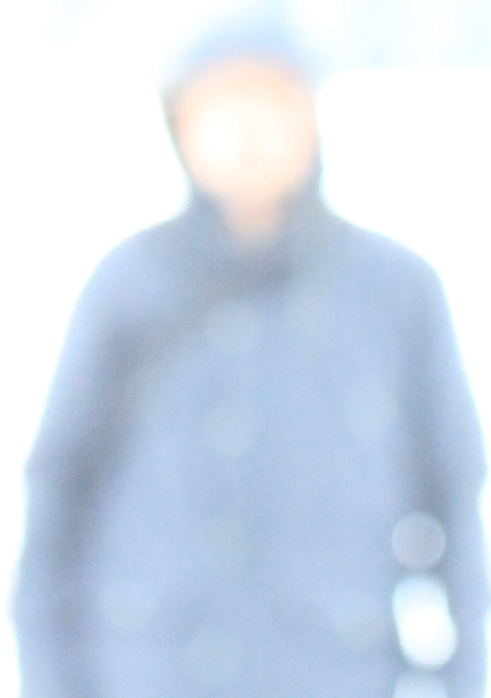


Christoph Ziegltrum

DEUS SALUTIS MEÆ

A short story.



»You look like absolute shit«, says Jan from the IT architecture team.

»Thanks«, I say, rubbing my chin. I'd much rather use that hand to punch him in the face. The fingers of my other hand scrape restlessly across the tabletop.

»I haven't seen you in ages«, he says, shoveling a fork with an absurdly large piece of pork loin into his mouth.

»Guess we kept missing each other«, I mumble, continuing to drum my fingers. My plate has been empty for a while; I wolfed everything down.

»That can't be. I'm basically always here and hardly ever work from home.«

»Well, you know me. Early bird. I rarely start after seven. Today's running a bit longer. I still have a meeting with HR«, I say, biting my lower lip. None of this is any of Jan's business. But he didn't hear me anyway.

»I should get going«, I murmur.

»Drop by more often«, Jan says. »I think it would do you good. You don't look so great.« Easy for him to say. A piece of fried potato falls out of his mouth. He grins crookedly. Everything about him is crooked.

I nod. Then I slip away and hurry off with my head lowered.

My office is on the fifth floor. Since the pandemic we've had flexible desks, but that doesn't matter to me — I don't need anything except my laptop and my headset. Ravi, Hannah, Caro, and Tom looked at me this morning as if they'd seen a ghost. By

now they barely notice me anymore. I grab my laptop and hurry to the elevator, which takes me up to the eighth floor. It's a duplicate of the fifth.

The small HR conference room is designed exactly like ours; the only difference is a ridiculous motivational poster. My boss Patrick is sitting inside, nervously rocking back and forth on his chair. The light from the fluorescent tube reflects off his receding hairline. At the same time I enter, a man in a suit comes in through the other door. The window is open; rain-soaked air flows inside. The gray outside perfectly matches the gray inside. The view is of another concrete pillar rising into the sky, filled with people just like us, working.

Patrick starts smiling when he sees me. The HR guy looks expressionless and gestures for me to sit down.

After a few seconds, the HR guy nods at Patrick.

»Glad this worked out«, Patrick says. »We haven't seen you in the office in the past months.«

I look at him and say nothing.

Sweat beads form on his forehead. Not a good sign for me. »You've been here very rarely in recent months.«

»So?«

»Well, the pandemic is over, and everyone is allowed to come back in.«

»I know.«

The two of them exchange helpless looks.

»I know«, I repeat. »But you also know that I'm a severe asthmatic, right? For me this is all a bit more dangerous than for most people. I'm not as confident as you are yet.«

»Well...«, the HR man says.

»I do my work from home at least as thoroughly as I do in the office. My reviews are excellent, all my targets for 2023 were met, and I'll meet the 2024 ones too. At the moment, I see no reason

to change the way I work. On the contrary. At home I feel more comfortable and can work more calmly, because I don't have to fear getting infected and suffering a particularly severe course.«

»That's true«, Patrick says. »But ...«

The HR man makes a gesture I can't interpret. In fact, I can't read the man at all. He's sitting there in a turtleneck sweater under a coarse blazer with corduroy elbow patches. He looks like a walking teacher cliché. Is this the new office chic?

I stop really following the conversation. In my bag is a medical certificate from my doctor. They don't stand a chance anymore.

The subway is bursting at the seams. I should have worked longer so I wouldn't be exposed to so many people during rush hour. But I couldn't take it in the office anymore. The chatter isn't even the worst part — it's the other noises: the clicking of the mouse, the clatter of keyboards, Ravi's rattling breathing, Caro's finger tapping.

I barely got anything done today, and yet I'm completely exhausted.

