

Extract from the novel

A Hidden Man

by Christopher Kloeble

Translation: Katy Derbyshire

Ambrosial

In the sky, the last two clouds floated towards one another. An out-of-focus arrow and a puffy, lily-white something that offered no scope for similes.

Below them stood Albert, flanked by his suitcases, outside a front door in the village of Königsdorf, looking at the doorbell and not daring to ring it. By that afternoon he had over nineteen hours of travel behind him, on the night train, the regional train and the number 479 bus. The driver had halted at every single stop in the foothills of the Alps, from *Pföderl* via *Wolfsöd* to *Höfen*, although no one had got either on or off, and now that he had so little ground to cross Albert wasn't sure he even wanted to arrive.

He had been visiting Fred in the holidays and at weekends for sixteen years, originally accompanied by a nun from Saint Helena's Catholic Orphanage and later alone, yet they had never grown particularly close. Fred always called him simply Albert and Albert called him simply Fred. He had never said Father to him. When he turned five, and Fred forty-six – that was in 1988 – Albert made sure Fred wore his water wings when they leapt into the lake hand in hand. At the age of eight, Albert paid at the till for Fred, as he didn't need to use his fingers to work out the change, unlike Fred. At thirteen, Albert persuaded Fred not to become an actor. (Fred only abandoned his dream because he was scared of being watched at work.) Aged fifteen, Albert tried to teach Fred the facts of life but he didn't want to talk about it. When Albert was sixteen he was still making sure Fred wore his water wings. And even before his eighteenth birthday Albert finally accepted that a man like Fred, whose voice had never broken and who thought

reproduction meant gardening, would never regard him as his son, let alone call him that. Fred was simply Fred.

Most of Albert's friends had gone abroad after they had finished school. Australia and Cambodia were very popular; when you came back from a journey to Angkor or the Outback, you'd not only found yourself but you also had an idea of what you wanted to do with your life. Or so they said. Albert - who had never understood why some people assumed that answers not even to be found in their immediate surroundings might be waiting abroad - had stayed at Saint Helena's, incapable of making a decision about his future. Which is why he had decided to move in with Fred, and as he stood outside Fred's house that afternoon he didn't know what he expected of the move; all he knew was, whatever it was they didn't have much time left for it.

The doctor had held up the fingers of one manicured hand, and Albert had wondered whether he always did that, whether he preferred to state the number of months his patients had to live with his fingers to spare himself from finding the right words. Five fingers. Albert had barely paid any attention, had taken Fred by the hand and left the hospital with him and refused to react to the doctor's calls - in person or later by telephone.

He had talked a lot on the way home so that he didn't have to speak to Fred, mostly about the weather, in the hope that Fred hadn't noticed the doctor's gesture.

'How many have you got, Albert?' Fred had interrupted.

'How many what?'

'Fingers. How many fingers have you got until you're dead?'

Albert had stood still. 'I don't know.'

'Why not? I've got five. Is that good?'

'That's... that's pretty good.'

'I knew it!' A laugh of relief. 'Hey Albert, I bet you've got loads of fingers.'

Albert had left that same evening to face his school-leaving exams – in the light of the news, he had regarded them as an obligation at least as ridiculous as his decision to take them in the first place.

Two months had passed since then. Three fingers left. The heat pressed against Albert's skull. Defying all weather forecasts, the summer had been refusing a storm for weeks now. The grass in Fred's garden was rusty brown, even the grasshoppers' chirps sounded exhausted, and the glimmering heat on the main road outside played tricks on Albert's eyes.

He lowered his head, gripped the handle of his suitcase tightly and stood motionless as the door in front of him opened and Fred appeared on the landing. A gangling giant of six foot six, his head cocked in embarrassment.

They stared at each other.

'Albert!' cried Fred in his little boy's voice, and before Albert knew what was going on he was lifted up and pressed against Fred's bony chest.

'Hello, Fred.'

'You're fat, Albert!'

'Thanks. You're looking good yourself.'

They smiled at each other, Albert rather smirking and Fred grinning happily.

