

Translated excerpt

**Anna Maschik**

***Wenn du es heimlich machen willst, musst du die Schafe töten***

Luchterhand Literaturverlag, München 2025  
ISBN 978-3-630-87814-0

pp. 30-40

**Anna Maschik**

***If you want to do it in secret, you have to kill the sheep***

Translated by Imogen Taylor



GEORG HAS DELIVERED COUNTLESS sheep, pigs and cows in his time, and recently even a horse. It ought to be the same, he thinks, but it isn't. The midwife sends him for bucket after bucket of hot water, only to let it go cold next to the bed. He can't help suspecting that she only sends him for water because she wants him out of the way, but that's fine by him. He takes his time, going to check on the sheep as he waits for the water in the copper to come to the boil. The sheep stare at him. When at last Henrike's screams die down, it's strangely quiet. Anna thumps the newborn on the back, but he makes no cry.

THE HOUSE WHERE THE LAYER-OUT LIVES is on Westerstieg, overlooking the stream and surrounded by lemon trees that bear bright-yellow fruit all year round, in spite of the cold winters and mild summers. Nora is responsible for the dead of the village. When people meet her on the street they nod politely, hoping she's not on her way to the house of anyone they know, and when – like today – she knocks on a door soon after the midwife, a strange silence fills the village. Anna and Nora stand on either side of Henrike who sits in bed, pressing her newborn son to her chest. Anna is in a pale-blue apron with bloody rags spilling out of the pockets, Nora in a dark, loose-fitting gown with a drowsy smell of lavender. Nora glances at Anna's implements on the table and thinks how much harder it is to enter life than to leave it. In *her* bag she carries only cloths and soap, powder, sewing things and death certificates. But when she sees the steady rise and fall of the child's belly, she knows she isn't needed. The two women slip out of the house side by side, leaving behind an exhausted Henrike, a confused Georg and a peacefully sleeping infant.

Word soon gets about that Henrike has given birth to a jinxed child that refuses to wake. Hours pass, then days, weeks and eventually years, and still the boy, whom they call Benedikt, hasn't opened his eyes.

SEVERAL TIMES A DAY, Henrike comes in from work to listen to the child's steady breathing. Over the years, the rhythmic rise and fall of Benedikt's belly has become a secret language to her: a Morse code consisting not of long and short but of in and out; a sequence of signals all the same length, in which she tries to find hidden messages. Sooner or later, though, she is always seized by the terrible certainty that Benedikt will stop breathing if she listens any longer, and she leaves the room, closing the door softly behind her, like a mother who has just got her child off to sleep and doesn't want to wake him.

In the evenings, she sits at his bedside, stroking his hair and singing a lullaby, and every morning she bends over him to kiss him awake. But Benedikt's eyes remain tightly shut, and if he dreams, his face remains impassive.

He reminds Henrike of her youngest brother who was just four years old when Mother died. She hadn't managed to give him enough attention, although it was her duty, as his big sister and the only mother he'd ever really known.

When the vicar comes to the farm and advises her to have Benedikt blessed and ask the Lord to release his soul from his body, Henrike withdraws her church membership that same day. The vicar, a young man of conviction, is back on her doorstep a day later: a child's soul can't go in peace, he says, if the mother clings to it so. Henrike sends him away. Let it stay then, she thinks, I'll do everything in my strength to keep it here.

THE ZEAL WITH WHICH HENRIKE devotes herself to the sleeping child makes Georg uneasy. She seems to lose some of her hardness in these years, moving through life like a sleepwalker, no longer anchored in the world. He almost feels that she's the one who won't wake. When he speaks to her, she takes a long time to react and then starts up as though emerging from deep waters, her staring eyes seeking a hold.

Once Georg says maybe it's true what everyone says, maybe it's unlikely the child will ever wake. After that she doesn't speak a word to him until the autumn. Years pass. Benedikt sleeps and grows; he looks as healthy as a perfectly ordinary child that has come in from playing outside and lain down for his afternoon nap, peaceful and unscathed.

