

Dörte Hansen

Old Country

[*Altes Land*]

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Cherry Trees

Some nights, when the storm came in from the west, the house groaned like a boat being tossed back and forth in a heavy sea. Gusts of wind squealed before they were deadened by the old walls.

That's what witches sound like when they're burning, Vera thought, or kids when they get their fingers caught.

The house groaned but wouldn't sink. The ragged roof held fast to its timbers. There were masses of green moss nests in the thatch; it was only sagging at the top.

The paint had peeled off the timber frame facade, and the exposed oak posts were embedded in the walls like grey bones. The inscription on the gable was weather beaten, but Vera knew what it said: *This hoose is mine ain and yet no mine ain, thaim that come efter me will caw it thairs.*

It was the first Plattdeutsch sentence she had learned on entering this farm in the Altland of northern Germany, holding her mother's hand.

The second Plattdeutsch sentence came from Ida Eckhoff herself and set the tone for the years they would spend together: *Hou mony mair o youse Pollacks are still tae come? Her entire house was full of refugees. That was enough.*

Hildegard von Kamcke had no talent whatsoever for victimhood. With her lice-ridden head held high, and three hundred years of East Prussian family pedigree behind her, she had moved into the ice-cold servants' quarters off the hallway that Ida Eckhoff had assigned them.

She had placed the child on the straw mattress, put down her rucksack and, in a quiet voice, and with the precise articulation of a singer, had declared war on Ida: “My daughter needs something to eat, please.” And Ida Eckhoff, a sixth generation farmwoman from the Altland, a widow and the mother of a soldier who’d been wounded on the front-line, had immediately fired back: “Ye’ll git naething fae me.”

Vera had just turned five. She sat shivering on the narrow bed, with her damp woollen socks itching her legs and the sleeves of her coat soaked with snot, which ran incessantly from her nose. She watched as her mother planted herself right up against Ida Eckhoff and started to sing in a fine vibrato and with a sneer: *Yes, reading and writing has never been my thing, for from my earliest days I’ve been occupied with pigs...*

Ida was so taken aback that she stood rooted to the spot until the chorus: *My ideal vocation is porkers, is bacon*, Hildegard von Kamcke sang, raised her hands in a grand operatic gesture in her refugee room, and was still singing when Ida, by now frosty with rage, was seated at her kitchen table.

When darkness fell and the house was quiet, Hildegard crept through the hallway and went outside. She returned with an apple in both coat pockets and with a cup of milk fresh from the cow. After Vera had emptied it, Hildegard wiped it out with the hem of her coat and returned it quietly to the hallway, before lying down next to her daughter on the straw mattress.

Two years later, Karl Eckhoff returned from a Russian prison camp. His left leg was as stiff as a splint, his cheeks were so hollow it looked as if he’d sucked them in, and Hildegard von Kamcke still had to steal her milk.

Ye’ll git naething fae me. Ida Eckhoff was a woman of her word, but she knew that the *individual in question* went into her cowshed every night. At some point she placed a jug next to the old cup in the hallway. She didn’t want half the milk going to waste during the nightly milking. In the evening, she no longer removed the key for the pantry where the fruit was stored, and she occasionally gave the child an egg, if she had swept the hall with the broom that was much too large for her or had sung the East Prussian anthem *The Land of the Dark Forests* to her while she was trimming green beans.

When the cherries ripened in July, and all the children were needed in the orchards to drive off the starlings, which swooped down in large swarms onto the cherry trees, Vera stomped through the rows of trees like a clockwork drumming monkey, beating an old pot soundly with a wooden spoon and bawling out over and over again all the songs her mother had taught her, with the exception of the one about the bacon.

Ida Eckhoff could see the child marching through the cherry orchard hour after hour, until her dark hair stuck to her head in damp curls. By midday, the child’s face had turned bright red. Vera slowed down, started to stumble, but carried on drumming and singing, and she continued to march, staggering like an exhausted soldier, until she tumbled head over heels into the mowed grass next to the cherry trees.

The sudden stillness made Ida sit up. She ran to the big door and saw the girl lying unconscious in the cherry orchard. She shook her head in exasperation and ran across to the trees, hoisted the child onto her shoulders like a sack of potatoes and lugged her over to the white wooden bench which was situated next to the house in the shade of a large lime tree.

This particular bench was off-limits for riff-raff and refugees. It had been Ida Eckhoff's wedding bench, and it was now her widow's bench. No one apart from herself and Karl was allowed to sit here, but now the Polack kid was lying on it with sun stroke and would have to stay there until she came to.

