

Andreas WEBER  
Excerpt from the novel LANZ

Dedicated to my mother

*But what's puzzling you,  
Is the nature of ma game  
--Jagger/Richards*

I

Two days before the end of World War II a murder was committed in a public square in a small town in the middle of nowhere. My story begins one night six years before the murder.

Since the *Anschluss*, when Austria had formally been taken over by Germany, Lanz had been living around a black and white picture. It was almost as if everything here had emerged out of this picture. The picture hung on the wall of an office, invisible, hidden by the night. In the daylight it was greeted by all who entered with a raised hand.

Beyond the picture there stood an ordinary cleared desk. During the day the master in the picture looked down severely at the leader of the local branch, the *Ortsgruppenleiter*, who was conscientiously fulfilling his duty. In the night, the *Ortsgruppenleiter* went home and slept.

Beyond the picture, the pencils on the desk were lying in a longish bronze bowl, as in so many houses of the empire. The top half folded out into a sculpture of three tiny monkeys, one holding his paws before his eyes, one his paws on his ears, the third his paws before his mouth. The monkeys sat in the great darkness. A symbol that was hundreds of years old, the monkeys represented messengers who reported to the gods about the world. In the belief that tidings of evil should be hidden within the earthly, they were depicted as blind, deaf and dumb. As the heavy wind of this night blew away the clouds high up in the sky, moonlight fell in the room.

Light wandered across the picture on the wall.

Soldiers were marching by below; tanks, vans and motorbikes were driving through Lanz; an engine howled; the driver honked the horn at men who were crossing the street too slowly.

You could hear the drilling.

Then all was quiet.

The quiet came with the night sounds through the open window of the office. A man was walking by on the pavement beyond the window. He staggered, stumbled and would have fallen to the cobble-stone ground if he had not had the handle-bar of his bicycle to hold. The man came out of the alley which led to the main road, where the soldiers had passed through a moment before, not stopping long in this little town. A market place, a brook, a baroque column in the middle of an intersection, the old bridge of the thoroughfare, which had lasted despite the heavy weight of the tanks. Then there was still a park, a football field, a railway station, three restaurants and a ruin on the lake outside the village. Somewhere down the road a door opened, the drunken man was at

home, a door was locked, the bicycle was lying on the ground. Further down, a window opened, the light went on and shone out through the night.

The next morning there was war.

In the offices of the community and in the classrooms of the school the pictures of the greatest strategist of all time hung for more than a year; not comprehending such greatness, asking no questions, the children learned always under his face, raising their hands to him to recite what they'd learned. The little about the frontier, told by the men coming home on vacation, sounded adventurous for the first few years. Later the soldiers on vacation were too tired to tell. There were tears running over the children's faces when informed that their fathers would never return. The grown ups talked about heroes and treated the youngsters with respect for a while. The children wept: there was a desperation they had never before seen in the faces of their mothers. They prayed each morning before classes for the shelter of the country and the *Führer*, but they prayed automatically, lacking real conviction or fervor. They asked many questions. Receiving no answers, their questions faded as time passed. They looked out the windows.

A golden bush stood in the meadow.

The fact that ever more men were reported as having fallen didn't lower the enthusiasm for the movement, the *Bewegung*. Through dying, the sons of simple farmers or vineyard workers became heroes of an empire lasting a thousand years. At least so believed the neighbors, parents, brothers and sisters of the heroes— including Sieglinde Kramer.

Sieglinde Kramer worked at the post office and was convinced like few others that these deaths were indeed offerings to the *Führer's* vision of a great future life united in peace. Sieglinde never grew tired of vividly describing the *Führer's* grand ideal to the bewildered people. Often she brought with her the book he had written as a political prisoner to show the others in print the passages she quoted to them by heart. She was popular among the young people of the town: often there was laughter, and many asked themselves how she managed to be so accepted. As if she belonged to the younger generation, she discussed for hours with the youth not just politics, but also art and the world beyond the borders of Lanz.

Eventually, some grew tired of listening to her political speeches, but nobody dared to tell her the truth. Allegedly, for a while she stood closer than appropriate to the later *Ortsgruppenleiter*, Paul Reck, who was married. Since the *Anschluß*, at any possible opportunity Reck had decorated his house with tan-twigs and flags of the movement. Finally, he draped a golden lace in each of his windows, which some people saw as rather ridiculous. But Mr. Reck was not somebody to laugh about loudly in public. Once—and Reck must have been *Ortsgruppenleiter* by then—after a quarrel with Hans Sax in a restaurant, he made Sax do knee bendings in the bright light of day in front of the municipal office while singing loudly: "I want to be a German Man." Many wondered that Sax agreed to do this, yet it was well known how quickly one could be arrested and disappeared upon uttering even the slightest doubts or making a joke about Him, even in Lanz. Hans Sax was drafted a short time later; the belief that Reck had something to do with his movement to the eastern front strengthened Reck's position in the village, even as the more skeptical minds doubted that the influence of a small *Ortsgruppenleiter* in the eastern part of the empire reached into the spheres of absolute omnipotence.