WHAT HENRIKE SINGS TO BENEDIKT IN HIS COT:

Though Thou wilt ne'er forsake us,  
From this world Thou wilt take us  
In gentle death so pure.  
And when cometh our end,  
Let us to Heaven ascend,  
O God so true and good and dear!

Or:

Sleep, child, sleep, close thine eyes and sleep!  
Throw the gates of Heaven wide,  
When the day comes that we die.  
Sleep, child, sleep, close thine eyes and sleep!

Or:

Good evening, good night,  
Spread with roses so bright,  
And with sweet cloves bestrewn,  
In the light of the moon.  
When day dawns, if God wills,  
You'll be woken anew.

WHAT HENRIKE SECRETLY SINGS TO BENEDIKT IN HIS COT:

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

THE FIRST TIME I HEAR a lullaby sung I am eight years old. I'm staying the night at a friend's house and her mother sings to her little sister who sleeps in the same room. She sings, *Good evening, good night.* She sings, *When day dawns, if God wills, / You'll be woken anew.* She goes out of the room. I lie awake, my eyes wide open, and think, What if he doesn't will?

HENRIKE'S SECOND CHILD is born with red cheeks and clenched fists. By the time Anna appears in the door with her black bag, the babe is already in the world – a girl they call Hilde. Henrike looks at her round face and bright blue eyes and feels anger at knowing the colour of this child's eyes before that of her son's. She thinks, Pity it's a girl, she'll have a harder time of it than a boy; she'll have to bear and suckle children and endure great suffering, but I will prepare her for it. She carries the newborn to Benedikt's cot and says, Look, that's your brother. Watch over him and take good care of him, for he is special.

Georg hopes this second, healthy child will rouse Henrike from her somnambulist state. He thinks, Good thing it's a girl, she'll have an easier time of it than a boy, won't have to do the heavy work on the farm or go to fight if there's another war. Women, he has heard, can now go to university, and it's clear to see how clever his daughter is, how keen to learn; even when she's still a very little girl, perched on his shoulders, her eyes are always fixed on the horizon. I won't hold you back, he promises her. You won't have to stay in the narrow world of the village like your brother. Not you.

GRANDMOTHER HILDE'S SKIN is clingfilm stretched over chicken breast. I have the feeling it might easily tear. Grandmother cries every year at Christmas. Later, she cries whenever we say goodbye.

Grandmother's house has a name rather than an address. It's long and low with small windows and thick walls. Inside, it's dark and cool even in the summer; when you come in from the sunny garden, spots dance in front of your eyes. Grandmother sits in a rocking chair in the middle of the sitting room. She likes to keep an eye on things – to know if someone's failed to bolt the shutters properly or laid the table wrong. In front of her is the television, so she can watch her programme in the afternoon. We never call it anything but 'her programme'. Grandmother hears if someone doesn't close the fridge door properly, but she can't follow her programme unless it's turned up to full volume.

Next to the television, framed photos hang on the wall in neat rows. The more recent pictures were chosen by Mother – one of every member of the family. The photos Grandmother picked are all of the past: Great-grandparents' farm with the low roof lidding the house's eyes; Great-uncle on the first tractor in the village; Grandmother as a young woman pushing an elegant pram; the North Sea. She tells me a story about every picture, usually two or three times in a row. When I'm bored, I ask her about another picture. It's a game I love: each picture is a door I can open to see what's behind.

I OFTEN SPEND WEEKS ON MY OWN at Grandmother's house. She walks with two sticks and if you get too close, she makes you carry something. On summer mornings she sits on a chair in front of the house peeling carrots or potatoes and I push a bucket between her feet to catch the endless spirals of peel. I have to lay and clear the table. I have to pick up everything Grandmother drops. When the washing machine is on, I have to sit on it so it doesn't judder across the bathroom floor and bar the door from the inside.

