The Angel Maker

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Some of Wolfheim's inhabitants maintain to this day that they heard the crying of the three babies in the back seat first, even before they heard the taxi's engine as it drove into the village. When the taxi halted in front of the old doctor's house at number 1 Napoleonstrasse, the women of the village promptly stopped sweeping their front porches, the men came out of the Cafe´ Terminus still clutching their beers, the girls halted their game of hopscotch, and in the town square Lanky Meekers fumbled and lost the ball to Gunther Weber, deaf from birth, who drove it home right past the baker's boy Seppe, who was looking the other way. That was on 13 October 1984. A Saturday afternoon. The clock in the bell tower struck three.

The passenger got out of the taxi and what everyone immediately noticed was the fiery hue of his hair and beard.

The deeply devout Bernadette Liebknecht hurriedly crossed herself, and a few houses down the street old Juliette Ble´rot clapped her hand to her mouth and muttered, 'My God, the spitting image of his father.'

Three months earlier, the inhabitants of the Belgian hamlet that was adjacent to the place where three borders met, which for its entire history had lain pinned between the sturdy thighs of Vaals in the Netherlands on one side and the German town of Aachen on the other, had been advised of Victor Hoppe's impending return. The skinny clerk from Notary Renard's office in Eupen had come to remove the yellowing 'FOR RENT' sign from the front gate of the deserted house and had told Irma Nu¨ssbaum, who lived across the street, that Herr Doktor was planning to return to Wolfheim. The clerk didn't have any further details; he couldn't even give her a date.

It was a mystery to the villagers why Victor Hoppe should be returning to Wolfheim after an absence of nearly twenty years. The last anyone had heard was that he had been practising medicine in Bonn, but that information dated from quite a few years back, so people came up with all sorts of hypotheses for his return. This one thought he was out of work, that one blamed his return on heavy debts; Florent Keuning from Albertstrasse thought he was only coming back in order to do up his house and sell it, while Irma Nu¨ssbaum suggested that the doctor might now have a family and want to escape the hustle and bustle of the city. It turned out that Irma was closest to the truth, even though she would have been the first to admit that it had come as just as

much of a shock to her as to everyone else to find out that Dr Hoppe was now the father of a set of disfigured triplets who were just a few weeks old.

It was Lanky Meekers who made the disconcerting discovery that very afternoon. As the driver of the taxi stepped away from his car to help Victor Hoppe open the rusty gate, Lanky Meekers, drawn by the incessant screeching, crept over to peek in at the side window. What he saw on the back seat gave the skinny lad such a fright that he fainted clean away, thereby becoming the doctor's first patient. The doctor brought him round with a few smart slaps to the cheek, upon which Lanky Meekers opened his eyes, blinked, glanced from the doctor to the car, scrambled to his feet and scurried back to his friends without a backward glance. Still a bit unsteady on his feet, he threw one arm over the burly shoulders of his classmate Robert Chevalier – they were both in the fourth form – and draped the other over the left shoulder of Julius Rosenboom, who was three years younger and two heads shorter.

'What did you see, Lanky?' asked Seppe the baker's boy, who was standing across from his friends, the leather football tucked under his arm, his face turned towards deaf Gunther Weber so that the latter could follow what was being said.

'They . . .' Lanky Meekers began, but he paled once more and didn't go on.

'Oh, stop being such a wuss!' Robert Chevalier prodded Meekers with his shoulder. 'And what do you mean by they, anyhow? Is there more than one in there, then?'

'Three. There's three of them,' Lanky Meekers answered, holding up the same number of spindly fingers.

'Thwee giwls?' asked Gunther, grinning broadly.

'I couldn't tell,' said Lanky Meekers. 'But what I did see . . .' He crouched down, glanced over to where Dr Hoppe and the taxi driver were in the process of opening both sections of the gate, and motioned his four pals to come closer.

'Their heads,' he said slowly . . . 'their heads are split apart.' And extending his right hand, he made a swift slicing gesture down his forehead, over his nose and right down to the underside of his chin. 'Whack!' he said.

Startled, Gunther and Seppe took a step backward, whereas Robert and Julius couldn't stop staring at Lanky Meekers' disproportionately small head, as if that too was likely to be split asunder at any moment. 'I swear. You could see all the way back, right to their throats. And that's not all, honest to God – you could even see their *brains*.'

'Their *whaa*?' demanded Gunther.

'Brai-hains!' Lanky Meekers repeated, tapping his index finger against the deaf boy's forehead.

'Gross!' Gunther exclaimed.

'What did they look like?' asked Robert.

'Like a walnut. Only much bigger. Slimier.'

‘Jesus,’ said Julius, shuddering.

‘If the window had been open,’ bragged Lanky Meekers, ‘I could have just snatched them – like this.’

Open-mouthed, the other boys followed the movement of his hand, cupped like a claw. But then suddenly the hand shot forward again, pointing, thereby directing everyone’s eyes back to the taxi, some thirty metres from where they were standing. Victor Hoppe opened the rear door, ducked into the car and re-emerged a few seconds later with a large navy-blue carrycot, from which there arose a terrible wailing. Lifting the cot by its two handles, he carried it along the path into the house, with the taxi driver, who was lugging two large suitcases, following close behind. The village square was all abuzz; two or three minutes later the driver came out again, pulled the front door shut, hurried back to his car, and drove off with visible relief.

