



"Remarkable, sparse, chilling." —Peter Millar, *The Times*

THE MURDER FARM

ANDREA MARIA SCHENKEL

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Translated from the German by Anthea Bell

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I spent the first summer after the end of the war with distant relations in the country.

During those weeks, that village seemed to me an island of peace. One of the last places to have survived intact after the great storm that we had just weathered.

Years later, when life had gone back to normal and that summer was only a happy memory, I read about the same village in the paper.

My village had become the home of “the murder farm,” and I couldn’t get the story out of my mind.

With mixed feelings, I went back.

The people I met there were very willing to tell me about the crime. To talk to a stranger who was nonetheless familiar with the place. Someone who wouldn’t stay, would listen, and then go away again.

*Lord have mercy upon us!
Christ have mercy upon us!
Lord have mercy upon us!
Christ, hear us!
Christ, hear our prayer!
God the Father in Heaven, have mercy upon them!
God the Son, Redeemer of the world, have mercy upon them!
God the Holy Ghost, have mercy upon them!
Holy Trinity, Three in One, have mercy upon them!*

*Holy Virgin Mary, pray for them!
Holy Mother of God, pray for them!
Blessed Virgin of all virgins, pray for them!*

*Holy St. Michael,
pray for them!
All holy angels and archangels,
All holy choirs of blessed spirits,
Holy St. John the Baptist,
pray for them!*

*All holy patriarchs and prophets,
Holy St. Peter,
Holy St. Paul,
Holy St. John,
pray for them!*

*All holy apostles and evangelists,
Holy St. Stephen,
Holy St. Lawrence,
pray for them!*

*All holy martyrs,
Holy St. Gregory,
Holy St. Ambrose,
pray for them!*

Holy St. Jerome,

Holy St. Augustine,

pray for them!

All ye holy bishops and confessors,

All ye holy Fathers of the Church,

All ye holy priests and Levites,

All ye holy monks and hermits,

pray for them!

He enters the place early in the morning, before daybreak. He heats the big stove in the kitchen with the wood he has brought in from outside, fills the steamer with potatoes and water, puts the steamer full of potatoes on a burner.

He walks out of the kitchen, down the long, windowless corridor and over to the cowshed. The cows have to be fed and milked twice a day. They stand side by side in a row.

He speaks to them quietly. He is in the habit of talking to animals while he works in the shed with them. The sound of his voice seems to have a soothing effect on the cattle. Their uneasiness appears to be lulled by the regular singsong of that voice, the repetition of the same words. The calm, monotonous sound relaxes them. He's known this kind of work all his life. He enjoys it.

He spreads a layer of fresh straw over the old one, fetching it from the barn next door. There is a pleasant, familiar smell in the shed. Cows don't smell like pigs. There's nothing sharp or assertive about their odor.

After that he fetches hay. He gets that from the barn, too.

He leaves the connecting door between the barn and the cowshed open.

While the animals feed, he milks them. He is a little worried about that. The cows aren't used to being milked by him. But his fears that one of them will refuse to let him milk her had been unfounded.

The smell of the cooked potatoes drifts over to the cowshed. Time to feed the pigs. He tips the potatoes out of the steamer and straight into a bucket, and then he crushes them before taking them to the pigs in the sty.

The pigs squeal when he opens the pigsty door. He tips the contents of the bucket into the trough and adds some water.

His work is done. Before leaving the house he makes sure the fire in the

stove is out again. He leaves the door between the barn and the cowshed open. He pours the milk from the cans straight on the dunghill. Then he puts the cans back in their place.

He would go back to the cowshed that evening. He'd feed the dog, who always cringes away into a corner, whimpering, when he arrives. He'd tend the animals. And while he worked he would always take great care to give a wide berth to the heap of straw in the far left-hand corner of the barn.

Betty, age 8

Marianne and me always sit together in school. She's my best friend. That's why we always sit with each other.

Marianne specially likes my mama's yeast dumplings. When my mama bakes those dumplings always take one to school for Marianne, or to church if it's a Sunday. I took her one that Sunday, but then I had to eat it myself because she wasn't at church.

What do we do together? Well, we play games, like cops and robbers, catch, hide and seek. In summer we sometimes play shops at my house. We make ourselves a little stall by the kitchen garden fence. Mama always lets me have a tablecloth and we can put things out on it: apples, nuts, flowers, colored paper, anything we can find.