## WHAT GRANDMOTHER COOKS:

Chicken and potatoes

Fritters and custard

Pork sausages and sauerkraut

Sauerkraut and bacon

Beef broth

HILDE IS A BRIGHT CHILD and always hungry. When Benedikt was born, Henrike didn't know what to do with all her milk; now she's afraid she won't have enough for the greedy babe who clings to her like a tick. Hilde is hardly ever sick – just a bout of colic once, and the occasional brief fever. She's strong and big for her age. Even as a very little girl, she helps her mother stir the blood; at first she's so small Henrike has to fetch her a stool so she can reach into the pan with her short arms. She helps her father drive the cattle to pasture every morning and back into the cowshed at night. She likes the big creatures with their gentle eyes and strokes their warm coats as they pass. Sometimes Georg sets her on a cow's back and she throws up her arms and squeals in delight. When Georg brings in the hay, Hilde sits on top of the haycart and when he takes her into town to the Saturday market, she walks from stall to stall with eyes as big as saucers.

Hilde starts to talk early and is soon prattling away. She makes up fanciful stories about houses that steal off at night on long spider's legs and wolves that go hunting with guns. Georg likes listening to her and fondly dubs her 'The Daily Paper'. Henrike calls her a fibber and clobbers her with the wooden spoon that's still hot from stirring the soup.

It bothers Henrike that Georg insists Hilde attend every lesson, even at sowing time or harvest. A woman should learn enough reading, writing and arithmetic to get along in the world, but no more. Soon the child is coming home with thick books from goodness knows where, and in the evenings Georg and Hilde sit up late at the kitchen table, talking about things that seem strange and unimportant. Henrike clatters the dishes and slips off to bed.

THE SCHOOL IS ON OSTERSTIEG, near the village square. It consists of one big room where children of all ages sit together and it has a grey-slate roof, high windows and a big veranda where lessons are held on fine days. For these outdoor lessons, the teacher pushes the heavy blackboard onto the veranda, scratching a notch in the doorframe every time so that Hilde can count the warm days by running her finger over the wood. The classroom is strewn with white sand. You can see where the children go by following the pale tracks they leave. When Georg wants to be sure Hilde hasn't been playing truant, he looks at the soles of her shoes when she comes home.

Some days Hilde doesn't walk down Osterstiege after the bridge but turns off onto the narrow farm track. She hides her satchel behind the Sörensens' barn and sets off over the fields out of sight of the village, then roams for hours unobserved over the wide green plains. She goes by roundabout ways, looping past copses, meadows and streams till she loses her bearings, but she always ends up on the coast, gazing silently into the distance with her face to the wind. The land is a big sleeping body she can caress with her eyes, and the sea is its breath.

[...]

HILDE CAN'T UNDERSTAND why her brother doesn't wake up. When she asks Father, he grows quiet and sad. When she asks Mother, Mother sends her into the barn to fetch something. Sometimes Hilde gets angry at Benedikt's sleep, angry at the lullabies, angry at her parents' whispered conversations in the darkened room and the neighbours who bring round baskets of biscuits and jam that she's not allowed to eat. She creeps up to Benedikt's bed at night – it's only a few steps from hers – and pulls his hair or pokes her fingers into his cheeks and tummy.

[...]

WHAT HENRIKE SINGS TO BENEDIKT IN HIS COT:

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

That you're my dearest one, you must know that.

WHAT HENRIKE SINGS TO HILDE IN HER COT:

EVERY DAY AFTER LUNCH, Grandmother sleeps for precisely one hour. I sit on the floor by her bed and stare at her until she wakes up. I'm scared to death and her snoring is the soundtrack to my fear.

Sleeping people give me the creeps. They are voluntary corpses who have left me here alone. Wherever they've gone, I can't follow them, and I can't forgive them that. The worst is their breathing. It doesn't sound like waking breathing; it's an uncanny sound that grows louder in the dark, like the ticking of a clock – deafening, even when the clock's in another room, even when it's practically inaudible during the day.

WHEN BENEDIKT OPENS HIS EYES, he is in a darkened room. He sits up and moves his arms and legs; he turns his head carefully to one side and then the other. His body feels strange, as though he hasn't used it for a long time. He looks about him and sees a chair in front of a shuttered window and dusty fingers of pale sunlight poking through the slats. Through the open crack of a wardrobe he sees what looks like a young girl's clothes. At the foot of his bed is a second bed, the covers untidily thrown back. Everything feels familiar and yet far away, like a place in a dream.

