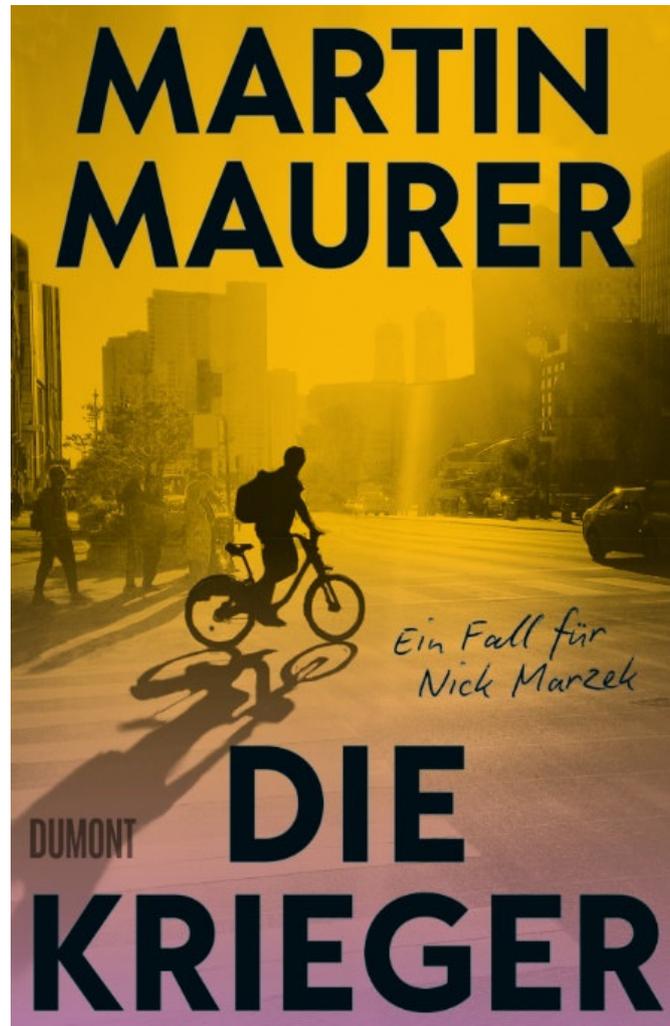


DUMONT



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I. The Hole

The entrance was located between a luggage bazaar and the Bosphorus. In the stairwell, the familiar melange of shit, cooking grease and beer. If he concentrated a little, Nick could make out the likeness of the Bavarian Minister President in the patterning of the stone floor on the first landing. Gruber had showed him the spot. "After four pints, you can see him right away. After eight, he'll stand up and call you names."

Someone had decided the office building at the corner of Goethe and Bayer streets was suitable. In retrospect, nobody wanted to be to blame, of course. The six men from the Third formed the vanguard for the other murder divisions and the colleagues from the missing persons unit, as well as the arson investigators, who were supposed to be following them. Since taking up residence in the dilapidated postwar building, they had cursed the nameless person responsible for this decision every single day. In the oversized office spaces with their flickering neon bulbs, they felt like they were stuck in a huge wrecked spaceship. Nothing functioned, peace and quiet never reigned here. To prevent the building's impending collapse, maintenance work was always being done somewhere on site.

Nick took two steps at once. The metal door on the second floor was bent and difficult to open. Somebody had scratched *South Curve* into it. On the other side of it ran a long, bare corridor at the end of which stood a drink machine.

A cluster of people had gathered in front of it.

Graziella, Hakan, the manager of the Bosphorus, and his brother Mehmet, who looked a lot like Hakan and who ran the Bosphorus gambling room at Goethe Street 7. In the middle: Gruber. The mood was heated. Everyone was talking over each other, and nobody could be understood - Gruber with his Lower Bavarian accent least of all.

It was Tuesday, December 27. The door to the conference room was standing open. Behind the three gray desks that formed an island at the center of the room, Aki was leaning against the window, smoking and watching the lights of the city.

Nick knocked on the doorframe as way of greeting. "What's going on?"

"*Servus!*" Aki turned toward him and ground out his cigarette. "It's about the hole."

