Romy Hausmann: True Crime (OT: True Crime)

Sample Translation
By Jamie Bulloch

CONTENTS

Handsjuk’s grandfather, Milawa/Victoria

My diary:
I hate true crime

OBSESSION
The case of Cari Farver
In conversation with Chief of Police Joachim Schneider,
head of the National and Regional Crime Prevention Agency, Stuttgart

My diary:
Changes

DRAMA
The case of Sherri Papini
In conversation with Dr Nahlah Saimeh,
consultant in psychiatry and psychotherapy,
specialist in forensic psychiatry, Düsseldorf

My diary:
Are there moments when it doesn’t hurt?

BARBARITY
The case of the Abbotsford Killer
In conversation with Professor Dr med. Markus A. Rothschild,
Director of the Institute of Forensic Medicine at University Hospital Cologne

My diary:
Setting things straight, with Leonie Bartsch
and Linn Schütze from the true crime podcast ‘Mord auf ex’

INJUSTICE
The case of Tim Cole

My diary:
Differentiating. A conversation with the ‘system’:
Corinna Sassenroth, juvenile magistrate, Berlin–Tiergarten District Court;
Judge X, Bavaria Regional Court; Thomas Ebner, chief inspector, Landshut Police; Professor h.c. (UTP del Perú) Dr Ingo Bott, criminal defence lawyer, Düsseldorf

FORGIVENESS
The case of Erin Caffey

My diary:
Could you forgive?

p. 11 - 18

My diary:
Why I haven’t written
a foreword

January 2022

Her name is Natalie and I’ve known how to get in touch with her since December. But I’ve been hesitant because December is, well, December. Because it’s inseparable from Christmas, the time for family, reflection, remembering. The pain must always be there, no question. But I can imagine that at Christmas time it’s on a different scale. I’m a mother myself, just like her. My own personal archive consists to date of twelve Christmases celebrated with my son. Images imprinted on the brain forever, such as when he got his first wooden building blocks and was more intent on eating them rather than making a tower. The decoration for the top of the tree, made at kindergarten out of a cardboard loo roll tube, a crooked Christmas tree cut from sugar paper stuck with cotton wool, and the pride in his face when he gave it to me. Or his increasing embarrassment as the years pass that his decoration still has its place at the top of our tree. Or how his round face, red with excitement and those big eyes, gradually develops features that give an indication of the future; and how the short, stubby fingers that clumsily tear open the bags of Lego bricks are now long and slender as they insert wireless earbuds only five years later. You could wake me out of a deep sleep to consult my inner archive and I’d have an image to fit every Christmas along with the date. You could show me a photo and I’d know exactly which Christmas Eve it was taken on. Talking of photos, entire family histories can be told through pictures taken at Christmas time. Until there’s one photograph in which someone’s missing, or the series simply stops because it would be pointless to document something that only highlights the loss.

But Christmas isn’t the only reason why December seems to be the worst possible time to get in touch. Because December was when it happened. December eleven years ago, twenty-two days before Christmas. Out of respect I decide to wait until January.

Then January comes around and I’m no longer spending weeks wondering when I should write to her, but whether it would be alright to contact her at all. I’d be churning things up inside her. My email – even if she just read the message before deleting it – would only cause her more pain. And I don’t want to do that, I’ve no right to.

But then I mull it over again.

I think my cause is a justifiable one, my intentions are good. I’m not one of those people who want to know if she saw her daughter one last time, the way she looked after she died, and what this made her feel as a mother. I don’t intend to dwell on the details of the death or go on about all the blood. On the contrary, I want to talk about life: how it was before and how it is now. Over the course of my research into this case I’ve come across so many headlines that have made me angry because to my mind they’re shocking and hurtful. As if relatives didn’t read newspapers, as if they in particular wouldn’t read them when – like in this case – so many questions remain unanswered.

