

THE DUCK IN THE BOTTLE

On December 22nd, 1995, eight days before *his* “death in Berlin,” I visited the dramatist Heiner M. in the ‘Hospital on the Right Side of the Isar’ in Munich. We were sitting at a table in the cafeteria, which was always densely populated with people looking less than chipper in their jogging outfits and bathrobes, because it was the only place on the hospital premises where, at an exorbitant price, a mildly alcoholic beverage—“Mumm’s” champagne by the quarter bottle—was sold, and because it was the only place where smoking was permitted.

Heiner was always dressed as if he were about to go out, that day wearing a trench coat, wool jacket, scarf, and a hugely oversized black sweater, out of which, with his eyes even more enlarged by the thick lenses of his glasses and with the now sharply defined contour of the nose in his pale, emaciated face, he peered like a baby vulture. We did not speak much; there were long pauses between Heiner’s monosyllabic questions, on which I would pounce gratefully, and the contrived cheeriness of my answers.

At one point—I think it was while Heiner was sipping his second quarter bottle and I my third—I mentioned a friend who had once told a story and died a short while afterwards.

When? Heiner asked.

I answered that Harry, whom Heiner had known but fleetingly, had been dead now for two years, and I told Heiner how I had visited Harry in the hospital and how Harry, because he no longer wanted to read and not even to watch television any more, had asked me to entertain him with stories, until one day I ran out of stories and said to him: All this time I've been telling you story after story, and now it's your turn. But I only know one single story, Harry said. And then, I said to Heiner, Harry told me the following story, a Zen story, which Harry was anxious to assure me he had heard in the pen from a karate teacher, a Taiwanese pusher. I'll try, I said to Heiner, to tell the story exactly as I heard it from Harry.

Once upon a time there were a master and his disciple. The master, as itinerant Zen masters are wont to do, had grabbed this disciple from the street. Perhaps he was an orphan. At any rate, he must have been glad that someone was taking an interest in him; he no longer left the master's side, and since he was strong, nimble, and intelligent, he became the best disciple the master had ever had. It was great; they panhandled, practiced kung fu and yoga, and at night they slept in their two little tents.

Well, one morning, as the disciple crawled out of his tent in the best of moods, he beheld his master sitting in the lotus position behind a bright green two-liter bottle with a long, narrow neck, a bottle that at first glance looked

uncommonly common. But what was that?! Caught in the bottle was a live duck, with wings, feet, and a bill.

What kind of duck? Heiner asked.

Oh, what do I know? Probably one of those white ones that you find anywhere.

Hmm, Heiner said, in Asia?

What difference does it make, I said, and went on with the story.

The master looked at his disciple with unaccustomed severity and asked: What do you think? How could the duck have got into this bottle? The disciple peered at the bottle from every direction; the duck inside quacked and flapped its wings. Master, the disciple said, it's not my fault; it wasn't me, I assure you, I have nothing to do with it, I . . . The master would not let his disciple finish; on the contrary, he did something he had never done before, at least not to this, his favorite disciple. He grabbed his shirt collar, pulled him up, boxed him in the stomach, struck him in the face, again and again; finally he dropped him on the dusty ground like a sack full of wet, rotten soy beans and walked away. The disciple crept back into his tent, crying bitterly for a long time, because of the pain and also—out of grief. What had happened to his gentle master? How had he got hold of that bottle and how had the duck got into it? The disciple tried to understand the events, but before long he fell asleep exhausted.

At the crack of dawn the disciple woke up from a bad dream, rubbed his eyes, and crawled into the open because he had to take a leak. But who was

sitting there, exactly in the middle between the tent of the disciple and his own, wide awake and ramrod straight, behind the bottle with the softly quacking duck? The master, of course. Well now, have you figured out how the duck got into the bottle? the master shouted mockingly. Master, the disciple stammered, I've thought about it and pondered it, brooded and meditated; perhaps another master, one even greater than you, possibly a glass blower from the Chinyang monastery, with his skilful lips blew the bottle around the . . . Once again the master would not let his disciple finish; he shook him, kicked him, and thrashed him so cruelly and unrelentingly that the poor disciple finally lost consciousness and sank to the ground.

And the duck, Heiner interrupted me, how could it still be alive?

Ducks are tough, I said. Besides, the master probably poured some food for it into the bottle, cookie crumbs or night crawlers or something like that.

Hmm, Heiner said, and a little water for drinking and diving?

But I did not pursue the matter, even though Heiner's interest in the duck of all things quite surprised me, because I had never before noticed a special affection for animals in him. And I went on.

When the disciple came to, the master was nowhere to be seen. Bleeding from a hundred wounds, with at least two broken ribs, almost immobile with pain, the disciple dragged himself to his tent, unable either to think or to fall asleep. For a timeless eternity he clung to his hard bamboo mat, sobbing. There was only one explanation: His master had taken leave of his senses. And only

one solution: As hard as it was for him, not only because of his injuries, he had to get away, and immediately, from this master who had gone stark raving mad. So the disciple packed his meager belongings and was about to abscond unheard on his stocking feet. But as soon as he stuck his head out into the pitch-dark night, a hand clutched at the collar of his sweat-drenched jacket; it was the master's hand, who else's.

I see, the master squealed with the voice of an old witch, you want to turn tail, you ungrateful, foolish good-for-nothing? But first this dumbest disciple I have ever had will finish his assignment. So what's the story? How did the duck get into the bottle?

Master, the disciple replied in a choking voice, you are my master no longer, for there's a crack in your rice bowl. I won't let you beat me to death. I don't give a shit how that stupid duck got into the bottle; I'm calling it quits now! The master let go of the disciple, but only in order to throw his arms firmly around him a moment later. My dear disciple, he said softly and with deep emotion, this time you really took forever to get it. It hurt me too that I had to thrash you so to make you understand at last. Now everything will be all right.

That, I said to Heiner, is the whole story.

Hmm, Heiner said, and the duck?

The duck, the duck, the duck, I said. – Why do you have to go on about the duck?! That's precisely the point about these Zen stories. The duck is completely unimportant; it only serves a diversionary purpose.

Hmm, a diversionary purpose, Heiner said; what sort of purpose?
Purport? Porpoise?

But you did understand the story, didn't you? I asked him. – I mean in *that* sense that all Zen stories have a point – or a lesson.

Hmm, I think I did, Heiner ventured. But you go first.

At the time, I said, I didn't understand the story, and Harry, of course, was no longer around to explain. I felt like that disciple; I too kept thinking only about the way the duck might have got into the bottle. But why that was suddenly completely unimportant in the end, that was something I did not understand at all. A little later, then, I got hold of the book of the Zen stories – I think there were ninety-two in it, all told – and looked up the one with the duck; if memory serves, it was number twelve and therefore still one of the easier ones, because the hard ones come later. And then in the back of the book I found the Zen-appropriate answer. – Wait a minute, I think it went like this:

Understanding is the most important thing in the life of someone who seeks enlightenment. He must revere, honor, and respect his teacher, who helps him understand, must honor him even if, at one time or another, he does not understand the teacher. But no understanding, not even the greatest, and no teacher, not even the best, are worth allowing oneself to be humiliated, mistreated or even killed *for* it or *by* him.

Hmm, Heiner said, good story, really; and yet, if the disciple in the last episode, when he wanted to leave the master, had at least smashed the bottle, for

the duck, so it could have got away from those two morons, it would be still better.