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 TEI
LÜBBE 

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TIME OF THE GUILTY

Sample Translation by Romy Fursland



Thriller

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PART 1
GUILT

Prologue

Nine millimetres

November 2022

Anne recognises him the moment the train door opens and he steps out onto the platform of Celle Station. His combed-back hair shines in the morning light like hoarfrost. His thick sideburns come down to his jawline – they still remind her of nailbrushes. And his loden coat is shiny with grease. Volker März has been wearing it nearly his whole life. He stands tall, smiling. It's the smile of a man who feels certain the world can't pin anything on him. He doesn't notice Anne as he heads for the exit.

It's the 22nd of November 2022 – a kind of numerical palindrome, she thinks. März is seventy-two years old now, six foot tall and still slim. He's in good shape for his age. It's all in the investigation file, which is several thousand pages long. Anne knows it off by heart, every detail of it etched into her memory. He goes to the gym three times a week, and he still does a few hours a week for a housing association where he works as a caretaker. He can't quit, he said during one of his interrogations, because his colleagues and the residents are so fond of him. He's the heart and soul of the place: he said that too.

The taxi rank is empty. März puts his briefcase down and lights a cigarette. Fog hangs over the station forecourt and drifts through the streets, chilly and damp. People come and go. None of them are talking to each other, all preoccupied with their own thoughts. Some are on the phone, others have their eyes to the ground, and all are in a hurry. The best camouflage is in the anonymity of the crowd.

As Anne comes up behind him, she can smell his aftershave. Tabac Original. It's sweet. Too masculine for him.

"Good morning, Herr März," she says.

He turns, drops his cigarette. "Frau Paulsen. What do you want?"

She pulls her service weapon out from under her jacket and presses the muzzle into his stomach, making sure no-one else can see. "If you shout or put up a fight I'll shoot you right here in the street. Do you understand?"

He nods. His hair has is thinning now, and the wind plays with the sparse strands.

"I'll also shoot you if you don't do exactly as I say. Understand that too?"

He nods again.

"Now we're going to go over to my car and you're going to get in. We're going for a spin."

"You've lost your mind. What the hell are you doing?"

Anne presses the pistol even harder into his abdomen. "Turn around. It's over there, the blue Golf. Move."

März picks up his briefcase and starts walking. His wrinkled neck is clean-shaven, its tanned skin speckled with age spots. He's wearing his gold curb chain around his neck, his favourite piece of jewellery. He coughs and clears his throat, a typical smoker's cough. Anne thinks of his yellow fingers, of which there are so many mentions in the file.

She directs him to the passenger door of her Golf. As he gets in she keeps the gun trained on him, and after joining him in the car she chucks him a pair of handcuffs. "Put them on. Do it."

His movements are jittery as he follows her instruction. "I'm a free man. You know that. This is illegal, what you're doing."

She starts the engine.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Shut up," she says, glancing in her wing mirror and putting her foot on the accelerator.

She doesn't want him to talk. Not yet. He'll have plenty of time to talk. He'll hope never to have so much time again. Anne feels her skin tauten. It's as if all the air is being sucked out of the car, as if it's being crushed from the outside.

Celle's central streets are unusually quiet for eight o' clock in the morning. Anne heads west. She turns onto the B216 towards Hambühren. März probably thinks he knows where's she's taking him, that's why he

doesn't ask again. But she's fairly sure he doesn't actually know their destination. Everything there is prepared for their arrival.

She takes her phone out of her trouser pocket. Thomas has tried to call her – no surprises there. Six times in the past eight hours. He's not giving up – no surprises there either. She turns the phone off. Now no-one will be able to track her location.

The whole car reeks of Tabac Original, as if there are millions of those little air freshener trees hanging from the rearview mirror. She opens the window a crack. Fresh air streams in. The windscreen wipers battle against the fog, which draws a misty veil over the windscreen.

"This will cost you your job," he says, with a forced laugh.

He won't be laughing soon.

In the rearview mirror, Anne sees a car that's been behind her since Celle. A black Volvo. She doesn't know anyone with a black Volvo. She slows down and watches the other car come closer in the mirror. It too seems to be slowing down – Anne's heart beats faster. She pulls into the next lay-by and stops.

"What is it?" asks März.

The Volvo drives on. The driver has his hood up. She doesn't recognise him, can't see his face. Or it could be a woman... could be anyone. She's seeing ghosts. The detective's disease. Ghosts lurk everywhere.

She pulls onto the road again and drives on.

About three hundred yards outside Hambühren she turns right onto a big plot of land. The old station building, surrounded by hoardings, is derelict – as is the pub. The familiar sign still hangs above the entrance: *'Wartesaal'*.

When Anne brought everything here yesterday, she couldn't believe her eyes. Some of the windows were smashed and boarded up, and the bar and several of the chairs had been vandalised. There was muck everywhere, pigeon shit, shards of glass, broken beer mugs. The ancient radio and record player was lying on the floor – but the piano still stood where it always had, in the corner at the back of the room. Everything was coated in a thick patina of dust.

She parks behind the building. There have been no trains on these tracks since the 1980s, and bushes and shrubs have sprung up between the sleepers.

The demolition company have parked two diggers and a skip on the gravel. The work is starting tomorrow: the workers will arrive at eight o' clock tomorrow morning and reduce everything to rubble. Then the *Wartesaal* will be history. There couldn't be a more perfect place, even though she'll be pushed for time.

März shakes his head.

She gets out and opens the passenger door. "Out!"

He hauls himself out of the car. Now she sees he's not in such good shape after all – age has left its mark on him in other ways than just his white hair. He's a head taller than her, an old, bony man. His cuffed hands are trembling. She grabs his left arm and drags him over to the floor hatch.

"What are you doing?" he asks. "Are you going to lock me in here and let me starve to death?"

Not a bad idea. But she has other plans for him.

She removes the padlock from the metal fittings on the floor hatch door. It hadn't taken her long to prise it open with the crowbar yesterday – it had given way almost immediately.

Eight steps lead down into the cellar. Beside them is a little ramp once used for rolling beer barrels down. Everything is slimy with mud and leaves. As they go down the stairs, Anne steadies März by holding him under the arm.

