

Chapter 1: The wrong ticket

Erik Vogler could not even imagine what was about to happen that evening. He had spent several hours preparing his suitcase. He classified his pure wool socks according to colours, his jackets according to thickness and several trousers having in mind how old they were. After this, at a side of the suitcase he placed a small sewing-set together with a leather case which contained all the items needed to polish his shoes. On the bed two perfectly rolled belts, several silk shirts and a toilet bag were yet to be put away. For an instant, Erik glanced at his work with pride. But, while he was folding the brand ironed underpants, someone knocked at his door.

- Hum... may I? -stammered his dad sticking out his face through the door.
- Yes, come in, come in -Erik replied inviting him to enter the room-. I have not yet finished.
- How are you going? -he asked quietly.
- Nearly done. But I would like to organize my shirts in alphabetical order.
- In alphabetical order?
- Yes, according to the brand name or by fabric. I've still got to make my mind. By the way, have you found out what temperature is it going to be in New York tomorrow morning?
- This is what I want to talk about, my son... You see, a small problem to do with the trip has arisen.
- What's the matter? -the boy asked fastening the inside zip of the suitcase.
- Well... do you remember I got the plane tickets through Internet about a couple of months ago?

Erik agreed with his head and sat at an armchair in the room. That night he was wearing a pyjamas and slippers with a tartan pattern which his uncle had brought back from a trip to Edinburgh. He looked at his father in silence. He couldn't guess what he meant with that question. Frank Vogler crossed his arms over his chest, swallowed and doubted for a moment. Then, cleared his throat and took in some air.

- Well... I muddled up the dates when I bought them -he let go looking at his eyes.

It couldn't be true. It had to be a joke, a very cruel one. But Frank Vogler nodded his head looking at his son's questioning expression. Then, the boy dropped this cashmere scarf he was holding in his hands.

- How? -he dared ask, and felt his pulse was beginning to accelerate.

- I bought them, by mistake, for last month. I made a mistake when I selected the dates and I have just realized this morning when I printed them -his father confirmed while biting his lower lip, as he did every time he had to give out bad news.

- No, it can't be, it can't be... -muttered Erik trying to control his nerves.

- I have spent the whole afternoon searching for tickets. But I have only been able to find a free place in our flight -Frank Vogler regretted.

- I can't understand.

- There was only one seat left -his father repeated.

- So?

- I bought it for myself -he confessed embarrassingly.

- Well, no worries, I can take the following flight -he suggested, trying not to sound desperate -and we'll meet at New York's Airport, or maybe I could take a taxi to the hotel. I'm sure there's a solution.

- There isn't -his father interrupted.

- ...I will search the Internet for the timetable and I will look for another ticket just now. I won't mind travelling in tourist class if necessary -he added not giving up hope.

- Erik, you don't want to understand, tomorrow holidays start and, unfortunately, all the flights are full. I have already checked it several times and there is no available seat. Too late. I'm afraid you won't be able to come to New York with me.
- ...But what are you talking about? -he asked absolutely bewildered and he sprung from the armchair.
- Don't worry, son, there'll be another occasion, I promise you -he tried to comfort him-. I'm so sorry.
- I knew it!!! I told you!!! -he screamed in hysterics-, I should have bought them myself!!!! I had EVERYTHING planned, dad, I had noted down different walks around the city, a list of restaurants and recommended museums, I know the main tube stations of New York by heart... and now, just look, just look! -he said, opening what appeared to be a tourist map and unfolding it in front of his face-. I had also numbered all the monuments in the city according to the date they were built to organize our visit. I had planned it by the millimetre! And what's going to happen now, huh? Can you please tell me? What am I supposed to do during my Easter holidays? Will I be staying alone in Bremen?
- No. You'll stay with your Grandmother -he replied.
- You are not speaking seriously.
- You'll go to Grasberg until I come back -his father announced.

Erik Vogler fainted just there, falling on the Arabian rug his uncle brought back from Morocco. In his hand he still had the map of New York upon which he'd been working so hard. When he woke up at midnight, he was laying on his bed, under this duvet cover, a cold sweat running through his body and a broken heart. It was 4 a.m. and he didn't fall asleep until it dawned.

Chapter 2: Far from New York

When Erik got into his father's car to go to his Grandmother's house, instead of leaving for New York, he knew his nightmare had started. Frank Vogler looked him out of the corner of his eye, through the rear mirror. The boy had all his hair smarmed down, with a part in a side, shining and dark. A deep silence had grown between them, only broken by the raindrops hitting on the car windows. They left the city very early in the morning.

Frank noticed, from time to time, his son's defiant look and he felt guilty. He was aware of the fact it would take a long time before he could forgive him. Therefore, to put that embarrassing thought aside, he tuned the radio, searching for the news of that April morning.

-A young girl who disappeared last week in the north district of Bremen has been found dead -informed a male voice-. They found her dead body less than an hour ago, in a park in the outskirts of the city of Hamburg. For the time being, the police have not yet identified a suspect for the crime.

Inspector Gerber, in charge of the case, has declined to talk about some rumours that connect this murder with those of the other two disappeared young people in Bremen in the last months.

Erik squirmed in his seat, uncomfortable.

-Must we listen to that kind of sordid thing? -he complained, furrowing his brow and looking through the window glass.

His father searched in the dial for a radio station which offered classical music. Now, it poured over the car. With Beethoven's Sixth Symphony as background, they finally left behind the city and took the road that would lead them to Grasberg, the village where his grandmother lived.