Gingerly he gets up and walks to the door. In the kitchen it's warm; there's a fire in the range and a woman is standing at the stove with her back to him. Strands of greying hair peep out from under a tightly wound headscarf. Benedikt knows his mother has been waiting for him a long time.

HENRIKE RECOGNISES HER SON AT ONCE. Although he looked a lot smaller lying down, there can be no doubt it's him. He has dark eyes like her, not blue eyes like Georg and Hilde. She throws her arms around him and says: At last you're awake. To herself she thinks: At last it isn't just Georg who has his child; now I too have a child of my own.

When Henrike comes into the barn with a stranger she calls her son, Georg doesn't know what to say to him. It isn't natural for a person to wake as a fully-formed young man who can speak and think. Henrike treats him like a soldier home from the war; there is a new softness to her. Benedikt isn't the only one who has woken up; Hilde has woken with him. Georg cannot forgive her for not waking for Hilde.

THAT EVENING HENRIKE GROWS UNEASY. What if Benedikt lies down to sleep and doesn't wake for another fifteen years, or even forever? She's relieved when he announces that he isn't tired and doesn't need to sleep; he's probably slept enough for a lifetime. She never finds out what he does instead that night or any of the following nights, and she never asks.

It troubles Georg that Benedikt doesn't sleep at night. He wonders what the boy gets up to in those dark hours when everyone else is asleep. Each morning he goes to his son's bed and finds it untouched. He places a hair on the pillow to make sure the boy hasn't just got up early and made his bed very neatly. The next morning, the hair is exactly where Georg left it.

WHEN I LIE AWAKE IN THE DARK, I think of Great-uncle and try to imagine what he does in his sleepless nights. Does he lie in bed waiting for the morning, his hands folded on his chest, his eyes staring at the ceiling like a corpse, or does he roam the fields, whistling softly, past the wayside cross and the raised hide? Does he crouch in the garden between the carrots, cabbages and turnips, or count the sheep in the shed? Does he pore over a book by candlelight or walk from bed to bed, peering into the faces of the sleeping as they once peered into his?

IT DOESN'T BOTHER BENEDIKT that he lost his childhood to sleep; he sees childhood as a ridiculous waste of time. Children are small, helpless and arrogant. What they learn at school, he learns from his sister, who teaches him patiently at the kitchen table every evening. She is clever and strong like Mother who's as sturdy as a pillar. Father, on the other hand, is insubstantial, easy to see through. It doesn't escape Benedikt's notice that Georg secretly lays a hair on his pillow. He smiles and leaves the hair where it is.

When he walks over the fields with Father, small groups of people gather along the way to stare at him, the *sleeping boy* – curious children and their mothers who keep the children close to their skirts.

Georg teaches Benedikt all he needs to know about work on the fields. Together they hitch the plough to a pair of horses and carve pensive furrows into the land to bring the fertile, rain-sweetened soil to the surface. When all the fields are ploughed, they make their rounds again, this time levelling the broken clods with the harrow. Georg leads the horses up and down the field while Benedikt presses the wooden tines of the harrow into the ground. Three times a year they do this work: in the spring before the sowing, after the sowing to cover the seeds with soil and in the autumn after the cattle have grazed the stubble. They sow rye and barley, grain that thrives in the cool north. Benedikt does as his father shows him and scatters seven seeds to every foot of land. The seeds must be neither too close together nor too far apart. When Benedikt is hungry, he sits in the shade at the edge of the field and eats the lunch Henrike has packed for him. While the neighbours and day labourers often have nothing to eat but dry bread, Benedikt always has cheese and smoked sausage and an apple. He washes the food down with must from an earthenware pitcher; the sweating clay keeps it cool till the afternoon.

