MIMIK

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Translated from the German
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With expert advice from Dirk Eilert,
the leading authority in facial expressions and
body language in the German-speaking world



An Aries Book

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For Regina Ziegler

We never fully know each other,
and overnight we have become different,
better or worse.

Theodor Fontane

Prologue

'I'm freezing, Mummy.'

'You won't be for long.'

The six-year-old was shivering. She should have put tights on, but it had been so warm at home. Before you left the house it was almost impossible to imagine how cold it might get outside.

Especially if you hadn't been moving for a while.

'Can we go back home?'

'Aren't you enjoying our little outing?'

'It's so hard on the stones.'

'It'll pass,' her mother said, but the girl had her doubts. She bet she'd be bruised all over tomorrow.

'Just keep lying here.'

'How much longer?'

'Until I tell you.'

Mummy's voice was shaky, as if she were freezing too but didn't want to admit it. In truth she'd sounded strange

all day. Maybe she'd been to the hospital again and come back with bad news. The first time, when she was away for weeks and her hair fell out, her voice was just as weird. As if she were angry and sad at the same time. Could Mummy feel the vibrations too? They'd spread to the girl's chest and vocal cords.

'Mummy?' she asked when she was certain she wasn't imagining the oscillations rumbling through her body.

'Yes?'

'I can hear a funny sound.'

'Ignore it.'

But why? Nothing had happened for half an hour except for the fact that her arms and legs had become so cold and numb they no longer felt part of her body. She waited a while longer then said, 'The noise. It's getting closer.'

'Don't worry. Just stay as you are.'

Mummy took her hand. But not like earlier. More like when you grab hold of something. Possessively.

In the darkness she turned to her mother who was facing her. Moonlight fell on Mummy's eyes and she fancied she could see herself reflected in them. The little girl would have been hard put to say what scared her more: what she saw in her mother's face or what Mummy said.

'There's one thing you must never forget.'

'What's that, Mummy?'

'You came out of me. My own flesh and blood.'

The cold of the night combined in disturbing unison with the frost in Mummy's eyes. The girl wanted to look away but couldn't, as if her mother's pupils were powerful magnets drawing in her gaze.

'What happened to the love that was always in your eyes

when you used to look at me?' she wanted to ask. Now Mummy's eyes reminded her of a frozen lake.

The vibrations distracted her. They were juddering through her entire body when her mother snapped, 'Close your eyes! And no matter what happens don't open them again until I say so.'

Brimming with fear, the girl obeyed. For she'd seen something else in her mother's eyes that she would spend the rest of her life trying to stave off.

They lay side by side in silence, as the noise grew louder and the vibrations more uncomfortable.

All of a sudden her mother barked, 'Never forget that we're the same, you and me. One and the same person!'

Even though they were lying beside each other, she'd had to shout these words to be heard over the noise and vibrations, which were now so menacing that the girl defied her mother's instructions and opened her eyes. She found herself gazing up at a sky that was much brighter than it had been when they'd lain down here.

'Mummy?' The girl turned to her again but couldn't make out her face because she was so dazzled by the light.

She wanted to scream, run away, sob – all at once.

But for most of these it was too late.

She felt so lethargic she couldn't pick herself up.

The cold ballast she was lying on had paralysed her arms and legs. And the headlights of the goods train hurtling towards her through the darkness were far too close.

1

HANNAH HERBST

Twenty-seven Years Later

Quiet.

Too quiet.

Normally around this time Hannah would be able to hear the children's laughter and squeals from the street, at least when she was lucky enough to find a parking spot near Zwergenwald Kindergarten. Sometimes she had to drive around the block several times until a space became free, even though most local residents had garages on their properties. But at rush hour, when the football players thronged to the nearby pitches, and the pupils at the neighbouring Waldorf School waited for their parents to ferry them home, double-parked cars would jam the roads in this smart neighbourhood of Westend like delivery vans on Kottbusser Damm. Today, however, Hannah had arranged to pick Paul up earlier, and thus enjoyed a choice of parking places right outside the flat-roofed building of the Protestant kindergarten.

