

Christian Huber:

While The Match Burns

(OT: Solange das Streichholz brennt)

Sample Translation by Rob Myatt

[pp. 9–12]

1 BOHM

His things were gone.

Bohm looked around. The silver of the moon broke through the cloud cover, reflecting in a puddle where ice crystals were weaving their patterns. Bohm hated the cold. And above all, he hated the damp.

Icy temperatures he could weather. He could pull on layers of jumpers and thermals, throw on his army jacket or curl up in his sleeping bag in front of the vents from a restaurant kitchen. Cold was a feeling you could alleviate. Damp, on the other hand, got into your hair, under your skin and seeped into your bones.

Bohm pushed his hood back. The city hummed around him. The smell of smoke suspended in the streets, the cries of drunks echoing down the passageway and into the courtyard, bottles clinking. It was Shrove Tuesday, the last day of Carnival. The whole of Cologne had come out to burn effigies of the Nubbel.

Everywhere you looked, from the pub fronts to the town squares, fires blazed. Pyres for burning the person-sized effigies that people scapegoated for their own sins and misdeeds. For their trespasses, for their lies, big and small. For their disloyalty or for leaving someone high and dry. The fire engulfed the Nubbels, bringing people absolution.

A two-hundred year-old tradition.

Bohm steered clear of these fires. He didn't believe you could offload your own guilt onto an effigy, didn't believe that setting light to a soulless dummy made of straw and papier-mâché was enough to make everything that had transpired vanish into a cloud of smoke and good times. Not even if those effigies were stuffed into suits and dresses, if they were laughing and crying, and if they seemed almost alive.

Had he ever believed in it? He couldn't say.

He had spent the last seven nights in a shelter that a caretaker must have built for bikes. It was a good spot. Behind the last row of bikes that no longer had owners and whose skeletal frames were rusting to themselves, his back to the wall, out of the wind. That wasn't why he'd chosen this place, though. He'd chosen it because of the small, dusty, grime-covered light screwed to one of the walls that burnt all night long. Bohm liked the light. In the mornings, he gathered his belongings and snuck out before anyone noticed him, not returning until long past sundown.

Except, today had been different: on Shrove Tuesday, the local Carnival society invited the homeless to a traditional goose dinner and Bohm hadn't wanted to roll up with his unwieldy rucksack, sleeping mat and sleeping bag. He had left his possessions on the wall.

Now, his things were gone. And the light was off. His old smartphone still had nine percent battery. He swiped down on the display, careful not to make the crack in the screen any bigger, and switched on the torch. The cardboard he had spread out his sleeping mat on lay there unmoved. But where this morning his water and vodka bottles had stood, now there was only a damp stain. The scent of spilt alcohol hung in the air.

Bohm was drinking less again. No longer drinking himself unconscious. He did still need three or four sips to reach the land of nod. Six, seven or eight if he had to.

His things weren't between the rows of bikes or by the flowers lining the back entrance

to the building. They weren't on the bench next to the entrance either. In a corner of the courtyard stood the bins. Not a trace in front, behind or underneath.

Bohm rubbed his tired face. A foul stench came up to greet him as he lifted the lid of the first industrial-sized bin and let it drop over the back.

His mat was lying at the top and underneath it was his rucksack, upside down, top open. Cursing to himself, Bohm brushed off the sleeping mat and placed it next to him rolled up. Then, he reached into the bin as far as he could, placing one hand underneath the compartment of his rucksack so that nothing more fell out of it. Lying on two bags of rubbish, his blanket was damp but relatively clean, as was his spare pair of socks. Next to them, between jam jars and discarded food, was his packet of tobacco, his greasy wash bag and a few things he had wrapped in rags. He fished items out of the rubbish one by one, inspecting them, wiping them off and putting them back in his army backpack. The stock-take of a man of no means.

Nothing seemed to be missing.

The problem was the sleeping bag.

Bohm didn't have a rain cover and so he tied the bag into a bundle with a length of cord. And this bundle was now lying at the very bottom of the bin, in a sludge peppered with mouldy chunks. One of the bin bags had split and nappies, brown wet wipes and a broken wine glass were forcing their way out through the tear in the plastic. The rain that had been pouring into the bin for the last few hours had saturated the rubbish, forming an inch-deep broth in the bin.

Bohm tugged at the sleeping bag, which was now little more than a sopping wet sponge, and strings of slime glooped back into the indefinable stew. The down filling had clumped together into a single glob. For a moment, all Bohm could do was stand there, before tossing the blob back into the bin.

Suddenly, he felt as if he were being watched. The curtains behind the ground floor

window had twitched. Bohm tied up the sleeping mat and swung his rucksack over his shoulder. Taking one last look in the bin, he noticed that the letter had fallen out of his rucksack. The grey of the recycled paper envelope reflected in the beam from his phone torch.

He hadn't opened the letter since it had been handed to him by a social worker a month earlier. Did he want to know what it said? No. Absolutely not. But he grabbed it anyway, saluted in the direction of the curtains and left the courtyard.

