



Friedrich Ani

Naked Man Burning

Novel

(Original German title: Nackter Mann, der brennt)

223 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 08 August 2016

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I sat down at the bar next to the inspector. Her smile was probably meant to look engaging. But she had lost as soon as I saw the look with which she wanted to make me believe that she was happy about me showing up.

»Cheers.« I lifted my glass in her direction and drank and ignored the expression on Regina's face, contorted with curiosity. She was standing opposite the two of us, a white wine glass in one hand, the other dug into her hip. Since I wasn't providing any answers to her unasked questions, she turned to her new bosom friend.

»He's like that, my favourite regular. Drops in at the most unusual times and doesn't talk. That's quite normal for him.«

»That's right,« I chimed in.

I would have bet a hundred Euros on Regina not being able to bear the silence for even ten seconds. »Now, tell us, where have you been so late?«

»Traffic jam on the autobahn.«

»At this time of night?«

Now it was my turn to smile insincerely. »Of course not. But I couldn't leave Nuremberg earlier.«

»You went to Nuremberg! I thought you had some business in Munich.«

»There at first, Nuremberg later.« Again, I raised my glass to the two women. It was empty. »I met with a producer. He wants to work with me. I'm supposed to write the music for a TV ad.«

»For which product?,« the inspector asked.

»A shampoo.«

Involuntarily, they both scraped my almost completely shaved head with their looks.

»I'll take another beer,« I said.

With a typical headshake, the one that was meant to tell me how impossible she found my behaviour, Regina placed a fresh glass underneath the tap. In order to create some sort of counter balance, I silently nodded to the civil servant for a while.

»We also had to laugh at first, Roger and I. That's the producer in Nuremberg.« And as if the hour of revelation had arrived, I set out to explain. »My first appointment in Munich was at 2 p.m., met with a colleague who used to write pop songs and who's now one of the most-booked writers for presenters and game shows. We've known each other for almost ten years. An incredibly funny and sociable guy. I'm always happy to see him. He loves life. At the moment he's working on a new project at the Bavaria film studios, a live show in which famous and non-famous people have to solve certain tasks and put each other to a moral test. Something like that. Henrik told me about so many things that I've already forgotten half of them. Rehearsals last for a month. After that, they'll record a test show and so on. He insisted on going to the Hofbräuhaus, his favourite beer hall apparently. So that's where we met. Of course I couldn't drink much myself, seeing as I had to drive for close to another two hundred kilometres. One pint and not a drop more.«

I looked at the full glass of beer on the counter in front of me. »But we still sat there 'til six o'clock. I mostly drank water, which isn't an easy thing to do in an environment like that.« The words were just flowing out of my mouth.

Even though I noticed Regina's expression, which was full of doubt – she didn't know me to be a chatty person –, the fact that my story forced the inspector to listen unconditionally spurned me on.

Besides, her presence ignited an ancient burning rage inside me.

»Even if my meeting with the producer hadn't been in Nuremberg but in Munich instead, I still could hardly have shown up drunk.« As a reward for my responsible conduct I took a sip. »Because of the heavy traffic I only arrived in Nuremberg after eight o'clock. We talked, Roger and I, had a meal together. He explained his concept to me. I scribbled down a

few notes. I often do that at meetings like that. Gets me going. When I checked my watch, it was eleven. Crazy, how time flies when you're being creative.«

I looked at Regina abruptly. »But the two of you obviously seem to have been having a good time.«

»You could say that. Couldn't you, Anna?«

Couldn't-you-Anna set down her wine glass – a controlled movement. »Certainly,« she said. »We talked about you a lot, Mister Dragomir.«

»Don't you want to do away with the ›Mister‹?« Regina lifted her glass.

»Why not?,« I said enthusiastically and hoped the inspector was going to decline.

»Sure,« Anna Darko said.

After we had clinked glasses and taken a sip, I felt the need to relieve myself. I suppressed it.

Regina poured some more wine. »I told her about how you sometimes bury yourself in your house for days at a time, nobody knows what you get up to there. And you've also never invited anybody over. You certainly are quite a difficult fellow, my dear.« Her voice quivered from the alcohol. I didn't like that.

»Is that so?,« Anna Darko asked.

»She's right,« I retorted. We had turned to face each other and kept ourselves sitting straight on the bar stools – textbook examples of stony politeness.

My bladder was about to burst.

No traces of fatigue or boredom were showing on the inspector's round, pale face. Her tempting mouth seemed to me like a carnival mask behind which the shifty grin of a completely calculating policewoman was hiding.

