

**Thomas Raab**

Still – Chronik eines Mörders

**Silent - Chronicle of a Killer**

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Translation: Caroline Waight

Chapter Eleven

The Trip

The day calendar was turned to the page showing Thursday 20 June. The number was lovingly marked; Johann had circled it by hand in red, in the shape of a heart. He'd fetched fresh roses from the garden this morning, trimmed them and put them in a vase in the middle of the table, which was laid with fresh-baked goods, freshly squeezed orange juice, a thermos of coffee, ham, cheese, eggs, fruit, vegetables, a small cake, a candle, the daily paper and a birthday card with a written message. Words from the heart. He'd then gone quietly back down to the basement, walked over to the bed and gazed down at his sleeping wife, planting a kiss on her forehead. And all the while he believed that he'd see her again that evening, take her in his arms and be able to wish her a happy birthday.

As always, Charlotte crawled out of bed a little while after Johann, disappearing into the bathroom for her morning wash and finally taking breakfast down to Karl in the basement. Today her wash was more thorough, her outward appearance better groomed, Karl's morning meal more plentiful. As was her own. Satisfied, she sat down at the table so lavishly laid out by Johann. The man's watch in her hand stood at the stroke of nine. She'd never given it back; it now seemed her final, solitary connection to its owner, Dr Albrecht Hofstätter. She had phonecalls from her parents Gertraud and Heinrich Auböck, from distant relatives, but no-one else. No call from Veronika Lamprecht. Friendships lapse, distressingly often. At ten o'clock Charlotte was still sitting there, gazing dully in front of her. She'd touched nothing, not taking so much as a single tiny bite, not a single tiny sip.

Unlike the Jettenbrunn soil.

Heavy rainclouds hung above the village, draining themselves endlessly from the early hours of the morning onwards and saturating the earth. The day was dark and sodden, almost windless, and the raindrops beat hard against the roof, the gutters, the window-sills.

His face consumed with pain, Karl was working away in the windowless sauna, stretching woollen blankets between the wooden benches and the floor, and weighting them down with stones from the oven before crawling into the tent he had made. It was more than just the wild hammering of the rain that made him do it. Karl guessed what would be coming, as it did on every holiday, special day and birthday: his mother. She came with a prowling tread, moved by the occasion, straining with purpose. Always the same futile desire, the same unfulfilled wish: just to hastily press her child against her. To feel for a moment everything that was otherwise denied to her. But Karl would stay hidden in his tent, pretending not to hear. Charlotte would cry, pleading with him to come out. Incessantly. At some point Karl would begin to watch his mother through a gap in the blankets, see the sorrow in her face and feel pity well up inside him; he'd be torn between his own resistance and a longing to help her. Eventually he'd come out just to put an end to the shrill whining, the droning – keeping at a safe distance.

She'd smile at him gratefully even for that, telling him it would all be alright. 'It will, won't it Karl?'

But nothing seemed to be alright that day. No, it wasn't alright at all.

Karl lay beneath the benches in the sauna and waited.

Charlotte sat in front of a full cup of coffee and waited too.

After a while, Karl heard a bottle of wine being opened, then someone talking softly to themselves, the scraping of fingernails on the furrowed wooden tabletop, increasingly agitated footsteps pacing back and forth, and finally the sound of someone vigorously dialling a number.

'Where are you? I thought you were coming?'

There was a moment's silence before his mother continued in an undertone.

'What's that supposed to mean? You're not coming any more?'

Slowly her voice rose.

'We should take a break? A break? What kind of pathetic excuse is that? Well then, what's her name? Is it Hedwig, that clumsy cow from Oberwald? Or – or – oh my God, it's not Veronika?' Now yet more hysterical, 'I'm right, aren't I? It's Veronika! Veronika. She wouldn't think twice about it!'

Charlotte's words grew louder and louder.

'Don't give me that about everyone being responsible for themselves. You know very well I was on the edge, and there must be no easier victim for a doctor than someone like that! You–'

Now all that was left was rage.

'Calm down? You want me to calm down? Is that your medical opinion, you miserable pig?'

She slammed the receiver violently back into the cradle. Then there was a scream, louder than Karl had ever heard from his mother's mouth. It was followed by sobbing, wailing, howling, roaring, pacing, the sound of objects being thrown, glass and porcelain breaking, a sudden silence, an endless spell of inactivity, and finally what he was dreading most of all: the opening of the basement door.

'Karl!' She announced her arrival in a slurred, tightly-wound voice. 'It's my birthday today, and at least you're here. What do I mean 'at least'? You're all I've got. Aren't you? Aren't you all I've got? Aren't you my one and only? Isn't that

Contact: [kerstin.schuster@droemer-knaur.de](mailto:kerstin.schuster@droemer-knaur.de)

right? Give me a present. Let's go out, together, just you and me, just this once. Like you used to do every day with your father.'

Though the content of her words was pleading, they sounded like a demand – an order. Karl crawled out of his tent, pressed the drops of wax as far as possible into his ears, and came towards his mother, knowing there was no getting out of it. No escape. This wasn't the obligatory game; this was something else. This time, unlike ever other Thursday, Dr Albrecht Hofstätter hadn't turned up; this time Charlotte wouldn't allow her son to keep his distance.

