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The Woman with Four Arms

Novel

(Original German title: Die Frau mit den vier Armen. Roman)

235 pages, Hardcover

Publication date: 20 May 2024

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Sample translation by Joel Scott

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1

The call of an oriole rang out. Three ascending tones accompanied by a zigzagged warbling. On the lookout for larvae, insects, and a mate. Later, he would move on to the forests of Eilenriede, perhaps to the hills of Süntel, thought Rita, and repeat his song, with only the slightest variation. She sat across from the Ihme Centre, the half-inhabited planned city on Linden's border with Hanover. Since October, the temperature had been fluctuating between minus 15° and 5° Celsius, and there'd been plenty of rain and snow. Nevertheless, Rita came here every morning, found a spot on the grass, and sat for a few minutes to look out at the water that flowed lazily from the Masch Lake toward the Leine River.

Instead of sitting on the little wall provided for this purpose that divided the grass into three levels, she chose to sit on her coat. She had brought a coffee with her from home in an old olive jar. Even though it cooled down more quickly, she could never bring herself to drink out

of a clunky thermos or, *quelle horreur*, paper cups. She pulled a slice of banana bread out of her coat pocket and ate it in a couple of bites. Then she wedged her feet beneath her knees and closed her eyes. She imagined someone undoing a zipper along the part of her hair and pouring sunlight into her skull. She concentrated on the lightness, the warmth, and the vastness. The sunlight crept up from her toes, the balls of her feet, her ankles, her Achilles tendons, the twin muscles of her calves, her shins, and so on, up to her shoulders, before it sloshed over her arms, and then slowly gurgled over her neck and onto the roots of her hair. She listened to the oriole, to the water, and felt a sense of inner equilibrium. Morning thoughts of disgust and enmity melted away, making room for a revitalised readiness for the now.

On the way back to her apartment, she noticed a young man wearing inline skates lying slumped against a tree. The oriole had perched himself on the man's shoulder. His plumage was yellow and black, like the body of a wasp. As Rita came closer, the bird flew off.

Sleeping in Ihme Park in this cold seemed like a decidedly bad idea. She knelt down next to the young man.

"Hello?", she asked.

No answer.

"Hello?", she asked.

He lay there, expressionless.

She held her index finger beneath his nose and waited a few seconds. The lightest breath would have sufficed.

"Shut your mouth", she said.

No breath came.

Upon closer inspection, there was visible bruising around the neck of the dead man, marks that would fit a medium-sized pair of hands. The haematoma indicated internal bleeding in the soft tissue of the neck and damage to the larynx. They would find petechial haemorrhaging on the conjunctivae of the eyes and on the mucous membranes of the mouth. Bright red dots were already glowing among his freckles. Though most of his face was covered by a beard. A set of headphone cables snaked down from his ears over a yellow-and-blue down jacket to the phone he was holding in his hand. When Rita bent forward, she noticed they were still playing music. In her notepad, she marked down the time, details about his clothing and his body. She didn't think the inline skater could be any older than twenty-two. If she had to guess, she'd say third semester of a humanities degree, probably not originally from Hanover, but not from too far away either. From Salzgitter or Minden, perhaps. Although the tattoo that was peeping out near his collarbone suggested he had grown up in a major city. It looked more like a lark than a burning desire to immortalise something on his body. Like the kind of stupidity that comes from a sense that the world is doomed climatically or politically.

Rita dialled 110.

It rang a few times.

“Hannover police, what can I do for you?”

“Rita Aitzinger, my address is number 2 Im Toge, I would like to report the discovery of a corpse”, she said. “A young man around twenty years of age is lying slumped against a tree,

strangled, in Ihme Park, Peter-Fechter-Ufer, it's on your way to the water from Wielandstrasse."

"Are you on site, Ms —"

"Aitzinger, Criminal Investigation Unit 1."

"Are you on site, Ms Aitzinger?"

"Send a patrol car and tell the colleagues there's no need for the Crime Squad."

"But —"

She hung up and started her stopwatch. After 97 seconds, the police sirens rang out. Rita could still feel warm sunlight beneath her skin.

"Rita, I'm on my way to Waterloo, what —"

Ilia Schuster sounded half asleep.

"Ihme Park. I found a body."

"What?"

"Yeah, I know. What can I say."

"You found a dead body?"