'Is it the holidays again?' asked Fred.

'No, not this time. This time I'm staying longer.'

Fred looked at him with hope. 'Until when?'

'Until...' Albert evaded his eyes, 'As long as I can.'

'As long as you can might be pretty long!' cried Fred, clapping his hands in joy. 'That's ambrosial!'

'Pardon?'

'Ambrosial, page eleven,' he raised a reprimanding finger. 'You need to read the encyclopaedia more, Albert.'

Then he tore the suitcases away from him and marched into the house, Albert following him. He stopped in the hall. The sugary scent of Fred's home, which had welcomed him on every arrival over all these years, caught him off guard every time.

Fred turned to face him. 'Are you weak?'

'No,' Albert took a deep breath, 'I'm fine.'

He hung his jacket on a hook next to Fred's royal blue rain cape, spidery handwriting inside the collar warning: *Property of Frederick Arkadiusz Driajes!* The same name was pasted next to his doorbell.

Nobody addressed him by his full name; for most people he was simply Fred, with a long e, an orphan of pensionable age who spent half the day at Königsdorf's only bus stop, counting and waving at all the green cars that drove by on the main road. (Apart from that there were a few simpletons who hung around in the landlord's beer garden, one hand on their beer glasses, who claimed he was slow in the head and called him *Freddie*.)

As Fred put the cases down at the foot of the stairs and went ahead into the cool, darkened living room, Albert felt a déjà-vu coming, or rather: the déjà-vu of all his déjà-vus.

First they would sit down on a shabby cherry-red chaise longue, exactly where they always sat, and no matter what he touched,

thousands of crumbs would stick to Albert's hands, and that would remind him that it was his job now rather than the carer's to provide at least one hot meal a day, tie shoelaces, make sure Fred's teeth were brushed properly, keep the house clean. His eyes would alight on the map of the world on the wall, on which a circle of green felt pen supposed to mark Königsdorf marked Germany, and he'd ask Fred how he was, to which he would of course answer: 'ambrosial,' what else, only to ask Albert the next moment to read to him from his favourite book, the silver encyclopaedia, just like he'd done so often at bedtime or before his nap. Fred would snuggle up to him, lay his head in Albert's lap, close his eyes, and he'd feel warm, pleasantly warm despite the heat outside, and Albert wouldn't dare move, and he'd open the encyclopaedia randomly and start reading, perhaps at *Billboard*, and wouldn't get further than *Billiards*. Fred would snore and asleep he'd look younger than usual, in his mid-forties at most. Albert would close the encyclopaedia, place a cushion under Fred's head and lay a far too short fleece blanket over his far too long legs. He would eat something in the kitchen, calming his stomach with thick slices of rye bread as he looked out of the cracked and re-sealed window above the sink, two letters in its bottom left-hand corner, of which he knew neither who had carved them nor when, but in which he could read nothing else but the initials of his grandmother Anni Habom, six tiny scratches in finest Zorro style. Albert would lean over, his left hand resting on the sink, and breathe on the window, and he'd write his own initials on the misted pane next to his grandmother's, *AD*, as thick as his finger. And he'd watch them fade away. Then he'd go to his room on the first floor and make sure there was enough of Fred's medication in the drawer next to his bed. Only then would he heed the call of the

worn-out mattress and feel tiredness creeping up and not be able to sleep.

And that's just how it was, even though Albert kept telling himself he ought to feel something special, less a déjà-vu than a première-vu. This was the last time he'd be arriving, after all.

Albert had been lying on his bed for barely ten minutes, leaden, empty and with a scarf over his eyes because the sun was shining in through the curtains as if this day would never end, when Fred burst in: 'Are you asleep?'

Albert waved him over – what else could he do? – and Fred lay down next to him on the mattress. He had his diving suit on, which didn't surprise Albert; more the fact that he was wearing it despite the heat of the summer. Fred usually only wore the diving suit under his clothes to keep warm when he stood at the bus stop in the rain. Fred had inherited it from his father. 'It looks disgusting with nobody in it, like sausage skin,' was Fred's opinion. Sometimes Albert filled the bathtub with cold water, added a packet of salt and announced: 'Look! The Pacific!' And then Fred jumped into the water in his diving suit, splashing around like a drunken frog and complaining that his eyes were burning.

