

Der Wald ist Schweigen Silent is The Forest

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They see the woman as soon as they reach the clearing. She is on her knees, vomiting. The ground is marshy, with bushels of grass poking out of it like straw wigs. Egbert Wiehl thrusts the mushroom basket into his wife's hands and tries to get to the woman as fast as he can without getting his feet wet. A pointless exercise - it has been raining for days. The woman is still young, with a blonde ponytail. She gives a slight yelp when she notices Egbert Wiehl, and he suddenly doesn't know what to say. Is there something the matter? Do you need help? It's quite obvious, it's a cold morning but the woman is still squatting right in the middle of a muddy puddle. A sportswoman. He forces himself not to stare at her long, muscled legs in a pair of tight black sports trousers.

The woman tries to say something, but her teeth are chattering too hard. There is a stink of vomit. The woman has very round, grass-green eyes. A thread of saliva hangs from her chin. She obviously hasn't noticed it, or at least she makes no attempt to wipe it off. Egbert Wiehl has the feeling she's scared of him. He squats down.

'Have you eaten something bad? Mushrooms? Did you fall?' He reaches out his hand to her and she flinches away from him. At the same time he remembers he's still holding his hunting knife.

'Sorry, the knife - we're picking mushrooms, Helga and I. It hasn't been a very good mushroom season, too cold, and now it's late in the year, but...' He sounds like an idiot. Hastily, he puts the knife back into its sheath on his belt and smiles.

'Come on.' He reaches his hand out to her again. 'Can you stand up? You can't stay kneeling here in that puddle. You'll catch your death.'

Instead of answering, the woman starts to retch again. Her face looks pale and ugly, a twisted mask.

'My wife is over there, we'll help you. I'm a doctor, but I'm retired now.'

Can she even hear him?

'Come on,' he urges her again.

The woman straightens up with difficulty now. She is still shaking, but she lifts her right arm and points to a raised hunting hide in the shade of the trees on the southern edge of the clearing.

'L-l-look.'

Egbert Wiehl follows the line drawn by her index finger with his eyes. Did she fall down from there? Unlikely, because she was still able to walk. Her footprints are clearly visible, pressed into the wet grass. They lead directly from the raised hide to the place where she is kneeling.

'Egbert! Is everything alright?' Helga's voice seems to come from far off. He gestures roughly for her to be quiet, and squints over to the hunting hide. Crows are flapping around the wooden hut at the top of the ladder, pushing through the gaps for the guns in the sides, in fact it even looks as if they are diving through the roof and being immediately catapulted out again, a reeling, restless confusion. Something is wrong.

'Wait here.' Egbert Wiehl gets up awkwardly. He has flashes of Hitchcock's birds, but pushes the film images aside to concentrate on the raised hide. No reason to be scared, he tells himself. The woman makes a movement as if she wants to run away. He pats her shoulder. 'You stay here, I'll go and look.' No answer, only her rough breathing. He stamps over to the hide. The sky is pastel blue and clear, and the sun is just climbing high enough to colour the tops of the trees in the valley red and yellow. Two hours ago, Helga packed coffee, mineral water, sandwiches, apples, a bar of nut chocolate and the picnic blanket into the rucksack he is wearing on his back. The weather report promised a beautiful Indian summer day. The last chance of the year to find a few milk caps and enjoy the view from Bärenberg Hill.

Egbert Wiehl reaches the foot of the ladder and peers upwards. The crows have no respect for him at all. There are lots of them, at least 20.

'Shoo,' says Egbert Wiehl, 'Shoo!'

He puts the rucksack down on the grass and turns around. The two women, Helga and the blonde sportswoman, are standing next to each other and watching him. It looks as if Helga is keeping hold the other woman. At that moment, he notices the smell. Sweet. Rotten. The sick and the dying sometimes smell bad, but not like this. The stink of decay, his brain tells him. He last smelt it so intensively 40 years ago, when they had to dissect cadavers in the basement of the university hospital. There was no air conditioning and you could never be sure what was awaiting you when they

lifted the dead from their formalin baths. Egbert Wiehl peers into the underbrush but can't see anything unusual. He tries to take as shallow breaths as he can.

