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Tortenschlacht (Cake Fight)

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Prologue (first half)

He was standing in the kitchen trying to decide whether he should open the champagne. A Brut Premier, whatever that might be. Unfortunately there was no-one there to celebrate with. If Traudl had still been alive she would have wanted to celebrate with him. Or so he supposed, anyway.

Outside it had been raining for hours. The courtyard was covered in big puddles, the water offering distorted reflections of the stables. And there was a light on in the barn. That was strange. He hadn't been into the barn for three days. If he'd forgotten to turn the light out, he would have noticed a long time ago. There had to be somebody in the barn. Somebody who had no right to be on his farm.

His wife had died two years ago and he'd been living on his own ever since. The fields were lying fallow. He'd rented out the rest of the land to a couple of breeders from the village who desperately needed hay for their rabbits.

So who had turned the light on in the barn?

He picked up the heavy beechwood club which he had carved after someone had nailed a dead cat to his door. Two days after that his sheep dog Rollo had been found, poisoned. And he was constantly getting anonymous post in his letter box: "WE'LL GET YOU, YOU DIRTY RAT!"

Well, that remained to be seen. Furious, he opened the front door and ran through the rain towards the barn. The light was definitely on, seeping out through a gap in the door. A huge pool of water had formed in front of it, and the rain was blistering its surface.

And couldn't he hear music? – Yes, definitely. It must have been coming from his old portable radio. The RIAS big band with Horst Jankowski. Gershwin's *Summertime*. That was a bit spooky. Music and light – it felt as if someone was deliberately trying to lure him into the barn.

To do what with him, exactly?

What idiotic plan did they have now? Did they want to make a stretcher-case out of him? Use force to stop him selling the farm?

Too late, boys, the deed's been done. And if they didn't get that, he'd clobber them with his club.

He yanked the barn door open and stepped inside. There was nobody to be seen. The barn was deserted. There was just the light from the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling and the sound of Jankowski's Big Band. But where was the little radio? It wasn't in its usual place on top of the workbench, but – he looked up – on the cross beam in front of the hayloft beneath the high saddle roof. Was somebody trying to play a stupid joke on him?

“What's this?” he shouted loudly, “You've been Framed?”

No answer. The jokers had obviously already left.

He took a firm grip on the wooden ladder that was leaning on the hayloft and shook it to check that it was stable. He didn't want to break his neck in his old age.

Then he climbed up to get his radio. He couldn't leave it on all night. He was just about to reach out for it when a shadow appeared above him, a shadow which had been waiting for him, hidden in the darkness of the hayloft. Lightning quick, the figure grabbed his head and slipped a rough noose around his neck. Suddenly, what was going to happen became clear.

‘The pigs are going to try and lynch me! It's a trap! They're going to hang me up like a piece of meat!’ As the awful realisation dawned, he tried desperately to defend himself. But he had no chance. His only foothold was on the wobbly ladder, and that was just being kicked away from underneath him.

His arms flailed about as he fell. A stabbing pain shot through him as the rope yanked his body to a stop and the noose tightened sharply around his neck. He hung in the air, struggling for breath, his legs jerking around.

Panic rose up inside him. ‘My God, who's doing this to me? They're going to murder me, they're just going to murder me!’

Sure, so he'd had disagreements with the people in the village, but he would never have believed that they would go so far. Were they really murderers, cold-blooded killers? Or was this about something completely different?

He was never going to find out, that much was clear. He was suffocating. Cold sweat was breaking out on his forehead, the blood was pounding in his temples, his heart was racing.

Finally, he lost consciousness.

His arms hung down limply and a last shudder passed through his body.

And Jankowski's orchestra played:

Summertime and the livin' is easy

Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high

Your daddy's rich and your ma's good lookin'

So hush little baby, don't you cry...

Chapter 9

My God, what a relief! OK, so Melanie had sounded anxious and upset on the phone, but she's alive. And that's all that matters.

I get into the car and race through the night, crossing the Buckower Chausee towards the edge of the city. It's still raining, well, not so much raining as pelting it down so hard that the windscreen wipers can hardly keep up, and I don't really have a clue where I'm going.

