



einzelkind

Billy

Novel

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1 You look as though the end troubled you. Your hands are shaking. You're sweating. I can see it. And I can smell it. A slightly sour odour. With a hint of orange. Cheap deodorant made of chemical compounds.

You're afraid.

All alone.

Here.

Now.

Don't cry, please don't.

We wanted to be brave, didn't we?

It's always the same when you realize that this is not a game, not a bluff, that there's no exit strategy and nobody is going to wake you from this dark dream. No superhero is going to come. No rescue mission. No forgiveness. Nowhere. At first, you laugh, unsure in the beginning, then whimpering. And then you want to pay. With money. But you cannot pay with that. Money has no value. Not here and not now.

I've been listening to you for four hours. I always listen. I owe you that. And also, I'm curious. I want to know why you did it, what your childhood was like, where you come from, what shaped you. Because that's what it's about: the cause, the reason. It's hardly ever exciting, but interesting, yes, that it is.

Sometimes you become familiar. After this fairly short time. I often get to know more about you that your family or friends will ever know. From some of you, it just gushes out. With others, it requires incessant questioning and probing. But it's enough for me to get the idea. A snapshot of you. I already have twelve of these pictures. They're forever in my head. And sometimes I take them out and then I remember. Your laughter, your rage, your doubts and your surprise.

And I remember something else.

Something much more intense.

The gift.

The silence.

After.

I look into your eyes for a long time. Each time, I hope to see your souls, in those last moments. If not now, when. Your eyes are brown. Light brown. They're big. As are the black pupils. Eyes in which one could drown. But I'm not drowning.

You wished for *Hurt*. Sung by the man in black. As a goodbye. Good choice. I press play.

It's time.

I get up and push the chair back. It moves over the floor with a grating sound. It leaves behind black marks.

Ducks are quacking outside. The idyll so close. Tell me where all the flowers have gone.

I reach under my jacket and remove the Walther from its hoister. The P₉₉.

You jiggle the chair with your hands. Why are you doing that? It's pointless. They're tied up. With gaffer tape. They're nice hands. You should have become a pianist. Didn't want to. Now it's too late. You won't have time.

Is it right? I ask myself this every time. Still. I even thought I knew the answer. A thousand variations of it. And if I look at it soberly, my task, my calling, isn't that unusual.

Every day, 1.500 people die by force of arms. Half a million every year. Not taking wars into consideration.

Is that a lot?

Or a little?

Or inconsequential?

I don't know. But I do know that murder is something ordinary. Always has been. Murder is human. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as inhumanity. No behaviour, no

deed, no crime – and be it ever so despicable – is inhumane. Only animals are inhumane. Or things. Humans aren't. Never. No matter what they do. Atypical, yes. But inhumane? Never. They are the way they are, and they aren't the way they're pictured in storybooks and how good people would like to have them. Evil is human. Has been since the beginning.

You were a saint. You redeemed them. All those women who were impure. And you never wanted recognition for all the trouble, no praise or gratitude, of course not. Modesty is your virtue, you said, acting in the background, not complaining, not causing a stir.

But don't worry. Nobody is going to hear anything. I always seek out places that can keep a secret. Isolated houses, underground bunkers, abandoned barns. Discretion is a necessity. I don't want to cause a stir either.

I'm putting the silencer on my Walther. You can never know.

I aim it at your forehead.

Release the firing pin.

Everyone I know goes away in the end, Johnny sings. There's no way around it.

Your eyes blink.

Mine don't.

A tear trickles down your right cheek.

I could catch it. With my index finger.

But why should I?

The last seconds.

Three.

Two.

One.

Farewell.

2 I don't even know where to begin. Most people probably start like that. Yes, of course they do. I should know. And I'm no exception.

34 years ago, I was born in Duffmore, a small town in Scotland. Duffmore has barely 8.000 inhabitants; it's located between Fort Augustus and Inverness, in the highlands, close to Loch Mhor. There's a forest north of town, Lonley Forrest, that is supposed to be haunted, that was just one big dare to us children and in which I spent the scariest night of my life. But that's another story.

Duffmore is a tranquil place that is befallen by an unrelenting marathon of festivals from summer until autumn. Literature, music, theatre, cooking, knitting – there's always a reason to honour and celebrate and compete. We don't always perform well in them, nor in the Highland Games where we throw around tree trunks, hammers and stones. But we have fun, and that's worth more than performing well, Uncle Seamus always says.