Once we even had chewing gum, my auntie brought it. It tastes lovely, like cinnamon. My auntie says the children in America eat it all the time. My auntie works for the Yanks, you see. And now and then she brings us chewing gum and chocolate and peanut butter. Or bread in funny green cans. Once last summer there was even ice cream.

My mama doesn't like that so much, because Auntie Lisbeth's boyfriend comes from America too, and he's all black.

Marianne's always saying her papa is in America as well, and he's going to come fetch her very soon; she's sure he is. But I don't believe it. Because Marianne does tell fibs sometimes. Mama says you shouldn't tell fibs, and when Marianne tells another of her stories we quarrel. Then we usually each take our things away from the shop and we can't go on playing and Marianne goes home.

The Christ Child brought me a dolly for Christmas, and Marianne was very envious. She only has a really old one; it's a wooden dolly and it used to be her mama's. So then Marianne started telling stories again. How her papa is coming soon to take her away to America. I told her I wouldn't go on being her friend if she kept telling so many fibs. After that she didn't say anymore about it.

Sometimes we go tobogganing in the meadow behind our farm. There's a hill that is great for tobogganing; everyone in the village always goes there. If you don't brake in time you shoot right down into the hedge. Then there's usually trouble at home. Marianne has to bring her little brother along sometimes, when she's looking after him. He clings to your skirts all the time. I don't have a little brother, just a big sister, but that's not always much fun either. She often makes me really mad.

When Marianne's little brother fell over in the snow he started crying and he'd wet his pants, too, and then Marianne had to go home and there was bad trouble. Because she hadn't looked after him properly and he'd wet his pants again and so on. Then she was very sad in school next day and told me she wanted to go away because her grandpa is so strict and so is her mama.

A few days ago she told me the magician was back. She'd seen him in the woods, she said, and she knows he'll take her to her papa. Yes, she said, she saw the magician. She told me that story once before, last autumn, right after school began and I didn't believe her, there's no such thing as magicians, and you bet your life there's no such thing as magicians who can magic you a papa who's supposed to be in America. So then I quarreled with her again and she cried and said there is so

magician, and he has all colored bottles in his backpack and other colored things and sometimes he just sits there humming to himself. So he must be a magician, just like in our reading book at school. Then I shouted, "Liar, liar, pants on fire!" and she cried and ran home. And because she wasn't in school on Saturday and she loves my mama's yeast dumplings so much, I took one to church for her on Sunday. But she wasn't there either. Mama said because none of them were there maybe they'd gone to visit family. Over in Einhausen where her grandpa's brother lives. So I just ate the dumpling myself.

Marianne lies in bed awake. She can't get to sleep. She hears the wind howling. It sweeps over the farm like the Wild Hunt. Grandma's often told her stories about the Wild Hunt and the Trud, an evil spirit in female form. She always tells them on the long, dark, frosty nights between Christmas and New Year.

"The Wild Hunt races on before the wind, fast as the storm clouds or even faster. The huntsmen are mounted on horses as black as the Devil," Grandma had told her. "Wrapped in black cloaks. Hoods drawn right down over their faces. Eyes glowing red, they race on. If anyone's rash enough to go out and about on such a night, the Wild Hunt will pick him up. At the gallop," said Grandma. "Just like that—got 'im!"

And she made a snatching movement with her hand, as if seizing something to extinguish it.

"Got 'im! And they take the poor fellow high up in the air and sweep him away with them. Up, up, and away to the clouds, they sweep him right up into the sky. He has to go with the stormy wind. The hunt never lets him go again, the hunt howls and laughs with scorn. Ho, ho, ho," laughed Grandma in a deep voice.

Marianne could almost see the Wild Hunt picking a man up and laughing as it carried him away.

"And what happens then, Grandma?" Marianne asked. "Doesn't he ever come down again?"

"Oh yes, oh yes," replied Grandma. "Sometimes he comes down again, sometimes not. The Wild Hunt drags the poor devil on with it as long as it likes. Sometimes it puts him down again quite gently once it's had its fun. Sometimes. But mostly the poor man's found somewhere the next morning with all his bones broken. His whole body all scratched and

bruised, smashed to pieces. Many a man's never been seen again. The Wild Hunt has taken him straight to the Devil."

Marianne keeps thinking about the story of the Wild Hunt. She'd never leave the house in a storm like this. The Wild Hunt isn't going to get her. Not likely!

She lies awake for a long time. How long she doesn't know. Her little brother sleeps in the same room. The beds are arranged so that they lie almost side by side. She in her bed; he in his small cot.