The stink gets worse the higher he climbs. The black birds fall crowing from the sky and whirl aloft again. 'Shoo,' he says again, but they don't fly away until he reaches the very top. The blood rushes in his head. His mouth is dry, his tongue a furred beast. The thing the crows have left behind is on the wooden bench. It stinks pitifully. It is naked and eaten away. Unprotected. There are boards missing from the roof of the hide. Egbert Wiehl makes an effort to swallow. Only the corpse's hair still looks human. It is silky and blond, like the sportswoman's.

Detective Inspector Judith Krieger is riding again. She gallops through a summer forest in broad leaps, rocked until she forgets that she and the horse are separate entities. A white horse. It speaks to her in a language she intuitively understands. A dark voice, deep within her. It hurts because it's so close. Some part of her knows all along that she's only dreaming and registers the telephone, but she doesn't stop stroking the horse's neck. Don't wake up. Ever again. Stay close, rocked like a baby. The ringing stops and then there is only the white back below her, the faint idea of happiness. Light filters through the tops of the trees onto the horse and dances in time with its muscles. Somewhere deep in her chest lurks the pain.

When they reach the edge of the forest she wants to turn around, but the horse won't obey any more. I don't want this, her real self thinks. I don't want this dream, at least not the ending, not this ending again. Far off behind the fields, a farmstead ducks into the valley. Plastic-wrapped balls of hay shimmer alongside it, the landscape strangely entranced like an art installation by Christo and Jeanne-Claude. The pain in Judith's chest gets stronger, panic mingled in with it, drying her throat. You're dreaming, her rational self tells her. 'You have to search,' whispers the horse. For what, she wants to ask, but then it suddenly bears her forwards - it's like that every time - faster and faster and there are no reins, only the mane she is clinging to, the smell of earth

and horse and the wind driving tears to her eyes. The Fear. She starts falling. Stop, I don't want to go to the farm, she tries to call out, but the unity with the horse has abruptly disappeared and she can't find her voice any more, only desperate longing and the overwhelming feeling of loss.

In the next moment she is alone, in the farmyard. A steep staircase, darkness surrounding her. The smell of rancid dirt. A stained mattress. Peeling wallpaper. Somewhere is the victim. Flesh and bone. Hair. Transitory. Too transitory. Then no door any more, no staircase, no escape, only a room with its ceiling too low. Where are her colleagues? A sound outside the house. Galloping hooves. Panic. The horse is leaving her alone. She is alone. She hasn't made it. Where is the door, for God's sake? 'Why didn't you come?' Patrick's voice. Why can't she answer? Why is this panic washing through her body, into her every pore? 'I just didn't make it.' A hoarse whisper. Is that really her voice? Her lips are stiff. She can't hear Patrick's answer. She only knows he's there, somewhere in this stuffy, dark brown room. The air is running out and she squats on the floor, sniffing like a wild animal. 'Patrick?' she whispers. So much hope in her voice, so much longing. She has to get help. After an eternity, she finds her mobile phone. It is on the windowsill, behind it no longer the field with the balls of hay, no longer the horse. She struggles to her feet and stumbles towards the phone. But her fingers are stiff and slippery with sweat, and won't do what she tells them. They catapult the phone right into a bottomless black void and she knows she's lost.

The engaged tone is beeping on the answerphone in the living room. The caller has obviously hung up without leaving a message. Judith Krieger lies motionless and tries to calm her breathing. She doesn't know what's worse, the moment in her dream when the horse runs away with her, the unending loneliness in the dark brown room or waking up. She doesn't understand this dream that has been haunting her night after night. She doesn't understand the longing and the intensity. She doesn't understand what the horse might mean. Apart from a brief, unpleasant phase as a teenager, she has never ridden.

She needs a coffee and a cigarette. Music to fight off black thoughts of white horses and the silence in her flat that Martin left behind in the night. She puts the espresso maker on the

hob and goes to the toilet. From the hall, she hears the muffled opening chords of Queen's Spread your Wings. She finds her mobile phone in the pocket of her leather coat.

'Krieger.'

'Oh there you are. Good.' Axel Millstät, her boss.

'It's Sunday morning.'

