the blood that got in my own eyes, but after having wiped it away with my napkin I saw the shooter walk calmly and quietly to the exit. My business partner, who was slumped back in his chair with his face – or what was left of it – staring up at the ceiling, lay there like a rag doll. His back seemed broken, that’s how unnaturally he was hanging over the back of his chair. But then he straightened up with a roar, grabbed a napkin from the table with one hand, jammed it against the hole where his eye used to be, and stood up. Without so much as glancing at me with his good eye, and cursing and ranting in a language I didn’t understand, he walked toward the kitchen, where he disappeared behind a swinging door.’”

The inspector peers up at Bonare over his little glasses.

“A language you didn’t understand?”

“Maybe you should ask the waiter, he seems to be good at languages.”

“The fact that you didn’t understand the man is one thing. But that’s not the strangest part of all this. Surely you agree with me?”

“Certainly.”

“Mr. Bonare, I’ve been a soldier, which means I’ve seen a lot. A dog with a knife in its back who walks around for three weeks begging for fresh scraps of bacon. A man who takes a

drag on a cigarette just after his head has been chopped off. But a guy who gets riddled with bullets at close range, hitting all his vital organs, including his brain, then stands up and walks to the exit cursing – I don't care in what language. That's a new one for me."

"That's as accurate as I can make it, inspector."

The inspector rubs his wrinkled hands over his tired, pigment-spotted face. And as he stares out the window at the bay of Porto Cervo, he thinks of his little boat. Of his family, who will be home now preparing their evening meal. He thinks of the puppy he bought for his daughter, and having to take it to puppy training tonight. He thinks of his wife, who the evening before had drunkenly promised to pleasure him orally every day if she never had to take the dog for a walk. He knows it's silly to think so, yet he hopes the promise will be kept, at least occasionally. He has no objection to returning the favor either, a thought that pleases him immensely. But he knows she doesn't like it and he's resigned himself, though it's a restless resignation.

"You can go," says the inspector at last. "Please stay nearby. We'll contact you if the need arises."

Pascal Bonare gives him a brief nod, stands up and hurries to the door.

"Oh, Mr. Bonare."

Pascal turns around.

"Your friend. Your acquaintance. Whatever. If you see him, in your dreams, or in a vision, or God knows where you get these fantasies from: tell him to drop in. I have a few more questions for him."

"The snake is wounded, inspector, but he still bites," says Pascal, and he leaves the room.

* * * * *

pp. 59 – 70

He studies the man again carefully. Sixty years old, with a few pigment spots scattered across his head and thin gray hair covering his skull like a layer of downy white fungus. The green eyes lie deep in their sockets, but they emit a strange glow. There's nothing attractive about the man, but he does have a charismatic smile. His head may be bland and insipid, but his colorful checkered

shirt makes up for it. On his feet are a pair of blue leather boots. This man reminds Lute of his former Dutch teacher, although he was a couple of heads shorter.

“Good afternoon, Lute. Not disturbing you too much, I hope?” says the man in a friendly tone.

“No, no, absolutely not! I’ve been expecting you. Please sit down. Something to drink?”

Lute hopes the man will ask for coffee, which would give him a reason to go downstairs and find out who has come to see him. But unfortunately...

“No, thank you.”

Something for the dog perhaps? Sausage from the canteen?”

“That’s very considerate, but it’s not necessary. He’s building up his appetite. He’ll need to eat a lot later on, but not now.”

“Aha.”

“Reiner told me you’re wrestling with a problem, which is why I came as soon as I could.”

Reiner? Jesus, yes, Reiner. The recruiter in the café. Finally the penny drops. This must be the Lombard he was talking about. But when had they made this appointment? They had only met the night before.

“Mr. Lombard, sit down. Please.”

Lombard takes a seat on the other side of the desk. The dog stays seated in the doorway, motionless.

“Your dog can come in too, you know.”

“Oh, him? He does what he wants. No use calling him. But Lute, let’s get right down to business. Because it seems to me that this is a matter of some urgency. And as you can tell, I’m not one to beat around the bush – for which I hope you’ll forgive me. So I’ll get straight to the point.”