Sieglinde helped many people in the beginning with her sympathy.

Her comforting words bore an even greater impact after her sons both remained in war for ever, one closely behind the other. She had no husband: it was said the sons

were from various fathers. For a while her eyes were tear-stained as the eyes of all hero-mothers, but soon she went with firm steps through the town and nobody thought to give her comfort. In fact, Sieglinde Kramer had no idea what people thought of her. She had been disappointed to know that after so many years few people even took her seriously. Some smiled at her as a fanatic who was unable to discern reality clearly. For how fabulous the whole story had seemed in the beginning, and how different the outcome from what had been expected. Many pitied her, because her enthusiasm was all she had. She had nobody now. Besides the gossip about her and married Mister Reck nothing was known about men in her life. Nobody tried to talk with her about her sons. People tried to be friendlier than usual, but she wasn't the kind of woman one could easily comfort.

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Anna Jordan was much too beautiful for the small town of Lanz.

At the beginning of war she moved with her husband Roland into the little house at the outskirts of town. Her bright satin blouses and her way of saying "Good day" left no doubt that she didn't belong in this place. You could see from looking at her hands that she had never had to work. On her lips, a smile - when she looked up, surprised at being greeted and gratefully returning the greeting. Her harmonious face always seemed surprised; it shone a little, but differently than the faces of all the others here, who were earning their daily bread with the sweat of their brow in the fields and the vineyards, bent down under the smile on the face of the Almighty God. Anna Jordan went through the streets upright. Although all the men turned around to look at her, each of them knew that she was not the kind of woman you could address with certain intentions. One could not even think of it. Besides, there were few opportunities to do so as Mrs. Jordan hardly went out alone. She lived alone: her husband was at war. This woman in her best years was, everyone said, so - "under-provided for." The people of Lanz could see into all corners of their neighbors' lives. The lies of the men hid what the priest called "coveting your neighbor's wife." People were not especially religious; they believed in a higher being, and in flats and houses, on radio sets or small shelves stood little glass domes of the sky in which, upon being shaken, white snow would fall gently down on baby Jesuses and pilgrimage churches.

The women didn't like Anna Jordan because she had never had to do anything that would have damaged her beauty. She and her husband had inherited; their cottage stood in the shadow of a chestnut tree. The garden behind the house bordered the vineyards, which belonged to their property, along with the wine-cellar. For the longest time it was not clear who was working in the vineyards, for her husband definitely touched nothing. He suited her. Had come in a suit, which obviously was not off the rack.

Then he was away for a long time.

One day he was seen in the uniform of an officer in the Austrian Army and a little later he wore the service coat of the German Nazi Army, the *Wehrmacht*. An Officer. One had expected something like that. Foreigners, delivered in the morning and picked up in the evening by a bus, worked in the vineyards of the Jordans. Naturally this couple was childless: the last thing in the world a woman like this would do to herself was have children, all the housewives and mothers agreed. But one day in summer a boy was seen in the front garden of the house; it was said this was the son, who attended an elite

school, where they let him come home only during the big holidays. The son was a surprise of which nobody had believed her to be capable. Even her best friend.

No one could imagine why Anna Jordan and Sieglinde Kramer connected so well with each other. Strange stories about the beginning of their friendship circulated. The truth was that Sieglinde Kramer had transmitted personally the typical battlefield-letter of the Wehrmachts-Headquarters, which announced the hero-death of Roland Jordan. Sieglinde remembered her feelings while opening this letter. She didn't want this news to be tossed into the mailbox by the postman; in the past, she had always delivered these sorts of letters personally until it came to her attention that her sympathy more often was felt as an interference into family affairs, which it was thought in the first place were none of her business and in her fanatic mania she couldn't understand. Thus it was that Sieglinde Kramer stood one month after the battle of Stalingrad, where captain Jordan had fallen, in front of his wife's house to tell her that she has become a widow.

Anna Jordan opened the door.

