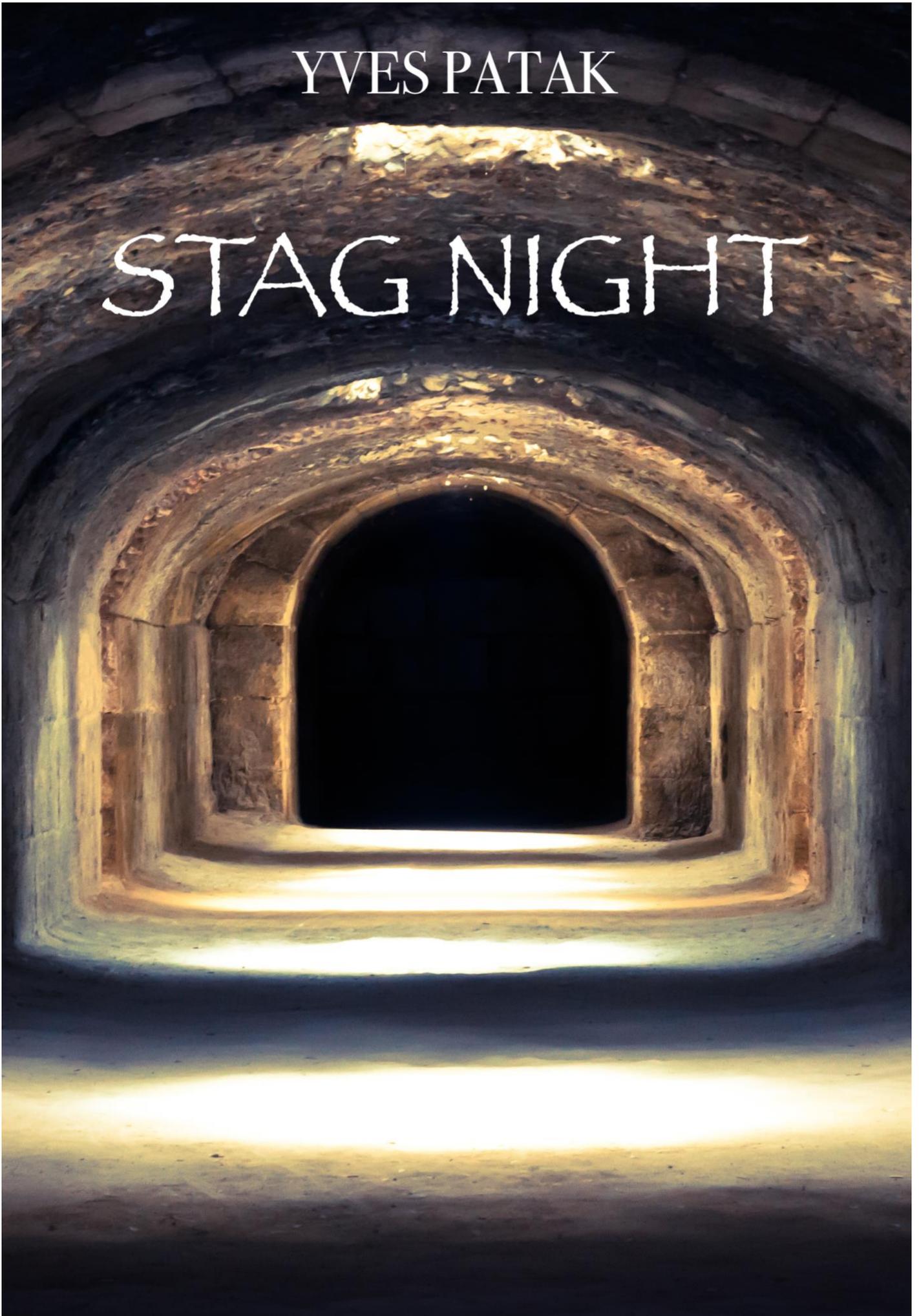


YVES PATAK

# STAG NIGHT



# Stag Night

Yves Patak

In the street's twilight, the five young men stood around the open manhole, gloating at Luke, their faces a collective, insolent grin.