Karl came hobbling out of the shed, but Ida was already at the pump, filling the bucket with cold water. She took the dish towel that was always draped over her shoulder, dipped it in the water, folded it over like a head bandage, and pressed it against the child's forehead. Karl lifted her bare feet and placed her legs over the white armrest. From the cherry orchard the distant clatter of the wooden rattles and pot lids could still be heard. Here, close to the house, where it was now eerily quiet, the first starlings were venturing back into the trees. You could hear them swooshing and eating noisily in the branches.

In the past, Karl and his father had shot at them to scare them out of the trees. They had moved through the arbour with their shot guns and blasted into the black swarms as if intoxicated. Afterwards, it was sobering to gather up the broken little birds. The huge rage and the puny bunches of feathers in its wake.

Vera came to, retched, turned her head sideways and threw up on the white wedding bench under Ida Eckhoff's manorial lime tree. When she realised what she'd done, she started violently and tried to get up, but the lime tree was spinning above her head, the high crown with the heart-shaped leaves appeared to be dancing, and Ida's broad hand pressed her back down onto the bench.

Karl brought a cup of milk and a slice of bread and butter from the house and sat down next to Vera on the bench. Ida grabbed the wooden spoon and the battered pot to drive off the impudent birds that were making themselves at home in her orchard and eating what didn't belong to them.

Karl cleaned the child's face with the white dish towel. When Vera noticed that Ida wasn't there, she quickly drank the cold milk and snatched the bread. She got up and did a wobbly curtsy before scurrying across the hot cobbles with her hands extended at her sides as if she was dancing on a tightrope.

Karl watched as she returned to the cherry trees.

He stuck a cigarette in his mouth, wiped down the bench and threw the towel into the grass. Then he tilted his head back, took a long draw, and made beautiful, round smoke rings, which hovered high in the crown of the lime tree.

His mother was still raging through the rows of cherry trees.

Soon you'll be lying here with sun stroke, too, Karl thought, just carry on drumming.

Ida then ran into the house herself, fetched the gun and shot into the swarms of birds, banged away into the sky until she'd driven the last glutton from the trees or had scared them off for a while at least. And her son, who had two good arms and one good leg, sat on the bench and watched her.

All in one piece, thank God!, Ida had thought when he'd come limping along the platform towards her eight weeks earlier. He'd always been thin, looked exhausted, and was dragging his leg, but it could've been a whole lot worse. Friedrich Mohr had got his son back without any arms. He'd now have to see what became of his farm. And Buhrfeindt's Paul and Heinrich had both been killed in action. Ida could consider herself lucky that she'd got her only son back in such good shape.

And that other thing, the screaming in the night and the wet bed some mornings, that was nothing serious. Nerves, Dr. Hauschildt said, it would soon pass.

When the apples ripened in September, Karl was still sitting on Ida's white bench smoking. He blew beautiful round rings up into the lime tree's golden crown, and at the head of the crew of pickers that worked its way basket by basket through the rows of trees was Hildegard von Kamcke. Being Prussian, she was used to farming on a different scale, she'd said, and Ida once again felt like banishing the haughty dame from the farm immediately. But she couldn't do without her. She had a hard time of it with this thin woman, who mounted her bike early in the morning as if it was a riding horse, and rode off to milk with impeccable posture. This woman who toiled away in the orchard until the last apple was down from the trees, who swang the fork like a man in the barn while singing Mozart arias, which didn't impress the cows.

But Karl on his bench liked it a lot.

And Ida, who hadn't cried since her Friedrich had floated as lifeless as a crucifix in the drainage ditch eight years previously, stood at the kitchen window and wailed when she saw Karl sitting listening under the lime tree.

If you don't feel the longing of love... Hildegard von Kamcke sang, thinking of course of someone else who was dead. And she knew as well as Ida that the man sitting there on the bench was no longer the Karl that the mother had waited for for years.

The heir to her farm, Karl Eckhoff, strong and full of hope, was left behind in the war. They had brought her back a cardboard cut-out. Friendly and as unfamiliar as a wayfarer, her son sat on the wedding bench and blew smoke rings up into the sky. And at night he screamed.

When winter came, Karl, whistling quietly, built a doll's pram for little Vera von Kamecke, and at Christmas, the countess, a blow-in, and her constantly hungry child were sitting at Ida Eckhoff's large dining table in the lounge for the first time.

