

www.bhernandez.de

B. Hernandez

Walking The Streets

© 2018 B. Hernandez

Cover: B. Hernandez

Translation: Julia Ritter

Publisher: tredition

ISBN

Paperback 978-3-7469-4884-3

Hardcover 978-3-7469-4885-0

eBook 978-3-7469-4886-7

All rights reserved

Original text:

“Das Leben ist ein Spaziergang”

B. Hernandez, 2017

So it was true - the tree had laughed at him. John could have sworn the tree started to laugh as soon as he'd stopped before it. Maybe because this leaf-bearing pole standing here in the middle of the sidewalk had seen the police car drive up. It could have warned him. Instead, it chose to laugh. John shrugged, leaned against the tree and watched as the cop wrote a ticket. The cop then handed John the ticket with a completely blank expression.

"Public urination is against the law, Mr. Smith. And it doesn't make a difference how urgently you needed to go or how much you wanted to spare your pants."

"Really? I actually thought, better against a public tree than in my private pants. Isn't that how it usually works?"

"Mr. Smith, it's 3.30 in the morning and I'm just doing my job."

"Call me John. No need to be so formal. After all, you've watched me pee."

"I don't think so, Mr. Smith. And I did not watch you pee. I caught you urinating in public. That's why you're issued this ticket."

It was 3.30 on a Saturday morning and the police car absolutely had to cross his path on his way

home. If he hadn't been drunk, John would have felt extremely pissed off and gotten into quite a rage about the cop's early-morning nitpicking. On the other hand: had he been sober there would have been no need to relieve his beer-and-vodka-filled bladder against the tree. Now, with alcohol still softly soothing his brain and temper like a layer of cotton wool, he only felt peaceful. He took the ticket from the cop's still-outstretched hand.

"Wow. The most costly piss of my life, hands down – or not, as it were. Listen, I'm plastered, doesn't that count as mitigating circumstances? Couldn't I get a discount or something? Pissing while pissed?"

"Sorry, Mr. Smith. Drunk or not, public urination is against the law and there are no discounts on the fine."

"I get it. Justice is blind, even at half past three in the morning. Don't worry, kind sir, I will pay for my misdeed. What is it they say? If you can afford the drink, you can afford the piss."

"Thank you Mr. Smith. Enjoy the rest of the night."

"You, too."

The cop turned his back on John and walked to his car. John watched him for a few seconds.

"That's it? No last admonitions or advice on how to avoid getting in conflict with the law?"

"Good night, Mr. Smith," the cop said without bothering to stop or turn around.

"Oh, come on! Who if not you is gonna give me some useful advice? Isn't that part of your job?"

Now the cop did turn around, his car door already open. He looked intently at John and then shrugged, a kind smile on his lips.

"Go take a walk. Sober up. Use your toilet."

With that, he raised his hand, got in his car, and drove off.

John waved after the cop car and did his best to ponder the officer's advice. Well, dumb questions did merit dumb answers. Wasn't that how the saying goes? But there was also this other one: there are no dumb questions. There definitely were. He'd just asked one. The answer made that clear. Though maybe he'd just asked the wrong person. After all, cops weren't the ones making the rules. They just made sure that everybody followed them and fined you if you didn't.

Anyway, it had probably been the *wrong* question. In his mind, John tried to phrase the right one, the really pressing one. But his mind wasn't up to the task. The night had been too long, he was too drunk. Instead, he noticed that his hand was still raised and waving at the police car, which he

couldn't see or even hear anymore. He dropped his arm and stared into the darkness at the spot where the car had disappeared.

Rules, the system, a full bladder at the wrong time, and on top of that, a gazillion questions. It was all a bit too much for John, this early in the morning.

Especially this particular morning. John had been out to dinner with a group of friends. Usually they were a slaphappy, cheerful bunch, guys who celebrated that much-quoted lightness of being. Or at least they pretended for a few hours to live that lightness. They always talked about living it, for sure. Or how one could go about living it. Should be living it. But today, Alexander went and spoiled it all. Took a sledge hammer to all that lightness and just smashed it to bits. Alexander arrived at the restaurant and announced that he would be boarding a plane and leave for warmer climates in just a few days. He planned to live there cheaply, and when the little money he saved ran out, he would take odd jobs. Maybe he'd live on the streets. Or on the beach. He had canceled the lease for his apartment, quit his job, and sold everything he couldn't fit into a knapsack. Sledge hammer. Obviously, no one believed him. They'd all thought he was pulling their leg. At least they'd agreed that even if he did actually leave, he'd be back within weeks, months at most. But they hadn't been sure about it. And then, as they were say-

ing their goodbyes, Alexander had asked if anyone cared to join him.