"Yes, Ilia, I found a dead body. What do you want me to do? Corner of Peter-Fechter-Ufer and Wielandstrasse, head towards the water, you'll find us."

"Rita, sorry, I —"

"Bring the car. Bye."

Rita stretched and yawned, and her fingers, laced together behind her head, cracked.

A patrol car came to a halt on the corner of Wielandstrasse and Glocksestrasse with the siren blaring. Two beat cops got out and grabbed a roll of red-and-white crime-scene tape.

“Good morning, Superintendent Aitzinger”, said one of them. His police cap was too big for his head.

“I beg your pardon?”, she said.

“I –”

“Gloves.”

He didn’t know what to do. His colleague gave him a pair of disposable rubber gloves.

The body of the young man was still lying slumped against the tree, unchanged. His eyes were closed. Which was not always the case with strangulations. Rita suspected they had been closed after he was murdered. She spun the front wheel on his inline skates. The bearings were silent and only slowly began to cease their rotation. Brand new, ABEC 7s or 9s, she thought.

“Did it rain last night?”

“Ah, no, I don’t think –”, said the officer with the oversized cap. “A light drizzle, but I couldn’t tell you what time.”

“Do you by any chance have a powerful minicomputer with a stable internet connection on you?”

“Huh, um –” said the officer with the oversized cap.

“She’s talking about your phone”, said his colleague. “I’m on it, superintendent.”

“Excellent”, said Rita.

“Light drizzle between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m.”

“Would you mind securing the perimeter? And be generous with it.”

“Can do.”

She turned back towards the dead man. She carefully undid the zipper of his jacket. She found a surf-brand wallet in the breast pocket. You had to undo a press stud to open it. Inside, she found a 10-euro note and a 5-euro note, some small change, an ID card, a bank card, an organ-donor card, a student card from Leibniz University, a health-insurance card from AOK Lower Saxony, a loyalty card from the burger joint on Limmerstrasse, on which three of the eight squares had been stamped, the photo of a woman, a receipt from an electronics store for an external hard drive, and a small, cheap key. She looked at the passport photo and compared it to the face of the dead man. He hadn't had a beard at the time it was issued.

“Sebastian Tamm”, said Rita, “who knocked you off?”

3

Ha Liebli and Thorsten Gehlert arrived at the same time as Ilia Schuster, who had a large plastic case with him. They were all driving Volkswagens.

“Aitzinger”, said Thorsten Gehlert. He smiled. Rita shook Liebli's hand. She shook Gehlert's hand. She didn't smile.

“The victim is a twenty-two-year-old man by the name of Sebastian Tamm. By all appearances, the cause of death is strangulation, but we'll have to wait and see what the coroner says.”

“Does the family know?”, asked Liebli. You could see that she'd only just gotten up. She'd grabbed a cappuccino from a bakery.

“No. According to his organ-donor card he lives in Hessisch Oldendorf. Probably his parents’ address.”

“It’s lovely there”, said Gehlert, flinging his scarf over his shoulder.

“Not really, but sure”, said Rita. “Between eleven and one it rained. The victim’s clothing is only a little clammy. Presumably from the condensation. His wallet is still there, so presumably not a mugging, unless he had something else on him, of course. The tattoos, the fact he was at university and his clothes suggest a liberal, middle-class background, but as we know, that can be deceiving. There is a song is playing on repeat on his phone, some pop song from 2017. She opened her notebook. “*Never Forget You* by Zara Larsson and MNEK, anyone heard of it?”

“Nope”, said Ilia after pausing for a moment to think.

“Me neither”, said Liebli.

“Are there more uniforms on the way, or is this it?”, Thorsten asked the two constables.

“Just us two, Superintendent. Staff shortages.”

“Well then, get to it, start canvassing the residents”, said Rita, “Liebli, Gehlert, I suggest you two do the same. Schuster and I will secure the crime scene.”

“Okay”, said Liebli.

“Are we going to talk about how it is that you’ve found another body?”, Gehlert asked Rita.

“Not now”, said Liebli looking at her colleague.

“I’ve never once found a dead body. And I’ve been in the job quite a while longer than her.”

His scarf had slipped back onto his chest, but now he left it there.

“I come here every morning before work to look at the water. That’s when I noticed him.”

“And how do you know his name?”

“It was in his wallet.”

“So has the corpse been moved?”

“The zipper on the victim’s jacket was moved. You can issue a complaint.”

