

A layer of fine fog hung in the air, like smoke on the water. The sun, already peeping over the treetops, would soon disperse it. Peering through the louvre window, Sally Morgan watched wild geese take flight from the lake. Their powerful wings worked against the pull of the earth, drawing them up and away from the damp and carving the water into finely sculpted waves.

Sally's short-cropped blonde hair and her snub nose, flanked by light blue eyes, reflected in the glass of the narrow panes. Emblazoned across her white nightshirt in black lettering stood the message "I'm a prototype!". Yes, that's me alright! Satisfied with her own reflection, she twisted alternately to the left and right, her arms placed akimbo on her slim waist. You don't look your 38 years of age, she told herself approvingly. At one with herself and the world, she got on with making her first coffee of the day.

Following her usual morning ritual, she first ran the tap. With an obstinate squeak, it released a trickle of water that gathered at the bottom of the dented kettle that had been her trusty companion for many years. To be more precise, since the day

she had received her parents' inheritance at the age of 25. A rolling legacy on four wheels, along with the old boiler, the stove with two gas hobs, and the ever too small fridge. Initially the VW camper bus, with its red chassis and white roof, had been her only leisure-time companion. Over time, however, she increasingly used the meanwhile historic bus for business trips. It had become her second home, now furnished comfortably with tender loving care. It was graced with birch veneer furniture providing ample room for a fridge, gas cylinder, sink, stove, and everything a happy camper needs. She had draped colourful cushions over the bright red upholstery, whose fabric pattern was repeated in the camper's curtains.

From the narrow kitchen cupboard, groping between the neatly sorted cups and coffee bags, Sally took out the coffee grinder and poured in some beans. She got everything ready for the quick shot of caffeine she would require afterwards. A freshly brewed can of coffee after a two to three kilometre swim in the lake. She couldn't imagine a better start to her day. It was

quite true that, at least for Sally in her favourite and mostly unfrequented location, the world is still in order at six in the morning.

She slips out of her blouse and blue shorts. With a few spirited steps, she swings her lithe frame over moss and reeds and slips smoothly into the water. The lake has stored the restorative energy of the long summer months. It envelopes her like a welcoming blanket – contrasting against the cooler ambient air as autumn draws near. With powerful arm strokes, Sally ploughs her way through the water. Her goal is an island in the middle of the lake, just a few hundred square metres in size. Not big at all. And yet distant enough for Sally to hide away, leaving the world behind whenever Sally the journalist needs a break. *I am a Rock, I am an Island ...*

Pause. Stop. Reset.

On her way back to the shore her ears pick up the sonorous growl of an engine. A Porsche 911 S – a 6-cylinder, air-cooled Boxer. Sporting open air filters, of course. Many of them have these to

improve engine ventilation. A muscular sports car from the 1970s. Even before the throbbing sound has fully registered with her, she knows exactly what is fast approaching on its four wheels. Occupational hazard of being a seasoned motor journalist with high-octane fuel in her veins.

Someone is abusing the quiet of an early Sunday morning – and the sleepy foothills of the Eifel – to put their foot down hard, pedal to the metal. Surfing on the nearby highway – *And we'll have fun fun fun fun now that daddy took the T-bird away ...* – Dude, ditch the curve-surfing before you get yourself hurt ...

Still lost in thought, she reaches the shore and makes her way out of the water through a few clinging clumps of reed. The boxer howls up, losing the taming effect of the tyres on the road surface. Sally is now wide awake. Fractions of a second nothing, then the impact. Silence again. No idea how long. Then the explosion, ejecting a jet of flame at a distance of around 200 meters. *Thunderbolt and lightning, very very frightening me ...*

Mom? Dad!

Sally Morgan still functions. Still in a daze, she sprints to the camper bus, slips into her shorts and into her barefoot shoes, throws her blouse over her head, and grabs the fire extinguisher and first aid kit. She's off and running. No time to lose. Nothing can stop her now. Not a blackberry bush that hooks its thorns into her calves, nor a branch that tattoos bloody stripes onto her shoulder.