»If you want,« I said, hands folded in my lap, »I'll invite you to my place some time. I'll make you south Italian pasta.«

»You can cook?« Regina's voice sounded shrill and offensive.

»My mother was a great cook.«

»You mother,« Anna said. »She's no longer with us?«

»She died in the mountains. Together with my father. They were killed in an accident during a hike when they were surprised by a violent storm. Just outside of Merano.«

»I'm very sorry about that.«

»Thank you.«

In the ensuing silence of sleazy sympathy, I slid off the bar stool and went to the bathroom. I locked the door behind me. The sound of my relief distracted me, brought lucidity into my head.

By now it was almost two a.m. I had told my story. The inspector, whose affable phoniness Regina had been sucked in by in reliable fashion, had listened and didn't trust me.

What was her goal?, I wondered. She was looking for Gregor Geiger and had shown up in Heiligsheim – of all things and not for the first time – at the old pharmacist's funeral.

I didn't agonise over the witness at the train station. My explanation had been clear.

When I washed my hands in the bathroom and considered my figure in the mirror, I had to think about Regina's description.

Quite a difficult fellow.

Not a single person on earth had any clue as to who I really was. Sometimes I even seemed like a phantom to myself. Before I was able to have a proper look I had already disappeared again.

Difficult fellow.

Ridiculous.

I was in nobody's way. People walked right through me, motionless, absent, chained to their shadows.

Nobody noticed me. Hiya, Ludwig. I was dwelling in the blind spot. I wasn't difficult. I was unleashed.

Look at yourself, I said to myself in the pub bathroom, you're wearing black trousers and a black shirt and both of them are too large for you. You have blue eyes and hardly any hair on your head. You weigh less than seventy kilos. People think you're a wimp.

I'm not a wimp. I'm Ferdl's shadow, Hanse's, Tobi's. I'm my own shadow.

I liked what I saw.

I had to stop talking to myself.

This was happening more and more to me lately. Probably a sign of ageing and decay. I leant forward and touched the glass with the tip of my nose. Became blurry in front of my eyes.

I could hear the rain through the closed window.

I stood like this for a while, bent over, and let my thoughts trickle away. Then I noticed that my hands were shaking.

I was startled, put my hands in my trouser pockets, took a step back and couldn't bear the sight of me in the mirror any longer.

The image of the completely demolished head in the woods appeared in front of my eyes. The rain was bickering down on Geiger's corpse, who was my uncle and who had abused me.

I spun around because I thought I had heard a noise. There was none bar the rain drumming against the small window. Maybe it wanted to come in and warm itself.

As did we all.

As did we all, during that night, back then. Come, rain, lay on the ground and sleep. Sleep and dream of silky clouds.

Minutes had to have passed, minutes in which I stood there – bent over, arms dangling – with rain falling from my eyes incessantly.

Afterwards I hated myself utterly for it.

Outside the pub the two women kissed each other on the cheeks. I shook Regina's hand. As she drove home through the rain on her bicycle, I accompanied the inspector through the village, she underneath her blue umbrella, and I under my black one. My way home lead past the Postillion Hotel.

There was nobody on the streets except for us. The street lights shone their buttery light on us.

As soon as Regina was out of earshot, the interrogation began.

»Mrs. Lange and yourself,« Anna Darko said, »are close friends.«

I had no reason to deny anything. I never denied anything. I was on the path of truth.

»We are having an affair that already started when her husband was still around.«

»Where is he?«

Presumably Regina had served her a story that I could not possibly guess. »Regina claims that she doesn't know.«

»What do you suspect, Ludwig?«

»It's fine by me if we return to a last-name basis.«

»Agreed.«

»I suspect that he's on the prowl with one of his lowlife friends.«

»What do you mean by ›lowlife‹?«

»Pimping, gambling, special bars. What do *you* mean by ›lowlife‹?«

»We know a couple of varieties.«

I knew that by »we« she meant the police. But I intended to let her diction inspire me. Twenty steps went by without any words being spoken.

»Do you know him well?«

»Vaguely.«

»He didn't notice his wife having an affair?«

»I don't know.«

»You don't care.«

»We don't care.«

»Who do you mean by »we?«

»Myself. Her, his wife.«

»Have you thought about your run-in with Gregor Geiger at the train station again?

