

Murder Child

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Levke had already been to three funerals. The first was for a classmate who had died in a car accident, then for her grandfather, and most recently for her grandmother.

All three funerals had been sad, but they were nothing compared to this burial. Henry hadn't had any friends in Rippenhoven, not even acquaintances. He didn't have any friends at all. He had been completely and utterly alone. The extent of his loneliness/solitude became apparent at the small cemetery behind the crooked church on the outskirts of town. In front of the morgue waited four people. The man from the funeral parlor, Ingo, the surfing teacher, Sue and Greg. Four people Henry had barely known.

"It's such a shame, isn't it?" Sue said with concern. Her light skin was even more sunburned today than that day at the beach.

"Well then," said the man from the funeral parlor, as if that was a suitable reply.

Ingo and Greg and the funeral director carried the coffin to the open grave, where he gave a brief speech. Levke didn't catch a word of it because she was thinking about Barbara the whole time. Levke had asked her that morning if she didn't want to come along, but Barbara had just raised her eyebrows and shaken her head. "Sorry, Levke, but I didn't know the man at all."

"Come anyway. Do it for me."

"Really, no. Funerals always bring me down. And it won't help him anymore, either."

"Please, Barbara. I did work for the man. And I was the one who found him."

"Oh, all right," her mother said reluctantly. "We'll meet each other later at the cemetery. But I can't promise I'll make it."

Of course she didn't show up.

Now the men were lowering the coffin into the grave with dignified expressions on their faces that betrayed their exertion. It was hard to imagine that Henry lay in there, his tanned brown face now gray and rigid. Maybe he was wearing a dark suit. A white shirt over the encrusted stab wound. And the Helly Hansen cap on his head.

I hope someone closed his eyes, Levke thought. Then she saw Tomasz running toward them through the rows of graves. Had Barbara sent him?

"I'm too late," he panted when he finally stood next to her. "Is it all over?"

"It's okay," Levke said. "I'm glad you're here."

They stood there until the others had moved away, then Levke placed a small bouquet of flowers on the mound of earth on top of the grave. Yellow roses. She had been to the single florist shop in Rippenhoven that morning and asked for yellow freesia, but they didn't have any. "No one wants freesia anymore," the woman in the florist shop had explained. Next to Levke's roses lay a bunch of violets that Sue had brought. And another bouquet.

Yellow flowers that Levke didn't recognize.

Who had put them there? Ingo didn't have any flowers with him, and the man from the funeral parlor certainly hadn't brought them.

"What kind of flowers are those?" she asked Tomasz, without really expecting an answer.

She knew what these flowers were called, even though she had never seen them before. That was freesia.

Afterward they went and got an ice cream: Ingo, Greg, Sue, Levke and Tomasz. Only the funeral director took his leave; he had another funeral to attend. Greg and Sue insisted on treating everyone, and when Levke asked herself why they were being so nice when Henry was really none of their business, Sue told her that they had had a child who had died. "He was only five," she said. Their sunburned faces appeared to be completely calm as she said it, as if it was totally normal to have a child and then lose him. Levke would have liked to ask how their son died and how long ago that had happened, but she didn't find the words, and certainly not in English. So she just nodded sympathetically and spooned up her ice cream, which stuck to her palate like a blob of cold lard.

She was ashamed that she had thought Sue and Greg were superficial without knowing the first thing about them.

As they said goodbye to each other later, Sue said something else that Levke didn't entirely understand. That nothing would calm down if there weren't a solution. Or something like that.

Levke told Tomasz about it as they walked back to the cemetery, where he had parked his moped.

"I wonder what she meant by that. What does she think should calm down? The town, or Henry's soul, or the murderer?"

"Maybe it's none of the three. Maybe she was talking about herself and Greg," Tomasz suggested.

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The front door usually stood open, but today it was closed. Levke didn't have a key with her, so Tomasz climbed over the fence into the yard; the door to the terrace was always unlocked. But when he had disappeared behind the currant bushes, she found her house key after all.

