

The round tissue

Erik Tantal



**FOR
A GOOD
REASON**

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Preface

Who even comes up with ideas like this? Things like that simply don't happen. I can already imagine the kinds of comments some readers might want to send me. But think about what we have lived through in recent years. And who knows what we may still have to face in the future?

My sincere thanks to everyone who contributed ideas to this book and helped correct it.

All names used in this book are fictional.

Erik Tantal

The Company

Frank walks slowly through the park, one thoughtful step after another. He barely notices the neatly planted flower beds. From now on, this will be his daily walk to work—just five minutes from his apartment.

Frank Krause is twenty-six years old. He has just completed his degree in business administration and taken over his late father's company.

Will he be able to make it work? Here, in a place where paper tissues have been produced for decades?

Tissue prince. Tissue boy. That was what his classmates used to call him, mocking him in the schoolyard. But that was long ago. The company had always been successful. They're just jealous, his mother used to tell him.

Actually, Frank can be proud of his father. But will he be able to guide the company in the right direction?

“Good morning, Frank. Where are your thoughts today?” asks Anton, his longtime university friend and, starting today, his closest colleague at the company.

“Hi, Anton. Good thing you're on time. To be honest, I'm scared. I just hope they don't tear me apart.”

“Nonsense. You know the company. You helped out in your father’s business often enough—even did a six-month internship there. You’ll be fine.”

The reassurance helps. Frank takes a deep breath. Anton makes a point of opening the front door for him and letting him go first.

“Good morning, Mr. Krause. All the best on your first day.”

“Thank you, Ms. Evers. Has anyone called yet?”

“Of course. I put the list on your desk. There’s plenty waiting for you.”

Frank hurries to his desk. He is nervous, which is completely understandable.

“Ms. Evers, please schedule an immediate meeting with all department heads. This is important. And please attend as well and take the minutes.”

Within a few minutes, every seat in the conference room is filled. Frank welcomes his employees and begins his speech right away.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I probably don’t need to explain the situation. Everyone here knows that our sales have stalled. The competition keeps growing. That creates

problems. That is why I'm presenting my new concept today. Don't worry—this is not about layoffs. Quite the opposite. If things go as planned, we will have to expand.”

Murmurs and disbelief fill the room. Frank notices that his speech is causing more concern than confidence. He continues.

“We cannot simply continue as before. We need something completely new. Our product has to stand out clearly from the competition.”

“How is that supposed to work?” asks the head of production. “We make paper tissues.”

“And we will continue to make paper tissues. But our tissues will change.”

Again, unrest spreads through the room. Skeptical murmuring. Even Anton gives Frank a questioning look.

Frank takes a deep breath and reveals the secret.

“We will produce new tissues that clearly differ from all others. Not in material—the quality will remain the same. Only the shape will change. We will be the first to produce ROUND TISSUES. You will find all further details in the brochure Ms. Evers is handing out.”

Reactions

“You certainly set something in motion with that,” Anton says. “Why didn’t you show me the brochure earlier?”

“It wouldn’t have changed anything. I made my decision a long time ago. I even took out a loan from our bank.”

Anton shakes his head, just like most of the employees. What nonsense. Has he lost his mind? What is that spoiled snob thinking? We’ll be the ones dealing with the mess when the company goes bankrupt.

Those are only the milder comments from the employees—comments Frank, of course, does not hear. But he can certainly imagine reactions like that.

Putting the plan into action proves difficult. Frank had expected that. New machines have to be acquired—machines that do not even exist yet. The advertising department has to develop entirely new concepts. All of that takes time and money. The first round tissues will probably not be ready for another six months.

The Beginning

The time has come. Frank can hardly wait. In the factory hall, he proudly receives the first large shipment of the new product: thirty small packs, each containing ten

tissues. Each round tissue has a diameter of fifteen centimeters. It is folded once. That was Anton's idea. His argument—that the package would fit better into a pocket that way—convinced Frank. Besides, it is now easier to pull out a single tissue.

Krause-Round, the tissue of our time. Clear dark-blue lettering on a white background, surrounded by a blue circle. A conservative yet attractive design. Blue and white, just like his father's packaging. But instead of a rectangular frame, there is now a blue circle.

The advertising department has also come up with something. In every advertisement and commercial, the round tissue rolls down a mountain and then back up again. Then it meets a funny animated character with a runny nose. "Krause-Round—fight the cold!" is one slogan. In another video, a celebrity explains why she has now switched to the round tissue. "The new favorite is Krause-Round. For good reason!"

But apparently the slogans are not especially convincing. Orders decline. Production has to be reduced because more and more packages are piling up in the warehouse. At one of the next meetings, Frank faces massive criticism.

Only Anton supports him. “We all should have expected this. But we shouldn’t give up at the first sign of trouble. Some customers have even ordered more packs. VOLI, for example, the drugstore chain.”

“But they only buy ten percent of our products.”

“This can’t go on.”

It is extremely difficult for Frank to calm the situation. Suddenly his legs feel weak. But he pulls himself together and does not let it show. In a clear voice, he tries to reassure his staff.

