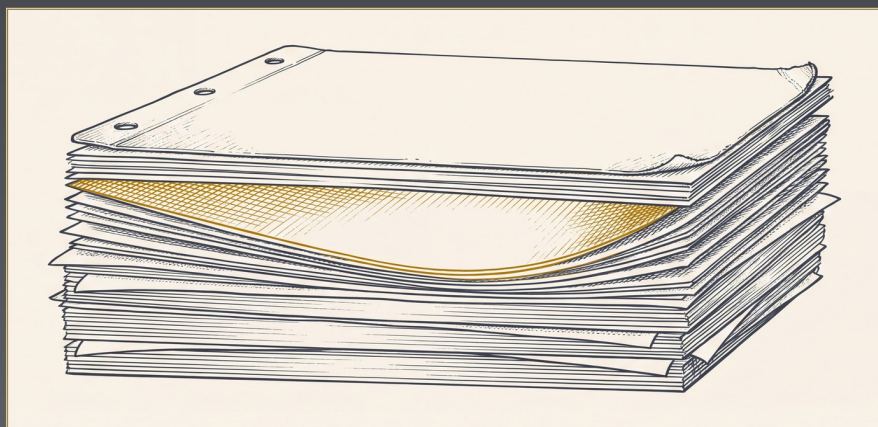

THE FOURTH PAGE

A NOVEL

KIAN CORDES



THE WENDFELD FILES · BOOK 1 · SAMPLE

TIMELESS TALES CLASSICS

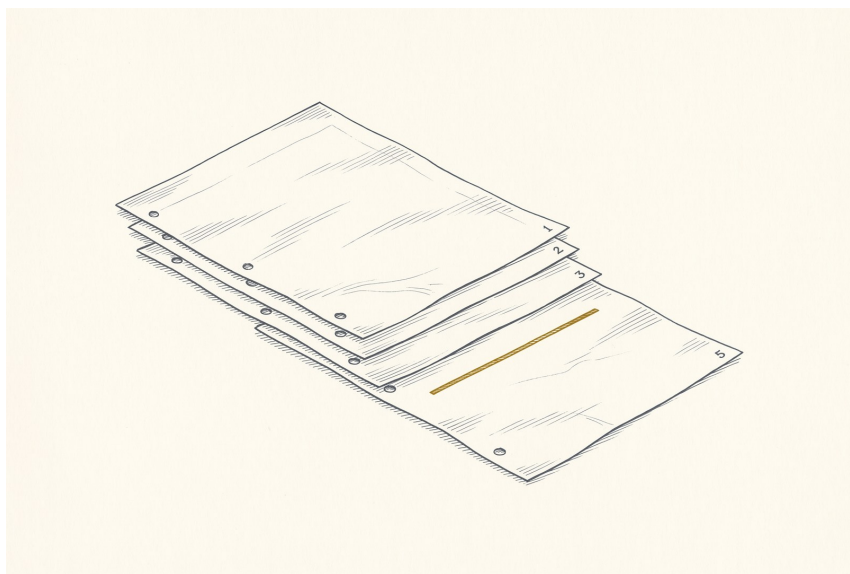
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The Fourth Page

A N O V E L

Kian Cordes

TIMELESS TALES CLASSICS



Prefatory Note

Wendfeld does not exist.

The town, the district, the Reisberg, the Selpe, the police headquarters, the public prosecutor's office and the institute of forensic medicine are invented, as are all the people in this book and the case itself. The federal state is not named, because there is none.

Any resemblance to real places, authorities or people is unintended.

PART ONE – THE GAP

REPORT 6,114 Records Office Information System REGIS · Hall 2 ·
03.03.2026, 04:17

Case 1998/K/4471, volume II. Folio numbering not consecutive. Captured: folios 213, 214, 216, 217. Folio 215 not captured. No carrier sheet, no adhesive fold, no duplicate capture. Within folio 214: record of interview form, page numbering 1, 2, 3, 5. Priority: low. I report.



CHAPTER 1

Two Hundred and Fourteen



Room U 14 had two windows, and both of them began at pavement level. When somebody walked past outside, Ruth Salzmann saw the shoes first, and then, if she leaned back, as far up as the hip. In eleven years she had learnt to recognise people by their shoes, and she had learnt that this was a completely useless skill.

It was the ninth of March, a Monday, and the list was lying on her desk.

The list was the unit. Two hundred and fourteen cases, homicides, unsolved or disputed, oldest entry 1971, most recent 2014. Each with a file ref-

erence, a name, a date and a column headed *status*, which for one hundred and seventy-nine cases contained the word *dormant*.

Salzmann had drawn up the list seven years earlier, when the unit had been set up, with two established posts and the remit to “subject existing historic cases to a structured reassessment”. She remembered the sentence because she had helped to draft it and because at the time she had been proud of it.

In seven years she had reopened nine cases. Five of them had led to charges. Three to convictions.

Three out of two hundred and fourteen. It was the best rate anywhere in the force and it looked like an argument against her.

“Boss.”

Toni Achterberg was standing in the doorway with his coffee mug in one hand and the tablet in the other, wearing the expression she had come to know by now: the face of a man who has found something he does not himself believe is anything.

“The collected reports from Fuchsloh. I’ve been through them, like you wanted.”

“And?”

“Four hundred reports since November. Three hundred and ninety of them are paper jams, scanning errors or somebody who didn’t take a paper clip out.” He came in without being asked and sat down on the edge of the second desk, which had been empty for two years. “Ten are something else.”

“What sort of something else?”