His arms hanging loosely by his sides, Karl stood at the foot of the stairs. 'You're already waiting for me! How lovely!'

They went out, though not outside.

'We'll do something I'm sure you can't remember, since it's so long ago. Ok? That way it'll belong to us, and nobody else. Just the two of us.'

Karl followed his mother hesitantly into the garage.

'Look what a nice, comfy den it is in there. I'm sure you'll like that.'

Charlotte, a bottle of wine in her hand, opened the door to let Karl climb into the back seat. It was too late to run away.

Charlotte left Jettenbrunn completely unobserved, her child at her side for the first time.

'We're just going on a little trip,' she comforted him as he pressed his hands over his ears, silent tears running down his face. 'So there's no need to cry.'

She began singing a tune.

'Daisy, Daisy,

Give me your answer do!

I'm half crazy,

All for the love of you!

It won't be a stylish marriage,

I can't afford a carriage

But you'll look sweet upon the seat

Of a bicycle made for two.'

She sang the chorus over and over with the same forced jollity, interrupted again and again by choking sobs, repetitions of 'give me your answer, do!', sudden laughter, and new, ever-louder refrains of 'all for the love of you!'

'You hear that, Karl? All for the love of you!'

Karl retreated even further into himself, sensing the threat and the uncertainty of what lay before him. Anything was possible. The car hummed beneath him. Ahead was his mother's singing, the fogged-up windshield, the air hissing past, sharp as a knife, as if he were plummeting in free fall. Above him the rain beat down on the metal roof.

What sounded like drumming to Charlotte would have felt to Karl – had he ever heard such a thing – like steady machine gun fire.

The car was going well above the speed limit, driving erratically through enormous pools of water and past lorries sweeping threateningly towards them.

Charlotte seemed entirely preoccupied with her own thoughts, drinking, whispering, her eyes glassy and her hands trembling. For the first time in his life, Karl's fear was paired with a sensation of nausea that was new to him. There seemed to be no end or purpose to their journey. He was wrong on both counts.

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## Chapter Twelve

### Release

The car turned off the Bundesstraße onto a forest road and Karl threw up, as if in anticipation of what was to come.

'For goodness' sake, darling!' He heard his mother's concern. 'We're almost there. Then we'll sort that out.'

They pulled up beside a muddy path that led into a dense clump of trees. The door opened. Without hesitating, Karl slipped past his mother and leapt out of the car, his clothes covered in vomit and his head splitting. The rain pelted down in vertical jets of water, sharp, burning and warm. He'd heard rain like this before, but never experienced it first hand. Curious, he turned his face upwards, eyes closed, his cheeks, brow and skin taut like the head of a drum, an extraordinary clamour inside him. But there was more: a feeling of being washed clean, something wholesome and purifying, as if the rain had the power to sweep away the dross, to clear it out far beneath the surface. They went into the forest, until the dense rows of fir trees grew thinner and the ruins of St Mary's chapel came into view. Beyond it was the Jettenbrunn pond, its surface rippling wildly beneath the thudding rain.

'This is where I married your father. It's exactly where you used to come with him, isn't it? And now we're here. The two of us.'

The chapel roof seemed to invite them in, yet they took no shelter.

Charlotte headed purposefully towards the shore. 'Do you know what I really want today, Karl, on my birthday?' The words were whispered, soft. 'Something every mother wants. What do you think that might be?'

She reached for his hand and Karl let her take it. He stood motionless on the gravel by the pond, staring at the ground. Mud squeezed in between the straps of his sandals, her hand closed around his fingers – tighter now, demanding.

'I want you to love me. Do you? Do you love me?'

Slowly his mother sank to her knees. There was a sharp stench on her breath. 'Then show me. Say it.'

He felt the emptiness inside himself, the numbness, all sensation concentrated in his feet. The water was creeping up to his ankles.

'Say it, Karl!' whispered Charlotte. 'Just once! MUM. Say it!'

But Karl was silent.

Charlotte got up, slowly stripping off her clothes until she stood completely naked in front of him. 'It's so warm. The pond, the rain – do you feel it, from above and from below? Let's go swimming. I'll hold onto you. Nothing's going to happen to you!'

She went into the water.

'Come on.'

But Karl didn't come, didn't speak, just watched – watched his mother putting one foot in front of the other, watched her wading into the pond up to her hips, turning around and calling to him, 'Say it, Karl. Say 'Mum'. Just that one word. Show me you love me with that one word. That's all I want. Or do you want me to go further in? Do you want...' she broke off abruptly, clasping her hands

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around her shoulders as if to hug herself, warm herself, and continued in a gentle voice: '... me to go? Is that what you want?'

Say it, Karl: Mum.

Say it!'

Something burst forth from Karl once more. Just like he had on the backseat, he vomited, though now from an entirely different impulse. It felt like he was choking on it, this word spoken for the first time, as if it were stuck in his throat and forcing its way out, impossible to repress. A word once spoken by his father at this exact spot on the shore of the pond. Karl's first steps, Johann's joy. Joy at the new, free path he would take from that day on.