Berta Vogler couldn't stand her grandson. She had tried more than once, but it turned to be something beyond her will. She couldn't bear his obsessions on cleanliness, nor that voice of a know-it-all, nor the affected way he used to blow his nose since he was a child. For that reason, when in the previous afternoon she received a call from her son Frank, asking her to allow Erik

with her all the Easter days, she felt that a wave of blood reddened her cheeks and she placed her hand over her heart to avoid it jumping out of her chest. She breathed deeply and tried to calm down before giving him an answer.

- But, son of mine, you know I'm not good at caring for him and, furthermore, it's a long time since he paid me a visit.

- I know, I know...

- I don't believe this is a good idea -she still tried to decline while she dropped onto a dusty sofa.

- That's why, mom, you hit the nail on the head! Now you have a nice opportunity to get to know each other better!

- You don't seem to recall what happened last time he came to my house - there was a silence at the other side of the wire-. And we were only together for just one afternoon! Can you imagine a whole week?

- Well, it's almost three years since then and Erik has changed a lot, mom...

- Don't try to fool me!... I'm sure he's still a complete bore.

- Please; please -Frank Vogler begged, holding on to the telephone cable and lowering his voice as much as possible-, you know I wouldn't ask for it if there wasn't an emergency. I made a mistake with the tickets purchase and now I don't know what to do.

- I don't think I'm able enough to go on with it, my son.

- Please!

- Absolutely no!

- I'm desperate! - He pleaded.

- Maybe you can hire someone to take care of him?

- I am running out of time, mom! Look, I'll be back in Bremen next Saturday night and I'll pick him up in Grasberg on Sunday without fail. It will only be a week and you'll see how the time flies! -he promised trying to be convincing.

- ...All right. But you owe me a favour. A very big one!

“One week with grandma, one week...”, Erik was mumbling. That was equal to seven days, one hundred and sixty-eight hours, ten thousand and eighty minutes, and six hundred and four thousand and eight hundred seconds. “I won’t be able to survive!”, he was repeating to himself in a low voice while he seemed to be looking through the window car all the time. And, in the meantime, his father would be either up at the top of the Empire State or walking along a avenue with skyscrapers at each side or even enjoying a Broadway musical. Life was unfair, awfully unfair. At least, such was the boy’s belief that morning.

So busy was he considering his misfortune that Erik barely noticed it had stopped raining. Either he didn’t notice that his father had switched the music off and was listening to one of the news bulletins again, where they continued talking about Sandra Nadel’s murder. And by no means did he see the sign that told them they had finally arrived at Grasberg, nor did he pay attention to the narrow streets they were driving through despite the bumps.

He was in tears, due to the wrath and the impotence he was feeling. At hardly fifteen years old, he was thinking on his map of New York’s monuments, on all the travel preparations he had planned for so long and, suddenly, those images were blended with his grandmother’s face, with her white, long, untidy hair shuffled by the wind, and he could not help a shiver all along his spine.

- Here we are! You may get out of the car! -his father announced all of a sudden stopping in front of an old house.

He opened the door with no enthusiasm at all, left the vehicle and... PLOP! He had just stepped on a deep puddle there happened to be in the street.

- My Lombartini! -he shouted with terror, while he removed his shoes from the water and walked on tiptoe.

Then, a black cat left in a hurry from the other side of the street and crossed his way. When he approached Erik, he watched the boy with his great yellow eyes and offered him a menacing meow.

Chapter 3: In the balcony

When they were left alone, Berta and Erik looked at each other silently. They were standing in the living-room, facing each another. He was grabbing his big bag. She was grasping in her lap an old blanket with orange and rose lines and from where some little balls sprouted.

-Well -his grandma began-, I have prepared you one of the rooms of the upper floor. It's still cold enough here in Grasberg, so some blankets will not bother you. When you're ready, you may come down to have your breakfast. If you need anything else...

-No, thanks -he lied.

Yes, he needed something more, he needed to know what on earth he was doing in that house, why on earth New York had suddenly become an unreachable dream and why his grandma's hair seemed to be a messy ball of wool where you would find either a fork or even a garden rake.

Berta took his grandson to his room, after walking up a long wooden upstairs which delivered a constant cracking from its steps, as if it could collapse under their feet anytime. At each step, the boy panted and gathered strength to lift his suitcase.

Afterwards, they went through a long and narrow corridor, scarcely illuminated, till they reached the last room of the house.

-I hope you'll like your room. You may hang your clothes in the wardrobe at the back, I have left several free hangers for you... I will be downstairs, I have to work in the cellar, if you need anything, just let me know -she said as a goodbye, while at the same time giving him the striped blanket, and opened the yellow door of his new bedroom.

- ...All right -his grandson muttered not daring to go in.

When he finally stuck his nose inside the room, his grandmother had already disappeared downstairs and he was completely alone. When he realized the conditions his room actually was in, he opened his eyes with scare. Immediately, he got a handkerchief with embroidered initials from a pocket of his Passion trousers and took it to his mouth. Dampness could be smelled around and something strange seemed to move under his bed. He left his leather suitcase and the striped blanket aside. After, he grabbed the coat stand there was in the back of the door so he could use it as a spear. Little by little, he cautiously approached the mattress. His hands started to sweat.

He felt his heart accelerate its beat as he moved on step by step. The wooden floor was grinding under his soaking Lombartini shoes. He lowered the stick towards the floor till it almost grazed it. He moved it all around in different directions under the bed, as if he was about to catch a fish with dreadful jaws. It seemed nothing was hiding there. After, he proceeded to slowly remove the coat stand, suspiciously, till the wooden end appeared before his eyes. "But..., what the hell is that?", he thought.