She meant to walk through the kitchen to meet him, but in the foyer she glanced through the half-opened door into the living room. In front of the fireplace stood Barbara. Barbara, who supposedly hadn't been able to come to the cemetery. Now she was starting a fire in the fireplace, calmly and in no hurry. And in the middle of the day and in high summer!

I'm going to talk to her, Levke decided. Here and now. I can't bear the uncertainty a minute longer.

As she pushed open the door and stepped into the room, Barbara had just finished twisting a piece of paper into a thin roll and lit it. She startled when she saw Levke. The flaming paper flew onto the hearth, blazed brightly and angrily, and then crumbled into black ash without setting anything on fire. Barbara hadn't intended to start a fire at all, Levke realized: the charred logs lying in the fireplace were the same ones that had already been there the day they moved in.

“What are you burning there?” Levke asked.

“Nothing,” Barbara replied, and this lie was so obvious and stupid that it made Levke even angrier than she already was.

“Henry is underground now.” Her voice sounded strangely cold and indifferent, even though she was shaking with rage inside. “Are you satisfied?”

“What do you mean by that?” Barbara asked without lifting her gaze from the ashes in the fireplace. She sounded completely calm, too.

“Buried and forgotten,” Levke continued. “Almost, anyway. Not that you would care.”

“What are you saying?” Barbara raised her head and looked at Levke, her pale blue eyes like a child’s, so helpless and innocent. So wrong.

“You’re lying to me,” Levke said. “We wanted to always be honest with each other, we promised each other, but you are lying and you have been lying for days.”

Barbara looked away. Whatever she had burned had collapsed into a heap of ashes, light as a feather, in the fireplace.

“I’m so sorry, Levke.” Her voice sounded bright and young all of a sudden, as if she had shed the years and the experiences, layer for layer. “I know I’m not behaving well. But it has to be. You have to trust me . . .”

Levke gave a snort of contempt. “Trust you? Why should I trust you? You don’t trust me, either. Just tell me what happened.”

“I can’t tell you, Levke. I’m not allowed to say it. I wish things were otherwise. But believe me, it has nothing to do with you.”

“What are you talking about? A man I know was murdered, and you’re involved in it. Of course it has something to do with me.”

“I am not in any way responsible for the murder. I truly didn’t know the man. Listen, Levke, I’ll tell you one time, but only once . . .” The pale blue eyes were fixated on her face again, but before she could continue the doorbell rang, and Barbara clapped a hand over her mouth in fright.

“That’s Tomasz,” said Levke. Apparently he hadn’t come into the house through the back door and was trying again from the front of the house.

“Stop, wait!” Barbara called to Levke before she had even made a move. “I’ll open it!”

She rushed past Levke to the door and tore it open as if it were a matter of life and death. Tomasz walked past her into the house, somewhat irritated.

“I’m so sorry,” Levke said apologetically. “I completely forgot about you.”

Tomasz disappeared upstairs, and Barbara and Levke were alone again. But it was too late. For one brief moment there had been an opening, a crack in Barbara’s hard shell, but now it was tightly shut again.

“What did you want to tell me just now?” Levke tried nonetheless.

“That I’m sorry I wasn’t at the cemetery. I was just about to leave when the glazier called, and afterward it was too late.”

That, of course, was another lie. Levke knew it, and Barbara knew that Levke knew it was a lie. But that didn’t seem to matter to her.

After that, everything became unbearable. All the doors were bolted and barricaded, even when they were in the house. At night Barbara closed all the shutters, even though the wood was so rotten that they wouldn’t have kept out any intruder in the world. They bought a lock for the gate in the garden, even though it was easy enough to climb over the fence.

“But you’re probably planning to set mines in the yard anyway,” Levke said. “Just be sure to remember where you’ve buried them so you can dig them up again when you’ve come to your senses.”

“Very funny,” Barbara replied, but she didn’t sound the least bit amused.

When the telephone rang, she ran like mad to be the first one to reach it. Most of the time she was carrying around the cordless phone and her mobile phone in the pocket of her workers’ overalls anyway.

