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*Chapter 15*

*((pp 53-57))*

The woman, so it seemed to Annegret, appeared to have made even more of an impression on her husband than on herself. *Now of all times, when he wanted to take the next step, the crucial one.* Thoughtfully she was setting the unwieldy backrests of the settee upright, when Hertha came into the room.

“Well, I’m glad to see you folding up the damned thing yourself for once, it was you that brought it here.”

Annegret smiled. In seconds she pushed back the seat part, fitted in the backrests, drew the cover over and stuffed it firmly down the sides, buffeted the four cushions with the edge of her hand so that the ears stood up and folded her arms over chest: “I’m surprised you can watch TV by yourselves.”

“You always had a knack!” Hertha stopped herself making a remark about her son-in-law whom from the start she had not trusted one inch because of the way his eyebrows met above the bridge of his nose. “But it’s still not coming with us! The coal company’ll refund it all.”

They folded up the sheets, pushed the chairs back in their places. “I thought it would get at dad more.”

“He was never any use when it came to butchering. And now. He couldn’t even get the sow fattened up properly. Deliberately. Nobody can tell me stories. There was something wrong, that it didn’t get any fatter. That was his wee scheme. That way the whole thing kept on being put off. If I hadn’t arranged a time and held a gun to his head, I would still be sitting here at Easter. Yes, you all always felt sorry for him. You always stood up for him.”

Annegret pressed the pillow and the sheet against her mother's chest.

“In that respect he's really got nothing to complain about”. Hertha went out of the room. With the bedding in her arms, Annegret followed her into the lobby.

The door of the wash-house flew open, and over her mother's head Annegret saw the woman against the light. They stood still. Diana Kampradt spoke.

*It all came so easily to me, thought Annegret, school, agricultural college, didn't I feed the cattle, stood calmly among them all, and if they pushed too close against me, they got a poke in the sides, I wasn't anybody's fool, even with motorbikes, I wasn't going to throw myself away, I had such a high opinion of myself, until Wolfgang took me, I even wanted to learn to pay for my pride, but there was no end to it, then Sabine came along, there wasn't much of me left for me, I would never have dreamt, that one day my last bit of pride would be to bear everything.*

*Hertha's back stiffened. People like us, we've slaved all our lives and the children with us, just wasn't any other way, without them we'd have been stuck, the little one had bad luck, we couldn't do anything, if the bosses decided something, it was done, open-cast, the power station, we had work because of it, only things didn't turn out for the best in the end, if it snowed, then after three days only the footprints behind one were still white.*

Hertha got herself moving again, round to the left, up the stairs. In the girls' room the women put the bedding down.

“Mummy,” Annegret began quietly, “who is this woman?”

Hertha shrugged.

“You must have got her from somewhere?”

“For our very last pig I couldn’t find a butcher anywhere. All the villages from here to Leipzig are gone. And in the villages that are still standing around the open-cast pits, hardly anyone still keeps a pig. There’s no money any more, when you deliver it, two hundred and fifty marks, if you’re lucky.”

“You can buy everything now, no one wants to take on all that work.”

“And if you’ve got to pay the butcher as well,” complained Hertha, “ten marks an hour, from six until three, and you want to give them a packet of sausages, so that they come again. Plus herbs, extra skins, meat inspector another twenty marks, it just isn’t worth the effort.”

“And where did you get the woman from?”

“There wasn’t anyone in the village I could ask. But then in October I bumped into old Everten one day.”

“She’s still alive?”

And how. No one’s going to get me out of here, she says, and if I have to jump in the pit in the end. She was always a bit mad; I run into her, how are Albrecht and Elke she asks? I couldn’t get away. Finally I asked her, if she knows someone around here who can still slaughter a pig, an’ she says, she knows someone, when is it to be. I didn’t know off the top of my head, an’ she says, when I did know, I should tell her.”

“Did you go into her house?”

I had to, of course. There was no sign of her. I thought, with all the cats, the place must smell terrible.”

“And what does it look like inside?”

“I wouldn’t have believed it. It was very small, the kitchen, but shiny as a new pin. It smelt of the herbs, which were hanging everywhere – I felt a bit dizzy.”