“Dear colleagues, I fully understand your concerns. I am not satisfied with this development either. Give us just a few more months. I am sure the tide will turn soon. We are already working hard on a new advertising campaign. Then everything will change.”

After the conference room empties, Frank remains seated in his chair, exhausted. Only Anton is still with him.

“You managed it this time, but only barely. How long do you plan to keep calming your staff with empty promises?” he asks.

“That is my responsibility. A member of the Krause family does not give up that quickly. Tomorrow I’m

meeting Tanja. She worked in New York for several years as an advertising expert. During our last phone call, she suggested something really interesting. Come with me tomorrow. We're meeting in her office at three in the afternoon."

The Idea

Tanja really has come up with something brilliant. Still, she seems reluctant to reveal it. Instead, she first talks about her experiences in the United States. She was successful there with several advertising campaigns—so successful that major corporations have been trying to hire her ever since. Frank is lucky to have access to her at all. He has known Tanja since his school days. He even once took a dance class with her. Strangely enough, though, he never managed to develop the relationship any further.

"Tanja, I already told you about our problems on the phone. Do you really have an idea that could turn things around?"

"I do. But it's a little tricky. And I don't want a single word of this conversation to reach the public. Can you promise me that?"

“Of course. But why?” Frank asks.

Anton insists. “The way things are going now, we can’t continue. If you know a way out, we need to hear it. Of course you can count on our discretion.”

Now Tanja begins. She proposes publishing a study on the harmfulness of rectangular tissues.

“Why would we do that? Are you joking? That isn’t actually true,” Frank protests. Anton also seems unable to follow her reasoning.

“Well, what isn’t true now may become true eventually. I know someone in the U.S. who can fabricate a study overnight. He has already managed to get similar forged studies accepted by respected scientific institutions.”

“But that isn’t legal, is it? No. We won’t do that,” Frank says.

Tanja smiles. “You’re being too cautious. A study like that won’t really hurt anyone. We just have to guarantee absolute secrecy.”

Anton seems to be warming to the idea. “What would that study look like? Why would rectangular tissues be harmful?”

It becomes clear that Tanja is starting to enjoy the conversation. She looks directly at Frank and says,

“Look, you were the one who came up with the idea for round tissues. The only reason you could give was that we had to ‘move with the times.’ But why? That won’t convince people. They need something concrete.”

“You’re right. But should we really claim that rectangular tissues cause diseases? No one will believe that,” Frank says.

“We can claim anything,” Tanja says, “as long as we give people a good reason. But threatening them with illness is a bad idea, in my opinion. Our study should conclude that round tissues are more effective for a stuffy nose than rectangular ones. But the truly important finding should be an accidental discovery: the old rectangular tissues cause personal failure. Of course, that isn’t proven. But neither is the opposite. All that matters is a study with convincing statistics. Yes, it’s fake, but that doesn’t necessarily have to come out. Hardly anyone understands statistics these days anyway.”

In the end, Frank has no counterargument. He agrees and asks Tanja to contact the man in the U.S. The expected costs should not be a problem.

The Study

“What do you know? Do you have any information about the study yet? What does it show?” Frank asks impatiently.

Tanja calms him down. “Don’t worry. Tobi is handling it. I just got off the phone with him. The RCT study is already underway.”

“What is that? An RCT study? Can you explain?”

“RCT stands for randomized controlled trial. That means the subjects are randomly assigned to the groups being compared. So they receive either round or rectangular tissues.”

“And then what?”

“The subjects are told that the main purpose of the study is to find out what effect the tissues have on the common cold. They are also asked to fill out a questionnaire.”

“What kind of questionnaire?”

“We want to show that rectangular tissues increase failure and that only our round ones are suitable for a successful life. So we ask them about everyday things. Did they drop a glass again? Did they miss the bus? Did they get

lucky in the lottery or in love? Who knows? There are countless things people can check off on the form.”

Frank is slowly beginning to grasp the concept.

Tanja continues. The subjects have to report their condition by phone. The participants using round tissues receive more positive feedback.

“For example, they are told that our new product has a wonderful and rapid effect. The others, the ones with rectangular tissues, are simply reminded that their cold must be completely gone before they report. That different treatment will certainly have an effect. On average, a runny nose disappears faster when round tissues are used. Once a statistically significant difference appears, the study is stopped. Then the questionnaires are compared as well. If you ask enough questions, you are bound to find some random difference. You pick that one, and the rest stays hidden. Of course, there is no real difference between the groups. But the study will show that round tissues really do work better against a runny nose. Even more important for us is the supposedly unexpected side effect: the shape of the tissue influences success or failure.”

“Wonderful. I’m truly impressed,” Anton says.

Frank is not convinced quite so easily. “Wouldn’t a study like that take too long? Three months? Maybe even a year?”

Tanja reassures him again. “Don’t worry. The study is already finished. After all, we already know what result we need. We’re using the version Tobi prepared on his own. He would have done it exactly the way I described. If he had actually carried it out, the price would be much higher. Besides, we would have to wait at least another month. This way, we can publish that the study was conducted in the U.S. six months ago. It involved four thousand people.”