And there, tangled in the end of the improvised spear, he discovered a giant mountain of brown fluff that was probably older than the very same house and which was swinging like the algae of the dark seas. Over the ebony chest of drawers of the bedroom, a defiant stuffed owl was watching him with crystal eyes and open wings.

He instantly dropped the coat stand and strongly squeezed a handkerchief over his mouth to refrain a growing wish to puke. He ran to one of the balcony windows and opened it as fast as he could. The cold air of the street brought life back to him. "As I suspected, I must disinfect everything!", he said to himself, looking around. Fortunately, inside his Chantel suitcase, he had brought with him a cleaning-kit for desperate situations. And that was certainly one of them!

He didn't wait for one more second to go by: he pulled some plastic gloves and a mask out and devoted himself to cleaning the room for several hours. Exactly as his grandmother had imagined, he only went down to the kitchen to pick up a broom and a dustpan. When he went by the table, he saw some round cookies on a plate. He stopped for a moment. He was hungry. "It will be best not to taste them", he thought. Last time he had tried to bite a cookie baked by his grandma he had lost a tooth and he needed to be fitted with a dental prosthesis. Such was the case that he didn't stop and went back to his bedroom.

When everything was cleaned and all the contents of the suitcase had their right place, he decided to take a shower. At least, as he checked in front of the bath mirror, his hair had kept all its composure. He put on some cologne-water and changed clothes. Finally, he went back to his bedroom, opened the wardrobe door and made sure that everything was in its place. Then he decided it was time to go down to the dining-room and join his grandma.

When he was going down the staircase, he heard Berta Vogler singing softly around the dining-room table. She was serving the meal into two big plates. -What's the menu? -he asked, cautiously reaching one of the chairs. -Vegetable soup with chickpeas, cabbage, carrot and boiled potatoes. Look how good it smells! - the old woman enthusiastically answered, while she brought the cooking pot to his nose.

The boy tried to move away, but it was too late. The stench of the boiled vegetables was so powerful that he felt he was about to fall unconscious. In

the meantime, Berta tried to stir the mixture with a ladle, though the vegetable soup actually seemed some reinforced concrete. The cabbage effluvium was, actually, the last thing the boy would remember before falling on the floor as long as he was.

He woke up a little later, disorientated, on the sofa of the living-room. Over his knees he had the blanket of orange and rose little balls. Due to circumstances, he accepted a hot milk glass but rejected, with a fake smile, the cookies her grandma offered him.

The afternoon dragged on eternally and dinner was another torment. Grandma hardly spoke. The television set didn't work since some years ago when lightning struck the aerial in the roof. Erik wished wholeheartedly that bedtime would arrive. When he tucked under the blankets, he nostalgically remembered his duvet cover and ergonomic pillow which were his uncle's gift after a trip to Sweden. Only one single idea could soothe him then: "One less day to come back to Bremen!" And he kept hold to it, stifling a sigh.

That night, the light of a full moon entered through the balcony windows and drew disturbing shadows all over the bedroom. One of the most terrific was that of the giant stuffed owl. Erik imagined that it could jump anytime over him and devour his liver merciless. He wrapped his neck with the blankets. He thought it better to be wrapped up to his chin.

The wind in the streets could be heard from his bed, through the branches of the trees, hitting in the windows and slipping through the door slits. He also noticed sound of footsteps on the stairs. At that same time, the corridor floor was creaking under Berta Vogler's feet and all around the house the slow bite of the woodworm could be heard.

It was then, crouched and flickering, when he felt that someone was watching him from outside the balcony. Some white, almost invisible fingers, knocked insistently against the window panes. RAT-A-TAT. He tried not to look that way. He closed his eyes strongly. Perhaps he was already inside a nightmare. After some seconds that seemed to last for ages,

he slowly opened his eyes again. He heard a soft noise in the window panes once more.

He spun his neck around very slowly. He could hardly breathe. At the other side of the balcony, there was a girl slightly older than him. Her shiny figure was floating in the darkness. She had long wavy hair. Her mane of hair was becoming messed up with the night wind. For some seconds, Erik managed to see her face. She had huge eyes, with no eyelids, which stared at him closely...

Chapter 4: The newspaper photograph

Erik, holding the bed sheet against his nose, was absolutely paralyzed when he saw the image which was sort of floating behind the windows. Feeling absolutely numb, with stiff fingers, he was sure his blood had curdled in his veins. If at that moment he had glanced at himself on a mirror, he would have seen someone as white as the girl who was watching him silently

through the window pane. The silhouette of the unknown person could be seen for a few more seconds and then, suddenly, it disappeared.

An hour later, he was able to move again. First, he moved his right hand's little finger until he lifted it from the bed sheet. Then, he did the same with the rest of his fingers. He was still lying down, in the same position, as a corpse in his tomb, but he could not avoid his hands and legs trembling. Cold sweat was running through his forehead. He felt his bottom. He had nearly peed his underpants. Behind the window pane you could now distinguish the branches of the old oak and, far away, a full moon standing out from a black sky. The wind was blowing furiously and dogs were barking angrily in Mr. Lemann's house.

The following morning, while Erik was fitting on his satin slippers, Berta Vogler put on a red scarf, which she had knitted herself during winter, and rode off her bicycle to buy the newspaper. Rain had just started to fall and the raindrops electrified her usually tangled hair, which as a consequence increased its volume. She got back home as the rain intensified. Cold had made her nose red and she was holding the handlebar tightly trying to avoid the puddles in the street.

In the bathroom, her grandson was looking at his own dark-eye rings. He actually looked like a corpse. He took the tube of hair gel and squeezed it lightly. Then, he applied it to his scalp and he begun the morning's ritual. As he was going down the stairs, he heard the lock of the main door. His grandmother appeared in a rush, protecting the newspaper beneath her coat and carrying a bag full of freshly baked pastries and bread rolls. Raindrops were falling down the window panes of the living-room.