“And?”

“She said, she had been expecting me, an’ started blathering away. When she poured out a tea for me I got goose pimples. I didn’t sit down, just said we wanted to slaughter on the 5<sup>th</sup> of the 12<sup>th</sup>, a Saturday, an’ could she really? And she: I could rely on her.”

“Didn’t you ask who she is?”

“I couldn’t bear being in the room a moment longer, was glad to be out in the fresh air again. Didn’t even tell Albrecht where I’ve found someone.”

They straightened the sheets, drew back the covers and placed the bedding they had brought on top. Carefully – and not out of consideration of those who were still asleep above – they went downstairs.

“When the pig is cut up we’ll have to bring them a coffee. Maybe they’ll want a roll too. I’m curious to know what the woman will have for us to drink,” said Hertha, when they were in the kitchen again.

## *Chapter 16*

*((pp57-71))*

The four of them dragged the pig on the short ladder and lifted it onto the trestles in front of the sty. Their teeth clenched the three men watched the woman.

“The stove door,” she instructed Sabine in the washhouse, “leave it ajar, so that there’s a draught, small pieces of wood, really get the steam going and keep on adding water, so that it doesn’t boil.” She opened the door to the corridor. Two steps in front

of her Hertha and Annegret with the bedding in their arms came to an abrupt stop. Sabine stuck her head through the door beside the woman. “Woman is not a gift and not a victim,” said Diana Kampradt to Annegret and smiled at Hertha. “Mother Hulda was out of luck here for fifty years and it wasn’t the fault of the girls.”

The two women continued up the stairs and the door shut in Sabine’s face.

Outside she poured a bucket of cold water over the pig to make the capillaries of the skin contract and handed out the bell scrapers. “Now decently hot water, sixty, seventy degrees. Then we don’t need any shaving cream. With the ladle she scalded the upper half of the pig and tugged at the skin as a test. As soon as the bristles came away, Wolfgang, Achim and Sonja went on scraping. Kathrin and René brought the buckets of water from the steaming washhouse. They were soon warm. Achim took off his jacket.

René poured the water over the pig for the men. The rapid scratching of the bell scrapers on the skin sounded like the barking of dogs. The butcher had her own pail and cleaned the difficult spots. When she scraped the rear and around the genitals, Sonja held the leg with the tips of her fingers.

Wolfgang nudged Achim: “A wee girl comes to Fritz: *Fritz, I’m bleeding*. Says Fritz: *Well, where then? – Between my legs.- You can’t be? – It’s true! – Show me*. The wee girl lifts her up skirt. *Bloody hell*, cries Fritz. *The balls have been rubbed clean away*.”

The butcher laughed so loudly, that the men’s grins vanished.

She scalded the stomach and looked at Kathrin and Sonja. The morning air had turned their skin rosy. Sonja’s light brown hair hung down to her shoulders. Her daughter stood ready with a full pail. She had long curly black hair and was smiling mischievously. *Just twenty*, thought the butcher: “Come over here!” Kathrin came round the ladder. The butcher turned her round to face the pig, pressed the bell scraper

into her hand and stood behind her. “You’ve surely got your hands on someone before?”

In the doorway Sabine grimaced. She watched as the butcher took her cousin by the arm, as the white shirt stretched around the red anorak.

“Here on the stomach there aren’t so many bristles. And they’re softer.”

“Like the ones on my brother’s chin,” laughed Kathrin. Her arm relaxed; willingly she allowed herself to be guided by the butcher.

“He’s still shaving with an eraser,” exclaimed Sabine. René laughed along with them.

“Take care around the teats,” said the butcher and released Kathrin’s hand which went on scraping alone.

“Ow, damn it!” Achim dropped his scraper. “Watch where you’re pouring the water.” He shook his hand.

René wiped the condensation from his glasses with his index finger.

“The lad can’t see a thing,” exclaimed Wolfgang.

René pulled his shirt out of his trousers and wiped his glasses with it. But the lenses steamed up again immediately when he held the pail over the sow. “I wasn’t made for fog.”