“And what is the final result?” Frank asks impatiently.

Tanja smiles. “Our study shows with 95 percent statistical certainty that round tissues cause 36 percent fewer household accidents than rectangular ones, for example. The results are similar for other types of failure.”

Media Frenzy

The front page of the newspaper *The Gaze* features a thick black headline:

THE PROOF: ROUND TISSUES ARE BETTER!

Below it are the faces of three very well-known people: the famous fashion model Mira, star athlete Ole, and even the beautiful Duchess Karina. A note explains that their exclusive statements can be found on page five.

Mira, for example, reports that she had three positive experiences on the very first day she used round tissues. That day, she arrived on time for her photo shoot—an arrival that surprised everyone. Later, she landed a lucrative contract she had worked toward for a long time but had already given up hope of getting. Finally, her fiancé gave her a valuable gift, which she prefers not to discuss for private reasons.

Star athlete Ole and Duchess Karina report similar experiences. At the bottom of the page is a detailed commentary by Professor Kramer, presented as an expert opinion.

He writes once a week about current scientific news and is considered especially competent. Discussing the discovery of the round tissue, he takes readers back to early human history. Back then, he explains, rectangular objects did not even exist. By contrast, our ancestors considered round things beautiful and desirable. Perhaps, he suggests, this preference has been preserved in our genes. If so, it is understandable that an American

research group could demonstrate it through the example of round tissues.

Television is also covering the topic. Manufacturers of the old rectangular tissues report a major slump in orders—all because of “Rectangle-Induced Malfunction,” or RIM. The new buzzword calls everything rectangular into question. Meanwhile, Frank is overwhelmed by the flood of orders and inquiries. At his company, production requires overtime. Any criticism from the workforce falls silent. On social media, more and more people are sharing their experiences.

“When I was still using rectangular tissues, everything went wrong. But now I’ve finally learned how to do better.”

Or:

“Since I started using round tissues, my runny nose disappears faster, and I have more joy in everyday life.”

Influencers hold round tissues ostentatiously up to the camera. Their hashtags are #DitchTheCorners, #StayRound, and #RoundAndHealthy.

“I won’t be able to stand this madness much longer,” Frank grumbles.

Politics

Large crowds have gathered in the lobby of the Park Hotel. The White Grain party has called a membership meeting. The reason is obvious: public support for the party is steadily declining, and local elections are coming up next month.

“We need a new issue,” the chairman demands. “Something that appeals to people who haven’t voted yet.”

There are many proposals, but none of them is truly interesting: improving traffic, keeping public spaces and streets cleaner, making rent more affordable, and so on.

“We know all that. And our competitors want the same things. Don’t any of you have something new?” the general secretary grumbles.

From the back row, a suggestion finally comes that sparks an intense debate.

“Shouldn’t we also support round tissues?”

At first, nasty and contemptuous comments dominate.

“What nonsense!” “That has no place at a membership meeting!” “Next we’ll be debating square bananas!”

Little by little, the comments become more practical.

“It is certainly a strange suggestion. But it would attract attention.”

“Right. And a proposal like that wouldn’t do any harm. If we present it with a wink and a smile, we’ll even show that we have a sense of humor.”

Finally, a vote is held. The party decides to buy round tissues printed with the party logo. They will be used as promotional material at all information booths.

In a Student Apartment

A quiet breakfast looks very different from this. But what else would you expect in a shared student apartment? Four students. Four personalities. Four ways of thinking: Klara, Emily, Jonas, and Leon. They rarely have breakfast together, but today is an exception. No one has to go to university on Saturday, so everyone promised to be at the table by nine o’clock.

“Where is Jonas? Is he still sleeping?” Emily asks.

“He’ll be here soon. He’s still in the bathroom. Give him a minute,” Leon says.

Jonas does arrive, but he does not sit down with the others.

“What’s going on? We were going to have breakfast together,” Klara reminds him.

Jonas has another plan. “Wait. You have to listen to this.”

He grabs his phone. Despite protests, he gets his way, and everyone has to listen to the rest of the news and the weather report. No one understands why this is necessary today. But then they begin to listen more closely.

“This is Saturday Morning Talk—always fresh, always current. Today with your host Henrik. Our guest is Eduard Wollner from the White Grain party. Good morning, Mr. Wollner. The floor is yours.”

“Thank you very much. And thanks to the many citizens who voted for us. We managed to improve by 18 percent. No one has achieved a result like that before.”

“Congratulations, of course. What do you attribute that to, Mr. Wollner?”

“I can’t prove it. In my opinion—uh—I’m actually quite sure—um—”

“Well? Quite sure of what, Mr. Wollner?”

“Excuse me. My nose.”

Host Henrik immediately steps in. “Oh, no problem at all. We’ll take a short break. Fresh music on Saturday Morning Talk.”

Leon uses the break to grab a roll. Klara and Emily help themselves to the fruit salad.

“What was that all about?” Leon complains.