*Time to call it a day*, Luke thought with growing unease. *This is turning nasty*.

But the peer pressure was on him, as oppressive and inescapable as an iron maiden.

„You guys are such jerks!” he said, trying to put up a brave front. But his smile felt harrowed, and his mind was racing. He needed an escape plan, and one that wouldn't make him lose face forever. But there seemed to be no way out. Of course, a simple, heartfelt ‚no!’ could have ended the whole rigmarole. But could he really own up to being a chickenshit? A candy ass, as Richard would put it? No. To reveal oneself as a lily-livered sissy among one's pals was the one mortal sin Luke couldn't afford to commit. Of course, his buddies wouldn't lock him out completely if he drew in his horns now. But there would be parties he'd miss because they ‚forgot’ to give him the word. Exam preparations he'd only hear about after the exams. Richard Dyreton, their tacit alpha male, was a zealot when it came to knightly allegiance – one for all and all for one and all that bull – and yet before you knew it, he'd turn out to be the ruthless bastard who'd sell his own mother for a song if there was profit to be gained by it. A fine lawyer he'd be one day, Luke thought sourly.

He glanced at the manhole, assessing his chances to cheat the gallows. Was he actually being a party pooper? For Chrissake, it was his stag night, and the other guys were *supposed* to bust his balls!

There had been plenty of taunt and tease as the small gang had been bar-hopping earlier that night, and more jibe as they checked out a notorious strip joint. Of course, they were perfectly aware that Luke was engaged to a girl who was the jealous prototype; that tomorrow he was going to tie the knot

with Elisa, a redhead who'd give him purple hell if she found out he'd been spending the night in the company of half-naked pole dancers and hookers.

There had been booze and boobs galore, and a lap dance performed by a curvaceous woman clearly beyond the prime of her career. Luke had bravely tagged along, hardly enjoying himself, hoping the night would end without something deeply embarrassing or even cataclysmic to his imminent wedlock.

But now, as he stood before the open manhole, surrounded by a gang of well-sloshed young men he barely recognized as his friends any longer, he felt the thin layer of prowess he had managed to affect so far crumbling. Looking at the shaft leading into pitch-black darkness, he felt a pang of claustrophobia that had a sobering effect on him like a slap in the face.

The others - all scholars of the same prestigious law school, just like himself - began to cheer him on.

„Down the hatch! Down the hatch!”

Luke shook his head, not smiling any longer. „I shall sue your asses for mental cruelty and duress as soon as I pass my board exams next year!”

They ignored his feeble joke and kept on chanting.

“Down the hatch! Down the hatch!”

*This is getting out of control, Luke thought. No way am I going down there!*

Still, the collective pressure was like a physical force, coercing him into a nightmarish role he'd never wanted. He frowned down at his legs, at the green fisherman boots that almost reached up to his groin. When Kevin, Richard's best buddy, had conjured the thigh waders out of a near trash bin, Luke had realized that the wicked game with the sewer had been planned all along. The dare ahead was frightful and disgusting beyond the scope of a friendly jest.

Richard pulled a moleskin booklet from his pocket, licked his finger and leafed through it, a judge passing sentence.

„Paragraph five, article two of the *Stag's Guide to Ecstasy and Agony*.” He cleared his throat. “The Brethren set the rules, the Stag proves blind obedience.”

“Ay!” the others agreed.

„Stag’s Guide my ass!” Luke rolled his eyes, and they all cried him down.

„Paragraph five, article four,” Richard declaimed, „the Brethren shall have a whale of a time at the Stag’s expense.”

“Ay!” the others shouted.

Richard pulled a longish object from his knapsack. „The Stag shall now receive enlightenment.”

He handed Luke a bulky D-Lite flashlight, along with an old-fashioned parchment treasure map. Luke shot him a poisonous look.

“Rick ... seriously now?”

Richard flashed him his patented fuck-you-grin. “This is *mucho* serious, my friend. You’ll need the light to dispel the shadows of doubt.”

„Guys!” Luke turned to the others, praying for support. „I think we had enough fun and games, and we should call it a night. I mean - “

„Wussy! Pussy!” the Brethren shouted. „Down the hatch! Down the hatch!”