John started moving. A little walk didn't seem like such a bad idea right now. The morning was quite crisp. There hadn't been frost for weeks, but the nights were still long and the temperatures only bearable in the sun. Spring crept up hesitantly this year. Still, John wasn't cold. Must be the alcohol in his blood. And his pace, too. He was a city dweller through and through. When he walked, he knew where he was going and did so quickly. But then he almost never walked. At least no farther than the next subway station. "Going for a walk" was not part of his usual vocabulary. That's why he was moving quite fast now, too, as if he knew where he was headed. Not caring where he went, he crossed streets, took a right turn, then a left, followed small side streets, passed little parks, and walked across squares. The only thing he really noticed was that the city was virtually dead at this time. He met a few cabs. Here and there a human figure appeared, but they soon disappeared again somewhere in the dark, or he just passed and left them behind.

The longer he moved, the calmer his mind became. Before long, he'd forgotten the ticket in his jacket pocket. Even the impact of Alexander's exit faded until John managed to finally dismiss it as

just another occurrence. Aimlessly, he walked the streets. At least that's what he thought. All the greater his surprise as he found himself in front of his mall.

Of course it wasn't "his" mall. Just the mall where he did his shopping every Saturday. He'd return here in a few hours. Right now, the mall was closed. An unfamiliar sight. Not to mention the ambient noise – or lack thereof. All John could hear was the faint burbling of the fountain in front of the main entrance. He stood still for a moment and listened. Normally you couldn't hear that sound over all the babbling voices, car horns, and other noise. Not even if you stood right next to the fountain.

John strolled on until he reached the wide stairs. They led up to the large courtyard in front of the main entrance, with the fountain in the center. The almost circular space wasn't a real courtyard but rather like a very wide passage. From the top of the stairs he had just climbed, John could see the wide, curved mall façade with its host of doors hugging the left semicircle of the courtyard. A tight arrangement of small fast food shops and cafés lined the other half circle. All of them were still closed at this early hour. Exactly opposite from the stairs that led up, mirroring stairs led down to a series of short walkways, which in turn led to the giant mall parking lot that stretched all the way to the canal. John considered hanging

around till the mall opened, but it was a bad idea. It would be hours and he was tired. Still, he walked up the rest of the stairs to the courtyard and the fountain in its center. It was pretty big – a circular pool with a wall that went almost to John's hips and a diameter of at least 50 or maybe even 60 feet. The sculpture in the middle was large enough to block the view to the fountain's other side, which made the whole thing seem even bigger.

John was surprised that the burbling didn't seem that much louder up close than before, when he stood quite a bit farther away down at the stairs. He tried to get a closer look of the sculpture in the middle. He'd been here often, yet he'd never really cared to find out what it was supposed to represent. It was a kind of memorial, he vaguely remembered. But however much he tried, he couldn't focus properly. Too drunk. John shrugged and stared instead into the water right in front of him. Almost reverently, he listened to the steady gurgling and sputtering. It was beautiful. Ripples of relaxation went through John's body, mimicking the soft little waves of the fountain. His eyelids started feeling heavier and heavier and finally closed. Slowly, his head sank down on his chest. It was a wonderfully pleasant feeling. Like the very last moment on the verge of consciousness.

It hit John that he was about to fall asleep. Immediately, his whole body jerked awake, his eyelids and head went up, and his arms windmilled through the air. Losing his balance with all this commotion, he staggered backwards, overcompensated and stumbled forward, hit the pool wall and went head first into the water, while his feet stayed firmly on the ground. Startled fully awake by the shock and the cold water, John grabbed the side of the pool and hoisted himself upright.

He had not quite processed what had happened and was still breathing heavily, rubbing water from his eyes, when he was startled yet again.

"What the hell are you doing in my bathroom?"

Someone had shouted at him. Dumbfounded, John stared into the pool and felt his legs give way as he fell backwards on his butt. Standing in the pool in front of him was a bearded and very naked man who stared angrily at him, hands on his hips.

