

## *Saying Goodbye in Brussels*

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It was a day like many others that had passed since Brett Smalley's arrival in Dusseldorf. It differed, however, in one significant respect for the sales representative of Chicago-based Windham Metallurgical, Inc. On this autumn day in 1975, Brett would drive his wife and kids to Brussels to put them on a plane for the United States; they would not be coming back.

Brett gazed out the window of his sixth-floor office and monitored the progress of a pair of barges snaking their way along the Rhine. Located on Count Adolf Platz, his building afforded a sweeping view of the river, alive with barges, motor launches, and cruise boats, even a sailboat or two, set below a near-flawless sky. The vista pleased him. As he slipped on a dark blue blazer and adjusted a sedately-patterned Italian scarf, Brett whistled a happy tune. It mattered not a whit to him that his coworkers deemed him a calculating self-promoter. It mattered not a whit to him that they treated him with less-than-complete respect. These things troubled him little because he'd persuaded himself their attitudes derived from simple envy.

Approaching forty, Brett looked at himself and liked what he saw. He believed with certainty women found him irresistible. Conceit embraced him like a best friend. Perhaps it was the neatly-trimmed beard and mustache, the wavy gray-blond hair, the blue eyes, the impeccable taste in dress and manner that he assumed drew women to him—all characteristics he credited himself with possessing to an unmatched

degree. He also assumed women, young and old alike, viewed him as a bit of a rogue. He cultivated the image and sought to perpetuate it.

Standing in the common area of the office suite he shared, Brett announced, "Well, I'm on my way. See you all on Monday."

Harry Maxwell, an ordinarily jovial fellow, appeared to swallow whatever it was he'd intended to say. He simply said from behind his desk, "Give Adele our best. Tell her Sally and I will miss her and the kids."

Brett nodded. "Right. I'll tell her." Brett disliked Harry; he disliked Sally even more. The two meddlers had been especially supportive of Brett's wife, Adele. None of their damned business.

"I expect it will be hard to say goodbye to the kids," Harry added. "That Mary is a little charmer."

"Yeah. It won't be easy. But then I don't see much of them anyway. Besides, once I drop them off at the airport, I expect I'll be able to get a good meal in Brussels. There's this great restaurant I know not far from the Grand Platz."

Brett went out and paused in the corridor. Through the half-open door, he heard Harry speak to Margaret Telford, the office director. "A good meal? Did you hear that? *A good meal*. That's a curious compensation. I wonder if that guy has any human feelings at all."

"All I know," Margaret said, "if there's such a thing as an elastic conscience, he's got one."

"That assumes he has a conscience," Harry added.

Envy. Pure envy, Brett thought to himself.

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Brett stopped the BMW sedan in front of his house in Benrath, a residential area near the Rhine and Castle Park, one favored by foreign

businessmen. The brick and stucco houses stood in disciplined rows, like well-behaved burghers. There would be no need to put the vehicle in the garage. The front door stood ajar, and the suitcases had been placed on the step. Adele clearly wanted to be on her way.

Well, so did Brett; time had come. He killed the motor, swung out of the driver's seat, and lingered for a moment admiring the midnight-blue car his wife denounced as an *egotistical indulgence*, as a *pathetic effort to behave twenty years younger than he was*. Indulgence, indeed. It was a sedan for Christ's sake—not the sports car he really wanted. Long ago, he had concluded her view of the world—and of life—was pinched and narrow; she just didn't get it. The car was his due; it symbolized the lifestyle to which he aspired, one she would never understand, never accept, and never be part of. He had good years to go, and he intended to live them.

Parked there on that cobblestone street lined with chestnut trees, the car appeared very much as it might in an upscale German magazine. Brett often sought to measure idealized images against reality, and he found it especially gratifying when his fantasies succeeded. This car, he thought, appealed to those with discernment, to those who appreciated a fine machine, to those who found ripping down the autobahn at 110 miles an hour an exhilarating experience. Adele grasped none of these things.