Richard’s grin widened, and Luke saw an unsettling glee in those slate blue eyes.

“Paragraph five, article nine,” Richard recited by heart, „the Chicago sewer system is a place of foulness, of darkness and putrid stench. It’s a place filled with vermin and carnivorous rodents, and we don’t give a flying fart, because the Brethren are up here, and the Stag goes down there.”

„Paragraph five, article twelve,” Steve the yea-sayer added, „you’re on your fucking own, and I wouldn’t be caught dead in that hole!”

The Brethren cheered and whooped at this.

Richard raised one hand, assuming leadership again.

„Paragraph whatever, article who-cares: You’re going to spend some time deep, deep down in the guts of the city. Nobody can hear you scream, so save your breath. We’ll be expecting you at point X on the map. It’s roughly one mile from here. Beeline, of course. And you better find your way out pronto; the batteries won’t last forever.”

“Yeah,” Kevin offered. “Cause our parsimonious mate Steve thought that Dynex batteries are good enough for a guy who’s dumb enough to get married!”

Luke considered the option to simply turn on his heels and run. Then he imagined himself half sprinting, half hobbling across the city, his legs clad in green rubber, his buddies hounding him, taking pictures of him skedaddling and posting them on Instagram.

„C’mon, guys!” Luke felt disgusted by the plaintive whine in his voice. “The party’s over!”

“Down the hatch! Down the hatch!”

He felt his hands clench into fists. No way would he climb down this hideous shaft. But if he chickened out now, he’d never hear the end of it. Not in a million years.

Richard seemed to read his thoughts.

„Article twenty-two,” he said pointedly. „The Stag must *not* puss out.”

He pulled his cell phone from his pocket – the latest iPhone, of course – and held it high so everybody could see the luminous display.

„I took pictures, Luke. You know, back in the Pink Banana? The lap dance and all?”

„Rick.” Luke felt his cheeks burning. “If you think that’s funny you better –”

„And if you draw in your horns now, young Padawan, I might send some of those pictures to your sweet fiancée Elisa. Accidentally, of course ... you know how heavy-handed I am with electronic gizmos. Right, guys?”

„Fucking A!” Kevin cried.

„You bet your ass!” Marvin, usually a nice enough guy, joined in.

*Jesus, Luke thought. Are they just wasted or plain evil?*

He took a tentative step toward the manhole. An ugly feeling of giddiness washed over him. The narrow vertical tunnel led into a darkness so complete it seemed like solid matter.

He hunkered down, rubber boots squeaking, and gazed down the shaft.

“You guys are such bastards,” he said without a trace of humor now. There was a dull gleam of metal right beneath the manhole’s rim. The first rung of a ladder.

*Fuck it ... might as well get it over with.*

Luke shoved the flashlight and the map into his waistband, took a deep breath, put his palms on the tarmac both sides of the hole and gingerly extended his leg, feeling for the ladder’s rungs. When his boot found one, the metal felt slippery. Treacherous.

„Down the hatch!” the others resumed. “Down the hatch!”

Luke was three rungs down, his head still protruding from the manhole. He looked at the five bawling idiots and realized he felt no wish to ever see them again. Then he grabbed the topmost rung with his hands. The metal was cold, so much colder than the air out in the street. He started climbing down, listening for the dark cesspool running somewhere far below him. The stench wafting up was bad, but bearable.

“Hold your breath, Lukie-Boy!” Kevin shouted from above. “Or you might die of acute shit-lung syndrome!”

“Say hi to the Morlocks!” Richard added. “After all, they keep the machineries running for us elitist Eloi.”

*Eat shit and die, Luke thought grimly. All of you.*

Holding on to the rungs for dear life, he descended into the foul-smelling sewer system beneath the city. Halfway down, he glanced up, halfheartedly hoping for a miracle, for them to call him back and cry off this stupid and probably dangerous joke. But all he could see was his tormentors’ faces grinning down at him.

He stopped and pulled the flashlight from his waistband. It felt dicey to hold on to the rung with only one hand, but did he have a choice? No way was he climbing into that darkness just by touch!