Die he maybe make a remark about who he was planning to meet after all?«

»I didn't remember anything new. If you're asking me what my guess is, I repeat what I have already told you. I believe that he has left the country with his mistress.«

»To Portugal.«

»It's possible.«

»So far we have not found any indication that that is the case.«

»Just speculating.«

»His brother and his sister-in-law deny that Gregor is having an affair.«

»Do you believe them?«

Not at all surprisingly, Anna Darko refused to answer that.

In front of the bronze statue of the Noble Knight Hartmann, who, sitting enthroned atop his horse, lifted his lance eastwards, she stopped. »The two of them, Paulus and Johanna Geiger, reported that you have spoken with Gregor occasionally, down by the lake. Gregor never wanted to say what that was about. What were the two of you discussing?«

»Memories,« I said.

The medieval settlement of Helisham was reportedly invaded by the barbarians from the East in order to conquer the land and kill the men and violate women and children. The Noble Knight Hartmann and his men confronted the invaders with all their might. But they were betrayed by one of their own and brutally murdered. Helisham disappeared off the map until a handful of monks settled down in the area around the Koglfeld and discovered old sketches and records. And so the settlement at the foot of the rock-cut cellar became a home to the holy

over which the Lord held his protective hand, for centuries, until today. And the Noble Knight Hartmann was his witness.

»Excuse me?,« I said.

»What are you thinking about?«

»The past.«

»I want to ask you again what you meant by ›memories‹ earlier.«

As a kind of homage to her concept of taking someone for an idiot by asking him what he meant by ›lowlife‹, I said: »Well, there are a few possibilities. Memories are things that are in the past but which we haven't forgotten about, that we exchange, that we share.«

After a few moments of hesitation, she continued walking, now alone on the pavement while I was walking on the street next to her. The rain, so it seemed to me, was beginning to become tired of falling. It was only about a hundred metres to the hotel.

»I understand,« the inspector said. »So you were talking about your childhood, about things you experienced with your parents in this village. Things like that.«

»Exactly.«

»Why did Geiger keep that a secret?«

»Don't know. From what I've heard, the brothers innately don't really talk to each other.«

»I forgot to ask something.« She looked at me. »On that day in January, when you accidentally ran into Mr Geiger at the train station, why had you gone to the city that day?«

»I was going to meet a friend of mine, a musician who was having a gig that I wanted to see.«

Taking a man for an idiot in order to tempt him to make a contradictory statement wasn't something for which I blamed a policewoman. Taking a man for an idiot in such an idiotic way, however, bordered on an insult.

Maybe I was just in a bad mood right now.

It had been a long day. I had had a lot of things to take care of. The rage of ancient times was festering inside me.

»Right,« she said. »Thank you. Officially, I'm just taking a few vacation days in this village, but I would still like to collect some information. We're continuing to follow the missing person's report on Mr Geiger, even though there is no evidence of foul play or an accident. That's just the way we work. You have to have patience.«

»Just like you do in art.« I felt called upon to chime into her chitchat. »I hear a melody, but can't write it down. As if it was just an echo. Then it's all about patience and then some. Doesn't always work, but often enough.«

In front of the main entrance, we stopped again. Anna Darko stretched out her hand towards me. »Good night,« she said. »I hope you didn't feel interrogated.«

»On the contrary,« I shook her small, cold hand. »I like it when somebody asks me questions. Very few do. I ask myself questions a lot and the answers are usually unsatisfactory.«

»What do you mean by that?«

»Life experience.«

The word conjured up some sort of ponderous look in her eyes, but clearly didn't lead to any follow-up thoughts. »All right, then. Sleep well, we're definitely going to see each other again at some point.«

»I hope so.«

I crossed the road and walked on the Alte Straße towards the Koglfeld – past the police station, where the fire station used to be and where we romped about on the neighbouring silo, past the restored house with the comical *Lüftmalerei*, past Huschek's garden store, past all the unlit, crouching houses in which people lived who saw and heard everything, asked no questions and planted violets on the graves so that the dead would have colourful dreams.

Nothing unusual.

People played pool with other people. One had to be the ball, another the queue, one the table, one was the felt and another was the stagnant air.

Sometimes, however, the most ignorant of billiard balls realises that it was a billiard ball. And changes its direction out of its own will and full of bravery and destroys the entire game, the fear-soaked expectations and hopes of the players, the system of dependencies and mutual intimidation. And nobody finds an explanation, everyone accusing the other of betrayal.

By the time I had reached my house, it had stopped raining. The air smelt of wet soil, grass and wood. The silence welcomed me like an embrace.

Leaning against the wall of the house, I closed my eyes. A lava stream of rage flowed through my body.