“Folio numbering. The thing counts the folios while it scans. If a number is missing, it reports it.”

Salzmann took off her glasses. “And if a number is missing, then in 1994 a colleague numbered a page wrong.”

“In nine cases, yes. I checked.” Achterberg turned the tablet towards her. “In one, no.”

She read the report. Six lines, matter-of-fact, with a timestamp at a quarter past four in the morning, because the plant at Fuchsloh ran through the night whether anybody was there or not.

Case 1998/K/4471, volume II. Folio numbering not consecutive.

“And what's different about it?”

“Two things.” Achterberg held up two fingers, which he always did and which she had not yet broken him of. “First: it isn't only a folio missing from the file. There's a page missing *inside* a folio. The record of interview on folio 214 has page one, two, three and five. That isn't a numbering error, that's a form with consecutive page numbers that somebody filled in, and then page four is missing.”

“And second?”

“Second,” said Achterberg, “the case is solved.”

Salzmann looked at him.

“Solved, charged, convicted, final and binding,” he said. “The man got twelve years and served eleven. Why is there a page missing from a file that was closed?”



She called the case up in the file register at ten o'clock, in the old system, which was still running alongside the new one because the new one did not know cases from before 2003.

1998/K/4471. Ritt, Marlen, b. 14.02.1981. Homicide. Time of offence 09.10.1998. Conviction 17.06.1999, Wendfeld Regional Court, Sperling, Achim, § 212 StGB, 12 years. Final and binding 04.11.1999. Case closed.

And underneath, in a field nobody filled in any more, because the field came from a time when cases still disappeared into cellars and not into databases:

Note: no resubmission required.

Salzmann read the girl's name. Marlen Ritt. Seventeen years old. In 1998 she had been twenty-four herself and had driven a patrol car in another force area, and she had never heard of the case, which meant nothing: in this coun-

try more than two hundred people a year die violently, and most of them you hear about once on the news and never again.

She wrote the file reference on a slip of paper and put the slip in the middle of the desk, where it could not be missed.

Then she read the rest of the list, because it was Monday.



At half past one, Bendler, the head of division, rang, which he did six times a year and never without a reason.

“Frau Salzmann. Have you got a moment.”

“I’ve got a moment.”

“The budget for 2027 goes out at the end of April. I’m telling you early so you don’t read about it in the paper: there’s a proposal to absorb your unit into Criminal Division 1.”

She had expected it. You expect sentences like that for two years, and then they still come on a Monday at half past one.

“Absorb means abolish.”

“Absorb means absorb. Your post stays, Achterberg stays. The cases get distributed among the specialist units.”

“Among the specialist units, which have thirty-two live investigations and not one afternoon to spare for a file from 1994.”

“Ruth.” Bendler used her first name about as often as he used the fire alarm. “I’m not the enemy here. I have a figure on my desk, and the figure is three convictions in seven years, and I have to explain it to somebody who has never held an old file in his hands. Give me something I can put forward.”

“By when?”

“End of April.”

She looked at the slip in the middle of her desk.

“And if I bring you a man who was wrongly convicted?”

At the other end it went quiet for a moment.

"Then," said Bendler slowly, "please bring me something else. A man wrongly convicted is not a figure you put forward. A man wrongly convicted is a figure you explain, at very great length, and not me – senior command."

"Understood."

"No," said Bendler, "you haven't understood me, you've heard me. With you those are not the same thing." He breathed out. "End of April, Frau Salzmann."



Achterberg came back at four with two coffees, one of which was for her, a habit he had got into ever since she had once told him she didn't drink it.

"Fuchsloh says the file is in Hall 2, aisle 41. It's already been scanned, we could read the whole thing digitally."

"We'll drive out."

"Why?" He put the mug down. "It's all in the system. In colour, three hundred dpi, with full text."

Salzmann took her jacket off the hook.

"Because a scan is a picture of a page," she said. "And because a file is a stack of paper that people have handled. You can see on a folio whether it has lain flat for twenty-five years or whether somebody put it back in a hurry. You can't see that on the picture."

Achterberg finished his coffee.

"You want to see the holes," he said.

"I want to see the holes."

"What holes?"

"The filing holes." She went to the door. "When a folio hangs in a file it has two holes, and the holes are in the same place as on all the other folios, because they were made with the same punch. If one folio was taken out and another put in, you can see it. Not always. Sometimes."

She stopped at the door.

“And if a folio was taken out and *none* put in, then you see nothing at all, because then there's only air. That's why we're driving out, Achterberg. I want to see with my own eyes that there is air.”

Fuchsloh



The Fuchsloh barracks lay nine kilometres to the north-west on the trunk road, behind a bend that had been built so that you saw the gate only once you had driven past it. That had been deliberate, in 1938, and it still worked.

Two halls, an administration block, a flagpole without a flag. On the parade ground stood twenty-two cars, eighteen of which were official vehicles, and on the grass behind it somebody had planted fruit trees years ago that nobody pruned.

It was a place where things stopped. That was its function, and you could see it.

“Fourteen degrees,” said Achterberg as they went through the airlock into Hall 2. “Always?”

“Always. And forty-five per cent humidity. Paper lives longer than we do, if you let it.”

The hall was a hundred and twenty metres long and you could not see the end of it, because the lights were switched in sections and only ever the section somebody was standing in was lit. Shelving up to the ceiling, rails in the floor, number plates on the end faces: 38, 39, 40, 41.

In the front third, where the vehicle hall had once been, stood the scanners.