'You have to come in to headquarters, right now.'

Someone told her recently that cigarette addiction is as strong as heroin addiction. She fishes a paper and a filter out of her tobacco pouch.

'They've found a body in the Bergisches Land. Not a pretty picture. We can't ID it. Wolfgang's got tonsillitis and the others are busy on the Jennifer case. I want you to drive to the Bergisches Land and take a look at it.'

She lights up the cigarette she's rolled and takes the gurgling espresso jug off the hob. 'Do you mean I'll be leading the investigation?'

'I wouldn't put it like that.'

Pause.

'You know, don't you, recently...'

Judith drinks a mouthful of espresso, burns herself, tips the rest into a glass and pours cold milk on top of it. Don't talk about it.

'Yes, I know.'

'God, Judith, I can't, as much as I'd like to. We all know what you've been through. Let me be perfectly honest with you. You were an excellent detective, you know I was on your side from the very beginning. But then the whole thing happened - no, let me finish. The whole thing with Patrick, and for God's sake, everyone understood you needed time.'

Don't talk about it.

'But now two years have gone by and you still haven't got what it takes. This case is a chance for you.'

Nicotine and caffeine pulse in her head. A hot flush. Judith inhales deeply. She isn't sure whether she wants a chance. Whether she feels up to a chance.

'Manni. You and Manni, you'll work it out. You'll be reporting to me.'

'Manni?'

'Manni.'

And she hears what he doesn't say too, what he doesn't have to say: Take it or leave it, this is your chance. Your last chance. She can't even blame him for it.

'In my office in half an hour?'

Judith blows smoke towards the ceiling.

'OK.'

Axel Millstädt has spaniel eyes. Spaniel eyes the colour of dark chocolate that never seem to blink. They stare at people for so long that they start to feel like butterflies, with the entomologist's pin plunging down on them. Once Detective Inspector Judith Krieger had the ambition to counter his chocolate stare. Like Icarus, she spread her wings and tried to fly up to the sun, and Millstädt valued that in her. Now she puts her head down, doesn't know where to look. Manni storms into the office, as eager as an over-dimensional foal. His bony legs are encased in fashionable cargo jeans, his blond hair gelled into little spikes on top of his head. Expectantly, he slides to and fro on his chair and crunches peppermints while Millstädt rattles off the few facts he knows. Judith doesn't know Manni well. She studies his profile furtively from the side. How did it get this far, that they've given me a greenhorn like this as a partner, she asks herself. Manni has only been in the murder squad for a year and normally works in a different team to her. Judith knows he spends his weekends in Rheindorf, the dump where he grew up. He has an incalculable number of friends there - the result of his many enthusiastic club memberships. The shooting club, the football club, the bachelors' club. When he talks about them he blushes. He probably takes his washing home to his mother and lets her cook for him.

She's glad Manni considers it his job to go through the missing persons files at headquarters and to inform the crime scene team and the pathologists.

'You go on ahead,' he says to Judith. It sounds lenient, as if he were her boss and she were a trainee he wanted to get rid of as soon as possible. Judith forces herself to stay calm. The prospect of inspecting the crime scene first of all and on her own is all too attractive.

Not much later, she is steering a brand new Ford Focus onto the

autobahn. The choicest car in the murder squad's pool - she has only got hold of it because it's Sunday. The polystyrene cup of coffee gripped between her legs improves her mood even more. Just before Lindar, she sees the first half-timbered houses alongside the autobahn, with the typical green shutters of the Bergisches Land. But it's no idyllic rural paradise any more. Edging onto the villages is a rank growth of the inevitable temples of the modern age: industrial estates, car showrooms and shopping centres. A few cows are eating their grass directly next to the A4, presumably gone deaf over the years or sedated by the exhaust fumes. A silo and balls of hay sealed in white plastic remind Judith of her dream. She turns the radio on. She comes off the autobahn at Bielstein and drives along country roads getting narrower and narrower, until after lots of bends and even more yellow forest she reaches the village of Unterbach. It's apparently only about three kilometres from here to the place where they found the body. She finds the gravel road branching off to the right a kilometre after the village, and the wooden sign a colleague from the local force described. 'Sun Farm' it says in ornate lettering. Someone has sprayed 'TO THE ASHRAM' in purple paint on the tree trunk holding the sign.