It's pitch dark in the cellar. She switches on her torch. The whitewashed clay plaster is crumbling off the walls in countless places. A musty smell hangs in the air. As a child, Anne hardly ever dared come down here. She thought it was full of ghosts – it was horribly creepy. Now she knows there are no ghosts. But the cellar still makes her feel uneasy. She's glad to prod März up the wooden stairs that lead to the cold store behind the taproom.

The old shelves are still on the wall of the cold-store – metal racks with chipboard shelving boards. The sliding door to the goods lift, which is set into the wall, stands ajar. Mum used to keep their stock in this room:

meat, canned food, vegetables and bottles of spirits. There was a freezer in the corner, always filled with ice lollies or waffle cones.

Anne opens the crossbar of the heavy steel door and pushes März into what used to be the bar. The *Wartesaal* – ‘Waiting Room’ – was a good name for a railway station pub. The stools are screwed to the floor in front of the bar. Their circular seats still turn.

“Sit down,” she says, pointing to one of the stools. It’s dark in the room with the blinds down. The beam of her torch dances across März’s face.

He screws up his eyes and sits. His knee joints creak. She unlocks one of his handcuffs and attaches it to the leg of the stool. That’ll hold. He won’t get free on his own.

Of course he knows where he is, even if he wants to pretend he’s sitting at this bar for the first time.

Anne pours mineral water into two of the glasses she’s brought with her, and slides one towards him. He reaches for it with his left hand and drinks.

His deep-set eyes have dark circles around them, the bushy eyebrows silver now and the irises very pale. They glow watery blue. Like they did then.

From the look in his eyes, it seems he doesn’t realise who Anne really is. But that will come.

The regulars’ table is opposite them. Anne imagines it full of people: Mum is there, a few uncles and aunts and even Grandpa and Grandma. All the adults are smoking. A fire flickers in the log burner. Laughter... and beer glasses standing around everywhere. When several of them are empty, Mum takes them behind the bar, rinses them out and refills them. There’s pork schnitzel on the plates, cutlets with Hela sauce, sliced peppers, onions and chips. Anne is four or five. She loves Mum’s sauce, and naturally chips are her favourite food. She plays with the Playmobil police car or with her dolls; Grandpa has built a little wooden house for them. Grandpa’s hands are gout-ridden, rough and huge, but very warm when he strokes her cheeks.

Anne liked to sit on his lap. Despite his gouty hands he often played the piano. He died too young.

Her heart is beating very fast – unevenly, as if the mechanism powering her circulation is out of whack.

Her fingers are clammy and stiff with cold. She takes a few logs from the corner, piles them up in the log burner the way Grandpa taught her to, stuffs some newspaper in between them and lights it. The wood is dry, it burns immediately. The smoke is drawn up the flue and outside.

März looks at her. His nostrils twitch as if in response to some unpleasant odour. And he grins. The grin is like a stab to her stomach.

The air in the bar is warming up now – not even März's icy eyes can prevent it. He looks around the room. Can he, too, hear the sounds of the piano he's staring at? And does he remember the cigarette machine that used to stand over there on the right, beside the door?

"And now?" he asks. "What now?"

She takes the laptop she brought here yesterday down from the shelf, opens it and connects the dictation machine. It's got the latest speech recognition software installed. Anne has trained the programme to recognise März's voice; the old tapes from his interviews are all still on file. She'd expected this to be more difficult, but it had actually only taken a few minutes.

She switches on the machine and sits down on the stool next to him.

"Now," she says. "Now we talk."

He starts to laugh. Softly at first, then more loudly and with less control. In the end he's laughing so hard that it makes him cough again. He rubs his face with his free hand. "Your commitment to the job really is something else," he says.

"Take out your phone."

"What?"

"You heard me."

He takes his phone out of his coat pocket. "Don't you have your own?" He grins.

She puts a piece of paper down in front of him on the bar. At the top, in red biro, she's written the number of her work phone at the Bureau. Underneath it is the text.

"You're going to ring this number. When it goes to voicemail, you're going to read out this text." She points to it.

He picks up the piece of paper, skims the lines of text and puts it back down. "What the fuck?"

"Just do it. We haven't got all day."

"Forget it."

She pulls her service weapon out of its holster, very calmly, very smoothly, and lays it on the bar.

He stares at the pistol and starts gnawing his lower lip.

She leans slightly towards him. The bitter-sweet scent of his aftershave really doesn't suit him.

Slowly she picks up the gun and points it downwards. She presses the barrel to his kneecap and cocks the gun.

"What are you doing?" he asks, too loudly. His voice is panicky, his upper body flinches. "Stop it."

She pulls the trigger.

März cries out. The P6 wasn't loaded – the gun barrel just hit his kneecap as it kicked forwards. Anne reaches into her jacket pocket, takes out a full magazine and swaps it for the empty one in the butt of the gun. She pulls the slide back and lets it spring forwards. The projectile clicks into place, the metal closure snaps shut. She presses the muzzle to his knee again, and again she cocks the gun.

"I advise you to take this seriously," she says and smiles, although it doesn't come easily.

The calibre of the P6 is nine millimetres, the muzzle velocity is three-hundred-and-forty metres per second. This is roughly the same as the speed of sound, meaning that the human ear doesn't hear the crack of the gun firing until the bullet is already embedded in its target.

Anne pulls the trigger again.

If she'd still been aiming at his kneecap, the bone would have shattered before März had heard the shot. Instead, the bullet lodges itself in the floor. But März still cries out loudly – not in pain but in shock. There's still plenty of time for pain.

"Be quiet," says Anne. "Just do as I tell you."

He picks up his phone and dials the number. "Hello, Frau Paulsen. It's me, Volker März. We need to talk. Come to my place, please. Right now, if you can. I'm at home. It's important. Thank you."

His Adam's apple bobs up and down. It moves with the same unevenness that has Anne has been feeling in her pulse. But now, in this moment, her heartbeat finds its rhythm and its force.

1.

From ear to ear

November 1981

Death smelt of disinfection first; putrefaction came later. This was particularly true here in the dissection room at the Eppendorf Institute of Forensic Medicine. Detective chief inspector Klaus Margraf had been coming here for years, but he had never got used to it.