I should, I thought to myself, slit my wrists and let the blood flow out into freedom, my inferno, about which the inspector didn't have the faintest of ideas.

Nobody had an idea about that.

Rightly so.

Wind sprung up, meaning well.

I call to you, Lord, my rock, don't turn away from me silently.

I opened my eyes and was alone. Lord, what am I to hope for?

There I stood, at the edge of night, born for murder, ready to die, and didn't die and murdered nowhere near enough.

Who am I, Lord?, I yelled and was startled by my own voice, worthy of a man. They christened me Celestine, the celestial, and sent me on a journey through the underworld.

Here I am, Lord, I cried, do not forgive me, as we do not forgive you, forever, Amen.

I took out the keys from my pocket, put it in the lock and was going to open the door. Something was blocking it. With my shoulder, I braced myself against it, pushing as hard as I could, I squeezed myself through the gap and into the hallway.

A lifeless body was lying on the floor, caught between a chest of drawers and the wall. String was hanging off the wrists and ankles. The chest was rising and falling imperceptibly. Saliva dribbling from the mouth. The face full of ugly bruises.

Steffen Lange had tried to escape.

When I had dragged the body away from the door and locked it, his eyes flew open. I knelt down beside him, formed the cross on my chest, grabbed Steffen's head and kissed him on the mouth.

I kept wake next to him for the rest of the night, until we heard farmer Fiedler's rooster crowing.

Toast with butter and strawberry jam, cut up tomatoes and cucumber, black tea with honey, sparkling mineral water. A breakfast true to its name.

We sat across from each other. The smell of shower gel, shampoo and aftershave wafted around the fresh air that I had let in through the widely opened window before. If we were lucky, the sun would break through the clouds later today. The rain had polished the forests and meadows.

I showed my guest the panorama from the living room window. I could see how much effort he put into looking astonished. As he was still a little shaky on his feet, I linked arms with him and lead him into the kitchen.

He was wearing a blue sweat suit that I had gotten from the laundry specially and on his feet he carried thick, black woollen socks. When he sat down, he let out a cry, but he calmed down again and got his pain under control.

Essential for survival.

One had to eat and drink, take a deep breath, think about something else. Today as much as back then.

When I looked at Steffen, he was mastering the situation fairly well. Better than we could ever have done. He also didn't munch, didn't gobble up his food, but chewed with closed eyes. He drank one sip after the other, showed manners.

The weekend began with peaceful company.

Before I had freed him from the shackles, which of course I had had to put back on him after his attempted escape in the night, and had let him used the bathroom, I had lolled about in the bathtub filled with cold water for half an hour. With a brush I had scrubbed my skin raw. I had submerged myself until I was out of air. I had washed away the dirt from the night before. I had turned onto my stomach, stretched out, imagined Regina as she lay tied up on the hotel bed, felt nothing.

When I brushed against my ears accidentally, I noticed that little hairs were growing on the lobes. This amused me. With my hands, I splashed around, like I had done back in the days, at home, after my return from the woods into which Mister Hofherr had lead me.

My mother had advised I take a bath, and so I had. And when I was sitting in the foamy water that was hot and actually quite nice, my arms had started to flail about, and my hands had drummed onto the water as if out of their own accord. Water had gone everywhere. And foamy flakes had fluttered through the air.

My mother came in, alarmed, and hadn't known what was happening to me. I was sitting in the bathtub upright. My body was going crazy, I didn't want to play. Again and again, further and further, my hands had hit the foam and smacked the green water. I had a soapy taste in my mouth. My mouth had been open without a sound emerging from it.

And because I hadn't been wearing my glasses and my eyes had been blurred by foam and were full of water, I hadn't been able to see anything and her touch frightened me to the core.

Somebody had touched my face. I had yelled. Then there had been fabric. Then hands on my back. Somebody had pulled me close. Somebody had pressed me against their warm, soft body.

In my mother's embrace, for fourteen moments, the world had stopped dying.

Afterwards, she had rubbed me dry with a white towel. I had smelt her perfume or whatever it had been, and had thought about this for a long time after, later in bed and in the darkness. Until the woods had swallowed me again, the silence, the pain and death, who was so cruel that he spit me out again.

My towel was black. I embraced my shaking body with it and sanded down my skin with it, didn't stop until I believed that I was ablaze and wouldn't be able carry out my day's work.

Afterwards I set the table.

Crumbs were stuck to his chin. With his swollen, disfigured face, he wasn't looking good. No accusation.