- How did you sle...? –she stopped when she saw the puffy-eyed boy.
“Dear me, what a sight, he looks as dead!”, she thought while she unbuttoned her coat and hung it on the coat stand.
- Actually, not very well. I think I missed my bed –he gave as an excuse.
- Well, don't worry, it is normal. I'm sure you'll get used to your new room tonight, wait and see. Listen –she added to change the subject-, I

have brought in some bread rolls to spread butter on or, if you prefer so, a couple of cherry cakes. Will you help me with breakfast?

Berta Vogler and her grandson went into the kitchen. She started heating milk in a pot. He set the mugs on a round table. They were both looking at each other out of the corner of their eyes. Grandma realized that Erik was polishing the spoons with a silk handkerchief under the tablecloth. And he was paying attention to the expiry date of the milk, the butter and the jam as she was taking them out of the fridge.

When they sat down for breakfast, she put the newspaper on the table as she usually did. It was folded and some raindrops had fallen on the front page. *"The dead body of the girl who disappeared in Bremen has been found"*, one of the headlines said. Erik leant over to the newspaper full of curiosity. During the past week he had heard TV news mentioning the disappearance of the girl. And just the previous day, while driving towards Grasberg with his father, he heard on the radio that the body had been found in the outskirts of Hamburg.

There was a black-and-white photo with the news. Berta Vogler took the newspaper in her hands. She opened it in a decisive way and disappeared amongst its pages. The German newspaper became a barrier between both of them. Erik had to tilt his head to be able to see the photograph clearly. He squinted his eyes and tried to concentrate on the low-quality image. Then, he felt a lump in his throat. He couldn't believe his eyes...

- Do you want some more milk? -her Grandma asked lowering the newspaper.
- Huh... no, no, thank you.

Her grandson smiled and impatiently awaited Berta to hold up the front page with the news on the crime. Once more, his grandmother hid herself behind the pages of the newspaper. He fixed his gaze at the front page image. The photograph showed the same face he had seen by the balcony last night. He was positively sure. It was the girl with long wavy hair who

had been knocking at the window of his room without saying a word. The only difference was that in the newspaper she was smiling, wearing a woollen cap which covered most of the head and a blue turtle-neck jersey.

Chapter 5: A ghost close in

Erik Vogler had to wait until his grandmother finished reading the newspaper to look for the news which interested him. He searched until he found the page of local news. He leaned forward and started reading with attention: *“Sandra Nadel was fifteen years old. She was a shy girl who lived with her parents in Bremen and studied at a high school in the north area. She had disappeared a week ago from home and nobody had seen her again until her body*

was found in a park in the outskirts of Hamburg. She had been stabbed several times after having her wrists tied up with a rope and being gagged...".

And a few hours later, he thought, the ghost of the girl had appeared at Grasberg, floating behind the balcony at his grandmother's house. "But why precisely there?", he asked himself looking at the photograph of the girl again. He had never met Sandra Nadel. About that he was completely sure. They had never met in Bremen, even if they both lived in the north area. They went to different high schools and had different friends. So, why had he seen her last night? Why had she appeared? This was the question he kept on asking himself without taking his eyes from the newspaper. When Berta Vogler went back to the kitchen after a while, he was still there with a thoughtful look.

- Grandma -he suddenly asked-, do you know this girl?

He pointed with his finger at the photograph on the cover.

- Haven't seen her in my life. But I have read she lived in Bremen...

- Yes, she lived there. But do you remember if she ever came here? After all, Grasberg is not so far away...

Berta paused and took the newspaper. She tightened her lips and nodded.

- No, I don't remember ever seeing her. Besides, her surname doesn't ring a bell either and if she had had a relative in the village, someone would have told me by now. I'm sure a neighbour would have spoken about the news of her disappearance. I haven't heard anybody mentioning they knew her... Why are you asking?

- No..., it's nothing, it's just that her face looks familiar to me, just that... By the way, do you know where I could connect to internet in Grasberg?

- I think it is possible in Verner's bar, in the square. Do you remember how to get there?

- Yes, yes... I'll be back for lunch.

The boy went up to his bedroom and took out a small laptop and an umbrella from his suitcase. He put on his raincoat and left the house. It was still raining hard and an unpleasant wind was blowing sharply against his

face. So he cringed holding the umbrella handle strongly and hastened his footsteps. Unfortunately, he had only brought his Lombartini to Grasberg. And soon the leather shoes started to suffer the effects of rain. When he reached the bar, he felt a gust of heat, mixed with a smell of beer and meat pies. A well-built waiter approached him from behind the bar.

- Good morning. A bottle of still water, not cold, please –Erik asked sitting on a stool.

The barman smiled.

- Could I connect to internet with my laptop? My grandmother has told me there would be internet connection here...

- And who's your grandmother?

- Berta Vogler.

- Well, well... so you are Berta's grandson. Of course you can connect to internet! Wait a second and I'll give you the password.

Erik stayed there until lunchtime. He opened his e-mail and found a couple of messages from his dad telling him he had arrived safely and that the weather in New York was horrible. Even if he tried to, that did not comfort him. At least not his son, who had spent months dreaming of that trip. He also asked him how things were going with his grandma and how he was enjoying his time in Grasberg. In the second e-mail, he sent him several photos of the city and one of the hotel room. But they were somehow out of focus because his dad didn't understand how the digital camera he had bought worked and because he never read the instructions manual. He answered briefly: *"I'm well. It is raining a lot. Don't forget the trousers I asked for. Keep leaflets of the museums and monuments you visit"*.