'Hey,' Albert looked closely at his chin, 'when did you last have a shave?'

Fred squinted. 'Yesterday.'

'Are you sure?'

Fred squinted again. 'Absolutely sure.'

'Looks like you missed a few bits.'

Squinting.

'Frederick...' (That was the version of his name that made everything sound slightly more convincing, or stricter if need be.)

'Mama says I look fine!'

Fred particularly liked to play the Anni card, to underline that this or that opinion wasn't the product of his own mind but that of a significantly higher instance. An instance that had last said anything to Fred sixteen years ago. Albert had been three at the time. His recollections of her could hardly be called memories; at times it seemed to him that he was merely imagining them, having inspected the many photos of her in Fred's house too often, comparing his face to hers in search of similarities.

Albert mimed a pair of scissors with two fingers and Fred covered his prickly beard with his hands: 'My papa has a blond beard!'

If you took Fred's word for it, Albert's grandfather had been a professional diver, one of only fifteen men in the whole world who could use a welder in absolute darkness on the bottom of the ocean, for repair work. When Fred was barely larger than the tummy he'd inhabited for nine months, his father had been sucked up by an open pipeline during one of these jobs, disappearing forever in a complex network of pipes and tubes. That was why someone else always had to flush the toilet for Fred. It got him even more agitated than shaving: 'My Papa's travelling through the tubes for ever and ever. Sometimes he's in America, sometimes in China and maybe one day in Königsdorf!'

Albert was used to it now, not even wondering any more who had told Fred such nonsense.

Albert got up, went into the bathroom, plugged in the shaver to charge the battery, and by the time he got back Fred was gone. Having searched the entire house, he found him in the garden in the BMW that Fred claimed had once belonged to his father. The speedster, Fred called it. As if it had been washed at a high temperature, the mint green of the paint indicated that the colour had once been much brighter. The rubber hung in ribbons from the tyres. The sound of the horn could be described at best as whining. The rough-rubbed leather upholstery smelled, Fred pronounced, yummy and whiffy like between his toes. An empty flowerpot held the left back door in its hinges. The key was always in the ignition.

Albert took a seat next to Fred, who was perched cross-legged behind the steering wheel. His stubble glinted in the sunlight and the encyclopaedia was resting on his lap. He had opened it at D. D for death. He pointed at an illustration of a Carrara marble gravestone.

'Will I get one like that?'

'Dove white.'

Fred shook his head. 'Swan white! That's even nicer. It has to be a very nice stone, Albert.'

'Deal,' said Albert. 'One swan-white gravestone for you.'

They fell silent for a while, and as the noise of cars zooming by on the main road died down and they were blinded by the sun one last time before it sunk into the moor, Albert remembered how he'd taught Fred to ride a bike on the pavement without stabilisers. He had run up and down alongside Fred, pushing him, firing him on, mending scraped knees with baby cream and wiping away crocodile tears after every fall, until Fred had cycled his first few yards without stabilisers at the end of the holidays, the wind blowing joy onto his face.

Fred had been forty-nine, Albert eight.

'Everyone always says dying's bad,' said Fred, admiring the picture of the gravestone with a dreamy look on his face, 'I don't think it is. I bet it's really different to that. I think it's great, like a huge surprise. I'm looking forward to it. You know what I'd like, Albert? I'd like to die with you. Except that'll be quite hard. I'm faster than you.'

Albert promised: 'I'll try and be quicker,' and Fred promptly grinned at him like a child – an aged child with bags under his eyes, grey temples and tiny wrinkles around his mouth.

'Mama says we're all part of the Story of the Most Beloved Possessions.'

'Is it a good story?'

Fred laughed as if Albert had asked an incredibly stupid question: 'It's the *Story of the Most Beloved Possessions!*'

'And what is a Most Beloved Possession?'