The gravel road snakes into the valley. Tall conifers swallow up the light. Judith takes a look at the display on her mobile phone - no signal. The valley seems unreal, as if it came from one of those farm sets for children. There are sheep paddocks and meadows with old fruit trees, two shaggy donkeys and a stream. The farmhouse, barn and outbuildings are positioned at unorthodox angles, as if the child at play had scattered these last building blocks at random in the middle of the field. This isn't the landscape from her dream, there's no white horse to be seen. And yet suddenly, remembering it all seems like a bad omen. 'Welcome to Sun Farm.' The sign is nailed to a post next to a muddy car park. A man is leaning on the fence and looking in her direction. He's wearing white cotton trousers and an orange T-shirt, which clashes with his ginger ponytail. His bare feet are wearing plastic flip-flops. Judith rolls the window down.

'Hello, I want to get to the Erlengrund clearing. There's a road that goes there. Can you tell me where to find it?'

He smiles, which makes his face look like a cross between Boris

Becker and Kermit the Frog.

'Are you from the press?'

'Do you know the way?'

'Sure.' He leans over to her. 'But it's all blocked off. The cops won't let you through - however nicely you smile at them.'

She looks him directly in his light blue eyes. She waits. He gives in.

'Carry on along the road, across the bridge and turn right just before the ponds. It's pretty muddy there. Don't say I didn't warn you.'

'Thanks. Do you know what's happened?'

He scrutinises her. 'Someone's dead. No one from Sun Farm.'

'Are you sure?'

'There's no one missing.' He doesn't look at all friendly any more. He folds his pale arms across his chest and takes a step back.

'Why aren't you wearing socks? Your feet are turning blue.'

To her surprise, the question seems to amuse him. He winks at her.

'Bye, press lady. Come by for a yoga class if you've got any more questions.'

'Bye bye.' Judith puts her foot down. Yoga. She might even take him up on it. She's pretty sure he wouldn't like that.

At the end of the valley, she finds the wooden bridge and steers the Ford over it at a snail's pace. Just behind it are the ponds, motionless and glittering like green bottle glass. To the right, a path leads into the wood. It really is extremely muddy. Judith keeps her car exactly in the tracks that other vehicles have dug out before her. The road block she reaches after about five minutes consists of two young uniformed officers, who shuffle from one foot to the other and check Judith's ID card carefully. The Erlengrund is a swampy clearing with a diameter of about 100 metres. Several police cars and a police van are parked around it on the forest path. Judith parks behind an estate car and gets out.

Even though the sun is shining directly above the clearing, it's cold. It smells of mushrooms and rotting leaves. From the police cars come the muffled static and bleeps of the radios. A man with grey hair walks towards her.

'Hans Edling. Are you from the murder squad?'

'DI Judith Krieger, yes.'

They shake hands.

'It's best if you take a look yourself. He's in a bad way, the poor lad. I called headquarters in Cologne straight away.'

He turns abruptly and jumps over a ditch into the clearing.

'Can you see the hunting hide over there? That's where he is. Some hikers found him. They're in the van now. A colleague is up in the hide, keeping an eye out. Shall I come over with you?'

'No thanks, no need. The fewer tracks...'

'Yes.' He jumps back onto the path. 'I'll see you in a minute then.'

Erlengrund, thinks Judith, as she walks through the wet grass. Erlens are alders, but what do they look like? She thinks of Goethe's poem about the Erlking. The German teacher with her nervous dormouse eyes flitting to and fro behind her tortoiseshell spectacles. She had a beautiful voice, soft and melodious, but the class of rowdy fifteen-year-olds didn't want to listen and Judith didn't dare to go against her classmates. Who rides so late through night and wind, recites Miss Meinert in Judith's mind. Damn, riding again. A child is afraid and dies, that's what the poem's about. The Erlking brings death. Erlking, Erlengrund. Pull yourself together, Judith.