In spring, as the cherry blossom fell like snow, Karl played accordion on the bench, and Vera sat down next to him.

And in October, after the apple harvest, Ida Eckhoff retired and had a daughter-in-law that she could respect but couldn't help loathing.

This hoose is mine ain and yet no mine ain...

The old inscription applied to both of them. They were equals who battled hard in this house, which Ida didn't want to give up and Hildegard no longer wanted to leave.

The screaming that went on for years, the swearing, the banging of doors, the smashing of crystal vases and gold-rimmed cups entered into the crevices of the walls and settled like dust on the floorboards and ceiling beams. On quiet nights Vera could still hear them, and when a storm got up, she wondered if it really was the wind that was howling so angrily.

Your house is no longer anything to write home about, Ida Eckhoff, she thought.

The lime tree stood in front of the house and shook the storm out of its branches.

Magic Flute

The open days were the worst. Once every six months, the 3-5 year olds would stream into the big rehearsal room with their parents, and Bernd would wear his blue jeans shirt, and the baby-blue hair band to match.

Bernd wasn't the type of guy to leave anything to chance, he just liked to give that impression. The round glasses, his full beard, the greying hair pulled back in a pony tail – these were designed to inspire confidence. Early music education was a business that required a great deal of sensitivity.

When the parents from the Ottensen district of Hamburg brought their children along to the open days, they didn't want to see a pedestrian music teacher in a bow tie. Bernd gave them the creative forty-something they were after, approachable, dynamic, laid back – but professional. This wasn't an adult education centre after all.

Musimouse represented a sophisticated concept of head start music education, and when Bernd gave his short welcoming speech, he carefully incorporated the appropriate keywords. *Playful* was always the first of them.

Anne sat in the big circle on the wooden floor of the rehearsal room, the corners of her mouth and her eyebrows turned upwards, the flute in her lap. It was her eighth open day and she closed her eyes briefly when Bernd said the word *caring*. Now all that was missing were *talent* and *potential* and *cognitive abilities*.

The girl sitting on her mother's knee next to Anne was three at most. She was chomping on a rice cracker and drumming her feet out of boredom. She looked at Anne for a bit and then leaned across and grasped at the flute with her sticky fingers. Her mother looked on, smiling. "Would you like to try blowing into that, darling?"

Anne looked at the kid's wet mouth, which still had bits of rice sticking to it. She held her instrument tightly in both hands and took a deep breath. She could feel a wall of rage building up slowly inside her and felt like crowning the kid with her soprano flute, made of solid silver – or, better still, hitting the mother, who was wearing striped tights and had a flowery scarf in her hair. Mummy was now frowning in disbelief because her three-year-old who was covered in slobber wasn't allowed to blow into a professional instrument worth 6000 Euros.

Calm down, Anne said to herself, the kid can't help it.

She heard Bernd come to the end of his short speech: "... just JOY in music!" His keyword, her cue. She stood up, turned her stage smile up a notch and went across the circle to him. Anne on her magic flute, Bernd on guitar. Each time she would play Papageno's theme three times over on the flute, and this was then followed by a short intro on guitar before Bernd said: "And now all the children can fetch a triangle or wood block from the centre, and the parents can sing along. You'll know the song for sure, all together now ... three, four: *It rings out so joyful, it rings out so nice.*"

While the kids hit the instruments, and the parents sang along more or less beautifully, Anne would dance through the room with her flute, with Bernd strolling behind her with his guitar, singing and smiling away.

He managed to rock his head back and forth enthusiastically the whole time he was doing this. Bernd was a pro.

He had choreographed the open days perfectly and it was paying off. The *Musimouse* courses were more sought-after by parents in this affluent district of Hamburg than an allotment with a power connection. There were very long waiting lists.

Anne could consider herself lucky that she'd got the job. Bernd usually hired fully qualified music tutors or graduates from the music college. Having dropped out from college, she

shouldn't have had a chance, but Bernd noticed, first of all, that Anne easily upstaged his diploma-qualified tutor, and, secondly, she had fit into his overall concept.

What this meant was that she looked good when she pranced through the rehearsal room with her flute and dark curls, in a *dress that was not too long* – Bernd's dress code for the open days. "Always remember, it's the daddies who pay for the lessons!" But the dress couldn't be too short either. "We don't want to upset the mummies after all!"

Bernd would grin broadly and wink whenever he said that, but Anne had known him going on five years now. He was deadly serious.