Two book scanners, each the size of a photocopier from the nineties, with a glass cradle for the file to lie in and a camera bridge above it. A roller unit for loose leaves. A trolley with bundles of files, a second trolley for what was finished. Three screens.

And a working student in a hooded top, turning the folios over at a speed that looked like boredom and practice at the same time.

“Morning,” he said without looking up.

“Salzmann, cold case unit. We'd like 1998/K/4471, volumes one and two.”

“That's been done.” He turned another folio. “Everything from aisle 40 on has been done.”

“I want the paper.”

Now he looked up.

“I can fetch it for you.” He stood up and stretched his back. “Takes ten minutes. D'you want to watch the thing while you wait?”

“What thing?”

The boy pointed with his chin at the middle screen.

“REGIS. It reads along.”



A list was running on the screen, and the list was running slowly upwards.

Folio 118 captured. Text recognised, confidence 0.97. Folio 119 captured. Text recognised, confidence 0.91. Handwriting, marginal note, not resolved. Folio 120 captured. Text recognised, confidence 0.99. Folio 121 captured. Reverse blank, captured.

“It counts,” said Achterberg.

“It counts, it reads, it checks whether the numbers are right, whether a date is in the future, whether the same time appears twice.” The working student shrugged. “And if something's odd, it makes a report.”

“To whom?”

“To the list.”

“And who reads the list?”

The boy looked at Salzmann as though she had asked who turns the lights off at night.

“Dunno,” he said. “Not us.”

Salzmann took a step closer to the screen.

“How many reports does it make a day?”

“Varies. Twenty, thirty.” He took a fresh stack off the trolley. “At the start it was three hundred. It reported everything then, every dog-ear. Then they turned it down.”

“Who turned it down?”

“The company. Because somebody complained that too much was coming through.” He laid the first folio in the cradle. “Fair enough, really. It doesn't report whether something's *important*. It reports whether something's *different*.”

Salzmann watched the cursor travelling.

“And what's the difference?” she asked.

The working student actually thought about it before he answered, and she gave him a great deal of credit for that.

“I think the difference is that it hasn't a clue what it's about,” he said. “It doesn't know there's a dead girl in that file. To the thing it's a stack with folio numbers on it. That's the reason it notices and we don't – we read along, we think along, we get an opinion. And the thing hasn't got an opinion, it's only got numbers.”

He pressed the foot switch. The camera bridge travelled.

“Two hundred and twenty-three,” he said. “Two hundred and twenty-four.”



The box came after twelve minutes, on a trolley, with a label on which 4471 / 98 – I + II stood in handwriting and underneath it, stamped, *CLOSED*.

Salzmann put on gloves. Achterberg saw it and put some on too, although he did not have to and although she watched him wondering whether he ought to ask why.

Volume I was thick. Volume II was thinner.

She laid volume II on the table, opened the cover and turned the folios without reading until she was at folio 213. Then she read the numbers in the

top right-hand corner, where they stood in pencil, in a hand that was always the same throughout this file.

213.

214.

216.

She held the place open with her thumb and turned the volume into the light.

Between folio 214 and folio 216 there was nothing. No remnant, no glue edge, no torn fold. The two folios lay one on top of the other as though they always had.

"There's air," said Achterberg.

"There's air."

She lifted folio 214 and held it up against the ceiling light so that the light came from behind.

Two filing holes, on the left, eighty millimetres apart, clean, with a tiny burr to the rear of the kind an old office punch makes.

"Do you see it?" she asked.

Achterberg leaned forward.

"They're all the same," he said.

"They're all the same." She put the folio back. "If somebody had taken a folio out by tearing it free of the binding, the punching on the neighbouring folios would be damaged. It isn't."

"So there was no hurry."

"So there was no hurry." Salzmann pushed the volume across so that Achterberg could read along. "Somebody opened the binding, took out one folio, closed the binding again. That takes a minute. And then he didn't correct the folio numbers."

"Why not?"

"Because he didn't want it to be noticed?"

"No," said Achterberg slowly. "If I don't want it to be noticed, I correct the numbers. Then the file has no gap and nobody sees anything. He simply wasn't interested."

Salzmann looked at him. It was the first time in twenty-one months that he had said something to her that she was going to write down.

“Yes,” she said. “That’s exactly it. He wasn’t interested. He didn’t act in secret, he *tidied up*.”

She opened folio 214.

It was a form. Printed, ruled in grey, a box at the top right for the file reference, at the top left the words **Record of Interview**, and underneath, filled in on a typewriter:

Witness: and then a blank space in the carbon copy, because the original had been sharper than the copy that lay here.

Salzmann turned the folio.

Page 1. Page 2. Page 3.

Page 5.

“Where’s the four?” said Achterberg.

Salzmann did not answer. She read the last line on page 3 and the first line on page 5, and then she read both of them again.

Page 3 ended in the middle of a sentence, at the bottom edge of the folio, with the words:

“...and then I drove on, because I still had to”

Page 5 began at the top with:

“...correct, I said that earlier. Nothing else.”

Between them about forty-five lines were missing.

About forty-five lines in which a witness in October 1998 had told an officer something that somebody did not want to have in this file.

“Boss,” said Achterberg, and his voice sounded different from before. “Who was the witness?”

Salzmann turned back to the head of the form and held it at an angle to the light, because the carbon copy was faint at that point.

It was a short name, five letters or six. Neither of them could be read.

What the File Says



She took both volumes with her, against the rules and with a movement slip that the working student made out without asking what for.

At home she cleared the dining table. She had lived alone for nine years in a flat that had been meant for two, and the dining table was the only place where a file of two hundred and seventeen folios could be opened out without anything falling off.

