

Anja Jonuleit  
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## PART 1

*A mother has many children, who are asleep.*

Liane van der Berg, Thursday, 6th April 2017

Liane van der Berg had been up reading half the night. That wasn't what she'd wanted to do, but rather a phenomenon that you have to deal with at her age. At almost 69, sleep was like a spoilt brat who crept back into his shell at the first peep and remained there for the rest of the night. Nothing to be said for getting old. She'd retreated into Gesine's old room, now a guest room, to get away from her husband's snoring but even that hadn't helped. Although it was silent inside the room, she could hear the wind all the louder. It made the scaffolding around the house creak and crack. To Liane it sounded as if someone were creeping around outside, just waiting for her to turn off the light before breaking in. She knew full well how silly this notion was. Her unease was solely down to the call that she'd got yesterday evening. And down to the ghosts that had slipped into the house with it. Why on earth had she picked up the receiver? She knew that telephone conversations so late in the evening only worked her up. And although this call had only lasted a few minutes, it had set off a dizzying merry-go-round of thoughts that Liane had been unable to stop all night.

Her son, Matthias, had told her in a somewhat suspicious tone that he'd received a strange letter. "A rather cryptic note that claims you have been actively destroying families since 1968. Ah, never mind, I'll pop the it in the letter box, then you can have a look at it yourself."

After Matthias had hung up, Liane had remained sitting with the telephone in her hand. It was only when her feet became ice cold that she remembered that she'd been about to get in the bath when the phone had rung. Since 1968? What a strange reference. So much time had passed since then; so many years in which she'd never thought of that time. Yet now, one single telephone call had made it clear that nothing was bygone and that everything still existed somewhere. Preserved like the tinned peaches, those lifeless lumps, that Carl had eaten by the tonne at university. But maybe this ominous letter didn't have anything to do with that. She shouldn't always think the worst. Maybe this nonsense was just the work of some harmless nutcase who'd read the article in the news magazine, Stern. It had namely also mentioned her time in the commune. She'd already been the target of such anonymous accusations on occasion. After all, she was a public figure. Everyone knew her: the Family Rescuer, the Super Granny with the big heart who's been solving other people's parenting problems for ten years. Even those who didn't watch her programme at least knew who she was.

After the telephone call, she'd got up and gone into the bathroom to check the temperature of the bath water, but the water had still been too hot. Since Matthias had got this damned collector installed on the roof for them, the water was boiling hot when it came from the tap, at least on sunny days. She'd run some cold water into it and got into the tub, but hadn't been able to stop thinking about the letter.

Now, hours later, as she tossed and turned in the bed, she was still annoyed that she hadn't asked for more details. She should have got Matthias to read the letter out loud to her. Now, she had to wait until tomorrow until he put the thing in the letter box. So typical of him. Why wouldn't he just pop in for a cup of tea or, for

all she cared, a coffee? What on earth was it about her that he was so intent on avoiding? On the other hand, this time it suited her rather well that he just wanted to shove it into the letterbox. It meant she could avoid Carl getting wind of it. She needed to know exactly what it was about first.

She sat up, switched on the bedside table light and looked at the clock. Only three o'clock, she thought, and arranged her pillows — one to the left, one to the right and one on which she would rest her head — and switched the light back off. Eyes open, she lay there and listened to the wind whooshing. What if the letter wasn't just the babbling of a lunatic? If what was written in it held water? Since the cover story in Stern, she'd attracted more attention to herself than she had done in a long while. Not just to herself, but also to the whole family. And naturally to Carl, who'd also featured in the cover photo. She closed her eyes, inhaled and exhaled; deep breaths down into her stomach. She tried to remember what exactly she'd said in the interview. She'd spoken about her marriage as a partnership of equals and how she'd managed to juggle the famous trio of children, cooking and career. But nothing in the article could have given anyone reason to poke about in her past. No, the interview had been fantastic, a total success. It'd painted a very intimate image of her, without being overly personal. She'd been able to steer the interview in the desired direction and had even managed to elegantly avoid certain events. So in the end, a consistent overall impression had been conveyed that perfectly matched the public portrayal of her life.

Liane sighed. And suddenly, the day it all began, that Easter Monday in 1968, came flooding back to her. Although for her it had started earlier; already in the previous winter. In the moment that she saw him for the first time.