Fred snorted and rolled his eyes. Then he reached out an arm, opened the glove compartment and took out a dented tin, in which something made a rattling sound. As he opened the scratched lid Fred bent low over the tin to block Albert's view, as if he first wanted to make sure what he was expecting was still there. Then he held a chestnut-sized stone under Albert's nose, glinting metallic in the evening light. 'Take it!'

Describing his expression as proud would have been an understatement.

Albert weighed the Most Beloved Possession in his hand. It was surprisingly heavy and looked like a crumpled, fossilised sheet of rich yellow paper. A bizarre thought crossed his mind, which Fred promptly spoke out loud: 'Gold.'

'Real gold?'

He whispered: 'My Most Beloved Possession.'

Even though Albert gave a nod of respect and extended his lower lip, he was sceptical. The stone in his hand matched up precisely with his idea of gold, and it was just that which aroused his suspicion.

But Fred looked at him in excitement, the green of his eyes shimmering like the water of a pond that you're not sure is deep enough to jump into.

Albert returned his gaze, wishing once again that he could have simply asked Fred a question and Fred could have simply answered it. A perfectly normal conversation, that was what he wanted, with Fred understanding his words the way Albert meant them, and most of all he wished that all his damn doubts would dispel and he could believe Fred.

'Who did you get it from?' Albert asked, giving Fred back his 'gold nugget'.

Fred tucked it back into the tin, satisfied. 'The earth spat it out.' After a short pause he added with a glint in his eye: 'I can show you where!' When he looked at Albert like this, Fred seemed even stranger and more familiar to him than usual. Albert knew him well enough to sense that he didn't know him at all. At least in that respect, he seemed like any other father to him.

'Hm,' said Albert.

'Hm,' said Fred.

At that moment the neighbour's cockerel gave a sample of its croaky cock-a-doodle-doo. Fred pulled a face, 'He never knows when to stop,' and wound up the window.

Albert tapped at the stopped clock next to the speedometer. 'It's getting late. The sandman's calling.'

Before Albert put Fred to bed he made him scrambled egg and tomatoes. Fred pushed the tomatoes to the edge of his plate because they 'didn't taste nice at all,' and Albert said, 'Eat your tomatoes,' and Fred gobbled up all his egg but not the tomatoes, and Albert repeated, 'Eat your tomatoes,' and Fred quickly washed up his plate, and Albert warned him, 'You won't get any bread and honey,' but Fred swore he'd eat the 'healthy tomatoes' next time, so Albert did make him bread and honey and tried not to hear Fred's quiet praising of himself: 'That was a good trick.'

Albert's best trick was mixing Fred's medication in with his food without him noticing.

Albert couldn't sleep that night. He stared at a fingernail-sized luminous star-shaped sticker on the beam above his head. When he was younger he'd looked at it every evening until his eyes had fallen closed; he'd found it comforting that this tiny light glowed for him, defying the black of a night in the countryside.

As Fred's murmuring breath came through the baby monitor on his bedside table, Albert pulled on a bathrobe and crept into the garden. Outside, he lit a cigarette. He could only risk smoking late at night; Fred had warned him 'Smoking kills!' and Albert didn't want to upset him unnecessarily. The smoke lost itself in the night. When his eyes fell on the BMW he flicked the butt over the garden fence; it flew onto the main road in a high curve like a diving glow-worm. Albert kicked the fender, expecting it to hurt, but he hardly felt anything. The car fender

seemed as if made for him to kick; he tried it again with his other foot and hit the bonnet as well, punching it with both fists. He hoped someone would come past and try to stop him, then he could beat them up or get beaten up – he didn't care which. But nobody came.

Out of breath, he collapsed into the speedster's passenger seat. The glove compartment fell open of its own accord, and he took the tin and put it on the dashboard. The flattering orange light of the streetlamp concealed some of its dents, lending it a copper-like shine. Albert would have preferred it to contain not a glittering stone but concrete clues, mementoes that he could have understood, a diary kept by Anni perhaps, or family photos, or at least some kind of documents. He had so many questions and his only hope of an answer was Fred.