She hated the bright blue jeans shirt and the pony tail. She also hated herself as she carried out the Pied Piper routine while the prospective *Musimouse* pupils mercilessly abused the Orff instruments in the big rehearsal room.

She felt like a hostess in *The Dream Ship* TV series who had to carry in the ice cream cake with the magic candles on it during the captain's dinner.

Cruise ship passengers, however, at least clapped in time.

"Do you really have to do that, Anne?"

Why had she gone to the phone last night? She'd seen her mother's number on the caller ID and answered nonetheless. A mistake she made time and again.

Marlene had first spoken with Leon for a few minutes, but he wasn't very good on the phone yet, nodding at the receiver, or shaking his head when his grandmother asked him a question. Anne had to put her on speakerphone and translate Leon's silent answers.

"So, what would you like grandma to get you for Christmas, darling?"

Leon looked helplessly at Anne. They had just started making lanterns at his daycare centre.

"I think Leon will have to think about it for a bit, mama." Mama with the stress on the second syllable. That mattered to Marlene.

When Leon had disappeared into his room, Anne turned off the speakerphone and got up from the sofa. She still snapped to attention whenever she spoke with her mother. Catching herself doing this, she sat back down.

"Anne, how are you? I don't hear much from you."

"Everything's fine, mama. I'm doing well."

"That's very nice." Marlene was a master of the pause.

"I'm also fine, incidentally."

“I was about to ask you, mama.”

Without noticing, Anne had stood up again. She picked up a cushion, dropped in onto the floor and kicked it across the living room.

“And what does that mean, everything’s fine,” Marlene asked, “does it mean you’ve finally stopped working at that jingle-jangle school?”

Anne lifted the second cushion from the sofa and kicked it against the wall.

“No, mama, that’s not what it means.”

She closed her eyes and counted slowly to three. There was a short dramatic pause on the other end of the line, then a deep intake of breath followed by an exasperated sigh. Then, resigned, and in a whisper almost: “Do you really have to do that, Anne?”

She should’ve hung up at that point, normally she would have. Yesterday was obviously not her day.

“Mama, cut the crap!”

“I say, what way is that to speak...”

“It’s not my fault if my life’s an embarrassment for you.”

A moment or two lapsed before Marlene managed to speak again: “You had everything, Anne.”

The other girls were always really nervous before the recitals. Pale with fear, they had sat next to their piano teachers and waited their turn. Then, with their heads hanging, they would drag themselves up the few steps onto the stage, as if ascending the scaffold.

Anne had loved it. The churning in her stomach, ever so slight, when her name was called. Mounting the stairs onto the stage with her curls bouncing, swinging herself onto the piano stool, tilting her head back briefly – then off.

“No wonder you think it’s brilliant, you always win,” her best friend Catherine had said without a trace of envy. It was simply a statement of fact. Anne’s first place at *Young Musicians* was pretty much routine. At regional, state, and national competitions it was a pretty bad day if she came in second or third, and then she was so frustrated that she tortured herself even more when practising afterwards.

In the first three years, Marlene had taught her herself, and she went along to all of her competitions after that. There were large ice-cream sundaes after the concerts, and when she got older, big shopping trips, arm in arm. They were very happy.

It still hurt to think about it. And about her father, his smile, his hands on her shoulders when she came home with a first prize, large hands that betrayed his origins as a farmer's son. "Potato picker's hands," Marlene used to say, and on good days it sounded affectionate.

Then it seemed that it didn't matter to her that her husband had climbed the social ladder. He was a country lad who may have lost his farmyard smell in lecture halls and libraries but whose 'r' occasionally slipped to the front of his mouth where he would roll it, pronouncing it in a Plattdeutsch accent. Marlene winced every time she heard it. *What a peasant.*

Anne loved it because Enno Hove the physics professor was approachable in such moments as was seldom the case otherwise. A papa with the stress on the first syllable.

"She gets her talent from me!"

Marlene had given up on her music career when she got pregnant at twenty-one. Or that was her version of events.

But it hadn't been a great sacrifice, grandma Hildegard always added by way of explanation.

"Let's just say it was a small sacrifice. Marlene and a career, good God."

But Anne seemed to have what it takes. Not even Hildegard von Kamcke doubted that. So, a grammar school with a focus on music, of course, the first concerts in schools and cultural centres, and then, for her fourteenth birthday, her own grand piano.

It was almost too large for the lounge, a Bechstein, second hand it's true, but her parents had still had to take out a loan. They stood arm in arm listening to Anne play her expensive instrument for the first time. The black varnish was as serious and solemn as a promise.