He stood in the middle of the room not knowing what to do with his hands. The air smelt of methylated spirit and chlorine, and perhaps a trace of vinegar in there somewhere. Harsh neon light fell from the ceiling. On the wall, like squares on a chessboard, were the stainless steel compartments for the mortal remains of the deceased. The whole thing felt like a giant pharmacists' cabinet, three metres tall and a good eight metres wide. Six compartments across, four down. Twenty-four repositories for suicides, murder victims and people who would turn out to have died of natural causes – repositories for death. And in a way, also for life.

Stop it, Margraf. Pathos doesn't suit you. He twiddled his moustache. He always twiddled it on the left-hand side. Friends and colleagues laughed about this, saying he was making his moustache lopsided – slightly longer and pointier on the left than the right.

A tube light on the ceiling crackled and started to flicker, but a moment later it was fine again. On a trolley – made of stainless steel, like the compartments in the wall (lots of things around here were made of stainless steel) – was a collection of scissors, tongs, pipettes, metal bowls, spreaders, saws and scalpels, all waiting for their next deployment. Margraf walked slowly towards them, each of his footsteps echoing through the room.

It was still a mystery to him why people became forensic pathologists – what impulse made them want to cut open dead bodies and

dissect organs, how they could bear all that black blood, and the stench. And yet most of them looked just like you and me. They came to work in the morning, spent eight hours or more in the kingdom of the dead, and went home again in the evening to their wives and children as if they hadn't done anything out of the ordinary at all that day. Margraf knew a few of forensic pathologists. They were all good at their jobs, but only one was truly outstanding: Professor Victor von der Straten. He loved his work and devoted himself to it like a musician to her piano or an artist to his paint: gentle, sensitive, earnest and always full of respect for the dead. Whenever Margraf came to see him at the Institute, the speakers set into the ceiling would be quietly playing German pop music. There was always someone singing about the human condition and the great love and pain which it invariably entailed.

Today was no different. The sound of Jürgen Drews singing *Ein Bett im Kornfeld* filled the tiled room.

Margraf took off his coat and hung it on the coat stand in the corner behind the door. The stand was made of mahogany. The dark, natural wood felt like a foreign body amidst all these white tiles, the grey tiled floor, the glaring neon light and the stainless steel of the doors and tables. It would have been more at home in a village pub. But the head of forensic medicine was an unconventional man, and Margraf wouldn't have been at all surprised if he'd won the coat stand in a game of skat in some scummy dockside pub. *Come back soon, lad.*

He went over to the table and began the familiar but always unpleasant procedure: picking up two little balls of cotton wool, he dipped them into a waxy, menthol-scented substance and stuffed them up his nose. The menthol burned his mucous membranes, and tears came into his eyes. He couldn't believe forensic pathologists could get used even to this.

The Hamburg Institute of Forensic Medicine at Eppendorf University Hospital was one of the most prestigious in the country. About a hundred and twenty victims of murder and manslaughter ended up here every year, which meant that statistically, one person was killed in the region every three days. The clearance rate was impressive, at around ninety-eight percent. And one reason for this was von der Straten, who was at this

moment entering the dissection room. He greeted Margraf with a handshake and a brief nod.

“Damned waste,” he muttered, going over to one of the compartments, opening the lever catch on the door and pulling out the metal tray.

The locking mechanism on the rails clicked into place, and the long white plastic sack on the tray seemed to flinch. At the foot end dangled a light green piece of card: ‘Nina Markowski, born 01.05.1964. Date of death: 4 Nov. 1981.’

This was five days ago now, but it wasn’t until the early hours of yesterday morning that Margraf had been called out to the site where the body had been found. An elderly couple had discovered it in an area of woodland between Celle and Hambühren.

Under ‘Cause of death’, someone had written ‘Unnatural’. This was enough to trigger an investigation. The specific cause would emerge later. Criminology was a puzzle, a search for connections, in which an overall picture gradually emerged from individual pieces. Von der Straten conducted this search at a metal table, with saw and scalpel, and sometimes his work was more valuable than that of the CID.

“What do you have for me?” asked Margraf.

Von der Straten gently undid the zip of the plastic sack. “The girl was seventeen. The killer raped her and she lost her virginity. We found traces of semen and blood in her vagina and her underwear.” He undid the zip all the way down and folded back the sides.

The effect of the menthol was wearing off – the smell of putrefaction grew stronger, that unique mixture of sweetish flesh and foaming acidity. Death was the only thing that smelled like that.

Blonde hair streaked with mud. Smearred black mascara. Chapped, almost blue lips. The throat had been cut and temporarily sewn back together – the stitches looked like something out of a Frankenstein film. There were two crusted stab wounds to the left breast. The abdominal wall was caved in – the victim must have lost a lot of blood.

“We counted twenty-two stab wounds,” said von der Straten. He pulled on a pair of latex gloves. “As well as the neck and the chest, the killer stabbed her several times in the hip and the abdomen. I would guess the

blade was about twenty-five centimetres long. He must have been like a man possessed, completely out of control. Look at her throat." Von der Straten pointed to the girl's laryngeal prominence, hardly visible now. He ran his index finger over the suture. "The wound goes deep, right down to the cervical vertebrae. He must have been incredibly strong. And just one cut from left to right, see? A clean cut. He wanted to be sure. The girl's heart carried on beating for a while and pumped the blood out of the carotid artery. She bled out like a slaughtered animal."

Margraf leant down a little. He had no idea how von der Straten had been able to identify a clean cut. The wound looked like plenty of others: dark red, almost black, undulating, scabbed.

"Anything else?" he asked.

Von der Straten went over to a table by the wall which held a Thermos flask and a couple of mugs, and poured himself some coffee. "Want some?"

Margraf declined. "I don't drink coffee."

The neon bulb on the ceiling flickered again, but like the first time it stopped almost immediately.

Von der Straten shrugged and took a sip. The coffee looked like dishwater. "There was soil and particles of skin under her fingernails. She must have fought back, scratching the killer in the process." He turned the volume down on the radio.

"Could they have been in a relationship?" Involuntarily, perhaps out of a feeling of pity, Margraf put out a hand to gently touch the dead girl's face, but he couldn't bring himself to. His arm froze halfway through the movement and he turned away from the body. It was unfathomable to him, every time – the things people were capable of.

"May I ask you a personal question, Inspector?"