Dad? Mom!...

The wreck appears before her, enveloped in flames. Emerging from the last few bushes, she is hit by the intense heat. In the centre of a gravel area that serves as a nightly lodging for truckers and prostitutes alike, the Porsche is upended on its roof. A red ladybird with legs desperately reaching up into the sky, no longer able to rise to its feet. A thought assails her – this one will never fly over the tarmac again. This one here is little else but flaming embers. Gravity seems to be

failing and dollops of liquid plastic are trickling from the dashboard towards the roof lining, only to be lapped up by tongues of flame. Panic seizes her, tightening her throat.

Fire! Now, Sally, don't freak out! Stay calm. Where's the driver? Whoever it was just threw the Porsche around those bends. Her eyes wide open, fixed on the flames, she grudgingly fumbles her way around the inferno – and finds the driver. There he lies, flat on his stomach atop the gravel a few meters away from the car, his face hidden in his arms. Blood is leaking from a laceration he has received to the back of his head. No critical injuries – hopefully. Internal injuries? Not a clue.

He's breathing! His chest gently rises and falls. Well done, however you managed to find your way out of that hellish inferno raging in its molten cage. You must have a guardian angel – like so many before you, too many, did not. Sally grabs the arms of the unconscious man and drags him a few metres away from the burning Porsche.

“You okay?” – Stupid question! But right now

anything more intelligent escapes her. No response. Except for a faint groan. Gently she turns the stranger on his side and takes a good look at him. Finely chiselled chin, elegant nose, bushy eyebrows, thick and dark mop of hair – perfectly matching an athletic frame. Could it be your guardian angel is a weight bench? A flabby couch potato would never have made it out of there, let alone survive the violent impact.

Sally deftly plucks her smartphone from her trouser pocket and dials 110: “Serious accident on the B477, near Nerbelsee. You know the gravel parking lot along that stretch? A car has somersaulted and is burning out. From what I can tell, there is just one passenger. Miraculously he made it out into the open. He’s breathing, but unconscious. You’ll need ambulances and paramedics. And don’t forget to bring the fire service with you!”

Sally squats down on the floor next to the stranger and brushes a curl from his forehead. His magnificent but unruly head of hair gives way reluctantly. He reacts to her touch, moves slightly

and, barely audibly, moans. On the second attempt, he opens his eyes: “Where am I?” Then his eyelids fall shut once again. Sally gently strokes his head, trying to calm him: “Shhh... Everything’s fine. You’re safe now.”

The battered body loses its tension. The man reopens his eyes: “What happened?” Slowly he starts reviving.

“You’ve flipped your Porsche over on its roof – but you’ve also been incredibly lucky.”

A first smile lights up his swollen face: “Depends how you look at it ...”

“Even after dropping out of med school years ago, I’d say you had a guardian angel riding alongside you. The cut on your head and the bruises will be history in just a few weeks. Let’s just hope you’ve escaped without internal injuries. To say for certain, you’ll need an immediate hospital check-up. Rescue service, paramedics, fire service – they’re all on their way here.”

A tentative smile crosses the stranger’s face: “That’s a deft diagnosis with quite a decent prognosis, my good doctor. Where there’s life,

there's hope. I, for one, feel like I've been hit by an Intercity Express. – Who are you?"

"Sally Morgan. I'm pitched up by the lake. Your landing here out of the blue has cost me a glorious morning dip in the lake."

"Peter von Ostendorf. I'm really sorry. I live in Cologne. Needless to say, I'm greatly indebted to you ..."

What's going on now?! No, Sal, you're not flirting with the battered victim of an accident who only a few minutes ago made it out of his flaming wreck alive – and may possibly not be quite all there yet.

Luckily Sally Morgan had no time to pursue this tantalising train of thought any further since she could hear the rescue ambulance and the emergency response doctor fast approaching almost in tandem, lights ablaze and sirens blaring. Seconds later they turned onto the gravel parking lot. The volunteer fire fighters from the neighbouring village also played their part in getting the situation sorted.