He was having some difficulty with keeping the tea cup steady. I regular intervals, he doubled over and screwed up his eyes. According to my calculations, he had to be about four or five years older than I was, which you wouldn't be able to tell by looking at him. Someone meeting us for the first time today would probably estimate him to be at least ten years older.

Haha, said the clown.

»More toast?«, I asked.

He shook his head and ducked. Maybe he was apprehensive of a blow. Maybe it was just the lies echoing within him.

Liars carried a bell tower around in their heads, this I had already learned from Father Schubert. The bells were constantly ringing out – as a warning and an admonition, as a timeless reminder of all the successful and failed attempts at deceit and destruction, of the cunning games during broad daylight.

But maybe Steffen had just developed a tic.

»Everything alright?,« I asked.

Relieved not to have spilled anything, he set down the cup.

He rummaged around for his voice laboriously. »May ... may I ask you a question? Please?«

»Of course.«

A minute passed. We weren't in a hurry. »Who ... who are you?«

That was an honest question. And no less honestly I replied: »Your mortal enemy.«

»But ... why?«

But why?

How I loved that question, and I said: »But why? How should I know, you explain it to me. My name is Celestine Geiger. Remember? We were almost schoolmates. Long time ago. Doesn't matter if you have to gather yourself first. Think about it. Take your time. Look at me. Do you recognise me? No? Yes? No? Yes?

Would it help if I turn sideways? Better? Let's try the other side, the left side is more presentable. Now? Still nothing? Then let's start again.

Who am I? Your silence is inappropriate, Steffen Lange. How old were you back then? Nineteen? Eighteen? Seventeen? Let's stop counting.

But why, you ask. Rightfully so.

Whywhywhywhy? Whyyyywhyyyy. No reason to laugh. No one's laughing. We don't laugh anymore, did you notice? Something came upon us and took the laughter with it. I know what it was. Want me to tell you? Do you want to know what it was that came over us and took away the laughter?

Quiz question.

Fourteen seconds are up.

It was the silence that came upon us and took the laughter with it. Or do you think differently? I would like to hear what you think about this.

What do you think of when you hear the name Rupp? Something sweet? Candy on your mind? Missing tooth in your mouth. Why, you probably asked yourself half your life, why did this man never go to be treated by Doctor Hofherr? What was stopping him? The fear of the chair? It's possible.

What do you think? Show me your teeth. Don't be scared. I'm not Doctor Hofherr. Open your hole.

Sorry I yelled at you. Just came out. Your teeth look alright. You can close your mouth again. Did you even brush your teeth?«

He nodded and ducked.

»Back to the essential question. Was it laughter or something else? Was it men like you and I or was it aliens? Or what?

Why aren't you saying anything?

It's me. Celestine. Just because I have hardly any hair left on my head and hardly any meat on my bones and no more glasses on my nose you don't have to treat me like a stranger.

You were there after all. Not every time in the flesh, I admit that. But you knew about it. And I believe that little Boxer was your favourite. Am I right? Yes? Say that I'm right.

It was Boxer, I'm sure of it. You gave him his nickname. Of course. You gave nicknames to all the kids younger than you. That was your way, and we were scared of you. You took your sling and shot at us with little metal hooks. Hurt when they were hit us.

Blissful childhood in the village.

You in the blacksmith's, which was a proper, solid blacksmith's, where old Klausner Hubert forged the horseshoes and shod the horses. Across from it there was a workshop for bikes and mopeds. You were constantly going in and out of there and bent the tough hooks into shape. Right? Right. You, Klausner's special buddy.

You called me Luggi. Why? Why? Why Luggi? Luggiluggi. Because my eyes were so big and blue and you thought that I was always looking too closely when there was nothing to look at. Luggi.

I thank you, Steffen, you have inspired me. Without you I would probably have agonised over a name for months. But because I have a functioning memory, I remembered my childhood nickname and called myself Ludwig.

Dragomir comes from Dragomir.

You couldn't have known this. It was the last name of a friend I met in the second year of secondary school. She gave me comic books and pretzels during breaks. Sometimes she touched my face when she walked by and I flinched. A hand in my face! Do you understand what I'm talking about? Of course you understand.

A hand in your face meant: a blow to your face.

Or didn't it?

Excuse me?

What?

A hand in your face equals a blow to your face. But not where Miss Dragomir was concerned. Her first name was Elke. Nobody's called that anymore. Back then, there were loads. Elke Dragomir gave me something and I didn't know if I was allowed to accept it. Yes? I didn't even know that. Nothing. Just knew what I had to do when Doctor Hofherr came. Or old Rupp. Or Uncle Gregor.