Liane, January 1968

She'd met Carl in the late sixties in Munich, after she'd finished her nursery nurse training. Back then, she was still new in town, a country bumpkin. She'd only finally moved away from Lühe, a backwater near Hamburg, that summer and in doing so had escaped the society of her family. On that winter's day, she was taking a walk in the English Garden as she often did during her lunch break. She was with Mathilde, her simple colleague with whom she hardly had anything in common apart from a need for fresh air and exercise.

The wind was blowing so icily over the grass that even her hood didn't offer her much protection from the cold. So they'd decided to turn back and return to the nursery earlier than usual. They were just walking past the Chinese Tower when Liane noticed the couple, clearly students. The young man was blond and strong. With a cigarette in his left hand, he was walking beside a young blonde woman, who held a book in her hand and was testing him from it. He was wearing a brown duffel coat and she was clad in a thigh-length sheepskin coat, and even though the couple were not particularly striking, Liane was suddenly unable to take her eyes off them. Not from him at any rate; how he was blowing smoke out of his mouth and moving his lips with a crease in his brow. And maybe that was already the moment that Liane decided that she had to have this man. At least that is how it seemed to her afterwards, although she would never admit it to him. There was certainly a casualness in his posture that captivated Liane, a manifestation of informality and of great self-assurance, but there was also something else that Liane couldn't put a name on. At any rate she felt a ridiculous desire to rip the book out of the girl's hand and to take her place at his side. And while chunky Mathilde continued to prattle on next to her, Liane strained her neck and couldn't take her eyes off him. From then on, she went to the park every lunchtime, with or without Mathilde, and ensured her laps brought her past the Chinese Tower several times. And in fact, now and then she saw him again; sometimes alone, and sometimes accompanied by his girlfriend. After she'd seen him a couple of times, she knew what he reminded her of with his wind-blown and slightly too long hair: a sailor.

When the girl was with him, Liane also studied her in detail; standing a distance away, leaning against a tree and observing her with a great dislike. She appraised her figure, how she moved and spoke, and dreamed of being in her place. Sometimes, especially when there were other young people around, she would walk past them so closely that she could overhear snippets of conversation, foreign words like propaedeutic and femur. Back home, she looked up these terms in Mrs Niethammer's twenty four volume Brockhaus dictionary and in this way she discovered that he was studying medicine.

When from one day to the next, he no longer appeared in the park, she felt a deep self-loathing. She cursed her own cowardice and her inability to do anything while there had been time. Why hadn't she taken the initiative and spoken to him or someone else from his group? Why hadn't she made sure that he noticed her? And at the same time, the thought of the blonde girl only marginally bothered her. She was almost most annoyed by the fact that she had behaved exactly the way that her parents would have thought was proper. A respectable young woman does not approach young men. In her dreams she'd long since held a very different image of herself, but she'd not yet succeeded in also acting on it; neither in regard to the stranger in the park nor at her work.

When it came to the decision what to do after school she wasn't at all sure whether she would be a good nursery nurse. She wasn't a massive fan of children, even though she usually managed quite well with the brats. To all intents and purposes, her parents had chosen her career for her.

"Little Liane wouldn't be any use in an office," her mother had claimed at family get-togethers even though she herself was a housewife and had never set foot in an office. And over coffee, Liane's father liked to joke, "well, the main thing is we keep her off the street". At which Uncle Ernst always burst into the same silly fit of laughter.