He clicked the light on and trained the powerful beam on the bottom below. For a terrible moment he was looking into a fathomless abyss. Then he saw the ladder’s bottom rung six feet below. The shaft had to be at least twenty feet deep.

From above, distorted by the echo, came Richard’s voice: „Farewell to our valiant Orpheus, entering the underworld!”

Hollow laughter, followed by a grating sound, like metal being dragged over concrete. Luke could actually feel the vibration in his hands and feet. He saw the patch of light at the top of the shaft began to shrink as if in a strange eclipse.

„Hey!” Luke felt the coppery taste of panic in his mouth.  
„Hey! Don't you *dare* – “

A hard clang, and far above all light went out. Luke stared at the lid's dull bottom side in disbelief. He fought the mad impulse to scurry up the ladder and bang his fists against the metal.

“You *fuckers!*” he screamed, and his voice echoed back in ghastly mockery.

The iron clasp of panic kept tightening around his chest, choking him, and he forced himself to take deep, regular breaths. The sewer's reek filled his nose like some ghastly slime.

*Buried alive*, he thought. *They've buried me alive!*

In his throat the frenzied throbbing of his heart. He felt the flashlight slip from his wet palm, and as he clutched it more tightly, the rung he was holding on to began to slither from his other hand. With a gasp he grabbed the rung with both hands, and the flashlight tumbled into the darkness. He heard the clang of metal on concrete, winced, then stared down in dumb bewilderment. There, right beside a mucky stream, lay the flash, the light still on!

Carefully, he climbed down and picked it up. The lens was cracked, but not broken. Luke let out a sigh of relief. *Thank God for little favors!*

Once more, he trained the beam up the shaft. He could climb up and slam his shoulder against the iron lid until it fell away with a bang – but of course that was a pie in the sky. He'd never be strong enough to heave the massive cover away. Hell, for all he knew his buddies were standing on the lid, tittering and cracking sewer jokes!

*'Hey, Kev, whaddya call a sewer expert?' - 'No idea, Rick!' - 'A connoisseur!'*

He forced himself to check out the surroundings and let the light wander over the walls, the water. The sewer corridor was about six feet high at its peak, eight feet wide and parted by a

stream of muddy water and half-liquefied feces. The vaulted ceiling left a very limited headroom above the two bordering walkways.

Luke considered. If he was to walk along the sewer, he'd be forced into a bent posture that would wear him out in no time. To make things worse, the concrete under his boots was infested by some kind of pallid fungus that made the surface slippery as ice.

For a long moment, he looked at the soiled water, then at his thigh waders. *No choice. No friggin' choice.* He sat down by the sewer's brink and let his boots dangle into the churning water. Even through the rubber the water felt surprisingly cold. With utmost caution he slipped into the sewer, felt the current tug at his legs. Brownish water, almost thigh-high, gushed around his boots.

He tucked the flash between his chin and shoulder, pulled the map from his waistband and studied it. The crude sketch looked more like a child's scrawl than an actual map. Luke could only guess that the puzzling grid depicted the sewer's subterranean labyrinth. An erratic red line strayed through it, connecting two capital X's, one black, one red. Presumably the points of entry and exit. But which was which?

„Fucking morons,” he spat. If he got lost down here, would they even search for him? Would they call the Chicago Police Department and admit they'd fucked up big time? Not very likely.

Then something dawned on him, and his eyes widened in horror. How in hell was he supposed to find his way with a map but no compass?

A sudden inspiration struck him. *My cell phone!* In his dismay he had forgotten the most obvious lifesaver – the ultimate remedy to his misery. He could download a compass app, or better still, call the cops to get him out of here. He shoved the map back in to his waistband, slid his hand into his pocket – and froze.

No cell phone.

He bared his teeth in a snarl. Those scumbags had stolen his cell phone, probably while he was busy not enjoying the imposed lap dance!

“Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*”

Once more, he forced himself to figure out his options. He could walk in any direction until he found the next shaft. Could climb up to any manhole lid just to find out it was too heavy for him to push away. And even with his lips nearly touching the metal, he doubted anybody would hear him scream.