Margraf shrugged. "Of course."

"When did you take over as head of the homicide division?"

"Over a year ago. Why?"

"How many bodies have you seen that have been mutilated like this?"

"I don't know. Not many – not this badly, anyway." The stupid cotton wool balls in his nose were annoying him – he couldn't breathe. He pulled them out and threw them in the bin. At once the stench of decay returned.

“Not many,” von der Straten repeated. “But you know no two dead bodies are the same.”

Margraf nodded. Of course he knew. “What are you getting at?”

“I think you’re an excellent detective. That business recently, when you convinced the public prosecutor, Jablonski, to bring a case against... oh, what was his name?”

“Jan Köfler,” said Margraf.

“That’s it, Köfler. When you presented Jablonski with the missing murder weapon... That was nicely done.”

Jablonski hadn’t taken the case seriously, for whatever reason, and to Margraf the whole thing had stunk. There was nothing worse than a public prosecutor who didn’t do the job properly. Jablonski had also been at pains to make Margraf aware of his place in the hierarchy: Jablonski on top, Margraf at the bottom. So Margraf had presented his results to the investigating judge directly. Not even a day later, Jablonski had taken up the case again. Margraf was a patient man, but you could only try his patience so far.

“Herr Jablonski works rather slowly at times.”

“Very true,” von der Straten agreed. “Which is why your intervention was so valuable. But...”

“But?”

“You still have to learn to categorise injuries to corpses.” Von der Straten sipped his coffee again.

Margraf hesitated. Categorise injuries to corpses? Him? Rubbish. That was what forensic medicine was for. He was happy to leave the assessment of wounds to the people who specialised in it – von der Straten, for example. Margraf’s focus was on the living, and on their relationships with the victim. Because in that field he was the expert, and sometimes it was his work that was more valuable than von der Straten’s.

Still, Margraf had to admit that he set great store by von der Straten’s opinions and judgements. The phrase “I think you’re an excellent detective” had been music to Margraf’s ears. It felt good to be praised by such an eminent authority. The man was an institution; he’d been doing this for decades and he knew everything there was to know about the strengths and weaknesses of detectives. He’d sat in enough courtrooms, in his capacity

as an expert witness, and seen enough patently guilty people get acquitted due to some mistake made during the investigation. Both he and Margraf found this not only intolerable but almost perfidious. Köfler would still have been at large if Margraf hadn't been so persistent. So far, his clearance rate was 100 percent. And he wanted it to stay that way.

"You're asking me if I think the victim was in a relationship with the killer?" said von der Straten. "I don't know. But I know one thing... Or rather, I'm assuming one thing, based on my thirty years of professional experience."

"And that is?"

Von der Straten looked at Margraf for a moment. Then he put his mug of coffee down, went over to the corpse and closed the zip of the body bag just as carefully as he had undone it.

"So, it goes like this: he rapes the girl, yes? And when he's done, realisation sets in. He sees that this could be very dangerous for him. It might be at this point that the girl tries to run away. He thinks of the knife he brought with him just in case, and imagines himself in jail, and puts two and two together. He runs after her and stabs her, indiscriminately, like a man possessed. He has to cover up the rape, he has to make sure he won't be brought to justice for it. So he stabs her again and again. Until she's lying there screaming, or perhaps just whimpering. And now he can't see any other way out. He has to get rid of her completely. She can never be allowed to talk, to tell the police what happened to her. So he takes his knife, leans over her and slits her throat cleanly from ear to ear. Only now can he be sure she's silenced forever. In my opinion, this is a clear case of murder being committed to cover up a crime."

Von der Straten unfastened the locking mechanism on the tray and slid it back inside the compartment. "In a relationship..." he went on. "Yes, perhaps. But it may also have been someone the victim had never had any contact with before, who simply lost control after raping her. It wouldn't be the first time." He took his gloves off, threw them in the bin and looked at Margraf again.

Chris Roberts sang *You can't always be seventeen*. Margraf was on the verge of turning the radio off. The music was unbearable.

In his view, the way the killer had mutilated the victim showed that this had been about more than just covering up the rape. Someone in such a violent rage must surely have been full of hatred or vengeance – motives that usually had their roots in a deeply held grievance. And that suggested that the killer and the victim had known each other.

“Ah,” said von der Straten. “Before I forget: take a look at these.” He held up a small see-through bag containing two pennies.

“Did she have those with her?” asked Margraf.

“They were lying in the grass a few metres away from the body. Her fingerprints are on them. I suppose she must have dropped them.”

Margraf took the bag and looked at the coins, two brass-coloured ten pence pieces. They had no distinguishing features, not even any mud or grass stuck to them. “Perhaps she tried to phone someone before she got in the killer’s car.” He gave the little bag back to von der Straten.

The pathologist looked at him with narrowed eyes,

“What?” asked Margraf.

Von der Straten smiled, took off his apron and draped it over his arm. “I don’t mean to be rude, but has anyone ever told you your moustache is lopsided? Just... I mean... a little... only a tiny bit, but I notice it every time I see you. It’s longer on the left-hand side than the right.”

The man really was unbelievable. Talking about his moustache at a time like this, under these circumstances... Margraf was speechless, and could only shake his head.

“Sorry – not important,” said von der Straten. “So, what are your plans now?”

First of all, as soon as he got home, he was going to go into the bathroom and look for the beard trimming scissors.

“I’ll start with the parents,” he replied. “The father left the mother not long after Nina was born. He never took an interest in his daughter. I’ll see where he is and what he has to say about all this.”

“And the mother?” Von der Straten took another slow sip. The coffee must be cold by now.

“Charlotte Markowski,” Margraf replied. “I was the one who broke the news to her. She collapsed – they took her to the hospital in Lüneburg in an ambulance. I’ll have to see if she’s fit for questioning.”

“Of course. It must be horrific, losing your only child.”

Margraf had caught Charlotte Markowski when her legs gave way beneath her. *No. No. It's not true. You're lying*, she'd stammered. Her daughter was upstairs in her bedroom, she said. Charlotte was going to take her up a cup of tea later. She always took her up a cup of tea in the evenings.

“Nina was her everything,” said Margraf. “It can destroy you, a loss like that.”