She hears his calm, regular breathing, they're lying so close. He breathes in and out. Sometimes, when she can't sleep, she listens to that sound in the night, tries to match her own breathing to his, breathes in when he breathes in, breathes out when he breathes out.

That sometimes helps, and then she gets tired, too, and falls asleep herself. But it doesn't work tonight. She's lying there awake.

Should she leave her bed? Grandpa will be terribly cross again. He doesn't like it when she gets up in the night and calls for her mother or her grandmother.

"You're old enough to sleep alone now," he says, and sends her back to bed.

There's a line of light shining under the door. Only faintly, but she sees a narrow strip of light.

So there's still somebody awake. Her mother, maybe? Or Grandma?

Marianne plucks up all her courage and puts her bare feet out of bed. It's cold in the room. She pushes the covers aside. Very quietly, so as not to wake her little brother, she tiptoes to the door. Cautiously, in case the floorboards creak.

Slowly, carefully, she pushes the door handle down and quietly opens the door. She steals down the passage and into the kitchen.

There's still a light on in the kitchen. She sits at the window and looks
out into the night. It gives her the creeps, and she starts shivering in her
thin nightie.

Then she notices that the door to the next room is ajar.

Her mother must have gone to the cowshed, Marianne thinks. She opens
the door to the next room wide. Another door opens out of that room into
the passage leading to the cowshed and the barn.

She calls for her mother. For her grandmother. But there is no answer.

The little girl goes down a long, dark feed alley. She hesitates, stops.
Calls for her mother again, for her grandmother. Rather louder this time.
Still no answer.

She sees the cattle in the shed chained to the iron rings of the feeding
trough. The cows' bodies move calmly. The place is lit only by an oil
lamp.

Marianne sees the door to the barn standing open at the end of the feed
alley.

Her mother will be in the barn. She calls for her mother again. There's
still no answer.

She goes on along the feed alley toward the barn. She stops again at the
door, undecided. She can't hear a single sound in the darkness. She takes
a deep breath and goes in.

*Holy St. Mary Magdalene,
pray for them!
Holy St. Catherine,
pray for them!
Holy St. Barbara,
pray for them!*

*All ye blessed virgins and widows,
pray for them!
All ye saints of God,
pray for them!*

*Be merciful unto them! Spare them, O Lord!
Be merciful unto them! Deliver them, O Lord!*

Babette Kirchmeier, civil servant's widow, age 86

Marie, ah yes, Marie.

She was my household help, yes. Well, until I went into the old folks' home.

That's right, my household help, Marie was. She was a good girl. A real good girl. Always did everything so neat and nice. Not like the young things now, gadding around the whole time, flirting with boys.

No, Marie wasn't like that. A good girl, Marie was.

Not all that pretty, but good and hardworking. She kept the whole place going for me.

I'm not so good on my legs anymore, you see, that's why I'm in the home.

I don't have any children, and my husband died nearly fifteen years ago. It'll be fifteen years in June, on the twenty-fourth.

Ottmar, now, he was a good man. A good man.

So Marie came to help me in the house because my legs didn't work so well anymore. Ah, my legs, it's a long time since they worked well. When you get old there's a lot that doesn't work as well as it used to, not just your legs. Growing old is no fun, you take my word for it, that's what my mother always said. No, it's no fun.

Once upon a time I could run like the wind. I was always going dancing with my Ottmar, God rest his soul. To the tea dance in the Odeon on Sunday afternoons. That was back before the war. Ottmar was a good dancer. We got to know each other at a dance, still in the Kaiser's time, that was. Oh, he was a dashing fellow, my Ottmar, in his uniform. Ottmar was in the army then; he's been dead nearly fifteen years now.

Time passes by, time passes by. I had that trouble with my hip. We're not getting any younger, are we?

That's when Marie came to help me in the house. She slept in the little bedroom. She didn't ask for much, not Marie. A bed, a chair, a table, and a cupboard, that's all she needed.

So in January, let me think now, yes, it was January when I went into the old folks' home, because I don't walk so well these days. Not so well at all. Yes, that's when Marie went to her sister's.

I didn't know if she has a job as a maid now. But that would just suit Marie. A good hard worker. Didn't talk much. That suited me fine, because I can't handle those talkative young things. Chatter, chatter, chatter all day long, while the house goes to rack and ruin.

Yes, Marie was my household help, that's right. Well, until I went into the old folks' home. It was in January I went into the old folks' home. A good honest household help, Marie was. A real good girl. Ever so good, she was. Always did everything so neat and nice.

