

Sample

## *The Short and Wonderful Life of Henry Hemingway*

Fred Schäfer

### *Prologue*

*What happened may have been predetermined, it may have been accidental, it may have been of my own doing. We don't know and those who think they know could be wrong. Besides, I am now all right with that Mona obsession and with the other girls and everything that happened. It has become a story. It makes me think that I have not missed out on anything. You really don't want to be regretting the past and thinking that you missed out on things in your younger years.*

This is not how it all started, but it is a good way to start. Monika was drunk when I met her at *Mutter Leidike*. She had consumed too much of the pub's renowned gooseberry wine. People drank the stuff like juice. It tasted like juice. Some people placed the full bottle on their lips and by the time they took the bottle off, empty or almost empty, the waiter had placed another bottle in front of them. Monika was twenty years old, but looked like fifteen. It was a Saturday night which had started like so many other Saturday nights. I had just popped in at *Mutter Leidike* to see if I could spot a familiar face.

Monika, with a bottle of wine in one hand, walked right into me.

"Excuse me", she said. Well, not exactly. We are reflecting here on an event that happened in Berlin. Accordingly, what Monika really said, or most likely really said, was something along the following lines: *Entschuldigen Sie bitte. Hoppla!* (I am not so sure about the *Hoppla*. This word is used more widely in the south of Germany. It means whoops!)

Then, all of a sudden, Monika's legs gave up on her. If I hadn't caught her, she would have crashed to the floor. The place was so crowded, people might just have stepped on her or fallen over

her.

She asked for a lift and since I was bored and had nothing planned for the rest of the night, I agreed.

This, as I realized retrospectively, was my mistake. Or maybe it was okay. The price I had to pay was small. A bit of emotional pain. Easily hidden and denied. Stay away from drunken women. Don't pick them up. My mother could have told me that.

In my car I asked the girl where I could drop her off.

She said she would prefer my place.

That wasn't what I had meant.

She lived with her parents and told me about a silly argument with her father and that she could not go home.

This didn't sound too bad. Can happen to anybody.

I didn't mind her spending the night at my place, but it was only ten o'clock, much too early to go home. What now? She suggested that I could do whatever I liked and she would curl up on the back seat of my VW and whenever I drove home I could wake her up. I didn't like that idea either. It was winter and cold and I didn't want to find her frozen in my car.

Hell, how would I explain that to her father and her mother and the police and to my father and my mother and so on?

Drunk was bad enough. Drunk and frozen would have been really bad.

We agreed that she needed a strong cup of coffee and after that we would go to the Bellevue, a cinema that showed slapstick movies every Friday and Saturday night from eleven o'clock till one or two in the morning. I thought this would cheer her up. But once in the cinema Monika fell asleep within minutes and I did my best to drink her gooseberry wine and enjoy Laurel and Hardy, Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin on my own. There was also a jazz band on the stage. Many people smoked and some had brought a bottle of wine or *Schnaps* along and shared it around. As far as I know, the Bellevue was the only cinema of that kind in Berlin. In any other cinema they would have gone berserk, called the police and threatened to arrest you if you smoked and boozed and farted and swore and whatever else people did in the Bellevue.

There was a good atmosphere.

The place reminded me of Paris: of locations I had read about in Henry Miller's *Quiet Days in Clichy*.

After the movie I carried Monika to my car. She was so slim and so light, I was worried that the wind may just blow her away. She still insisted that she wanted to spend the night at my place.

“You hardly know me,” I challenged her.

“You look all right,” she said.

I didn’t argue with this.

At the time I lived in a little apartment in Kreuzberg, just around the corner from where the painter Kurt Mühlenhaupt had his atelier. Monika spent the night on my sofa. The next morning we had breakfast together. It was a bit like in one of those old Rock Hudson and Doris Day movies. I had a good fire going and she walked around in her panties and a blouse and nothing else.

It was actually much better than in those stupid movies. We made love and Monika’s bohemian appearance reminded me of Mona, one of Henry Miller’s characters that he had modelled on his muse and wife June.