“Trying using washing-up liquid,” suggested Sabine.

The butcher dipped the front leg in the pail. “Or spit.”

“Spit?” He spat on the lenses. Sonja made a face.

“Old divers’ trick.” She pulled off the toes from the front trotter and scraped the snout clean with scraper and knife.

“The old remedies are the best,” said Achim. “When new football boots used to pinch during a game because they weren’t broken in yet, we stood behind a tree and pissed into them. With shoes like that you had a nose for the goal.”

They turned the sow over.

Below, where the cobble stones of the yard stopped, the water trickling away became clearer; by a crooked apple tree the damp earth stood out darkly. The streamlet dribbled away in thin veins beside the enclosed place for the ashes. A couple of bristles which had floated along to the last cobblestones, stuck to clumps of earth, grass and couch-grass stalks. Others had been carried to the edge of the gutter which gently led down the length of the yard. Under the clothes line, stretched from the garden to the hen house, a clot of blood floated in a little pit. A hoof toe had been flung as far as the front door of the house, two others lay in a dirty puddle in front of the byre, which had been empty for a month. Around the ladder, as far as the scalding water had splashed, there was a ring of everything that had been scraped and washed off: bristles, scraps of skin, pig faeces, mud from the yard, streaks of blood. In the middle which was repeatedly washed clean stood the butcher and her helpers. The watercourse streamed from the ladder down as far as the apple trees. It was a cold December morning.

The butcher burnt off the remaining bristles with the gas burner. There was an acrid smell. Wolfgang scrubbed the pig with the brush under cold water. She drew the knife along the skin once more. The pig glowed fresh and pink. In some places there were red stripes from the determined scraping.

They heaved up the pig first at one end, then at the other in order to clean the ladder. She gouged out the eyes and the inner ear. Apart from the hole in the temple, the head now had four ugly spots. René watched as the bloody bits of gristle were thrown into



the offal pail. “The most important parts of the body taste the worst,” he said to his father.

“That depends. My mother ate the eyes of the carp. That was the best bit, she always said, when she spat out the pip.”

With careful thrusts the butcher exposed the heel sinews of the back legs and forced the bent wood between tendons and bone. She tied the piece of wood to the ladder with the rope with which she had led the sow from the sty. Four of them lifted the ladder off the trestles and leant it against the stall. Crucified, its head hanging down, the pig’s innards slid into its chest. Blood ran from the wounds in its head, in its chest, from mouth and nose.

She took a new knife, sharpened it on the steel and cut the skin from the pelvis to the head. The men put the trestles beside the car trailer in front of the through barn and placed the long hay ladder on top. With the cut-off knife the butcher opened up the pelvis below the anus and drew the cut cleanly between the haunches through the stiff white connective tissue. “The lock.” Audibly she separated the hip bones from the joint gristle.

“Cracked it.” René looked at her fingers.

She changed knives and cut out the bladder and the genitals. “Does anyone want the bladder?”

Sonja said no. “When we were children we inflated them. Then we had a balloon to play with.”

“I’d like smoked brawn better,” said Wolfgang.

“I can make all of that.”

Achim nudged Wolfgang: “Just recently I separated a litter of rabbits, so that the bucks don’t screw themselves stupid. Sonja looks over my shoulder and asks how I can tell the bucks apart from the females. I say: *You have to blow*, and hold one up for her. She really does blow between the hind legs and says in all seriousness: *I don’t see anything!*” He held up his hand confidently between his mouth and Wolfgang’s ear: “My old dear doesn’t have a clue about...”

“Achim, something for you to lick!” The butcher threw the genitals to him at waist height. As a reflex he caught them. The surprise in his face turned to disgust as he felt the flesh in his fingers. They stared at the butcher, who burst out laughing. “There’s quite a lot of blood on it. Do you think she was having her period?” Achim looked foolish. “Well, now if it comes down to it, if it comes down to it.”

Wolfgang took a step away from his brother-in-law: *Idiot, she would have done anything for him, if he had done the right thing, if he had wanted to.*

“Nothing but filth.” Sabine giggled behind Achim. He threw the genitals into the pail next to the eyes and went into the house.