We live in an old steading from the 19th century, two old stone houses and a small stable. Uncle Seamus bought the weathered grounds after he landed his first big jobs and restored it over the years. It's located in the north of town, a little secluded, up Hobbard Road and then left onto Lyndon Street, until the end, then to the right, up the short driveway, not even five hundred metres and you can already see it. On average, there are five cats, two dogs and Bernhard, the donkey, living with us. Well, we do have the space. In the idyll. In our little world.

But as a child, I was drawn elsewhere, whenever possible, into the woods, across the hills, to the lake, along unexplored paths, always searching, for adventures, for more. The winters are mild, so we can spend all year outside. And because I was never delicate and the constant rain didn't affect me, I ran outside every chance I got. Not without taking my long sword, so that I could conquer far-away kingdoms with my army of a thousand brave and invincible highlanders and save beautiful princesses from the claws of bad smelling villains. I had a great childhood. With all ups and downs.

The first down wasn't long in coming.

When I was seven years old, I heard that Uncle Seamus and Aunt Livi weren't my biological parents for the first time. It was the first time I heard of Birdy and Monkboy. Names that sounded as if they were taken from a fairytale. The photos they gave me posed a big mystery as well. They showed a plushy, surreal world that exploded in a frenzy of colour and that seemed entirely strange to me. Birds of paradise, they called my parents. Or late hippies. With incense sticks and all that. But they didn't only smoke weed, listen to old *Doors*-records on a black disc turning round and round in circles, and dream of a safe, colourful world. They preferred to shoot their brains into spheres even further away, in which only they existed. I was told that there were hardly any veins left in which they could stick their needles. One week before my first birthday, they must have found some, though. And since they couldn't believe their own luck and because it was Tuesday, or maybe Wednesday or Friday, a day to honour in any case, a fabulous day, they measured out the junk more than generously; it wasn't supposed to be a quick trip, they were planning a short holiday at least. When they were found, Uncle Seamus said, they could see the smiles still in the corners of

their mouths. *Puff, the Magic Dragon* by Peter, Paul and Mary was playing. Over and over again. The record was broken.

Birdy was Seamus's younger sister. He talked about her often. About my mother. That she was open and happy and naïve and that she looked so incredibly frail. It was only the two of them. Their older brother died of diphtheria when he was nine, two other siblings passed away when they were only babies. He had always wanted to protect her. That was his task. And he failed. Even though he had tried everything. Coxing, yelling, locking her away, hospitalising her, cold turkey, therapy, everything. He blamed Monkboy for the dilemma, my father, whose name wasn't Monkboy, but Will. My mother wasn't called Birdy either, her name was Rachel. But nobody called the two by their real names. They were simply the oddballs who didn't harm anyone but themselves. I would like to have a proper memory of my parents, not just photos and stories. I don't know what they smelled like, what their voices sounded like, I can't remember their laughter, or their touch, or how they used to call my name.

But I can't complain. On the contrary. Uncle Seamus and Aunt Livi always treated me like their own son. Like it was the most natural thing in the world. Even though they had already had two children of their own. Frankie, three years older than I, and Polly, who had just been born. To feed one more, Aunt Livi said, wasn't an effort, no biggie, two, three potatoes more didn't make a difference. But they gave me more than food and a roof over my head. I was met with curiosity. Everyone always wanted to know what I thought, and why I thought it, what I'm doing and why I do it. They didn't ask in order to control me, but because they were interested. And it was annoying. And it was wonderful.

But first things first. Maybe I shouldn't start with myself. Maybe I should first introduce Uncle Seamus a bit better. The head of the family, the person who shaped me the most, whom I have looked up to since I was little and who has always been the smartest person of all to me. Because of him, I became what I am. A murderer, yes, that too. And even though I always called him Uncle Seamus and still call him that today, he was the father I never had.

Uncle Seamus never went to university, had no training, didn't even finish secondary school. He left school when he was fourteen, he just stopped going. And there was nothing for him at home, where he already knew everything and liked none of it. Not the alcohol that flowed like a stream, nor the beatings that he got. Calvinism, he learned at an early age, wasn't for him. He had to go, as far away as possible. And so he crammed all his favourite clothes into his green duffel bag one Sunday morning, looked back one last time, spit out onto