She looks around with new concentration. Footprints lead to the hunting hide from various directions. There is no path across the clearing. They'll have to work out which prints are whose. The sun is high in the sky. With its brightly coloured trees and glittering puddles, the clearing would make a good motif for a landscape photographer. There is no sign that an act of violence has taken place here. The world is beautiful and people do all they can to make each other's lives hell, thinks Judith. The hide is half hidden between sparse trees. When she reaches it a policeman climbs down the ladder. He has tied a scarf around his mouth and nose, which he pulls down with a swift movement.

'Hello, Ma'am. That's a smell you never get used to.'

'Why don't you wait down here?'

He points his thumb at a tree, where big black birds are perching in the crown.

'No good, too many vultures.'

He lights up a Marlboro and inhales greedily. Judith looks up at the hunting hide. Her feet are wet. It smells of death. The only sound is the hoarse crowing of the black birds. She pulls on latex gloves and shoe covers. You always think it's going to be bad, but it's always different every time, she thinks once she's got to the top. Then she forces herself to look closely.

He finds her in the barn, mixing the feed for the lambs. He takes her in his arms and lifts her onto the shelf where the shearing tools are kept. How soft she is, but how firm her body feels. Warm and alive. She throws her arms around him, then her legs. Their bodies rock softly, breathing in time. She smells so good. A little bit of sandalwood, a little bit of patchouli, a tiny little bit of sweat. He pulls her even closer and puts his hand under her fleece jacket. She's got muscles since she's lived on Sun Farm. Slight curves left and right of her backbone, that column of life that bears so much and is so fragile. Parawati, he thinks. Divine companion. Take her here and now, bury yourself in her, again and again, over and over again.

'Wait here, wait a moment.' He kisses her throat, disentangles himself and goes over to the door. He looks outside, doesn't see anyone, and bolts the door. He takes a square of plywood and puts it in front of the window above the shelf. It fits into the opening as if it had been made specially. The smell of hay, the dusky light and the knowledge of what they're about to do arouse him even more. There's an electric heater in the room in front of the stable. He takes it under his arm, pulls a blanket out of the cupboard and goes back to the shelf where his goddess is sitting watching him.

'I want you.' Each of his steps is now a furtive creeping, pushing the excitement until it's almost unbearable.

'You mean here, right now? But...'

'Shhh, don't speak.' He puts the heater down on the floor, finds a socket and switches it on. 'Take your clothes off.'

'You mean...?'

He nods. He goes to her and puts his hands up under her fleece again. He finds her breasts. He watches the fear of being discovered battle with lust in her face, until she can't resist the lure of forbidden fruit.

'You're impossible!' It sounds nothing like a reprimand. With a single movement, she pulls her fleece and her T-shirt over her head and throws them on the floor.

Hurry up, he wants to say, but now it's up to her to set the pace. She enjoys his impatience, jumps to the floor, turns a few playful pirouettes. He's still amazed at how she, otherwise so aloof and unapproachable, can make love without the slightest shyness or inhibition. Because it has to be, because she's the right one.

He pulls off his clothes, not taking his eyes off her. She laughs when she sees his erection. Not a mean laugh, a happy one.

'Take your clothes off,' he says again.

Incredibly slowly, she undoes the zip on her cords, incredibly slowly, she pulls the trousers down over her hips, then her pants. He spreads the blanket out over the dusty shelf, she turns another pirouette and laughs at him. But now he can't wait any longer. He takes three fast steps towards her, grabs her, holds her tight and lifts her onto the blanket.

'Lie down.' He's so grateful that she stops playing with him straight away, that she feels his need or at least gives into it. That she obeys his hoarse whisper, lies down, keeps still, moves the way he wants her to. That she enjoys everything he does with her and shows it.

When they've finished he sits up next to her and embraces her. They share a cigarette. Then another. That too has become a habit, an addiction, just as forbidden as their love.

'We have to get dressed.' Her fingers are stroking the back of his neck, the front, his chest. 'We're lucky no one came in.'

'I wish we could do it again.'

'That's enough for now, I've got to take care of the sheep.' She sits up and looks him straight in the eye. She raises her eyebrows and purses her lips like a sour governess.

'Tut tut. Have you no shame, young man? One has to learn to control one's desire.'