Albert gazed at the fingers of his left hand. A tiny, quiet, shrinking hope.

For no particular reason, he opened the tin and took the 'gold nugget' in his hand. He spotted an audio cassette on the bottom of the tin; on a yellowed strip of tape the words: *My Most Beloved Possession*. The curly schoolgirl style was nothing like Fred's spidery handwriting. Albert fetched the battery-operated cassette recorder out of the house, the one Fred and he occasionally used to play tapes of stories about Benjamin the Elephant. For a while Fred had been obsessed with an episode in which Benjamin thought acting meant telling lies. He'd played it over and over, sometimes ten times a day, until Albert couldn't help secretly destroying the tape.

He fed the cassette into the flap, pushed the switch from OFF to ON and saw the red light next to the counter light up.

Albert pressed PLAY. First came a crackling. Then, rising gradually, a sound of static that seemed strangely familiar, as if demanding

something. It sounded like someone sitting in silence. He searched to and fro, fast-forwarding and rewinding, placing his ear to the slits of the speaker and checking the A and B sides.

Nothing.

He clambered over the centre console and sat behind the steering wheel, took one of Fred's calendars out of the side compartment in the door and opened it up. He ran a hand over a page full of magenta scribblings that smelled as sickly sweet as the air in the house, feeling the slightly uneven texture of Fred's notes pressed into the paper.

Monday, 24.5.2002: 76 green cars, 8 green trucks, no green motorbikes.

Tuesday, 25.5.2002: 55 green cars, 10 green trucks, 2 lovely green motorbikes, 1 green tractor. Wednesday, 26.5.2002...

Albert threw the calendar on the back seat, turned the volume up, hiding in the static from the thought that he'd never have a proper family, and felt the weight of Fred's gold in his hand.

Then he pressed EJECT. The cassette compartment popped open.

Albert put the tape and the 'gold nugget' back in the tin and threw it in the bin as he went back into the house. He walked into Fred's bedroom, switched on the light and woke him up.

'We're going to hospital tomorrow.'

Fred rubbed his sleepy eyes awkwardly with his thumbs. 'But Albert, I have to show you where the gold comes from!'

Albert said: 'Frederick.'

Fred bit his lip, shaking his head. 'You promised!'

'Shut up,' said Albert.

In a single bound, Fred leapt up at him, grabbing his hand and pressing it hard.

At first Albert didn't feel anything. He wanted to pull his hand away, it was as if frozen stiff, and he struggled in vain to loosen Fred's grip with the other hand. 'Let go.' Fred's hair fell over his eyes, his lips opening and closing in silence. He increased the pressure, Albert's fingernails bored into the palm of his own hand, and the pain mingled with a numbness that migrated up his arm. Just before it reached his elbow he pushed himself backwards with all his might. 'Fred, stop it!' he yelled, and only then did Fred let go and Albert fell on his back and hit his head against the edge of the bed. As quickly as he could, he stood up and ran into the bathroom. He locked himself in and examined his now dark-red hand, moving one finger after another. They didn't seem to be broken. He avoided looking into the mirror over the washbasin, listening to the house. Silence made its way through the door. He lit a cigarette with one hand. He was hot; he pulled off his shirt, got tangled up in it, the material refusing to let go until he hurled it to the floor. He stood there undecided for a while, trembling. Even without looking he knew Fred would never move an inch of his own accord. He had once spent five days in the speedster without eating because of some petty incident Albert couldn't even remember, and he would have stayed put even longer if Albert hadn't let him have his way. Fred was at least as stubborn as Albert, and it was precisely because Albert would have to go and get him that he didn't want to. He pressed the cigarette out in the basin. Now Fred had managed to make him feel childish. Albert sat down on the edge of the bathtub, closed his eyes and imagined Fred coming to get him, just this once. Fred would knock at the door and apologise, and they'd talk about everything through the door and laugh, they'd laugh a lot, and at

some point his father would ask him to open the door, and Albert would do it.