

SCATMAN

FACTION BY NINA RAPI ©

Scatman, aka Andreas Grassl, knew no fear when it came to verbal acrobatics. Burn - A List of my Enemies, his column in his Bavarian High School newspaper, run for five consecutive years, hitting his targets with caustic wit and irony. The list of enemies ranged from Bavarian farms (compulsory normality) to television companies (the rule of mediocrity) to Paris Hilton (trivia domination). Before graduating from high school, Scatman finished his last column with the following sentence: 'Please tell me, what am I supposed to conjure up as a grandiose finale for the end of this five-year series?'

Hard-wearing sea walls, tarred bungalows and faces sculpted by harsh necessity, is what you'll come across at the Minster sea front on the Isle of Sheppey. And if you look at the horizon you'll see massive tankers ferrying cargo from the North Sea to London. Minster is a key location next to the world's busiest shipping lanes. Its residents are used to the sea vomiting strange offerings, including Second World War bombs. Of late, those who live close by the shore had been hearing motorboats at the crack of dawn and believed them to be carrying illegal immigrants from the super tankers heading for London.

So when on the 7th of April 2005 they saw a young, tall blond man wandering on the beach, looking dazed and confused, wearing a soaking wet suit, they thought he was where he shouldn't be. The man seemed to have come out of nowhere. No-one in town knew him or had seen him before. He looked harmless but that made him even more dangerous. The citizens knew that both psychos and terrorists have an uncanny capacity to blend in by looking extremely normal. It was in fact the young man's extreme normality offset by that slight touch of strangeness - the wet suit - that marked him out as someone to watch out for. He had to be caught and questioned.

When the police picked him up he was unable to utter a word. They searched his suit for clues but all the labels had been torn off. Unable to identify him or converse with him, they considered him an unwell man and took him to the nearby Medway Maritime Hospital. The man continued to remain silent except for giving little yelps whenever someone approached him. People obviously scared him. Had he been brutalized? A kind nurse gained some of his confidence and he eventually asked through gestures - for pen and paper. He drew a grand piano in minute detail. The nurse led him gently to the chapel piano and he played non-stop for four hours, collapsing afterwards. This was to become a pattern. He'd play anything from Tchaikovsky to the Beatles for hours at an end, then collapse. Was the man a genius?

The hospital contacted the Missing Persons Hotline which placed the man's photograph on its website, alongside suspected murder victims and suicides. There was absolutely no response. No-one seemed to know him. Nowhere. The man was a total mystery: no memory, no voice, no identity.

. His silence was as persistent as his low rate breathing. What was he hiding? Echoes of the film *Shine* bounced dreamily in people's heads. Was he a gifted pianist like David Helfgott on whom the film was based? Who was this stranger? Who, what was behind him? No answers, just inscrutability.

Gradually, fragments of information about him started leaking into the press. The

collective unconscious, hungry for angels and demons, colluded and collided with shrewd, obliging and self-serving media and created the legend of the Piano Man, propelling him into the stratosphere. Within one month he became a global phenomenon.

Andreas Grass, aka Scatman was born on October 25, 1984 in the Bavarian village of Prosdorf, near the Czech border, a small aggregate of farm houses. Life in the village has its own unbreakable order: if you are a man, you grow up working in the farm, get married, take over your father's farm, grow old, pass it to your son, die. A clean, steady reassuring rhythm, demanding total obedience in return, leaving little space for change or difference.

Andrea's father was the owner of a dairy farm and 53 milk cows. His mother was a deeply religious woman, attending mass every Sunday without fail. God was a big feature in the Grassl household. So was keeping your head down. Blending in was what the family was after. As one of the neighbours had later said: 'The Mother was always afraid of standing out'.

