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HANS

by Daniel Webre

“You there. Come forward,” a stark woman with auburn hair commanded. She didn’t bother looking up from her paperwork. “I can see you there, Hans. I know it’s you.”

The man she was addressing was not called Hans, ordinarily. His name had always been Bryce. He’d only wanted to browse the shelves of used books.

“I’m waiting,” she said, this time pausing from whatever administrative task had been occupying her. She was in her forties, he guessed, though the horn-rimmed glasses may have made her seem older than she was. She fixed him with a look he hadn’t seen since first grade. But this still didn’t make him Hans.

“Very well, then.” She returned to writing on the paper in front of her, periodically punching numbers into a calculator, and he figured it was safe to continue examining the books. He hadn’t come into the store for anything in particular. It was the quiet he was after. So much had changed in the city since last time he’d lived here. If he couldn’t find any familiar faces, at least he might find comfort in an old text.

Who was this Hans? he wondered. He couldn’t decide if Hans was in trouble or not, just judging by the woman’s tone. She’d sounded stern but not angry, necessarily. She clearly expected something from him. Then again, how important could it be if she’d let the matter drop so easily? He didn’t believe she was convinced yet that he wasn’t Hans. After all, he hadn’t denied it.

He approached the low platform on which the desk rested—an old-style cash register sat on top of that. She was writing in a ledger, entering a string of numbers with decimals into columns. She didn’t stop at first. When she did, she took off her glasses long enough to rub her eyes.

“You aren’t Hans, are you?” she said.

For a brief moment, Bryce considered telling her he was, but that would have been a lie. Instead, he said nothing. If she assumed he was Hans, then that was her business. It shouldn’t reflect poorly on him. And why not Hans? He tried to imagine how a person called Hans might respond in a situation like this one. He adjusted his posture accordingly, standing up straighter. Hans would be confident, though not excessively so.

“I am here now,” Bryce said, and this was absolutely true.

“Good,” she said. “I wondered when you’d be back. You can help with the inventory. Start with that section over there.” She pointed to “Poetry.” “Say the title, then the name of the author. Loud and clear now.”

Bryce walked across the store to where the Poetry section lined the far wall. He turned to see if she was watching.

“Go on, Hans, begin with the first one.”

Bryce removed a clothbound volume from the top left.

“What does it say? I want to hear. Read it to me. Title first. Author second. Slowly.”

He said the words out loud, just as she had directed.

“Again, Hans. I want to verify what you have said.”

He read the title and the author’s name to her again—a tricky foreign-sounding one. He hoped his pronunciation had been accurate, or at least adequate.

“That’s very nice, Hans,” she said, jotting down a few notes in the margin of the paper. Bryce couldn’t tell if there was any correlation between what he’d said and what she was writing. He stood too far away to make out any of the exact details.

“Go on, Hans,” she said once the pen stopped moving. “Proceed.”

Bryce removed the second book, also bound in cloth but with no jacket. His nerves were calming now, and he tried using his best reading voice.

“You’re good at this,” she said, after he’d repeated the title and author without any prompting. He thought it best not to reply, but he did allow himself to take more than a moment’s pleasure in her encouraging words.

He noticed she was watching him expectantly now. Just as he reached for the next book, however, the front door opened with a jangle, followed by a bang as it crashed into the wall. Bryce saw the source of the violence—a broad-shouldered man, made of solid muscle, at least a head taller and thirty pounds heavier than he was. He knew instantly this could only be Hans.

“Who is this man?” Hans demanded. “Has he made advances toward you?”

“Hans, come forward.”

Bryce released the book he’d been preparing to inventory and waited to see if the real Hans would obey. But then he realized both she and the man were looking at him, and he began to suspect that he was the one she’d spoken to.

“You have some explaining to do,” the man said, from just inside the doorway. In contrast to his explosive entrance, he eased the door shut with a touch so light-handed there was hardly a tinkle.

“Now, Hans, will you please come forward?”

This time there was no doubt she meant him. Bryce walked slowly in the direction of her desk, stopping after just a few steps. “With or without the next book?”

“Without.”

Bryce hesitated.

“Come now, Hans. He won’t hurt you. We both have some questions we’d like answered.”

“Like what?” Bryce asked.

“What’s that? I can’t hear you from all the way over there. Please come closer.”

“Do as she says, Hans.” The man was speaking now.

The woman’s head jerked in the man’s direction. “Stay out of this,” she said.

The man laughed, but not in a way that lessened the tension. Bryce resumed his slow walk, wishing she had given him the go ahead to bring a book. It would have provided some security.