The hole was located in the floor next to the drink machine, had a diameter of about twenty centimeters, and had been there from the beginning. When Aki had asked

the manager about it, he was informed that everything was just fine with the hole. The construction company just needed to relocate a few cables, and then the hole would be plugged. That had been in November. Since then, workers of all kinds had come and gone, but none of them had felt any compulsion to deal with the hole. In the meantime, the police officers had made their peace with it, since it came with some definite advantages. They could comfortably holler their orders down to Hakan without having to go downstairs. Hakan would then send someone up with their food. In addition, their colleagues from vice and drug enforcement would call occasionally in search of their regulars, and ask the Third Murder Division guys to peek through the hole since sooner or later the hunted pimps and dealers were bound to show up at the Bosphorus. The restaurant was a favorite meeting spot.

“There’s been an incident,” Aki said.

“A few more details, please!”

“In short, Hakan and Mehmet have accused our Graziella of dumping the dirt she sweeps up down the hole into the Bosphorus.”

By now, Nick was used to the peculiarities of the Third’s officers, but Graziella’s personality still baffled him. True, she had a certain charm, though she struck him as a little unsophisticated. And when considered quite frankly, she was totally unsuitable as a cleaning lady. She didn’t seem to know the meaning of fixed work hours. She would appear out of the blue, rush like a berserker through the passages of the space ship, and generate untold chaos. She seemed unable to wipe up dust, but rather beat it to death. It wasn’t all that hard for him to imagine her sending a load of dirt to its death on the floor of the Bosphorus through the hole. Her makeup was always too garish, and her dark hair was always fixed the same way - teased on top of her head. However, the officers adored her, for whatever reason. And anyone who had a bone to pick with her, was automatically picking a bone with the entire Third Murder Division. However, as a clandestine canteen owner, Hakan was similar in status to her, and this made the conflict between the two of them all the dicier.

“And what did Graziella say to that?”

“Graziella said, *Fucking Turks*, and Gruber now has his hands full.”

“It’s no use. They can’t understand Gruber.”

“Who does?” Aki sighed.

But somehow Gruber worked things out, and a few minutes later, they were all sitting around peaceably in the conference room, drinking beer and raki. “Man, you have to understand, Graziella,” Hakan said. “Nobody wants cops’ pubic hairs in their doner kebabs.”

“One with the works, please!” Graziella crowed, toasting Hakan. By the time the call came in, they were friends again.

Nick drove as Gruber guided him out of the city. His Christmas songs were still stuck in the tape deck.

So “Silent Night” it was.

Of course, the light in the sky above Neuherberg wasn’t a star, but it still led them to their destination. Across from the Society for Radiation Research, two vehicles were engulfed in flames. Nick turned off of Ingolstädter Road and drove past the campers, vans and repurposed postal vehicles.

Fourteen of them parked here regularly overnight, Gruber had reported, and eighteen during the daytime. Things got started at ten o’clock in the morning. Everything was precisely regulated and divided between two “gas and protection companies.” These were two pimp gangs which no one knew much about and which squeezed out half of their girls’ earnings for site rental. Fifty marks per number, four to five clients an hour, ten-hour shifts. A million-mark business. Assuming, of course, that Nick had understood Gruber rightly.

Roof-high flames. Bursts of sparks shot into the sky. Gruber peered outside. “It’s the last two.”

The fire department was already there.

“Great,” Gruber groaned. Fire out - clues gone. That’s what usually happened. Nick came to a stop and tried to figure out the flashing lights around them. One emergency doctor’s vehicle, one ambulance, two patrol cars, and the pumper truck, of course. “Jingle Bells” had just started, but Gruber pressed the stop button and said: “Let’s go.”

A crowd had already formed. The women were mostly wearing leggings and had hurriedly pulled something over them. At first glance, they looked like aerobics instructors at the Neuherberg Athletics Club, but when he looked closer, Nick could make out haggard faces and smudged makeup. They had been crying or still were.

“Scuse us, watch out.” Gruber forged his way through the crowd.

When they reached the police tape, a uniformed officer walked up to them. As he brought them up to speed on what had happened, Nick studied the prostitutes. Their leggings and sequined tops reflected the flames and the flashing emergency lights. They glittered and sparkled.

Gruber had been right. It was the last two vehicles that were on fire. A Hymer and a Ford Transit.