Andreas stood out without trying, he was born different, he relished being different. Fate must have been smirking when she put him in that family context. For Scatman was urbane and sophisticated by nature and the last thing he wanted to do was to milk cows. And the only God he knelt down to was self-expression; all else seemed like a shackle. Still, he did his best to be a good and obedient son, doing farm chores with his sisters without complaining. For Scatman appreciated the pleasures of obedience as much as he craved rebellion and often felt pulled by the two at the same time. The older he got though, the more suffocated he felt by this unnatural environment, this being-forced-to-be-what-he-was-not. He lived for the moment he could make his exit.

One such moment arrived when he went to high school. School was both home and freedom and his motto was indeed freedom, scrawled on his notebooks in a thousand and one ways. School was a place where rules, regulations, systems were to be played with, not feared. Scatman loved discipline the way he loved freedom. In fact he strongly believed that discipline was freedom. He strictly trained his desires precisely in order to give full reign to them. Whenever he had a thought, a feeling, a desire, he'd force himself to examine it from a totally new angle. Obvious answers were not to be trusted. He needed to be original as much as he needed to breathe. And he needed a new identity to mark his new space. That's when Scatman was born. Scatman was what Andreas wanted to run towards: a sea of endless possibilities. Scatman was a man of the world, taking Andreas the country boy under his wing, showing him what life could really be about. His column 'Burn - A List of my Enemies' reflected that.

Parisian bohemia as a writer was the future he was mapping out for himself.

Within days of the Piano Man story going global, the lines of The Missing Persons Hotline caught fire. No-one knew him before but now thousands of leads started pouring in. The Piano Man was a virtuoso pianist from the Czech Republic; no, he was Stephen Jones, a jazz musician who had worked in Paris; he was a poet from Inverness; he was a radical priest from Sweden; he was from Sussex; he was from Dublin; he was from Norway; he was a rent boy out of his head on Charlie, well known at Soho; no, he was a girl's long-lost sailor boyfriend; he was a wayward brother; he was the son a

mother had to give away for adoption twenty years ago; a woman swore she had seen him being chased out of Tesco's by security men, in the main town of Sheerness, days before he was discovered; no, he had tried to drown himself but the sea wouldn't t have him; he had jumped off a playboy's boat for a bet and was a brilliant swimmer; he had played the organ at a recent funeral on the island; no, no he was a DJ at a recent wedding on the island; no, he was an Albanian mega pimp on the loose, hunted by Interpol, recognized by customs officials; he was a serial rapist, a mass murderer, a British soldier fighting in Iraq, gone awol; he was a KGB agent.

Some people took a more rational approach. They were scientists. A few argued he had suffered a nervous breakdown. Others believed that his non-communicative state, his detailed drawings of the grand piano and his repetitive piano repertoire showed that he was autistic.

One area of school work Scatman did not excel at was physical education, which didn't make him very popular. That coupled with his appearance - dark hair parted in the middle and painful acne - tripled with his intelligence and quadrupled by the suspicion that he was not interested in girls, marked him out as a weirdo for some.

But Scatman didn't care about other people's opinions. He knew that his quest for unknown territories mentally, sexually, emotionally was bound to alienate him from his fellow students. He found refuge in his writing. Apart from his column, he also wrote on 'discipline and freedom' (he knew his Foucault) on 'lovers and other fantasists' (he knew his Barthes too) on punk rock (vintage 70s bands only), Britney Spears (like a good gay boy) and teachers locked up in a world he wanted to escape. He also made proposals to television companies, radio stations and national newspapers, having some accepted, most rejected, thus fuelling his caustic wit.

He was a bit of a loner but liked to belong too. He was part of a little clique of other 'weirdos' like himself, such as his friend Dona, people he could casually drop comments to like 'I'm into boys' and nobody would bat an eyelid. For Scatman never really hid the fact that he was homosexual. Certainly not from those who mattered to him, like his friends. He knew though that his sexuality wasn't something to loudly broadcast in Waldmunchen or indeed his own family and fellow villagers. He knew how to protect himself. He was no fool. Besides, he liked playing around with secrets.