But before he can take a bite, the program resumes.

“And we’re back. Saturday Morning Talk with host Henrik and Mr. Wollner from the White Grain party. Where were we before the break, Mr. Wollner?”

“Well, I had to blow my nose, and that’s why I was looking for my new pack of tissues.”

“You’ll have to explain that to our listeners, Mr. Wollner. What new tissues?”

“We only use the round ones now. I’m sure things improved for us once everyone in the party had those round tissues. That is why we gained 18 percent.”

Mr. Wollner grows more and more enthusiastic. It almost sounds like a commercial for the Krause company. The students are barely listening anymore, except for Jonas.

“Just listen for a minute. It’s coming. They announced it yesterday evening.”

Mr. Wollner continues. “You should appreciate that 18 percent. We need that for our entire country as well. Industry is shrinking everywhere. That is unacceptable. That’s why our party has decided to focus more strongly on the round tissue.”

“What does that mean?” the host asks.

“Well, experts clearly agree that the round tissue causes fewer failures. Additional studies have now confirmed this. So it makes perfect sense for the government to ensure that every citizen—and the whole country—can benefit. Therefore, we will support a law that consistently prohibits the possession of rectangular tissues.”

That is enough. Jonas switches off the radio and looks around in disbelief.

“Did you hear that? That can’t be true.”

“Have they lost their minds?”

The other students are shocked as well. No one can imagine that the government would approve such a law. But two hours later, the planned vote in parliament is announced. The law will be passed on Wednesday.

Changing Opinions

There is little time for discussion. Discussions happen anyway—not only at bar tables, but in almost every home. On Monday, during a prime-time broadcast, the Minister for Science presents his explanation.

“Dear fellow citizens, do not worry. Yesterday’s topic was the vote on the tissue law. I am firmly convinced that this law will not find a majority. That is what common sense demands. Rectangular or round—it makes no difference. With or without studies, we must keep our minds clear. Thank you for your attention.”

For many people, these words are reassuring. Why should they throw away all the packs of tissues they bought only a month ago, just because those tissues are rectangular? Many share that opinion. These politicians should take better care of people’s real needs, they say.

Companies that have always produced rectangular tissues also begin to protest. Why rebuild entire manufacturing facilities? They have only recently been modernized. New construction would cost a great deal of money. And what happens if someone demands oval tissues tomorrow?

But the opponents and critics clearly do not stand a chance. Just twenty-four hours after his speech, the Minister for Science gives another one.

“I realize that I may be confusing some of you now. But there is no other solution. I have to correct the position I expressed on Monday. Scientific studies show with a high degree of certainty that it is indeed better to use round tissues. So do not be misled. Throw away all your old rectangular ones. Thank you for your understanding.”

The Chancellor also asks to speak. On Tuesday, before the scheduled vote, almost all citizens sit in front of their televisions and listen to him.

“Dear fellow citizens, this is about responsibility. As Chancellor of this country, I swore to work for the well-being of the nation, and I do so with all my heart. That is why I have proposed that our parliament show responsibility as well. Tomorrow’s vote will take place without party discipline. Each representative will answer only to his or her conscience. I hope everyone understands the importance of this and will vote in favor of the law on the use of round tissues. Broad agreement is essential. Only then will we all benefit. Thank you for your attention.”

Protests

“It’s time. We have to do something,” Klara says.

She has just heard the news about the vote in parliament. As expected, there were only a few dissenting votes. Leon is not willing to accept it either.

“We won’t tolerate this. There’s going to be a demonstration downtown at eleven o’clock on Saturday. The meeting point is Station Square. That’s where we’re going.”

The protests are not limited to their city. A movement against the tissue law is forming across the country. The driving force behind it is the activist group known as the Clear Thinkers. Most of its members are students. Companies that want to continue producing rectangular tissues are supporting them.

Emily and Jonas arrive at Station Square on time at eleven o’clock. About three hundred protesters, mostly young people, are waiting in front of the stage. Almost everyone is holding a cardboard sign with a slogan: Stop That Nonsense! Rectangular = Attractive! Round and White—Control in Disguise!

About a thousand police officers surround the square. Around five hundred counterprotesters make a lot of

noise. Their signs read Stay Round, Down with Rectangles, and Round = Healthy.

The protesters slowly begin to move. The police keep the rival groups apart. The Clear Thinkers are not satisfied at all. Why have so few supporters shown up? Jonas walks next to an old man with a gray beard. He is carrying a sign that says For Our Freedom. The two start talking, and Jonas learns that the activists are meeting that evening in the basement restaurant of city hall. There, they will discuss the current tissue law in detail. Jonas wants to come too. He tells his friends from the apartment.

Clear Thinkers

They are already sitting at the long table in the restaurant: the activists of the Clear Thinkers. Bernd does not waste time with a long welcome. He reads aloud the text of the recently passed law. It is a long text, but some passages are easy to remember.

“Carrying rectangular tissues is prohibited in all public places. After an initial warning, a fine of €100 will be imposed. For repeated offenses, the fine may reach up to €1,000.”