[...]

[pp. 43–48]

6 BOHM

‘My name’s Alina Alev,’ said the young woman.

Bohm’s hand twitched automatically, as if he wanted to offer it to her, but he caught himself and went behind his towel, pleased to have a barrier between himself and the woman. He looked her up and down, perplexed. ‘Do I know you, ma’am? If you’re here about the permits, I’ve shown mine to the council.’

Bohm noticed that he was slurring slightly from the previous night’s overindulgence. Instinctively, he took a half-step backwards and folded his arms. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d called anyone ‘ma’am’.

‘I’m not here about the permits,’ said the woman called Alina Alev, smiling.

Nice voice, thought Bohm. It was only now that he realised Alina Alev was trying to hand him a business card across the towel. Red nails, dainty fingers.

Bohm had taken too long and so she lowered her arm with the business card and said, ‘Don’t worry. I’m a reporter. I work for a TV station.’

Bohm was at once happy he hadn’t had to take the business card from her and at the same time sad to have missed the opportunity. The feeling subsided as quickly as it had come.

A gentle scent of perfume wafted over on the breeze.

‘How are you, Mr Bohm?’ asked Alina Alev casually. She seemed used to making small talk.

‘I’m fine,’ said Bohm, which in the haze of alcohol came out as *mfine*.

‘Good. And your dog is doing okay too? He looks very sweet.’

‘Reckon so.’

‘And you’re managing in these temperatures? It’s really arctic. Not to mention the constant rain.’

‘S’fine.’

Before Bohm could enquire about what it was she wanted from him, Alina Alev continued, ‘A little birdie told me you’ve not been doing too well. And this stuff you’re carving here. It’s a really great story, the mice and everything.’

Bohm was starting to get the impression that all she wanted with him was a bit of a chinwag.

She asked if Bohm had read that story about the island somewhere. She’d never been to New Zealand herself, she said, but she’d love to go there one day. She wondered what the best time of year was to go.

Bohm replied in single syllables, still cautious, but no longer so hostile. ‘Where’d the girl get to?’ he asked.

‘She had to go,’ replied Alina Alev. Yet something in the way she spoke had changed. She was speaking faster. She had abruptly pulled out a smartphone. ‘Do you mind if I film this? And maybe I can take a photo of you? With your dog? Just for background.’

What? Bohm wasn’t sure he’d heard her correctly.

She was already scanning his work with her phone camera, then she positioned herself and Bohm heard a quick succession of digital clicks.

Bohm instinctively covered his face with his arm and turned away. ‘Stop!’ he said. ‘What’s this all about?’

This Alina was clearly pleased with her haul.

‘Please accept my apologies,’ she said, her chit-chat voice returning. ‘I totally should have explained first. I’m doing a report on homelessness. I’m looking for someone I can shadow for a

few days. Sorry, I didn't meant to ambush you like that.' Bohm didn't believe for a second that she was even remotely sorry. 'The lady at the train station mission said you might be a good candidate. She was nice enough to tell me where to find you. Apparently,' she said, smiling, 'you're an alright kind of guy. You would of course be compensated if you agreed.'

'Kerstin sent you here?'

Nodding, Alina held out her business card again, and again Bohm didn't take it. She put the hand, together with the business card, in her jacket pocket.

Bohm still didn't understand. 'What you do mean 'someone you can shadow'?'

'You would show me how you live, Mr Bohm. How you cope day to day, where you spend your nights. And everything in between.'

She had amber eyes with jet-black pupils. A solar storm.

At that moment, the wind changed direction and pressed at him from behind. Alina Alev, who was still standing near the towel, stepped back an inch and for a split second, Bohm saw the corners of her mouth droop. She immediately put her smile back on.

Bohm gulped. He was conscious of how much he reeked. For a brief flash, he felt shame, then something else, something beyond words, before the defiance rose in him and clarified his thoughts.

She had been faking it, trying to catch him off-guard. Her friendly chit-chat was nothing more than a façade. She was looking for *something* to do a story on. And there was absolutely no way he was going on TV.

As keen as he had been, initially, for this woman to perhaps stop a while at the pavilion next to him – near to him – and as much as he had been enjoying chatting, now he very much wanted her to leave.

'I absolutely do not want you to follow me,' he said.

‘You wouldn’t have to do anything differently.’ The reporter was clearly unaffected by his rebuffing of her.

‘It would just be me with a little handheld camera. I could put a radio mic on you for sound. And I think we can dispense with the formalities, can’t we? I’m Alina.’

Bohm was silent, then said, ‘Bohm.’ Neither of them went to shake hands. ‘And I still can’t help you.’

He waited for her to be on her way and started rolling a cigarette. Alina watched him. Bohm pulled the upturned fruit crate over and, after giving Fox a scratch, sat down in his spot.

There was no getting rid of this Alina. Like Bohm, she now held a cigarette between her index and middle fingers. White cigarette paper, white filter, separated by a strip of gold.