Brett extracted a handkerchief from his pocket, meticulously wiped away a blemish he'd spotted on the car door, then strolled up the brick sidewalk. It was an old house, but one that had been cared for and was well-preserved. Halfway to the entrance he stopped and glanced up at one of the gabled windows. He caught a fading glimpse of Adele's face; she must have been on watch for him. She had no doubt become

impatient, even though he'd only arrived ten minutes late. Among her off-putting behaviors, her impatience particularly bothered him. Well, that would soon be a thing of the past.

Brett shifted his attention to the sky where dark-bellied clouds had begun to crowd the western horizon. Cologne television had forecast rain but it was not likely to arrive until evening. Brett hoped so. He did not relish the idea of driving to Brussels in the rain.

By the time Brett let himself in, Adele had come down the stairs to the parlor. A bone-thin woman, she teetered on the brink of middle age, physically and psychologically, if not chronologically; her face, which he once considered pretty, was now severe, the effect intensified by her red-rimmed dark eyes and frame of brown hair. It was the face of a woman whose pride had been wounded. Outfitted in slacks, blouse, and a light sweater, she stood ready for the trip back to America.

"Frau Bremer thought you might want something to eat," Adele said. "I told her no, but she went ahead and made sandwiches anyway. They're in the kitchen."

"She needn't have bothered. I've already eaten."

"She's worried you'll let her go once you're *alone* here."

"I hadn't thought about it. Where are the kids? Are they ready?"

"Tommy is in his room saying goodbye to Konrad."

"He really likes that damn hamster. Not very sanitary, if you ask me."

"Tommy's six years old, Brett. Konrad is the only pet he's ever had. And now he's leaving it behind."

"He'll get over it. I'm sure you can get him a new one in the States."

Adele just looked at him, shaking her head in quiet exasperation, then said, "Here's Mary now."

Frau Bremer, a plumpish, gray-haired woman, had entered the room with the Smalley's four-year-old daughter Mary clinging to her hand. Neither the housemaid nor the child looked happy.

"She's ready to go, Mrs. Smalley," the German woman said in a tremulous voice. She could burst into tears at any moment. "I put on those Oshkosh B'Gosh overalls your mother sent her."

Brett extended his open arms and said, "Why don't you give Daddy a hug?"

Instead, Mary fled into the folds of Frau Bremer's long skirt.

"Not very friendly, is she?" Brett said.

"She's hardly seen you in the last several weeks. What do you expect?"

Tommy came into the room, head down, dragging his feet. A tousle-haired, smallish boy, he exuded unhappiness when he spoke. "Why are we going away? I like it here."

"I'm sure your mother told you, Tommy. You're going back to Michigan to visit Granny. I have to stay here to do my job."

The boy regarded his father with disbelief. "I like it here," he said again. "I don't like Granny's house. It smells funny and it's dark and the floors creak."

Brett consulted his watch. "Twelve o'clock. We'd better get going. I'll load the bags." He gathered up two suitcases and carried them to the car. He made another trip with two more small bags, then placed all four in the trunk. Arms folded, he lounged against the car waiting for his family. Despite the casual pose, his tapping foot betrayed impatience—the same impatience he attributed to Adele.

After five minutes his wife appeared with the kids, shook hands with Frau Bremer, and came to the car. The housemaid hovered on the step, her apron drawn up to her face in two hands to hide her tears.

"I thought you were right behind me," Brett said to his wife.

"Sorry. We were hunting for Mary's Elmo." Barely able to restrain herself, she said, "I know you're in a hurry to get rid of us." Bitterness laced her voice.

"Those are hurtful words, Adele. It's just that . . ."

"It's true, Brett. You know it's true. Your little playmate's probably waiting for you right now in some cheap hotel." She slid stiffly into the back seat with the children. "Let's go."