Von der Straten clapped him on the shoulder as if to comfort him. “Such a young life, just... snuffed out. A damned waste, I tell you.”

Margraf went to the door and took his coat from the hook. Before leaving the room, he turned back to von der Straten. “May I ask you a personal question, Professor?”

Von der Straten raised his eyebrows.

“Why do you listen to this awful music all the time? German pop is like a form of torture.”

Von der Straten laughed, went over to the radio and turned it up. A woman was singing about how all of Paris dreamed of love.

“Perfect world,” he cried. “Wonderful, perfect world.” He started dancing.

The man had properly lost it. But there was probably some madness that could only borne with more madness.

[...]

3

Dance

August 1981

This year, like every other year, there was a queue outside the entrance to the marquee. It was flanked by straggly birch trees on either side, and above it hung a banner saying 'Hambühren Marksmen's Fair, 3rd – 5th August 1981'.

The queue moved more quickly than she'd expected. The marquee was packed. Most people's faces were shiny with sweat – the air was muggy and stale. Almost everyone was smoking: the younger people had cigarettes and the old men had cigars. The old men's bellies bulged out above their waistbands, straining at the fabric of their white shirts; their braces looked as if they were about to ping off at any moment. Each of them had a mug of beer in his hand and a red face.

Nina's skirt wasn't too short. The fuss Mum had kicked up about it earlier had been completely unnecessary. Nina's friends' skirts were no longer than hers – it was just the fashion these days. And after all this was a dance, and Nina was seventeen so nearly an adult. Mum's bourgeois attitudes had been pissing her off for a while now, although of course Nina had never said this out loud. Mum meant well; she said so often enough.

Nina had spent the afternoon with Kathi and Andrea at the swimming pool. It had been too hot everywhere else, even in the shade of the trees. Later on she'd had a shower and got ready at home. Mum had come into the bathroom. As usual she hadn't knocked, and Nina had forgotten to lock the door. Mum had immediately gone off on one about the skirt and the bright red lipstick. Girls would never have gone out like that in her day, she'd said: it was slutty. Nina had asked Mum to leave the room, and Mum had gone out shaking her head.

It must just be how mums were. Her friends' mums were no different, and their dads had very old-fashioned ideas too. These dads wore only two types of clothing: either overalls with a lumberjack shirt, or corduroy trousers – often with one of those hideous in-between jackets you saw in all the department stores. They were always reduced and always a light grey or that shade of khaki which for some reason the shops labelled 'mud'. They were as far removed from fashion as Roland Kaiser from Pink Floyd. But it would have been unfair to judge any individual dad for it, or the men of Hambühren as a whole. They were only doing what most other people did: dressing like everyone else, listening to cheesy pop music like everyone else and going down to the football pitch on Sundays like everyone else to cheer on the men's first team and hope they might finally get promoted to the regional league. There they stood, broad-chested and pot-bellied, eating bratwurst and drinking beer, spirits or herbal liqueur, smoking HBs or Reval non-filters. It was always the same routine and they submitted to it day in, day out, week after week, for their whole lives. It gave them security, the feeling of familiarity they needed in order to be happy or at least content. Lunch was at twelve o' clock, coffee and cake at three o' clock, and at six o' clock it was time for dinner. The women, when they weren't doing laundry or housework, spent millions of hours of their lives in the kitchen preparing millions of meals. But they didn't seem to mind these endlessly repeating, unchanging routines either – quite the reverse. Their mothers had lived this way, and their grandmothers before that. This was how life was: there was no other way. It would have been pointless to complain.

Nina's father had probably been irritated by all this without saying so out loud. And perhaps he'd been fleeing from this monotonous small-town life as well as from his wife and daughter. Nina had no idea – she didn't know him. She didn't even know if he went to the football on Sundays or wore an in-between jacket.

Even as a young child, Nina had wanted more. One sunny July morning she'd set out on her tricycle, determined to ride all the way to Harz to see Grandma and Grandad in Braunlage. She'd had no idea how far away it was, and even if she had, she still wouldn't have known it was impossible to cover that kind of distance on a kid's trike. But she hadn't cared about any of that. Armed with her doll Emma, a few biscuits from Mum's sweetie

drawer and a Capri Sun, she'd set off to find the place where her grandparents lived and where her mum always had a smile on her face. She wanted to ride there and she wanted to stay there forever, without Mum if necessary. She'd have Grandma and Grandad, anyway.

Mum had been beside herself when she'd picked Nina up a little way out of Hambühren on the cycle path that ran alongside the road. She'd given Nina a smack on the bottom, chucked the trike in the boot and driven her home. Grandma and Grandad had been angry too, but there had been one silver lining: Nina and Mum had spent the autumn holidays in Braunlage with the grandparents, in the lovely wooden house where Nina had her own room. She could see Wurmberg from its window. During the long car journey Nina had tried her best to memorise the route. But she hadn't managed it until years later.

The world was a big place, however, and it was her oyster – now more than ever. Her Abitur grades next year were set to be very good; perhaps she'd study music at university, or medicine. She was the only one in her family to have got this far. Who knew – perhaps even Mum would be proud of her one day. And maybe her father would finally take an interest in his daughter.

The band on the stage stopped for a break. The musicians fortified themselves with Mett rolls containing generous helpings of onion.

As Nina wormed her way through the crowd her eyes fell on Volker März, who was standing with a few other men from the band a little way from the stage. He spotted her too, and waved. She returned his greeting – he smiled. Volker played the clarinet. He was good, and for most of the pieces he didn't need the notes. At a previous festival in Hambühren he'd told her he had the notes inside him like invisible road maps. He had actually said "road maps", which Nina hadn't understood at first and which had caused him to misunderstand her in turn. But the more she thought about it, the more she understood what he meant. Whenever he played a song, he mentally drove along the "note roads" he saw in his mind's eye. He travelled from place to place, driving sometimes more slowly, sometimes more quickly, stopping briefly and then setting off again. His hands obeyed what he saw in his mind's eye. His feeling for the music gave a framework to the sounds and coaxed the necessary sounds out of his instrument. It was the

same for Nina when she sang with the choir. A piece always sounded best when she could sing it with her eyes closed.

