

CIGARETTES

Bert Vandecasteele – bert.vdc@gmail.com

67 year-old Ursula Behmke stands on the doorstep. She does this five times a day: once at eight, then at ten, again at twelve forty-five, followed by three in the afternoon and once more at five-thirty. Every time, she begs a random passer-by for a cigarette.

Of course you'd think she's one of those lonely victims of the city. But you know the truth? She's perfectly content. She's happy to stand there and beg people for cigarettes. Like it's a passion or at least a very productive hobby.

Sometimes, people don't just offer her a cigarette, but a light as well. How cute. And naive. They haven't come to the conclusion I have about Ursula Behmke. You see, it's funny, because they actually think she's in urgent – *dire* - need of a smoke.

To these people I say: nuh-uh.

I've been to her flat.

(Well, I stood at her closed door, at least)

And it didn't smell like cigarettes.

And that got me thinking.

What if...

She doesn't smoke the cigarettes?

What if she saves them?

And what if...

... She has been for years!

Hold on. I can hear you – yeah, you, in the back, going „That's improbable“. Well, it's not. Let me save you the trouble.

Five cigarettes a day.

Six days a week.

Thirty-six weeks a year. (she hibernates)

Equals 1080 cigarettes. A year.

But here's the thing. There's a sense of habit here. The way she asks, the flick with which she pushes the cigarette behind her ear... This is a part of her. She hasn't been doing this for a year. She's been doing this her entire life.

1080 times 67.

72 thousand 360 cigarettes.

Crazy, right?! I know! Think of the logistics for a moment. Where does she store this amount of – these 72 thousand 360 cigarettes?

I know what you're thinking.

So I measured one for you.

A normal cigarette (Lucky Strike original RED) is 8,3 centimeters long. Its diameter is 0,75 centimeters. So the volume of one cigarette is 14,67 cubic centimeters.

Times 72 thousand 360.

That's 1 million 61 thousand 521 cubic centimeters. Point two.

Now I'm just a simple Joe so I don't even know what that means anymore. So I figured: maybe some riddles just aren't meant to be solved, right?

Unless I'd break into her flat.

(Which I didn't)

(Obviously)

(That'd be crazy)

And there was no need to! Fate tossed me a helping a hand. Two Turkish movers were dragging an antique chest of drawers down the stairs. When I enquired who was the owner of this marvelous piece of furniture...

...you guessed it. Ursula Behmke.

And there's more. Turns out they weren't movers. They weren't moving the chest of drawers. They were buying it.

And there's only one reason for a 67 year-old woman to sell an antique chest of drawers. She doesn't need it anymore. And that's because...

Ursula Behmke makes her furniture out of cigarettes. It's the perfect solution! She can store her heaps and heaps of cigarettes in an orderly fashion – in a cupboard made of cigarettes.

So there you have it. The whole truth.

There's only one piece of the puzzle left to solve. A one-word question: why? Why would anyone collect five cigarettes a day for their entire life without smoking them?

Market research?

Being the enabler at parties?

Making funny youtube videos of stuffed animals that look like they're smoking?

Don't be silly.

Think about it. Think logically. Ursula Behmke is 67 years old. She was born in 1945. In Berlin. And she's been doing this her entire life. What if - and this might blow your minds - what if she was born in a prisoner-of-war camp? Abandoned by her mother (probably a Prussian prostitute), Ursula Behmke quickly understood there was one simple rule of survival. The one thing. The one... currency...

The cigarette.

And it never stopped. Even after the war. For her entire life, Ursula Behmke kept collecting. To prepare. After all, the next war was probably lurking around the corner. A war in which she would

be prepared. A war in which she would be on top.

And there you have it. Take this information as you will. Just know the next time you pass by my front door at eight, ten, twelve forty-five, three or five-thirty: don't judge Ursula Behmke. Don't blame her, my neighbour, my honest-to-God cigarette-begging neighbour for what the tragic circumstances of her birth made her into.

You know who is to blame?

Adolf Hitler.