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Chapter 11

We left the motorway at Aumale and drove east back along a narrow country road for more than a mile. Jesse read Kevin Brennicke's road map and predicted what was going to come next. A curve. A junction. The bank of the River Bresle. I drove north for a little bit, past the river meadows, which already lay dark green in the evening, at our back the roaring and whistling of the long-distance traffic rolling across the motorway bridge. Jesse kept a lookout for the pool or pond which must be on the right somewhere, but where there were only willows and boggy meadows, and sang along with »Smells Like Teen Spirit« until I switched off the CD.

»Hey! My favorite song!« he exclaimed, immediately indignant. »Blasphemy.« He reached out to the CD player and switched it back on. The guitar din started once again.

»Turn the music off,« I said calmly. »Please. Take a look around. It's really out of place here.«

»Says who?«

»I do. Isn't that enough? Turn it off, for Christ's sake,« I snapped.

I looked at him and he looked at me and once again I was certain that when he was angry and put on his stupid face Jesse looked like me and I looked like my father.

»I need some peace and quiet, at least for quarter of an hour. Silence – got it?«

»Na,« he said coolly. »If you need some peace and quiet, why do you get so worked up? We're not even there yet.«

And I said: »Yes, we're there« – and turned right onto a track, where I stopped and switched off the engine. The music was cut off, no power any more. There was silence. But it only appeared to be so. The noise of the world was still there. Crickets or cicadas could be heard, somewhere in the distance a circular saw, the shrieking of which flushed out birds, starlings, to judge by their mocking cries. And superimposed on it all was the hum and the quiet clattering that came from the bridge.

As a precaution I pulled out the key. The track led to the edge of a small wood, which lay between the fields of half-faded lupines and the pillars of the motorway viaduct, perhaps half a mile away. I only needed to walk straight ahead, to put one foot in front of another, and the heaviness in my head would lift. I reached behind me for the lunch packets and the bottles of water from Mons.

»Here,« I said, and when he didn't respond I put sandwich and bottle in his lap. In order not to turn his face towards me, he looked out of the side window, where there was nothing to be seen in the dusk apart from concrete pillars and lupine flowers, and played with the button of the electric window winders. The window opened a little bit and slid shut again, up and down, up and down, but only in Jesse's imagination. When I didn't stir either, the blood went to his head and like his mother he turned red with suppressed resentment.

»At the back in my holdall there are a couple of comics,« I said, »no mangas, but good comics and graphic novels, some from Japan, too. Look at them, if you like.«

He touched neither the water nor the sandwich. Instead, without saying a word, he stuck the headphone plugs in his ears, pulled his mobile phone out of his back pocket and began listening to music. It was an automatic gesture without the least significance or hope. He had sat for hours like that in the room full of posters, books and toys that his on-call foster parents had fitted out for teenagers like him. If Ira was feeling very bad and she needed one or two weeks to find her way back to life, Jesse went to the Lewandowskis. They were nice, committed, with no children, teachers, both of them, with a left-wing alternative background and a holiday home on Gomera. For twenty years they had been taking in young people, whose parents were going through a crisis, for stand-by fostering. They liked Jesse, but he didn't like them. The Lewandowskis depressed him. He only stayed with Karen and Ingo because his grandparents and uncle didn't have any time – which he didn't hold against us. Nevertheless I picked him up at home from time to time and, after a visit to the cinema or something to eat at McDonald's, took him to the Lewandowskis in Langenhorn. Once my father came along and on the way the three of us stopped at Fuhlsbüttel and looked at an air show with old propeller aircraft and even a copy of the Wright Brothers' »Flyer«. My father took the local train back from the airport, and

when I dropped Jesse off in Langenhorn, I asked him whether he would rather stay with me than spend two weeks with Ingo and Karen. But he didn't want to. »I have to go in now,« he said in front of the house. »I promised Mum.«

I didn't know whether then, in his room in the Lewandowskis' terrace house, he had listened to music or audio books or had only pretended to do so in order to be left in peace. But when for once no truck trailer was thundering over the bridge at Aumale and when beyond the fields the shrieking of the saw broke off, then it was so quiet in the car, that I heard the sound booming through his head.