“Here it is.” The officer beamed his flashlight at a spot on the ground, about level with the Transit’s front axle. A man’s hand was lying there, covered in blood, the fingernails partially ripped off. The hand had been separated at about ten centimeters above the wrist. A clean cut. In the flashlight’s glow, the bones looked like porcelain.

“That’s all we’ve got?” Gruber asked.

“Yeah,” the officer said. “At least, at this point.”

“The rest of it must be somewhere.”

“Sure. Somewhere.”

“Be careful!” Gruber shouted at the fire fighters who had brought their hose dangerously close. Nick noticed the two paramedics who were in the process of carrying a person on a stretcher over to the ambulance.

“And over there?” he asked.

“A different site.” The officer waved this off. Apparently a john hadn’t kept himself under control. “The little girl looks rough, but didn’t have anything to do with the hand. That’s where things are right now.” It was getting darker, as if someone were slowly turning down the light. “The fire’s out!” the fire chief called. All that remained of the campers was two smoldering ruins.

“Nobody was in there?” Nick asked.

“No,” the officer replied. “As far as we know right now, the two campers were unoccupied at the time the fires were set. But everything is still a little uncertain ... and the ladies have ...” He broke off, then shook his head and continued: “Somehow everything is still totally unclear.”

“Good,” Nick said. “Then let’s go.”

A tall brunette and a short blonde made their camper available to them. This way Nick and Gruber could quickly take the statements of the girls and the few johns who hadn’t gotten away quickly enough. The patrol cops organized everything and called up one witness after the other. All of them were pretty shaken up. “But none of them know anything,” Gruber said when they climbed back into their BMW. It had started raining a little while ago.

No one had witnessed the arson attack or seen a violent altercation. Several of them mentioned an Audi 80 that been parked with its headlights turned off in the driveway of the Society for Radiation Research. Some of the others described a Mirko, others a Marko, a Yugoslav or a Greek, who had been responsible for the safety of Gypsy Heinz’s prostitutes and who had disappeared without a trace. They hadn’t been able to determine who had been in charge of security for the other spots along here. As soon as the questions turned to the pimps, everyone lapsed into single syllables. Nobody seemed to know to whom they were shelling out their money. Don’t know. I can’t say. Never saw him.

“We’ll need to ask our friends on the vice squad,” Gruber said. “They’ll know.”

They assumed that Mirko/Marko was one and the same person. It was possible that the hand belonged to him. In any case, the man who was supposed to have taken care of security out here had failed miserably tonight. Leopold Street. Schwabing. “Lo,

how a rose e'er blooming." They had almost reached the spaceship when their pagers went off. Gruber cursed and turned them both off. "Wait down here. I'll see what's going on."

Nick found a parking place right in front of the Bosphorus. Gruber hurried through the rain. Few of the tables inside the Bosphorus were occupied. Exhausted faces. Neon lights. A junkie sitting on one of the bar stools had fallen asleep over one of the gaming machines. It looked as if his face was plastered to it. That didn't look stable at all. Nick considered going inside to tell Hakan that maybe he should take the man down before he hurt himself. But then Gruber reappeared. He yanked open the door and dropped into the passenger seat. "Here at the end of the year, everyone's going crazy," he groaned. "Let's go."

Number 56 was one of those buildings that looked desolate the moment it was finished. The ambulance's flashing lights flickered across the concrete, reflecting off the windowpanes on the second floor. A park sat on the other side of the road - a creepy, not a friendly one. He had no idea where they were located in the city. Not in the best of neighborhoods, in any case.

The uniformed officer at the entrance nodded at them. "Fifth floor."

Nick was already on the stairs by the time he heard Gruber call out behind him: "There's an elevator." But he knew about those things. The ones in the cheap new buildings were the worst.

Gruber followed him up the stairs. It smelled like food. On the third floor, the door to the left was open a crack. Handel's *Messiah* filled the staircase. A curious pair of eyes. "Did they fin'ly kill each other?"

"*Grüß Gott*," Gruber said.