He takes a small notepad with yellowed pages from his coat pocket. The pad is bulging around the edges, as if it had been lying in a damp cellar for years. Lombard also fishes out a ballpoint pen and scribbles something down. Lute notices the black edges under his nails.

“So, thirty-two units, is that right?” Lombard asks.

“Units?”

“Souls. Personnel. Employees.”

“Ah, that’s right,” Lute answers. “Thirty-two people who I have absolutely no reason to let go if it wasn’t a matter of dire necessity.”

“All of them pharmaceutical specialists?”

“Absolutely. Sales & Quality. They’ve been keeping our factories afloat since day one. But there’s a sale in the works, you see, a sale that no one in their right mind would say no to. They’re interested in production, but the rest is of no concern to them. And that’s their choice.”

“Is this keeping you awake at night?” Lombard asks.

Lute, surprised by the question, thinks for a moment. “Well, whether I can sleep or not is neither here nor there. And who am I to say no when I’m given an order like this? I’m just a pawn too, if you know what I mean. What can I do? What can I say?”

Lombard, who has been writing non-stop, lifts his pen from the paper while raising one eyebrow and looks up at Lute.

“Just to be clear: you cannot, or you will not do anything to stop this?”

Lute begins to stutter.

“I... look... I would *like* to. Of course I would like to. I wish all these people the future they deserve within the company. But my authority doesn’t extend beyond the daily grind. When it comes to personnel policy I have no input at all. Especially in situations like this. So: what choice do I have? None! Normally Josta deals with this kind of thing. She’s from HR, okay, but she’s been home sick for months. Sad story.”

“You could resign, of course,” says Lombard, without blinking an eye.

Lute, however, issues a volley of blinks. He forces a laugh.

“Sure! I could do that, of course. Pack my bags. Except my successor is standing in the wings right now, ready to make his entrance, and he’ll be far less troubled about putting these folks out on the street without shedding a tear. Their fate remains the same. So if it has to happen, let it be supported by capable hands.”

Lombard smiles reassuringly at the now red-faced Lute.

“Listen, Lute, I think it’s clear.” Lombard, unlike Lute, speaks slowly and deliberately. “You’ve been given responsibility for something you can’t handle. Something you don’t want to take on. A responsibility that admittedly is part of your job. Indeed, a responsibility that you knowingly signed up for. But it’s just too onerous. And that makes sense.”

“Thank you.”

“I see this happen so often. Having said that, let me start by suggesting that the guilt you feel is not justified. Yes, these people have been loyal employees for many years. They expect to continue working here for years to come. Some of them have moved here with their families. And you will – undoubtedly – have formed a bond with them. But there is a personal world, in which we all try to be nice and kind to each other, and a business world, in which tough decisions have to be made. Do not confuse the two. That’s my first piece of free advice.”

Lute pours himself a glass of water.

For a moment the two men are silent. Then Lombard crosses one leg over the other and leans forward, taking a silver tube from his breast pocket. He taps the tube against the flat of his hand and a cigarette falls out, which he offers to Lute.

“No, thank you,” says Lute. “I’ve quit.”

Lombard nods and puts the cigarette back.

“Do you know why God created kestrels?”

Lute feels blindsided by the question: is this a well-known Bible story that he’s supposed to know? He thinks back to his days at Catholic school, but nothing comes to mind. Fortunately Lombard doesn’t expect an answer.

“God created the kestrel so the sparrow could learn to escape. You have run into something that you cannot deal with. So you look for someone with the right kind of expertise. Knowledge. Skill. And that, Lute, is me. If you’re the sparrow trying to get away from the kestrel, I’m the hawk who sets his claws into the flesh of the kestrel and flings him against the rocks, smashing him to bits.”

Lute nods slowly, rather disconcerted by the graphic description. Then Lombard cheerfully gives his thigh a good slap.

“So! You want to pass this responsibility on to me?”

“Very much so,” says Lute with a sigh of relief.

“A hundred percent certain?”

“I see no other way out.”

“Then let’s do it!” Lombard’s eyes suddenly begin to twinkle. Even his downy hair seems to glow. “When shall I get started?”

“Well, that’s a good question!” says Lute. “What’s the procedure? They have to be properly taken care of, that’s all I ask.”