“Why do you look at the water every morning?”, asked Gehlert.

“Thorsten”, said Liebli.

“Yeah, yeah”, he said.

He and Liebli worked out with the beat cops who was going to do which apartments, and disappeared.

“Don’t forget the Ihme Centre”, Rita cried out as they walked off.

“Then we’ll need more people”, said the officer with the oversized cap.

“You’re more than welcome to train some”, said Rita.

Ilia grabbed a compact digital camera from the case. He started to document the scene.

“Good teeth, scruffy beard, small silver chain”, he said, “a yellow sweatshirt with a map and a comic figure on it.” Rita recorded his report on her phone. “He’s sitting against the tree facing the water. No smell of alcohol. The cold and post-mortem processes have left the skin tinged a bluish white.”

“Traces of struggle?”, asked Rita.

“Fingernails are clean. No scratch marks.”

“What do you think?”, asked Rita.

“It looks like he was just sitting there.”

“And?”

“As if he’d just been sitting there and then died. “

“Or someone killed him and brought him here.”

“What do you reckon he weighs? 75 kilos? 80?”

“Maybe we’ll find some tyre tracks. Something like a cargo bike.”

Rita went through the other pockets of the victim. Receipts, clingwrap, an N95 mask.

“Nothing over here”, yelled Ilia, who was standing near the edge of the river.

“No traces of inline skates either?”

“Bottle caps, cigarette butts, juice boxes.”

“Bag them.”

Rita inspected the tips of the thumb and the middle finger of the victim. No nicotine stains.

“He didn’t smoke, or at least not much. No cigarettes on him, no lighter either.” She held the screen and the back of his phone up to the matte light of the morning sun and looked at the card slots of his wallet. “No signs of drug use.”

“Hm”, said Ilia, who was busy filling little plastic bags with evidence after photographing their position.

The phone was still playing the same song on repeat. Sebastiana Tamm had received an email.

Without unlocking the phone, Rita could read the subject line and the first few sentences. An appeal for solidarity with ... from the student union.

“What happened here?”, asked Rita.

“A fight?”

“No.”

“Revenge?”

“No.”

“Sex?”

“Maybe.”

“Love?”

“Maybe, maybe”, said Rita.

“How does he look to you?”, Iliia asked.

She thought for a moment.

“Peaceful.”

[...]

18

Back in the day, everyone went to McDonald’s. But then they went to uni and learned that McDonald’s is bad. The burgers were made of rats and the Chicken McNuggets were made of other rats. The food made you old, it was poison. On top of that, the employees were enslaved and the profits were funnelled directly into the US military. So you weren’t allowed to go to McDonald’s. But everyone still wanted to go to McDonald’s because it was a childhood memory. And so one night, three men got together and came up with an idea. They would open a McDonald’s branch but pretend it was something else. The trick was that while the patties were still made of rats, they were locally sourced rats from the Calenberg countryside. And the trick was that they had a different name for everything. The burger was a Smash

Burger, the Chicken McNuggets were called Korean Chikin, and the Coke was Homemade Lemonade. But the most important trick was that the burger joint on Limmerstrasse itself had no name, which is why everyone called it the burger joint on Limmerstrasse. Which eventually led people to call the burger joint on Limmerstrasse the McDonald's on Limmerstrasse, with which the circle of mutual deception was etymologically closed.

“Have you eaten here before?”, asked Ilia.

“No”, said Rita. The shopfront windows were fogged up. Ilia opened the door.

“Superintendent Schuster?”, asked Patricia Pérez from behind clouds of smoke.

“Correct”, said Ilia, “how'd you know?”

“I looked up your picture on the net”, she said.

“Oh”, said Ilia.

“Aitzinger”, said Rita.

“Hello”, said Patricia.

“Have you got a minute?”

“Of course. Take a seat.”

“I'll have a UFO Burger”, said Ilia. “And a sparkling water.”

“And the lady?”

“The superintendent.”

“Nothing.”

“Coming up”, said Patricia and disappeared into the kitchen. Rita and Ilia sat down in a corner by the window. Apart from them, the only people there were young people staring at laptops wearing brightly coloured sweaters and with equally brightly coloured hair. There was a loud

sizzling coming from the kitchen and the kind of music you'd hear in a film about the moving story of a friendship.

“My parents used to make burgers sometimes”, said Ilia.

