

BATTLE WITHOUT HONOR OR HUMANITY
VOLUME 2

**BATTLE WITHOUT
HONOR OR
HUMANITY**

VOLUME 2

TRAUMATIZE THE SOLAR PLEXUS

D. HARLAN WILSON

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For Sensei.

“The lamprey seeks a silver fish
in the green lagoon.”

—W.S.B., *Word*

Hawgstrüffel

He stood on the roof and blinked at the stars. His name was Hawgstrüffel. He didn't look anything like his name and yet every gesture, every glance, every spoken word was an attempt to assert an identity that the name promised and reliably failed to deliver.

Somebody killed Hawgstrüffel. They dragged his body off of the roof and flung it into a ditch near the interstate.

It went unnoticed for months.

A motorist named Grängeer discovered it. He had lost control of his vehicle and crashed into a signpole. The sun got in his eyes. He was hiking back to the motel on I-96 to call a tow truck when he encountered the bloated corpse of Hawgstrüffel.

It rested among the cattails and the stalks like an empty rucksack.

Alarmed, Grängeer picked up his pace, but by the time he reached the motel, he had forgotten about Hawgstrüffel

Hawgstrüffel

as well as his car. He booked a room and took a shower, admiring the grout that held the showertiles together. He turned on the TV and climbed into bed, disavowing the unpleasant sensation of stiff, starched sheets.

Somebody killed Grängeer. It may have been the motel's groundskeeper, Wendelmoët, who had been hiding in the closet, fingers clutching the saltpeter blinds of a sliding door panel.

There was no gunshot.

Wendelmoët succumbed to a crippling depression. Unable to cope with the prospect of committing murder, he rushed to see Njäl, his therapist.

[TERRIFIC PAUSE]

“What are you thinking?” asked Njäl after a terrific pause.

“I'm thinking about your neck,” responded Wendelmoët. “You have a thin neck. It makes your head look like a balloon or something.” He studied his head. “But your head isn't as big as all that. Not in and of itself.” He studied his neck. “You have a thin neck,” he repeated, and made a snapping gesture.

Striking preemptively, Njäl leapt onto the chaise and strangled Wendelmoët with his tie. This occurred just as his secretary, Hildebert, entered the room to ask if anybody wanted coffee, so Njäl had to strangle him too.

After a series of deceptions and evasions, Thörstenson, Jürgen and Diederik took Njäl into custody. The detectives bound him by the wrists and ankles with nickel-plated cuffs, stuffed him into an unmarked vehicle, and drove

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him to prison. They ran several red lights and rolled every stop sign, sirens blaring like broken pelicans.

There was a concerted interrogation. Nobody tortured Njäl. Nobody even raised their voice to him. But he spilled his guts anyway.

Somebody killed Njäl. They left him in his cell, artfully draped across the lower bunk.

There was no cellmate.

Thörstenson, Jürgen and Diederik sort of looked at each other and wondered what to do. "Njäl is dead," Jürgen remarked. Thörstenson and Diederik nodded in consternation and scratched themselves.

Jürgen pecked at the floor with the toe of his shoe.

By the time Gelderlöö showed up, Thörstenson, Jürgen and Diederik had fled the crime scene. He assumed the arresting officers were dead. "Everybody dies," Gelderlöö reminded the deputy sheriff, Björn, ribbing him. He laughed perfunctorily and poured himself an aperitif. Police chiefs like Gelderlöö didn't have to answer to anybody except mayors and Ingegärd was on vacation.

Something happened to Gelderlöö and Björn. Everybody figured they got killed.

As Vanderzüid, the forensics expert-in-residence, inspected the bodies, he wondered if the aperitif had been spiked with something. The glass had exploded when Gelderlöö allegedly dropped it and left behind a telltale stain on the floor. But that didn't account for Björn. Additionally, there were no traces of anything poisonous in Gelderlöö's system, by Vanderzüid's reckoning, and in fact Gelderlöö's heart was still beating. So was Björn's.

Hawgstrüffel

As if sensing Vanderzüid's concentrated attention, both hearts skipped, then flatlined.

Nothing happened to Vanderzüid. Everything turned out all right for him.

Ött, on the other hand, preferred to be called Ütne, since Ött, in his view, failed to adequately reflect his selfhood and angle of incidence, whereas Ütne did just that.

Ött had no connection to Vanderzüid, Björn, Gelderlöö, Diederik, Jürgen, Thörstenson, or anybody else. He was just a man with a name.

Nothing happened to Ött either. Not for awhile anyway. Something was going on.

Ött met Vanderzüid at a café to talk about being alive. They had never met before. "It's Ütne," blurted Ött as they shook hands.

"Ütne?" said Vanderzüid.

"Yes. Ütne," said Ött. "Ütne. *Ütne*."

They sat down near the dessert carousel and a waiter brought them a menu. There was only one item on it.

Espresso.

"Two espressos please," said Vanderzüid. "Then dessert."

The waiter told them there was only one espresso. As the menu indicated.

"One espresso please," exclaimed Ött, then leaned over the table and whispered to Vanderzüid, "We'll share it."

Vanderzüid ran a gray fingernail across the glass of the dessert carousel.

The waiter never came back . . .

At home, Ött took his time making the guacamole. He peeled a fresh avocado, put it in a bowl and mashed it up

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with a shellback spoon. He added chopped red onion, diced cherry tomatoes, lime juice and a crushed clover of garlic. He arranged a fan of water crackers around the finished product. Before he started eating, he had to clean the garlic press. He hated cleaning the garlic press. It was hard to get residua out of the holes. It might have been his least favorite thing to do in life.

Somebody called Ött on the phone. He picked up the receiver.

“Ütne here,” he bellowed.

“Nobody’s ever been alive as long as you,” said a voice. It sounded like a ghost, reedy and echoic.

It sounded like Hawgstrüffel.

“Hawgstrüffel?” said Ött.

There was a faraway moan . . . interrupted by the sonic dissonance of a passing supertrain. Then the line went dead.

Distraught, Ött abandoned the guacamole. No time.

He went to the pool and took off his clothes and applied suntan lotion and ordered a margarita. The waiter skipped away excitedly and put in the order with the bartender. Ött reclined on a lounge chair and closed his eyes and thought about what it would feel like to die. The dissolution of consciousness. The prospect terrified him and he got up and put his clothes back on and went back home and locked and bolted the front door and the back door and the attic door. All this happened before the margarita had even been served, depressing the bartender, who had put considerable effort into the drink, how it tasted and how it looked, and when the waiter delivered the news, he experienced a minor breakdown.

Hawgstrüffel

As if in retaliation for the act of impertinence, somebody killed Ött.

It was Vanderzüid. The murder had nothing to do with the margarita.

Vanderzüid had received a similar phone call from a man or a ghost whose name may or may not have been Hawgstrüffel.

He waited outside Ött's house until Ött came home and the sun went down and then he poured a lot of gasoline onto the exterior of the house and he also set up a number of explosives and finally Vanderzüid lit a match.

Rationale: *Only one of us can live forever.*

More importantly, Vanderzüid didn't like the pretense of Ött referring to himself as Ütne. Deflecting one's signature is the stuff of anarchy, the quintessence of failure.

Later, Vanderzüid tried to call Hawgstrüffel and tell him what happened, but Grängeer or Wendelmoët or Njäl or Thörstenson or Jürgen or Diederik or Gelderlöö or Björn or somebody else answered the phone and all they did was make loud wooshing noises, so Vanderzüid hung up and took a moment to collect himself. He was worried but confident. He was insecure but determined. He was fearful but adamant.

He stood in the ash and blinked at the stars.