

THE LUGER

by PAUL BROWN

PETER was beginning to doze when the knock came at the door. He opened his eyes and listened. He expected no visitors. He lived alone in a small flat in a suburb of Amsterdam and, since his retirement, he valued his solitude. Peter sat up in his high-backed chair and looked out of the window at the canal below. Rain pattered against the windowpane, and the tarmac on the streets was dark and glazed. Drops of rain met the surface of the canal like tiny pin pricks. There was no one in the street. No locals, no dog walkers, no tourists in brightly coloured raincoats. It was a grey day.

Another knock, louder this time. Peter grasped the arms of his chair and gradually raised himself to his feet. Of course he was not as fit as he had once been. Now the damp weather upset his knees and stiffened his ankles. Previously Peter would leave the flat every morning, to buy a newspaper or groceries, or to take a stroll by the canal. Now he would enjoy sitting and watching the world through his window.

Peter straightened himself out and slowly made his way to the door, past the old coffee table and battered sofa, and the tall

display case containing his collection. The flat was old, the wallpaper peeling in places, but it was cosy and safe and warm. Peter stepped up to the door and put an eye to the peephole. A young man in a suit and raincoat was checking his watch on the stairwell.

‘Who’s there?’ said Peter.

The young man coughed to clear his throat and said, ‘I’m looking for Mr Voorjens.’

‘Who are you?’ said Peter.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ said the man. ‘My name is Arnold Numan. I have something for Mr Voorjens. May I come in?’

Peter clipped the doorchain into its latch, unlocked the bolt, and pulled the door partway open. The hinges creaked and Arnold Numan smiled. His hair and shoulders were damp, as if he had been in the rain for only a short time.

‘What do you have?’ said Peter.

Arnold tapped the brown leather briefcase at his side and said, ‘It’s all in here, Mr Voorjens.’

Peter thought for a moment. The young man’s shoes were spattered with rainwater, and he beamed widely through the door crack.

‘Do you have any identification,’ said Peter.

‘No, Mr Voorjens,’ said Arnold. ‘I’m not from any official body. I’m from... Can I let you see?’

Peter unclipped the doorchain and pulled open the door.

‘Thank you,’ said Arnold, stepping into the flat. Drops of rainwater fell from his overcoat onto the worn carpet. He took Peter’s hand and shook it firmly. ‘My name, as I say, is Arnold Numan, and I’m from Kriger Investments.’

Peter sighed and said, ‘I’m not interested in investments.’

‘Ah!’ said Arnold. ‘Who is? Who is, Mr Voorjens? It’s a terribly boring subject. But not one we should lightly dismiss. May I sit down?’

Arnold pushed himself into the room, unbuttoned his raincoat, and sat on Peter’s saggy sofa. Peter closed the front door,

wandered back to his chair and slowly lowered himself into it. Arnold opened his briefcase and removed a file full of papers. He sniffled a little as he did so.

‘I think I’m coming down with a cold. It’s the weather,’ he said. He opened the file and flicked through it. ‘Voorjens, Voorjens, Voorjens... Ah yes, Mr Voorjens. You have a company pension from...’

‘Murit and Son,’ said Peter.

‘Murit and Son. Of course. The firm of solicitors.’

‘Draughtsmen,’ said Peter.

‘Of course. And you’re married?’

‘My wife died eleven years ago,’ said Peter.

‘That’s right. Let me tell you something, Mr Voorjens. Let me tell you something right from the off. I have something here. I have something here that you may well have absolutely no interest in. You may have no interest at all, and, if that is the case, then I will bid you a friendly farewell and leave and take this thing that I have to someone else. But I am going to show you it. You may well have no interest in what I am going to show you, but I am going to show you anyway.’

Arnold cleared away a memorabilia magazine and a television remote control from Peter’s coffee table and placed them on the floor. Then he took a large laminated card from his briefcase. He opened the card and placed it on the table facing Peter. On it were pictures of coloured rocks.

‘Do you know what they are, Mr Voorjens?’ said Arnold, pointing at the card. ‘They are precious stones. A diamond, a ruby, a sapphire, and that is an emerald. Why am I showing you these precious stones? Let me tell you. What is the number one thing a man desires when he reaches your age? Financial security? Wrong. He desires financial security for *his children*. His children and grandchildren. It’s peace of mind, isn’t it? When you are gone, you can be safe in the knowledge that your children will be looked after.’

‘My children are fine,’ said Peter.