Another passage reads: “Due to the current poor economic situation, the obligation to carry and use round tissues, as required by the new law, must be implemented consistently. Anyone who publicly approves of rectangular tissues, downplays their dangers, or denies the effectiveness of round tissues commits a criminal offense.”

The law also states: “To promote the use of round tissues, every citizen may receive a pouch with a string to wear around the neck. This pouch will be provided free of charge by all pharmacies. It has room for two semicircular packages.”

The most disturbing lines are these:

“The police are entitled at all times to check citizens’ pockets and clothing without any particular cause. Searches must be conducted by officers of the same sex whenever possible.”

The discussion of this rule simply will not stop. Finally, Bernd closes the meeting with the words, “Let’s wait and see. We’ll see how many people accept this free tissue pouch. Then we’ll know how many supporters we still have.”

Interview on a Talk Show

Bernd does not quite know what to do with his hands. It is a live television broadcast, and he is sitting on a strange chair on the studio stage. Next to him at the table are three other guests. The moderator, Melanie, wearing a light green jacket, welcomes the participants and especially the large audience.

The audience immediately applauds with excitement.

“Live on radio and television—and right up to the minute. Today we welcome Bernd Breder from the Clear Thinkers. Next to him is Frank Krause, whom I probably no longer need to introduce. Our special guest is Duchess Karina, and of course we also have our expert, Professor Kramer. Thank you all for being here.”

Another wave of thunderous applause follows, even though the conversation has not yet begun.

“You probably already know today’s topic: the Round Tissue Debate.”

The camera moves closer to Frank, who is smiling tensely. The cameraman immediately shifts the focus to Duchess Karina. Her expression is, of course, more attractive. She offers her most professional smile. Professor Kramer, as most people already know, looks

grumpy and dissatisfied, while Bernd cannot hide his nervousness.

“Duchess Karina, please tell our audience what you think of the round tissue,” the moderator says.

But the duchess does not answer. She opens her round pouch, takes out a round tissue, waves it gently, and with an elegant movement brings it to the tip of her nose. The audience reacts at once and applauds.

“Thank you very much, Duchess. That was a clear statement. And now, Mr. Breder, it’s your turn.”

Bernd concentrates. What should he say? He knows this is a great opportunity for him and for the Clear Thinkers. So he has to cooperate, whether he likes it or not. He also pulls a round tissue from his pocket, holds it up, and says, “My tissue used to look different. I don’t understand why we can’t use the old rectangular ones anymore.”

This time there is no applause. Someone in the audience even shouts a disapproving “Boo!”

“May I say something?” asks Professor Kramer.

The moderator immediately encourages him. “Of course. Go ahead. You are our expert.”

“Well, it is remarkable how quickly our population has accepted this new product. Clearly, we are on the right track. I simply do not understand why some people still oppose it and yet call themselves Clear Thinkers.”

This time the applause seems even louder than after the duchess’s silent demonstration. Melanie now turns to Frank.

“Mr. Krause, what is your view?”

“Our study was quite clear,” Frank says. “We tested four thousand people.”

A murmur of approval ripples through the hall.

“But it was only one study,” Bernd says excitedly. “Shouldn’t we repeat it, just to be safe?”

Professor Kramer objects. “Repeat what? That was a perfect RCT study, a randomized controlled trial. The result has a statistical confidence level of 95 percent. Do you still believe the world is flat, Mr. Breder?”

Bernd wants to answer immediately, but before he can open his mouth, the moderator interrupts him.

“Well, Mr. Breder, is it true that many people in your association believe in conspiracy theories like that?”

Once again, Bernd does not get a chance. The discussion is becoming more and more biased. The audience, however, seems to enjoy the situation. One against three. Actually four, because the moderator is obviously not neutral.

Control

The flower beds in the park are no longer attractive.

Frank walks past them without paying attention. Autumn has arrived. He still likes walking to work each day, although by now he has gotten used to being driven around in the company car. His company is doing very well. Orders are plentiful because the whole country is buying the product. It was also fortunate that the first package was patented right from the start. As a result, the company is financially secure.

All of this runs through Frank's mind on his way to work. He even thinks about finally proposing to Tanja. In recent months, the two have grown closer. He now sees her every day—not only at the company, but also at his home. As he leaves the park, Frank passes a flower shop. Many people are waiting in line. Should he buy Tanja a bouquet of red roses today?

He still has time, so he joins the line. He is waiting behind an elderly woman. She looks him up and down suspiciously. Frank does not understand why. Finally, he cannot stand it anymore and asks, a little rudely,

“Why are you looking at me like that? Is something wrong with my coat?”

The old woman leans toward him and whispers, “Where is your little round tissue pouch? It really shouldn’t matter to me, but don’t you have one?”

Only now does Frank understand what she is thinking. He knows about the offer from the pharmacies, but he has not had time to take care of it. Besides, he does not like the idea of wearing such a pouch on his belt all the time. Is he actually required to do that? He thanks the old woman politely and finally buys the bouquet.

“Are those for me?” his secretary asks coquettishly. Of course, she knows who will receive the roses.