Not Rita's.

“So”, said Patricia Pérez, with Ilia's order on a tray, “what can I do for you?” Ilia grabbed his burger and made an “ah” sound.

“Sebastian Tamm”, said Rita.

“Sebastian Tamm”, said Patricia, “yes.” The name seemed to have an effect on her.

“Sebastian Tamm was found yesterday morning in Ihme Park, murdered”, said Ilia.

“That's really unfair”, said Patricia.

“What?”, asked Rita.

“He didn't deserve to die.”

“Who does deserve to die, in your opinion?”

“Nobody. Probably.”

“So death is unfair?”

“Well, no.”

“Which death is fair then?”

“Tyrannicide?”

“And the death penalty?”

“Rarely.”

“And when Mussolini was shot dead and strung up by his feet to roof of a petrol station?”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“But this death, the death of Sebastian Tamm?”

“Such a young guy? That’s awful.”

“So at what age would it have been okay to murder him?”

“You know what, I take it back.”

“So you think it’s fair that he’s dead?”

“Sebastian Tamm had a loyalty card from this burger joint”, said Ilia after coughing loudly.

“Did you already know him as a customer?”

“I gave him the card when we met up for the first time.”

“You met him through Dating App, is that right?”

“It’s kind of weird to talk about this stuff with the cops.”

“About which stuff?”, asked Ilia.

“Love”, said Patricia.

“Suppose it depends, right?”, said Ilia.

“Do you want to hear my story?”, asked Patricia.

“Okay”, said Ilia.

Rita looked at Patricia’s gnawed fingernails, the burst little veins in her eyes, the rapid movements of her pupils, the tattoo next to the collar of her shirt.

“Okay”, she began, “so I live in a little shack in south Linden. It’s a building in the shadow of two other buildings. But it’s beautiful. There’s ivy. There’s a little shelter over the bikes. The kitchen and the bathroom are on the bottom floor and I’ve got a bedroom upstairs. It’s not big.

Maybe fifty square metres of living space. The furniture has accrued over the years, the same with the crockery, the lamps, from a flea market somewhere or from Dithmar's department store, back when that was still around, out in List, but they closed down a while back. My grandparents moved to Linden in the sixties, like a lot of people from Ahrbergviertel. My grandfather worked for Telefunken, my grandmother for Bahlsen. She would bring me a cookie sometimes. I remember sitting in a car and looking out the back window. I saw a beehive, I saw a raven. Although I don't come from Spain, strictly speaking, I understand the language and can speak it too. I have it from my upbringing. But that's a while back. When the streets were covered in ice, I couldn't ride my bike so much. So I would go to the gym. For that, I bought myself some spandex leggings and a bright pink Nike top. I like looking at myself in the mirror when my muscles are flexed. I usually listen to podcasts when I exercise. I'm interested in everything, really, but especially economics and neuroscience. For a long time, I was in a relationship with a man from List. He would visit me in my shed, I only went to his place a couple of times. One time, I happened to be at Dithmar's, so I called him, but he didn't pick up. He was with another woman who wasn't allowed to know that we were also together. He shared an apartment with the other woman. It wasn't so bad. I loved him. But then the two of them moved away, I think it was to Münster, or Giessen, the man was smart and worked at the university. He was my tutor. Then he applied for a new position, because it's hard for academics, you know, where they can work. Now he teaches at Münster or Giessen. He knew all about EFTs and nothing about oral sex. No matter how often I told him I didn't like it when he stuck one of his fingers in my butt, he just wouldn't stop. When he left, I was alone. That was in the summer. During one single night I killed ten mosquitos and held them over a candle. Because they were full of my blood, they exploded. I rode my bike to the North Sea. I went camping, alone, and at night, someone grabbed hold of my wrist. I walked off and was afraid. Nothing happened. But the next morning my sleeping bag cover had disappeared from the tent. Sometimes, when I'm with friends, I notice that they have no