Liane hated this chitchat and dreamed of escaping the reactionary society of her parents as soon as possible. So in the end, her training place at the Waldorf nursery in Hamburg suited her very well; a feeling that had intensified when she realised what Waldorf educational theory actually was. Oh, her parents would have been appalled if they'd ever realised what "hogwash" was being contrived with the children there. In fact, it was very different to the nurseries in the countryside, and Liane liked that just as much as she liked her life in the big city. In the end, she almost enjoyed going to work and would have stayed on there if they had wanted to take her on after her training, which however was not the case. That had almost driven her mad since it meant that after her training she'd ended up back at home in Lühe. So it suited her perfectly well that she eventually found a position in Munich of all places; a good eight hundred kilometres away from her home town. Unfortunately, this time it was a state nursery and to boot it enforced an extraordinarily strict regime. Liane soon realised the draconian rule of the head invoked her rebellious nature, but she found no way to resist it. Mrs Wiegand as well as most of the other nursery nurses were so resistant to progress that it was enough to make you tear your hair out. At lunchtime, the children had to rest for two hours, and if one of them let out so much as a squeak, they had to catch up on five minutes sleep per word spoken. If the children spoke too loudly, they were sent out to the corridor, where as punishment they had to sit bolt upright with their finger held in front of their mouths. And Liane knew where all of that came from: Mrs Wiegand had of course been lapping up the indoctrination of the Nazis from an early age. And even Liane's colleague, Elfriede, who in her youth had been a squad leader in the League of German Girls, couldn't be persuaded to trust the children more and to just let them do their thing without intervening straight away. This attitude nipped every bit of independence in the bud and forced young children into a corset that restricted their thoughts and from which they may never be able to free themselves for the rest of their lives. In contrast, at the Waldorf nursery in Hamburg even the smallest children were whittling themselves sticks

and sawing boards!

Some days, Liane also felt these strict limitations constrain her, as if she were in a straitjacket. She wondered if her career would continue along the same obedient path until her pension and she envied the blond student and his friends enveloped by the glowing aura of freedom.

Annamaria, Monday, 3rd February 1986

It's the same every morning. When the alarm rings at about three o'clock, Annamaria would give anything to sleep on, especially now with the pregnancy. But it's no good. She feels for the zwieback that she'd placed on the bedside table. Quickly get something down, before the morning sickness takes hold.

She nibbles the zwieback and thinks about when she will tell him. Although she is a little jittery about that. But then she remembers he'd once said to her how much he would like to have children and that Sabine would never grant him that wish. Because she is totally fixated on herself and her career. That's what he'd said, word for word, and even then she'd thought that eventually she would be the one to make this dream come true for him.

Of course, the timing is really awkward. After all, Markus is still her teacher; but, thank God, the first of the final exams are scheduled for mid-March and with a bit of luck she won't have to take the oral exams. And at driving school she is almost ready to register for the exam, even though, she won't get her licence until July of course, on her eighteenth birthday. In any case, she will have to get it all done before the 24th of June.

That's when the doctor said her due date would be. Then she would just get her certificate sent to her. But whatever happens, whether she has to do the oral exams or not, she's overcome much more difficult challenges in her life. After living in a children's home, she isn't so easily knocked for six.

She throws off the covers and sits for a moment on the edge of the bed. At any rate, it looks like she's outwitted the morning sickness again. And this fragility that goes with the pregnancy will also subside. At least that's what the doctor said.

Later as she is walking through the quiet streets, she freezes and feels faint, but as always she tries to dream of her future with Markus. When she finally moves in with him, everything will be just fine.

But today, she can't really summon the images. Maybe it's due to the weather; icy wind and rain, a combination that doesn't entice you to dream, at least not when you're delivering papers at four in the morning.

She needs a good quarter of an hour just to collect the papers today. The old bike has a flat tyre again so she can't ride it and has to walk the whole way. Since the railway station closed, she has to go up to Senn-Bäck as the papers are always delivered there now. However, there is one good thing about it: it means that she walks past Markus' house every morning and that is wonderful. Because at that moment, Annamaria feels so close to him. A thrilling feeling, walking under his bedroom window and imagining how he is lying there and sleeping. His peaceful breathing, the warmth of his naked skin. Less thrilling is the idea that Sabine is lying next to him. But that's just a matter of time. Until he tells her. Tells her that he's going to move out.

On the way back comes the prettiest part of her round, the detour to the house of the Happy Family. After climbing the hill and sticking both papers in the letter box, she usually stops for a short while. Hellsternhof; the half-timbered house, named after the local fairytale of the Hellstern man and situated a good bit above the village. It's the only household that doesn't get the regional paper, the Alb-Bote. Nobody else in Rosenau reads the German and Swiss nationals: the Frankfurter Allgemeine and the Neue Zürcher Zeitung. The man of the house is a doctor at the hospital in Reutlingen; Annamaria has known that for a long time. And that the house is full of children. Five of them apparently! What's more, the woman isn't just a housewife. She's called