'Say it!' Charlotte howled at him again.

Then he spoke.

His voice rang clear, deep for his young age. Loud and unmistakable, each letter cutting mercilessly through the rain.

'Go.'

The single word hung like one of the dark clouds above the water, heavy and insistent, as if wanting to make sure that its full import had been understood. Charlotte, by contrast, did not stay still.

All emotion drained from her face as she stepped backwards, staring at her son, putting one foot behind the other until slowly her chest, her shoulders, her chin, her mouth and finally her eyes, waiting until the last moment, disappeared beneath the surface. But nothing else was said – no 'stay', no 'mum, please', no attempt to save her. Nothing.

Everything seemed of a piece; it was impossible to tell where the falling water came from, where the clouds stopped, where the sky began. And in the midst of this murky veil, this relentless hammering, stood Karl, gazing across the now empty surface in silence.

He remained for a while on the soft gravel of Jettenbrunn pond's edge, almost turned to stone. How, he asked himself, could a person last this long with just a single breath of air?

He had tried several times to hold his breath, keeping his gaze and concentration focused on the water. Waiting. Waiting for the moment when his mother, too, would finally gasp for air, surfacing once more and climbing out towards him. But she didn't come.

Karl didn't know why.

He only knew he was glad.

Wherever Charlotte had had to go, there were only two things Karl wanted: that she should stay there, and that she'd be happy. Like him. Not knowing what it meant to die, he felt no sense of loss, no sorrow. Only peace. Peace, infused with something new to him: a feeling of inner quiet.

Above the thick-laid blanket of clouds the sun had already reached its zenith, but Karl remained where he was. He stayed even as the grey wall brightened, and warm rays of light touched his body – wet, bloated, pale and shivering.

Even as his father came home earlier than usual because of Charlotte's birthday, and found no-one in. Only chaos. Only the man's watch lying in the middle of the dining table. It wasn't his, but he knew where it came from. In despair he rushed from house to house, calling for his wife. But no-one in

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Jettenbrunn could help. Even as a small search party gathered together, Karl remained where he was. Even as they found the car parked at the edge of the woods, and finally Karl himself, the water shimmering gently in the sunlight before him, his mother's clothes abandoned in the gravel beside him. His father's voice was loud, desperate: 'Where's mum?'

Slowly Karl lifted an outstretched arm towards the middle of the pond, and sensed for the first time what dying meant: horror, despair, pain. Everything became loud and frantic. Karl sank to the ground as if in agony, his face contorted, the palms of his hands pressed against his ears. His father was rushing around, passing by him, howling. 'No!' A long, drawn-out sound full of grim foreboding. Behind him the post office manager Hubert Oberwaldner, the mechanic Gerwald Lamprecht and two other men were swimming out into the pond, diving down again and again. The water was clear. Then horror seized them. A few threw their hands to their faces and some broke down in tears, as Johann Heidemann, dripping wet, emerged from water with his naked, lifeless wife in his arms as if he were carrying her over the threshold. He laid her down in the gravel and sank to his knees beside her.

Karl's throat was tight. All he saw before him in that moment, full of bitterness and worry, was the fact that his mother was returning. Back again. She was back again, it was all back again – his sense of guilt about his own existence, passive and mute, yet the cause of so much pain, his fear of being trapped, of coercion, his instinct to flee. To leave, just leave, was his first impulse. But then he saw it, saw Charlotte's motionless body, the snow-white face, unburdened now, her breathlessness. It had gone strangely calm; no-one ventured a word or a movement. There was only numbness, all around him. Whatever had happened between Charlotte's journey into the water and her journey out, Karl couldn't tear his eyes from his mother, spellbound by the unfamiliar transformation that had taken place. It was as if his need for distance had been washed away. Gradually he began to move towards her.

'Take the boy to the village. He shouldn't see this', he heard in the background, and he snatched his upper arm away from the strange hand trying to hold him back. He knelt by his father, captivated by his mother's beauty, her all-encompassing peace. It almost seemed to Karl as if she were about to reach her hand towards him tenderly, to say in conciliation, 'Here, my baby – you see, everything's alright, I'm with you now.'

She could rest at last, just as Dr Hofstätter had wanted her to this morning. She looked as if she'd been released – from her own sorrow, from the torment of life. Released by something invisible from the apparent might of nature. Something to which his mother had gone willingly, as if she'd known about the enchantment in store for her. Something that had turned her all at once into a person for whom Karl was able to feel affection, to a degree he had never known before. Love. After all these years.

But what power, what force could be so strong, so forgiving, could end the torment at a single stroke? In one brief moment? Karl didn't know.

And as he knelt there by the pond with this sense of endless peace, of reconciliation, one brief phrase slipped forth like a whisper, filled with sense and meaning, from among the many aphorisms he had so often read in his books and pondered without understanding.

Love grants in a moment  
What great pains may never yield.

*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

Love. Is that what it was?  
Had it released his mother?  
Karl stroked the wet hair carefully back from his mother's face, crying  
noiselessly, happy. Curious.  
And nothing could have been more hideous.