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Cleaning Della Müller

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Edward VanHeiden weeps into his hands.

I hear his rough body scrape against his side of the confession box as he speaks, lips thick with spit, his plethora of sins. They are the same as last week.

I am doing my best, I promise! I don’t want to look at Fräulein Stella, but she is temptation itself! And this morning she did it again! When we hopped off the cart at the field—and I was thinking pure thoughts, I swear—and her skirt caught the edge of the cart. She got so tangled in it, laughing and hooting and making a fuss for everyone to see. And then she looked right at me, and I smiled! I didn’t want to smile, but it happened so fast, like sneezing. I know my wife knows, and I promise I try! But we are always put in the same row to hoe, and I can’t stop. It’s only looking.

I recite without passion. The Lord has taught that betraying your wife in your mind is just as wicked as using your body. You have sinned. You have done wrong, my son.

I call him my son although he is several years older than myself.

—And then she ties her skirt around her waist, and I see her thighs. They are so smooth and tight, young—
I rap my fingers against my leg and roll my eyes.
God is with you, my son, I repeat. Just endure and persevere.
I let my thoughts wander to the body of Della Müller. It lies on the
washing table behind the altar and behind the curtain, the corpse
fractured and purple. The odor of her death seems to sully the entire
chapel. The stench is either her or Edward, huddled on the other side
of the confessional, refusing to mask his naked shame. He comes
daily, shirking the last two hours of work to cry. His clothes are still
stiff with sweat from the fields.
As he continues to describe Fräulein Stella in detail, I look
through the square window of my side of the confession box. The
orange sun peeks its face in the top of the stained glass window,
saturating the sunken stones in blues and scarlets. The day is
leaving me. I withhold a sigh.
You are forgiven. Go and sin no more.
The words sit dry on my sandpaper tongue. I pause for a breath,
and Edward takes the opportunity to describe—again—Stella’s fair
hair. I raise my eyebrows at no one. If I were assigned a church in
Frankfurt, I wouldn’t have to deal with this.
Eventually I hear him stop to breathe, and I rush out a promise
of forgiveness. This time, he hears me. He stutters and blubbers as
I continue. Upon taking my last breath, he steps out from his side
of the box. I plaster on a smile and emerge as well. His calloused
fingers swallow mine in a handshake.
Bless you, Pfarrer, he says.
His palms are rough and unpleasant. I nod demurely, once. I
watch as he glides past the pews, his limbs so weak and soft that
it seems he will catch the air and drift away. But his large body
stays on the ground. Edward smiles towards heaven as he wafts out the door.

He will be back tomorrow.

My back aches. I swallow once, twice, then rub my hands together. Cleaning a body is a chore. So I first sweep the pew seats, then wipe down the altar, then say the Lord’s Prayer. When I finish, I break form, blessing the village and the people and their sins and the crops and the houses and the foundations of the houses, and I pray we shall avoid another bout of the Black Death. Finally, when the sun is low in the sky and I can no longer justify a delay, I rise from my knees and reach for my basin of clouded Holy Water.

I hear a knock on the chapel doors. I blow air out my cheek.

Come in.

The heavy door opens before I finish speaking. A little girl grunts as she shoves with all her might. When she manufactures a crack big enough, she slips inside the chapel.

My heart drops to my feet. I swallow. The child is young, and—compared to other children—quite beautiful, with bronze curls and raspberry cheeks. I turn away from her.

Pfarrer Weber in Berlin warned me to avoid being alone with beautiful children. He told me there was a plague of lies, stories of old priests committing wicked acts. Naturally, none of these are true, he said. Such things do not happen, but prying eyes can spin stories of deceit, and we must be wary. Pfarrer Weber held my hands, his palms smooth from turning pages of the Holy Word, as he made me promise I would avoid the appearance of all evil—or even insinuated temptation. We are above such things, he said.
The child is staring. I scratch my forehead and look at the floor before her feet.

Hello, dear one. I cannot remember her name. Erica? Agatha? She is one of the Josts' daughters. Families in the congregation produce children by following the same tried-and-true method as that of planting a good harvest of corn: sow as many seeds as possible, and expect only a few to survive until ripening.

Welcome to the Lord's house.

Hi, Pfarrer. This one is still young enough that her sudden death would not be a shock or a tragedy. We buried a child around her age last week, and I briefly wonder how many wore this girl's dress before she ended up with it. Her bare feet slap the floor as she walks down the aisle. Bathed in stained light, she looks my way. Pressing her hands together, bouncing them against her belly, she says, How're you?

As well as I can ever be in the service of our Lord. Where are your parents?

Still in the fields. Mama likes to finish her rows before she makes supper.

I stand there, holding the bowl of Holy Water.

I see. How may the Lord serve you today?