And I'm even more exhausted when I get home. I didn't even manage to grab a sandwich at SUBWAY.

After standing under the shower for what feels like an eternity, trying to wash the city's grime off me, my food is waiting outside my apartment door. The delivery driver was too slow today; despite the thermal packaging the curry is only lukewarm, the rice already completely cold.

Then I notice something. A small note is stuck to my door. From my neighbor, the old woman who has asked me rather insistently a few times to help her with errands. Since I have my groceries delivered, I once ordered her list along with mine. It was too expensive for her. She didn't thank me, she just complained.

At least she sometimes accepts my mail. Today there's a package waiting for me at her place. I hate going into the stairwell after showering. It feels like all the dirt immediately sticks back to my body. But I don't want to wait until tomorrow either. So I get dressed, pull on gloves, and knock on her door.

She beams at me and wants to chat about this and that, but I say I don't have time, snatch the package from her hand, and hurry back into my apartment.

It rarely happens that I forget to eat. Today, for instance. I'm holding an LP in my hands. The label in the center reads *Test Pressing* and DEUS SALUTIS MEÆ.

For a long time I just stand there, holding the LP. I start sweating; my shirt is already damp at the back of my neck, and so is my ass crack. The excitement electrifies me, my fingertips tingle. How does a test pressing of DEUS SALUTIS MEÆ end up in my apartment? I put the LP down on the coffee table, sit in front of it, eventually take the remaining curry onto my lap and start eating. I get a headache. Normally I'd listen to music now, but the pain quickly swells into a massive beast raging inside my skull.

It's 7:30 p.m. I turn off the light and go to bed.

I wake up at 7:00 a.m. feeling like I've partied all night. My skin is sticky with sweat, my back aches, my legs are heavy as lead. It's still dark outside, and I hope it stays that way all day. At least the weather will remain bad today — sleet and storms. Once I'm fit again, I can get to work and maybe be done around 5:30.

After two large cups of coffee, I sit down at my desk and start with something less intense. I begin the day with an album I've loved since my teenage years. *Aspera Hiems Symfonia* is exactly what the title promises. I feel like I'm flying as I model sequences

of numbers, turning statistics into a symphony of digits. Another coffee and I'm up to operating temperature.

In the next hour, I accomplish more than the others in my team do in an entire day. I've put on another album by now, staying in the same vein, *Soulblight*, which I always liked better than its predecessor *Witchcraft*.

At 10:30 there's a meeting I have no desire to attend. I stay muted the entire time, listening now and then, then drifting off again. I filter out everything unimportant — which is most of it.

From 2 p.m. onward my eyes grow tired, my fingers cramp. By now I'm listening to music that can run quietly in the background while I focus on data cleansing as intensely as possible.

When I finish my work for the day at 5:30 p.m. as planned, I feel good. It was a productive day. Only one meeting, no conversations, and generally no need to interact with other people.

I should really go outside for a bit. Right next to the residential complex where my small apartment is, there's a little park. But at this time of day too many people seek recreation there — even on a day with weather as dreadful as today's. The fact that the park is so meticulously maintained irritates me as well. Nature isn't meant to entertain us; it's meant to put us in our place. A park isn't nature anyway — it's a human-distorted imitation of what people believe nature to be. It's repulsive.

So I stay home and suddenly notice an album by DEUS SALUTIS MEÆ in my music library that I haven't listened to yet. When I sit on the balcony with a cup of tea in my hand and the rumble of the train line tickling my feet, the music drags me into a chaotic maelstrom. I think I hear words that definitely aren't audible in the music — yet the words are there. I know what they mean: Hebrew psalms. And yet I've never engaged with

religion in my entire life. Somewhere in my brain this knowledge must be stored; otherwise I wouldn't recognize them.

The music pulls me deeper and deeper into the abyss. Dissonances upon dissonances — ones no human mind could reasonably invent — screw their way into my head. And yet it sounds so familiar that tears well up in my eyes. From the layers of sound unfolds a panorama unlike anything I've ever heard, and yet I know these sounds have always been stored inside me.

The album ended two hours ago, then I realize I'm still sitting on the balcony, staring into the night. I'm freezing miserably and barely manage to pull myself inside. In the bathroom, I turn the shower as hot as it will go. I almost forget to undress before stepping under the stream. Nothing in my head seems to work anymore, I am afraid.

At least the shower — gradually turned ice-cold — clears my head a bit. Then the obvious occurs to me: the online encyclopedia for everything related to underground music must have something on this. Normally the site is very up to date; real nerds are active there.

But nothing. No mention of a new album, compilation, or collaboration by DEUS SALUTIS MEÆ that I don't know. Maybe the site just hasn't been updated yet, I think, and decide to check again tomorrow.