“By the way! Has anyone here got her red letter days?” Frowning the butcher looked over to the women. Even René knew what she meant, although he hadn’t heard the phrase before.

Pouting, Sonja shook her head.

“Na,” said Sabine shocked.

“Just a little bit.” Kathrin grimaced. She had a small pretty face with dark eyes and round cheeks. Sabine felt something like malicious pleasure.

“Have you ever heard that then a woman has no business being around when an animal is slaughtered?” Diana Kampradt put her hands on her waist. “That she spoils the meat?”

Wolfgang nodded. Sonja pushed her lower lip over her upper lip and looked at her daughter.

“Nonsense. As old as the Bible. Woman as unclean creature! That’s where the whole business starts.” The butcher looked angry. “Just stand your woman. As long as the *sow* isn’t on heat, the sausage will taste just fine. A small basin.” She emptied the bladder and rinsed it out. Wash it down and get it in onto the slaughtering table.” She washed her hands and carefully, so as not to cut the guts, opened up the stomach between the double rows of teats.

“How many breasts a pig has!” Kathrin was astonished. “They must be fertile beasts.”

“That’s the milky way. The piglets dream of it.” She reached into the abdominal cavity, freed the rectum and lifted out the entrails. They slopped out a little, steamed and smelt.

Achim came out of the washhouse looking pleased. The butcher saw his loosened tongue. “When the sow is hanging from the hook, that’s when the first glass is poured.”

Sonja, who had looked at her husband reproachfully and didn’t rightly know whether she should be annoyed or ashamed, glanced up in surprise. Achim didn’t have to be told twice, turned round and straightaway brought a not quite full bottle and glasses. “Minty. Hertha won’t cough up anything else yet.”

“The green stuff.” Contemptuously Wolfgang held out two glasses. Achim poured. Wolfgang handed the butcher a glass.

“It really is a bit early,” said Sonja hesitantly.

“When she’s right, she’s right.” Achim laughed. The four of them clinked glasses. They emptied them in one go, except for Sonja, who made a face, although she liked the sticky liqueur.

“A tub.” Wolfgang and René lifted the basin under the intestines. The butcher tied and cut the gullet a hands breadth away from the stomach. The innards tumbled heavily into the basin. She cut at the breast cavity, detached the diaphragm from the ribs, revealed the liver, the heart and the lungs. “In the slaughterhouse each worker only makes a couple of movements, and they have to be precise, as exact as the organs in their place in the pig. Henry Ford got his big idea from the slaughterhouses in Chicago: assembly line, division of labour, mass production. The same principle only in reverse: putting together uniform parts and a metal skin over it.” The thick pale and dark red flaps hung at the sow’s breast, as she carefully pulled the gall bladder from the liver.

“Someone who hasn’t got a sure hand,” said Sonja, “can spoil the whole meat.”

“How can you make a pig out of a pig?” Sabine called over.

“Anything can happen,” said Sonja. “The butcher accidentally let the gall squirt out and, although he immediately rinsed everything in lots of water, afterwards the liver sausage didn’t taste right. In November seventy six. I remember it because of Biermann.” She thought for a moment. “Such a small sow and such a bitter aftertaste.”

The breastbone didn’t cause the butcher any trouble. She tugged away the gullet and the windpipe, cut out the tongue, the heart, opened the gorge, washed it out with cold water and – Sonja gave her the butcher’s hook – hung the whole viscera on the ladder behind her. She drew the lard from the stomach, when a small man with a doctor’s bag came across the yard, detached the kidneys from the stomach fat and removed the urachus.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.” With his free hand he tapped his grey hat. The people around the butcher pretended that they only now noticed him and nodded in greeting. The butcher turned round, the kidneys in her left hand, the knife in her right.

“My, my!” His eyes narrowed behind his glasses: “Silbermann.” He inclined his head forward a little.

“Kampradt”. She cut into the kidneys.

“Pleased to meet you. A tidy pig. Good weather for slaughtering, cold and dry, the meat cools off more quickly. How much did it weigh?” Only now did he stop looking at the woman.