The only way out was to find the damned shaft marked with the red X on the map. Or was it the black one? And would those assholes really be waiting there for him?

Flash in hand, he waded through the channel, following the stream. Logic commanded that the water eventually had to exit the sewer system somewhere. The stream's swoosh seemed to grow louder by the minute, like some giant beast exhaling its foul breath. With some alarm Luke realized how easy it was to regress into childish superstitions down here, in the city's twilight underworld.

*No beasts down here.* The thought echoed in his mind, a protective mantra. *No beasts. No ghouls. No monsters.*

The flash's beam cut through thick blackness for as far as thirty feet, and then lost itself in the shadows. Luke kept breathing through his mouth to avoid the sewer's noxious stench. Unsettling stories unreeled in his mind, stories about people choking to death in agricultural silos, choking on carbon dioxide or other lethal gases. Was it even safe to be down here? He couldn't recall ever seeing a drainer wearing an oxygen mask, but then again, had he ever seen a drainer at work at all?

He let the beam move over the filthy stream, and his stomach cringed as a big brown sausage floated past him, a sausage that looked like the biggest turd he'd ever seen.

*I'm wading through Chicago's collective shit.*

He felt his gorge rise. Imagined how the convulsions of vomiting would send him toppling into that liquid hell. How he drowned in this rotten slurry.

*I'm not going to puke ... and I'm not going to die!*

After a moment, the nausea subsided, and he shuffled on. From the corner of his eye he glimpsed something scurrying through the shadows, but before he could catch it with the light, it was gone.

*A rat. Just a rat.*

Something hard touched his boot. He recoiled, screaming – and slipped. Flailing, he tried to regain his balance, but in vain. Foul water washed over him, rushed into his mouth, his nose, his ears. Spitting and coughing he struggled to the surface – and found himself in absolute darkness.

„Help!” he yelled, and the walls cast back the word.

*Help ... help ... help ...*

He fought the mind-numbing panic that tried to overwhelm him, fought the nausea choking up his throat. Without the light, he was doomed, no doubt about that.

Pushing away all thoughts of futility, he shuffled around in circles, feeling for the flashlight with his boots. With no object to fix his eyes upon, and with the current tugging at his legs, he felt another wave of dizziness and nearly fell again. Then his boot touched something on the sewer’s ground.

*The flashlight?*

He reached down, flinching each time something touched his arm, but the water was too deep. If he wanted to get to the flashlight – if it *was* the flash at all – he’d have to dive. Submerge his head into that epitome of all grisliness once more ... except that this time it would be in utter darkness.

*No way. I’d rather die.*

An idea struck him. Carefully, he used his boot to push the flashlight toward the ditch’s wall, then edged it up.

About halfway up the wall, the flash slipped off his boot, and he started again. And again. And again.

After innumerable attempts he finally had the flash close enough to the surface to reach for it. His hand slid into the water, trembling with effort, and clutched the flash’s grip.

It was a miracle.

Despite the cracked lens the flash was still working! Flooded with light, the sewer tunnel almost seemed pleasant to Luke.

He brushed back a strand of wet hair from his forehead – and touched something cold and soft. Crying out in disgust he flicked the object from his hair and stared at his hand, stared at the shitty brown goo in his palm. This time, nausea hit him with a vengeance. He barely managed to lean over the

walkway, then he threw up over the moist cement.

At last, the retching subsided, and he crept out onto the walkway, where he stooped on trembling legs, hands on his knees.

„Fuck you.” He coughed. „I hope you’ll all rot in hell!”

He moved on, bent over like a tottery old man. The going was painful, but he’d rather break his back than slip into the pestilent sewage once more.

He let the flash’s beam wander from side to side, searching for a way out, a magical exit shaft without a lid. There was none. Patches of mildew grew on the wet walls like strange continents. Fighting a growing sense of claustrophobia, he followed the sewer downstream. There *had* to be an exit somewhere!

He checked his watch. He’d been in this ghastly underworld for hardly more than half an hour, and yet he felt as if he’d spent eternity down here.

There was a glint in the dark, and he pointed the flashlight at it. A rung. Several rungs.