“Don’t you know that cell phones can cause cancer if you carry them around with you all the time? You used to say that all the time yourself.”

“That hasn’t been proved,” was Barbara’s reply as she closed the door from the terrace to the garden, blockaded it, and then tried the door handle to make sure it was really shut.

What are you afraid of? thought Levke. But she didn’t ask the question out loud anymore, because she knew she wouldn’t get an answer.

Levke still worked every morning at the surf club, where she organized the classes that Ingo held. They had some time, until the end of the month, because the rent was paid until then. Levke asked herself why Ingo continued. Maybe he hoped he could just take over the surf club if no heirs turned up.

And her? She kept working because it kept her distracted, at least temporarily, from her feeling of being trapped and from the question that hung over everything: Who had killed Henry?

Barbara had always trusted Levke with a lot. She was allowed to find her way home from school by herself earlier than most of her classmates, to ride the subway, to go to the movies or the disco. "Less happens to children who are brave than to fearful ones," was Barbara's explanation. "And I want to have a brave girl."

But like everything else, that was a thing of the past now. What Barbara wanted now, no one could tell.

She drove Levke to the surf club in the mornings and picked her up again in the afternoons. She brought her into town and to the beach. With days of uninterrupted rain, at first that was a welcome change, but then it got on her nerves.

At some point, Levke wasn't even allowed to go to the neighboring farm anymore, where she had always gotten eggs. "I'll do that later," Barbara said.

"But I want to see if the hunting dogs have had their puppies yet," Levke protested.

"Wait another five minutes," Barbara replied as she cleaned the kitchen ceiling, "then I'll drive you over."

Levke stared at her in disbelief. Barbara smeared thick globs of cleaning goop on the ceiling and spread them evenly with a trowel. All around her ladder, thick drops fell to the sheet of plastic on the ground, a rain of white paste.

"You've lost your mind!" Levke spluttered. She ran into the foyer and yanked on the door, which was locked, naturally. Barbara overtook her just outside and dragged her back to the house by the arm like a disobedient little girl. Levke fought her off at first, but then she saw Tomasz at his window upstairs. He was looking down at them. Suddenly Levke was so ashamed that she followed Barbara voluntarily.

She went straight to her room, and this time it was she who locked the door behind her.

After dinner she packed a few things into her backpack, clothes, her toothbrush, and every cent of her savings. Two hundred and sixteen euros. Not much, but she needed to get away from here. And it was important. The last train to Wismar left at 9:27 p.m., and there would be a connection from there to Berlin.

She threw her backpack out the window and climbed down. As quietly as possible, she took her bike out of the shed and pushed it through the gate onto the street. Only when she was a good stretch away from the house did she dare to climb on and pedal away.

The train station stood there as if it were abandoned. There wasn't a soul to be seen on the platform, and it was already 9:15. Apparently no one but her felt the urge to go to Berlin or anywhere else. Or the train didn't stop here.

She walked through the hall to the yellowed poster with the departure times. There it was: 9:27, Track 2. Express train to Wismar. Daily except Wednesdays, she continued reading. And of course today was Wednesday.

Damn it. Now she stood there and couldn't go any further.

It was enough to make her flip out. She kicked an overflowing metal trash can so hard that an empty tin can toppled off the pile and rolled clattering through the hall. Damn it, damn it, damn it!

Now she had no choice but to sneak back and hope that Barbara hadn't yet noticed that she was gone. She kicked the trash can again.

"Don't break it," said someone directly next to her.

With a cry she whirled around.

"Tomasz!" He had a backpack on his back and two helmets in his hands.

"I saw you run off. If you want, I'll take you there."

"You don't even know where I want to go."

"You have to tell me, otherwise it's hard to know."

He looked at her in his calm, impenetrable way. Say it, if you want. If you don't want to, that's all right, too.

"I want to go to Berlin."

“I thought so. So let’s get going. It’s a long way from here.”

“Do you seriously want to take me all the way . . .”?

But he was already on his way outside.

He had also brought a motorcycle jacket for Levke. It was much too big for her – it was probably Vlad’s, just like the helmet. But she was glad that Tomasz had thought of it, because when she sat on the seat behind him it started to drizzle.