Afterwards, he sailed through internet looking for all sort of information on Sandra Nadel. He found her in many pieces of news from newspapers, radio and TV channels. He also found her name in a social web. Nevertheless, he never managed to access her profile. After trailing all the data he was able to find in the internet, he left the bar feeling disappointed. He had not managed to figure out anything which both of them had in common.

He spent the afternoon listening to music from his cell phone and only left his bedroom to go to the loo. He had hardly eaten any of the beans his grandmother had prepared when he'd come back. He spent several hours in his room, releasing flatulence which he concealed with a cushion. To make matters worse, at nightfall lightning fell in the village and left them without electricity. During dinner, using candles stuck on a silver candelabra, Berta's grandson could still hear the rumbling of his belly. So he excused himself saying he felt very tired and went back to his room. But, before going to bed, he decided to take a shower.

To reach the bathroom you had to walk the whole corridor. Erik Vogler took a towel, his toilet bag and an old candlestick his grandma had given him. When he opened the door of this bedroom, a dark and narrow tunnel awaited him. From that distance, it was impossible to see the bathroom door. With his Scottish slippers he started walking very slowly and watching his steps. The wooden panels on the floor squeaked under his feet and the light from the candle moved back and forth. Holding the candle on his right hand made his face look like a ghost, shadowed by his eye-rings and his cheekbones appeared pale and sick. In the meanwhile, Berta had gone to bed and was snoring softly.

Her grandson, on the other hand, was moving forward along the never-ending corridor, cringing because of the cold, the darkness and a strange deep fear. Suddenly, a gust of freezing air blew out the candle he was holding in his hand.

- I can't see a thing! - he shouted terrified.

Indeed, he was surrounded by blackness everywhere. And, unfortunately, he didn't have a match to light the candle again. He stood very still. He seemed to hear a noise behind his back.

- Grandma, is that you? -he muttered without daring to move a single muscle of his body.

Nobody answered.

His heart started beating faster. He turned back very slowly looking over his right shoulder. He saw a slight whitish glitter. A strange light, hardly real, enclosed the image of the murdered girl. She was floating very near him, actually, with only a meter between them. Erik Vogler felt his legs fail him. Then, the girl's face leant towards him, nearly touching his face and, suddenly, her image became a skull.

- AHHHHHHH!!!! -Erik waved his arms hysterically and started running like a madman along the corridor.

Without seeing, he opened one of the doors. Something brushed against his face when he entered the bedroom. He kept on screaming. His shrieks woke his grandmother, who sprung from her bed.

Later, Berta Vogler found him curled up in a corner of a room she had not cleaned for ages. He was covered in spider webs and his gaze was haunting. Grandma dangled the candle in front of him several times. But her grandson did not react. So she helped him get up and took him to his bedroom. On the way back they stumbled upon the toilet bag, the towel and a huge candlestick which rolled over when she kicked it accidentally.

Chapter 6: The chess piece

Next morning, Erik Vogler woke up feeling feverish. He sensed a wet cold had reached his bones. His grandma had carried a cup of milk and a hot-

water bottle to his bed. She also placed two cushions under his back so he could sit up and a pink wool shawl on his shoulders.

- Let's see if this helps to properly warm you up...! You look extremely pale, as if there was no blood inside you, like a wax figure. Give me your hand a moment... Damn, your heart beats exhausted! –she exclaimed when she felt a weak pulse in his wrist.
- Am I going to die? – Erik whispered in a tragic tone.
- “Am I going to die? Am I going to die?” –his grandma repeated mocking him-. Oh my God, what a tiny spirit you've got, my son...! Come on, drink your milk before it turns into cream... But before, put this hot water bottle near your the feet to warm them up.
- Ouch! It's burning!

Grandma launched a resigned sigh into the air. She passed him the breakfast mug. A thick cream layer had been formed over the milk. Erik tried to put it aside with a little spoon. Despite his efforts, some cream traces still floated inside the cup...

- Yuck! –he felt he was about to throw up when a cream bit got glued at the back of his throat-. I hate this cow milk...! When in Bremen, I only take beverages from soya beans, oats or rice.

Berta moved her head from side to side with defeated air. “So, that's how he had changed a lot in the last three years, uh-huh!”, she said to herself recalling her son Frank's words. “What a nerve!” Unaware of her thoughts, the boy hadn't stop grumbling, he had returned the cup on the tray and complained about noticing something in the mattress that was sticking into his backside.

- Oh, my! If you only knew how impatient I am for your father to come and pick you up! –grandma exclaimed before leaving the bedroom, slamming the door.

Frightened by Berta's shout her grandson stayed still for some instants. He had the certainty that something strange was on the mattress. With his hand, he searched carefully till he felt a small object. When it appeared

before his eyes, he stared at it with amazement. "What on earth is this supposed to be doing here?", he thought in awe.

It was a chess piece, and, more specifically, a white king figure. It was wooden-curved and it seemed a very old one.

With a quick movement, he dropped the pink shawl from his shoulders and got up from the bed. He took the milk to the bathroom and, while he was urinating, he threw it into the toilet. After getting dressed, he went to search for Berta. He found her in the kitchen; she was scrubbing some pieces of cutlery furiously, throwing them at one side of the sink as soon as they were covered with lather.

- Forgive me, grandma. I'm so sorry. I... I have drank all the milk, you may check it if you want... -he said in a conciliatory tone of voice while he showed the empty cup.

She didn't answer. She kept showing her back to the boy while she moved the arms in a showy and frantic way, opening her elbows like a rugby player.