On the other hand, as I’ve found out through my research, both Natalie and her father have in the past been willing to take part in television documentaries, and so haven’t ‘gone to ground’ as a sure sign they just want peace and quiet. Although the case of their daughter/granddaughter had officially been solved, it was still baffling. As if parts of the puzzle

didn't fit together, as if something wasn't quite right. It seems out of the question that the case might be reopened; the appeals have been exhausted. All the family can still do is to keep the public focused on those elements that don't add up. To ensure that the case isn't forgotten until one day a review does take place.

I watch the documentaries over and over again in a ridiculous attempt to weigh things up. Can I write to her? There's absolutely no way I'd be able to help shed new light on the case. So if Natalie agreed to an interview with me, what would she get out of it? Why should she bother?

Even from a distance it strikes me that I admire her. I find her smart and uncannily reflective. As the camera films her taking a sear in the café she used to frequent with her daughter, the tears well in my eyes. It used to be a ritual, she tells the reporter. Once a week, every Friday. Now she sits there alone, her beautiful, wild hair slightly greying. The footage is from 2016, when Natalie was fifty-four and Phoebe had been dead for almost six years. Phoebe was twenty-four when she died. A horrific, mysterious death that gave rise to endless speculation. She was the oldest of Natalie's three children and her only daughter.

Natalie tells the reporter how important they both found their weekly meetings in the little café on the outskirts of Melbourne. Here they did a lot of chatting; they laughed and cried together. I'm reminded of my student days, when I used to take the train home on Friday evenings. Mum would pick me up from the station and we'd do exactly the same: go to 'our' café, sit at 'our' table and catch up on the things we hadn't talked about during the week because we were apart.

Maybe that's why. When I see Natalie sitting there all I can think is: that could be my mum. Or the mother of a good friend of mind. Or simply any other mother on the planet.

And perhaps this is also the reason why, on the evening of 31 January, I finally do it: I send Natalie an email.

I tell her that I come from Germany and I'm a thriller writer. That I make up stories about people who get into hopeless situations. People who for the right reasons make the wrong decisions or cling so desperately to their long-held world view that they try to defend it with every bone in their body. Stories that could have turned out just like Phoebe's one. For this very reason I do a wealth of research into real criminal cases, often spending hours online to find out more about the background to, and motivation for, crimes. I'm both fascinated and horrified, and sometimes I cry too.

I outline my idea that stemmed from a desire to compile some of the cases I'd come across in the course of my research over the years. All of them have touched me in different ways and yet they have one thing in common: they sound as if they're straight from the imagination of a writer who's overstepped the mark. Too artificial, too divorced from reality, no way! – readers might respond if they were confronted with these cases in a crime novel or thriller. With a roll of their eyes they'd flip the book shut and leave the author a crushing one-star review.

But the point is: we're talking about the real lives of real people here, not some preposterous fantasies.

I think we forget this sometimes. We listen to true-crime podcasts while peeling potatoes or as we go to sleep. We read true-crime books as we would page-turners. And I eventually wonder: is this right? Do we understand what a crime *really* means? Do *I* understand?

Certainly not.

I tell her about this book, for which so far I've researched and written up four cases. I've

interviewed experts to help me clarify certain topics and contexts. But the more information I gather and the deeper I get into the cases, the more apparent it becomes that this book cannot merely be a collection of stories. It needs to be a reminder of what really lies behind 'true crime'.

I press SEND, only to regret it a moment later. She's probably going to think the entire project is bigotry. Someone earning a living by dreaming up crimes, who thinks she's got the right to get into the heads of victims, criminals and relatives merely for the sake of her books, suddenly wants to know what a crime *really* means? In truth, doesn't this person bear a large chunk of responsibility for the fact that the boundaries between fiction and reality are becoming increasingly blurred?

I feel unbelievably stupid. Perhaps I'll get lucky and my email will go straight to her spam folder.

