

Excerpt from:
Elder Moon
by Jutta Wilke



COPPENRATH VERLAG

Elder Moon

Prologue

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“Some call me the Little Elder-Tree Mother; others a Dryad, but my real name is Remembrance”

Hans Christian Andersen, The Little Elder-Tree Mother and Other Fairy Tales

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The Mauerbach Charterhouse, an infirmary, June 1783

It had grown dark in the old cloister. The cold returned with the night, stealing in through the cracks and creeping underneath the people pressed close to each other, lying on the ground. Only the multicoloured glass window, through which the moonlight fell, served as a reminder that this room had once belonged to a church. It seemed as though the white umbrella-flowers of the elder, blossoming outside the window, were trying to lay a shroud over the place.

Johanna tucked the sheet tighter around her little brother. She stroked his trembling body and whispered calming words into his ear. She had spent so many nights sitting by Samuel's makeshift bed, holding him fast and rocking him to and fro almost the whole time. Her back was already stiff and her arms felt heavier and heavier. Samuel's whole body was burning, and Johanna knew that she had to give him some of the water she had fetched from the well. She tried to sit him up and put the cup to his mouth, but she hardly had the strength. Finally she dipped a corner of the sheet into the water and put it between Samuel's lips. Her brother began to suck thirstily. Johanna moistened the piece of cloth again and again, putting it into Samuel's mouth. In the meantime almost all the other people had fallen asleep. The few who were still awake moaned quietly in their beds.

The cloister was a cold, damp place, even on summer nights such as this. It smelt of sickness, rot and death. Johanna would have loved to go out into the fresh air, but Samuel, the only person she had left in the world, was here.

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And now he was sick too.

Samuel sucked another few drops of water, then his head fell onto her shoulder. She stroked his dark curls and kissed his burning forehead. She clasped him tighter in her arms and held him as he slept. Johanna was tired herself, so tired that her eyes were nearly closing. But she was afraid to fall asleep.

“Don’t leave me alone Sami, please don’t leave me alone,” she whispered. Tears ran down her face. How she longed for her mother. But her mother was dead, as was her father. She was continually tormented by images that crept from their hiding places at night, as though they had lain there the whole day like a vicious animal, lying in wait for the moment when she would have no more strength to defend herself against them. She saw the men who had first wrapped her father in white cloths. Then the neighbours had lain a light linen over her mother’s dear face, and the men had taken the bodies of her parents out of the parlour like old furniture that nobody needed any more.

The night after their mother’s death, Samuel too had got the dreadful fever. He’ll die as well, one of the neighbours had said. Another thought it would be best to burn down the cottage, with the children inside: they were lost in any case. But then the old midwife had arrived, and took them with her to the cloister. The Lord God is with these children, she had murmured, and pushed them both through the great gate. Since then they had been here, and Samuel had grown weaker by the day. Johanna held him fast in her arms and leant into him. Her head was getting heavy, she wanted to lie down, just to shut her eyes for a moment, not to sleep, but just to rest from the day.

Suddenly she gave a start. She felt as if a draught of air had brushed her cheek. Johanna listened. The only thing she could hear was the low moaning; otherwise the church was quiet.

Then she saw the stranger.

He towered high over the sick beds, a dark figure in a long habit. A hood drawn low over his forehead almost completely hid his face. Johanna held her breath and made herself very small. Who was the man and how did he get in? She knew that the heavy iron gates of the cloister were closed at night. It was to prevent people from getting up from their beds and fleeing

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back to their houses. The sickness should not be carried outside the walls and into the town. What was the stranger doing here in the middle of the night?

Johanna stretched a little in order to see better. He looked neither left nor right, and had no interest in the people who were lying here. He hurried down the aisle with long strides. In his arms he held a bundle which he pressed tightly to himself. He did not notice Johanna, though he passed by her so close she could have touched him. She quickly pressed her face harder into Samuel's curls and pretended to be asleep.