- You know... I have found something very odd on the mattress of my bedroom....

Erik didn't know how to start because Berta didn't pay attention and she seemed so furious.

- Look, it's a chess piece! -he exclaimed, cautiously approaching her. Then, his grandma launched a fork over the heap and remained very still. After, she slightly turned her head to the left side and looked out of the corner of her eye at the figure her grandson was holding in his hand.

- It's a white king. Is it yours? - Erik asked showing her the chess piece. Berta dried her hands with a cloth. Then she caught the wooden king without a single word. She watched it for some seconds. Afterwards, she went to the living room silently, with a mysterious air. Her grandson followed her close by, not daring to pronounce even a word that could disturb or distract her. The grandmother opened a cupboard which had

crystal doors and looked at her chess board. The pawns, the tours, the queens, the horses...

All the pieces were in their places, all but one. The white king's space was empty. Furrowing her eyebrows, Berta Vogler put it back in its place again. Grandma and grandson looked at each other without speaking. Both were thinking the same thing: how did that piece end up in his bed? What an explanation was there to understand what had happened? And... who placed it under the blankets?

That same morning, after the mysterious find of the white king amongst the sheets, Erik went back to Verner's bar and asked for "the usual thing". The barman served him some still, room-temperature water. Then, the boy sat on one of the stools and opened his laptop. He started sailing through Internet. He went over the newspapers headlines, some radio audio and, finally, he accessed Youtube to search for the videos he had seen the previous day.

In one of them some policemen could be seen searching for clues in the park at Hamburg. "I don't think this was the one..." he thought. In the next, the victim's parents appeared. "Not this one either", he said to himself. He played the third video, in which he noticed the image of a Bremen's young lady who had trouble in speaking correctly, as she was so nervous. Erik bent over his computer screen and listened attentively to what she was saying with a trembling voice:

-Sandra was one of my best friends. We studied together at secondary school and I was with her that afternoon when she disappeared. We went to the chess club as we used to do on Mondays. We said goodbye after that and that was the last time I saw her.

Chapter 7: Schubert's record

Walking back home, Erik remembered the words which the friend of the murdered girl had spoken: "We went to the chess club as every Monday. We said goodbye at the entrance and that was the last time I saw her". He had discovered that Sandra Nadel had been playing chess the afternoon she disappeared. And he was sure that it was her ghost which has placed the chess figure in his bed. But he didn't have a clue about what she was trying to tell him.

When he got home, Berta had already prepared lunch and was waiting for him in the living-room. They hardly spoke. The grandmother enjoyed her stewed meat in silence. Erik was selecting the pieces of meat which were not covered in onion, pushing aside the wrinkled peas and avoiding the carrots, which had a suspicious colour.

- I'll go out this afternoon, but I'll be back soon. I want to buy some Easter eggs and I've got some errands -Berta suddenly explained after draining a glass of wine-. I won't be long. Can I leave you alone or are you going to faint in my absence? -she asked ironically.
- I don't know what you are talking about, grandma... -he answered with a defiant look.
- I mean -she answered mimicking her grandson and sticking out her little finger with which she was holding the fork- your unpredictable faints or your panic attacks in the middle of the night, for example... what were you so afraid of when I found you in that room? You still haven't told me what happened yesterday.

Erik Vogler remained silent and stuck his fork in the stew. A rebel pea flew out of the plate. It fell on his grandma's hair and it stayed there. They finished eating not long after. Not one of them said a single thing: she was thinking in what her grandson might be holding back from her; while he couldn't take the image of the ghost, which he had already seen twice, out of his mind.

Later, the grandmother left home, as she had announced, and rode her bicycle towards the centre of Grasberg. Erik was lying down on the sofa and was looking thoughtfully at the cupboard doors where Berta kept her chess board. From there he could distinctly see the figure of the white king. Everything looked in its place, or at least, he thought as much.

In the background, the sound of the constant tic of the wall clock and the crackle of the fire could be heard. He felt he was falling asleep. Inside his delicate stomach the stew his grandmother had cooked centrifuged with difficulty. He tried to keep his eyes wide open but he was clearly worn out. He couldn't resist any longer. With the heat of the fireplace and feeling cuddled by the sofa, which seemed to suck him in little by little, he gave up and he closed his eyes, at last. Outside, the rain had stopped.

When the boy had fallen asleep, someone opened the door of one of the cupboards very slowly. It was where Berta's old record player was kept, which was placed under a window. Since a girl, his grandma had loved classic music and she kept some of her jewels of her collection. Fingers which were nearly transparent went over the records which were piled in the cupboard. They seemed to be looking for something.

Suddenly, they stopped in one of them. They opened the paper cover and took the record out without making a single noise. For some instants, the record seemed to float in the air like flying. The ghost's fingers set it very carefully on the record player. Then, a red light in the record player switched on. The needle trembled for a few seconds until it fell on the record which was already turning round.

Violin notes started to sound, at the beginning softly, but later much stronger. The volume started increasing progressively. Every time more, and more... The rhythm of the music accelerated its strength at the same time as the sound was building power. More, more, more strength, much quicker! Until a high-pitched and enduring note woke Erik up from his deep sleep. When he opened his eyes, completely bewildered, the music was so high that he jumped from the sofa and put his feet up all of a sudden. One of his slippers flew away and landed on the carpet.

"What is the matter?", he asked himself looking around him, expecting to find his grandmother in a corner or behind a piece of furniture. Was it some joke of hers?

Nevertheless, there was no sight of her bicycle by the entrance, which confused him even more. His grandmother had not yet come back from her errands. He was at home alone. He looked towards the record player. The music was still increasing its volume and it was becoming unbearable.