She tugged instinctively at the hem of her skirt. Volker was still looking at her, and now he gave her a thumbs-up. His shirt was unbuttoned almost to the navel, and his black chest hair was exposed. The gold chain around his neck glinted. He dressed differently from the other men in Hambühren; a mud-coloured in-between jacket was definitely not part of his wardrobe.

Katharina and Andrea should have been here by now. They'd arranged to meet at seven o' clock, and it was already half past. Nina headed for the exit and stepped out into the fresh air.

At the stall opposite her, a few boys were trying their hand at shooting air rifles. Giggling girls, all younger than Nina, urged their young admirers to shoot them a plastic flower. Or better still, a teddy bear.

One of the boys was having problems holding his gun steady, but luck was on his side when he pulled the trigger. A cardboard tube encircling the metal stem of a plastic rose was shot to smithereens. The other boys started cheering him and clapping him on the back, while the girls carried on giggling. The man behind the counter plucked the flower out of its holder and gave it to the boy. He handed it to one of the girls, who took it without giggling but probably with a blush, Nina couldn't see from here.

To her right, a little further away, the lights of the dodgems flashed against the blue summer sky. Music blared from large speakers: Rivers of Babylon by Boney M. Nina was keen to go on the dodgems tonight, and if Kathi and Andrea didn't come soon she'd go on her own.

"Shall I shoot a rose for you?" Volker appeared beside her, pointing to the stall opposite. His aftershave smelt sweet. Nina knew the scent: Tabac Original. It didn't smell as bad as everyone said.

"Hey, don't you have to get back on stage?" She brushed a strand of hair out of her face.

Volker was half a head taller than her. The muscles in his arms and upper body showed through the fabric of his tight white shirt. Unlike the others in the band, his stomach was completely flat. He was thirty-one, apparently, but he looked a lot younger.

“Are you here on your own?” he asked. His smooth-combed hair was parted in the middle, his face tanned. He took care of himself, you could see that at a glance. He thought highly of himself, and it meant something to him when others spoke well of him. Nina knew that, or at least assumed it. Mum called him “a fine man”. Only his hands didn’t match the rest of image. His fingers were yellow with tobacco – he was a chain-smoker. He was lighting up again now, in fact. The thumbnail on his right hand was unusually long, much longer than all his other nails, and had a beige tinge to it.

“I’m waiting for a couple of friends. They were meant to be here by now.” Nina took a few steps and looked around for Kathi and Andrea again, but there was no sign of them.

Over by the rifle range, the girl leant in close to the boy who’d shot the rose for her and kissed him on the cheek. He put his arm tentatively around her waist.

The smell of roasted almonds and bratwurst drifted across the fairground. The dodgems speakers were now playing *Waterloo* by Abba. The disco ball above the track sent flashes of light across the cars and the people standing around. A few people at the edge of the ride were dancing.

Nina turned to Volker and walked back towards him. As she did so, her heel got caught in a crack in the wooden floorboards and she stumbled. In a single bound Volker was beside her – he grabbed her left arm and caught her. His grip was firm and resolute, but it didn’t hurt.

“Oh,” she said. “Sorry. Thank you.” She smoothed down her skirt.

“Thank you,” he replied.

“What for?”

He smiled and released her arm. “For letting me catch you.”

His dark chest hair curled over the fabric of his white shirt. The gold curb chain around his neck glittered. Volker was a lot older than her, but not that much older. Or was he? Yes – fourteen years, if it was true that he was thirty-one. He was almost twice her age. But he really didn’t look it. His hand had been soft and warm – and strong at the same time. She wouldn’t have expected that from this man who’d always struck her as gentle and vulnerable, in spite of his height (he had to be at least five foot nine) and his broad chest. He never spoke loudly and was never pushy. On the contrary,

he tended to be quite reserved. If Kathi and Andrea didn't turn up she'd ask if he wanted to go on the dodgems with her.

From inside the marquee, a gong sounded.

Volker raised his eyebrows. "I've got to go back in," he said. "Do you want to come and listen? I'm probably the worst clarinet player in the world. But..."

Nina could guess what he was going to say next. She folded her arms behind her back and rocked slightly from side to side. "But?" she said.

He clasped his hands in front of his mouth, took a deep breath and held his arms out to her. "When I know you're listening, I definitely play better than usual."

At the rifle range, the next boy was trying his luck. He stepped up, aimed and shot wide. His friends laughed and waved him aside. The man behind the counter took the gun out of his hand, cocked it and gave it back to him.

Nina put her arm through Volker's. "You're good even when I'm not there," she said. "But I'll come anyway. Just to be on the safe side."

On the stage, the band got into position amid the hubbub of the crowd sitting at the long rows of tables. Emmi and Fred Klüsen were there. They were over eighty years old and still kissed each other in the street. The lads from the volunteer fire service sat beside them, beer mugs in hand, hugging one another. At the other end of the row of tables sat Mum, and next to her was that bloke from Lüneberg, Hans-Dieter. He was whispering something in her ear. Mum laughed with her eyes closed and threw her head back, resting her elbows on the table, as a long chunk of ash fell from her cigarette. Her upper body shook. A glass of something black stood in front of her – rum and coke, no doubt. She loved the stuff.

Up on the stage Volker took his place in the second row, while Nina sat down at the end of the row of tables. Kathi and Andrea would soon spot her when they came in. Nina looked towards the entrance. Still no sign of them. It was half past eight now.

The band opened with a slow dance: *Santa Maria* by Roland Kaiser. They didn't have a singer, but Nina knew the words off by heart – the song was always playing in their kitchen at home. ... *At night on your snow-white*

beaches, I held her youth in my hands. Happiness for which there is no name

...

The dancefloor quickly filled up. Mum was dancing, Hans-Dieter had asked her. Okko Modersohn, the owner of the only jewellery and watch shop in Hambühren, watched the two of them from where he sat. You couldn't see from his expression what was going through his head, but unless Nina was very much mistaken he also had a thing for Mum. He always smiled when he spoke to her or when he ordered beer or champagne for them both.

Volker played with his eyes open, but he gazed at Nina the whole time. He obviously didn't need to read the notes for this song. Nina wasn't far off that now either. There were a few pieces she could sing almost without looking at the music – she already had the road maps in her head. There must be songs just for clarinet and voice.

