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The Strawberry Picker

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Extract

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1

It was one of those days when you could almost smell the heat. Skin burned brown by the sun. Sweat breaking from every pore the moment you moved. The kind of day that made him feel edgy and irritable. It was better not to annoy him on such days.

The others were used to that by now. They let him work in peace, didn't speak to him, even lowered their voices when he passed them.

He couldn't understand why some people always had to be talking. They didn't distinguish between what was important and what wasn't, just let their petty, silly, excitable words spill over everything. Even as a child he'd found out how to defend himself against that kind of thing by just switching off. He liked to see someone else's lips moving while not a sound reached his ears. Like a fish, he thought. Like a fish on dry land.

He used to get beaten for switching off like that. These days no one noticed that he'd gone underground. Most people were as pathetic and stupid as the silly things they said.

Another hour, then it would be time for the lunch break. He'd get that over with quickly and then go back to work.

He knew where this restless feeling would lead if he didn't take his mind off it. He knew what happened when his hands began trembling. Like now.

Oh God. He stifled a groan. Two women turned to look at him. He hardly knew them, and stared darkly at them. They lowered their eyes and turned their backs to him again.

The sun was blazing down from the sky.

Burn these thoughts out of my body, he thought. Please! And these feelings!

But the sun was only the sun.

It had no power to grant his wishes.

Only a fairy had that power.

Young, beautiful and innocent. Most of all, innocent.

A fairy just for him, not for anyone else in the world.

* * *

As I drove along, the wind blew the scent of fresh strawberries in through the open window. And the heat, which had come far too early this year. My skirt was sticking to my legs. There were beads of perspiration on my upper lip. With all its faults, I loved my beat-up old Renault, but there were days when I longed for a newer model with air conditioning.

When I'd turned the bend in the road I could see them – the strawberry pickers in the fields, bending over the plants or walking carefully between the rows, carrying crates full of punnets. Spots of bright colour on the wide expanse of green. The sun turned their skin brown.

They were seasonal workers, some of them from Poland, some from elsewhere, some from the most remote corners of Germany. The last adventurers, an annual invasion. The villagers shut their doors and windows against them.

In the evenings the strange men and women, boys and girls met by the well in the middle of the village, drank, smoked, talked, laughed. They kept themselves to themselves, didn't greet their neighbours, didn't even smile at them.

A lot of proverbs make sense. *As you sow, so shall you reap.* The villagers had sown distrust, and now they were reaping the cool reserve they deserved.

I drove up the long, winding drive to the house. White gravel crunched under my tyres. Like a movie, I thought. All much too perfect, much too good to be true. Suppose I woke up and found I'd only been dreaming?

As soon as you came close to the house you could positively smell the money that had gone into every detail. The old watermill had been carefully and expensively restored. The architect had even used the millstream in his design for the interior, tapping it for water to run along a narrow channel through the entrance hall.

The sun shone down on two-hundred-year-old red-brick walls, made the gravel gleam, was reflected back from the glass front of the extension, which looked like something thought up by a sci-fi author.

My mother's house. Every time I came to visit, its beauty enchanted me again.

I opened the door and went into the hall. Welcome cool air met me. So did our cat Edgar, who owes his name to my mother's love of the stories of Edgar Allan Poe.

I picked him up and cuddled him. Enormous quantities of cat hair drifted to the floor. I put him down again and he washed one side of himself and stalked over to the stairs ahead of me.

Everything inside the house was equally exquisite and expensive, designed by someone who knew what he was doing. The sun cast soft afternoon light through the tall windows of the hall and made the wood of the staircase glow. The rattan chairs on the terrazzo floor made you want to be in Italy, like the plainly whitewashed walls and the round, monastic window niches.

The staircase was a work of art in itself. The steps actually seemed to be floating in the air. The joiner who made them was famous for using the minimum material to create the maximum effect. He did it very well. It was

the same with everything here, every room and every piece of furniture. On principle my mother had chosen the best and the most expensive. She could afford it.

Once Edgar reached the top of the stairs he padded along the upper gallery, purring. He knew I always went to see my mother first.

There wasn't a sound from her room. Perhaps she'd fallen asleep. I carefully opened the door.