“Oh, no, Ms. Evers. Not this time. But could you pick up one of those little round pouches from the pharmacy for me? I’ve already signed the receipt form.”

“Of course, Mr. Krause. I’d be happy to. Maybe I’ll receive a bouquet from you someday too.”

But the round tissue pouch is no longer available. Due to high demand, people will have to wait another month or two. This shows how widely the round tissue has now been accepted.

In a Restaurant

The Clear Thinkers have grown smaller as a group. Today, only six of them are sitting together at the long table.

Bernd reports on the developments of the past few days.

“Unfortunately, that’s where we are. You can see it in the round pouches. At the moment, we are receiving hardly any support.”

Jonas, who has come again, asks, “What about the groups in the other cities?”

The situation is the same there. It seems that very few people are still willing to trust their own judgment. Quite a few even seem to enjoy reporting people who still use rectangular tissues. The old man with the long gray beard says,

“Just imagine this. At a bus stop, a mother wipes her little child’s nose with a rectangular tissue. A man standing nearby sees it and immediately runs to a police officer

who happens to be passing by. The woman only receives a warning. But what else is going to happen to us in the future?”

“I was checked too,” another person adds. “Luckily, I only had round tissues in my pocket. But it is a really strange feeling when a police officer pats you down.”

Bernd confirms that he has already received many similar reports. He knows all that, but it does not help if people only complain.

“We have to challenge the validity of this new law,” he says.

The proposal receives general approval. With the help of a lawyer, they will request a review of the study. It is doubtful whether the study was actually conducted according to scientific standards. Bernd asks the secretary to give each member of the group a copy of today’s notes. One copy will even be sent to the editor-in-chief of the local newspaper. Bernd says, “We have nothing to hide.”

Police Search

Who is ringing the doorbell so early in the morning? Bernd is still eating breakfast. When he opens the front

door, the last bite of food almost sticks in his throat. Standing in front of him is a uniformed police officer, accompanied by a colleague and a special operations unit: four armed officers in black masks.

“Open the door, Mr. Breder. We have a warrant to search your apartment. Let us in.”

“There must be some mistake. What am I accused of?” Bernd asks.

“Read it yourself. It’s right there. You are suspected of violating the new tissue law.”

“That’s impossible. I only take round tissues with me when I leave the apartment. I only use the old rectangular ones I still have as kitchen towels.”

“What you do with your old tissues is none of our concern. But we have reliable information indicating that you are spreading false information about the new law. That is why we need to inspect your desktop computer, confiscate your computer, and take your phone as well.”

“But you can’t do that. I need those devices.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll just take them to the police station. After the analysis, we’ll return everything. Now show us your desk.”

Bernd knows it is better to cooperate during the search. He leads the officers into his office.

“Here it is,” the policewoman calls out. She grabs the sheet of paper still lying in the printer tray. Now the officers seem satisfied. They no longer want to take the devices after all. They confiscate only the notes from the last club meeting. The officers say a polite goodbye: “See you later, Mr. Breder. You’ll hear from us.”

Bernd has lost his appetite. He clears the dining table.

What now?

He cannot wait until the next regular club meeting. He immediately informs all members of the association and invites them to a meeting at the restaurant that evening.

But none of this can change the ruling Bernd receives three days after the search of his apartment.

The document alleges that the Clear Thinkers association questions the validity of the tissue law and even advocates the continued use of the old rectangular tissues. If such statements are repeated, the association could face a ban. Since this is a first offense, however, only a fine of €3,000 is imposed.

At School

The students of class 10c stare curiously at the screen showing the changes to the schedule. Fourth period promises to be interesting. They read that a new teacher named Leon Berger will teach a substitute class. Leon has been given a teaching assignment for three hours a week. It is only a small job, but it does not conflict with his university schedule. He greets the class. Twenty-four boys and girls look at him with curiosity.

Today's topic is freedom of speech. Leon did not choose it. The homeroom teacher had decided on it the week before. Leon begins.

“What do you think? Should soccer players be suspended if the police catch them taking part in an illegal street race?”

It is probably not the best example, but he has to start somewhere. Without waiting for answers, he adds a second example.

“What do you think? Should a performance by the famous singer Eve M. be banned because she has a terrible voice?”

This causes laughter, and Leon receives many comments.

“And what do you think? Is it allowed to say that Minister A. B. C. is a corrupt pig and that it would be better to hang him?”

One of the brightest students raises his hand and says, “Who do you mean by A. B. C.? You probably don’t want to risk a lawsuit.”

Leon smiles. He is pleased that he has managed to introduce the topic successfully to a class he has never met before. Many more comments follow. Leon asks everyone to write down notes on at least three examples.

Now he has a short moment to breathe—but not for long. The same bright student raises his hand again.

“Mr. Berger, what do you think about the new tissue law?”

Leon swallows. He was not prepared for that. After a moment’s hesitation, he faces the question.

“To be honest, I have doubts about it. I think—and this is only my personal opinion—that it is not dangerous to wipe your nose with rectangular tissues.”