She began at eight in the evening. By a quarter past two she was through.



What the file says, in the order in which it went in.

On Sunday, 11 October 1998, at 08:15, an emergency call comes in to the Wendfeld control room. A man by the name of Ewald Prahm, fifty-eight, from Nettelheim-Ost, is walking his dog along forest track 4 on the Reisberg, a track which, as he later states for the record, he has walked “every Sunday for twenty years”. About one thousand four hundred metres beyond the barrier, three metres off the track, at the mouth of an old extraction lane, he finds a dead girl.

She is lying on her left side. She is wearing a dark blue quilted jacket, jeans, one trainer. The second trainer is found the next day forty metres further on.

At 09:40 the site is sealed off. At 11:20 she is identified: **Marlen Ritt**, seventeen, resident in Nettelheim-Ost, missing since Friday evening, reported on Saturday morning by her mother.

The missing person report is in the file on folio 6. It is three quarters of a page long. Under the heading *Particular circumstances* it says, in handwriting: *Mother states daughter is reliable, would otherwise always come.*



On Monday, 12 October, Dr Vural Kaya carries out the post-mortem, a registrar at the Wendfeld institute of forensic medicine, together with the director of the institute, Prof Dr Ehrenberg.

The report runs to nine folios. Salzmann read it twice, the second time more slowly.

Cause of death: asphyxia by compression of the soft tissues of the neck. Manual strangulation, from the front, with counter-pressure. Petechiae. Fracture of the hyoid bone on the right. Subcutaneous haemorrhage on both forearms, which the report describes as *defensive injuries*. No evidence of completed sexual intercourse. Injuries to the inner surfaces of the thighs and a tear in the waistband of the jeans running from the outside inwards.

And, at the foot of folio 41, a sentence that Salzmann copied out:

Time of death, on the basis of post-mortem changes, stomach contents and ambient temperature, to be narrowed to 09.10.1998, approx. 18:30 to 20:30.

Two hours. For a finding made after thirty-six hours lying in the open that was a narrow window, and a man who made it that narrow did so because he was certain.

Beneath the report, on folio 50, a list of the exhibits secured. Fourteen items. Clothing. Fibre traces. Swab samples. And item eleven:

Fingernail debris, both hands, secured separately, retained at the institute.

Salzmann read the line and went on, without knowing that two months later she would think of that line the way you think of a door you have walked past.



The investigation runs for ten days. As far as Salzmann could judge after twenty-eight years, it is sound work.

Thirty-one witnesses are interviewed. The family, the school, the employer – Marlen had a Saturday and Friday-afternoon job at the Bruhn drinks market on B-Straße – friends, the driver of the number 4 bus, two neighbours, a forest officer, two huntsmen, three residents on the Reisberg.

The girl's route on the Friday evening is reconstructed: end of shift 18:05, seen by her colleague. On foot towards the Selpabrücke bus stop, 1.2 kilometres, fourteen minutes. The 18:20 bus leaves without her; the driver states that he saw nobody get on. The next bus goes at 20:50.

That fixes the gap in which everything happened: **between 18:20 and 20:30.**

A girl who misses her bus, eleven kilometres from home, in October, in the last of the light.

Salzmann knew this paragraph in about thirty variants. It rarely ended well.



On 21 October Achim Sperling is arrested.

Sperling, twenty-four at the time, warehouseman with a haulage firm at the Selpahafen, living with his mother in Wendfeld-Nord. In the file there is an extract from the Federal Central Criminal Register: one conviction in 1996, criminal damage, a fine.

What brings him into view is on folio 133 and is so thin that Salzmann read the passage twice: two witnesses – friends of Marlen's, both seventeen – state that Sperling once “chatted her up in the summer” and had been “odd”. A third witness says he “looked at her”.

Sperling has no alibi for the evening of 9 October. He says he was at home. His mother was working nights.

He is provisionally arrested on 21 October at 16:50 and interviewed the same evening.

The interview lasts until 21:30. He denies it.

On 22 October he is interviewed from 10:00 to 12:30. He denies it.

On 22 October, at 17:40, the third interview begins.

It ends on 23 October at 02:40 with a confession.

Nine hours.



The confession is on folios 178 to 191 and is the longest continuous record in the file. Salzmann read it all, sitting up, without anything to drink, and when she had finished it was a quarter past one and she noticed that she was cold.

Sperling said he had met Marlen on the trunk road. He had spoken to her. She had come with him. They had argued. He had held her. Then she had “become quiet”.

He described the track. He described the quilted jacket. He described her losing a shoe.

And in three places, spread over fourteen folios, he said a sentence that looked the same every time in the record, because records smooth sentences out:

“I don't remember exactly any more.”

At the end of the record, after the closing formula, he had signed. The signature was large, slow and stood half beside the line.



On 17 June 1999 the Wendfeld Regional Court sentences Achim Sperling to twelve years' imprisonment for manslaughter.

The judgment is not in the file; what is in the file is the notification that it had become final and binding, one folio, stamped on 4 November 1999.

Achim Sperling served eleven years and was released in 2010. He died in 2019 at the age of forty-five.

That is not in the file. That was in the registration office record Achterberg had sent by email at ten in the evening, with the subject line *just so you know* and no further text.



Right at the back of volume II, behind the notification of finality, behind the note recording the destruction of the exhibits on 14 September 2009, behind everything a case normally contains, there were another twenty-seven folios.

They were letters.

They were all written in the same hand, all addressed to Wendfeld police headquarters, all on one side, all with the same first sentence.