Goodbye to this miserable hole of a town, she thought as the last houses of Rippenhoven glided past them. Tall yellow flowers bent over a garden fence and nodded silently in the rain.

As they reached the highway, she let go of the handles behind her and wrapped her arms around Tomasz.

Mo

Berlin, 1975

On the 25th of April, the Holger Meins Commando of the Red Army Faction (RAF) attacked the German embassy in Stockholm, Sweden. The news spread like wildfire through the scene. They found out about it at three in the afternoon, and an hour later they met at Sailor’s on Moritz Strasse and stared at the television above the door as if hypnotized.

The terrorists had killed a German military attaché and taken eleven people hostage. They demanded the release of twenty-six prisoners, including the entire leadership of the RAF: Ulrike Meinhof, Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin. “The hostage-takers threatened to blow up the building if their demands aren’t met,” reported one journalist.

Photographs of the imprisoned terrorists appeared on the television screen, and then Chancellor Helmut Schmidt looked at the crowd gathered in the pub with a stern expression. “The German government cannot be blackmailed,” he said. “We will find a solution . . .”

The rest of his statement was drowned out by the general commotion. “Shut up, you filthy pig!” screamed a man in front of them, jerking his beer glass in the direction of the screen so that beer spilled all over Sue, who was sitting next to him, but she was so agitated herself that she didn’t even notice.

“Let them go!” she bellowed at the top of her lungs, as if Schmidt could hear her; and by then he wasn’t even on the television anymore. “Stop this madness!” Mo at first thought she was talking about the hostages in the embassy, but of course she meant the prisoners in Stammheim.

Now the television presented an archive photo of the embassy complex in Stockholm.

Somewhere off-screen a moderator’s voice was explaining something, but you couldn’t understand a word because everyone was talking and yelling at the same time.

“Everyone be quiet!” Waldo cried, but it was no use.

“Hey!” JJ bellowed, and then things settled down a little. “Let’s gather on the Ku’damm, a spontaneous demonstration to show our solidarity.”

A few people cheered and raised their balled fists in the air. But most hesitated.

“Are you crazy?” asked one large woman sitting near him.

“Excuse me?” JJ stared at her threateningly.

“I asked if you’re crazy,” the woman repeated. Mo had never seen her before. “If you go marching up and down the Ku’damm right now, probably with a banner in your hand, they’ll come down on you first thing.”

“Not with banners,” JJ said, not so sure of himself.

The stranger gave an almost imperceptible smile. She was a little older than Mo and Sunny, but maybe she just seemed older because she was so confident. Her hair was ash-blond, shoulder length and smooth, and she had a fairly large nose. Sharp facial contours. Not JJ’s type; he went for a more feminine look like Kessy or Sunny.

“Without banner there’s no point in having a demonstration. Think about it, man. We have to do something totally different now.”

Mo could literally feel JJ’s body tense up. His eyes were half closed, and he assessed the stranger like one predator sizes up another. He hated it when someone contradicted him. Especially when it was a woman.

He hates it, and yet he loves it, thought Mo. And here we go.

“What would you suggest, then?” he asked quietly, as the noise level in the room slowly rose again. The report from Stockholm was apparently over, and on the screen above the door soccer players ran around on a playing field.

JJ wasn't aware of any of that. He would just concentrate entirely on the woman and wouldn't let up until he had her in bed. Under him.

"We're certainly not going to talk about that here," she replied equally quietly.

JJ stood up and the woman got up as well. Mo and Sunny exchanged a look that was half amused and half annoyed. But it wasn't the way they thought. Or the way JJ thought.

The strange woman didn't want sex, at least not with JJ. She was planning a covert mission. She had observed JJ and selected him, and one at a time she would involve Sunny, Mo, Gaucho and Waldo, too.

"No," she refused when JJ wanted to bring Kessy with to one of the meetings. "We can't afford to take any chances."

She didn't explain why Kessy posed a threat.

She explained very little, in fact. She simply gave orders. And the others followed.