... Her proud gaze was fiery, and deep inside she burned with longing, Santa Maria (Maria), to take that step, Santa Maria (Maria), to turn from a girl into a woman...

When the song ended, people applauded. The men on the stage took long swigs from their mugs of beer.

The air in the marquee was so thick you could have cut it with a knife. Hans-Dieter went outside – probably to use the toilet or to get something to eat. Either way, Okko Modersohn soon noticed that Mum had returned to her seat on her own. He stood up, ran a hand through his short brown hair, checked his tie was straight, smoothed the lapel of his dark jacket, and walked past the two rows of tables to where Mum was sitting. He spoke to her, apologising for the intrusion perhaps, or perhaps offering to buy her a drink. Mum smiled and nodded. He sat down beside her. He too was someone Mum would describe as a “fine man”. It was nice to see the two of them together. Both he and Mum smiled all the time when they were with each other.

The band struck up a march – or was it a polka? – and the whole marquee erupted into rapturous cheers. Everyone was soon swaying to the music and dancing and laughing. Volker blew into his clarinet. To Nina, the instrument seemed too sophisticated for this kind of music, and she felt pleased somehow to see Volker roll his eyes as he played.

“Hey!” called a voice from behind her.

She turned; it was Kathi and Andrea. They seated themselves next to Nina on the bench and put down three glasses of beer, one of which was for her. She didn't like beer – too bitter. But she clinked glasses with the others and drank.

"Where were you?" Nina shouted above the noise. It was so hot in the marquee that her top was sticking to her back.

"Sorry," said Andrea. Her skirt was at least as short as Nina's. "It was my grandma's eightieth today. When Kathi came to pick me up she wouldn't let us leave. We had to stay and have some ice cream punch with her."

"I'm literally fifty percent vanilla ice cream right now," said Kathi, and all three of them laughed.

The musicians stopped for another break. A waiter brought more beer onto the stage. Volker was talking to Maik Kreutzer, a car mechanic with his own workshop where everyone in Hambühren took their cars to be repaired. Mum always said Maik Kreutzer was the richest man for miles around, only the taxman knew nothing about it. Nina wondered if Volker paid Maik in packs of cigarettes from his delivery van when he took his white BMW to be repaired.

"Oh là là." Andrea tilted her head to and fro. "Look who keeps staring at you." She nodded towards the stage.

Nina hadn't realised Volker had turned away from Maik and had his eyes fixed on her again.

Kathi lit a cigarette. "That would be useful," she said, with the fag in her mouth. "We'd have a constant supply of fags and we wouldn't even have to pay for it."

"He'd want a different kind of payment," said Andrea.

"He'd put his horrible yellow fingers up your skirt," said Kathi.

"Yeah, exactly." Andrea laughed. "Or fondle your face with them."

"Urgh," Kathi exclaimed. "Stop it. That's gross."

They both laughed. Volker wouldn't be able to hear their laughter from up on stage, and even if he was watching them closely he wouldn't realise he was the target of their derision. He was tall and confident, but at that moment Nina felt sorry for him.

"I actually think he's quite nice," she said.

The laughter subsided immediately.

“You what?” cried Andrea.

“Eww!” Kathi clapped a hand to her forehead. “The guy’s a retard. He’s over thirty and he still lives with his parents. He listens to James Last records like my grandad.”

Andrea looked slightly disgusted. “Exactly! And those poncy clothes and the massive great sideburns. He’s such a creep. How the hell can you think he’s nice, Nina? He’s just wrong on so many levels.”

A waiter came over to their table. Nina could still taste the bitterness of the beer on her tongue. “Three rum and cokes,” she said loudly.

The waiter jotted it down and went away again.

“Cool idea,” said Andrea, and Kathi gave Nina a kiss on the cheek.

Hans-Dieter had installed himself at the bar by this point and had his arm around the shoulder of a man Nina didn’t know. Mum was sitting at the table with Okko Modersohn. They were leaning in close, still smiling as they talked.

It wasn’t long before the waiter returned with the drinks. There was a lot of rum in them, and no ice cubes. But that didn’t stop Andrea ordering another round straight away.

Kathi and Andrea were right: Volker März was a bit singular. She looked up at him on the stage. He kept closing his eyes as he played, seeming lost in the music. People said he’d never had a girlfriend, and there were rumours locally that he batted for the other side, because he always wore expensive clothes and gold jewellery and his aftershave was so strong. Also his hair was always neatly combed and his skin was always tanned, even in winter – he must spend a lot of money at the tanning salon in Lüneberg. He drove there often in his permanently pristine BMW.

Basically, Volker wasn’t like other people. He cared about his appearance – apart from his yellow nicotine-stained fingers, anyway – and he was more polite than most of the men around here, let alone the boys Nina’s age. The fact that he was in his early thirties and apparently still a virgin didn’t make him a bad person.

Andrea downed the rest of her rum and coke, plonked the glass down on the table and stood up. “Let’s go, girls!” she shouted above the music. “Dodgems time.” She and Kathi hurried outside.

Nina finished her drink. When she stood up her knees gave way a little. For a moment she saw double.

As she left the marquee she turned to look at the stage again. Volker was watching her as he played. She made her hands into fists and mimed an invisible steering wheel. Perhaps he'd come and find her later. A crazy thought – but a nice one, somehow. Volker nodded.

Outside, people were clustered around brightly-lit kiosks and stalls all over the fairground. The sky had darkened now, and thankfully it wasn't as hot as before. Nina went over to Kathi and Andrea, who were standing with some boys from their school. Nina didn't know all of them, but there was one she recognised at once: Tim. Cool Tim in Year 13. He was wearing a white knitted Lacoste jumper and baggy jeans tucked into cowboy boots. He had a fox tail dangling from his belt. Nina found herself breathing faster.

Tim had recently become men's champion at his tennis club, and had his pick of the many girls wanting to go out with him. He was very good-looking and drove a red Alfa Romeo convertible with a wooden steering wheel and leather seats.

She mounted the two steps to the edge of the dodgems track as Tim turned to look at her. The music boomed, and the dodgems kept whirring past and crashing into each other. For a moment Tim looked as though he was about to fall over. He staggered, but managed to stay on his feet by holding onto one of his friends' shoulders.

"Oh, look who it is," he said.

"Hi, Tim."