Dear Sir or Madam, it was not my brother.

The first was dated 3 December 1999. The last 11 October 2025.

Not one of them bore a date-of-receipt stamp. Not one of them bore a direction. They had been filed, twenty-seven times, by changing hands, neatly, in chronological order.

They were signed **Marion Sperling**.

Salzmann read all twenty-seven, and at a quarter past two she closed the cover and stayed sitting for a while.

She thought about what Achterberg had said in the hall, about the folio numbers nobody had corrected, and about a person who had not been interested.

Then she thought: he was wrong.

A great many people had not been interested.

What They Could Do in 1998



“They were sloppy,” said Achterberg.

It was Tuesday morning, he had folios 51 to 68 in front of him, the part of the file that deals with the examination of the scene, and he had been through it in forty minutes and had reached a conclusion.

Salzmann put down her pen.

“Tell me what you see.”

“Fourteen exhibits. Fourteen.” He turned the folio round. “In a homicide. Today we’d have eighty. No ground impressions from the track, no tyre mark, no comparison samples from the residents, no photographs of the extraction lane from more than two directions. And the main thing: they secured the clothing and did nothing with it.”

“Why did they do nothing with it?”

“Because they were lazy.”

“No,” said Salzmann. “Sit down.”



She pulled the folios over to her and picked out three passages she had marked in the night at the dining table.

“First: the tyre mark.” She put her finger on folio 54. “They tried. It says here: *Vehicle tracks in the area of the extraction lane, casting not possible, ground saturated.* On the Saturday it rained for eleven hours, that’s on folio 19 in the weather report, and she was found on Sunday morning. The tracks were gone before the first officer got there.”

“And the clothing?”

“The clothing lies in the open for thirty-six hours.” She turned on. “Second: what should they have done with it? You’re thinking of a test that in 1998 did not exist in that form, at any rate not for a case in a country town.”

“There was DNA.”

“There had been DNA since 1988.” Salzmann nodded. “And in 1998 it needed a visible trace. Blood, semen, saliva at a pinch. A fibre with perhaps a few cells clinging to it was not a sample in 1998, it was a wish. The methods that get something out of material like that come in the two thousands, and out in the sticks later still.”

Achterberg looked at the list.

“And the fingernail debris?”

“The fingernail debris.” Salzmann found folio 50. “Item eleven. It was taken. By a thirty-two-year-old registrar, because his chief left him the donkey work.”

“And then?”

“And then it wasn’t examined.” She said it without emphasis. “And now I’m going to tell you the unpleasant part, Achterberg, and you’re going to listen to the end of it: in 1998 an examination of this material would in all probability have produced nothing. It would have been expensive, it would have taken weeks, and at the end of it there would have stood: no usable trace. In 1998 that was the most likely outcome.”

Achterberg looked up.

“You’re defending them.”

“I’m describing them.” Salzmann pushed the copy across to him. “And I’m doing it for one reason only, and it isn’t loyalty to colleagues. If you start out in an old file accusing the people of the time of laziness, then you stop reading. You already know what you’re going to find. And then you find what you already knew.”



“So what was wrong, then?” said Achterberg after a while.

“That’s the right question, and it’s a different one.” Salzmann stood up and went over to the wall. “First answer: nothing that would have stood out in 1998. The scene work at that site is sound for 1998. It is better than what I have on my list from two other cases from the same period.”

“And the second answer?”

“The second answer is on folio 50, item eleven, and it isn’t that they did nothing.” She turned round. “It’s that after that nobody ever looked again.”

Achterberg waited.

“In 1998 a sample that has not been examined is not an error. It is a decision with a reason.” Salzmann came back to the table. “It becomes an error the moment the methods change and nobody goes through the old lists again. In 2002 it could have been done. In 2008 it could have been done. By 2015 certainly.”

“And why did nobody do it?”

“Because the case was closed.” She sat down. “You know the sentence. It is in this case word for word, in a field nobody fills in any more: *no resubmission required.*”



In the afternoon they went through the photographs.

There were thirty-four of them, in a clear plastic wallet, prints in the ten by fifteen format, and on the back of each print a number stood in ballpoint.

“Eighteen from the site,” said Achterberg. “Six of the extraction lane. Four of the shoe that was found on the Monday. Three general views of the track. And three from the post-mortem, they’re separate.”

“And what’s missing?”

He went through them again.

“The track,” he said then. “There are three general views, and all three of them were taken from the place where she was found. There’s no picture of the barrier. There’s no picture of the car park. There’s nothing at all that shows how you get up there.”

Salzmann took the wallet and held it up to the window.

“Why does nobody photograph that?”

“Because you drove along it,” said Achterberg slowly. “You don’t photograph the way you took yourself. It’s there, isn’t it.”

Salzmann put the wallet down.

“Write that down.”

“That’s nothing.”

“That’s exactly the same as before, only with a camera.” She pushed the pad across to him. “In 1998 the question was: who knew the girl. It was not: who came up here. And that’s why there are eighteen pictures of three metres of forest floor and none of one thousand seven hundred metres of track.”



Achterberg spent the evening writing a table nobody had asked him for.

It had two columns. In the left-hand one stood the fourteen exhibits from 1998. In the right-hand one stood what could be done with each of them today and what it would cost.

For twelve out of fourteen the same word stood in the right-hand column.

Destroyed, 14.09.2009.

For one it said *Clothing, whereabouts unclear.*

For item eleven there was nothing, because Achterberg did not know what to write there, and because at that place in the file there stood only the sentence that it was retained at the institute.