On the fifth floor, the next uniformed officer pointed out the way. They waded through cold smoke into the living room. The stench was horrible. Gruber pressed his hand over his mouth and nose. Like the bow of a ship, a bed rose tall in the room. Since the emergency doctor and paramedics blocked his view, all Nick could see was the fox tail that dangled down next to the handle on the bed gallows and the shattered catheter beside it. The paramedics were standing in urine. Sitting beside the window was a table covered by a plastic Christmas tree with colorful lights, an overflowing ashtray, and empty bottles. On the chair next to it, the collapsed body of a man in an undershirt. All that remained of his head was a ruin; the rest was splattered across the window pane and the wall. A Helnwein poster had taken the brunt of it. Next to his right foot, clad in a tattered tennis sock, lay a 9mm Beretta. Flashing lights. The forensics team was taking pictures.

Nick turned around and watched the paramedics lift the other man from the bed onto the stretcher.

Gruber quietly asked the doctor: "What's wrong with him?"

"Complete dehydration."

The paramedics picked up the stretcher. Nick could now see the man's face: around fifty, shrunken cheeks, chapped lips, huge eyes. An IV in his right arm and a silver bracelet clasped around his gaunt wrist. Indian, maybe.

"Can he answer questions?" Gruber asked.

"Just look at him," the doctor replied as the forensics team discovered sawdust on the tennis sock.

It didn't take them long to confirm the dead man's identity. Christoph Rechberg, 45, Munich native, carpenter with his own business, four employees, no criminal record. A single-family home on the edge of the city.

One window was still bright. They wouldn't have to wake anyone up. At least that was something. Gruber pressed the doorbell. A shadow quickly materialized on the other side of the milk glass pane. The door opened as wide as its safety chain would allow. Suspicious eyes underneath dishevelled hair.

"Mrs. Rechberg?"

Notifying the next-of-kin was always the worst part of the job, but even where this was concerned, the rules helped. Just inform to begin with. The interrogation would come later. Plan for sufficient time. Make sure that people were sitting for the news and had a glass of water close at hand. Sometimes there were pets or, as in this case, children involved. But in principle, things always proceeded in the same manner. The only thing that differed from home to home was the smell.

Gruber knew about a bar a few streets over. He ordered two beers and made a beeline for the restroom. Nick pulled a HB cigarette out of its package and stuck it in his mouth before sitting down at a table that was the furthest away from the others. Cop conversations weren't anyone else's business. The gaming machine warbled brassily, as rain drummed against the window. The beer beat Gruber back to the table. He had just sat down when the music was cranked up: "The police always drive in pairs around dark corners through the night ..."

"Funny!" Gruber toasted the bar owner. "But a little quieter, please!" The owner saluted with a grin and turned down the volume. Gruber wanted a cigarette too and said that he was looking forward to his shift being done. He had plans to take his kids to the Krone Circus. This time, they had even brought over performers from the GDR, and the star of the evening would be Borra, the King of the Pickpockets.

“Did you know that his real name is Borisav Milojkosomething, and he trains cops all over Europe?” Nick said.

“What does his teach?”

“Theft prevention.”

Gruber hadn't known that, but thought it was interesting and would tell his kids about it. He then talked about several other things which Nick couldn't really track well. Nick took a drag on his cigarette as his thoughts kept returning to the hand on the road, the burning campers, the puddle of urine in the apartment above the eery park, the blood splattered everything, and the peculiar smell in the Rechberg house on the edge of the city.

They ordered another beer and drew straws to decide who would write up the report and who would drive to the hospital to question the beaten prostitute whose statement was still missing. He didn't really care, but since he knew how much Gruber liked to gamble, he agreed to draw straws - and got the prostitute.

“Enjoy it!” Gruber grinned wolfishly as he fished a few coins out of his pocket. “Bill, please!”

Nick let him out in front of the Bosphorus. The junkie had disappeared. Somebody must have peeled him off the machine.

The patrol officer back at the arson site had told him the prostitute had been transported to the Schwabing Hospital. Nick pulled a city map out of the glove compartment, unfolded it, and draped it across the passenger seat so that he could see the city center. This didn't prevent him from getting lost three times, though, before finally turning down Leopold Street. From this point on, he only had to drive straight ahead. The streetlights reflected off the rain-wet asphalt. At a red light, he opened the glove compartment again and pulled out the cassette that Jo had sent him. “For Daddy. Christmas 83” was written on it. Still the same scrawly childish handwriting. He pulled out Gruber's Christmas music and stuck in Jo's tape. The unmistakable voice of Ian Curtis: “Don't walk away, in silence.” He wrapped his fingers around the steering wheel. “See the danger. Always danger.” Two punks leaning against a junction box stared at him. The light turned green.