“Thirty-two is a substantial number, but it’s a sector that’s always looking for new people. If you leave the human resources of the company to me, everyone will benefit.”

“But the thing is this...” And here Lute hesitates because he knows this is where the whole scheme could break down. “It can’t cost too much.”

Lombard dismisses Lute’s words out of hand.

“It’s peanuts compared to what you’ll be spending on employee insurance. Unlawful dismissal is hopelessly regulated in this country. But don’t worry: you supply the specialists and the purchasing client pays the bulk of my costs.”

Lute squeezes his fist under the table. He can hardly believe it. His problems seemed insurmountable, but seated here before him is an angel personified.

“Mr. Lombard, I’m beginning to think this is no coincidence. What a blessing that I ran into your colleague. I didn’t know which way to turn.”

As Lute talks and expresses his relief, an uneasy feeling suddenly creeps over him. The bears that had seemed to have strayed off the road like meek little lambs are turning their great heads and slowly lumbering back.

“Although... I don’t know how you can convince them to leave of their own accord.”

“People are capable of anything if you tell them the right story, Lute.”

“That may be true, but some of them have worked here half their lives. I’m talking about twenty or thirty years of service.” Lute tries to sound severe, but he knows that even Lombard’s slightest counterargument will win him over. Yet he goes through the motions: “They live here in the area. They have families, kids who go to school. I don’t see it happening as easily as you describe.”

The dog at the office door, who has kept fairly quiet all this time, pokes his head inside for a moment. Lombard casts a glance at the animal over his shoulder, nods and turns back to Lute.

“My dear Lute. Now I work for MediScouter, but let me be honest with you. I have nothing but contempt for the whole company. Who they are, what they do: I couldn’t care less. Pharmaceuticals, high schools, universities, public broadcasting. I’m everywhere. And everywhere, people are childishly easy to persuade with the right bit of marketing. It really doesn’t take much.”

Suddenly Lombard slaps his leg and holds an index finger to his ear.

“Do you hear that?”

Lute listens, but all he can hear is the gentle murmur of the air conditioner. “No, I don’t hear anything.”

“Somebody has the radio on. Somebody with taste! *Il trillo del Diavolo*.”

Lute assumes that he’s not meant to respond, yet he does feel uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry, my Italian isn’t up to snuff.”

“You’re an admirer of classical music? You know composers like Tartini?” Lombard asks.

“Oh, yes, of course,” Lute answers.

“Name a work.”

“Excuse me?”

“A work. By Tartini.”

“Ah. Well, I have to say that I don’t know any by name.”

“But you just said that you knew Tartini.”

“Ah. Yes. Look. When you asked, ‘Do you know him?’ I thought you meant, ‘Have you heard of him?’ And I do think I’ve heard of him.”

Lombard frowns.

“If I had wanted to ask that, I would have done so, wouldn’t I?”

“Well, yes... that’s true. I apologize.”

“You are not familiar with Tartini?”

“No.”

“You lied just now?”

“Well, no. I think I misinterpreted the question. Please excuse me. My apologies.”

“Do you feel that you can’t be honest with me?”

“I can. I can. I’m sorry.”

“Because that could really get in the way of a good working relationship.”

Lute feels his shirt collar begin to pinch.

“Please excuse me. Please. That’s not what I intended.”

“You don’t have to raise your voice.”

Lute holds up his hands by way of defense. “I didn’t think I did, I...”

“You seem agitated.”

“No, no. I’m just trying to apologize. I...”

“Calm down. You’re the boss here. You’re paying me. You’re in charge.”

“Yes, that’s true. It just bothers me that I may have given you a bad impression...”

“Don’t get so worked up. Please try to remain professional.”

“Yes, yes. I apologize.”

Lombard leans forward and places his hands on the desk. He smiles kindly.

“Listen to us jabbering on about classical music while you probably have a very busy day ahead of you.”

“Yes... right,” Lute answers. “What happens next? What kinds of deadlines are we talking about?”

“I’m going to call around, check with my clients to see where the openings are. If you can provide me with names and CVs... Then I’ll submit the interested parties to you, and if you agree I’ll arrange for interviews with the employees. I understand you’re in a hurry, so if we act quickly we should be able to get this done in good time. As for the interviews: I’ll need a small office. Is such a thing available?”