The gate wasn't closed properly and that was unusual too. Unnerved, Hannah put a hand to her throat. Something here wasn't right, and this something seemed to have clamped cold fingers around her neck.

She'd never been able to enter the front garden before without putting in a PIN first. Everyone abided by this security measure, waiting as they went in and out until the buzzer stopped and the gate was firmly shut so no child could run out into the road.

Have they gone on an outing?

But Myrte, the head teacher, would have said something that morning when Hannah told her about how the whole family were going to Dresden for the opening of an exhibition of Richard's new paintings. They would be taking Kyra, Richard's daughter from his first marriage, out of school a bit earlier too.

It was still silent when she opened the door to the porch.

Inside Hannah checked the notices and found one introducing Wolf Schlagmann, the new trainee, who wanted the children to call him 'Wolle'. Beside his photo was a note about the resumption of early-years music lessons. Kindergarten swimming wasn't until tomorrow. There was nothing particular scheduled for today.

Hannah opened the next door, which led to the cloakroom area. A dozen small coats were hung here in more or less orderly fashion, changes of clothes stored in compartments and little shoes arranged beneath.

Here the silence was broken. But the invisible noose around her neck tightened. For the sounds that now reached Hannah's ears were ones she'd never heard in the kindergarten before. Nor did they tally with a place where children were

supposed to be happy. Sure, there were tantrums, blubbering and tears, like when one of the children tripped and hurt their knee. But what was the cause of this uninterrupted hissing which, as she discovered when she listened more closely, was composed of at least three elements: whispering, whimpering and sobbing?

Crossing the cloakroom area, Hannah opened a final door and saw the crazed hostage taker at the same time that she heard him.

'Tell me who it was!' he shouted. 'Or I'll kill both of you!'

2

The scrawny chap, who was around twenty-five perhaps, was standing in the middle of the multipurpose room that lay between the classrooms and the kitchen. At this time of day it was used as a lunch hall. The smell of rosemary potatoes and chickpeas hung in the air. The full plates were laid out on small tables, but the children who were supposed to be eating from them were sitting by the piano, which Myrte and Anja had kneeled in front of, holding out their arms to protect the little ones.

This was the source of the whispering: 'Don't stare at him. Look away; look at the floor,' they said quietly to the children, hardly daring to raise their eyes themselves.

The hostage taker was standing in the spot where they always put a Christmas tree in December. He had two children at his mercy, one arm around the neck of each.

Brain hiccups is how Hannah would later describe to Richard the throbbing she felt in her head at the sight of the

life-threatening danger. As if millions of cells beneath her skull kept going into spasm at irregular intervals, each time interrupting her train of thought.

The girl in the grip of the madman was… *yes, that was it*… Samira, dark-haired and with shining green eyes, who always wore a ribbon in her hair. Today it was red, matching her Mickey Mouse dress. She was the one responsible for the gut-wrenching sobbing and whimpering.

The boy beside her was silent, even though it was his head the hostage taker was pointing his gun at. Unlike with Samira, Hannah didn't have to think hard about the name. Because it was Paul. Her five-year-old son.

3

'Oh God!' she gasped almost silently, the invisible hands around her neck hardly allowing her to breathe. Nobody was taking any notice of her. Not the teachers, not Paul, not even the armed hostage taker.

'Which one of you told these lies?' he bellowed.

Hannah felt as if a torrent of thoughts were squeezing its way out of her head.

I know that man. I've just seen him.

Wolf's – 'you can call me Wolle' – face was contorted into a grimace and bore little resemblance to the smiling photograph Hannah had just seen on the noticeboard.

In a few hours' time the news websites would post what the newspapers would only be able to publish the following day: how the 'Kindergarten Killer' had forced his way into the building with a weapon and gone berserk.