“Please wait a sec,” the nurse at the reception desk said after Nick showed her his badge. And so he sat down on one of the chairs. A man in a robe was struggling with the drink machine. His right arm was stuck in a splint, and Nick considered briefly if he should help him, but then let it go. Nobody was helping Nick either.

“Detective?” The nurse then told him that about an hour ago Ms. Schmidl had been released at her own request. He would need to wait a little longer for the nurse to figure out if she was authorized to provide him with Ms. Schmidl's home address. She

wasn't just authorized to do that. She was obligated to, but she didn't believe him. She needed to hear this from other quarters, so he sat back down again. By this point, the man in the robe had managed to get his beer out of the machine. He gazed at it adoringly, but when he tried to open it, it slipped out of his hand. The bottle crashed to the floor and shattered into a thousand pieces. The man looked as if, instead of a bottle of beer, his entire life had just come apart.

The nurse returned, smiling. "I can do it!"

Swell, Nick thought.

Martina Schmidl lived on Heigel Street. In Untergiesing, as his map revealed. This meant he would have to drive all the way across the city. There and back again. That would shoot the rest of the evening.

The rain. The lights. Joy Division. The second Christmas without Susanne was now behind him. He hoped that Jo was okay on his own off in Berlin. Only a few more days, and he would see him again. Nick was glad.

Schmidl was printed on the top line of the doorbell chart. He pressed the button and waited. Front yard. Bird house. Curtains in the illuminated windows. The door buzzer sounded. He pushed open the door and climbed up to the fourth floor. A young woman in pajamas was standing in the door frame. Around twenty. Her face was tear-stained, and her eyes were suspicious. He showed her his ID. "Ms. Schmidl?"

"No."

"Then I've ..."

"No, you've got the right place. I'm just not Ms. Schmidl."

"Who are you then?"

"Is that any of your business?"

"Fine, then. I have to speak with Ms. Schmidl. I need her witness statement ..."

"She isn't here."

"Where is she then?"

"How should I know?"

At this point, he wished he could hold his gun up to her temple and make it clear to her that even cops deserved to be talked to like normal people. You didn't always have to pull bullshit like this with them.

However, all he removed from his pockets was his hands. He took a step closer and leaned against the door frame. "Where is Ms. Schmidl?" He could be menacing, he knew that.

The girl retreated a step, fearfully. "Probably in her camper. On Ingolstädter Road. You know the place. That's where she always goes whenever she needs to get away."

Nick thanked her for the information and wished her good night. As he walked back to his car, he decided to speak with Martina Schmidl tomorrow. First thing in the morning. He wasn't going to drive all the way across the damn city one more time. He'd had enough for now.

He was dead tired by the time he drove up to the wasteland along Senefelder Road, which was poorly lit by a single streetlight. It was officially a parking lot, but unofficially it was the garbage dump for the entire train station neighborhood. In the nooks and crannies of the spacious site, there were piles of broken doors and rusting drainpipes. Rugs moldered in puddles for days and weeks, and then suddenly disappeared. The trash seemed to find its way here on its own, departing again on its own. It was a labyrinthine area with low pass-throughs to back courtyards, which were also rented as parking spaces. The Kingdom of the Crooked Man.

He lived in one of the concrete cubes next to the site entrance. The cube had five, partially barred windows and several iron doors, all of different sizes and haphazardly scattered so that the building looked like some child's unsuccessful craft project. An external staircase with a rusty handrail led to a door about halfway up the facade, over which "Park Guard" had been lettered in white paint. He maintained outposts spread across the entire area - a guardhouse with shattered window panes, a verdigris-covered camper, and a weathered log cabin - in which he was never seen and the use of which was unclear.

Nick left the wasteland surrounded by firewalls and 1950s apartment buildings without running into the Crooked Man. He passed by adult movie theaters, strip clubs and Turkish import-export businesses as he headed toward Schwanthaler Street, where he lived. The station neighborhood was packed with people. Middle-aged men from Stöcking, Rottbach or Copenhagen, all of them great adventurers who thought they were off on the hunt, while in reality all they were was prey. An entire city district - fifteen establishments along Schiller Street alone - lived off of them and their hubris. It wasn't until around five AM that peace returned to the neighborhood along with the garbage trucks.