My mother was sitting at her desk in front of a stack of paper, reading glasses on her nose. She turned to me and smiled. 'Jenna! How nice!'

My mother's a writer. A crime writer, to be precise, with a list of very successful books. Ever since she turned her back on what my grandmother and her reading group would call 'real literature', her books have sold like hot cakes. They've been translated into over twenty languages, and production companies scramble for the movie rights.

'Sit down. I'll be through with this in a moment.'

You can interrupt my mother any time, whatever she's doing, unless she's making a note of an idea or sketching something out. I'd got accustomed to it ages ago, and I didn't mind any more. I used to. I always felt the words mattered more to her than I did.

Edgar had already jumped up on the sofa and was waiting for me to sit down. He curled up on my lap, closed his eyes, purred and dug his claws affectionately into my thigh.

I can still remember life before my mother was so successful. We lived in the town of Bröhl then, in one of a row of houses. The front gardens looked like well-tended family graves, planted up with evergreen shrubs, rhododendrons and annuals. Here and there water gurgled over the nice clean stones of a water feature and ran into a lily pond containing several fat goldfish.

My father had his office on the lower ground floor, behind windows

surrounded by ivy. A brass plate was fixed to the right of the front door at about eye level, saying THEO WEINGÄRTNER. FINANCIAL ADVISER. The plate was polished till it shone. Many of my father's women clients checked their make-up in it before they pressed the bell.

We had a cleaning lady who came in twice a week, and a window cleaner came once a month. My mother wrote and wrote.

After her study on the first floor, her favourite place was the garden, which looked like a showpiece feature for a glossy mag like *Homes & Gardens*, with just the right mixture of formal beds and wild corners, the sort of thing that gardening magazines like.

My mother coped with writer's block by working in the garden. Perhaps there were times when she'd have liked to discuss a problem with my father instead of digging it into the soil or tying it up to a trellis, but he couldn't muster any interest in the conflicts my mother described on paper and the words she used for them.

When he talked about my mother's profession, which wasn't often, he called it *scribbling* and described her as a *scribbler*. He did it with a friendly wink, thus making light of the whole idea. He couldn't bring himself to say *writer* or *author*, because that would have meant he took her career seriously.

And he went on acting the same way even when my mother first began to appear on chat shows, and journalists turned our house upside down doing photo-reportage pieces and making short films about her.

But the royalties from the publisher earned even my father's respect. They paid for perks like the new BMW, a modern, better-planned design for my father's office, a new computer for my mother, the conservatory she'd wanted for ages.

My mother's writing had little to do with our daily life. She did it on the side, so to speak, and we didn't get to know much about it.

There'd be a day when she remarked, in the kitchen, that she'd just finished her new manuscript. A few weeks later her editor would come, and the two of them would sit in the conservatory discussing the manuscript and scattering pages everywhere, so it was difficult to walk about without creating hopeless confusion.

Later still the postman brought proofs, the jacket design and then the finished book.

My mother needs her writing. She needs it to help her stand up to everyday life, she says. She always did. Perhaps she needed it even more back then, because she had to stand up to my father too.

He doesn't like surprises; he's keen on having a perfect life in a perfect home and with a perfect career. Sometimes I feel he's like someone living in an outsized doll's house where nothing is ever moved and everything stays neatly in place.

My mother, on the other hand, is naturally chaotic. I'm sure that when she was a child her doll's house was a mess, and it was only logical for her to get other people to look after the house.

She turned more and more to the garden. It was her own manageable, self-contained universe where she could do just as she liked. Success was obvious and mistakes could easily be put right.

And it was the same with writing. My mother could create a complex world where only she had power over her characters and their story. People were born, people died, and my mother pulled the strings. It all went on quietly, behind the closed door of her tiny study. Sometimes she talked about it, and her eyes seemed to sparkle. But usually she kept her writing experiences to herself and we discussed other things.

A magazine once described my mother as a woman who was addicted to writing but had learned to hide her addiction well. Life wasn't

enough for her, said the journalist; she invented another life in her stories.

Another life. Perhaps my father could have gone there with her if he'd wanted. But he didn't want.

And what about me? No one asked me what I thought.