‘Do you know anything about investments, Mr Voorjens? I’m guessing you don’t, but let me tell you this: Ninety-nine percent of all investments are a waste of time. This is because they rely on something called *the stock market*. We live in troubled times, Mr Voorjens. Everything fluctuates. We can rely on very little. We certainly cannot rely on the stock market. But what if there was an investment that relied on a solid commodity that *never loses value*? What if the value of this investment could rise but never fall? Take a look at the stones, Mr Voorjens.’

Arnold picked up the memorabilia magazine from the floor and began to thumb through it, the newsprint pages fluttering between his fingers. It contained advertisements, large picture ads and small text classifieds for military uniforms, guns and badges. Then he looked up and around the room, and spied the display case.

‘You collect war memorabilia? Second World War? May I take a look? While you look at the stones?’

Arnold stood up from the sofa and walked over to the case. It was glass-fronted, and stood from the floor to the ceiling. Items were presented on shelves and hooks against a baize background. This was the hobby that Peter had taken up shortly after Stella’s death.

‘What I’m offering you, Mr Voorjens, is a chance to invest in a selection of premium precious stones,’ said Arnold, poring over the display case. ‘Our company has a secure facility in Switzerland containing over three thousand of the world’s finest stones. What you’re looking at there on your coffee table is... Jesus. Is this all real?’

‘Yes,’ said Peter. ‘It’s all real.’

Inside the case was an original SS uniform, cleaned and pressed, with peaked cap, grey jacket and trousers, and long black boots. It was complete with patches, badges, and sash, a metal swastika belt buckle, a leather holster, and a ceremonial dagger engraved with a message from Heinrich Himmler. Alongside it were framed propaganda posters, old photographs,

original U-Boat and Panzer badges, and, the most prized of his possessions, a P-08 Luger. Every week Peter carefully stripped the pistol, first removing the magazine, then the takedown lever, next slipping off the side plate, then the barrel, the toggle, and the bolt. Each piece was carefully polished, the barrel was wiped with a cleaning rod, and the wooden grip was scrubbed with oil soap.

‘May I take a closer look?’ said Arnold. He pulled at the door of the display case.

‘It’s locked,’ said Peter.

‘Do you want to unlock it?’ said Arnold. Then he saw the key was in the lock. He turned it, and pulled open the glass doors.

‘Mr Numan, I don’t want to invest in your diamonds,’ said Peter.

Arnold reached into the case and pulled out the Luger.

‘Mr Numan, thank you very much, but I’m not interested in your offer,’ said Peter.

‘This must be worth a fortune,’ said Arnold, admiring the pistol. ‘How much did you pay for it?’

‘I didn’t buy it,’ said Peter, shifting in his seat.

‘Isn’t it illegal in our country to buy Nazi memorabilia, Mr Voorjens?’

‘Please, Mr Numan,’ said Peter, ‘I don’t mean any offence, but I’d like you to leave.’

‘Don’t worry, Mr Voorjens, I’ll be leaving just as soon as we’re finished here. Take a look at the stones.’

‘I don’t want to look at your stones.’ Peter picked up the laminated card and placed it on top of Arnold’s file. ‘Please take your things and leave. I have things to do. And I’m expecting visitors any time now.’

Arnold ran his finger along the barrel of the pistol. He wiped away some rainwater that had run from his hair to his face.

‘Mr Numan,’ said Peter, ‘I must insist that you leave right away.’

‘You know, Mr Voorjens, I’m sure that the police would be very interested to hear about your little collection.’

‘Please leave,’ said Peter.

‘What are you?’ said Arnold. ‘A bloody Nazi?’

The soldiers came in the spring of 1940. Dutch military resistance lasted five days. After that the soldiers marched into Amsterdam and stayed for almost five years. Peter lived through the Nazi occupation of Holland, but his father did not. Edward Voorjens was a tall, slim man who owned a printing press in the city. Many of his friends were Jews. Edward published the *Joodse Weekblad* for them.

At first, everything was the same. Soldiers in smart uniforms stood on street corners smoking cigarettes and laughing. Most were fearful of them, but some Dutch girls spoke to them and were given cigarettes. Then the Germans began to transport Jewish families to the East to find work. Neighbours disappeared without saying goodbye. The Davids lived right next door. Leanna David was due to be married in the spring. Over dinner, Peter’s mother would ask him which of his friends were missing from school. He would tell her that Harold Sobel and George Pelski, and others from his class, had been absent for days. And she would cry. Then the *Weekblad* reported that the families had not been sent to find work. They had been sent to Buchenwald and Mauthausen, to Auschwitz and Sobibor. Peter knew nothing of these places, but their names filled his mind with terror.