I was fascinated by Monika’s body. She was so slim, so perfectly slim. Before I had met her I would not have thought it possible that such a slim female body could stir up such tremendous sexual feelings in me. Monika was very down to earth and had a great sense of humour. She phoned her parents and returned home a few days later.

We had more sex.

Then, one day, she told me that she had fallen in love with someone. She asked if I wanted to meet the guy. I didn’t.

Why would I want to meet him?

I realized that my search for a muse – *my Mona* – would start again. We phoned each other a few more times before we lost contact.

After that I never picked up a drunken girl again. Not because I wouldn’t. It just never happened. This was a once in a lifetime experience. She was there. I was there. She was too drunk to stand. I caught her. She asked for a lift. This is how these things sometimes happen.

### *I can still see you*

Back in Berlin, Sybil Koenig could have become to me what I saw in Susanne and what I thought I could not live without – my Mona, my June, my muse, my inspiration.

Alas, it didn’t happen.

This is actually a sad story.

Well ... kind of sad and funny.

Sybil fell in love with my writing but apart from the fact that I happened to be the man who wrote the stuff, she could see

nothing in me which would interest her the slightest bit.

She worked as an editorial assistant with a small publisher and was crazy about books. She smoked large, black cigars and consumed huge amounts of cheap red wine.

I smoked cigars.

I enjoyed cheap red wine.

Couldn't she see how many things we had in common?

She lived in a little flat in Kreuzberg. I lived in a little flat in Kreuzberg. Her place had lots of character. Maybe that's not quite true. Her place was a mess. To me, her place had lots of character because there were books and cigars and full and empty bottles of red wine everywhere. She kept books in the kitchen, in the bathroom, in the toilet, on the sofa, in her bed. Everywhere. In her living room along the walls there were piles of books. Books on top of each other reaching from the floor to just below the ceiling. Sybil was one or two years older than me. She was overweight, but in a balanced way. She was attractive. Her wardrobe consisted of a mix of old-fashioned grandmother stuff and hippie gear. There was just one problem. She wasn't attracted to me. She accepted my existence as an inevitable necessity. I was the tool which produced the manuscripts which she welcomed and took pleasure from reading. She didn't like me. Full stop. A few times I spent the night in her apartment when I was too drunk to go home. It didn't bother her. She told me to make myself comfortable on the sofa between the books. Which I did.

She walked naked from the bathroom to her bed.

Just the way she would have done it if I hadn't been present.

Maybe, in her mind, I didn't really exist as a living creature.

Maybe, I was only there like a piece of furniture. A bookshelf.

Maybe, I should just have jumped in her bed and made love to her.

She never openly criticized my writing. She asked questions. She did this in such a skilful way that I was able to critically reflect on my stuff without the need to defend myself.

I could not keep up with her drinking although I tried it several times in an attempt to find out more about her and to seduce her. But I am not very good at such things when I am intoxicated and stoned and half dead. Once or twice she talked about herself. I believe she talked about a relationship with someone who was important to her in the past. But then, when I woke up ten hours later, I couldn't remember a thing. She could have told me that she had been married to Elvis Presley or the Pope. I just didn't

remember a damn thing. Each time I had a terrible hangover and would not have survived without the help of large quantities of aspirin tablets. Somewhere I had read that a healthy male can consume up to sixteen aspirin tablets spread evenly over twenty-four hours without endangering his life, although it may ruin his stomach for years to come. That's probably a lot of bullshit. It may kill some men and do nothing to others. I didn't actually count the tablets I swallowed. But I remember one frightening instance when I wasn't sure which pain was worse, the headache from my hangover or the ache in my stomach from my irresponsible consumption of aspirin tablets. Sybil's comments didn't help either. She told me that aspirin could cause severe internal bleeding. If not controlled, she emphasized, it can lead to a slow and painful death.

I believe this was the only time in our relationship where she showed personal interest in me.

She had consumed more red wine than I. Why wasn't she dying? How could she eat breakfast, drink black coffee and read the paper? It wasn't fair. Damn it!

But then, Sybil came to my rescue after all. She made me a large pot of very strong chamomile tea which, like a miracle, stopped my stomach cramps within minutes.

Thanks Sybil.

I can still see you with that big, black, stinking cigar in your mouth.

Naked and very attractive.