It's 2 February, 2002, two days later. I'm still feeling ashamed. Who am I, a total stranger, to ask for such an intimate glimpse into people's lives? A stranger is precisely what I am; none of this is any of my business. I've only told two people what I'm doing. Both called me 'bold', a polite euphemism. I don't want to talk about it anymore, but I do want to understand. It's as if a door has opened inside my head that behaves obstinately with every repeated attempt to close it. A wobbly handle, a squeaky hinge. I started to ask colleagues why they write what they do. Why we freely make up crimes when the real world is bursting at the seams with horrific stories. Why we give more place to evil through fiction. Is it our attempt to understand the world? To engage with our own fears? I wait expectantly for their answers.

It's only just after five in the morning – too early for the laptop. Over my first cup of coffee I check emails on my phone. Natalie's name pops into my inbox. I feel caught red-handed. I put my mobile down and decide to finish my coffee in peace first, suspecting that I'll spend the rest of the day feeling like an idiot. Then I click on the message. I can immediately see that it's short; I just have to make it bigger before I can read what she's written. But the reason it's short – obviously – is that a rejection doesn't need many words.

I'm wrong.

Dear Romy
It's rare to come across someone who's interested in how Phoebe's loss has affected those who loved her so much. I'd be happy to talk to you about how the eleven years since her death have changed our lives.

Best wishes
Natalie Handsjuk

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Maybe now, dear reader, you've worked out why I haven't written a foreword of the sort you're used to seeing in other books. I'd intended to write one; I'd meticulously planned and structured this book. I would present eleven cases and gather additional material relating to them. I'd carry out interviews, ask professionals for their expertise and maybe I'd get the opportunity to speak to one or two of those directly affected. I just could never have imagined how contact would have developed in one of these cases and even now, almost two weeks after Natalie's first message, I

still can’t predict it. All I realise is that something is changing, something is happening here. A process has been set in motion that I’d like to record in a diary.

Please don’t think that this one case, Phoebe Handsjuk, is going to be given greater importance than other ten. It’s more a case of ‘pars pro toto’ – you, dear readers, have decided, together with me, to get to the bottom of the question of what true crime *really* means, or at least get a little closer to the answer. Natalie Handsjuk, a mother who lost her daughter, gives us an opportunity to do this, and I doubt I’d have understood the meaning of my own book if I hadn’t given this opportunity the space it needs.

But now, let’s begin with the first of eleven case files, let’s embark on our journey.

Best wishes
Romy Hausmann

p. 131 - 142

True crime is…
DETERMINATION

The case of Phoebe Handsjuk

Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, 10 December 2010

Victoria Police, Melbourne, Homicide Squad. Lorne Campbell hasn't come to here to go away again immediately. He wants an explanation as to how they reached their conclusion so quickly and without the slightest doubt. What's the problem? Surely they can speak to him on equal terms; he knows their language, he knows the procedure. He is one of them, after all. *Was* one of them. Is this the reason why they're being so guarded? Giving the impression they'd rather see the back of him? Of course some things are different from how they were when he entered the police service back in 1959. Lorne is now seventy and has been retired since 1993. The methods have changed, as have the possibilities, obviously. But one thing hasn't changed: you don't bloody well shut a case file and shove it in the cupboard just because it's complicated. Especially not then! Right now, however, this is probably the biggest problem. Because, for the detectives of the Homicide Squad, nothing appears complicated. On the contrary, as they're concerned the case has been solved as far. Two days ago they notified the dead woman's parents. Told them the findings of their five-day investigation. When Lorne found out about this he couldn't believe it. Only five days given the circumstances? Circumstances that they don't consider strange in the slightest? They can't be serious, Lorne thinks, but apparently the officers have no more to offer him than a shrug.

The case concerns a young woman: Phoebe Handsjuk. She was twenty-four and lived in apartment 1201 in Balencea, a chic 23-storey skyscraper in Melbourne. The building, with its black glass façade, towers 60 metres high above St Kilda Road, one of Melbourne's main arteries, between the business district and Port Phillip Bay, where the Pacific Ocean meets this large metropolis. A home to the great and good – huge, expensive apartments. Phoebe didn't fit into these surroundings particularly well; she always remained something of an outsider here. Like a dark stain on a fine, white tablecloth.

