

The Moth

by Gunter Ott

I dislike me.

Also, I dislike my money grubbing, dumbass family.

I dislike my 'shark smells blood in the water' lawyer wife.

I dislike not being able to have children (my failure).

I dislike the icicles that surround my heart.

I dislike my well-trimmed corner lot home with its precisely clipped lawn.

I dislike Springdale (where I live) which is a subdivision of Summerhill, which is part of the Tri-State area.

I dislike my job as a lighting supplies technologist.

I dislike my petty, ignorant co-workers.

I dislike my overbearing bully of a boss ... until today when he waddles up to my cubicle as I am sorting invoices.

"You!" he bellows as he leans over the cubicle wall. "I need you to do something for me. Jordan, my best salesman, is supposed to fly to Hamburg, Germany for a conference and trade show where he is meeting with some important clients. But he just called in sick, so you are the only one I can spare. Get ready to fly out tonight. See my secretary for the details." He turns abruptly and storms off.

My first thought: My boss is actually speaking to me!

My second thought: Jordan is not sick. He's on another one of his three-day benders.

My third thought: My boss needs me to do something for him.

My fourth thought: I can't do this; I've never been out of Springdale. I've never flown on a plane. I can't do this!

My fifth thought: Wait a minute; couldn't this be the chance I've always been looking for to break out of this endless grind -- to actually have an adventure and show everyone what I can do?

Yes, I think I can do this... I think.

Twenty-four hours later I'm standing in the registration line for Luminara, the World Conference and Trade Show of the Lighting International Manufacturing Association (LIMA). I move slowly toward the front of the line where a pretty, highly efficient young woman hands me my badge.

"The Opening Night Meet & Greet Experience has just started," she says in flawless English. She points me toward the ballroom entrance.

I wander through the glass doors into the hotel ballroom, which is dim and smokey but pierced by random flickering lights. In a corner, I see a local band playing bad southern rock.

Swarms of people mill about in the murk, all carrying drinks and shouting over the music. I am not sure what to do. They all seem to be speaking German or some other foreign language.

I look around the room until I spot a cluster of large men in plaid jackets and gray pants. The Americans. They all balance drinks in one hand and a cigar in the other while thumping each other on their backs and laughing uproariously at dirty jokes. I move to join them, but stop. With a sigh, I turn to leave the ballroom and walk out of the hotel.

Outside, the sun is beginning to set, and streetlights are flickering on. Giant neon signs all along the street come to pulsing life with their

messages of instant gratification. “Live Peep Show ... Kaiser Keller Kuties ... See It, Feel It, Taste It ... All At Our Live Show.”

I am in the slow, throbbing heart of the St. Pauli district. Touts stand in front of seedy burlesque palaces handing out ‘come hither’ flyers and tourist discount coupons next to large window areas where young, scantily clad women preen and shimmy under garish floodlights. I am overwhelmed by the mass of people, both tourists and locals, surging along the sidewalk around me. A sea of bodies pulsating like some giant insect, writhing and fluttering in the street.

I am repulsed and terrified by the noise, the glittering lights, and the dense miasma of the crowd, but then I begin to feel the vibration of the street itself, pulsing up through the cobblestones and piercing my body as I have never felt before.

The street is a living, writhing entity and I feel I am somehow being devoured or absorbed by it. I am bumped into and knocked about and let myself be swept away in a tide of humanity, lights, and noise.

After flowing along with the surging crowd for awhile, I am tossed up in an eddy of calm at the side of the street. I look up and see a flashing sign: Rick’s Café Americain. Of course, it has to be Rick’s. Of all the gin joints in all the world....

I shrug off my unease and step inside. The crowd noises fade, along with the frantic lighting. I see that the club is a cool, dark place – maybe a sanctuary for me in the midst of the alien turmoil. People sit at small café tables drinking beer and nodding along to the German pop music coming through speakers strategically placed around the room. The place doesn’t seem intimidating, so I begin to relax.

I square my shoulders and walk up to the long bar. I order whiskey and soda, feeling quite cosmopolitan. Fortunately, the tattooed bartender understands my hesitant English. I sit on a leather-covered stool to nurse my drink.

I grow conscious of another person sliding onto the stool next to me. A tall, well-dressed man with a shock of youthfully blond hair. He orders whiskey straight up. After awhile, he turns to me and nods. "American?" he asks. "Me too. I'm Malcolm. You here for the Trade Show? I came a few days early to make some quick deals with these Europeans," he tells me. "This is such a fabulous whirlwind of a town, isn't it? Lots of opportunities if you are ready to seize them."

