An excerpt from

YOUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE, YOUR CHILDREN ALL GONE

A Novel

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Martin

In September we celebrated Thanksgiving in Hemmersmoor,* and mass was followed by festivities at Frick's. In the afternoon, after beer stuck to every surface, the villagers spilled into the square to take part in the yearly cooking contest.

"For the first one death, for the second starvation, for the third one bread"—that old proverb described the colonization of the Devil's Moor, but our bread remained as hard and gray and sour as our soil.

To enter the cooking contest was costly, because the rules stated that each dish had to feed at least four dozen people. Hemmersmoor had three categories: best stew, best roast, and best *Butterkuchen*, the buttery, sugar-sprinkled sheet cake our baker, Meier, was famous for and that he sold for funerals and weddings alike. Meier always won the contest, uncontested that is, because who would dare go up against him?

The stew contest was, for the imaginary outsider—there were never any real outsiders present during the cooking contest—an unappetizing affair. You need to have lived in the

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* German Thanksgiving is celebrated in late September or early October.

North to appreciate *Labskaus*, an old sailor dish, or Pears, Beans, and Bacon, another favorite.

The roast contest was maybe our favorite, and the more contestants entered, the better the feast that followed in the village square. Nobody in the village could resist the doctor's wife's pork roast or help stuffing themselves with beef dished out by the mailman's wife. And this year the competition was unusually fierce and promising. Four families had entered the stew contest, five the roast contest, and Meier faced his first rival in fifteen years—my mother, Käthe Schürholz.

Fueled by compliments on her *Butterkuchen*—my father, the *Gendarm*, insisted it could compete with any cake anywhere—my mother, with fingers trembling and her hair refusing to stay curled, announced her entry the week before Thanksgiving.

During the days leading up to the contest I stayed in school as long as I could, then went home with one friend or another. If Alex had to help at his father's inn and Christian was nowhere to be found, I followed Anke Hoffmann to her house and played all afternoon with her and Linde Janeke. Patiently I combed the hair of their dolls and listened to stories about cursed princes and princesses immortally in love with young men of low birth, only so Mrs. Hoffmann would invite me for dinner. All the dolls had names. Some were called only Dolly or Baby, but the better ones had names like Rosemarie and Kunigunde. Two of the dolls looked very similar, and both wore flowered dresses; they were Anke and Linde. The real girls almost looked like twins, and they often wore the same colors to heighten that impression. But Anke wore shiny barrettes and necklaces, and her shoes always looked freshly polished. Even her dolls looked

more glamorous than Linde's, and she had twice as many as her friend and a whole drawer full of dresses for them. She insisted that her dolls wear fresh clothes daily.

I never mentioned those afternoons to Christian or Alex, and hoped the girls and Anke's brothers wouldn't tell on me. Yet each day I stayed as long as the Hoffmanns would have me. Only after nightfall did I return home, and neither my father nor my mother ever noticed my absence.

Each day my mom baked several small sheets of cake, trying to improve on the moistness of the dough, its texture, butteriness, or even the way to sprinkle it with sugar. If she noticed me at all in those days, it was only to put a plate with a large piece of *Butterkuchen* in front of me. "Try it, Martin," she'd say, but I couldn't enjoy the treat. One false expression on my face would bring her to tears; no praise would appease her.

My sister, Birgit, was thirteen, almost twice my age, and usually out with some boy or other. But now she was forced to help, which she did with a face so frightened and serious, with eyes so large and wide, she appeared to have seen a ghoul; one false move and they might pop out and roll under the cupboard.

My father followed my example and stayed away as much as possible. He preferred a drunken brawl, a burglary, or even assault to the murderous atmosphere that had befallen our home, where the kitchen light stayed on long after midnight. After hours I picked him up at Frick's, where his uniform bought him as many drinks as he needed. "Of course I complimented her," I heard him lament on one of these occasions. "That's what I'm supposed to do. If I don't tell her how delicious her cake is—every single time—she thinks I'm ungrateful. If I want cake, I have to encourage her."

Peter Brodersen, whose own wife would take part in the roast contest, put one of his big hands consolingly on my father's shoulder.

"It'll be okay," Jens Jensen, the old peat cutter, said.

"It won't," my father sighed. "Her cake is fine for us, but it's not Meier quality. When she loses, I won't eat anything but dry bread for weeks. Her honor, her confidence—she'll be humiliated, laughed at. She'll never be able to set foot in Meier's bakery again."