the muddy ground and left. He was excited to see how far his savings would get him. And he was surprised that they weren't enough to get to Africa. Not even to get far enough to leave the borders of the kingdom. He got as far as Birmingham. He didn't have any special plans or even goals, he just wanted to conquer the world, that was all. And if he had to start with Birmingham, then so be it. The first stop, no more and no less. Back then, the city was still a seething monster. In the dark alleys and damp corners it smelled of steel and sweat, of a world in which men were still men. And those who didn't shy away from backbreaking work could muddle through unnoticed and get by. Since Uncle Seamus could easily pass for eighteen when he was only fourteen, and was what they called a »real fighter« in certain circles, he got all sorts of temporary jobs without any problems. He worked as a drudge, a track layer and road builder, even as a steelworker shoveling scrap metal, coke and iron ore into ovens burning at 1600 degrees. The hard physical labour helped him control his aggression and his anger as best he could. Seven years he spent in Birmingham. He ended up not conquering the world. The world, it seemed, had better things to do than be conquered by Uncle Seamus. And apart from that, he also lacked the time to start a proper campaign. He worked until he dropped six days a week, and the only thing that he wanted to see then was his bed. On Sundays, he went to the football matches from time to time, to the races, or to the back alley fights, the illegal ones, in order to bet. And that's where he met Jean. The only one who was even younger than Uncle Seamus, but who had the same weird look in his eyes. Both were on the search for something they couldn't really describe themselves, but that had to be big and outrageous – that much was certain. They became best friends. Forever. Uncle Seamus sets great store by true friendship, honour, a word kept, and Jean admired Uncle Seamus, even though he would have to look down on him in later years, because Jean got to be almost two metres tall, half-African, with muscles that little boys always dream about.

One single time, Jean took Uncle Seamus to his house, to his parents, for dinner.

It would become a significant meeting.

Jean's parents' house was everything but working class. Mr Johnson, Jean's father, was a professor for African studies at the local university. It was the first time that Uncle Seamus came in touch with the cultural upper class. He had grown up in simple circumstances among ordinary people, and all the people around him were either unemployed or labourers or simple clerks and culture was something only for sops who had no clue about real life. But he didn't feel intimidated by all the books and the art on the walls, neither shy nor embarrassed, merely curious. Jean despised his father, despised the conceit, the language, the affected behavior and the kindly smiling hypocrisy. Uncle Seamus himself wasn't sure whether he

liked Mr Johnson or not, but it didn't really matter. Because Mr Johnson must have seen something in Uncle Seamus, like most people see something in him. After dinner, he gave him a book and said that it might interest him. That was the moment everything changed for Uncle Seamus. Even though at first he thought that the educated old man was making fun of him. Because what was he, the underaged, unskilled labourer from Scotland, supposed to do with Plato? He had heard the name somewhere before, but he would never have thought of even touching one of the books by this Greek who had been dead for 2000 years. When he lay in bed in his room one evening and couldn't sleep, he opened the first pages of *Gorgias*, on which punishment, rhetoric, justice and injustice were discussed. He was surprised to find how simple the language was and how complicated the content. The next day he remembered how heatedly he had argued with and against Gorgias, Socrates and Callicles. He was confused. And he was, as he put it later, hooked. He didn't only read all the dialogues; from that day on, he also read all the philosophers he could discover and even taught himself some provisional Latin. With philosophy, a world had opened up to him that utterly confused and overwhelmed him, that was stronger than him. And that had never happened to him before.

Uncle Seamus stayed in Birmingham for seven years, then he went back to Scotland, not to Ullapool, but about a hundred miles further, to Duffmore, where a distant cousin, who had offered him a job, lived. A profitable job. The first few years he rented a place, a small apartment, hardly bigger than a garage, with mould on the walls and a coal stove for heating. He wanted to save up. For a future. With a family. A real one.

Duffmore was also where he met Aunt Livi. She worked in Dougan's ice-cream shop, *Milano*. She also saved every penny resolutely, for her own café, one day, that was her dream. To Uncle Seamus, she was the most beautiful ice-cream waitress within the radius of two solar systems. It took him almost a year to approach her. And even though he talked nonsense and the words only came out in a stutter, he scored a first date.

It was a disaster.

For a picnic in the woods, he had hired a violinist and had come to pick up Aunt Livi in a rented Bentley with a driver. As sure as Uncle Seamus was in his interactions with men, an alpha-dog, no doubt, when encountering women, he was insecure and occasionally awkward. He confused romance with kitsch, interpreted gestures and looks completely wrong and was often a total wreck before he even went on the date. When it came to Aunt Livi, he knew that she was the one, a woman you only meet once, and he didn't want to screw it up. He was lucky that his clumsy bravado amused her. What was more, she liked his eyes and that mixture of aggression and insecurity.

They were married one year later and moved to a small house on the edge of town. They had two children, Polly and Frankie. My siblings. I never spent much time with Polly, we like each other, but she has always been rather withdrawn. It was different with Frankie. I spent most of my time with him and we survived many an adventure together on our quest of growing up. We're blood brothers. Real ones. The scar on my wrist is forever. I wouldn't hesitate one second to place my life in his hands, even though sometimes I wish that he was, how shall I put this, more sociable.