"Hi," he replied. "Good to see you."

Nina just nodded.

"We're going to get something to eat. You coming?" Kathi pointed with her thumb towards the bratwurst stall.

Nina shook her head; she wasn't hungry.

Kathi went off with Andrea, who turned back after a few steps and called: "We'll be back in a minute, don't go anywhere!"

Tim put an arm around Nina's shoulders. He was swaying so hard that Nina was afraid he was going to pull her down onto the track with him. Perhaps she should have gone with them to the bratwurst stall. She still could, but something was holding her back. It felt pretty cool to be standing

here next to Tim with his arm around her. A few of the other girls were looking over at her sullenly; dozens of them were probably having their hearts broken at this very moment. Tim. Everyone's crush. With his arm around Nina and no-one else. She wanted to enjoy it, but he was still swaying – he was completely pissed, and his breath smelled of onions. She wanted to walk away. But she couldn't bring herself to.

His face came very close to hers. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

The smell of his breath was vile. Nina extricated herself from his arm and was about to go and join Andrea and Kathi when Tim put out a hand and held onto her.

"What's up?" he asked. "You don't like to party, huh?" He took a swig of his beer; it ran out of the corners of his mouth and down his neck, and soaked into his white jumper.

The dodgems session was over, and one of the cars came to a halt right in front of Nina. It was black and green and glittery.

Tim stepped onto the track, pulling Nina with him. "Come on," he called. "Let's have a go."

Nina wanted to leave – and at the same time she didn't. Perhaps tomorrow, when he was sober, he might even pick her up from school in his convertible. A crazy thought, probably, but perhaps not completely absurd.

She squeezed in beside him on the narrow plastic seat of the bumper car. He rummaged around clumsily in his pocket and pulled out a chip, which he dropped into the slot in front of them.

The music was loud, and the bright flashing lights blurred into one big pool of colour as the announcer sang the praises of the dodgems. "Roll up, roll up! Great fun to be had!"

A deafening signal sounded and the car started moving. Tim laughed – the airflow blew his hair in all directions. The track was full of dodgems, everything was flashing, people kept screaming, and the bass was pounding. Their car was repeatedly rammed, and Tim rammed other cars too. "Yeah!" he yelled over and over again. "Yeah!"

Suddenly he grabbed her hand and placed it on the wheel. "You drive," he said, putting his right hand on her knee.

Tim's hand was cold and moist. His shoulder kept digging into her, and his hand moved up the inside of her thigh. The bass went on booming

from the speakers, the bright lights flashed frenetically. For a moment Nina felt as if she was in a hazy dream. She tried to tear the hand away from her thigh, but Tim's grip was too strong. His fingers reached her knickers. She wanted Tim to stop, she didn't want this. She wanted to get out of the car, run away. But the car drove on and on, crashed into other cars, changed direction, kept moving.

At last the session was over. The car came to a standstill in the same place where they'd got in. The boys at the edge bellowed and clapped. Suddenly Tim leaned towards Nina and pressed himself against her. His head was between her breasts, she felt his tongue on her skin, he rubbed his hand over her private parts. The fabric of her knickers was thin – he pushed a finger inside her. *The disgusting pig!* Nina wanted to push him off but he was too strong and too heavy. For God's sake, she had to get out of this bloody car somehow.

Tim pressed his mouth against hers. Disgusted, she jerked her head away. He pushed his finger deeper into her vagina and licked her neck.

Tim's bright white jumper, flashes of light, the fox tail. Everything merged into one. Mum was there, and Father. They were both shouting at each other. Nina put out a hand to them both, but the hand disappeared in searing whiteness, and then Mum disappeared and then Father. Mum had been right: her skirt was too short. Why hadn't she listened? Her skirt was too short, it was too slutty. Nina had gone running around looking like a whore, flaunting it for everyone to see. No wonder a drunk bloke had tried it on with her. But Tim? Amazing Tim? It was impossible. *It's your own fault, you slut. Why go around flaunting it like that? It can't come as a surprise to you. Men are just men after all. They can't help it. Tough luck. Why do you have to tempt them like that? Honestly, it's your own fault.*

"No!" she shouted at the top of her voice, but this seemed to cause the boys at the edge to egg Tim on even more with their raucous shouting. "No!" She had to get out of here, but she couldn't shift the mass of Tim's body. The sweat on his forehead, his faraway look. Staring eyes. Mad eyes.

Her resistance was fading. Her own body wouldn't obey her anymore. She could no longer move. She could no longer feel.

As if out of nowhere, a fist came flying towards Tim and knocked his head sideways. Nina smelled sweet aftershave, saw bushy sideburns.

Volker grabbed Tim by the neck of his jumper and hit him again. Blood trickled from Tim's nose, and he let go of Nina. Volker lifted her up and out of the car. The other boys stopped laughing. They stood there motionless. Tim staggered over to them and fell to his knees in their midst. The fox tail had fallen onto the dodgems track – someone accidentally stepped on it. The music pounded on and on. Nina clung to Volker. He put his arm around her and pulled her away from the ride.

She felt a burning sensation between her legs, and her whole body was trembling. She'd lost her bearings. What had just happened? Where was she? What time was it? But then she remembered. The marquee, the band, the rum and cokes. Dancing. She straightened up and took a deep breath.

Volker gently stroked her head. "It's all okay," he whispered, and kissed her forehead.

Away from the fairground, under a streetlamp, they sat down on a bench. Volker took off his jacket and draped it over her shoulders. The moon was shining, it was still warm, and the music from the fairground drifted over to them.

What had just happened – it could only have been a bad dream. She just had to believe that hard enough and she'd wake up tomorrow and everything would be all right. She just had to give herself a good shake and it would all go away. Slowly, she lifted her head. The sky was starlit and twinkling.

Volker went on stroking her hair and wiped the tears from her cheeks. She wanted him to stay with her all night, she didn't want him to stop doing what he was doing. She wanted him to keep stroking her. The way Father stroked her, in her imagination. She's a little girl, Father sits down by her bed. He reads her a bedtime story and kisses her forehead before turning off the lamp on her bedside table.

Volker's fingers weren't yellow. Nina nuzzled deeper into his chest. His breathing was calm, but his heart was beating fast.

[END OF SAMPLE]