*An exit shaft!*

He tucked the flash into his waistband so that the beam pointed upward, grabbed the ladder’s rusty metal and started climbing. Even if the lid weighed a hundred pounds, he was determined to push it away or die trying, and never mind if he popped a ligament or tore a muscle. He was through with this stinking cesspit!

Seconds later, he reached the shaft’s top and paused. *Moment of truth.* He took a deep breath. Put a tentative hand on the cool metal. Pushed. The lid didn’t budge an inch. He bent his head and pressed his shoulder against the gully cover. Nothing. The lid seemed to be welded into its frame, as if to avoid any kind of misuse. *Like stag night stunts*, Luke thought with sudden fury. *I’m going to beat the living shit out of Richard for this!*

There was a tiny oval finger hole in the lid. He put his lips against it and yelled into the night.

„Help! I’m trapped down here! Help!”

He waited. Counted to twenty. Then yelled again. Nothing happened. No answering voices. No approaching footsteps.

No sounds at all.

“HELP!” he shrieked, terrified by the panic in his voice.

At last, he climbed down again, the flash’s beam casting wild shadows across the shaft. Like a living creature, the sewer’s stench seemed to ooze its way into his body, into his soul.

Back on the walkway, he shuffled on, his back smarting from the bent-forward posture. His gaze wandered over the stream. Every now and then thin sheets of water spilled over the walkway’s brim.

He clenched his teeth. Was the water level rising? What if it was?

Something jumped from the shadows ahead and ran in his direction. Luke shrank away and banged his head against the vaulted ceiling. It was a rat – no, not one, but two, three, five huge sewer rats, their beady eyes gleaming in the flash’s light. Ignoring him, they scurried past his boots and disappeared in the direction he had come from.

With a queasy feeling, he gazed after them. *What on earth has routed them out? Or who ...?*

The water’s swoosh seemed to change, to grow louder. Moments later Luke could see the reason. The tunnel opened into a large room, where the ceiling was higher and flat instead of vaulted. The walkway was broader than further upstream, and there were narrow metal doors in the walls, like in a locker room.

He looked around – and stifled a scream. A few yards ahead, someone was squatting on the walkway. Like a flight animal, the man scurried away on all fours. Just before he drew back into the shadows, Luke had a fleeting moment to take the apparition in. Gaunt to the point of emaciation. Filthy pepper and salt beard. Clothes in tatters. No shoes.

*A hobo ... some homeless guy.*

In his mind, Luke was already running away, yet he found himself riveted to the floor. Whoever the man was, he had to be a freak to dwell down here – a *dangerous* freak for that matter. Luke forced himself to keep the beam away from the man’s face, lest the light nettled him; but he kept his eyes glued on the bum.

From the shadows, the man was watching him. Stone silent.

Frightened ... or lurking.

„Hello?“ Luke said.

For a long moment, nothing happened.

„You’re lost,“ the crouching figure eventually said. His voice was husky, but not unpleasant – the voice of a man who hadn’t talked in months, maybe in years.

„Yes,“ Luke said haltingly. „Do you know the way out or are you lost, too?“

The man didn’t budge, but Luke could feel his eyes on his skin. What to do? Judging by the man’s beard and voice, he was an old-timer, a malnourished geezer, which alleviated the threat of physical harm considerably.

“Why don’t you come closer?“ Luke prompted, hoping to radiate confidence.

To his surprise, the man actually crept from the shadows. At close quarters, he looked even older than Luke had guessed. Seventy-five, pushing on eighty. The pallid face was deeply wrinkled and caked with the dirt of many unwashed months, maybe years. Faded blue eyes stared at Luke from deep sockets. A long leather necklace with a Hand of Fatima pendulum hung over the man’s scrawny chest.

Luke cleared his throat.

„Sir ... can you tell me how to get out of here? Some idiot friends sent me down here for kicks, and now I’m afraid I’ve lost my way.“

The man scrutinized him for a long moment. „Went for a swim, didn’t ya?“

Luke gazed down at his filthy wet clothes and nodded grimly. Simultaneously he was glad the man didn’t pose a real threat. He seemed strange, slightly absent-minded, but not dangerous.