Liane van der Berg, is a psychologist or psychiatrist — Annamaria isn't quite sure what the difference is — and Hedi's granny said she's quite famous and that she writes books about children and parenting. And of course Hedi's granny would know as she knows everything about everyone in the village. Like every morning, Annamaria thinks how lucky these children are to be growing up in such surroundings. She knows from lighter mornings that the old cottage garden is like an adventure playground; there's even a tree house with a swing under it, plus a trampoline and a seesaw. And even though the house is so far out of the way and everything is shrouded in winter darkness, Annamaria isn't afraid. For she knows that there, behind these windows, the Happy Family is sleeping. Soon she will also have such a family, thinks Annamaria, and happiness floods through her body, so intense and strong that she almost can't stand it. Dizzied by these thoughts of her own future, she takes a deep breath, exhales it and then heads back. Early mornings are such a peaceful time, she thinks. Maybe it's because people's thoughts are not yet in the world and that everything is at rest, even evil.

On a night, when she walks home from babysitting, it's different. The silence feels more threatening, full of suppressed desires. Maybe it's because she always goes past the Goldener Ochsen Inn on her way home, and if she is unlucky she bumps into a couple of drunk locals such as Cornelius and his mates who, like her, are heading home. Then she always ends up hearing their smutty remarks, which is not at all pleasant. And now, during Fasching, it's even worse.

Shortly after, as Annamaria unlocks the front door to the old signalman's house, she stands for a moment and listens. Not a sound from Sibylle's bedroom. In contrast to last night, when her foster mother had staggered in with this bloke and the pair of them had caused an awful racket. Sibylle had probably not told him that they weren't alone in the little house. At any rate, Annamaria had locked her bedroom door as a precaution and had also pushed the chest of drawers in front of it in order to avoid any unpleasant surprises. And then she had even stuck cotton wool in her ears. But it was no use; the dreadful creaking of the bed could still be heard. Muffled humping packed in cotton wool. Just a few more months, thinks Annamaria, then I'm out of here.

After sneaking into the kitchen and closing the door behind her, she bends down, reaches behind the cupboard and pulls out her secret coffee supply. If she didn't hide it, Sibylle would just guzzle it all, even though Annamaria buys it with her own money. And of course, Sibylle never buys a new one because she spends all she has on gin. Someone had once told her that you can't smell gin on your breath.

In contrast, Annamaria saves every penny. She has already got 1780 DM together. She's only seventeen, but at times she feels extremely old. At any rate, older than her foster mother. Since Sibylle's husband ran off, everything has been turned on its head: it's not her foster mother looking after Annamaria, but rather Annamaria looking after her foster mother. Actually, she should be getting the cash from the child support, not Sibylle. However, she doesn't want to complain. For even a boozing Sibylle is a thousand times better than what Annamaria had experienced before, in that home. It had been the worst time in her life, and when she thinks back to it, even just briefly, her heart immediately begins racing so hard that she can feel it thumping right up into her throat.

Annamaria boils the water and spoons coffee into the filter, then she stands at the window and looks out. Now she's tired again. But the day's just beginning. The red signal at the level crossing illuminates everything in a strange, somehow bloody, light. Annamaria watches the trees sway from side to side and notices the winter wind tugging at the roofing felt of the allotment hut on the other side of the tracks. It pulls at it with all its force as if trying to rip off the roof. Last night as the noise in the bedroom got louder, Annamaria had toyed with the idea of staying in the hut for a while. There, she'd thought, she would at least have peace and quiet and could also dream a little about Markus. About how they'd been there together in the summer. But



now, as she sees the wind ripping at the roof, she's glad she didn't do it.

She hears a noise in the hall. Crap, she thinks, switches off the light and ducks under the table. Steps make their way towards the kitchen and the kitchen door is opened. For a moment, it's silent. Annamaria holds her breath. Then, thank God, the door is closed again and the steps become more distant. Most likely, Sibylle's drinking buddy looking for something to drink from. She waits a little while underneath the table, until the steps disappear into the bathroom. Lucky escape, she thinks. She really has no desire to see some bloke's bits so early in the morning, before the first sip of coffee.

Annamaria turns the light back on, brews the coffee and creeps back to her bedroom, pushing the chest of drawers back in front of the door. The first sip is almost therapeutic; hot but not as strong as she'd like out of consideration for the baby. When she's finished her final exams, she'll stop drinking coffee altogether. But she isn't going to lie, she won't manage before then.