Maybe she'd tried to adapt to her new environment. Integrate into these surroundings, especially because at first glance they promised far more structure than her inner life. She had her long, brown hair cut short and dyed black, like Christina, the sister of Ant, her partner. The twelfth-floor luxury apartment in Balencea belonged to him. Ant was a successful event manager, forty-three years old, whose father was a former High Court judge and stepmother a judge at the district court. Phoebe, who was now working three days a week for an advertising agency, had met Ant eighteen months earlier when he was a customer at the hairdressing salon where she used to work on reception. After about six months she moved in with him. A new life, new stimuli – but many problems too.

'Every day she struggled to deal with the simplest things,' Ant later said on record. 'Some days she wasn't able to go to work or carry out basic tasks. When things got too much she drank, and then I saw a complete change in her personality. She behaved and talked like someone I didn't know at all, and she was totally self-destructive. She was angry, irrational, flustered and felt worthless. This often led to an argument and she'd disappear for hours or even

overnight without me knowing where she was.'

This had last happened on the Monday – three days prior to her death. After an argument about how much she was drinking Phoebe left their apartment, met up with a friend and then spent the night at Natalie's – her mother's – house. She only came back in the middle of the night on Tuesday–Wednesday, then spent most of the following day in bed. Ant went to work and received a strange text message, as did Phoebe's family: 'Hello family, I'm lying in bed, about to go to sleep, and when I wake up I'll have transformed into the most unbelievable person you can imagine – not! I'm going to go to hospital, it's much safer there. Besides, there's tomato soup for dinner, apparently. Delicious! Nutritious! I love you all very much, but not enough to send each one of you an individual text – sorry about that. Time is sleep and I must be on my way – happy, happy, happy, life is but a dream. Kisses.' Jeanette, Phoebe's grandmother, asked Ant to go home to see if Phoebe was alright. Yes, he confirmed soon afterwards. Everything was fine, she was resting. As he later put on record, Phoebe had taken two 'Stilnox' sleeping tablets.

Ant and Phoebe, Phoebe and Ant. A difficult love affair. Phoebe had already moved out and back in again a few times, and in recent weeks they'd often been preoccupied by thoughts of a separation. Thoughts she'd shared with her therapist, her family and her friend Vanessa. On the one hand Ant, who Phoebe occasionally found controlling, who quickly became jealous of her male friends or colleagues. On the other Phoebe, plagued by the feeling she didn't measure up to the demands of her substantially older man, and who was often tricky to deal with when she'd been drinking. 'We never officially broke up,' Ant stated later. Although in the six weeks from October until her death they'd had four separations, he conceded, it was never serious. On the contrary, they'd planned to go to Paris together on 21 December, which Phoebe was really looking forward to, he claimed. But her therapist said, 'Phoebe didn't know if she really ought to go to Paris with Ant.' And this is just one minor discrepancy in a case that will be marked by contradictions and conflicting opinions.

Lorne Campbell wants clarity. He wants to know exactly what happened eight days earlier in the Balencea Apartments. But most of all he wants to know how it could come to that. He's already spoken to Phoebe's parents, Natalie and Len. They've given him a full account of the conclusions the Homicide Squad came to. But Lorne's not satisfied with this. He wants to hear it from the detectives themselves. He wants them to answer his questions.

Thursday of the previous week, 2 December 2010: the day when it happened. At shortly after nine in the morning, Phoebe's boyfriend Ant left their apartment to go to work as usual. Phoebe and Yoshi, a Staffordshire Bull Terrier, were still asleep. The past few days had been arduous for Phoebe and now she had to get better, be on good form for the evening because she and Ant were meeting her father Len to celebrate his birthday in a restaurant. And tomorrow, Nikolai, Phoebe's youngest brother, would be celebrating his eighteenth birthday. A big party was planned; Natalie, Phoebe's mother, who was currently working in the Alice Springs desert, was on her way home especially for the occasion.