"What the hell are you doing in my bathroom?" the naked guy in the pool repeated.

John kept sitting motionless and wide-eyed on the ground.

"If you didn't come to bring me a towel, get lost!"

John gasped for air. But even after his breathing had returned to normal and he had rubbed his eyes repeatedly he could see the naked guy stand-

ing there. Plus, he felt his butt hurt. The fall had been pretty hard. John started shivering in his cold, wet clothes. He stood up carefully and with considerable effort.

"Who are you?" he asked the man in the pool as he straightened.

"Nobody. Got a towel?"

John looked around as if to check for a towel somewhere on the floor.

"Unfortunately not. I could use one myself right now."

"I don't care. Get out of my bathroom."

"Wha-? This is no bathroom, it's a fountain and ..."

"Are you drunk? You smell of booze. And why else would you fall into my bathtub? Just get lost!"

"Again, this is not a bathtub and it's none of your business ..."

"Don't talk to me while you're drunk. Take a hike!"

"Okay, okay, slow down. Yes, I have had a few drinks and I'm sorry I fell into your bathtub ... into the pool. I didn't do it on purpose. My name is John. And you are?"

"Pissed off. And late for my morning ablutions, thanks to you. Come back when you've sobered up."

With this, the man turned his back on John and waded away through the water.

"And don't forget my towel next time!" he shouted over his shoulder.

John just stood there and watched him disappear behind the sculpture in the fountain's center. That must be where he'd come from in the first place. John shook his head. This for sure was new. A naked, bearded guy taking a bath in a freezing fountain pool, telling him off and demanding he bring him a towel. It was so weird that John started to chuckle. Laughing felt like a release. Maybe that was just because he was so tired and had started to shiver all over from the cold.

For a moment he thought about going around the fountain to talk to the man again. But the guy had been pretty clear. John turned instead and walked down the stairs and along the small side streets to the main road passing the mall. There was a lot more traffic already. He set off in the general direction of his home, hoping to find a cab pretty soon. Before long, he got lucky and stopped a bored-looking cab driver who didn't even seem to wonder about John's wet hair and clothes - much less care to ask him about them.

When he finally got home, John took a hot shower and then snuggled up on the couch in front of the TV. He fell asleep before he could even notice what was on.

It was already shortly after noon when John woke up again and turned off the TV. His head ached and he felt nauseated. Most nights, he'd have a few beers and his body spared him the unpleasant and no less savory reminders the morning after. But last night, beers hadn't been enough to blunt the shock of Alexander's farewell. John dragged himself to the bathroom and under the shower. Alexander wouldn't be gone forever. Certainly not. No one would just pick up and leave. At least no one John knew. He let minutes pass by as the hot, prickling shower massaged his scalp and neck, the water enveloping his entire body like a close and pleasantly warm embrace as it flowed down and disappeared into the drain. Afterwards, he felt slightly better and got dressed.

He went to the kitchen, shoved a couple of pre-baked buns into the oven and watched through the glass door as they slowly went up and turned brown. It was a wonderful sight and John felt immediately uplifted. Warm buns were the best. Ever since he'd started seeing Izzie more or less regularly, he was well supplied with baked goods. Izzie worked in a bakery and never came by without

bringing him a little something from the shop. Out of pure sympathy, as she liked to say. Because it was the only human touch in his entire apartment. Needless to say that she didn't care too much about his place. Too big, too modern, the walls too white, the decor too cold and impersonal - whatever that was supposed to mean. Not to mention the of gadgetry and the fact that the building was in the wrong part of town. John lived in the city center, which was surrounded by the river on one side and the canal on the other, which earned it the name "the Island". As if that wasn't enough, he lived in the northern part of the Island, purported to be the "upscale" neighborhood. And when Izzie said "upscale", she made it clear that there was nothing good about that. But well, John didn't care about Izzie's complaints as long as he got his fresh buns. He just loved their smell. Maybe in part because that particular smell usually filled the air after he had sex with Izzie. Last time, though, they had met at her place. Which is why he had to resort to the pre-baked buns that morning.

Only now did it occur to him that he should have called Izzie the day before. Actually, he should have called her some time ago but kept forgetting. He definitely had to do that today.