His statement again causes general amusement. But the lesson is over. He does not know whether he will have

the chance to teach that class again. For today, he leaves the school.

He has been assigned to teach another substitute class the day after tomorrow. But the very next day, the principal calls him.

“Mr. Berger, please come to my office an hour earlier tomorrow. We need to discuss something.”

Leon wonders whether he has done something wrong, but he cannot think of anything. Quite the opposite. The last class went well, didn't it? In the principal's office, he learns otherwise. A student from the class told his father about the substitute class. The father took Leon's comment about the tissue law as a reason to call the principal.

“That's right, Mr. Berger. You are paid by us. And we have instructions from the school authority to teach students that rectangular tissues are now dangerous. In any case, round tissues are to be used, and students should, of course, be encouraged to support them.”

“But what was I supposed to do? The students asked for my own opinion.”

“Don’t be so naive. If you don’t understand what I’m saying, you’re in the wrong place. Find yourself another job.”

Thoughts Are Free

In the Department of Social Affairs, department head Kruse calls his colleagues together.

“We can’t put up with this. These Clear Thinkers are getting worse and worse. Now they are even trying to question the tissue law. We have to stop them. I don’t understand why they only have to pay a fine.”

After this speech, he orders one of his officers to file charges immediately against the restaurant where the Clear Thinkers meet. Ideally, he says, the restaurant should be closed at once, because it is obvious that false claims about the tissue law have been spread there.

Another employee is instructed to gather more detailed information about the study. He must find out whether the study is actually scientifically sound. The local press reports not only on the latest meeting of the Clear Thinkers, but also on the denunciation by the Department of Social Affairs.

The headlines read:

CONSPIRACY IN THE RESTAURANT

THE CLEAR THINKERS PLAN A COUP

No one expected what happens next. Suddenly, support for the Clear Thinkers begins to grow. At the next meeting, not only is the long table full, but every seat in the hall is taken. The number of people standing is impossible to count.

“We meet here every week in our restaurant. We will not let anyone take that away from us,” someone shouts.

He is a member of the bowling club that has used the basement bowling alley for many years. Others, some of whose political leanings can even be recognized by their round pouches, also begin to speak out.

“Let the Clear Thinkers think what they want. We live in a free country, after all.”

Jonas seizes the moment. He happens to have brought his guitar because he had been at music school before the meeting.

Now he stands on a chair and begins to play the well-known song “Thoughts Are Free.”

The audience gets goosebumps. Everyone stands and sings along. The reporter from the local newspaper is also

present. His report on the meeting appears in the newspaper and, of course, causes a strong reaction in the Department of Social Affairs.

In the Ministry

Egon Schmidt, the head of the Ministry of the Interior, reads a secret message with a worried expression. It concerns the study on round and rectangular tissues. The message does belong to his ministry, but it is explosive. He would rather not even pass it on to the intelligence service. Instead, he first contacts his closest assistant, Hartmut Wohlers.

“Hartmut, you’re a lawyer, so you’re exactly the right person for this. Take a deep breath. The tissue study is a hoax.”

“Oh my. Then we had better keep this between us. This absolutely must not become public,” Hartmut says.

“You’re right. We have just published the regulations for kindergartens and schools. Educators are supposed to teach children from an early age that rectangular shapes are dangerous. We can’t take that back. The manufacturer Krause benefited most from this study. I will offer him a confidential conversation.”

And so Frank Krause is invited to the Ministry of the Interior. He has no idea what it means and feels uneasy. Now he is sitting in the office of department head Schmidt. Mr. Wohlers is also present. He gets straight to the point.

“Mr. Krause, please don’t try to fool us. We know everything. Your study is fake. Can you imagine what that would mean for you?”

Frank feels his stomach tighten. He knows very well that denying everything would not be wise. But what should he do? Before he can open his mouth, department head Schmidt turns to him.

“This could end very badly for you, Mr. Krause. But we hope you will cooperate.”

“Right, but—how am I supposed to do that? What do you expect from me?” Frank asks fearfully.

“Absolute secrecy,” Mr. Wohlers says. “Absolute secrecy. That is basically all we want from you. Do you understand?”

No, Frank still does not quite understand. Department head Schmidt has to explain in more detail. He demands that the Krause company give no one any information about the study. In return, the ministry promises to refrain

from prosecution. To emphasize the seriousness of the offer, Mr. Schmidt ends the conversation with a new promise.

“Mr. Krause, in the coming days you will receive an official letter from the ministry inviting you to a ceremony. At that ceremony, you will be presented with an award: the Grand Cross of Merit with Star, the highest honor of the state.”

Frank could never have imagined this. He will not be punished; instead, he will receive an award he does not deserve at all. On the other hand, he now understands that he must maintain absolute secrecy. That becomes a constant worry.

Garland

A string of colorful balloons stretches between two trees in the garden. Anyone can see it from the street. Emily’s sister Ina is celebrating her fifteenth birthday today. Almost all of her classmates are coming, so the garden needs more decoration. Emily has an idea. She remembers the big package of old tissues. Now all she needs is a lot of alligator clips.