Melanie's story sounded completely crazy. They'd been smoking some really weird stuff, come off the road and crashed into water. Someone was unconscious, someone else had hanged himself, and she didn't dare call the fire brigade even though there was a fire.

It sounded like a pretty bad trip, and Monika had got into a total panic. It took me ages to calm her down. She insisted she was coming with me, but I managed to persuade her to stay at home. Then if Melanie called again, someone would be able to answer the phone and calm her down. All I needed to do now was find Melanie, and, with the confused directions she'd given me, that was easier said than done.

Somewhere in East Berlin – well, great! Near Schoenefeld was a bit more helpful, as the airport was actually reasonably well signposted by East German standards. The

only problem was that Melanie wasn't waiting for me at the Interflug arrivals, but somewhere out in the back of beyond.

"Can't you be a bit more precise?" I'd asked, but all she'd been able to say was that the planes were flying so low overhead that they made her feel sick. Apart from that there was just wood and trees and the burning farmhouse, where she was calling from. No, she didn't know the address, and there was no-one around she could ask.

Low-flying aircraft, then. With the help of the map I concentrate on the area under the flight path and cover as much of it as I can. The burning farmhouse has to be somewhere. A fire that size had to be visible from miles away. Again and again I stop on empty roads, call Melanie's name, and strain to hear a response in the rainy night. Nothing.

Or is there? Sometimes I imagine that I hear her voice, but it's always just the whisper of the rain in the tall trees, the gurgling and dripping of the water on the asphalt. How long have I been driving around? No idea. But I'll find her. I'll definitely find her.

Suddenly there's a gleaming light above me and a hissing roar that gets louder and louder. I look up, startled, and instinctively take cover as a giant jumbo jet flies over me, so close that I feel I could stretch out my arm and touch the gigantic undercarriage. Melanie must be really close.

I put the car back into gear and drive slowly along the murky road. For a while it takes me through dense woodland, but anything more is difficult to see. Water streams over the windscreen, and even though the wipers are on full speed, I can't see much further than the bonnet.

Captaining a submarine couldn't be more demanding than this.

There's a bend in the road, the wood seems to thin out, and at last a blurred figure appears by the side of the car, waving both arms.

I slam the brakes on so hard that they screech. The car is stationary, the engine is humming, the windscreen wipers are treading water. Then a pale face appears at the passenger window. Thank God, it's Melanie. She wrenches open the door, sinks soaking wet into the seat and flings her arms around my neck, sobbing.

"Dad, at last..."

She cries helplessly, her small body shaking with fear and cold, and she reeks. Not just of rain and mud, but mainly of weed. A bit awkwardly, I stroke her narrow back. “It’s alright,” I say, although I’m sure I’m going to have to get a new car seat put in after this trip. “Everything’s alright. I’m here now.” Melanie is so wet that the upholstery is totally soaked through. She’s shivering and sniffing pitifully, and is obviously worried sick.

“You’re stoned,” I tell her gently, “and things can seem worse than they are when you’re in that state. But we’ll sort everything out.”

She lets go and looks out at me through wet strands of hair. “Are you cross with me?” I’m never cross, I think, at most I get irritated. But today I’m not. I’m just relieved to have my daughter back. OK, she looks awful and clearly has a massive drug problem, but she’s alive. That’s the main thing.

I give her a searching look. “So where’s the fire?”

“Over there.” She gestures in a vague direction and wipes her wet sleeves over her dirty face. “There was a sudden bend in the road, but the car kept going straight on. And then we crashed into a ditch.”

“Who’s we?”

“Me and Dark.” She shudders. “He was bleeding, and I went to get help.” She starts crying again. “But there was just the dead man.” She clings onto me again.

“It’s OK, sweetie,” I reassure her, gently stroking her wet hair. “It’s absolutely fine. Everything will sort itself out, OK?”

Melanie looks at me hopefully. “Do you think so?”

“I’m sure it will,” I nod. Actually I’m not at all sure, but I have to calm her down somehow and get things straight in my head.