Then suddenly a clattering sound made her flinch.

The stranger had tripped over one of the sick people at the edge of the aisle. Something shiny rolled towards her over the stone floor.

The full moon was now high in the sky.

By its warm light, Johanna could make out a golden chalice, which came to rest just in front of her. She had never seen anything so valuable. Johanna pushed the sheet aside. She had to touch the chalice - she had to know what it felt like. Slowly she ran her fingertips over the smooth stones around its lip, and felt the delicate engraving that wound around it like a snake. The stranger's gaze found her. He lifted his right arm and held his hand out towards her. Johanna hesitated. The man took a step towards her. He did not speak a word, but even so Johanna knew he would not leave without the chalice. Carefully she laid Samuel on the bed, got up and went slowly towards the stranger. It was only now that she realized how tall he was. Much taller than any man she had ever met. She clutched the chalice more tightly and bit her lips. The man's right hand was missing a finger. She quickly handed him the chalice.

The stranger turned around and went towards the altar. There, he touched the large painting behind the marble table – and vanished. Johanna unfroze and rubbed her eyes. At first she thought the moonlight falling through the church windows had played a trick on her. She ran to the altar, expecting to see the stranger there. But the man had vanished. With a pounding heart, Johanna climbed the steps to the holy table. She gazed reverently at the enormous picture, gingerly touched the painted canvas, and fell – into a black nothingness.



1.

***Germany, the present day**

It was summer when Jan locked the door behind him and left the house forever. He crept like a thief out of their lives at daybreak. The first sparrows were scrapping loudly over the best places in the cherry tree, and the sun had only just begun to dry the dew from the leaves.

Nele laid her forehead against the window pane and looked out into the street. She would never be able to eat cherries again without thinking of this morning.

Jan, her father, stood below her window. She had not called her parents Mum and Dad for a while now. At some point they had become Lilli and Jan. Jan looked up at her again and waved goodbye, then he got into his old blue bus and drove away.

Nele was freezing. It felt as if it wasn't only Jan's furniture, his books and clothes that were disappearing round the corner in the bus – no, it was as if a piece of her had been packed into boxes and was travelling further and further away from her.

“See you later,” Jan had said, taking her in his arms again. See you later. As if he were just going on a business trip or his annual fishing holiday and would then be coming back. But she knew Jan would never come back. Not to this house, where they had lived together happily for so many years.

She would move out of the house soon too. Lilli had rented a smaller flat for the two of them.

Nele shivered and pulled the hood of the huge grey sweatshirt over her head. It was Jan's jumper. She had secretly taken it out of one of the packed crates and hidden it under her bed. This morning she had dug it out and crept into it. When she pulled the hood right down over her face and stuck her nose into the neck, it smelt of Jan. But the smell would disappear in time, she couldn't hold onto the past.

“Nele, *please* open the door!”

For the second time today, Lilli was standing outside her room. Nele didn't answer. What could she have said?

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“Nele, please! We can’t go on like this. We have to talk!” Lilli knocked again.

“Dammit, leave me alone – I don’t want to talk to you!”

Nele turned away from the window and threw herself onto the bed. Tears streamed down her face. She pounded angrily on the pillow with her fists. It was the only way she could cope with the pain deep inside her. This day had rolled towards her like an avalanche. Initially she had still believed that her parents would make up again soon. But then Jan had begun to cut adverts out of the newspaper and go flat-hunting. Finally he found a place and started to pack his things into packing crates.

Each day the house had got a little emptier, and with every full crate his face had changed a little more. Where Jan’s things had been, the room looked like a picture that somebody had started rubbing out.

Nele let her gaze roam over her room. Soon another child would live here. Would they have brothers and sisters? Would their parents get on better than Lilli and Jan? She sighed. She was still cold. She took the blanket off the bed and wrapped herself up in it. Then she turned the key in the lock, opened the door and went downstairs. Lilli was sitting in the kitchen, clutching a cup with both hands. Her mother looked pale.