“Pathetic,” the man said. He shook his head in disbelief, but Bryce noticed how careful he was this time not to jolt the door on his way out. It was the woman who was shaking her head now in disgust.

“Fool,” she said. “Do you know him? It seemed to me as though you did.”

Bryce believed she must have directed this insult toward the other man. What sense would it have made to disparage him—Bryce—after the praiseworthy work he’d just completed? But it was an emotional time for him after being so long away from the city, and the tiniest possibility of a slight left him feeling unsettled. He’d tried so hard to be Hans, after all. Now he might be losing his inventory job after only two books. It wasn’t fair.

“Don’t worry, Hans. You aren’t in trouble. Not with me anyway. But I can’t speak for Hans. He is his own man, and he has seen straight through you. I am quite certain of that.”

“Is that right?” Bryce had drawn close enough to speak in a normal conversational tone. “So you knew all along that I was not Hans?”

“That is correct.”

“And yet you continue to address me in this fashion.”

“I see no reason not to.”

“I do have a name of my own, you know.”

“Hans will do quite fine, thank you.”

“It’s Bryce.”

“I didn’t ask you.”

“I’m telling you.”

“That is no concern of mine.”

“What about the other Hans?”

“Which other Hans?”

“The one just in here.”

“Don’t worry about him. He’s gone now. Do you want a job here or not?”

Bryce hadn’t had an opportunity to think beyond the afternoon. Now he had no idea what to say.

“You will have to answer to Hans, of course. I call all my male employees Hans. You will be no exception.”

“I’m not asking for special treatment.”

“Then I believe we were on book three.”

Bryce weighed his options. Nothing much awaited him back on the street. And he really had been enjoying himself, reading out those titles and their authors. Not only that, he now believed he was good at it. She’d said so herself. Without another word, he returned to the shelf of poetry books and continued with the third. He could see she was smiling as she made more notations on the page.

Employed, Bryce extended his stay in the city. He was already three weeks past his scheduled departure date. He had not received a check, as of yet, nor had they negotiated any specific terms. After week one, he’d found out that the woman’s name was Veronica. Apparently, she had been reluctant to share it with him until he demonstrated some sustained level of commitment to the inventory. Now that she had confided in him, Bryce believed things were progressing quite well.

They had completed the Poetry section rather quickly, and now they’d moved on to Biography and Memoir. There were times, though, while moving about in that section, when the author and the title were the same, which could lead to no small level of confusion. Furthermore, Bryce hadn’t seen the other Hans lately, nor had Veronica mentioned him. And despite knowing that her name was Veronica, Bryce found no opportunities to use it after that first exchange of verbal intimacy. For the most part, context clues had rendered this unnecessary. Plus, he’d been severely reprimanded the one time he’d dared speak it.

As for sleeping accommodations, there was a storeroom with a cot and an understanding that he could stay there for as long as he wanted. At least, that was his understanding. They had never explicitly discussed this either, but Veronica must have noticed his things in there after he’d moved them from the hotel and taken up residence the day after his first. He had no intentions of staying long term, of course. He would happily relocate to more permanent quarters of his own, once he received—and cashed—his first paycheck. But he wasn’t sure how money might change his relationship with Veronica, and he decided not to force the issue.

Several more days went by before the real Hans appeared again. When he entered the store on this occasion, the bell on the front door shook quite gingerly.

“Welcome, Hans,” Veronica said. “Hans, this is Hans,” she said to Bryce, as though they hadn’t met before.

Bryce played along, stopping what he was doing to acknowledge the other Hans. “Charmed, I’m sure,” he said to his rival. He set down the pink feather duster he’d been using to freshen up a set of ancient leather-bound encyclopedias before the other Hans had come in.

“Pleased to meet me,” Hans said without even bothering to offer his hand.

“What brings you here?” Veronica asked him.

“Business. I wanted to see how our friend here is working out.”

“Hans, you heard the man. What have you to say?”

Bryce didn’t want to lie, but he didn’t care to pour his heart out either, not under these circumstances. He elected the interrogative mood, instead. “What could be better?” He went back to work with the feather duster.

“Very good, Hans. Well-played,” Veronica said.

“Bravo,” Hans added, bringing his hands together in a silent round of applause. “He will do.”

He will do for what? Bryce wondered. It was Veronica he’d been interested in pleasing, not this Hans character.

“I’ll be back,” Hans said. The door slammed shut, sending a shiver of jingling bells to the floor.