“What do you think?” Diana Kampradt reckoned the man – smooth shaven, big sticking out old man’s ears – to be in his mid-sixties. The nose she guessed to be reddened by the morning cold rather than habitual drinking.

“I’ve never seen such a small sow at the Albrechts. Hanging there it can’t be three hundredweight. If you could lend a hand.” He pressed his bag against Kathrin and took out a little knife, a pair of tweezers and two little glass discs. “No one wants fat sows any more. Nowadays bread is barely covered, not properly spread. Instead of sausage, people want ham on it. You can take the bag into the washhouse now, my dear, but careful. If you’ll allow me?” He nipped a bit off the kidneys in the butcher’s hand and stepped behind the ladder to the viscera.

The butcher placed the kidneys in the bowl: “Where the blood is.” She washed her hands and shaped the white lard on the board into a flat, round cake: “On the ladder.”

The meat inspector stuck his knife into the lungs, cut off a piece of muscle and stepped back, made a sweeping gesture with his hand, as the butcher bent down and cut into the head behind the ears.

“If I may ask, I know most of the slaughterers in the district: You’re not from around here?”

“I’m not a stranger.” She held the head by the snout, by the ears, twisted it round with a crack, breaking the neck and drew the knife down between occipital bone and first cervical vertebra. “A basin.”

Silbermann ran his tongue across his lower molars and followed the others into the house. The butcher took the axe and pushed the basin to the right to the chopping block. She held the left half of the head firmly by the ear, at the last blow the right side fell into the basin. “A plate.” It all happened more quickly than René had thought. The butcher nodded at the jackets hanging on the wall. “They have to go.” Kathrin took them away. On the slaughtering table she scraped the brain onto the plate – in fact the bolt had gone through the temple and crushed the front part of the brain.

Silbermann bent over the half skull on the table to examine the lymph glands. “The pall bearer who stabbed someone at the store in Borna in January, at least that’s why he’s on trial now, says on that evening he downed twenty three beers and sixteen kirsch whiskies. Try to imagine it. Maybe he was even driving around in his Moskvich in that state.”

“Terrible way to play around.” René shook his head.

“From January there’ll be a 0.8 alcohol limit for drivers in the East,” said Sonja.

Silbermann laughed and that got the others started, including Sonja. “The brain box is twenty six and doesn’t even have a driving license.”

“What alcohol level,” asked René, “do you have after twenty three beers and sixteen kirsch whiskies?”

“Four, I would say.” Silbermann nodded thoughtfully. “You only survive something like that in the emergency ward.”

“For all that he still had a good memory,” said Wolfgang.

René followed the butcher into the yard. “‘If language could produce material goods, the bletherers would be the richest people in the world.’ Joseph Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, known as Stalin.”

“Lawyers get rich with language,” said Sabine.

“If they can do more than twist words.” It annoyed Wolfgang the way she was standing around at the door. He had to pull himself together, not to kick the broom on which she was leaning. Sabine made faces behind her father’s back.

“Now the willy has to decide which side it wants to be on!” She split the pig in two along the spine.

“There’s something I’d still like,” Silbermann looked at her with narrowed eyes again, as if he wasn’t looking at all, but thinking instead, “to ask you. It’s no business of mine, I mean, maybe I’m a little, but was your father a butcher?”

She smiled warmly and made room for the meat inspector. “Would you like to take a look at the marrow as well?”

“Of course,” said Kathrin, “the two halves are never completely equal, and they can’t be, because only one half has the pecker.”

“Dresses to the left,” exclaimed Sabine. René grinned. The meat inspector went into the house.

“On the left where the heart beats.” Sonja tried to make a joke about herself. The butcher cut the little curly tail out of the rear.

“This one here, this long one,” Kathrin prodded the tail with her index finger, “that’s a pecker the way my brother likes it. He can grip it like a macaroni and hold it up and look at everything from below.”

The butcher reached under her apron and brought out a big safety pin, which she thrust into the skin just behind the cut, where the tail was a little bloody, past the gristle and out through the skin again. “A butcher also has to keep the jokers happy. That’s part of the job.”

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