“Why do you need tissues and alligator clips?” Ina asks curiously.

“You’ll see in a moment. But bring me your thick markers. Then you’ll understand.”

Emily lays thirteen tissues flat on the table. She puts two alligator clips on each tissue to weigh it down.

“I’m turning fifteen. Don’t I still need two more tissues?”

“No, just wait.”

Emily paints a large letter on each tissue.

And there it is: H A P P Y B I R T H D A Y

Now it is clear. The rectangular tissues are attached to the string with alligator clips. Balloons hang on the left and right. A quick photo of the birthday girl under the garland, and the party can begin.

Emily did not expect what happens next. Her neighbor, Mrs. Brandt, seems to dislike everything. Emily has had several arguments with her, often about Mrs. Brandt’s dog, which has left its mess right in front of the garden fence. Most often, though, Mrs. Brandt complains about loud music. But today there has not been any music yet.

“What does she want?”

“You can’t do that,” Mrs. Brandt scolds. “Take it down right now.”

Then she disappears. One by one, Ina’s birthday guests arrive and spread out through the garden. Everyone is in a good mood, enjoying the sweets and drinks.

Suddenly, a police car stops in front of the house. A police officer and his colleague get out and ask for the owner of the house.

“My mother isn’t home right now. I’m Ina’s older sister. She’s celebrating her birthday. What’s wrong?”

“We received a phone call. We’re sorry, but your garland has to be taken down,” the policewoman says.

“Why? It doesn’t bother anyone,” Emily says.

“You’re wrong. You are using rectangular tissues. And that is exactly what many people are complaining about these days. So take them down, or we will have to intervene,” the policeman threatens.

Emily cannot understand it. But what is she supposed to do—defy state authority? She does not have the courage for that. But she has an idea.

“Fine. I’ll do it, but only if you give me your order in writing, with a stamp and a signature. Ina, get a notepad and a pen.”

Of course, the photo of the birthday garland appears successfully on the front page of the local newspaper. Such garlands are not illegal, as confirmed by a lawyer for the Clear Thinkers. Meanwhile, the two police officers are instructed to apologize for their intervention.

The incident amuses not only the members of the Clear Thinkers. Similar garlands can now be seen in many gardens and on many balconies. But that does not threaten the round tissue. More and more people are now carrying round tissue pouches as well.

The Award

Tanja is delighted. “Very good, Frank. You look excellent in your formal suit.”

“Can I really accept a medal of merit like this?”

“Of course you can. I’m proud of it.”

“Stop it. I don’t feel good about this. What happens if everything comes out later?”

“Nothing will come out. I’ve already spoken to Toby. His company in the U.S. no longer exists. He fled to Canada and founded a new company there. His name isn’t even Toby anymore. He really is a clever guy.”

This information calms Frank. Soon he will accept his award at city hall without a stomachache. Frank can hardly believe it. The mayor gives him a special commendation. It is far too much praise. He hears that, with this award, he is taking on a great responsibility for the well-being of the people. Isn’t that a bit much? Frank is not sure whether he can live up to such a requirement.

When he gets home, his thoughts will not stop. What has he really achieved for the people? They all buy round tissues now. That obviously brings his company a lot of profit. But what benefit do people get from it?

His thoughts are suddenly interrupted. In addition to Anton and Tanja, other guests have arrived. Everyone is happy to celebrate with Frank. Everyone wants to wear the Grand Cross around their neck. Finally, Frank asks to speak.

“Thank you very much, dear friends. I truly feel honored. But it is too much praise—far too much. I received this award only because you supported me the whole time. So, of course, you also have the right to wear the cross

around your neck. Thank you again to all of you, and especially to Tanja.”

Of course, by her own admission, she is the one who deserved the Cross of Merit. She was the one who had the idea for the study. But no one should know that.

The Next Step

As usual, Frank walks to his company. Normally, hardly anyone is on the road at that hour, which gives him time to sort through his thoughts. Today that does not work, because he has to pass a group of protesters. He hears chants like “Stop the nonsense!” “Rectangular is sexy!” and “Round and white—organized stupidity!”

Frank takes a deep breath and continues on his way. Relieved, he reaches the front door and stares into the air.

“Don’t make a big deal out of it,” Ms. Evers says. “There are always a few people who are against everything. They’ll calm down soon.”

By now, Frank has calmed down too. He discusses further planning with Anton.

“Exactly. You have to keep that positive attitude. It’s helped us all along,” Anton says.

Frank can only agree. But he does not know where that attitude came from. Suddenly, everything becomes clear to him.

It must be because of the round tissues.

They are the reason everything got better. The company's sales doubled. He even received the Grand Cross of Merit with Star. And there is something else that brings him even more joy: his relationship with Tanja. Tonight, he will propose to her. But first, he explains a completely new idea to Anton.

“We need a new department. And you are the person who will lead it.”

“Excuse me—what? I'm being promoted? What department?”

“Brace yourself. Starting today, you are working on the introduction of round toilet paper.”

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