I want to put on the test pressing that arrived by mail yesterday — but I can't find it. Not the LP, not the box, not a sleeve, nothing. I turn the entire apartment upside down, suspecting the record in every corner. It drives me insane. Every time I misplace something, it obsesses me — even after it turns up again, I can't suppress the urge to keep searching.

But this time, I doubt my own sanity. Yesterday at the office, with all those people around me, was exhausting and draining. My memory of that day is already blurred, as if I hadn't really been there at all, as if it were only a dream. Did I actually just dream the scene with the LP?

The noise of the city seeps into my small apartment, so I close all the windows and sit down on the couch. Something urges me to do a short meditation—something I haven't done in years, but within moments I'm back in the same trance state I used to reach eight years ago, when I still meditated regularly.

By the fifth breath I'm calmer. Yesterday was a long, exhausting day. The many smells of people around me, the bad light, the cramped subway, the constant chatter in the streets, in the cafeteria, in the office — this sensory overload led to an intense dream.

And how on earth would a test pressing of DEUS SALUTIS MEÆ even reach me? The band isn't exactly known for making money off stuff like that. They don't run stupid giveaways, and I certainly don't participate in them.

DEUS SALUTIS MEÆ are as sincere as they are insane. They turned the black metal game completely upside down and still managed to stay away from the hype, even though everyone likes them — the *true* idiots as well as the post-black metal hipsters. Even if they'd never admit it.

I personally ordered all three albums, but that only works through their label in Spain. Shipping was obscenely expensive — since COVID, all the parcel services have gone completely mad.

Suddenly I feel like listening to their current album *Tantrakatharsis*, and shortly afterwards I'm drawn into an intoxication of tremolo riffs, dissonances, blast beats, and that strangely high-pitched singing. The ambient textures and field

recordings in the background give the music more depth, and I shiver every time the industrial beats rise up out of the buzzing, whirring guitar vortex on the B-side. I really know very little music released in the last ten years that is simultaneously this relevant and new – and yet so familiar.

When I open my eyes, it's 5:30 in the morning. I'm still sitting on the couch, wearing the same clothes as the night before. The shirt stinks and my pants cling to me.

Just as I'm about to stand up and get one more hour of sleep in bed, I see a key lying on the coffee table. A bare, simple key, like one for my apartment door. Even the logo of the locksmith is stamped into the metal. Is this a spare key to my apartment? The teeth don't match, and yet I try it in my door. As expected, nothing happens.

Following an impulse, I go to the elevator, ride down to the ground floor, and try to unlock the entrance door with the key. When it works, I feel as if the ground is pulled out from under my feet.

Whose key is this? That thought occupies my mind throughout the entire workday. Not even the music I'm listening to drives it away – and today it's *666 International*, one of my five favorite albums of all time.

I don't know anyone in this building except the old neighbor who occasionally takes my mail, and the key doesn't fit her apartment door either. (I waited until she left the building and then tried unlocking her door.)

»What was going on with you?«, asks Anke, my superior's boss. She looks at me sympathetically while Patrick can't hide his anger and disappointment.

»Such careless mistakes might happen to a new employee or trainee — but not to someone like you.«

I sit there motionless. I'm shocked by my own failure as well. As a statistician, making a mistake often has little to no impact. But if the statistics lead to fundamentally false assumptions about purchasing behavior for our three biggest clients, that's a problem.

Not a single faux pas has happened to me in recent years; my workflow is automated. It must have something to do with that office day a few weeks ago. That threw me off my rhythm—clearly.

Instead of justifications, all I offer is silence. No *I-was-distracted-because-I-had-to-work-in-the-office*, and no *but-the-others-mess-up-more-often*.

»How indifferent can someone be, causing chaos that drives one of our A-clients into an existential crisis?«, Patrick suddenly shouts.

I can't move, frozen in place. Of course I didn't want any of this — it was a mistake, one I can't even explain to myself..

Justifying myself is something I've never done. Lazy excuses don't help — never have, never will. So I remain silent. Instead of saying *sorry, I'm not feeling well right now, I'm sleeping badly, strange things are happening in my apartment* — I say nothing. Even though all of that is true.

Patrick's outburst works in my favor, though. Anke is the good cop.

»How about you take a long weekend? Take Thursday and Friday off. Are you in a relationship?«

I shake my head.

»Okay«, Anke says, giving Patrick a meaningful look.

I cut this farce short. »Thanks for the offer, Anke. You're right. I've barely taken any breaks in recent months. I think I'll

go visit my cousin in the Eifel for a few days. We haven't seen each other in years. It's his birthday the day after tomorrow — I could surprise him.«

Anke leans back, a winning smile crossing her face. »There you go — that sounds good.«She nods toward Patrick, who pulls a face and forces out a strained »Great idea.«

Of course I'm not going to visit my cousin in the Eifel. I don't have a cousin there. Fuck you, fictional cousin — and fuck you, Eifel.