Does that ring a bell? Gregor? My uncle, from the boat rental?

Did you also go out there with little Boxer? On the high seas where all people are equal? You were there.

And I ask you: why?

Now, don't stay silent any longer. I host you, and you keep silent. Is that polite? Do I have to teach you what is proper first?«

He shook his head and ducked.

»Ludwig Dragomir,« I said. »The rest just fell into place. Due to life. Had to live through some tough times. We all did. You did too.

By the way, don't believe I don't see you just because I'm not wearing glasses. Enormous technical progress all over the world since then. I can see you as you can see me. Isn't that lovely? A reunion after such a long time? In my house. In your village.

Hanse Maurer, you knew him, as did I. He slept in this house and ate and drank, just like you. Woke up in the morning, the rain was over, and he looked forward to going to farmer Fiedler's cows. Or farmer Berghof's cows.

Do you remember, Steffen, whose cows Hanse liked best? I don't recall. What do you think? Fiedler's cows or Berghof's? It would be good now if we knew that. Hanse. Horrible thing.

But why?

Why is an eight-year-old run over on a completely straight road? Walking around there, gets hit by a car, is run over a few times and lies there, dead. And the driver? Takes off in his car. Turmoil. Incomprehensible to everyone.

Laugh a little, won't you.«

»I'm telling you funny fairy tales and you're staring at me like a monster. Walking around there. Steffen! You and I both know that he wasn't walking there by chance. What's his business there? Big question. Police also asked it.

What is an eight-year-old student doing on a country road at three o'clock in the afternoon? All on his own. What? Come on, Steffen. What?

He has no business there.

Finally we agree on something. Another cup of tea? I'll have one more, my throat is dry. More water? You have to drink, that's important for your metabolism. At your age. Are you sixty yet? No. Me neither.

The tea is still hot, think about it.«

»So we have answered the question of why Hanse was walking around on the road. He wasn't just walking around. This obvious answer has remained hidden to the police until today. The inspector also doesn't have the slightest clue. Anna Darko. Never seen her? She's on vacation here at the moment. Is looking for the missing Gregor Geiger. Do you know where he is?

Back to Hanse.

Somebody took him out to the country road and told him: run home. I wouldn't swear an oath on the exact wording. But it might sound about right. Did you hear that? A rhyme. Do I have to teach you how to listen first?«

He shook his head and ducked.

After a dramatic pause, in which I took a sip and fell silent – commemorating Hanse Hauser, in whose childhood home I now lived –, I stood up. Immediately, Steffen jerked on the chair.

»Stay put,« I said. »So someone dropped him off there, turned the car around and ran him over. Those are the facts, yet the police couldn't find out anything. Not quite. They assumed that the perpetrator ran over the boy lying down on the ground numerous times with his car. I forgot the exact number. Do you remember it? Three times? Four times? Why?, the policemen asked themselves and strolled through the village and interrogated people who knew nothing. Nothing unusual in a village like this.

Do you know something?

Yes.

You know everything, but you mustn't tell anything. Nobody here knows that you know something.

What do you know?

Everything.

Everything, really?

Steffen knows everything.«

On my way through the narrow kitchen I blessed my guest with looks – just as Father Schubert used to do in class, when he read from the bible and walked through the rows and looked down upon us. We sat there perfectly still and our hearts beat faster.

I had to laugh.

Thoroughly intimidated and with crouched posture, Steffen looked up at me. In order to calm him down, I stopped with a wave of my hand, turned in a circle and took some new steps.

»The boy,« I said, »took the sad mystery to his grave. Quote from the local newspaper. Memorised it. Did you memorise it too, Steffen? Back to the essential question: Why did you keep quiet? Fear of damnation?

It's all good, old friend.

All I want to know from you is: Who took Hanse Maurer out to the country road and ran him over? It would save us time if you could also tell me who drowned Ferdl Ballhaus in the Griesbach stream, while you're at it. Remember?

He lived back there behind the fire station and was fascinated with dead animals. What sort of hobby do you call that! Wasn't a hobby, of course, we both know that. Ferdl just wanted to conquer his fear, just like we all did. We wanted to be heroes.

Cowards we were, naked and defenceless.

Not anymore, Steffen.

Talk to me and we're even.

Honestly.

Do you think I'd lie to you, after all we've been through together?

Now it's your turn.«