„Yeah,“ Luke said. „I guess it’ll take some sandblasting to get rid of that guck.“

The man nodded. „You gotta watch out for the rats.“

“Oh ... yes?“ Luke wondered if this non-sequitur was going anywhere.

„Some of them are huge,“ the man said. “And they swim.“

„Yes,“ Luke said again. „I guess. So ... do you know how to

get out of here?”

The old man stared at Luke some more, as if fascinated by his unexpected visitor.

„Of course,” he said at long last. „There are many, many ways out. Some are true. Some are cattish.”

*Crazy*, Luke confirmed his assumption. *Or senile*.

Another silence ensued. The old man turned his head left, then right, as if listening to a tune only he could hear.

„Sir?”

The man flinched, as if jerked back into reality. “Yes?”

“Er ... could you show me a way out, please? I mean ... a *true* one?”

The old man pursed his lips, which lent him the air of a piqued sparrow. „Do you know where we are?”

Luke frowned. „Well ... in the sewer system?”

„What I mean to say,” the old man persisted, „do you know which part of the city is above us?”

Luke shook his head uncertainly. „Not really. We started out in Lincoln Park, but – ”

„Nope,” the man interrupted. “Ain’t no Lincoln Park up there.”

He paused, as if listening for that secret tune again. Then he looked at Luke as if for the first time.

“Went for a swim, didn’t ya?”

*Shit*, Luke thought. *We’re going in circles here!*

He decided to change the subject. Maybe going off on a tangent would reboot the geezer’s brain.

„May I ask what you’re doing down here, Sir?”

To Luke’s surprise, the man’s face lit up. “This is my hideaway, chum. My sanctuary.”

„Oh?”

„You better believe it! This ole sewer is my safe haven. Only place where I can find peace of mind.”

“Ah?” Luke said, trying to keep a straight face.

„I used to be an actor.” A dreamy expression mellowed the

wizened face. „Long, long time ago. Back when the dinosaurs roamed the earth. When life was good and I was sane.”

*He's aware that he's crazy?* Luke thought, amazed.

“I had a wife,” the man said. “Oceanne was her name. Most beautiful name I ever heard. Couldn’t have children, alas. But we were good for each other. Until one day my Oceanne came from the doctor and told me she had gotten the shit end of the stick. The big C.”

„The big ...?”

“Cancer. Told me her ovaries looked like something growing after a nuclear war. She had a wicked sense of humor, my Oceanne!” The old man tittered, then turned serious again. „Four months later, she was dead. And that was the day when the voices came.”

*Jeepers creepers.* Luke clenched his teeth. *Talk about rotten luck. Lost in Chicago's sewer system, and the only soul I meet is a friggin' schizophrenic.*

„I couldn’t think clearly anymore,” the man said continued. „Couldn’t sleep. Couldn’t concentrate on my minor roles. Wrecked the company car and lost my bread-and-butter job as a cabbie. Lost my apartment. Everything.”

Luke wondered if the time had come to excuse himself and keep searching for an exit. But crazy or not, the old man was still his best bet. Maybe his only bet. *Let him ramble on for a while ... poor fool probably hasn't had anybody to talk to for months.*

„My therapist called it an atypical posttraumatic schizoid episode,” the man droned on. „Atypical, because I didn’t hear one voice or two, but hundreds, *thousands* of them! They drove me crazy. And the goddamn neuroleptics turned me into a zombie. So I flushed them down the toilets. Never told my therapist.” He nodded, as if confirming he had done the only right thing. „Then I began listening to the voices. Not just hearing them but ... *listening*. And I finally understood.”

He gazed into thin air, as if he had lost his train of thoughts.

„You ... understood,” Luke repeated, curbing his impatience.

„Yes!” The man nodded fiercely. „Those voices were the thoughts of the people! I wasn’t mad, nosiree – I was picking up the world’s insanity, like the world’s most powerful radio receiver! I had turned into a freak of nature, drowning in a

current of negative and inane thoughts! Thoughts of fear, greed, frustration and destruction. And those millions of thoughts nearly drove me suicidal, until” – he gestured around – „I found this shelter here.”