The emergency doctor flanked by paramedics saw to the man's head wound and bruises. Peter von Ostendorf was put on a drip with painkillers and sedatives to ease the trip to hospital for him. Just as suddenly as he had entered her life, he had suddenly disappeared again, swept away in the ambulance.

"Excuse me, are you the lady who reported the accident?" And so began police inspector Hans Müller's official investigation into the accident. The rotund official was ill-suited to both his uniform and the summery temperatures. "This guy's ready for the ice bucket challenge," thought Sally involuntarily. When he took off his cap, his short and greying hair stuck to his head.

"Yes, Sally Morgan. I was the one who called you. I drove out to the lake in my old Camper bus this morning. Wanted to spend a little time down by the water, chilling out in perhaps the last bit of summer sunshine. Autumn's very close. More's the pity."

"Please tell me what you saw." Müller fiddled around with his tie and managed to untighten the knot a little.

“Diddly-squat.”

“What, nothing?!”

“It was more of a radio drama.”

“OK, I see. The road’s quite a bit away from the lake.”

“Yep. I heard the Porsche going like the clappers, speed-curving down the winding road. You can’t mistake the sound of that six-cylinder engine. Suddenly silence. Then the sickening sound of the impact. Followed by an explosion and a towering tongue of flame. I ran right over towards it. Everything was ablaze.”

“I don’t know many who could pick out a Porsche six-cylinder from such a distance.”

“Occupational disease. As a motoring journalist addicted to vintage sports cars.”

“I know of worse vices than that. Can I please ask you to come down to our station in Zülpich on Monday to get the paperwork done? Do you happen to have a business card for me?”

“You’ll have to walk me back to my bus then. I’ll treat you to a memorable cup of coffee.”

“Sounds too good to say no! Count me in.”

Sally Morgan gathered up her unused fire extinguisher and first aid kit. With the officer in

tow, she returned to her Camper bus.

While the police inspector made himself comfortable on the folding chair under the awning of the Camper bus, Sally Morgan put the kettle on. With coffee grinder in hand, she plonked herself down next to him.

“You hand grind your coffee? Good gracious, the last time I saw someone do that was my grandmother, decades ago.”

“And I picked up this habit from my mother. Cappuccino, latte, espresso – these were her favourites whenever we holidayed in Italy. She felt that’s where they truly belonged. But filter coffee – that’s a very German thing.”

“Like I said, haven’t had any for ages.”

“Then it’s about time. You’ll be amazed. You’ll be hooked on the stuff afterwards. – Here’s my business card.”

Sally accurately weighed off 16 grammes of ground coffee, filled a single-cup amount into the AeroPress flask, poured water heated to precisely 88°C onto it, stirred the brew carefully, and waited for exactly 25 seconds. Only then did she

put on the strainer and locking ring. She turned around and slowly pressed down the plunger. With a final quiet “pfffff”, the last remaining drops trickled into the cup which was then topped up with hot water.

“Milk, sugar?”

“No thanks. I like it black as coal.”

“That’s the only way. You’re a connoisseur after all! Have a taste!”

Hans Müller leaned forward and gingerly took hold of the steaming cup. He took a first cautious sip and his eyebrows shot up in surprise: “There’s no way you got the beans from a bargain bin at the supermarket, is there?”

“You won’t find anything nearly as good there. These beans are organically grown in the Andes, at an altitude of 1,600 metres, and then painstakingly refined at a small roasting plant in Eckernförde up on the Baltic coast. This quality and the workmanship that goes into producing them, plus their sustainability, that’s what I really cherish.

“Like your model T2 here. A real gem with a fine high-gloss finish that has a wonderful shine

and depth to it.

“Or rather, an heirloom.”

Müller leaned forward with a questioning glance: “So, from your parents, I take it?”

“Yes.”

“They’ve passed on?”

“A dreadful traffic accident on one of the world’s most beautiful roads. Happened quite a while ago. Not an eternity ago, but almost. Last millennium. Back in 1998, just after my 18th birthday.”