The buns on the other side of the oven door were almost done. John took a deep breath and inhaled their aroma. He took the first one from the oven, cut it open, buttered both halves, waited a

bit until the butter had melted into a thin layer, and took a big bite out of one half. A deep and deeply satisfied sigh escaped John even before he started chewing.

After devouring the rest of his buns in front of the TV – a rerun of last night's game – he got ready to go shopping. On weekdays, he bought whatever he needed urgently at the shops around the corner or near his office. Today was Saturday, though, and on Saturdays he indulged in a nice long visit to the mall. The very mall he'd come by in the wee hours. John smiled as he remembered what had happened. His smile quickly faded when he put on his jacket, checked his wallet and found last night's ticket. He rolled his eyes, dropped the slip of paper on the floor, and left. He had planned to make a mental grocery list but instead he just walked on, thinking of other things.

Like Alexander's announcement. That had really been something. And John had almost missed hearing the shocking news. If his day at the bank where he worked as an oversea bond broker from noon to midnight had been just a little bit busier, he would have cancelled the night at the club. After all, those nights with his buddies weren't a binding commitment. Everybody had too many of those in their lives. You didn't want to burden your valuable free time with another one. Plus,

John considered only a few of those present as real buddies. Some former colleagues, a neighbor from back when, friends of friends. Of all these people, Alexander was the only one he felt actually close to. In fact, John considered him one of his best friends. They knew each other from college and worked in the same industry, albeit for different companies. Alexander hadn't even told him when exactly his plane would be leaving, let alone where to. He only said that it was his last meal with them because he'd relocate to warmer climates, an island somewhere, for good. He'd figure out how to get by when he got there. All he wanted was to live the simple life and be satisfied with what he had.

John had reached the pedestrian light at the large crossroads near the mall. He just needed to cross the street and then take a left, that would take him directly to the large stairs he'd been at the night before – or rather, that same morning.

The lights changed to green. John was about to take a step onto the road, but stopped. Other pedestrians pushed past him. Some of them cursed as he blocked their way.

The light went back to red. John watched the cars rush past from both directions. Noise rained down on him: engines, car horns, and the vague static of the city. It had been a long time since he had really, consciously heard all that. He didn't actually need to buy anything. He had enough

stuff at home and usually ate out somewhere, anyway.

A bit surreptitiously, John glanced up to check whether he could see a plane somewhere. There actually were some crossing the great blue sky – but for sure it was unlikely that Alexander was aboard any one of them. Alexander had a very good job. And it wasn't as if he'd have to flee a bad relationship – he was single. No known illnesses, either. Alexander's life had been good. Or had it?

John kept walking down the street. It led him south of the Island through the Financial District into the neighborhood called "Newtown", where the canal met the river. The bakery where Izzie worked was down here, too. He once again remembered that he should have called her. Well, at least this gave him a destination. Izzie worked on weekends. From early morning until the afternoon, as always. He glanced at his watch: it was late afternoon. He knew for sure that Izzie's shift would be over by now, but still he kept walking in the direction of the bakery. Maybe she would still be there after all.

His headache had lifted a little. No amount of drink had led Alexander to divulge any more information about his plans, let alone to dissuade him from going through with them. Sure, they had

all been fantasizing time and again about leaving the daily grind behind. They had all kinds of crazy ideas how they'd like to live the rest of their lives. Parallel universes. Alternate realities of practically inexistent probability. Mind games. Male consolation bonding. Things like opening a bar. Or a diving school. Living in a cave far away from it all, all the rules and systems, a free and autonomous existence. Real life. But it had been no more than therapeutic nonsense. Night-shade dreams that wouldn't survive until morning.

Alexander used to say that they all missed out on the true wealth life had to offer and that none of them were doing anything about it. As long as human beings didn't need to worry about the barest necessities, he said, the governing doctrine would continue to work. But that didn't mean that he, Alexander, had to follow the herd and keep prostituting himself to some employer. He'd always thought that mankind's misery was obvious. *Just look around you, he'd said. Does anybody seem truly happy? Or even satisfied? All you see in their faces is numbness and routine. They're indifferent. They just put up with it. They're dead. Everyone has some kind of psychological condition: burnout, bore-out, ADHS, all the other diagnoses, and the pharmaceutical companies sell lots of pills that are supposed to help. And if you don't like to take pills, you run a marathon through the desert, climb some ridiculously high mountain or join one of those ultra-modern gyms and work out till you break down. Just to get that next finisher*