

Whiskey and Murder

Word Count: 1280

It was a bright spring morning and I was sitting cross-legged on the gravel outside of our house, repairing my sister's bicycle. I looked up and saw a large and luxurious four-wheel-drive vehicle snaking its way up our drive. It crunched to a halt in front of me and out stepped the ample figure of Mrs. Thorn. She waved gaily at me as was her usual manner and asked me where my mother was. Inside, I told her, and watched with interest as she wobbled into our front door. She must have been between fifty and sixty years old and had accepted the ageing of her body with the bad grace that is usual for her type. Her hair was dyed a vaguely offensive shade of red and a layer of make-up covered the spreading network of wrinkles in her face. She wore the obligatory green wax jacket and extravagant headscarf that was typical in this part of the country. She was actually a harmless and quite pleasant woman, despite the fact that she could sometimes irritate. Her husband was very wealthy and both of them were very well known in our village and beyond.

A sudden movement caught my attention and I was dismayed to see Mrs. Thorn's little Jack Russell leap from her still-open car and come trotting towards me. His name was Whiskey and he was nauseatingly pampered and spoilt by his childless owner. I have always had a dislike for small dogs but reserved a special disgust for Jack Russells. They invariably seem to have an air of smugness around them and, unlike all the other hapless dogs in their size category, can be astonishingly vicious. Their eyes are large and intelligent but far from a docile faithfulness they seem to disguise contempt and disregard for all things human.

Whiskey trotted over to where I was industriously occupied but I shooed him away. "Get lost," I hissed and was pleased to see him alter his course to occupy himself otherwise.

I worked away in the sun, the tranquillity only occasionally broken when I rummaged around in the greasy tool-box beside me. From the meadow behind me came the constant chattering and cheeping of

our yearly crop of baby geese: fifteen goslings in total, all confined in the cage my father had built for them. As I contentedly laboured away, quietly humming to myself, I failed to notice that, not twenty yards behind me, those tiny pattering voices were being extinguished one by one.

Some time later, as I had almost reassembled my sister's bike, my father came out of the front door. He said that he was off to pick some goose-grass, a strange and clingy plant which grew in great confusions along all the hedges at this time of year, and which the goslings munched voraciously. Suddenly I became aware of the ominous silence that had enveloped me in the last twenty minutes and an unrecognised apprehension began to creep into my mind. Unawares, my father crunched past me on the gravel, opened the gate into the meadow and walked to the gosling cage.

And then it came, a scream, almost choked with disbelief. I leapt up and ran into the meadow, stopping beside my father who was pale and leaning heavily against the gosling cage, as if he were about to faint. Reluctantly, I focused on the interior of the enclosure. The carnage that I saw there was worse than I could have imagined. Fifteen yellow little bundles, strewn across the grass they had trampled down with their tiny feet. Their blood was shockingly red and fresh against their clean and fluffy down. One lay on its back, its wrinkled feet kicking lazily into the blue sky. And worse than all of this was the profound silence that lay over the whole scene. Never again would they chatter and chirp and cheep and twitter in their loveable, high pitched voices.

Beside me my father was breathing heavily. He had brought up every single one of these animals. He had laid their eggs in the incubator, he had turned and sprayed them with water every day, he had peeled them out of their shells and dabbed the blood off their bedraggled newly hatched down. All of them had lived in a cardboard box in our kitchen, where they had charmed and entertained everyone that saw them.

At that moment Whiskey came sauntering towards us. His eyes had the typical what-do-you-want expression and my heart dropped when I saw what was stuck to his nose. It was a piece of damning, evidence: a single, half-developed, yellow feather. I knew that my father had seen it too, and then he

spoke with a surprisingly calm tone of voice.

“I’m going to kill that fucking dog”, he said and turned around and walked into the house. At that moment my mother and Mrs. Thorn appeared, chatting about some inanity, no doubt. They stopped when my father abruptly pushed past them with an air of thunder all around him. Uneasily they walked towards me. I waited until Mrs. Thorn had taken in the slaughter in the cage to a satisfactory degree before I fixed her eyes and told her coldly whom the culprit was. Then I too turned and walked towards the house, just as the first sobs of shock and denial began emanating from her flabby throat.

Halfway to the house I began to run and seconds later I burst into my father’s study. My worst fears were realised when I found him loading the twelve-bore shotgun. He had ripped open a fresh box of cartridges which had spilled onto the floor around him. He was just sliding two into the breech as I entered and snapped the gun barrel shut with an expression of murderous determination. My heart sank even more when I saw what he had loaded into the gun. It was not the conventional shot, used for shooting birds and other small animals such as rabbits, but the cartridges which contained a single rifled slug of lead, used for killing much larger beasts. The projectile, which was about the size of my thumb, would pass through Whiskey as if he were a cloud of smoke, and would only come to a halt at the bottom of a one foot crater.

With undeniable reluctance I blocked the door but my father pushed past me roughly. I gathered myself and chased after him and managed to grab his arm. “Get off me” he grunted but I hung on and briefly we wrestled in the hall-way. I was expecting an eardrum-splitting explosion at any second and a cloud of plaster dust to settle over us, but thankfully this did not happen. Gradually the almost insane rage in my father’s eyes was replaced with rationality and his struggles became weaker. Then, without a word he turned round and with a hanging head returned to his study.

Outside, my mother was attempting to calm the hysterical Mrs. Thorn. With detachment I watched her flailing around until my mother was eventually able to get her into her car. Mrs. Thorn was just about to close the door when she stopped, as if remembering something.

“*Whiskey!*” She shouted, an indisputable edge of repulsion in her voice. The wretched animal appeared a moment later, trotting nonchalantly across the gravel. It stopped briefly to sniff at and then urinate over my mother’s roses, before it leaped up into the car which growled to life and sped hastily down our drive and away.

© Caspar von Wrede 1999