“So you crashed into a ditch?”

Melanie nods, shivering.

“Where?”

“Come on.” Melanie opens the car door. “I’ll show you.”

We get out, and I follow Melanie through the rain. Her path takes us across country, and after a few metres I’m soaked through as well. The ground is soft, and with each step I sink into mud up to my ankles. Then we’re standing in front of an irrigation channel. A pickup truck has slid down the bank – an old Ford transit van. It’s half submerged, nose down in the dark murky water. The rain is hammering on the metal.

“Were you driving?”

“No,” Melanie answers, “I don’t know how to drive, do I?”

“That’s exactly what it looks like.” I clamber carefully down the bank and look around. “Where is this, er...?”

“Dark?”

“Yes. Dark...”

“He ran off.” Melanie kicks angrily at the ground. “What an asshole! Leaves me here to deal with all the shit on my own!”

“I thought he was injured?” I climb back up the bank.

“Yeah,” Melanie nods, “so did I.”

“We’ll deal with him later,” I promise and wipe the rain from my face. “So where’s the dead man?”

“Do you really want to go and find him?” Melanie looks at me in horror.

“Dead people are my job,” I answer calmly. “So? Which way do we go?”

“It’s on the other side of the road,” Melanie mumbles. “It’s all just ashes there anyway now.”

I follow her across the road through the rain and the darkness, through puddles and mud. We cross a marshy field. There’s water everywhere, the ground is slippery and very uneven. I almost lose my balance more than once. But I manage to stay on my feet. Falling face first into the mud would be all I needed right now. Through the damp foliage of some trees I can see the reddish light of a cloud of smoke. We walk straight towards it, go through an archway, and find ourselves in a cobbled courtyard. There are enormous puddles here too. And smoke everywhere. An old tractor glistens in the rain. On the right of the courtyard is the burnt-out shell of a house, standing on a bed of glowing ashes, hissing softly, the odd flame still flaring up. On the left, a large building with a high saddle roof has been spared. As has the blue and white 1950s car parked in front of it. It looks like an old Borgward Hansa 1500, but Melanie says it’s a Dreieifer Wartburg. Siggi used to drive one too.

Suddenly I hear voices.

“It’s a radio,” Melanie whispers as if talking about a ghost, “it was on earlier. Really creepy.” She points to the half-open door of the dimly lit barn. “You go in, I’m too scared.”

I squeeze carefully through the gap into the barn.

“Several years ago Udo Lindenberg got on the Special Train to Pankow,” I hear the sonorous voice of Nero Brandenburg saying, “to knock on Erich Honecker’s door. But the tune that he chose for his border crossing song was borrowed from a much older steam engine...”

In the faint light of a single bulb suspended from the roof I can make out a man. He has hanged himself and is wearing a suit and tie, as if he had dressed up smart for his final moments. The dead man’s eyes are bulging grotesquely out of their sockets. His tongue, blue and swollen, protrudes through his lips. On the crossbeam above him there is an old transistor radio:

“... which left New York for Chattanooga almost fifty years ago.” Big band music strikes up as the voice on the radio announces cheerfully: “Here’s the original: the Glenn Miller orchestra with a recording made in 1942, ‘Chattanooga Choo Choo’!” The music bursts forth. A happy journey through America and a striking contrast to the corpse that is dangling freely in space. A telephone receiver is hanging down above the workbench next to a small window. It belongs to an old black Bakelite phone attached to the wall. That’s probably where Melanie called me from.

I turn away, step back out of the barn. Melanie’s eyes are fixed on me. “And?”

“Dead,” I say, shrugging my shoulders. “Nothing we can do.”

“Awful, isn’t it?” Melanie wipes the wet hair out of her face, shaken. “Do you think he set fire to his house himself?”

Probably, I think. People who commit suicide are lonely. Who knows, if Melanie and this Dark guy had had their accident a bit earlier, they might have been able to stop the poor man from carrying out his desperate plan.

“Shit!” Melanie shouts, startled, and runs to the gate. “The cops are coming!”

A longer sample translation is available from NBG – please contact Charlotte on
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