My mother took refuge in reading tours too. She'd travel around for weeks on end, calling me from Munich, Hamburg, Zürich, Amsterdam. There was always a list of the hotels where she was staying beside our phone. *Mama: can be reached at . . .*

While she was away our cleaning lady became housekeeper too: she spent the day with us and did all the housework. She cooked as well: good home cooking. My father ended up ten kilos overweight.

My mother became famous. I gradually acquired special status at school. Even some of the teachers looked at me with awe. I began selling my mother's autographs, and I did pretty well out of them.

It was in the evening, when shadows fell into the house, that I missed my mother. Not that I'd have wanted her to be at home all the time. Far from it. But I was used to hearing her going up and down the stairs. Reading part of a manuscript aloud under her breath. Phoning. And I missed the scent of her perfume, lingering invisibly in a room where she was or which she'd just left.

We grew rich. My parents bought the old watermill in Eckersheim with twenty thousand square metres of land, in the idyllic setting of a landscape conservation area, and hired a well-known architect to renovate and convert it. My father would have preferred a villa on the outskirts of Bröhl, but he didn't get his way. He got a secretary.

Her name was Angie and she looked like an Angie too: mid-thirties, ash-blonde ponytail, fingers covered with rings, skirts too short and too tight. My mother spent every spare minute on the building site; my father

had no spare minutes at all, because he and Angie were so deep in his work.

I was left somewhere in between. I just hung around, didn't work hard enough at school, and all of a sudden I grew up. I was fifteen.

A year later my parents divorced. My father didn't move into the converted mill with us. He stayed on in the old house with Angie, who was pregnant.

'There.' My mother took her glasses off. 'You've come at the perfect time. I'm dying for a coffee. Do you have to dash off?'

'No, I can stay as long as you want. Sure I'm not disturbing you?'

She put her pen down. 'Yes, but at just the right moment. I'm stuck. I switched the computer off ages ago. You know what it's like when you're staring at the last sentence like a rabbit hypnotized by a snake, and you suddenly realize a whole hour has passed?'

My mother didn't expect an answer. Rhetorical questions are her speciality. She stood up, bent down and gave me a kiss.

I was as familiar with her perfume as with her voice or the warmth of her skin. Calypso. She never wore anything else. It was light and fresh and smelled of summer. My mother had it made specially in a perfumery, mixed just for her, and she had chosen the name herself.

That was the one extravagance she'd allowed herself since becoming a rich woman, except that she paid a small fortune for striking rings, necklaces and bracelets, and then didn't wear them because she thought they looked too conspicuous.

'Something wrong with me?' She patted her short black hair, which had silver-grey threads in it.

'Nothing at all!' I smiled. 'You look great. As usual.'

She took my arm and led me out of the room. 'You too.'

That was a downright lie. But perhaps she didn't even notice she was

lying to me. Perhaps she was lying to herself. Persuading herself I was beautiful, like her.

But I'm not, and I never wanted to be. I wouldn't change the way I look, even if it's nothing to write home about, not for any beauty in the world. I'm me, which is more than many people can say about themselves.

We went downstairs. Patches of sunlight shone on the kitchen floor. Our other cat, Molly, who is black and white like the squares on a chessboard, was lying stretched out on one of them. Molly, who owes *her* boringly ordinary name, inspired by no one and nothing, to me, greeted me with a chirping 'Miaow', rose and rubbed round my legs. Then she and Edgar disappeared through the open terrace door into the garden.

My mother made us coffee in the rather elderly espresso machine. I noticed again how she was getting to look like my grandmother, though she often said crossly that Grandmother and she were like fire and water, and nothing seemed able to change it.

'How are you getting on with the new book?' I asked, perching on the edge of the table, which was warm from the sun.

'This one's going to cost me years of my life.' My mother has a way of combining the most dramatic statements with the most ordinary of gestures. Concentrating on what she was doing, she put coffee cups, sugar and a dish of orange biscuits on a tray and carried it all out onto the terrace. 'I wrote better when you were still living here. I miss the peace and routine of our life then.'

'So it's not me you miss?'

I regretted the words the moment they were out. Was I still annoyed to be just a rather unimportant part of my famous mother's life? Did it still hurt to know that basically she didn't need me? That any kind of daughter would have done for her, a daughter picked at random, interchangeable?