He turned the screen towards Salzmann.

“What do I put in there?”

Salzmann looked at the empty cell for a long time.

“Put *unknown*,” she said. “And put today’s date beside it, so that later on somebody can see when we didn’t know it for the first time.”

Achterberg typed it in.

“That’s the saddest cell I’ve ever filled in.”

“No,” said Salzmann. “The saddest are the twelve above it. There’s a date there, a file reference and a signature, and every part of it was correct.”

The Other Nine



“You said that in nine cases it was a numbering error,” said Salzmann. “Show me the nine.”

Achterberg looked up.

“Why?”

“Because I want to know how often this thing is wrong.”

“It’s never wrong.” He pulled the tablet over. “It reports that a number is missing, and a number is missing. What’s missing is the reason.”

“Then show me the nine reasons.”



It took half the morning, and it was the sort of work that after two hours Achterberg said was astonishingly joyless, and after three, astonishingly interesting.

Report 5,902. Case from 1994. Folio 61 missing. Reason: at the bottom right of folio 60 there is a 61, and on the following one likewise a 61, the second crossed out and changed to 62. An officer miscounted and noticed.

Report 5,940. Case from 1989. Folios 12 to 14 missing. Reason: they are in volume II, because somebody lost the order while refiling. They are all there, only in the wrong place, and there they were numbered a second time.

Report 6,011. Case from 2001. Folio 208 missing. Reason: it is a photograph sheet that was once taken out and put in a clear plastic wallet, and the wallet was given a number of its own.

“And so on,” said Achterberg at half past eleven. “In three of the nine it was a carrier sheet for receipts. In two, somebody counted a page twice. In one, somebody didn't count a page at all because it was blank.”

“And in all nine cases the paper is there.”

“In all nine cases the paper is there.” He leaned back. “Nothing is missing. It's only that nobody counts properly.”

Salzmann looked at the list.

“Nine out of ten,” she said.

“Nine out of ten.” Achterberg nodded. “And if I hadn't gone through the nine, I'd have put ten reports in front of you on Monday and you'd have said that's a list.”



“How many reports has it made altogether?”

“Since November?” Achterberg worked it out. “Four hundred and twelve. I've seen them all, it doesn't take long, because three hundred and ninety of them are paper jams or paper clips or duplicate capture. You can sort that out in an hour.”

Salzmann did the arithmetic with him.

“The lad in the hall said it makes twenty, thirty a day.”

“It does, too.”

“Four hundred and twelve since November is three a day.”

“Yes.” Achterberg turned the tablet towards her. “Because those are two different figures. It records everything, every deviation, and that runs into a log nobody ever looks at. The collected list isn't a folder somebody puts things into. The collected list is a query.”

“A query on what?”

“On the log.” He tapped. “You aren't seeing what it reported. You're seeing what today's threshold lets through. That's why ours carries the number six thousand one hundred and fourteen and not the four hundred and twelve. The counter runs with the log. The list runs with the setting.”

Salzmann looked at the screen for a while.

“And the remaining twenty-two?”

“Twelve are date errors. There’s a date somewhere in the future, mostly a typing error, once it was a stamp somebody had set the wrong way round.” He turned a page. “And ten are folio numbering. The nine and ours.”

“And who reads the list?”

Achterberg looked up.

“The boy in the hall asked that too.”

“The boy said he didn’t know.” Salzmann pulled her chair up. “I want to know. Who is responsible?”

It took until the afternoon, and in the end the answer came from a clerk in the administration who searched for three minutes and then became very polite.

“It’s in the specification of services,” said Achterberg. “I’ll read it out to you, because otherwise nobody believes it. *Anomalies are documented in a collective list and made available to the commissioning body.*”

“And the commissioning body is?”

“The headquarters.”

“The headquarters has fourteen hundred employees.”

“Yes.” Achterberg put the sheet down. “Nowhere does it say who reads it. Nor does it say that anybody has to read it. It says that it is made available.”

Salzmann stood up and went to the window, past which two pairs of legs were going by at pavement level.

“Since November,” she said. “How many months is that?”

“Four.”

“And in four months one person has read it.”

“Me.” Achterberg said it without pride. “And only because you asked me in February what they actually do out there, and I didn’t know and found it embarrassing.”

Salzmann looked out of the window for a while.

“Write that down.”

“That really isn’t something for a case file now.”

“No,” said Salzmann. “That’s something for Bendler. For the day he explains to me that this unit produces too little.”



“Achterberg, go back once more to the point the boy in the hall made.”

“Which one?”

“That at the start it made three hundred reports a day and that they turned it down because somebody complained.”

Achterberg looked it out. It was in the configuration, in a field nobody had hidden, because it had not occurred to anybody that it might be interesting.

“In January,” he said. “On 14 January the company reduced the sensitivity. Before that every deviation stood in the list. Since then only the ones where more than one test is triggered.”

“And what does that mean for us?”

Achterberg read the parameters, and you could watch him slowing down.

“Our report triggered two tests,” he said. “Missing folio number and page numbering within a form. That’s why it got through.”

“And if it had only been one?”

“Then it wouldn’t have got through.”

He looked up.

“Boss, that’s—” He broke off and began again. “If that folio from the interview had been a single page, without page numbering, then the thing would have reported that a folio number was missing, and that’s one test, and then the report would have been filtered out in January.”

“Yes.”

“And then we wouldn’t be sitting here now.”



Salzmann sat down again and wrote it out, and it took her longer than anything else she had written that morning.

“What are you writing?” said Achterberg.