Indeed, Hans came back, only a day later, wheeling in a hand truck stacked with boxes.

“Let’s see what he does with these,” Hans said, as though thinking Veronica might be interested.

He unloaded the boxes into a single pile and stepped away. Bryce understood that he was supposed to see what was inside. He sliced open the packing tape with his pocketknife, pausing before lifting the flaps. This first box was filled completely with name tags. Bryce picked one up, and as he suspected, saw that it was printed with the name “Hans.” He looked to see Veronica’s reaction. She nodded, and he pinned it to his breast pocket. He closed the box again and carried the whole thing over to her desk, where he set it on the edge of the platform.

The next box contained old maps of the city. He unfolded one and saw that it was from the last time he had lived there, more or less, and he wondered how the streets could look so similar when the people were now so different. He attempted to fold the map but had never been any good at that. Hans was laughing at him now and Bryce felt increasingly desperate to make it lie flat again. Instead he lay the map on her desk, half-folded. “I’ll take this one,” he said, in the manner of what he hoped sounded like an exuberant customer, while reaching equally to maintain the air of a sophisticated connoisseur of antiquities. He watched as Veronica made more notations in her book.

Bryce wondered if he were passing whatever sort of test this might be and believed that the last box might turn out to be the tie-breaker. He kicked at it and was certain that it kicked back at him. He looked at Veronica.

“Go on, Hans. It’s your job, after all.”

Bryce opened the third box and discovered a dwarf lying inside. The dwarf was awake and looking up at him, but was wearing a dressing gown and a stocking cap and rested his head on a tiny pillow. Bryce hesitated, unsure of what to do in this situation. He walked over to the first box, still partially open next to the desk, and removed another name tag. Carefully, he reached into the dwarf’s box and pinned the tag to the man’s shirt-front. The dwarf sat up, immediately seeing the half-folded map on the desk, and went to work folding it properly.

“Excellent, Hans.”

This time Bryce understood it was not he she was addressing. And the real Hans had already left the building.

“I’d still like the map,” Bryce said.

“Of course you would,” Veronica said. “Only now you’ll observe that it’s properly folded. It seems that Hans has brought you a helper.”

Bryce picked up the map and the man’s box and carried them both into the storeroom. He didn’t see why he needed a helper. He thought he was doing just fine without one. But when he came back into the store and saw little Hans dusting the bottom shelves, he warmed up to the idea of having someone else around with whom he could divide up the work. Anyhow, reading out the inventory was what he had liked best of all—cleaning had never been his strong suit.

“Let us continue with our reading,” Veronica was saying. “Hans, we will begin with Drama.”

Bryce walked to the shelves where the plays and screenplays were kept, but was shocked to see that this new Hans had beat him to it. Bryce cringed, then stifled a laugh as his so-called helper managed to mangle both Jean Anouilh’s name and his retelling of Antigone. He felt ashamed of himself for critiquing the man’s pronunciation, but the inventory was supposed to be his job, after all.

“Very good, Hans.”

What? Very good? Had she even been listening? Bryce grabbed the book and wrenched it away before sounding off with a corrected reading. But Veronica interrupted him.

“Hans? What is it that you think you are doing?”

“I—”

“Go to your room, please.”

He found her words astonishing, insulting. This was not at all what he had signed on for, and he wanted to tell her as much, but then he thought better of it. Where else was there to go? Instead, he did as he’d been told, but left the door open in an act of clear defiance and took a seat on the cot. He reached for the map and unfolded it at once, then desperately attempted what the dwarf had done with such ease. But no use.

Soon he was up again, slamming the door shut so he wouldn’t hear the small man’s distorted intonations. The fading map, spread out now, was a confusion of creases, and its very fabric had started tearing apart where it had been folded wrong too many times.

The door to the storeroom swung open, and there stood the real Hans. He dropped the box of nametags just inside and laughed once more in his unpleasant fashion, as the dwarf droned on in the distance.

Daniel Webre

Daniel Webre’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Big Windows Review, Talking River Review, Cottonwood, The Ignatian Literary Magazine, The MacGuffin, and other places.

BITCH

So he went out and picked a pariah puppy from the streets where it had been wandering with the other strays, grubby and famished, but set apart by its floppy ears that he found unusual and endearing. It was a small dark thing, much like himself, so they could keep each other company, as he explained to his speechless wife. Then his daughter, home from her American university for the winter break, pointed out that it was female. As she put it in English: “Baba, it’s a bitch.”

– Pritika Pradhan

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