'Forget it.' I dismissed my question with a gesture. 'I didn't mean it seriously.'

She was looking at me, hurt. 'Can't you stop being so over-sensitive, Jenna?'

That was rich, coming from her! My mother could spend hours arguing over a single syllable.

I dropped into one of the garden chairs, leaned back and took a deep breath. If I were ever to feel sorry I didn't live there any more it would be because of the view. I was looking at gently rolling countryside with grazing sheep. They belonged to a neighbouring farmer. Here and there a crooked old fruit tree stood defiantly in the grass, as if it had been forgotten.

No one had touched this landscape. Mercifully even my mother hadn't thought of laying out a mini park here, or having a designer do it for her. Like me, she appreciated its magic and left the garden untouched.

The murmuring of the millstream made the idyll complete. I clasped my hands behind my head and closed my eyes.

'When are you off on a reading tour again?' I asked.

My mother waited for me to open my eyes before she answered. 'I have just a couple of readings planned, no tour. You know I always use the summer holidays for writing.'

Summer holidays. Everything revolved around her writing. Even the seasons. And the writing had loomed even larger since she and my father divorced. As if it protected her from the world, from loneliness, from her feelings.

I looked more closely at my mother. Suppose her whole self-controlled outer appearance was just a façade? A perfect suit of armour. I sensed her nervous energy. It actually seemed to flow over the table. She was always like that at the beginning of a new book. Putting out feelers, sounding out

everyone she met, every word, every sound and every noise, every smell. There was no point trying to tell her anything at moments like this, because although she might be physically present her thoughts were somewhere else entirely.

'It's a funny thing about this novel,' she said, hesitating briefly. 'I still don't know who my central character's going to be, and I've already finished the first chapter.'

I nodded, not knowing just what to say. Anyway, my mother doesn't usually expect any answer when she's talking about her work problems. She's just thinking out loud, using whoever she's talking to as a mirror.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the cleverest of us all?

No, wrong fairy tale. I didn't have the talent to be a Snow White. I could choke on a single poisoned sentence.

We drank our coffee in silence.

'So what did you come for?'

Good question. What did I come for? Perhaps I'd known, but by now I had forgotten.

* * *

The dead girl lay in the undergrowth, naked. She was on her back. Her arms hung down beside her body. Her right leg was bent at a slight angle; her left leg was stretched out.

Her hair had been cut off. One loose strand still lay on her shoulder; others had blown away and were wrapped around the stalks of plants or caught on the rough bark of trees.

Her eyes were wide open, staring at the sky. As if, at the moment of death, her principal emotion had been surprise.

Some children had found her. A boy and a girl, brother and sister, the boy ten years old, the girl nine. Their parents had forbidden them to play in

the wood. They played there all the same, and had been terribly punished with a sight they would never forget.

They ran away screaming. They stumbled, still screaming, across meadows and pastures, clambered over fences, crawled under barbed wire. As they were taking a short cut through the brickworks yard, one of the workers stopped them. He listened to what they told him through their tears and sobs, called the police and took the children to the police station, where the secretary made them cocoa and rang their mother.

The corpse turned out to be that of an eighteen-year-old girl. She had been raped. Seven stab wounds were found on her body. The first of them, straight into her heart, had killed her.

The murder victim came from Hohenkirchen, near Eckersheim. She was still at school and lived with her parents. One of the police officers who went to the crime scene was able to identify her. He knew her parents and volunteered to break the news to them.

Her mother collapsed at the door. The woman's husband led her to the living-room sofa and put a blanket over her legs. Then he clapped the policeman on the shoulder and offered him a drink.

People sometimes act that way when they're in shock. They do the strangest things. Once the police officer had met a woman who, on hearing that her husband had died in an accident, went into the kitchen, ladled cold chicken soup into a plate and ate it as if she hadn't had a good meal for ages.

The girl's name was Simone. Simone Redleff. The entire village went to her funeral. It was the biggest funeral anyone had ever seen in Hohenkirchen.

The whole of her school year came. The girls had handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths, the boys surreptitiously wiped tears away with the backs of their hands. They were all still in shock. Death had come too suddenly, out

of the blue. But that wasn't the worst. The worst was its terrible, unsparing violence.