Speculations about the identity of The Piano Man continued. People were now inspired by the tortured artist theory. Hearts melted, spirits roared. For a while.

Then something shifted. Tortured Artist? No way. Autistic? No. The man was surely a conman like Phillip Staufen, the 1999 no memory man, emerging out of nowhere, also tall, also blond, also East European looking, and most significantly without labels on his suit. Well, even his own lawyer now claimed Staufen was a crook. They were one of a kind. In fact it might even be him. But Bone, a police detective in Toronto where Staufen was found, dismissed this theory as well as the autism one. No, this man's nose was thinner and he was much taller too. No, absolutely no but there may be a connection and it is this: the Piano Man obviously knew about Staufen and copied him, tearing the labels off his suit and staying silent. This trick worked. Guaranteed identity loss. Bull's eye. Total cover. He was running away from something. Something criminal most definitely. If this guy opened his mouth, the detective claimed, we'd know where he came from and eventually discover his identity.

But The Piano Man had no desire to reveal his identity. Not yet. Let them believe what they like, he kept thinking, whenever rational processes like thoughts entered his mind, which was not very often. Memory traces of who he was were lingering in his mind, his sense of identity not totally lost. But ideas of who he was, who he wanted to be and who he could be danced around each other in his head, competing for centre space, making him dizzy. What the Piano Man felt above all else was a sense of disorientation and dislocation. He actually felt at home in that space. It was after all a familiar mental space. Only the physicality of it was new, a little hostile yes but also kind, providing an upright piano for personal use and plenty of interesting delusions to play around with. Because the Piano Man loved playing around with delusions, breaking them down, turning them around and making stories out of them. He was after all a writer.

When school was over, Waldmunchen for Scatman started feeling as claustrophobic as his Bavarian farm. He wanted to move to a more urban place. The city of Saarbrücken, around 500 kilometres away beckoned seductively. Compulsory military service was an obstacle however. Scatman dealt with it the best way he knew – by distancing himself from a duty he didn't believe in. He refused to serve the Army on ideological grounds. As conscientious objector, he had to do a voluntary service instead, something he gladly accepted.

His job was to help care for 36 physically and mentally disabled people living in sheltered accommodation. He started work there in the summer of 2004. He liked his colleagues, finding them open-minded and easy-going. He came out to them at once. No ostracizing or insidious punishment followed his openness. On the contrary, his workmates accepted his sexuality as simply a part of who he was, no big deal. They liked him anyway: his wit, his directness, his friendliness.

He went clubbing with them, hung out in music pubs, relished literary events. He devoured any urban pleasures this regional capital had to offer.

His room was cell-like yet it felt like freedom. This was after all a temporary stop on his way to Paris and University.

Yet, when his voluntary stint was completed in March 2005, Scatman did not head for Paris. For Scatman was not ready for freedom. Strangely he missed home, its warmth and unquestioned sureness about life, about futures, about nature. Home also gave him something to fight against and that fight made him strong, that fight turned him from Andreas to Scatman, that fight made him a writer. What would happen to him if he had total freedom in Paris? He didn't even want to speculate. But there was no way he could go back home, either. He was still running away from the unquestioned sureness he also craved - the sureness that left no space for standing out. He reached a compromise. He'd go to a place like home, yet different: Pornic, a small, provincial town on the Atlantic. He rented a small apartment there and found a temporary job, as care worker in the local mental health unit.

The atmosphere there was very village-like with all the good citizens eager to gossip, spy and judge; eager to negate, freeze out, demolish any outsiders.

Their attitudes to homosexuals for instance could be epitomised by this statement made by the manager of Le Grilladin, a small restaurant: 'There are hardly any homosexuals here. And when one of them dies or moves away, nobody here is particularly sad if you know what I mean.'