“Hey there big girl, do you want to have breakfast with me?”

Nele took a cup and poured milk into it.

“That’s Jan’s seat!” she snarled at her mother.

Lilli looked up, shocked. Without saying another word, she stood up, pushed her cup along and sat down on the next chair. Nele sat opposite her and sipped her milk. She knew she was being mean, but she couldn’t help it.

“You look cozy in your blanket.”

Nele rolled her eyes. She hated the way adults always had to say something, even when there was nothing to say.

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“I know you’re not feeling good. But look, it’s only a week before Jan picks you up, and you can look round his new flat.” Lilli took a gulp of coffee.

Nele didn’t know what to say to that. That was what they had arranged. Jan would move out, spend a few days settling into his new flat, and then she would visit him. After all, it was the summer holidays. And of course Nele wanted to see how Jan was living now. *Did* she want that? She stared at the place where he had always sat at breakfast time. She wanted him to live here again, to sit there where he had always sat. Nothing more.

The telephone rang.

Nele sipped at her milk and waited. Lilli stared into her coffee. But the phone kept on ringing, until Lilli cursed, put her cup down and went into the hall.

“Hello?”

A pause.

“What do you mean, you have to go away? How long for? And why couldn’t you just tell us that before?” Lilli’s voice got louder. “What about Nele?”

When she heard her name, Nele stood up and walked slowly towards the hall.

“Shall I tell you something? Time after time, over all those years, your job was more important to you than anything else. Now you have a chance to spend two weeks alone on holiday with your daughter, and once again she has to take second place to your job?” Lilli was shouting now, and Nele winced. “Come here and tell her yourself. You should at least have the guts to do that, don’t you think?” Lilli banged the phone onto the dresser and stared at her.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing, nothing at all.”

“You had another argument. About me. What happened?”

“It’s nothing Nele, really.” Lilli turned away and went into the bathroom.

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“Nothing at all?” Nele followed her. She stood outside the closed bathroom door. “What should he tell me himself? And what’s going on with his job?” she shouted.

She listened as the shower came on in the bathroom. Her mother didn’t answer. Nele kicked the door in anger. She had to get out of here. She hurtled down the hallway, brushing the telephone off the dresser as she ran past – it crashed onto the tiles. She tore open the door and stepped out into the garden. The morning was still cool, and somewhere a blackbird twittered. She knew the voices of the native birds; Jan had pointed them out again and again on their long walks together in the woods.

Nele sighed. The garden seemed so unreal, the silence so peaceful and completely out of sync with the rest of the world.

At the bottom of the garden stood the little playhouse that Jan had built her, and which had so often been her castle, her wigwam or her cave. The blackbird was sitting on the roof and looking at her inquisitively.

Nele slipped under the roof, hunched up against the wall and put her arms around her knees. If only you could turn back time. She had so often wished she could be an adult already. But today she felt smaller than she had for a long time, and yet everything about her seemed too big. Her legs were dreadfully long, and she couldn’t stand up in the little house any more without banging her head. Her arms had grown so long that she only had to stretch out to touch the walls to the right and left. Nele closed her eyes and imagined it wasn’t she who had got bigger, but the hut which had shrunk. This is what Alice must have felt like in the rabbit hole, before she had drunk the magic potion.

“Is this where you’re hiding? I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

The sun was high in the sky when Nele woke up. The blackbird had stopped singing long ago. Nele rubbed her eyes and wiped her face with her sleeve. Under the wool blanket it had grown hot, her hair clung wetly to her head and her sweatshirt was soaked with sweat. Jan was standing in front of the hut. “Do you want to come out, or would you like to carry on stewing until you’re cooked through?”

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Nele had not reckoned on seeing her father again so soon. At first she didn't know whether to be happy or annoyed at his reappearance. She scrambled out of the hut and stretched.