If he had screamed just then, no one would have heard him. He ran towards the record player and with a quick movement picked up the needle and left it in its initial position. Immediately, silence reigned over the living-room, with just the wall clock ticking, the raindrops and the hot coals in the fire.

Erik Vogler, who had just knelt by the record player, sighed and felt relieved. The relentless violins had stopped. His heart, little by little, was going back to its ordinary rhythm. The record had stopped turning round. But its paper cover was still on the floor, at a few centimetres from the boy's knees. He extended his fingers and turned the paper very slowly to see the front cover. It was a recording of one of Schubert's pieces, a string quartet known as *Death and the Maiden*.

Chapter 8: A peculiar neighbour

Erik Vogler stared at the record cover during a long time. When he calmed down, he picked up the needle of the record player and set it on Schubert's record. He lowered the volume and listened carefully to the melody. At the beginning, he didn't recognize it, but as the notes began to flow he wondered where he had heard it before. "Where? Where?", he repeated to himself. Why was that music ringing a bell to him? Where had he heard it before? Just when he seemed to be remembering, the main door opened with a strong blow.

Berta's grandson put away the record in its cover quickly. Then, he put it away in the cupboard and got up in a jump, appearing as normal. He realized a slipper was missing and he ran to the sofa to put it on. His grandmother had just entered the living-room pushing her bicycle. Her hair was soaking and fizzier than ever. To her grandson's surprise, she turned back and looking towards the street, she waved her hand for someone to come in.

- Go on, come in, don't stand there, it's pouring!

Then, a guy entered the door with a jump while he shook his trousers which were very wet. He must have been about fifteen years old. He was very thin, tall and as pale as see-through, with blue veins. He had a peculiar brightness in his eyes and thin lips which he hardly moved, not even when he spoke.

- Erik! -his grandmother exclaimed-. This is Albert Zimmer, my new neighbours' son. Well, only temporarily. In fact, they live in Bremen. I just met him when I was leaving the bakery and I have invited him to spend the afternoon with us. He is also fond of playing chess, as you are, so I thought you might want to play a game together.

Albert Zimmer walked towards Erik and stuck out his cold and wet hand out to him. They hardly brushed against each other, because Berta's grandson felt a horrible shiver at the first touch. The new neighbour smiled hiding his teeth and went to the kitchen with his grandma.

- We're coming back -Berta announced-. Why don't you start by taking out the chess board and putting it on the table? We're going to prepare some snacks and to dry ourselves. By the way, Albert -she said looking at her young guest-, you should take out these shoes and change your socks. You'll catch a cold. My grandson can lend you a pair without any problem, can't you?
- I'm sorry, but I can't understand, grandma... -Erik excused himself, slipping his hand over his hair to check if his fringe was still in perfect conditions.
- Well, I'm sure you've got a pair of spare socks in that suitcase of yours - Berta muttered with the aim of Albert not hearing her- and, as you are a very good boy -she continued in a threatening tone-, you won't mind sharing them with our neighbour.
- Our neighbour? -he complained annoyed-. But I have never met him before!
- I know, but I have realized you have a similar foot size. Let's not talk more about it! -she decided with a stiff smile.

Erik Vogler walked up the stairs furiously and he went to his bedroom with his fists tightly closed. The idea of a stranger putting his sweated feet in his pure wool socks was pure terror to him. He opened his suitcase and took his time to decide which pair he was going to lend him. It had to be the oldest one of all, obviously. Nevertheless, all his socks were in great conditions.

In the end, he decided to sacrifice a mauve-coloured pair. He looked fondly at them before leaving the room. He remembered the first time he put them on, the evening he went to the opera in Berlin with his dad. And he felt a sudden pang in the side, like a spine being twisted in order to make him suffer.

When Erik entered the kitchen, Albert Zimmer was sitting in one of the chairs at the table. The new neighbour was waiting for him without socks and had already pulled up his trousers. His feet were a strange purple colour, his yellowish nails were actually not very well trimmed... At a reasonable distance, making a huge effort not to look at them, Erik handed him the socks.

- Here you are... You can keep them -he said clinging to them.

After a slight struggle, Albert put the socks on and thanked Erik by staring at him. So much, in fact, that Berta's grandson flew from the kitchen in a state of panic excusing him by saying that he had to prepare the chess board. There was something very disturbing in that kid, in the orange-ish colour of his eyes, in the see-through skin, in that smile which showed no teeth...

"And, to make matters worse, I have to play chess with him!", Erik complained while opening the doors of the lounge cupboard.

- Here come the Easter eggs! -Berta announced walking towards the table. She was carrying a tray with chocolates and three mugs with hot milk. But her grandson was standing still in the middle of the lounge, without believing his eyes. He was holding the chess board and staring at it very surprised. All the pieces were in its places, but one of them was missing. The white king had mysteriously disappeared again from its square. And the door of the cupboard was locked by a key. "This is not possible", he thought. Who could have taken it away? Had it been Sandra Nadel's ghost? Why had it been removed again? The boy swallowed before setting, with care, the chess board on the table and sitting on a chair.

- It looks as if there are ghosts in this house! -his grandmother joked when she realized what had happened-. But no worries, we'll replace it with

another piece and that will solve it –she suggested while looking around the shelves-. There it is! –she exclaimed triumphantly-. We’ll use this bone china shepherd.

- I’ll choose black –Albert said, refusing one of the chocolate eggs Berta was offering him.
- Don’t you fancy eating something? Easter eggs are delicious. Take one at least –Erik’s grandmother insisted.
- No, thank you very much. I never take anything between meals... -the new neighbour said with a slight smile.