You often heard of dreadful things like this, but at a distance. If such violence could happen to someone they knew, the mourners seemed to be thinking, where would they be safe themselves?

In the chapel of rest, they played pop songs chosen by a friend of the dead girl. The tunes, among all the flickering candles and the flowers smelling of death, filled the room with desperate sadness.

Outside, the sun shone down as if nothing had happened.

But nothing would ever be the same again.

The murder of 18-year-old Simone Redleff, as Detective Superintendent Bert Melzig of the Bröhl CID said at the press conference, has many features in common with the murders of two young girls a year ago in the north German towns of Jever and Aurich. Neither case has yet been solved. Melzig would not give any detailed information while police inquiries are still in progress.

* * *

He was worn out, but all the same he didn't sleep long. He liked the half-dreams that came into his mind between sleep and waking, but he hated and feared them too. At the moment he feared them.

He tried desperately to think of something else.

He couldn't do it. The images kept coming back like boomerangs.

He still felt the excitement. No other emotion was anything like as strong.

Oh, girl, he thought, why did you let me down?

Because on closer inspection she hadn't been a fairy at all, not even really pretty. Her voice had sounded squeaky with fear, like a bird's. It

had infuriated him. He hated shrill voices. You could hear the fear in them.

He hated the sweat of fear too.

Her hands had been all slippery.

Not that he really believed in fairies. He wasn't a child any more. And a fairy would have been more powerful than he wanted.

She had to be *like* a fairy. Like the fairy in the storybook he had as a child. Slender. With soft, shining hair. Beautiful.

Big eyes. Long lashes.

You didn't see details at a distance. You saw them only when you were really close to each other. And by then it was usually too late. He kept finding something that took him by surprise, something he wasn't prepared for. Even a mole in the wrong place could spoil the image.

The girl in Jever had smelled of tobacco smoke. She'd even offered him a cigarette! She'd smiled flirtatiously, put her head back and blown smoke in the air, never guessing that she'd already signed her death warrant.

Groaning, he turned over onto his other side. He was glad he'd taken a room at this little inn and wasn't staying at the farm with the others. The room was small and ugly, and instead of a bathroom it had a shower cubicle so small that he could hardly move in it. It was right under the roof and hot from the sun in the evening. The window looked out onto the chimney next door. But the rent was within his budget and he didn't have to give up his freedom.

Above all, he could dream safely.

His dreams were not the sort you could have in a hostel dormitory. It was difficult to hide the uneasiness that often made him wake suddenly, drenched in sweat. And he couldn't risk talking in his sleep.

No, it was better here. Almost perfect.

If only he could drop off to sleep.

He needed his sleep to get through the days. To maintain his façade. Of course the cops had been snooping around, asking the strawberry pickers questions. And they'd be back. As soon as they had some definite clue.

He turned onto his back and clasped his hands behind his head.

But they wouldn't find anything.

They wouldn't get him.

They'd never done it yet.

He smiled in the darkness.

Soon afterwards, he was asleep.

2

After school I went straight home. I didn't feel like hanging around in the café having a coffee with the rest of the physics class. Suddenly it struck me that maybe I'd been looking for life in the wrong places too often.

Somehow I'd grown out of school. I ought really to have been taking my final exams this year. I hated having had to stay down in Year Eleven, so that now I had another year to go. Timetables, exam papers, the smell of white-board pens, sweat, the same faces all the time – it was getting me down so badly I sometimes felt like just hitting out.

I found the mornings at school so deadly dull that I had difficulty not falling off my chair.

Formulas. Numbers. Poems. Truisms.

Noise. Teeming crowds in the school yard. Bad air.

I don't know what architect gave his bad taste free rein in our school building. Probably one who was never a school student. A nightmare of glass and concrete, it was an oven in summer and an ice house in winter.

I just couldn't wait to get out of it again.

I lost half an hour in a traffic jam for which there was no obvious reason before I finally turned into Lessing Street. My resident's parking permit was no use if there wasn't a space free. I drove all around the block twice, cursing, then someone moved out and I squeezed my Renault into the space.

The staircase smelled of an exciting mixture of cabbage, coffee and fried