Peter last saw his father on a December evening in 1942. He watched him through a frosted windowpane as he walked along the cobbled street towards their home. He was smartly dressed, wearing a thick woollen coat over a suit, and carrying a brown paper parcel under his arm. Two SS officers stepped from a doorway and pushed Peter’s father into a car. The car started away and was gone even before Peter could call for his mother. A city official said Edward Voorjens had been taken to Mauthausen. He never returned.

Peter and his mother spent the rest of the war claiming tiny victories against the Nazis. Peter would sell the soldiers lemonade made with urine. His mother would swap rationed foods with neighbours and cook forbidden feasts. They would write letters to Mauthausen and place the German stamp in the top left corner of the envelope, reserving the top right corner for the face of their own Queen Wilhelmina. Then, on Prince Bernard's birthday, the Dutch people took to the streets wearing orange carnations. Hundreds of them, holding hands, walked through the mist along the length of the canal as the Germans looked on.

And then it was all over. Peter stood in the snow on the pavement outside his mother's house as the Germans marched out. They no longer marched in time. One soldier broke rank and reached into his belt. He held out the Luger, and Peter took hold of the handle. The soldier's eyes were tired and watery beneath a creased brow. He offered a sad half-smile, like a defeated boxer. Then he turned to rejoin his unit. Peter felt the weight of the gun in his hand, and the soldiers marched around the corner of the street and were gone forever.

Arnold packed the file and laminated card into his briefcase and closed it at the clasp. 'I'm very sorry you're not interested in this investment. I must admit I feel I've wasted my time here. Perhaps my offer will be more suited to one of your neighbours. Do your neighbours know about your little collection, Mr Voorjens?'

'Please leave,' said Peter.

'I'll leave,' said Arnold. He fastened up his raincoat, picked up his briefcase, and stepped back to the display case. Peter watched as he picked up the Luger again. Arnold shut one eye, held the pistol up to his line of sight, and began to aim it variously around the room, at plant pots, at picture frames, at the television set. Then he stepped to the window and aimed the gun down into the puddled streets.

'Please, please leave,' said Peter.

‘Or what?’ said Arnold. ‘You’ll telephone the police? With this collection in your flat? This sick collection? Don’t worry, Mr Voorjens, I’m leaving.’ He stepped towards the door, the pistol still in his hand.

‘Don’t take the gun,’ said Peter.

‘*Don’t take the gun?*’ said Arnold, face reddening. ‘Let me tell you something. I had grandparents who lived through the occupation of this city. Stood up against animals like you.’ He pointed the gun at Peter’s head. ‘Do you know how many innocent people were taken from this city and killed? Thousands. More than ten thousand.’ He began to spit. ‘Ten, fifteen thousand people. You sick...’

Arnold’s breathing quickened, and saliva bubbled at his lips. At the end of his outstretched arm his right index finger trembled over the trigger of the Luger.

Then Peter stared into the barrel of the gun and spoke. ‘I have a friend who keeps snakes,’ he said. ‘Poisonous snakes. He has been bitten twice, and almost died. But he won’t give up his collection. I hate the Luger, the uniform, and everything else I have collected. But I can’t allow you to take it from me.’

Arnold’s grip tightened around the pistol, and he took a deep breath. For a moment the two men listened to the rain tapping on the windowpane.

Then Arnold said, ‘You Nazi bastard,’ and pulled the trigger.

The gun clicked harmlessly. Neither man said anything. Arnold released a long exhale, and threw the Luger onto the sofa. He turned, opened the front door, and stepped out into the stairwell, pulling the door behind him.

Peter sat for a short while listening to the rain. The breeze made it roll as it fell. Then he gripped the arms of his chair and raised himself to his feet. He stood for a moment and straightened himself out. The electric fire made a clicking noise and the bars glowed red. He picked up the Luger and carried it to the display case. Taking a cloth from the case, he polished the barrel, the body, and the grip. He replaced the pistol, ran his hand over

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the SS uniform, and carefully closed the case. Through the walls of the flat he heard a neighbour playing piano music. Then he went back to his chair, sat down, and looked out of the window.

Two children were playing in puddles by the canal. There was blue sky in the distance. Soon the rain would stop.