The policeman extracted a white handkerchief from his trouser pocket and dabbed at the beads of sweat forming on his brow, teased out of him from drinking the piping hot coffee: “Mmm, just like today. Only this time the driver was much luckier. If he’s well-insured, that is. He’s bound to be a guy who can easily afford a car like that. No great financial loss, at least.”

“Sure, if you only see a classic car in terms of its cash value. To their owners, these cars have a purely emotional value.”

Police inspector Müller cleared his throat: “Well, I also loved my first car, a VW Beetle 1300, a real petrol-guzzler. It had a simple grey

paintjob, but was almost indestructible. It got me and my girlfriend halfway around Europe just fine. Its Spartan trim and naked metal interior didn't bother us a bit. The real luxury were those two hand straps on the B-pillar ...”

“Yes, that's what my parents raved about, too – while gazing deeply into each other's eyes.”

The ears of the rather rotund officer turned red. He immediately tried to change the subject: “So, how much would an old Porsche like that put you back?”

Sally smiled gently and knowingly: “Well, this ‘old Porsche’ is really something special. It's a model 911 S. It was one of the first six-cylinder cars made in Zuffenhausen. 2.7 litre engine, packing a tidy 175 in horsepower. Lightweight and fast, aerodynamically speaking it was top of the range in the first half of the 1970s and had truly eye-catching front and rear spoilers, fondly referred to as ‘ducktails’ by experts and Porsche fans alike.”

“Ms Morgan. I'm bowled over by your expertise once again. I mean, I may be 55 but I'm not an old male chauvinist pig ...”

“... but women and cars, especially sports cars,

don't really go together well, do they now?"

"No, I didn't mean it that way ..."

Sally neatly deflected: "You were asking about the price. Well, if a Porsche like that is in good shape and if everything about it is original, then think of cancelling your savings account and putting aside another two years' salary to close the deal."

Müller's face turned into a frown. He took a deep breath, the buttons of his shirt tightening precariously in their buttonholes, his mind crunching the numbers. Then his eyes lit up: "You mean upwards of 150,000 euros?"

"That'd make it a real bargain in fact. It could easily top 200,000 euros. And many a man would happily sell his own mother-in-law to get his hands on a top classic car like that." Or be willing to kill for it, so she thought, without saying it aloud.

The policeman's chin had sunk deeper and deeper: "No kidding?!"

The words of this undersized closet chauvinist had got under Sally's skin. She was going to teach him to show greater respect for her in future: "You

can't even begin to imagine what's really going on out there. It's big business talking – big bucks. It doesn't matter a bit whether the masterpiece is by Marc Chagall or Ferdinand Porsche.”

Müller sipped his coffee broodingly: “So you're saying works of art and classic cars can shift millions?”

“Bang on. Mountains of cash are being redistributed around the globe – and the tax authorities often don't have the foggiest idea of what deals are going down.”

“Ok, I get it. We're talking money laundering, making bad money look legit. And on top of everything else, it's a tidy investment that makes life a tad more entertaining and enjoyable. Not bad at all.”

“In a nutshell. Well, if you've no further questions for me, I'd like to continue our little chat down at the station on Monday. But I'm happy to walk you back to the accident spot so you can take a closer peek at the car wreck.”

The policeman rose phlegmatically from the camping chair, leaving Sally to lead the way. They strolled back along the route Sally had

covered in a sprint scarcely two hours ago, now free of her first aid kit and fire extinguisher. She wanted to see what was left of the fire-ravaged sports car with her own eyes.

The fire had truly done its job. The black dashboard was barely discernible any longer. It had been melted away. Just like the timepieces in Salvador Dali's famous "Clocks" painting, thought Sally involuntarily. The blaze had stripped the sports seats clean of their leather coverings and insides, leaving nothing but bare metal. The Porsche had been transformed into a metal skeleton.

"Holy Moly!", breathed Hans Müller. It sounded almost as if he were grudgingly acknowledging the devastation the blaze had caused.

"You bet," Sally agreed. "It's a total write-off."