“What you just said. Word for word.”

“That doesn't belong in the case file.”

“Yes it does.” She went on writing. “It belongs precisely in the case file, and I'll tell you why, and then please write it down for yourself as well: because in five years somebody will write a submission setting out what a plant like that costs and what it produces. And that submission will say that it made four hundred and twelve reports, of which four hundred and eleven were nothing.”

“Which is true.”

“Which is true,” said Salzmann. “And underneath it there has to stand that the one that was something existed only because in January somebody set the sensitivity to two tests and not to three.”

She read the sentence again and changed one word.

“Otherwise next time somebody takes the three.”

The Man with the Dog



Ewald Prahm was eighty-six and still walked.

He lived in Nettelheim-Ost in a house with a ramp in front of the door that had been there for four years, and he opened up before Salzmann had finished ringing, because the dog was already standing at the door.

“He’s deaf,” said Prahm. “But he notices all the same.”

It was an old terrier with a grey face.

“The third one,” said Prahm, when he saw that Salzmann was looking. “Back then it was the first. He was called Sammy.”



They sat in a kitchen with a table from the seventies, and Prahm poured coffee without asking and set the pot down on a stand that belonged to the pot.

“You’ve come about the girl.”

“Yes.”

“I knew somebody would come again one day.” He sat down. “Two thousand and ten I thought it, when he came out. And then nobody came.”

“How did you know he came out?”

“Well, you know these things.” Prahm shrugged. “In Nettelheim you know everything. You just don’t know what to do with it.”

Salzmann put her hands on the table.

“Herr Prahm, I’m asking you about the Sunday morning. Not about the details. About the sequence.”

“Yes.” He nodded slowly. “That I can do.”

He told it the way a man tells something he has perhaps told twenty times in twenty-eight years and not at all for the last twenty of them.

He had set off at a quarter past seven, like every Sunday. He had gone up forest track 4, like every Sunday, because the dog knew the way and because you meet nobody up there.

The dog had stopped.

“That’s where I stop,” said Prahm.

“That’s all right.”

“No, I mean, that’s where I stop because I don’t tell it.” He looked into his cup. “I told them back then, and once more after that because one of them hadn’t written it down properly, and not since. I’ve worked it out that way for myself.”

“Then tell me what happened afterwards.”



“Afterwards I went down to the road, because I didn’t have a telephone.” He made a gesture with his hand. “That was ninety-nine – ninety-eight. You didn’t have one in your pocket then. I went down to the car park and then another three hundred metres to the bus stop, because there was a shelter there with a telephone.”

“And then?”

“Then I rang 110. And then I waited.”

“How long?”

“Too long.” Prahm said it without reproach. “Twenty minutes, half an hour. And then they came and couldn’t get in because the barrier was shut.”

Salzmann did not move.

“And then?”

“Then I went down again and rang Kolbe. He has the key.” Prahm drank. “He was there in ten minutes.”

“You rang him.”

“Who else? The forest officer sits in town.” He set the cup down. “Kolbe does the barriers. It’s been like that for forty years.”

Salzmann wrote nothing down.

By now she had heard three times that Rainer Kolbe had opened the barrier that Sunday – from the man himself, from the file, and now from the man who had called him – and all three versions agreed, and none of them meant anything, because there was no second person with a key.

“Herr Prahm, did anybody ask you again afterwards? After the second time?”

“No.”

“Not even when the trial was on?”

“I was at the trial.” He looked up. “Half a day. I sat there and then they said they didn't need me any more, because he'd confessed. And then I went back on the bus.”



“Herr Prahm, what did you do on that Sunday afterwards?”

He looked at her as though she had asked about the weather.

“How do you mean?”

“At a quarter past eight you called the police. You waited, you rang Herr Kolbe, you went up again. At some point you went home.”

“Half past two.”

“And then?”

Prahm turned the cup round.

“Then I sat down,” he said. “My wife asked where I'd been all that time, and I said I'll tell you later. And then I never told her.”

“Never?”

“She died in two thousand and sixteen.” He said it plainly. “Eighteen years. In eighteen years I never told her what I'd seen, and she never asked, and to this day I don't know whether she didn't want to know or whether she was waiting.”

Salzmann said nothing for a while.

“Did anybody ask you how you were?”

“What?”

“In 1998. An officer, somebody from the parish council, the vicar. Anybody.”

Ewald Prahm actually thought about it, and it took long enough that the answer was not a complaint but the result of a calculation.

“Kolbe,” he said then. “He rang that evening and asked if I was coping.”

“And apart from him?”

“Apart from him, nobody.”



At the door the dog was standing waiting again.

“I still walk the track,” said Prahm.

“The four?”

“The four.” He took the lead off the hook. “Every Sunday. Twenty-eight years.”

“Why?”

He actually thought about it, and Salzmann gave him credit for that, because she had put this question twice before and both times had been given an answer that had been ready in advance.

“Because otherwise I'd be the one who doesn't go up there any more,” said Ewald Prahm.

He opened the door.

“I thought at the time that I could have found her on the Friday already, if I'd walked on Fridays too. That's rubbish, I know that. But if I stopped now, then it would have been right.”

Salzmann stopped on the ramp.

“Herr Prahm. One question, and it has nothing to do with the case.”

“Ask.”

“Is there anything there? At the place?”

“No.” He shook his head. “There's nothing lying there, nothing standing there, nothing hanging there. Two thousand times I've put a stone down and taken it away again.”

“Why taken it away again?”

“Because I thought to myself, that isn't mine to do,” said Prahm. “All I did was find her.”