Back home, a tingling quickly spreads through my feet and my stomach tightens. An exhaustion unlike anything I've ever felt comes over me, and at the same time I'm seized by a violent restlessness. Like a caffeine rush. Only many times more intense.

And yet I initially let myself sink onto the couch and decide to put on something calming. The kind of music that puts me into a meditative state. It can be any genre; it's not about style but about the fundamental feeling underlying the music. Duke Ellington as much as KVIST, Arvo Pärt as much as MORBID ANGEL, DJ Shadow as much as NEUROSIS, Townes Van Zandt as much as ULCERATE. But contrary to the usual effect, it doesn't work. I'm jittery, unable to settle on any music. Trying to calm my body through exercise or masturbation does nothing — I feel far too nervous and overstimulated. And meditation is completely out of the question.

My entire life, since I was seven years old and saw my uncle's LP *The Number of the Beast* at his place, I've had only music. He willingly told me all about it, let me listen to *Hallowed Be Thy Name*, which to this day remains one of the best songs ever written for me. Until he died of cancer at 39, I was only 13 at the time, he was my only real point of reference besides my mother,

who has no affinity for art, science, or reason. *Hallowed Be Thy Name* is what electrifies me- This intensity, this emotion, this spirit of the times. And so that we don't remain stuck in the past, the zeitgeist has to keep evolving. And only black metal has that potential: the last great musical rebellion.

I must have drifted off somehow. It's 11 p.m. now, and a different kind of exhaustion fills me, like I've accomplished something over the last five hours, even though I can only remember sitting on the couch. My mood improved slightly thanks to *Live After Death* by IRON MAIDEN, and then there's nothing until just now. At least five hours are missing.

I hate it when this phase comes, but this time it's far worse than usual. The repression doesn't work; I realize that every few months I feel these holes, time that has slipped away from me.

Cold sweat sticks my clothes to my body. In this moment I know that in maybe two weeks I'll already remember nothing of these evenings. These evenings when I find keys, when I receive strange mail, when I feel as if I've been incredibly productive.

Then I see markings on the palm of my right hand. As if I'd made notes there. That horrifies me, shakes me to my core. I'm right-handed. How could I write something on my right palm?

If only I could decipher what it says. They're abbreviations, letters—or occult symbols? If I hadn't lost my voice, I'd be screaming at the top of my lungs right now. And why is my voice gone? What's wrong with me?

My gaze falls on the coffee table. The key lies there exactly as it did yesterday. But now there's a tag attached.

It bears an address. My address. And: *15th floor*. But this building only has fourteen floors.

Instantly I'm wide awake. The next moment I'm at the door, the key in my hand. I run up the dimly lit stairwell. Nine flights. Adrenaline floods my body, so I feel no exhaustion at all when, minutes later, I stand on the fourteenth floor. The stairwell ends here, except for a fire ladder leading to the roof. I climb up but can't push it open.

My last idea is the elevator. I look at the buttons, only 0 to 14. After blinking once, there's another button. 15. My pulse races as I try to breathe slowly. Then the doors close and I ride up one floor.

With an unceremonious *ping*, the doors open and I'm standing on the roof of the residential complex. On it stands something like a shack, cordoned off. Of course the key fits the lock marked D-S-M, and I go inside.

The lights are still on. A laptop sits on a desk; next to it is a surprisingly large mixing console. When I turn around, I see an armada of guitars, basses, and synthesizers.

The room is neither cold nor ugly; it's beautiful. Functional, minimalist, but very stylish. Exactly what I myself love. And it's even heated – on top of a building.

The studio draws me in magnetically. In my mind, a switch flips. I sit down at the PC and open the browser: DEUS SALUTIS MEÆ, with countless subfolders, numbered by year.

Right. My work is almost finished, it dawns on me. Album number five—nearly complete. A dissonant symphony, eight songs in just under an hour. Not much is missing. Earlier, I lost myself in this work for hours, trying to figure out what was too much and what was too little. When I was done, overwhelmed by a wave of exhaustion on the couch, I had an inspiration and noted it on the palm of my hand.

This album will be better than everything that came before. I can tell because the boundaries between DEUS SALUTIS MEÆ

and the human behind it are blurring like never before. Maybe it should be my last album.

But I thought that before.

And before that.

And before that.

Just a few more days and album number five will be finished.
A few more months, and I can release it.

Trust the process.

Thanks to Mario Grummt for editing and proofreading, and to BLUT AUS NORD / Vindsval for the inspiration.

Translated with the help of AI.

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