New people in Hemmersmoor were regarded with suspicion, and you stayed new until well after you'd lived in our village for twenty years, possibly forever. Our neighbor Bernd Fitschen, who arrived in Hemmersmoor when he was a toddler, and whose sparse hair was now white, and who had great-grandchildren my age, was still called "the foreign Bernd." He'd moved here from Groß Ostensen, a city twenty kilometers to the east.

New people were supposed to fit in and keep a low profile and not draw any attention to themselves. So Helga Vierksen's entry to both the stew and roast contest, in only her third year in Hemmersmoor, would normally have raised eyebrows. Not this year though; this year my mother's herculean task took center stage and left the quick tongues of Hemmersmoor little time for other topics.

The shadows around my mom's eyes grew wider and darker, and her expression changed from euphoria to hopelessness in a fraction of a second. Friday night, two days before the contest, I heard her cursing herself in the kitchen. "You couldn't stay, could you, you vain hag?" she asked. "How Heidrun, Bertha, and Gertrude—how the whole village will laugh at you!"

I stole myself away and learned how to braid Linde's hair. It

was brown and heavy, and Anke showed me how to do it and laughed at me when I was done. The braids weren't the same length and looked silly. Linde said it wasn't so bad.

When the Hoffmanns finally sent me home, my mother's kitchen was still brightly lit. My father crept into my bed after midnight and whispered, "Martin, move over, and for heaven's sake don't go downstairs."

What had Hemmersmoor done to deserve such a sunny day? Our climate was as rainy and dreary as any, but I can't remember a single Thanksgiving ruined by dark clouds and showers. Unfailingly Sunday crept over the peat bog, and the sun drove us out of bed and into church. Starched shirts and ties and dresses that had not fit even the year before made mass uncomfortable, but by the time we were free to walk over to Frick's Inn everyone's mood was as mild as the September day. Only the owners of the Big House, which stood several kilometers outside our village, didn't make an appearance. For such a family, the spectacle of our contest was a disgrace, and the thought that the von Kamphoffs should sit next to us on the wooden benches was ridiculous.

At one o'clock, with faces red from beer and Bommerlunder, the men led the way into the square, where the women had set up the different contests. The priest stuck red ribbons on the jurors' lapels and blouses, and the fifteen men and women lined up for their right to the first taste. The rest of us awaited our turn to dig in. Anke and Linde stood with their parents; they were wearing white dresses, and their braids were wound around their heads in the same manner. They waved at me, and I almost ran over to them but stopped myself just in time, pretending not

to have noticed them and hiding red-faced behind my father's broad back.

The jurors ladled stew into their bowls and slurped and smacked their lips while making important faces. They had been drawn lottery-style, to preclude any misgivings. If you judged the contest one year, you were not eligible for jury duty the next.

Hemmersmoor had experienced its scandals. Nine years before, a farmer's wife had bribed jurors and later been barred from the contest for life. Now Heidrun Brodersen's three-year winning streak was the subject of terrible suspicion by those who had tasted her roast at one of the Brodersens' dinners. Yet by and large the system had proved useful.

It came as a surprise then, when after half an hour of conscientious tasting, the newcomer Helga Vierksen's stew was awarded first prize. Yes, the jurors had to be fair, but they were indebted to tradition. Awarding Vierksen first prize was a slap in Hemmersmoor's face.

Even more surprising was that no one who had tasted her stew—with potatoes, carrots, and large, tender chunks of beef—protested. It seemed that even other contestants, among them staunch Hemmersmoor luminaries such as Rosemarie Penck, conceded defeat. Helga Vierksen's pots of stew spoke a clear language—only hers were empty, as though licked clean by hundreds of cats.

Helga, a large woman with large breasts and a fine smile with most of her teeth still intact, accepted the wooden plaque and said a simple thank-you. She knew not to gloat. Her five young children, the oldest being one of my classmates, stood around her, demanding to hold the prize. The crowd applauded hesitantly but with conviction. We weren't heartless.

The next contest produced Heidrun Brodersen's fourth consecutive victory, which had her neighbors shaking their heads. Yet on a sunny September afternoon, who wanted to argue?

My mother's face was so red when the final contest started, the skin stretched so tightly over her jaw, nose, and cheeks, I feared it might tear. All the while her false teeth kept grinning, with the gold wires of her dentures blinking in the light. Her twelve sheets of *Butterkuchen* outdid even the sun with their golden, buttery glow. The sugar sparkled.