I think I'm getting tired. I fancy a nap now. A person needs a lot of sleep when she gets old, you know. Many old folk can't sleep, but me, I need a lot of sleep. I always did like my sleep.

Oh, now what was it you were asking me? I've quite forgotten, dear me, it's old age, you know. You were asking me about Marie. Yes, yes, Marie. She was a good girl, Marie was, willing and

hardworking.

What's she doing these days?

Isn't she at her sister's?

Oh, I'm so tired, I really fancy a nap now. You know, when a person gets old she needs her sleep.

Winter refuses to give way to spring this year. It is much colder than usual this season. There's been alternating rain and snow since early March. The gray of the morning mists lingers all day.

At last, on Friday morning, it clears slightly. The dark, gray-black clouds lift a little. Now and then the cloud cover breaks entirely, and the first rays of the spring sun shine tentatively through.

At midday, however, the sky grows dark again, and in the afternoon rain begins once more. It is so gloomy that you might think the day was already coming to an end, and night was falling.

Two figures, clad entirely in black, are on the move in this dim light. They are making for the only farm anywhere near. One of them is pushing a bicycle, the other carries a backpack. The farmer, who has just left the house to go to the sheds and stables, prudently lets his dog off its leash. Only when the two figures have almost reached the farm does he see that they are both women.

He whistles the dog back and holds it firmly by the collar.

One of the two women, the one with the backpack, asks for directions. They're looking for the Danner family's farm in Tannöd, she says. They've lost their way in the poor light. Can he help them? Does he know how to get to the farm?

"Over there, beyond the last field, turn left into the woods and you can't miss it," he replies.

The two of them go on. The man puts his dog on its chain again and thinks no more about the couple.

Traudl Krieger, sister of Marie the maid, age 36

Early in the morning that Friday, I helped our Marie pack all her belongings. She didn't have much enough to fill a backpack and a bag, too, that's all. No, it really wasn't much.

I'd promised to go with her when she started her new job. She didn't want to go out there alone because she didn't know the way. So I gave her my promise. Gave her my promise . . .

It was fine first thing in the morning. But it was midday before we started off at last. The weather was nothing special by then. My mother-in-law came to look after the kids while I was gone.

My husband, Erwin, was still at work. He has to be on the building site early, he's a bricklayer. Never comes home until late on a Friday. Not that he has to work such long hours, no. But he gets his wages on Friday, and then he goes to the pub after work.

Usually he comes home late and drunk. That's men for you; drinking in the pub they forget everything, wife, children, just about everything.

When we set off, Marie and me, it hadn't begun raining yet. The weather was still reasonable. A lot of dark clouds in the sky, but on the whole the weather wasn't that bad. We'd had nothing but rain and snow over the last few weeks.

I carried the backpack, and our Marie strapped her bag on the carrier of the bike. Now and then I helped her to push it.

I'd borrowed the bike and the backpack from my neighbor the miller's wife. Erwin takes our own bike to work with him, and I didn't want to walk the whole way back. I thought I'd get home quicker on a bike.

Frau Meier who keeps the shop, she told me just how to get there. She told me about the vacant position in the first place.

"Your sister Marie's a good strong young woman. She can turn her hand to anything, and she's not work-shy. Over at the Danner farm their maid's walked out. They're looking for a new one. Just the thing for your Marie." That's what she said.

Frau Meier in the shop always knows everything. People come from all around here to see her when a new maid's wanted, or a farmhand, and they tell her all the news, too, who's died, who's had a baby. Even if you're looking for someone to marry, you just have to go to her. She can get the right couple together. Then her husband is the go-between and fixes up the wedding.

Marie had been with us in our little place since January. She's not demanding, well, you can't be not with us.

Our place has two bedrooms, one for the children and one for us. It has a kitchen that's our living room, too, and its own bathroom, not one for the whole floor of a building where you have to stand in line and wait for the others to be finished.

The place is big enough for Erwin, our three children, and me, but with Marie as well space was very tight.

Marie was sleeping on the sofa in the kitchen living room. It wasn't going to be forever, really not, just for the time being. That's why I was so pleased about the job.

And after she came to us, our Marie was with my brother for three weeks. In February, that was ~~My brother has a little farm, just a smallholding. Our parents left it to him. My brother's wife~~ wasn't well, so our Marie went to help out. Marie was a good girl, you see. A really good girl. She could work hard, oh yes, she could, and she liked to work, but she was a simple soul, too.

I mean, she was a little bit backward. Not mentally handicapped or anything, just a bit simple, and she was good natured.