‘A thousand euros,’ she said casually, peering into her pack of cigarettes and patting her jacket. Then she looked at Bohm. ‘I’ll give you a thousand euros, cash, if I can follow you around with a camera for one week and use the material however I want. Five-hundred now, five-hundred once we’re done filming. That’s a lot of money.’

Bohm stood firm as she looked at him. Why couldn’t she just leave? ‘How kind of you,’ he said, ‘to clarify that that’s a lot of money for me.’ He had put the cigarette between his lips as he spoke.

‘That’s now how I meant it.’

‘How did you mean it then?’ He struck a match with his right thumbnail, while sheltering it from the wind with his left hand. Smoke rose from Bohm’s mouth and nose, and he tossed the match to one side. He was a glow-worm, then he was nothing. ‘I don’t need your money,’ said Bohm, ashing the cigarette, taking care not to spread any on his wooden creations.

‘Could have fooled me,’ said Alina quickly, followed by an even quicker, ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean that.’

‘You say an awful lot of things you don’t mean,’ said Bohm.

Alina patted her jacket again, the pockets, the place where the inner pockets were. ‘Shit. You haven’t got a light, have you?’

Saying nothing, Bohm tossed her his box of matches which she caught. ‘Thanks.’

The wind had picked up even more. Alina struck a match on the strike pad and it went out immediately. Match in one hand, box in the other, she had no way of shielding the flame. Her second attempt failed as well, and her third.

Bohm didn’t for a second consider helping her. She chucked the matches back over to him, irritated.

‘So,’ she said, her entire face clenched. ‘Sorry again about what I said. But a thousand euros *is* a lot of money. What do you say?’

‘The same as I did two minutes ago: No.’

A long frown line etched itself on Alina’s forehead, all the way to her hairline.

‘Forget it then.’ She crumpled up the business card, tossed it in Bohm’s direction and left without once turning around.

[...]

37 ALINA

She clicked through the recordings. Should ought to delete it all. Bin it and be done with it.

She hit Select all. But when she went to hit the Delete button, her finger wouldn't listen. It couldn't. Instead, it jumped from clip to clip, hitting play, unable to stop.

Was she looking for something?

What exactly that might be she couldn't say, not at that particular moment. She pored over her materials in no particular order. The recordings where she had been holding the camera and the ones where she had placed it on a tripod. Shaky phone clips, zooms, panning once, twice, three times, the camera on the body. The first attempt below the underpass. Bohm's jokes. The two of them by the river. The fair. The repulsive, funny fly. The crêpe with gold dust.

Bohm. Dozens of Bohms. She had to delete it. But she couldn't bring herself to. And something occurred to her: no matter how many shots she clicked on, there wasn't a single one where you couldn't hear her laughing or see her in a reflective surface smiling. It was always genuine. All of a sudden, she felt that smile on her lips, tasted the sugar and the cinnamon on her tongue. Felt *his* lips.

There had to be something else. Here. In front of the vet's. With Fox. By the food waste bins.

Alina felt a knot in her stomach when a clip flashed up on the screen of Bohm legging it off the train the minute the ticket inspector showed up. The way he had looked at her. That look that saw her. That warmth had made the tiny seed in her chest grow and grow, until it emerged, shimmering and shining in all the colours. Planted, sprouted. Nature only ever looked forwards.

Now, not only was her stomach tying itself in knots, but her heart, too, felt like it was shrinking to the size of a raisin.

There. That time they played that game with the match.

‘Do you also ever worry about not being yourself?’ asked Bohm.

‘Yes,’ she heard herself replying without hesitation.

‘When?’

‘At work. Nearly all the time, in fact.’

Then came something she couldn’t make out. Apparently she had said something, quietly under her breath. Bohm seemed to have missed it too. You could tell that he wanted to ask her to repeat it but the burning match didn’t give him the time.

Alina rewound the recording and turned up the volume, but her voice was just a whisper above the white noise. Alina couldn’t make out the words. And if she was being honest, she didn’t have to. She knew what she’d said. She’d said, *I’m being myself right now.*

She rested her elbows on the dresser, burying her face in her hands.

Now she knew why she couldn’t delete the recordings. Now she knew what it was she was looking for.

Give me a reason to love you? No, not exactly. What she was looking for wasn’t a reason to love Bohm. What she was hoping to find was a reason not to love him. This whole time. *Give me a reason not to love you.*

But that wasn’t how it worked. When you fell in love with someone, when you loved them, then you loved that person. There were no arguments for or against.

Love only ever looked forwards.

He could be anywhere. His phone was off.

But she had an inkling.

She grabbed her jacket, her phone and her handbag. She left the camera. She wrapped Fox in a blanket and scooped him up delicately.

Sample Translation „Title” (Autor)

She opened the front door and found herself outside. She could feel the air on her skin, the rain. She just stood there. And for the first time in a long time, she felt awake.

[...]