“What are you doing here?” She looked at him uncertainly, as he stood there, his hands buried in his pockets.

The telephone conversation came back to her. Come here and tell her yourself, her mother had shouted. He didn't need to say anything. His guilty look was clear enough. Nele looked at the bee crawling deep into the blooming clover at her feet.

“Come here.” Jan sat down on the bench next to the playhouse, which stood under the old spruce, and drew her to his side as he often used to do.

“How old are you now?” he asked quietly.

Obviously he knew exactly how old she was. What was that supposed to mean? “Twelve,” muttered Nele.

“Twelve? My little princess is twelve years old already?”

“Why are you here?”

Jan sighed.

“You're just as stubborn as your mother,” he said, without looking at her. “I've come to say goodbye.”

“You said goodbye this morning.”

“Nele, I have to go away. I've known since yesterday evening, I just didn't know how to tell you. Your mother's right, I'm a coward.”

A pine cone landed at their feet. Jan kicked it away.

“I got a phone call from Austria – from Vienna. It was about some valuable objects that had been stolen from churches.” His voice sounded almost pleading.

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Nele stared at the pine cone in the grass. So that was the way the wind was blowing. Her father worked in a museum. He was an historian, specialising in church history.

“When do you have to leave?” She almost whispered it.

“Today. They’re expecting me in Vienna tomorrow morning.”

Today. He only moved out today.

“Jan, please, you have to take me with you!”

He shook his head silently.

“Why not?”

“I won’t have any time for you there. I’ll be out all day, and I can’t look after you. You have to understand. We’ll make it up with a visit later. I promise. In October half-term at the latest. It’s not easy for me either, but you know how difficult it is to make a name for yourself in my profession. I have to take the job. I’d much rather spend my summer with you too, please believe that.”

“I wouldn’t care about spending the whole day by myself. I could read. Or take my school books with me and work.”

“But...”

“I’m alone here too. All my friends are away. There’s nobody here.”

“Your mother is at home.”

“But I don’t want to stay here with all the packing cases. Please take me with you! I’m not a little kid any more, you don’t have to look after me all day.”

“No, of course you’re not. But I can’t take you with me, Nele. Please be sensible!”

Tears welled up in her eyes. Sensible! She had heard that word far too often recently.

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“But I don’t want to be sensible!” She pushed his arm from her shoulder and ran to the house. Lilli was standing on the patio, looking worriedly at her.

“Nele!”

“Leave me alone!” She pushed past Lilli and ran up the steps into her room. Gulping, she shut the door behind her. She was so fed up of being treated like a little child! Nobody ever asked her opinion! And she was always supposed to be sensible. Nele grabbed her pillow and hurled it across the room. She would never be sensible again! Never! She would go to Vienna with Jan, whether he liked it or not. Nele pulled her rucksack out of the cupboard and began to stuff things into it willy-nilly. Jeans, her hoody, underwear, two t-shirts, socks, a notebook, her mobile. She almost forgot her lucky stone, which Jan had given her when she was little. Smooth and round, it lay in her hand, a shimmering golden-brown. “Tiger’s eye”, Jan had called it. Nele put the small stone in the pocket of her jeans.

Money, she needed money! She carelessly stuffed the tin with her savings in with the other things. Her favourite book, and her soft toy rabbit. But the rucksack was full. Carefully, she put the rabbit back on her bed and covered him up. She was not a little girl any more. He would have to stay here. Nele looked around her room again. Then she put the rucksack on, quietly pushed the door handle down, and listened. She couldn’t hear anything. Her parents must still be in the garden.

She tiptoed carefully down the stairs, opened the front door and slipped out of the house. Jan’s bus glinted blue in the sun. She registered thankfully that he hadn’t locked it. She opened the sliding door, climbed in and shut the door again quietly. She quickly scrambled to the back and crawled under the last seat. He couldn’t easily see her there. She pulled her rucksack in with her and settled down for a long journey.

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