Chapter 12

So I let him sit. I took my food, water, got out and left the door open. Alone at last, I walked away, into the evening, and smelled the autumnally heavy aroma of the lupines and felt the whistling wind, which pressed violet waves into the field. Hardly a hundred steps and I had already eaten the sandwich and half-emptied the bottle. A quiet pleasure, an evening calm, I persuaded myself as I watched insects flying over the sea of purple blooms and thought I could feel at my back the boy's eyes, from which I was running away. In truth I was not walking alone along the track, but walking next to myself, watched myself in a drawn-out moment of shock as I greedily bolted down the white bread and gulped down the water, and saw myself look at the countryside as if infected by a general feeling of fright. I was ashamed, but couldn't do anything about it. With all its might it drew me back to the Mercedes in which the son of my dead sister was sitting, but I continued walking, stubborn and offended, and didn't even turn around. I was ashamed of my lack of self-control and I felt like an egoist because in a no man's land between two forage crop fields under a giant bridge I was letting my body take over without any resistance.

Then for a few seconds I hoped in all seriousness to be able to get in the mood for the coming week simply by looking at this motorway bridge. But the Bresle Bridge said nothing in the least to me; I could not even imagine that a quarter of an hour before I had driven across it. In an evening growing gradually greyer it was a dark grey monster. It cut through the vastness as a stone ramp, blew apart the rural

calm, so that the spinning and sailing above the fields and the flowing and rushing in the river became unreal, unbelievable in the face of the speed and the noise with which the traffic roared over the bridge. Jesse was right. Grinding and slicing, Nirvana's sawing racket fitted here very well. Noise and suffering from noise, both were present in Kurt Cobain's voice.

A narrow drainage ditch, oily, brown, walled in with concrete and straight as a die, ran between the field of lupines and the track before disappearing in the distance. When I had finished the water, I stood still and held the empty plastic bottle and the sandwich wrapping in my hand for a while. Then in a fit of anger and disgust I threw both down the embankment. The plastic floated but didn't move. There was no current whatsoever in the ditch, the almost chestnut brown water was completely motionless - and the inertness moved me. I stood still myself, looked at my refuse and gave up the idea of walking as far as the little wood. It was in any case too far away. Above me, clearly outlined in the dark blue evening sky, as big and loud as a jet plane landing, stood the bridge. It's beautiful, I thought suddenly, beautiful because it spans something that no longer exists. The little river Bresle, that also feeds the dead ditch, once, a long time ago, it had been as broad and mighty as the bridge, a proper river, rolling as infernally over boulders as the traffic that now surges above nothing but empty air.

I lit a cigarette and walked slowly back, very slowly and glad at every step. This concrete ditch, once perhaps it had been a stream. I looked at my shoes and thought of my father who had been with me when I bought them. I thought of his basement workshop and his basement workshop slippers in which he went from one table to the next, where there were books lying everywhere and models of propeller aircraft, which were his great hobby. I remembered again the planes of the US Air Force that had bombed Mons by mistake. I imagined how, almost seventy years before, when my father was eight, they had flown past here, how the navigators had kept a look out from their plexiglass cockpits and compared prominent landmarks in the countryside stretching out below with points marked on their maps of the Somme, Marne, Lorraine, Alsace, Belgium and the Rhineland. I pictured how in a *Liberator* or *Flying Fortress* someone decided he had recognized something, railway tracks, engine sheds, a railway bridge, a larger railway station building, thanks to which he

imagined himself to be, more quickly than anticipated, over Aachen, Mönchengladbach or Koblenz, so that he gave the bomb aimers the signal to release the load.

There had undoubtedly already been a bridge across the Bresle in 1944, presumably a much smaller one, a little further to the south, in the middle of the village, across which the people from Aumale drove their carts and on which their cars bumped along. In the late summer, as the Wehrmacht retreated from Normandy, British and Americans had come through here and advanced eastwards across Picardy, French Flanders and Belgium to the Rhine.

I stamped out the cigarette and was already within calling distance of the car when I stopped again and looked up at the motorway viaduct. I would not have been able to say why, and was as usual not sure of my impressions, but somehow the form and color of the bridge also seemed to say something about those days, even if it had not been built until twenty or thirty years after the end of the war. Everything was equally remote, was equally valid. That is what the bridge, with its twenty Y-shaped concrete legs, its grey ramp and the grey slabs that spanned the riverbed of the original Bresle, appeared to be saying. It was up to me to have eyes for it. And at this thought I noticed I tautened with curiosity and my spirits lifted and how all at once I really did feel a desire to draw.

I knew, of course, that now there was no time to make a drawing or even a sketch of the bridge, and I wasn't even sad at that, at most a little disgruntled. So I returned to the car and only then noticed that the driver's door was no longer open. The doors were closed but not locked and the Mercedes was empty. Jesse was nowhere to be seen.