He went down the ramp with the dog and stopped at the bottom.

“Frau Salzmänn. If something comes of it – will you let me know?”

“Yes.”

“Not for my sake.” He shortened the lead. “I'd just like to know before the dog dies. He's thirteen.”

Nine out of Two Hundred and Fourteen



Achterberg asked it on a Thursday evening, in the tone he used for things that had been on his mind for some time.

“Boss, whose desk is that?”

Salzmann looked up.

The second desk in U 14 stood against the wall under the right-hand window, it was the same size as hers, it had three empty drawers and a plastic desk mat with a coffee ring on it that had not come from her.

“Britta Vollmer,” she said.

“Never heard of her.”

“No, you’ve been here twenty-one months and she left two years ago.” Salzmann leaned back. “She was there from the beginning. Five years.”

“And why did she go?”

“Because she couldn’t do it any more.”

Achterberg waited.

“That isn’t an insinuation, that’s the answer,” said Salzmann. “She sat in this room with me for five years reading cases in which somebody died without our clearing it up. With most of them nothing comes afterwards. With most of them nothing ever comes. And at some point she told me on a Friday that for a year she hadn’t been able to fall asleep without reciting names while she did it.”

“And then?”

“And then I talked to her, and then she went back to the specialist unit, and she’s doing well there.” Salzmann looked at the empty desk. “That isn’t a sad story, Achterberg. It’s a good one. She noticed in time what was happen-

ing to her, and she did something about it, and that takes more than staying put does.”

“And you?”

“Ask me instead how many file references I can recite from memory.”

“All nine of them. Of the other two hundred and five, about thirty.” Salzmann looked at the screen. “And those aren’t the worst ones, before you start thinking that. Those are the ones I started once and stopped again, because nothing came. You read for a fortnight, you find no thread, you put it back. That isn’t a defeat, that’s the normal case.”

“And you remember the number anyway.”

“I don’t recite names.” She took off her glasses. “I recite file references. That’s either healthier or worse, I’ve never decided.”



“Then why am I not sitting there?”

“Because you took a different one.”

“I thought it was yours.”

“No.” Salzmann looked at him. “On your first day you came in, looked round and took the desk by the door, which is smaller and in a draught. I said nothing at the time and I made a note of it.”

Achterberg looked at his desk.

“I thought somebody had sat there.”

“Somebody did sit there.”

“Yes,” he said. “Exactly.”



She opened the list, because he was going to keep asking, and turned the screen round.

“While we’re at it, we’ll do it properly. You’ve been here twenty-one months and you don’t know what this unit has done in seven years, and that’s my failing and not yours.”

She scrolled to the top.

“Two hundred and fourteen cases. Nine I have reopened in seven years. I’ll give you a sentence on each.”

She needed eleven minutes.

A case from 1989, reopened in 2019, closed after four months: the only witness had developed dementia. A case from 1996, reopened in 2020: a lead that was not one. A case from 2001, reopened in 2021, charges, acquittal. A case from 1994, reopened in 2021: conviction, nine years. A case from 2007, reopened in 2022: conviction, life. A case from 1978, reopened in 2022, closed again after three weeks, because the only suspect had died in 1991. A case from 2011, reopened in 2023: charges, proceedings discontinued, the defendant was unfit to stand trial. A case from 1985, reopened in 2024, open. A case from 2003, reopened in 2024: conviction, eleven years.

“Tell me one of them properly,” said Achterberg.

“Which one?”

“The one from 2007. Where it came out life.”

Salzmann leaned back.

“A woman, fifty-three, dead in her flat in Kohlgraben. Closed in 2007 as a suicide, with a finding that supported it, and with a farewell letter that was on her computer.” She looked at the line. “I reopened the case in 2022, because the file said the letter had been written on the day she died, and because the same folio said that the machine had not been switched on that day.”

Achterberg looked up.

“And that was on the same folio?”

“On the same folio. Two paragraphs apart.” Salzmann nodded. “For fifteen years. The husband has been inside since 2023.”

“And how long did it take you?”

“Fourteen months. And in those fourteen months I did nothing else, and in those fourteen months not one other line on the list was worked on.”

She turned the screen a little.

“That’s the price, and you always pay it. If I open one, two hundred and thirteen are shut.”

"Nine cases," she said after a while. "Five sets of charges. Three convictions."

"And five where nothing came of it."

"Six, if you count the open one, and you should."

Achterberg looked at the list.

"And that's the best rate in the force."

"That's the best rate in the force." Salzmann turned the screen back. "And now you understand why Bendler can't walk into a meeting with it. Not because he's a coward. Because sitting next to him is a man who in the same period has closed three hundred investigations, and he's right."



"I've got one more question," said Achterberg at the door.

"Yes."

"The two hundred and five you haven't opened. How do you know there's nothing in them?"

Salzmann looked at him.

It was the second question in twenty-one months that she was going to write down.

"I don't know," she said. "I have two hundred and fourteen cases and about forty working weeks in the year, and I read them in the order in which something strikes me, and if nothing strikes me I don't read them at all."

"That isn't a method."

"No," said Salzmann. "That's a staffing level."

Achterberg stayed standing in the doorway.

"And the case we're sitting on now – did that strike you?"

"No." Salzmann closed the file. "That struck a machine which counts folios at a quarter past four in the morning and doesn't know what's written in them. And that's the only reason we're talking this evening about two hundred and five cases and not about two hundred and six."

End of the sample

This was the beginning of *The Fourth Page*. The full edition is published by Timeless Tales Classics.

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