Her inherited dress still reaches her feet. With time—and luck—she will live long enough to grow into it. The sounds of the fabric scraping against her thin body echoes through the chamber.

Is it true Oma Müller died today?

Indeed, I say. She has been freed from this mortal coil and has been returned to God.

Oh. Her gaze trails the empty pews. Can I see her?

I blink. What?
She stops and fingers a chipped armrest.

Oma Müller used to live in the house two away from my house. We’d run races in front of her door all the time. She was really mean. Awful Abigail, she’d call me.

Abigail.

Death is a part of the plan, Abigail. She is at peace with God. Oh.

I sway, waiting for her to leave. Her clear eyes meet mine. So can I see her or not?

I look out the window. There is no one nearby. The villagers won’t return from the fields for an hour or so. I shrug, intrigued.

I suppose for a few minutes. Then you’d best be on your way before anyone comes.

She grins and frolics forward. I pull up the curtain to the backroom, brow furrowed. I check the window again, seeing no one. She enters. I follow.

The room is cluttered with used robes and dirty rags. The washing table lies in the middle, well worn and oft used. I am grateful that I wiped the table for the most obvious blood puddles before Abigail came in. Now Della Müller’s broken body is only glazed in an orange film, dried and splitting. Her neck is twisted to one side, jaw unhinged. One leg is backwards.

Abigail stares, mouth wide.

Hi Oma Müller.

I hide a smile. I give the appearance of ignoring her as I snatch up a bronze-stained rag and wet it. I wash the face.

How come you’re cleaning her?

The water trails down Oma Müller’s cheekbones and pools in
her ears and open mouth.

I clean her to honor the creation of her body, I explain with care. According to the Bible, God made it. Now it is empty, and we reverence Him by cleaning His creations.

Oh. Well why are her eyes still open?

My tongue presses against my teeth.

Because she is empty. It doesn’t matter if her eyes are open because she’s not here. This is just her body.

Will she ever come back?

I wipe along the eyebrows.

She shall return to her body at the Resurrection. But the body is not her—only her soul is who she is. Her body was a shackle, an evil prison. And now she is free from the sin of it.

Oh. She doesn’t blink while she watches. I am awakened to my movements. I take extra time rubbing Della Müller’s hairy chin, striving to appear engaged in my work.

If she’s gonna get resurrected, maybe we should close her eyes then. She won’t want to wake up with her eyes open.

I say I’m not going to close the eyes.

Okay, I guess.

Abigail rocks on her toes, hands behind her back. She tilts her head. How’d she die?

I wipe around the nose and mouth, caked with years of sweat and dirt. Sunspots and worry lines underneath manifest themselves.

She fell out of a tree.

Huh. Abigail takes two steps forward. Her lips pull together like a period. Why was she in a tree?

My shoulders tighten. I don’t want to say that Della Müller came
in a few days prior asking about the consequences of taking one’s life out of God’s hands and into their own. She asked how badly hellfire hurts and postulated whether—like a scorch mark from a match—someone could adapt to its perpetual throb. I informed Della Müller that we are expected to rise above our bodies and their base, violent impulses, regardless of our temporary circumstance. Della Müller didn’t shake my hand when she stepped out of the confession box, neglected making the sign of the cross, and went crying into the night.

I tell Abigail none of this. Instead I say, I don’t know. Sometimes adults do funny things.

But they don’t go in trees. They know they’re high.

I don’t respond. She watches my hands move up and down the body’s voiceless leather neck. Cold water drips off my fingers as I squeeze out my rag and start on the left arm.

Can I help?
I am not sure if you want to. This is harder than it looks.
It looks easy, though.

I raise an eyebrow and continue working. Abigail skips to a cluttered table and rifles through a sack of rags. She pulls out the grayest one she can find. Holding the rag by two corners, she inspects it on both sides in the dim light before returning. She drops it in the basin of water, letting it float atop for a minute. Then she presses in the center and drowns it. With a little hum, she wrings it once and hurries over to the end of the table.

Can I help do the feet?
I say nothing. She is grinning wide, loose hair bouncing as she lifts onto her toes. She starts rubbing the soft underbelly of the feet.

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Then she says, Her feet are wrinkly. Like brown apples, only more wrinkly.

Shouldn’t you be going home?

Abigail wraps her rag around an ankle. She twists it. They don’t mind I’m here. Mama doesn’t look for us anymore, except if we get in trouble. If I was in a tree like Oma Müller, I’d be in huge trouble. Maybe if Oma Müller had a mama like mine, she’d know not to be in the tree. Or if Opa Müller was still alive, he would’ve told her to get down.