„The ... the sewage system?”

„Yes! The only place where the voices can’t haunt me. The only place on earth that’s peaceful.”

*Mad as a batter*, Luke thought.

„It’s a holy place,” the old man said in a near-whisper. „After a while, the stench doesn’t bother you any longer ... and you find a peace of mind no Buddhist has ever experienced.”

Luke nodded, as if acknowledging an essential cosmic truth.

„So ... you actually *live* here?”

„Nope.” The old man shook his head decisively. „Too dangerous. Sometimes, the water rises without warning, and one could easily drown down here. But I spend many hours here, every day.” He scratched his scabby scalp. „It’s the place where I recharge my mental batteries. When I’m strong enough, I go panhandling, usually on Michigan Avenue or Randolph Street. Buy myself some food. Then I come here. Meditate. Enjoy the blissful calm. The absence of voices. Sometimes, I sleep here, but I’m always on the lookout. The waters are dangerous. And so are the rats.” His gaze became intense. „Promise me not to tell!”

„Tell what?” Luke shrugged. “About you being here?”

„You mustn’t tell,” the man repeated. The intensity crumbled from his face, and he looked anxious again, anxious and lost. For a fleeting moment, Luke felt a touch of compassion for the poor wretch.

The old man fidgeted with his necklace, as if seeking solace.

“I’ll tell you how to get out. But you mustn’t tell your friends about me. You see, if they find me, they’ll put me in a looney bin, and I’ll be at the mercy of those voices forever!”

„Don’t worry, Sir.” Luke held up his hand. “Cross my heart and hope to die, I’ll keep my lips sealed. Now please show me the way. It’s pretty chilly down here.”

The old man pointed into the darkness. “You walk straight ahead. After maybe three hundred yards there’s a shaft with a

new generation sewer lid. Much lighter than the old-fashioned ones.”

„Thank you so much!” Luke felt a relief so strong he had to fight the tears burning in the corners of his eyes. “You take care of yourself, Sir.”

He turned around and hurried away, stooping into another arched part of the sewer. What a piece of luck under the circumstances! Not only would he finally get out of this hellhole, he’d even have a crackerjack story to tell. His fair-weather friends would gawk at him, wondering if Luke had gotten himself a sewer-gas intoxication or if he’d really encountered this crazy old man. A curious shine stole into Luke’s eyes. Hell, he could even sell the story to some tabloid or buzz blogger. He could already picture the headline in the Chicago Sun-Times:

*Law student faces notorious sewer man.*

Best of all, he’d impress his spouse with this outlandish adventure! He’d be her intrepid hero forever, and —

Hot pain exploded in his throat, and he gasped for breath. His hands darted up and touched something sinewy digging into the soft flesh below his Adam’s apple.

“I warned you,” the old man wheezed in his ear, strangling him with the leather necklace.

Luke tried to scream, tried in vain to fight off the garotte.

„Didn’t believe me, did ya?” he panted. „But down here, I can hear your thoughts, cause there are no others. And you sure as hell won’t sic some paparazzi on me!”

The necklace kept tightening, and Luke felt a wave of unreality wash over him. *This is not happening!* His field of vision was rapidly shrinking. Gargling sounds escaped his throat, and there was a warm sensation around his groin as he lost control over his bladder.

„This is my safe haven!” the old man hissed.

The flashlight slid from Luke’s hand, rolled over the walkway and fell into the stream.

In the sudden darkness, there was a splash. Moments later, Luke’s body was carried away by the squalid water, toward the sewer’s exit.

*Yves Patak, March 2018*

**About the author**

Yves Patak, MD, physician and writer, sees himself as a modern Dr. Jekyll and Mister Hyde: psycho- and hypnotherapist by day, he spends his nights writing about the dark side of the human soul and the eerie entities between the dimensions.

Inspired by Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King, Patak's pet subject became the mystery thriller.

Published novels: Der Screener, Tödlicher Schatten, Ace Driller, Himmel und Hölle, Null Bock auf Karma, Gespräche mit Luzi (latter also translated into English and Spanish).

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