Brett got in and turned on the ignition. Adele had been right about one thing. The sooner they got free of one another the better. But she had it wrong about Maria. The German shop girl who waited for him did so in the Brussels Renaissance, hardly a cheap hotel. He wouldn't be savoring those mussels by himself. Not at all. But then how would Adele know? She'd stopped asking questions long ago.

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Perched uncomfortably between the children, Adele spoke not a word as they drove out of the suburbs and on to the autobahn in the direction of Maastricht. For a long time, she maintained an icy silence, seemingly caught up in watching the farmlands, villages, and factories roll by. Finally, she said, "How long will this take?"

"A little over two hours. It's 220 kilometers or so."

More silence. Then she said, "When we get to the airport, you can just let us out. I'll get a porter to help with the bags."

"Oh, come now, Adele. No need to put on your martyr robe. I'll see you to the gate."

"We're going to be on our own anyway, Brett. We might as well get started sooner rather than later."

“I said I’ll help you.” Okay, he said to himself, if that’s the way you want it.

She ignored him. “Do we have to go so fast? You have two children in the car.”

“It’s the autobahn, Adele. It’s perfectly safe.”

“You’re going too fast.”

“For Christ’s sake, Adele. Did you see that Mercedes that just blew by? He’s been flashing his lights. Trying to get me to speed up.”

“I wish you’d watch your language.”

“You won’t have to hear me for much longer. Anything else?”

“No. Nothing we haven’t been over a hundred times.”

A stultifying silence saturated the car as they flew past Liege. Adele stared straight ahead. The children dozed.

Brett felt no need to engage in self-reflection. After all, he had a life to live. He’d already told Adele he’d send her money. What else did she expect? People move on. He had moved on. No point dragging it out. The children would adjust. This was how his mind worked. Like the driver of the Mercedes who passed him, Brett, in turn, impatiently flicked his lights at the car ahead. The jerk was only doing 140 kilometers an hour.

Just as Brett entered the Brussels ring road, a blackening sky poured in and rain splattered on the windshield. Traffic thickened, and Brett had to slow down.

A North Sea front had moved in early, and brilliant forks of lightning relentlessly lit the sky. Within moments the flailing wipers could barely fight back the sheets of rain that engulfed the roadway and the car.

"I don't like it," Tommy said. "It's scary." His little sister flinched at each flash of lightning and began to whimper.

"Don't worry, children," Adele said. "We're almost there." She said to Brett, "Do you think our flight might be delayed?"

"Oh, I don't think so. It will probably clear up before long." He had no real idea of the expected duration of the bad weather. But he *did* have a dinner reservation. The place enjoyed real renown and he didn't want to lose his spot. "Even if it's raining, with today's aircraft they can lift off and fly right out in no time."

Brett's words failed to reassure her. "I just hope we don't have to wait around in the airport. The trip is long enough as it is."

Brett said nothing and peered through the rain-swept windshield. "There it is." He had sighted the turnoff leading to the Brussels International Airport at Zaventem. Traffic had coagulated in a rain-soaked mess, and he didn't want to get stuck waiting around at the airport. Why drag it out? After all, Adele had fended off his offer to help them through the departure.

The rain cascaded down the face of the multistoried terminal building that stood like a glittering glass box. Brett maneuvered through the double queue of buses, taxis, and cars that crowded the vehicle lanes in front of the entrance and found a place at the curb.

"You sure you don't want me to park and give you a hand?"

"No," she said. "We'll manage."

He'd anticipated this answer. Any other would have discomfited him.

They stood uncomfortably under the entrance portico, while a porter trundled away a cart laden with their luggage. After a strained interval, Brett said, "I guess it's time to say goodbye." When he



awkwardly tried to embrace her, Adele turned away. "Too late for that. Goodbye, Brett," she said.

"How about a hug for Daddy?" Brett said to Mary. She, too, pivoted away and retreated behind her mother.

Then, contrary to Brett's expectation, Tommy ran to his father and clung to his leg. "I don't want to go," the boy sobbed.