Chapter 9: Checkmate

Erik looked at his opponent suspiciously while he supported both elbows on the table. Then, he raised his right hand and moved the white pawn placed in front of the king’s bishop forward one square. Albert Zimmer’s reply was to move his king’s pawn ahead two squares. After placing the piece in its new position, the youngster looked at him arrogantly. In that very same moment, a lightning flash illuminated the room. Soon after, some thunder broke out and the afternoon became darker.

To calm himself down, Berta Vogler’s grandson just finished nibbling one Easter egg and a chocolate bit stayed glued on his upper lip, creating a small moustache. Both players kept a respectful silence. The wall clock ticking could be heard. Erik breathed in and cleared his throat. Then, he moved his horse to the c3 square. While the game was going on, grandma was sitting in one of the armchairs of the living-room and trying to make the most of it by reading a crime novel. Erik’s rival slowly moved his queen’s pawn to the d6 square.

A deep silence reigned all over the room. Albert Zimmer didn’t stop staring at his opponent, as if he were a bird of prey ready to jump over an

ingenuous canary, like the stuffed owl in the bedroom. Erik squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. He hesitated for a moment, but afterwards he shifted the pawn in front of the king's horse to g4. He looked at his opponent pretending to be in a quiet mood. His opponent's eyes shone then intensely. Berta's grandson took his eyes off him and led his look to the chess board. He breathed deeply. All of a sudden, Albert Zimmer's bony fingers got over the black queen. Very slowly, greatly enjoying his play, he moved the piece, as if by some kind of magic, to the h4 square.

- Checkmate -he whispered with a triumphant attitude while he knocked down Erik's little white shepherd-. Checkmated king -he repeated. The white king had fallen down in less than five minutes. "Checkmate. It isn't possible!" Erik was repeating to himself without believing what had just happened a moment ago. He wasn't aware to have been defeated before in such a little lapse of time. However, that stranger had done it without even blinking, without a single second of hesitation, and not using, apparently, the slightest effort in the confrontation.

Albert Zimmer got up very slowly. He smiled hiding his teeth, in the same way he did when he came into Berta Vogler's house. He showed a winner's expression which made Erik be sick and, at the same time, his look was somehow disturbing.

-By the way, you have a little bit of Easter egg glued here -he let him know pointing his finger at his upper lip.

A bit of Easter egg was there? Damn it! And, in the meantime, he was acting as if nothing had happened! As fast as he could, Erik got one of his handkerchiefs of embroidered initials and cleaned his moustache. Though his cheeks were boiling, he tried to pretend normality.

-Well, it's becoming a little late -Albert Zimmer added, changing the subject after a quick glance at an old watch he had taken out of his pocket-. I must go back home.

-Did I hear correctly? Is the game already over? - Berta asked highly surprised. She had only got to read two pages of her book.

-We've just finished it off for today, right? -the new neighbour answered, offering the little shepherd figure to his rival.

Erik Vogler pushed it aside with a quick movement, when he perceived, for the second time, Albert's frozen touch over his fingers. A shiver ran all along Berta's grandson's arm. Grandma closed her novel suddenly and got up to walk to the house entrance. Then, she offered an umbrella to his guest and went with him to the door. Her grandson didn't even try to leave his seat.

-And thank you for the socks! -he added as a goodbye, before going through the threshold.

Erik Vogler clenched his lips and noticed his heart was beating furiously. Only when he checked Albert Zimmer was out in the street he sighed with relief and got ready to place all the chess pieces in the board.

-What must I do with it? -he asked lifting the shepherd porcelain figure.

-Leave it in the white king's place till it reappears... Just if you wish a return game, we can call him another afternoon so you can play with him again... He didn't wish a rematch, nor he wanted to admit that that defeat had hurt his pride. After having been compelled to offer him his mauve socks and succumbed like a daft guy in the chess game, calling Albert Zimmer again was the last thing in Erik's mind.

Actually, what he really wished with all his heart was to go back to Bremen, his city, to hide under his duvet cover, in his bedroom, to resume his fossils collection and add the New York pictures to his digital album. And forget those absurd and unexpected holidays in Grasberg. His father had sent him that afternoon a mobile message to ask how he was doing. And he had answered with a melancholic: "I want to go back home".

After dinner, he said goodnight to his grandma. He felt dispirited and very slowly he climbed the stairs to go to his bedroom. He turned the doorknob with a small crack. The storm in progress could be seen through the window panes. The branches of the trees waved in the air violently. Just when he closed the door and was about to switch on the light, a tremendous thunder

boomed all over. He put his right hand over his heart and a lightning drew its uneven line in the sky.

The ceiling lamp had stopped working, as the only light bulb that remained alive had just burnt out. So, he had to go across the room blindly till he reached the bed. The stuffed owl seemed to follow him with its crystal look in the half-light. Erik sat upon his grandma's blankets and searched for the switch of an old kerosene lamp which was on the wooden night table. The lamp scarcely illuminated the room, just one of the corners and a part of the bed headboard.

In shadows, Erik turned his head towards the left and noticed a small silhouette in the centre of the pillow. What was there over his bed? He swallowed before stretching his hand out and slowly touching that unknown object. What was it? He felt by touch that a paper covered it. He took it with trembling hand and neared it to the faint light of the oil lamp. Next, he unwrapped the object carefully. A new thunder burst strongly not far from Grasberg.

Inside the wrap he found the white king piece belonging to his grandma's chess board. Dry blood had stained it. And in the paper that covered it, he could read the following verses that someone had ripped from a book page:

*"When at the end (now nothing can save it)
In an iron tooth he was captured,
When the tragic moonlight was fading away..."*