At the Cafe´ Terminus that afternoon, Jacques Meekers had the floor. He gave a detailed account of what his son had seen, not refraining from hyperbole when called for. The older villagers especially were all ears, and were able to tell the others that Victor Hoppe had been born with a facial disfigurement himself.

‘A harelip,’ Otto Lelieux explained.

‘Just like his father,’ Ernst Liebknecht remembered. ‘His spitting image, too.’

‘Spit from a rusty tap,’ laughed Wilfred Nu¨ssbaum. ‘Did you see his hair? And that beard? As red as . . . as . . .’

‘As the hair of the devil!’ cried one-eyed Josef Zimmermann suddenly, whereupon the cafe´ suddenly fell silent. All eyes were on the slightly inebriated old man, who was pointing an admonitory finger in the air. ‘And he has brought with him his avenging angels! Keep your eyes peeled, because they will strike as soon as they get the chance.’

It was as if his words had opened the floodgates, because all of a sudden others also found themselves recalling stories that showed the doctor in rather a poor light. They all knew something or other about him or his parents, and the later the hour, the more yarns were exchanged. Most of the tales were only hearsay, but no one seemed to question their veracity.

‘He grew up in an asylum.’

‘He got that from his mother. She died of insanity.’

‘He was christened by Father Kaisergruber. The child screamed bloody murder.’

‘They say that his father . . . you know . . . from the tree next to his house.’

‘The son didn’t even come to the funeral.’

‘He was never seen again after that.’

‘The house was only rented once. The tenants left after just three weeks.’

‘Poltergeists. That’s what they said. There was this constant knocking.’

Over the next few weeks Dr Hoppe would make forays into the village as regular as clockwork. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning, at half past ten on the dot, he would follow the exact same trajectory, from the bank on Galmeistrasse, on to the post office on Aachenerstrasse and then Martha Bollen’s grocery shop across from the village square. He rushed from one stop to the next at a brisk pace, head bowed, as if he knew he was being observed and was intent on getting home again as quickly as possible. However, his hurry only served to attract even more attention to him. The villagers would usually cross the street and watch him from the opposite pavement until he disappeared from view.

Martha Bollen, as well as Louis Denis the bank teller and Arthur Boulanger the postmaster, all reported that Dr Hoppe was a man of few words. It seemed that he was rather bashful, yet amicable in his own way. He always had a ‘Guten Tag’, ‘Danke scho¨n’ and ‘Auf Wiedersehen’ for them – pleasantries that betrayed his speech impediment.

‘He tends to swallow some of the sounds,’ said Louis Denis. ‘His voice is very nasal,’ said Martha, ‘always droning on in the same tone of voice. And he never looks at me when he’s speaking.’ To the frequent question as to what the doctor had purchased, she always gave the same answer: ‘Oh, the usual. Nappies, formula, milk, cereal, detergent, toothpaste – stuff like that.’

But then she would lean over the counter, shield her mouth with the back of her hand and continue in a whisper, ‘He also buys two packs of Polaroid film every time he comes in. Why would anyone want to take that many pictures of children who look the way they do?’

Her customers would usually profess surprise, encouraging Martha to beckon them even closer. In a tone implying some criminal wrongdoing, she’d end with, ‘. . . And he always pays with thousand-mark notes!’

Louis Denis was able to explain the derivation of those banknotes: he reported that the doctor sometimes came in to exchange German marks for Belgian currency. He had not yet opened an account, however, so he must be keeping all that cash somewhere in the house.

Since Dr Hoppe was not making any effort to attract patients and had not hung a sign on his gate listing surgery hours, some burghers decided that he must be living off past earnings of some sort or another. Still, it did look as though he was intending to practise his calling in the village eventually, because in those first few weeks a lorry from Germany had stopped in front of his house at least three times to deliver medical equipment. From behind the curtain of her kitchen window, Irma Nu¨ssbaum would jot down the registration number and time of delivery, and what the delivery consisted of. Some of the goods she had been able to recognise straight away, such as the examination table, a large set of scales and some IV-drip stands, but most of the wooden crates kept their contents hidden, so she had to use her imagination to flesh out the rest – monitors, microscopes, mirrors, flasks, flagons, test tubes. After each delivery she would give the other women of the village a full report, and when, one bitterly cold morning some time at the beginning of January, she saw her neighbour emptying his postbox in a white lab coat with a stethoscope around his neck, she announced to all and sundry that Dr Hoppe’s surgery was officially open for business.

A few brave villagers had admitted they were planning to have themselves looked at by the doctor – if only because they wanted to catch a glimpse of the children, for the latter had been kept out of

sight all these weeks, so that little by little their existence had grown into a mystery greater than the Holy Trinity itself. But at the next Sunday Mass a sermon given by Father Kaisergruber, who had been ministering to the parish for almost forty years, had alarmed even the most confirmed sceptics.

'Believers, beware!' he had cried from the pulpit, his index finger in the air. 'Beware, for the great dragon is at hand, the old serpent, whose name is Devil and Satan, and who leads the whole world astray! I tell you, he is cast down here upon the earth, and his angels are cast down with him!'

After that the village shepherd had paused briefly, letting his eyes roam over his two hundred or so parishioners. Then, pointing his finger at the front row, where the village boys sat side by side in their Sunday best, their hair neatly slicked down, he had warned in a thundering voice: 'Take care, and be vigilant! The devil, thine enemy, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking those he means to devour!'

And all the parishioners had seen how, as he spoke those last words, his trembling finger had pointed straight at Lanky Meekers, who had turned white as a sheet and did not dare show his face in the village square for the next few days.