Thomas, her younger brother, was seven then. He was just about to enter second grade and had four loose teeth. Oddly enough she still knew that.

Anne had shown him his first pieces on the piano very early on. Thomas on her lap, his fat little fingers on the keys. He learned quickly. Soon they were playing duets.

By eight he had caught up with her.

At nine he overtook her.

An audition at the conservatory, and an assessor who had to struggle to retain his composure. Their mother blissfully happy, their father almost timid in his reverence. A child prodigy!

The whole world illuminated by the radiance of this child.

You had everything, Anne.

First everything and then nothing at all. Lights out. A total eclipse of the sun at sixteen. No one saw a gifted child when an exceptionally gifted one entered the room.

After the Pied Piper routine she had to run to get Leon from the daycare centre, and still she got there much too late.

Red-faced, she tiptoed to the breakout room, where Leon was playing in the Duplo corner by himself with his coat on already, while the preschool teacher was sweeping under the dinner table. She greeted Anne with raised eyebrows.

Anne had grown accustomed to simply shouting *Have a nice evening!* into the room rather than apologising. She grabbed Leon and carried him out quickly, like a ticking time bomb that could go off at any second.

She bought a roll for him and a cappuccino in a takeaway cup for herself, then pushed the buggy in the direction of Fischer's Park, assuming her position on the well-worn path trodden by the Hamburg-Ottensen wholefood mothers, who streamed out of their flats in grand old buildings every day to air their offspring. Takeaway coffee in hand, they carried their shopping from the organic supermarket in the nets of their top-rated buggies, whose pure-wool footmuffs contained a small child with something in its hand made of wholemeal and soggy from saliva.

Like everything in her life, even that seemed to have befallen her somehow or other: being a mother in a trendy part of the city.

It was a cold afternoon, the sky was as grey as stone. They wouldn't be able to hold out much longer in Fischer's Park, which the mothers all called the *Fischi*. But Leon needed some fresh air after spending the morning cooped up in the daycare centre.

His 'Beetle' group didn't get outside often enough. The topic would be raised again at the parents' evening she wasn't planning to attend.

Anne lifted Leon out of the buggy and gave him his Playmobil digger, sat down on the bench and watched him march over to the sandpit, where a small boy was sitting with a tortoise sand mould. He had already produced a sizeable population of reptiles and apparently intended the rest of the sandpit for other tortoises.

Leon stood in front of it with his digger and was clearly anxious about going in. Anne looked away. It was better not to interfere.

Two benches away a woman was coaxing her daughter up the steps of the slide rung by rung. She was wearing a parka with a number of drawstrings and zips and a pair of *Campers*.

Most of the mothers in the playground wore these shoes. They left long, curling oval patterns in the sandy surface of the playground whenever the women, like good-natured family dogs, retrieved the dummies and drinking bottles that their small children threw out of their buggies.

Leon was still standing at the edge of the sandpit. He had swung one leg over but hadn't got any further because Tortoise Boy was defending his territory vociferously.

"You can't come in here! It's only for tortoises!"

Leon looked round briefly at Anne and when she nodded he placed his second foot in the sandpit and put down his digger. Tortoise Boy started to scream and tried to push Leon away.

Anne noticed a pregnant woman struggle up from one of the benches and approach the sandpit, smiling. She bent down to Leon and turned her head slightly to one side: "Hey, listen, could you maybe dig somewhere else? Would that be okay? Alexander was here first, you see, and he's making such lovely tortoises just now."

Anne jumped up and went over to the sandpit.

She knew herself well enough to realise that she wouldn't win a war of words with one of the super-mums from this part of the city, so, without saying a word, she stepped into the sandpit with Leon, flattening a few tortoises in the process, unfortunately, and destroying a few more as she knelt down in the sand and gave her son a kiss.

"So, Leon, get digging. Or should I do it?" She pretended she was going to take the digger away from him. Leon laughed, grabbed his toy and began to dig.

Anne sat down at the edge of the sandpit and watched him.

The mother of Tortoise Boy stared at her in disgust. Her son's bawling, meanwhile, was drowning out all other sounds in the playground, so Anne couldn't understand what she was saying. She just saw the woman yank her screaming child out of the sandpit, console him as she put him into his pram, and take off.

They had spoiled the day for poor little Alexander, his pregnant mummy and – most probably – the unborn child in her tummy, too.

Anne hoped they wouldn't turn up at the next *Musimouse* open day.