She jumps down to the floor and fishes for her pants. So outrageously young and outrageously sexy. Learn to control desire, he thinks. You've no idea how hard that is.

The body has empty eye sockets and no lips. No nose. Its whole face is just a raw, rotten mess of flesh. The skull bones shimmer through around the eye sockets. The chest is blood. Brownish guts are spilling out of the abdomen. It looks as if they've been pulled out piece by piece. Blond hair. The body is leaning in the corner on the wooden bench, one elbow almost casually stuck out of the opening, the other hand resting on the bench, legs stretched out. There is no obvious cause of death. The head and the rump are strewn with wounds. Vultures, the officer said. Judith has never thought about what crows eat. There's a German saying that crows don't pick out each other's eyes - honour among thieves

- which might have a very real origin. She estimates the victim's height at over six foot. She squats down and pushes the intestines slightly aside. Clearly male. He must have been dead for at least a week, probably longer.

Has the victim not got any clothes? She bends down further and peers under the bench. Dark encrusted stains, more or less below the body. A couple of cigarette ends ground out into the wood. Hand-rolled cigarettes, very thin, no filter. At the very back in a crack is something else. A piece of hard transparent plastic. She picks it out and holds it up to the light. A splinter, about three centimetres long with a ridged edge, perhaps a piece of the grip from a cassette or CD box.

'DI Krieger, your boss from Cologne wants to talk to you.' Hans Edling's voice echoes across the clearing.

'I'll call him back in a minute!' All she needs is a moment of peace. Time to get a feeling for this place, a feeling that will guide her later on. At least that's how it used to be. It's cold. She puts her hands in the pockets of her leather coat. Manni will be here any minute with the crime scene team, and then it'll be too late for undisturbed observations. Come on Judith, hurry up. Her eyes fly to and fro.

The victim has no clothes, no shoes, no ID, no weapon. The roof of the hide has a big hole in it. Judith stands on tiptoe and runs her fingers over the edge of the opening. Presumably, there used to be boards nailed across it, or tar paper. Where are the boards now? She looks down, but all she can see is bushes and the officer lighting up another cigarette. She remembers a documentary she watched one night a few weeks ago when she couldn't sleep again. It was about a tribe that lays its dead to rest on litters in trees, offering them up to the light and the birds unprotected. It was something to do with reverence and the wishes of the gods. Judith didn't watch it all the way through, but carried on channel-hopping. Dried blood is everywhere in grotesque splash patterns. Someone has written 'L & A' in black marker pen in a heart on the back wall of the hut. A Sarah and a Mick have also left their mark in a heart, this time carved into the wood with a knife. 'Tom, you sexy beast' is written next to it and further to the left 'Meli was here.' Various initials and dates - highly unlikely to have anything to do with the murder. Do local lovers sit up here in the hut, cuddled up on the bench, invisible to the world at their feet, looking out through the gaps in the wall at the treetops? Carefully, Judith bends down far enough so that her head is on a

level with the body. What was the last thing he saw? Was it day or night when he died? She's suddenly sure it was night, that he was alone with his murderer. No hiker for miles around to help him. Just the forest, the stoic, silent forest and darkness. Judith stands quite still. She closes her eyes, and thinks she can still feel the man's fear, a racing, flitting protest.

She climbs down the ladder and rolls a cigarette. The police officer snaps open a silver lighter and gives her a light.

'You can forget that call.'

'Pardon?'

'Forget it, you can only get a signal up there in the hide. If you're lucky.'

Judith fishes her mobile out of her coat pocket and looks at the screen. 'Signal search.' He's right.

'I'd better be getting back up there.' He puts his cigarette out with his foot, picks up the stub and puts it inside the cellophane wrapper of his Marlboro pack.

'Nasty job. Let's hope your colleagues from Cologne get a move on.'

He nods at her and pulls the scarf back over his face.

Judith stamps back across the grass. Her right foot sinks into a puddle; cold water creeps up the leg of her boot. Then the feeling from the dream is suddenly there again. The unreality. The longing, never to be fulfilled. A threat in slow motion. As if she were running forever through liquid glass. She rams her fists into her coat pockets and quickens her step. If she's lucky someone might have some boots to lend her.