I sat down behind the wheel and sounded the horn three or four times, the resonance long and, to me, extraordinarily piercing in the evening desolation. Nothing happened. The sky was dark blue, nearly violet, almost the same color as the lupines, their aroma hardly less powerful than that of the lilies and 'Maréchal Niel' roses in my mother's garden in Wellingsbüttel. In the gentle breeze the stems made a quiet trickling sound. Less than an hour, I thought, and it'll be pitch dark.

I waited for a couple of minutes. In my mind I saw Jesse running away out of sheer rage, standing by the side of the road and stopping a car. Was it possible that he had got into a stranger's car and gone off without leaving a message? I imagined it and thought it at once quite possible and yet impossible. I saw him driving towards Le Havre and Bayeux on the motorway, an older man at the wheel, asking him questions, a man travelling on business, a sales rep, then again a young woman was driving the car, who was very charmed indeed by his excellent French. Cursing, I struck the steering wheel, but also became aware of how I was gradually beginning to feel afraid. The sandwich, the bottle of water, his rucksack, none of it was there any more – as if Jesse had never been there at all, and I had driven the whole way alone. I imagined my mother's reaction and automatically let my chin sink to my chest, just as she would have done. »I'm going to beat her black and blue!« she had once exclaimed in anger when Ira, at fifteen or sixteen, hadn't come home in the evening for the first time. I had not forgotten it, because our parents had never, ever, hit us.

I got out and shouted for the boy. I went a little way down the track again, but turned around once I was certain no other path branched off from it. I walked past the car and stood by the side of the country road. I waited there for perhaps three minutes without the headlights of a car or a tractor appearing out of the semi-darkness. Altogether we had seen virtually no people at all since entering France. The people one did see were sitting in cars. If one suddenly found oneself, as if by force, in the open country, one was overwhelmed by the unreality, then hurt by the astonishment at how simulated everything appeared. The circular saw had fallen silent. The bridge roared. Crows cawed above the river. Nearby a quiet hum filled the air – autumn mosquitos were coming. Have mercy! At regular intervals, with long pauses in between, I shouted for Jesse and each time realized more clearly that I didn't want to believe in his disappearance.

Behind the steering wheel again, I picked up my mobile phone and called my mother. She wasn't surprised to hear from me and I waited to hear whether Jesse had been in touch. She didn't mention anything, asked me how he was and where we were. When I told her, she was surprised nevertheless.

»You didn't stay in Belgium? Why not?«

»There weren't any holdups,« I said. »We're trying to make it to the hotel. That was all I wanted to say, really. By the way... Did Jesse leave his mobile behind at home?«

She hadn't seen it, she said, and she had already tidied up his room in the early afternoon.

»Is that another one gone?«

I heard the neighbors' little dog barking and asked myself whether it would still be barking when everything else was over and in the past.

»We can't find it at any rate,« I said with as little expression as possible. »Could you give me his number? Perhaps we'll find it when we hear it ringing.«

»But the boy can tell you himself!« she exclaimed cheerfully and laughed at me.

And I said: »He's forgotten it.«

And my mother: »Pass him over to me.«

And me again: »Not this moment. He's gone to the toilet. We're parked at a service station. It's pouring. Can you hear it coming down? There's thunder, too.«

I held the phone out of the window, towards the bridge. I didn't know why I was lying. Or I knew very well – something of the old pleasure in defending oneself through invention, when they had pushed one of us into a corner in order to find out something from Ira or me.

Or simply out of tiredness.

»Yes, I can hear it. Goodness, am I glad that I didn't have to go on this trip! With awful weather like that I only need to think of your father and his inflamed tendons. I get the horrors. - So, here's the number. Have you got something to write with or should I send it to you?«

»Better if you send it. We'll call you. Say hello to dad. Don't worry, everything's OK.«

With that I ended the conversation. I pressed the key with the little red receiver. It looked like a tiny bridge in the light of the setting sun it, but was supposed to represent a telephone. Line dead, I thought immediately. Every conversation with my mother seemed to me like unavoidable proof of Ira's death. That's why I believed I had understood everything about the woman who had brought us into the world.

The text message with Jesse's number had already come. Full of apprehension my heart was in my mouth as I keyed it in. I realized how little I expected him to answer. It rang. So what would I do? It rang and the ring tone was the chorus of an old hip-hop track. The music was coming from inside the car, from the back, and as I turned round to the carrying space I saw that the boy under the woolen blanket there had sat up and was laughing at me with malicious sad eyes.

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