A few months had passed and no-one had claimed the Piano Man as their own, convincingly. The Piano Man had now shifted from tortured artist and crook to pathological fake. Even well respected doctors started doubting him, indicating that his illness was a pretend one. Dieter Naber for instance, professor of psychiatry at the university clinic in Hamburg, stated he knew of no other case where the patient had remained silent for so long. (The professor surprisingly ignored the scientific possibility of a new form of psychological disorder appearing for the first time).

Meanwhile Andreas felt more and more suffocated in Pornic. It was too much like home to offer any solace or most importantly a sense of freedom. He was as far away from his imagined future as he could possibly be. He had to fight against this sneaking desire to conform and be a nobody.

The more he fought it though, the bigger it became until it started haunting him in his dreams, giving him endless sleepless nights. He'd dream of staring at his father milking cows with a fixed grin on his face and would wake up screaming. He'd get up and write non-stop about the fever that won't subside the pain that won't go away the desire that's never satisfied the shackled scatman who must be free the scatman who knows how to be in the world the scatman who mustn't feel fear the fear that only gets bigger and bigger and bigger the scatman who becomes fear the fear of becoming a nobody the fear of being nothing of becoming nothing of dreaming of hellish fucking fixed grins and smiley fucking faces that never think never feel never rebel just go from day to day to day to day till they die etc etc etc. And he'd go on writing, worried that if he stopped, the walls would cave in, his ribs would break, his veins would burst. And he'd go on writing until it was time to go to work.

He had to do something to get out of that rat-hole. What exactly? He could just jump on the ferry across the channel to England, for example, a place full of possibilities. London in particular had so much to offer: clubs, gigs, urban angst, fashion, literary festivals, saunas, cruising, bars, countless counter-cultural magazines and newspapers, he'd have a go at being a writer there, so much to explore. Language could be a problem. Perhaps Berlin would be a better option? He'd have no language problems there. Paris would have a lot more to offer surely. But Paris, oh Paris, Paris was too painful. What about open and gay and free Amsterdam? No, Rome would be better, he spoke Latin, he could easily adjust. Why make obvious choices? Why not try something totally different like Athens, he studied the classics, he'd feel at home there. Hell, why not New York, now that was a place to be!

A few days later, on 7th of April, Scatman, aka Andreas Grassl, was found soaking wet, dazed and confused, wandering on the beach of Sheerness.

The Piano Man appeared on the news less and less. People, the media and the third entity consisting of their collusion, could only take silence for so long. The mystery was demanding resolution and that was not forthcoming. Meanwhile, the July bombings in London took over the collective consciousness for a while. The Piano Man instinctively started to question the effectiveness of his silence. Was it offering him freedom or keeping him trapped?

Andreas' parents had heard nothing from him for a while and started getting worried. Worry locked them into inaction. Finally they called his apartment manager in Pornic, for information. He told them that Andreas had given up his job and left town. Andreas' parents tried not to panic. Self-control and rational responses were after all their stock-in-trade. But as they realized they could not trace Andreas anywhere, they thought they should take action. Still, they could not deal with the public humiliation of declaring their son missing. So, they prayed and waited.

Four and a half months had passed since the Piano Man was found and he finally broke his silence. He remembered his name: Andreas Grassl, aka Scatman, from the Bavarian village of Prosdorf in West Germany. Reality crashed the legend, the disappointment was almost corporeal.

Psychiatrists were now split in two: those who considered the Piano Man a fake and those who believed he went through a psychotic episode.

As for the artistic genius theory, it was now totally rejected by most: the official version was that the Piano Man could only actually play a few chords again and again and again. There were those though who refused to believe that the Piano Man was not a virtuoso pianist and considered any suggestions to the opposite as malicious gossip.

Andreas-aka-Scatman-aka-the Piano Man, was taken back to the village he had escaped from... Some believe he is planning another spectacular escape, others he is writing his autobiography...

A final question remains unanswered: his parents, friends and colleagues had his image blasted all over the press and the media, yet NONE recognized the Piano Man as their Scatman, their Andreas. He changed his hair style and hair colour. He also looked lost. Is that all it takes to become a non-person?

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