Shortly after half past eleven that morning the fire alarm went off inBalencea, meaning all the residents had to leave the building. The CCTV camera in the entrance area captured Phoebe as she exited. She was wearing blue jeans, an olive-green top and large sunglasses. Her black handbag was over her shoulder and beside her was Yoshi on a lead. A few minutes later it became clear that the wailing of the siren had been a false alarm and so residents were allowed back inside. Phoebe too went back to her apartment with Yoshi. How she spent the hours that

followed is uncertain – all we know for sure is that at some point between lunchtime and evening Phoebe must have left her apartment again. Her destination was the little room at the end of the long corridor, home to the rubbish chute. Every floor in Balencea has one of these chutes. Open lid, rubbish bag in, down a tube, through a compactor and finally into one of five bins in a separate room on the ground floor.

Shortly after half past six in the evening Beth, the duty concierge at Balencea, received a complaint that someone had made a real mess in the lift, which was full of crumbs. Beth promised to sort it out. She fetched the hoover from the cleaning cupboard to vacuum the lift, but soon realised that it wasn't working. Maybe it had a technical fault. Beth decided to clear up the mess with a dustpan and brush instead. These were in the garbage room on the ground floor. Beth tried to open the door, but it didn't budge far; there seemed to be something blocking it on the other side. She set her shoulder to the door and only with all her strength managed to clear the blockage. The sensor for the automatic light went on, revealing an even greater chaos than inside the lift. One of the bins was on its side and rubbish was strewn over the floor. More work for Beth. But before she could get even more irritated, she saw the blood. A large trail of blood running from the toppled bin towards the door. And finally she noticed the reason the door had been blocked. There was something on the floor behind it, to the right. A young woman who wasn't moving.

On that day Phoebe Handsjuk didn't go to the chute on the twelfth floor to dispose of a bag of rubbish. Phoebe Handsjuk is supposed to have opened the lid, squeezed herself into the narrow opening, roughly the size of a laptop, and fallen. One metre, two metres, more than thirty metres down, through the compactor until her body landed in one of the bins on the ground floor. She was bleeding profusely; the compactor had mangled her right foot. But she was still alive and even managed to drag herself out of the container and crawl across the garbage room towards the door, towards help. In vain. Phoebe Handsjuk bled to death. She died alone and forsaken on the filthy cold floor in the dark, stinky garbage room of the luxury tower block – of her own accord, according to the police's findings. The investigation team were in no doubt that Phoebe Handsjuk committed suicide. She had an alcohol problem and suffered from depression, amongst other things. Then there were the difficulties with her boyfriend. Love, separations, self-doubt. A typical candidate for suicide – case solved.

Lorne Campbell feels a tugging in his chest. He tries to be a police officer, a professional. But it's hard for him to listen to the sober deliberations of the men in the Homicide Squad without becoming rude. Because Lorne Campbell isn't just a former colleague.

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Dear Romy

My name is Lorne Campbell and I'm Phoebe's maternal grandfather. Many thanks for your interest in Phoebe's case. I'd be delighted to help answer your questions. We will never be free of the pain at Phoebe's loss even if time tries to heal the wounds. It doesn't agitate me if someone asks my views. On the contrary, being able to talk about it with people who are genuinely interested is strangely cathartic. So please don't hesitate to ask me questions. I'll do my best to answer them all.

With my best wishes,
Lorne

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The young woman was found in the garbage room. Lying on her back, head staring upwards, right foot almost severed, attached to the body by just a few strands of muscle. Her jeans hung below her knees, the studded belt was only threaded through the first of the five trouser loops as if she hadn't had taken the time – or had the time – to get dressed properly. There were bruises on her wrists, right upper arm and her neck. A grazed right jaw and – as the post-mortem established later – a subdural haematoma on her left side, i.e. bleeding between the hard cerebral membrane and the brain. When the emergency services were called, the police and paramedics were sent out. The former sent the latter away to avoid contamination of the scene. Besides, it was quite obvious that any medical assistance for the young woman was too late. This was the first wrong decision the police made. Because it meant nobody checked the dead woman's temperature. And thus the precise time of death could never be established. At that moment the identity of the woman wasn't clear either.