A bit flummoxed, Brett said, "You'll like it in Michigan, Tommy. Granny has a nice dog you can play with." He reached down and loosened Tommy's grip. "Shake hands, now, and go with your mother."

"That dog tried to bite him the last time we were there," Adele said. Without looking back, she marched off with the children toward the check-in counter.

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Traffic crawled and then, owing to a crash, stalled altogether. His family out of mind, Brett daydreamed about Maria Mueller: her wonderfully soft lips, large blue eyes, long legs and cascading chestnut hair. She was not, he thought, overly bright and seemed somewhat shy, but she compensated; in bed her shyness gave way to wantonness. A nice find.

Much to his unhappiness, it took Brett more than an hour to reach the hotel. When he arrived, Brett turned the car over to a valet, quickly crossed the lobby, and rode an elevator to the third floor. He knocked gently on Maria's room door. "I'm here. It's me." There was a near lilt in his voice.

When Maria unlatched the door and let him in, Brett smiled broadly and said, "They're gone. Now, you lucky girl, you have me all to yourself."

To his disappointment, Maria was dressed demurely in a skirt, blouse and cardigan. Brett's daydream had led him to anticipate something more alluring.

“Yes. They are gone.” She said it matter-of-factly, without enthusiasm and without a reciprocal smile. When he kissed her, she responded mechanically, without passion.

“What’s the matter, Maria? It’s what we’ve been waiting for.”

“Yes. What we have been waiting for.” She pulled free of his embrace and sat on the edge of the bed. “I need a drink.” She wouldn’t even look at him.

Brett said, “I think I’ll have one too.” He fetched a bottled water from the fridge and went to a side table stocked with liquor and an ice bucket. He made two scotch and waters and handed one to Maria. “It’s really coming down out there. I hope it stops before we go to dinner. Might be hard getting a cab.” The ordinary bustling sounds of the city were absorbed by the rain. Rain—all he could hear.

Maria drained her glass in two swallows. “Were they sad?” she said. “Your wife? The children?”

“I suppose. But once they get to the States, they’ll be fine.”

“Very sad? Were they very sad?”

“I don’t know. Tommy had to leave his hamster. And Mary was pretty attached to Frau Bremer.” Brett turned back from the window.

Maria lit a cigarette and took short, nervous puffs. “Maybe you shouldn’t have . . .”

“Hey. It’s not the end of the world for them. They’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. I don’t feel nice.”

“Anyway, how about us? I haven’t seen you in two days.” He put down his drink and tried to pull her down on the bed.

But she resisted. “No. Not now. I want to finish my cigarette.”

“Why the face? What’s bothering you anyway?” Miffed, Brett sank into an easy chair. He picked up his drink and swirled the ice in his glass.

"You said you really love me. Do you really love me?" Maria said.

"What else do you want me to do? I've packed them off to the US, haven't I?"

"I don't know. Maybe there was some better way. Maybe this is not good."

"Where's all this remorse coming from? None of this seemed to bother you before."

But in fact, he'd detected signs of her growing feelings of guilt much earlier. She'd been restrained when he first told her he was sending them home, and as the departure date approached, she had become increasingly uneasy, increasingly moody. He reassured himself; once Adele and the children flew away, everything would be fine, just fine.

Maria pushed back a straggle of hair. "Don't you think it is cruel?"

"Necessary, Maria—not cruel. We'll all be better off. We'll be happier. They'll be happier. You're a very considerate person, Maria. That's one reason I am so drawn to you."

"Really? I thought it was for sex. You said your wife was, how you say, a cold fish."

"Well. That too, but . . . Anyway, they will soon be safely on their way and you and I will be enjoying a nice dinner and a nice glass of wine. Starting a new chapter. Right?"

"Maybe you will send me away, too," she said morosely.

"I'm going to take a shower," Brett said. He sounded petulant. "I want to see a smile when I come out."

When he emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel fifteen minutes later, he found Maria perched on a chair, her legs tucked beneath her. She had refilled her glass.