I finish the arms. It feels improper, somehow, to undress the body in front of the girl. So I lift the neck of Della Müller’s dress and reach blindly, tapping the woman’s belly and breasts. I feel her ribs shift as I press down. Abigail watches, holding her rag with both hands. I redden in shame. I have never been embarrassed touching a body before.

Does she hurt?

No.

I look at the floor and study the knots nestled in the floorboards—how they weave and move at my feet.

Abigail soaks her rag again. The water now drips a dirty brown.

I give up on Della Müller’s covered parts. I will finish when Abigail leaves. I pull out my rag and wash it. I start in on the upper legs. We continue in silence, both rubbing the filth from her body, a steady rhythm in each of our movements. The sounds of us brushing her flesh echo like calling birds.

My baby sister died last month.

I know, I say. I remember.

It’s because she was so little. She couldn’t run fast enough, but
I'm big enough so that if death came for me, I'd run away.
   Is that so? I smirk.
   She nods, her blue eyes gleaming. With the corner of the rag, 
   she pushes carefully between the toes, a little smile on her face. She 
   hums a little tune. I mirror her, wiping in between Della Müller's 
   fingers. The webbing between whines red, as if they protest my 
   harsh touch. As if it still feels.
   Do you fear death, Abigail?
   I watch her expression move up and down.
   Mmmm . . . not really. I'm too fast. Death can't catch me.
   That doesn't make sense.
   It does if you pray about it.
   Now it's my turn to purse my lips.
   That's not how prayer works.
   Oh. Sorry.
   She wipes the curves of the ball of Della Müller's foot, a sudden 
   frown on her face. I correct myself.
   I suppose prayer can work that way sometimes, in a spiritual 
   sense. After all, when we pray our bodies are strengthened by the 
   Lord. So spiritually we can outrun the Father of All Lies with enough 
   determination and righteousness in pursuing the Pfarrer of Truth. 
   Spiritually, we will all live, even if the bodies we inhabit fall.
   My words reverberate in the chamber. I like the sound and taste 
   of them. They savor like an oft-quoted hymn or a beloved idiom.
   Okay.
   She isn't listening anymore. She is fingering the rough patch of Old 
   Lady Müller's backwards foot. Dirt is engraved in her rock-hard heel.
   You don't have to get all the black bits.

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But I can, she insisted.
She scrubs hard.
Sorry, Oma Müller, Abigail says as she digs in.
Sorry, she says. Sorry.
I am done, but Abigail is not. So I wipe down Della Müller’s mouth again, trying to force the jaw closed. I listen to the steady rhythm of Abigail’s apologies.
When Della Müller’s feet are buffed pink and soft, Abigail declares herself finished. Folding the rag on the table, she reaches for the twisted foot with both hands. Grunting and groaning, she struggles to flip the leg upright. After a minute, she drops her arms with a loud sigh. Then, wiping her brow, she carries her wet rag back to the basin. Placing it beside the dirty water, she nods once. I reach for a white shroud off the tall pile. It billows as I begin to drape it over her body.
Abigail screams. I jump back.
What?
You can’t be done!
I’m not. I freeze, scared. Of course I’m not.
I watch her moon-wide eyes burn with tears. She edges around the table, her bare feet hitting the floor. She points, accusatory.
You haven’t brushed her hair. You can’t bury her like that!
I keep my arms hanging in the air, the shroud halfway on the corpse. Abigail glares back, defiant. I sigh and let the sheet collapse on Della Müller’s legs. I wipe my hands.
Fine. You can brush out her hair if you want.
Abigail smiles and starts in on it. I have no hairbrush, so she does
it with her fingertips, scraping out tufts of curls from under Della Müller’s ears. Gritting my teeth, I step close and lift the head. Abigail pulls the rest of the hair out from behind the neck and continues.

The woman’s neck pulls and twists as the girl’s hands get lost in the tangles. She sings stories, silly stories, about frogs playing with Jesus and her pfarrer and brother down by the biggest stream by the village, and they play tag and catch frogs. She’s at it for so long that I feel that itching discomfort again of being alone with her. It must be dark now, and anyone could walk in on me watching her work. So I say, I am going burn a candle for Oma Müller’s soul.

Uh-huh, she says, not looking up.

I peel back the curtain and move into the chapel. As predicted, the sun has fallen below the horizon and the room is cast in purple shadows. I light two candles on the altar, then reach below for a small, white one. I ordered a surplus of votive candles last year after the outbreak. I finger a match and strike it against my leg. It bursts into activity, sizzling to life. I carry its enthusiasm to the dull wick. It catches easily, erupting into an orange animal swaying above dead wax.

The flame on the matchstick burns fast. My fingers grow hot, and I wince at the impact. I flick it out. The ghost of it trails high and fills my mouth and nose. It smells of autumn and the fading of days. I breathe it in. I can taste its spirit on my tongue.