I have nothing to say; I shrink back a little from the energy he is putting out, but I give him a weak smile. He continues talking about his successful lighting deals and how much he is enjoying all the wonders of the city. He tells me he comes from New York, which I guess explains his in-your-face attitude.

As he continues to rave about the fun things he has experienced, I start to warm to his presence. Here, I feel, is a kindred spirit set on doing business and taking advantage of the opportunities given him. I envy him his liveliness and wish that I could be more like him.

But why not, I think. What is stopping me? I'm in a new place, a new time and no one else knows the old me. Why couldn't I forge a new identity? I begin responding to his comments. He buys me a round and then I buy him a round. I am enjoying myself for the first time in a long while.

Suddenly, I sense a mood change in the room. The bartender has pulled the plug on the pop music. In the back of the barroom, huge laser

lights begin flashing as a DJ steps up to a complex apparatus and begin to spin heavy, throbbing beats.

I notice a change in the crowd as well. Suddenly there are more young people dressed in flashy party clothes, and they begin to flutter over to the DJ booth like moths to a flame. The pulsing beat makes them jerk spasmodically and writhe in some sort of grotesque dance.

The relentless thump, thump, thump of the bass speakers pounds into my body with a fevered intensity that is rapidly making me ill.

Malcolm and I look at each other in panic. "This isn't working for us – let's get out of here," he shouts into my ear. I nod numbly. We each toss some Euros down on the bar and fight our way through the writhing revelers to the door.

Once outside, we stare at each other and begin to laugh. It is only slightly quieter on the street. Some rain has fallen, so the cobblestone streets glisten – reflecting the wild, pulsating lights around us.

"Come on," Malcolm shouts. "I know a place further down that's way more comfortable."

I follow in a daze; my body still vibrating from the intense beat inside the club.

We try to push through the evening crowd until we realize that progress is impossible. Malcolm stops at an alley. "In here," he cries. "I know this shortcut will get us to where we want to go." He pulls me out of the throng and into the alley.

For the first bit, it is bright and quiet, but gradually the lights and noise from the street fade. We find ourselves moving carefully around reeking

garbage bins and clutter with only an occasional dim light bulb shining from the rear of the buildings around us.

We are stumbling along a particularly dark patch of ground when a darker shape leaps out at us from the gloom. A man in black clothing stands in front of us. His right arm is stretched out in front of him. In the faint light I see the gleam of a blade.

“Halt!” He snarls in German. His left hand snakes out toward us. “Geltbeutel,” he demands. “Schnell, schnell.”

We freeze. Malcolm is slightly ahead of me. I feel a wave of fear and nausea wash over me, but I understand what the man wants. I dig in my pocket for my wallet.

“Schnell, Schnell,” the man shouts again, his hand waving the blade back and forth impatiently.

As I move forward with my wallet in my hand, my shoe catches on a jagged piece of cobblestone and I stagger, bumping into Malcolm who also staggers forward right into the robber’s arm.

The scene freezes like some bad cinema noir movie. I feel the universe and stars staring down at us in horror. Then the world blinks and moves on.

“Ach, Scheisse,” the man mutters as he withdraws his blade. “Scheisse, Scheisse,” He turns, still muttering oaths, and slithers back into the dark.

I catch Malcolm as he begins to slump. I sit him down in the filth of the alley, gently leaning his back against a wall. Looking down at him in the dim lamplight, I can see a rapidly spreading darkness covering his pristine white shirt.

My friend's eyes stare up at me in surprise. I notice little points of light glistening in those soft eyes, then watch as they slowly fade into a cloudy haze. I sit down beside my friend and stare off into an abyss of despair. Eventually, I reach into my pocket for a cigarette and light it. The flare of my lighter sears my eyes for a moment.

I take a few shaky puffs, then toss the cigarette aside. The butt flares in the night, then slowly fades into cold ash. I stare out into a darkness that seems blacker than black. I see nothing - a void.

I pick up my friend's hand and hold it. It is still warm to the touch. I hold it for a long time, feeling it grow cooler, until it is as cold and hard as the icicles that have formed in my heart.

Eventually, I become aware of a fluttering sound and look up at the lonely light in the alley. A large moth has come toward the light. The moth has beautiful markings on its wings. I have never seen anything so lovely. I watch it dance around the light, sometimes moving closer, then fluttering further away, fighting between its need and its fear. Back and forth it flits until it comes too close.

I wince at the sudden crackle and flare, and watch as the lifeless body spirals to the ground.

Gently I lay my friend's hand on his chest. I stand up in the dark. I turn toward the faint light and noise further down the alley. I shuffle toward the light.