"Come on, Maria. Brighten up," Brett said, his voice tinged with irritation. He snapped on the television set. "Maybe they'll have an update on the weather."

At first, he thought he had tuned in just such a broadcast. A newsman positioned in front of a map gestured with his hand toward an area of the North Sea not far out from Blankenberge. Then came a video clip of what appeared to be an armada of small boats crisscrossing a storm-tossed ocean. But the grim-faced man was no weather forecaster.

"What's going on? What's he saying, Maria? You speak French."

Before she could answer, the broadcast cut to a shot of the Brussels Airport terminal. Her hand flew to her mouth. "It is a crash. An airplane crash."

Brett riveted his attention on the screen. At a live press conference, a harried Belgian official sought to cope with a barrage of shouted questions from the reporters.

"What are they saying?" Brett asked again.

"It's a bad crash. Oh, could it be...?"

"Could it be what?" he said. The question sent a convulsion roiling through his gut.

"It's our fault." Maria began to snifle, then to cry. "It's my fault. It was the TWA flight to New York. It crashed into the water soon after the takeoff. They are all killed. Every one of them. Oh, Brett. Every one of them."

He could not accept what he was hearing. An awful sense of loss struck him, one he could not have imagined earlier.

"I have to go to the airport," he said, his voice shaking. "Wait for me here."

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It seemed to take forever. Traffic crawled, and in his agitated state, Brett missed the airport off-ramp. When he finally did get back to the terminal, Brett encountered a disconcerting spectacle. The lounge to which he was directed brimmed with crying people, anxious people, angry people, all of them waiting for word of family members and friends. They wanted to reject what they had heard, wanted to believe the reports were wrong. There had to be some survivors. Perhaps the first reports overstated the extent of the tragedy. But such hopes soon curdled.

Brett pushed his way through the crowd toward one of two tables where harried airline representatives consulted passenger lists as distraught relatives and friends pleaded for information. There was no mistake; there had been no survivors. Boats at the crash site were now engaged in the recovery of bodies. A temporary morgue had been established in a nearby hangar, and some relatives had already identified remains brought in by helicopter.

"God, Smalley. It's awful." Brett recognized the speaker, a fellow member of the American Club in Dusseldorf. "I put three colleagues from the office on that plane," the man said. "Apparently nobody made it."

"My family was on the plane," Brett said, touched by a spark of emotion.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Momentarily mute, the man stared at his shoe tops, uncertain of what to say. "I'm sorry," he said again.

Brett nodded and threaded his way further forward to a table. The man directly ahead of him groaned in despair and shuffled away mumbling something unintelligible.

It seemed futile, but, like the others, Brett had to be certain. And, a grim prospect he wished he could reject, he had to determine whether or

not he would be required to make any identifications. Or if there would be any remains to identify.

“My name is Smalley. My wife and children were on the flight. Can you tell me if...?”

The young man behind the table looked at him through steel-framed glasses set on a prominent nose above a faint gray mustache. He said, “Yes, sir. I understand.” He then ran his finger down a column of names. “Please spell,” he said.

“S-M-A-L-L-E-Y. Three people.”

The clerk scanned the list a second time. “There have been some mistakes I fear to say. But I do not find this name.”

“Please check again. Is there some other list? A spelling error?” English was not the fellow’s first language.

While the man scrutinized the paper for a third time, Brett sensed the agitation and anguish of those waiting behind him.

The answer did not change. “I do not find this name.”

Brett had stepped away from the table, baffled and at a loss as to what to do next, when a familiar voice captured his attention. It was Harry Maxwell.

“I’ve been looking all over for you. They didn’t make the flight, Brett. They didn’t make the flight.”

A look of disbelief, and then of relief, transformed Brett’s face. “Didn’t make the flight?” he said weakly.

“Mary apparently got sick. They never even checked in. Adele couldn’t find you. Called the office. So I came right over. Traffic was impossible. Just got here a little while ago. They’re in the PanAm lounge. I said I’d look for you here.”