And how we ate! We ate and ate, and sweat gathered on the fifteen jurors' brows and foreheads. The baker Meier, accepting the challenge, had exceeded our already high expectations, but had he surpassed my mother? His larger sheets seemed the only distinction between his cake and his competitor's.

So we ate more. We couldn't leave this matter to whimsy. Coffee was being served, thanks to Frick's generosity. All year he took what our fathers earned on the peat bog, but on Thanksgiving he gave back to everyone.

Around the time the jurors convened to decide on the winner, Jens Jensen, the old peat cutter, pointed at Otto Nubis and said, "Otto, your tongue is black."

"No, *yours* is as black as tar," Nubis, the foreman at Brümmer's tool factory, shot back.

When the priest approached them—sensing that a fistfight, another staple of our September feasts, might be at hand—and tried to calm them, the two men turned on him, grabbed him, and held open his jaw. "Your tongue is as black as your coat." And so it was. Soon we all stuck out our tongues, and they were black, every one of them. What had happened?

Our shock wore off soon. We knew this could have only one

explanation. Even though we hadn't experienced it ourselves, our history was clear on the matter: "For the first one death, for the second starvation, for the third one bread." We had eaten bread all our lives, but stories of our forebears and their plight lived on, and we knew what some of the first settlers on the Devil's Moor had done to save themselves from certain death. Now it had happened again. Our tongues were blackened because we had eaten human flesh.

Silence fell over the crowd, and all eyes searched for the contestants. My mother and the baker Meier did not come under suspicion, but where were the cooks of the roasts and stews?

"It's Heidrun," a voice cried. "That's why she wins every year." It was my father shouting. "I've eaten her roast, and it's no good."

"He's right," Bernd Fitschen cried. "It's Heidrun. That's why her roast is so tender."

The accused was a fat and charming woman, who turned the heads of Hemmersmoor's men. Her feet were stuck in the most fragile shoes I'd ever seen, and she was still holding on to her wooden plaque. "You ingrates," she shrieked. "I've lived with you all my life, and you're turning on me because your wives can't cook." Much of what she said after that was drowned out by cries to hack her to pieces. Until, in utmost despair, with a hundred hands grabbing her apron and dress, she shouted, "Why this time? You've eaten my roast before. It's not me."

While everyone was thinking about this, Heidrun took advantage of the break to continue. "It's not me. It's Helga. It's the new one."

Silence again. Hemmersmoor did not think fast on a full stomach. Yes, Heidrun's accusation made sense. Why else had Helga entered the contest but to poison us? Why else had we scraped her pots clean? Yes, Helga, the new one, was the culprit. People let go of Heidrun.

Her cries, her begging, her shrill voice didn't help Helga one bit and stopped no one, and when the village was done with her and her children, the bodies shapeless, resembling five small and one large bag filled with rags, sticks, and stones, my father led the way to Helga's house.

We set fire to home and barn. Helga's husband—having admitted his guilt by staying home—was struck down with an axe and dragged back into the house, where his remains were buried under falling beams and collapsing walls. The whole village watched and cheered the fire and helped a neighbor when flames from Helga's barn began licking his own.

After the pangs and the hissing had finally died down though, an eerie silence fell over the village. Our tongues were still black, but our rage had subsided. We stood around the still smoldering house like children, embarrassed, silent, but ready to attack anyone who would point a finger. The boys and girls of the village had screamed so much they had lost their voices and were now searching the ashes for little treasures. Anke and Linde stood to one side. They had pulled a badly singed hat with a colorful bow and a necklace with a green stone from Helga's house, and their white dresses were soiled and their braids hung limply at their sides.

That night Frick, against his custom, served a second round of free beer, and more bloodshed was avoided, even though

many swore that next year it would be Heidrun's turn. Even when Jens Jensen claimed that Frick poured water into the beer, people answered with nothing but laughter.

The only person in Hemmersmoor who was not satisfied with Thanksgiving was my mother. No winner had been declared in the *Butterkuchen* contest, and the jurors, after acknowledging that their black tongues were in no shape to come to a sound judgment, refused to award first prize.

My dad welcomed the outcome. He was fond of pastries and did not want any misgivings between him and the baker. My mother, though, was not to be consoled.

When Anke and Linde asked me the following afternoon if I would come home with them to play, I answered in a loud voice, so Alex and the other boys could hear me, "I don't play with girls. I'm not stupid."