When the grain is ready to be harvested at the end of the summer, Georg shows him how to cut it with a scythe. A cloth cradle is attached to the scythe to catch the stalks and

protect the ears of corn. Georg and Benedikt lay the grain to dry in the sun and tie it into sheaves with straw rope they make themselves. Henrike and Hilde help with the tying; the Klausens from the neighbouring farm also lend a hand; it's laborious work. Benedikt loads the sheaves onto the cart and drives them into the barn where they are stored in the loft to be threshed in the winter.

[...]

WHEN WOLFGANG GOES TO SCHOOL in the morning, he's an only child; when he comes home, he finds a stranger in the house.

Wolfgang's in a hurry to get home; he's hungry, and keen to join his friends on the square. In the hall he flings his bike against the wall where it falls to the floor with a clatter. He's already halfway up the stairs when he hears a whimper and voices coming from the workshop. He stops and listens for a moment, then runs back down. In the workshop are Mother, Grandmother, a woman in a pale-blue apron and this ugly Thing. Look, Wolfi, Grandmother says, your brother. Mother is so engrossed in the Thing, she doesn't look up. The scene burns itself into Wolfgang's mind. Mother is lying on a carpenter's bench surrounded by tools and sawdust. A black bag stands at the foot of the bench; a pillow has been shoved under Mother's head and a sheet spread over her tummy and legs. He sees the clamps screwed to the edge of the workbench and thinks: They must have been used to pin Mother's arms and legs to the bench so she couldn't defend herself. He sees the saw hanging above her on the wall and thinks: That must have been used to cut Mother in half, like the woman in the conjuring show he saw on the fair last year. They sawed her in two like a log and cut a slice out of her middle. Then they took the plane and sandpaper to it and made this Thing that's supposed to look like a baby. Wolfgang's not stupid; he knows it's the fathers who put the babies inside the mothers. His friend Emil got a baby sister last month and told him everything. What he hadn't known until now, was how the babies get out again. It's appalling. Wolfgang decides he'll never forgive Father. Or Mother, come to that. After all, she was the one who brought Father into the house.

Come, Wolfi, Grandmother says, don't you want to have a proper look at your brother? He's called David. You can hold him if you like. Mother looks horrified and presses the Thing closer to her chest. It's like when Father turned up at the farm, Wolfgang thinks, and Mother came over all funny. That's not my brother, he says. That's just a bit of wood.

WOLFGANG STARES AT THE DOLL that Mother has strapped on her back. It looks more finely wrought than it did on the carpenter's bench, as though Mother has been secretly filing away at it. The wood it's carved from is smooth and pale, lovelier than all the furniture in the flat. It has puffed-out cheeks and a pointy mouth with wrinkly pink lips that disgust Wolfgang because they're always sucking and crying. The doll can open and close its eyes with a fluttering noise; there's a special lever for this at the back of its neck. You can turn its head a few centimetres either way; its legs can be moved at the hips and knees, its arms at the shoulders and elbows. The little hands are clenched into tight little fists. Best of all is the hair – Mother's done a good job there; it seems to be human hair, dark brown and very soft. Wolfgang thinks with horror of the real child somewhere, whose curls have been ripped from its head so they can be stuck on this Thing that is supposedly his brother.

Mother has dressed the doll in a navy-blue sailor suit with a starched white collar and a sailor's cap. Sometimes she puts it in blue-and-red striped rompers. It even has tiny shoes on its feet, with laces which she ties as though she were saying a prayer. All the grown-ups say how neat and tidy and pretty it is. Wolfgang thinks that if he had shoes like that, he'd be neat and pretty too and wouldn't always have grazed knees and sticky fingers. If he had a sailor suit instead of these stiff old Lederhosen that are far too big for him, it would be easy to be the perfect child.

SOMETIMES KONRAD CATCHES Wolfgang looking at him so coldly he's afraid of the child. It troubles him not to know what went on in the boy's early years, what he was told about his father. When David is born, Konrad is relieved to have a son he can know right from the start, who will see him as a loving father, not an intruder. This one will be my child, he thinks. I'll teach him everything I know. This one won't be a stranger to me.