When our sister-in-law was better, Marie came back to us. Marie never got on too well with our brother. He was always going on at her, she couldn't do anything right, not for him. He's been a grouch all his life, he won't ever change.

I'm younger than Marie, that's true, eight years younger, but to me our Marie was always the little sister I had to look after. When our mother died, I mothered Marie instead of the other way around. Our father died a long time ago, too, he died just after Mother. Consumption, that's what the doctor said.

It'd be easy for anyone who wanted to take advantage of our Marie. She always did as she was told, she never asked questions. Like Mother always said, the easy-going are usually good at heart too.

Well, Marie wasn't so much easy going, but she was far too good at heart. She'd have worked for no wages, just for board and lodging. That was our Marie. Poor creature.

Up till New Year, our Marie had a job with Frau Kirchmeier. Babette Kirchmeier. Frau Kirchmeier was a widow, and Marie kept house for her as best she could. But Frau Kirchmeier had been going downhill fast. In the end she could hardly walk, and she was getting a bit confused. So then she went into the old folks' home; she's got no children who could have taken her in, poor Frau Kirchmeier. So our Marie lost her job.

And like I said, I'd promised Marie to go to the Danner farm with her.

From what Frau Meier told me, it should have taken us an hour and a half to get there, but the weather was getting worse and worse.

It turned really dark, and a squally wind was blowing. I keep on thinking we never ought to have gone, not in that weather. Then everything would be different now.

Well, we left our place around two, and by three-thirty or so we were hopelessly lost. So we wandered around for a while. Then we went back again a little way to the last farm we'd passed.

When we got there we asked our way.

Last field on the left, take the path through the woods, you can't miss it, the man said.

And it started raining again in the woods, so when we finally reached the farm we were sopping wet. It's a very isolated place, you know. I'd never have thought it was so far out in the country. I I'd known I'd never have let our Marie go there. Never. Out there in Tannöd, there was only the old lady at home, she opened the door to us. I didn't see anyone else. Only the old lady and the little boy.

A pretty child, two years old, I'd say, with lovely golden curls.

Marie took to the child on sight, I could see that, our Marie likes kids. But the old lady was very odd, she looked at us so suspiciously. Hardly passed the time of day. We hung our wet jackets over a chair. Close to the stove to dry. Old Frau Danner never said a word all the time. I tried to get her

talking. I mean, there's questions to be asked when someone new comes to a farm. But no, we couldn't get anywhere with her, though the little boy was already laughing and clinging to Marie's skirt after five minutes.

And our Marie was laughing with him.

The kitchen was just like the farmyard, old and gloomy, and a little bit grubby too. The old lady was wearing an apron that could have done with a good wash. And the little boy's face was dirty.

I sat there with my sister Marie on the bench by the tiled stove for an hour, and in all that time old Frau Danner said maybe five sentences. Strange, surly folk, I said to myself.

At the end of an hour I put on my jacket, didn't want to go home in the dark. The jacket was nearly dry by this time and I wanted to set off straight away.

"I'll have to go home now, it's getting dark. I don't want to lose my way again," I told Marie.

Then I met old Frau Danner's daughter on the doorstep.

Right there in the doorway.

We had a word or so, she was a bit friendlier than the old lady, and then I went out the door. Our Marie came with me. I pushed the bike through the garden gate and said good-bye to her at the fence. She didn't look all that happy, I think she'd rather have gone back home with me. I could see how she felt, but what could I do? There was nothing else for it.

It almost broke my heart. I just wanted to get away from there quick. I told our Marie, "I hope you like it. If not we'll find you something else."

Marie only said, "Oh, I'll be fine."

I ought to have just taken her away with me. Something else would have come up. I'm certain it would. But I turned away and rode off on the bike. When our Marie called to me again I stopped and got off the bike.

Our Marie ran after me and gave me a big hug. Squeezed me tight. As if she never wanted to let me go. I really had to tear myself away and get on the bike in a hurry.

I pedaled away like mad. I didn't want to stop again.

The house, the farm, no, I wouldn't even want to be buried there, I said to myself. It shook me that place did.

How can anyone stand it out there with those people? Poor Marie, how would she be able to stand it? I was so upset, my chest felt tight, but what else was I to do? Marie couldn't sleep on our sofa anymore, and Erwin was tired of it all, too; he'd wanted to be rid of her long ago. I pedaled and pedaled. I didn't stop. I just wanted to get away, right away!

I wanted to get away from my guilty conscience as well.

After a while there was water running down my cheeks. I thought at first it was because the cycling made me sweat so much. But then I realized it was tears.

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