Brett stood transfixed, like someone unexpectedly pardoned for a heinous crime. "I should have waited. I just dropped them off. I . . ."

"Doesn't matter. They're here. And they're fine. It's right down the corridor. I saw Peter Jackson's wife in that other line. I'd better check on her." With those words, Harry walked away.

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The reason for the missed flight turned out to be uncomplicated. While they waited in line to check the bags, Mary had suddenly announced, "My tummy hurts," followed by session of vomiting, multiple trips to the bathroom, and the appearance of a fever. By the time the child had got through her bout of nausea, clothes had been changed, and Adele's misplaced passport (yes, that, too) located, the plane had finished boarding. A gate agent told Adele she could expedite their bags and, if they ran, they could still make the plane. But frazzled by the problems she'd had to deal with, Adele decided to wait for a later flight.

When Brett arrived, Adele said, "We could have been on that plane. We were so lucky." She spoke in low tones to mask her concerns in front of the children. For a brief moment, there was a glimmer of affection in her voice. "Thanks for coming, Brett."

"I was shocked when I heard the news. I only imagined the worst. Then I saw Harry. Good old Harry."

Adele's demeanor stiffened, and she said, "I'm not sure why I even felt the need to contact you. But I had the odd notion you might like to know we were safe. I had no idea where you had gone. So, I called the office. Harry came right over. I think he must have set a new land speed record."

Not quite certain what, but aware something bad had happened, both children gravitated toward their father. "Can we go home now?" Tommy asked.

Caught up in the moment and surprised at the intensity of his own reaction, Brett said, "Maybe, Tommy. What does Mommy think?"

"Mommy thinks not," Adele said. "It wouldn't work. A week, two weeks. You'd be gone again, Brett. I realized driving over here that I was really saying goodbye to nothing."

"But perhaps . . ."

"If it wasn't the current one, there would be another, and then probably another." Adele's voice stayed steady. "I'm sorry Brett. I know you. We are going. Bags are already checked on a PanAm flight to Detroit. Leaves in a couple of hours." Her eyes seemed more burdened with resignation than with belligerence.

Brett hung around the lounge for twenty or thirty minutes trying to play little word games with the children. But the children lost interest, and with nothing much left to discuss long silences fell between Brett and Adele.

Finally, she said, "It's time. It will take a while to walk to the gate. Let's have the goodbyes right here. We'll let you know when we get there."

Brett lingered in the corridor and watched them walk away. Adele had a child by each hand. Once or twice Tommy looked back. Then they turned a corner and disappeared.

Swept by a surge of contrition, initially Brett felt uncomfortable and somewhat downcast. But he soon concluded the mood would pass. After all, they were safe, and everything was as he'd originally intended it, just somewhat behind schedule.

When he came out of the terminal, the rain had stopped and left the early evening sky rinsed clean. By the time he merged onto the ring road, his spirits had begun to rise. There would still be time for a late



dinner with Maria and then a sexual dessert with Maria. He salivated at the prospect of both. Brett switched on the radio, and the sounds of the Berliner Philharmonic wrapped around him. He felt better already. He'd have to get Maria back on track.

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When he returned to the hotel, however, he discovered Maria had gone. She had left a handwritten note on a piece of hotel stationery.

*Dear Brett: I am an awful person. It is my fault—and yours too—they were in that terrible crash. I am a murderer. I don't even want to live anymore. I always knew it was wrong. But you were so handsome. I think you kind of tricked me a little. I will go back to Koln. Then I don't know where. I am sorry for your loss. Don't call because I do not want to see you anymore. Goodbye, Maria*

Brett tossed the note in the trash and poured himself a drink. He opened a can of cashews and popped them into his mouth one after the other. So, Maria thought they were finished. Well, he had dealt with conscience-stricken women before; they always managed to get over their moral afflictions; they always came back. Maria would be just like the rest, he told himself. She'd come back when she found out Adele and the kids were okay. □