idea about really basic things, like: what is NATO for. And yet they still go on about it. That amazes me. That might sound arrogant, but I have the feeling that it's mainly men who have no idea what NATO is for or who the supreme commander is, and why it's always a four-star US general, but in conversations, they still take up the most space. Maybe I'm wrong. I was in a bad way for a long time. My heart was broken. I'd been an idiot. I had fallen in love with the wrong guy and hoped that if it came down to it, he would choose me. But for him, my little house was a shabby brothel where he didn't have to pay an entry fee. And yet, that little shack is the place where I live, and I really like it. For me, that's where the sun rises. There are beautiful pots and bowls, I have a few books that aren't bad, and I built my shoe rack myself. When I go to the hardware store, I know what I need to buy. I found a special branch from a tree and nailed it to the wall, and now you can hang your coat on it. It smells like fresh tea at my place. Light refracts through old glass. But for this man, these were all just elements of a brothel. For him, they were all hearts or handcuffs or whatever it is that you find in a brothel, I don't know any brothels. So I was in a pretty bad way, and the worst thing was that I had started to see my house as a brothel as well. I looked at the buzzer and instead of Pérez, it said *massage parlour* or *rub and tug*. There's nothing wrong with just wanting to fuck someone, there really isn't. There are people I just want to fuck, and we do it. We meet up and we fuck. There's nothing wrong with it, in fact, it can be great. But both people need to know that it's just a fuck. There are people I meet up with just because I want to talk to them, or because I want to play badminton with them, or because I know that they regularly sell drugs. I don't think there is anything wrong with a connection with an acquaintance being functional. But then don't say that you want to leave your girlfriend, don't say that we're going to go on holidays together, tell me this is just sex and ask me if that's okay. And stop sticking your finger in my butt. I don't like that. So anyway, a friend of mine said I'd spent long enough moping about and that I should sign up to Dating App and meet someone new, someone better. So I did. I picked out three photos that I looked good in and uploaded them. I didn't

write anything in my bio. Writing something in your bio screams of desperation. After one day, I had 170 likes and 40 matches, but most of them men only wrote to me to say that they wanted to rape me, which is a crime, so I reported their profiles, but I don't know if that achieved anything. I'm sure they have their reasons for their behaviour, or their demons. To be honest, I can hardly think of anything more annoying than being a heterosexual man. But that's another topic. With some it was nice. Chatting, that is. With Sebastian, for example. So we met up."

"Did you have the impression he was high?", asked Rita.

"No."

"How was your date?"

"Great. Sebastian was hygienic and a good listener."

"But?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you gave him a loyalty card on your first date. They were two stamps on the card, but there was no second date."

"Yes there was."

"Really?", asked Rita.

Despite the fact that the idea behind a UFO Burger is that it's less messy to eat – the sides of the bun are sealed in a waffle maker, creating its eponymous – Ilia's face was smeared with mincemeat, mayo and onions.

"You've got something on your –" said Rita.

"Mhw", said Ilia.

“We met up a few times”, said Patricia, “but I had the feeling something was off with him. Or, it was like he wasn’t really interested in dating. More like it was something you were supposed to do. I can’t really describe it.”

“So did you end it?”

“Sometimes he was completely empty. As if he were just a body, no thoughts. The opposite of a ghost.”

“Have you told this story often?”, asked Rita.

“Yeah. Talking about love reinforces social contacts.”

“Can you show us your chat?”, asked Ilia.

“Yeah, sure.” Patricia looked for it on her phone.

“Hm”, she said. *Cool, see you in a bit then :)* was the last message in her chat too. “We wrote to each other more after that. And we met up too.”

“Maybe Sebastian deleted the messages”, said Rita.

“I guess so”, said Patricia, “but why?”

“Did you sleep together?”, said Ilia.

“Not really.”

“Maybe he deleted the messages because he was scared of you”, said Rita.

“Or of himself”, said Patricia.

“Can we get access to those deleted messages?”, asked Rita.

“Hopefully”, said Ilia. He handed Patricia his card.

“Jonas Hartung, does that name mean anything to you?”

“No.”

“*Jonas, 24.*”

“No”, said Patricia.

“Have you ever had a heroin problem?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“Can I take a photo of you?”

“What for?”

“Our investigation.”

“Okay.”

Rita took a photo of Patricia. “Well, that’s it for now”, she said.

“Okay”, said Patricia.

“Nice try, by the way.”

“Sorry?”

“Trying to con us into believing that you don’t know what the inside of a brothel looks like.”

“What do you mean?”

“At least it was more believable than trying to convince us that you didn’t know whether it was Münster or Giessen. You even googled my colleague before we came.”

“Yeah, that was stupid of me, sorry.”

“What’s his name, anyway, your john the tutor?”

“Peter.”