At the same time, twelve floors up in apartment 1201, Phoebe's boyfriend Ant has been home from work for about an hour. His electronic key card recorded his entry to Balancea's underground garage shortly after six p.m. He was greeted only by Yoshi the dog; Phoebe didn't appear to be there. Even though her handbag was on the kitchen counter, together with her purse and key card, without which she wouldn't have been able to get back into the apartment. Beside the bag were two empty glasses. On the floor lay shards of glass. Small smears of blood were on the keyboard, mouse and a doorframe. At 6.51 p.m. Phoebe's father Len called his daughter's iPhone to find out what time they'd be meeting at the restaurant. But, according to the statement he gave later, Ant had taken the phone to a repair shop that morning so Len's call was unanswered. At 6.52 p.m. Ant rang Len from his mobile. A coincidence, as it would say in the investigation report. The sort of coincidence that occasionally happens in life at an exceptionally inopportune moment. For coincidences breed mistrust, sometimes rightly so, sometimes not. Len would say that Ant had never called him before, but chose this very day to so, and right now, just a minute after he'd tried to phone Phoebe. Ant did, however, have a good reason to call him, seeing as they were supposed to be going out for dinner together and Phoebe had disappeared. This was unsettling news for Len, but the two men agreed that without her handbag and key card Phoebe couldn't have gone far and surely would be back soon. For the moment it seemed as if dinner was off; all they could do now was wait. After hanging up, Ant fed the dog and ordered a takeaway.

At 8.03 p.m. – about an hour after the dead body had been found in the garbage room – the delivery driver rang apartment 1201 with Ant's takeaway. He told him about the police squad in the lobby. What was going on? Ant decided to take a look for himself and learned of the horrific find in the garbage room. He identified himself to the detectives as a resident of the building and told them his girlfriend had disappeared. One of the detectives followed him up to his apartment and asked to see a photograph to confirm whether the dead woman was indeed Ant's missing girlfriend. It was. 'I think Phoebe took her life this evening as a result of her depression and alcohol problem,' Ant told the officer. He didn't want to accompany the detective

back downstairs; he didn’t want to see Phoebe like that. First he called his mother and stepfather. Then Len. Len collapsed when he heard Phoebe was dead. And now he had to tell Natalie, who’d only just come back to Melbourne because of Nikolai’s birthday party. Back home, to her family. Len got her on her mobile and tried to explain that their family was suddenly no longer complete. Like Len, Natalie collapsed.

The world has ruptured, the world is now a crater and has swallowed an entire family. The following pages in the diary remain unwritten, no more poems on paper napkins, no broad grins and loud laughter, no Friday meet-ups in the café. An unfathomable new reality.

I crept under my duvet, praying that all of this was just a nightmare I’d soon wake up from, Natalie recalls. *They said she’d taken her own life. To begin with I thought maybe that was true. It was the worst thought that had ever entered my mind! Losing your child is horrible enough. But if that happens as a result of suicide, it leaves you utterly broken. It’s unimaginably painful to think that your own child felt such despair and that you couldn’t console or protect her in such a situation. When I found out how she’d died, I wondered if at that moment she’d thought of herself as a piece of rubbish. The idea that she might have felt that way was unbearable.*

But then it very soon became clear to us that some aspects of this theory didn’t add up.

And now, eight days after her death, this is precisely what Phoebe’s grandfather Lorne is trying to spell out to the Homicide Squad: something isn’t right here; the case needs examining in detail again. There are details that give rise to justifiable doubt. The detectives, however, are reluctant to back down. According to Forensics, Phoebe was seriously drunk at the time of her death; her blood–alcohol concentration was 0.16. They also found zolpidem in her blood, the drug in the sleeping pill ‘Stilnox’. They know from Ant about Phoebe’s problems, her depression and dependency on drugs and alcohol. And, after all, Ant did live with her. Wouldn’t he be in the best position to know her state of mind at the end? And what about the strange text that Phoebe sent her family on the day before she died? Wasn’t it highly revealing? *I must be on my way* and *Life is but a dream*. Might that not have been Phoebe’s way of saying goodbye?