Placing the white candle in the center of the altar, I do not pray for Della Müller. Instead, I watch the second flame, the child of the match, move and dance on its pinnacle. At first, I think it is shackled to the black wick, the prisoner of its anchor. But, with time, I see the flame overcome the string, holding it like a child holding the hand of a parent. Part of me burns to touch it, to scorch myself and feel its
sting for days, but I do not move. I only watch. The wick head glows a soft peach, and it raises its three-pronged arms towards heaven, speaking an elusive song of rapture.

I'm done now.

Abigail pulls the heavy curtain away and comes to join me at the altar. She is unimpressed with the flame.

I'm not really good at braids, but I did my best. I did two braids cause she used to feed those two rats on her porch. I know she did it, but she didn't tell anybody because rats are gross. But I was sneaky.

Well, Abigail. I turn to her and smile. I still worry about us being caught through the window. Thank you for serving in the church today. The Lord will remember this sacrifice on Judgement Day.

Uh-huh. She bounces on her heels. Well I'm going home now.

She starts her way down the dark pews, bending left and right. Something catches in my throat, watching her dance and twirl in her homemade dress that is too big for her. She reaches the door.

Abigail?

She stops and faces me, chin jutted out. I stutter, searching for the appropriate words.

Why did you bother braiding Oma Müller's hair?

Abigail tilts her head. Her hand rests on the knob. She then grins. 'Cause her face is so fat. Fatty fat, like some rabbit or something, and she doesn't look like a person unless she's got her braids, don't you agree?

I repeat that it doesn't matter.

Abigail shrugs. She turns and yanks on the door handle. It doesn't budge. She says something about hell, a parroted curse from some
loose-lipped farmer in town. I step forward and open it for her. The night outside is bitter. She smiles at me.

Thanks. Goodnight. Bye, Oma Müller!

The door closes. The sound of it rings throughout the chapel like a chant, doubling over itself in vain repetition. It fills the empty space, invigorating the nothingness.

I sway on my feet. My thin body moves on its own as I turn around. I face the golden cross behind and above the altar. The entire day I had forgotten its existence, as it hangs so high.

There is a marble corpse stuck to the cross, hanging low and broken. He is a horrid sight, drenched in black blood. A mournful expression creases His indented eyes. I meet His gaze as the three flames burn at His feet. His mouth gapes, as if He will either speak or groan. I open my mouth as well, and breathe in the quiet echoes of the last chant of the closing door. The sound enters me, whispering in an arrhythmic pulse. I suddenly feel naked.

Looking back to the floor, I shake off the feeling and retreat into the washing room. She still lies there, half covered. I don't feel comfortable washing under the dress anymore, so I move to the front and grab the edges of the cloth. Then I see the braids.

They are horrendous, haphazard and crude, limply bloated and swinging off the table. I drop the cloth at her waist and, with unsure fingers, I unthread them. My hands tremble as I do so, and I redden as Della Müller's face bounces when I pull. My hair is short, and hers is long. I haven't experienced someone's hair in a long time, and it is smoother than I remembered, like the silk of a bishop's robe. A few stray strands catch the air like smoke.

After the braids are out, I pull my fingers through her hair again,
from root to tip. Just once, for the feeling. Her hairs slip through like a river and flutter down. Before I know it, my fingers stand empty in the air.

I throw the sheet over the purple body and turn away. I shuffle the rags together and furrow my brow at no one. I feel like I have done something unpardonable in this back room; as if I’ve taken a knife to Della Müller’s body and carved her open, and now she won’t heal. I cannot rub the grease of her off my fingertips.

Pfarrer!

Edward is back, calling for me. He hasn’t endured two hours without sinning.

I move past the table in a rush and heave the dirty rags to the floor. I apologize to Della Müller—apologize in the same blind way I speak to misplaced table corners and strangers on city streets. Jesus looks down at me as I emerge, and I am scared to look up at His face. I know His face. Instead I focus on Edward.

The farmer doesn’t even look at me as he slips into the booth. I enter the other side and sit, rubbing the corners of my eyes.

Bless me, Pfarrer, for I have sinned.

Edward begins his rote complaints. They muffle and catch in the thick curtain between us. He continues along in his same, tired way. All about Stella and the sin of her. We cannot see each other, so Edward VanHeiden does not notice a few minutes in when I bend in at the shoulder blades, hunch into my arms, cover my flushed ears, and bite back a sob. I endeavour to do so without betraying myself, but the sound still rises like a smoking tendril, hot between my lips, an animal breaking free.

He stops suddenly and says, Pfarrer?
I am listening. I return to my erect position and wipe my face with full palms. The heat of my shame whines in my innards. I am still here, Brother VanHeiden. Please continue your confession.