“Oh, of course. We’ll take care of that.”

Lombard stands up and extends his hand to Lute, who clasps the bony fingers in his own.

“To whom should I send the particulars?” Lute asks.

“Just print it all out and leave it here. When I come to the office I’ll look it over.”

“That’s fine.”

“And one more thing, Lute.” Now Lombard lowers his voice and softens his tone, as if he were sharing a secret. A cloud passes in front of the sun and dims the light in the room.

“If you don’t want to go through with this, just tell me. If you want me to disappear, I’ll disappear. Then the responsibility passes back to you and I won’t try to talk you out of it. But say it now, because once the train is on the tracks, it keeps on going. Choo-choo-choo.”

“No, no. Absolutely not,” says Lute hastily. “I accept your services.”

“Very good.”

Lute walks him to the door. The dog gets up, yawns once, and starts his journey to the exit.

Before Lombard can follow him, Mea cuts him off.

“Excuse me, sir,” she says timidly. She steps aside and turns to Lute.

“Can I speak with you for a second?” she asks.

“Later, Mea,” he growls through clenched teeth. “I’m seeing our guest out.”

“Oh, don’t let me keep you,” says Lombard. “I’ll find my own way.”

He takes a step toward his dog in an attempt to distance himself from the conversation.

“Out of the question, Mr. Lombard,” says Lute, a little confused. “I’ll walk with you to the exit. Mea, can’t this wait?”

“Of course, Lute. I’m sorry. All I wanted to say is that if you’re not hiring anymore, just tell me. The thing is, I’ve got someone waiting to hear from me. Someone with oodles of talent who’s desperate for work. She has a lot of experience and she’s great with people. She could replace Josta now that there’s no one in HR. But if that’s not what you want, just say so.”

Lute feels himself turning red, and to mask his irritation he decides to laugh. But there’s panic in his laughter, which makes it sound maniacal.

“Mea, please. Later, okay?”

At that moment Lombard steps back toward them.

“Excuse me. It’s certainly not my custom to eavesdrop, let alone to come up with my own ideas if I don’t know what’s being discussed. But if I understand correctly, you know someone who’s in need of a job?”

Mea, who until now has taken the man for a mere inspector, looks up at him with interest.

“Yes, indeed,” she says. “Top talent. A real people person.”

“Aha,” says Lombard. “And she has a CV to prove it?”

“That, too. Before this she worked for a big insurance company. Human resources.”

Lombard looks at Luke and shrugs. “To be honest, Lute – and I have absolutely no desire to dethrone you, so please take what I’m about to say with a rather large grain of salt and dismiss it if you don’t agree – but I think I could use some help in the near future.”

Lute’s face is now so red that he’s afraid his vital organs won’t be getting enough blood.

“Ah, yes... but. Is that really a good idea, given our... situation?” he asks.

“Sometimes you have to take one step back in order to take two steps forward,” says Lombard, while executing a strange little dance step with his lanky body. “A temporary contract, perhaps?” he suggests. “To start off with? Three months with a view to an extension?”

“I think that I, uh...” Lute wants to object, but suddenly all his ideas seem devoid of any respectable line of reasoning.

“And she’ll have a probationary period, of course,” Lombard continues. “If her CV is in order and she’s highly motivated, she’s got a month to prove herself. If not, at least you tried. You agree, Lute?”

“Hmm, yes. Of course.”

“Don’t just do this on my say so! You’re the boss.”

“No, no, I think it’s a good idea.”

“Wonderful! And now I will make myself scarce,” says Lombard. “Do with this what you will, I’ve put in my two cents.” He clicks his tongue and the dog heads straight for the elevator, slightly dragging his left hind leg as he does so. Lombard follows and doesn’t look back. When he gets to the elevator the door opens immediately, and within a few seconds he’s gone.

Mea and Lute stand opposite each other in the hall, silent, like two patients in the doctor’s waiting room uneasily ignoring each other.

“Send her over, tomorrow morning at ten o’clock,” says Lute, still looking at the elevator. Then he turns around, walks to his office and shuts the door behind him.