With the black leather bag of a postman wrapped about her, Sieglinde Kramer stood there and in the light brown blouse of her service uniform she felt very official. Suddenly she didn't know what to say, or what she was doing there. She reached into her bag, pulled out the battlefield-letter and said, "I wanted to bring this to you personally."

Anna Jordan stepped out of the door, descended three steps down and went towards Sieglinde, while lifting her hand in defense. The woman from the post office was silent. Mrs. Jordan took the letter and turned away without a word, looking down at the letter.

Suddenly she turned around.

Her severe face was soft and full of helpless sadness. She began to cry before this unknown woman. Sieglinde stepped by, laid her arm over her quivering shoulders and accompanied her into the house. The two women took places in the kitchen. They sat opposite to each other and Anna cried. Eventually, Sieglinde stood up, put water on the stove and poured *Linde*-coffee into the boiling water as if she had been in this kitchen often. She filtered the coffee-powder and wondered about the fact that even this woman had to satisfy herself with supplement-coffee. Then they sat opposite to each other and some time later Sieglinde said: "I have lost two sons."

Anna took her hand and pressed it.

Sieglinde stayed until it was dark. Anna was completely different from Sieglinde's mental image of an officer's-wife. Mrs. Jordan had not noticed Sieglinde Kramer during her years living in Lanz. The two were surprised at how much they had to talk about.

The officer's-widow and Sieglinde Kramer, whose two fallen sons had a father known only by the mother, from now on met almost daily. Anna Jordan did not want to participate in the funeral service for her fallen husband, but Sieglinde picked her up. In the end, when all the people raised their hands in the air to do the German greeting, she just stood there. Some called her a figure made of stone, which showed no emotion. Anna told her friend later that she had thought: "How could I raise my hand for *them*, for they have killed my husband."

Sieglinde was startled, but she said nothing and told about the escapades, which she and her two sons had organized during the forbidden period of the movement as illegal Nazi activists against the police, their political rivals and reds. The policeman didn't like to come and question her, because Sieglinde always fooled them; one day, when a policeman asked her, "what's this metallic rumble in the coal box," and she said, "hand grenades," all the officials ran off, because they believed this lunatic could do anything.

The respect they gave her made her proud. Sieglinde made no secret of her enthusiasm for the Movement in her conversations with Anna. But there was something like melancholy in her voice when she said: "Most beautiful was the forbidden period. When we all suffered, then there was a holding together."

Sieglinde quickly understood that Anna, who seldom went outside to be among other people, did not feel superior to others; rather she was a woman who was satisfied with her own company. One day after they had been friends for some time Anna mentioned that the fallen officer had not even been a member of the National Socialist party, but rather understood himself always as an Austrian officer, a fact that greatly astonished Sieglinde. The German hero Roland Jordan, son of a Social Democratic judge - a fanatic anti-militarist and opponent of his son's army career - was a member of the socialist students' group in Vienna, which Sieglinde could hardly believe. She and her family were National Socialist party members of the first hour and had lived for generations in Lanz. Anna Jordan was one of the two daughters of a minor Viennese clerk in the town-council's financial-department. The family of her husband came out of the noble Viennese district Hietzing and were old patricians whose ways often amused Anna. After the war, they had planned to emigrate to a foreign country if there still were countries in which Germans were welcome. Sieglinde, at the time already fifty-one years old, realized that her best friend was lacking loyalty to her people, and decided to keep an eye out on her.

To start with, she organized prisoners of war from the nearby camp to be allotted for the work in Anna's vineyards. These men, for the majority French and Russian officers, were in high demand because they were hardworking and worked for free. During the harvest period some of them slept, with the special permission of the camp director, in the houses of these families, where they often became dear comrades of the children. It was all easier in Lanz, for there life seemed to take place far away from the affairs of the larger world. After the *Anschluß*, soldiers had given out goulash to the public, and that was it. A little later the work on building the street from Lanz to the capital of the federal state, the *Gau*, which was ten kilometers away, began.

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And one day it was announced that He would pass through Lanz on his inspection-tour of the Sudeten region, which had recently been taken back home into Germany "without a shot," as people said. Maybe it would be possible to persuade Him to hold a short speech on the main-square. Reck was supposed to have the very highest connections.

Never before had this little town seen such excitement and activity. Lanz was polished up, all facades were freshly painted, and the old houses shone in new colors so that it all was a sheer pleasure to look at. On the main square beside the baroque column a wooden structure for the choir and the seats of the notables were erected and decorated with spruce branches. Barriers along the sides of the streets had also to be built because the crowds from all the surrounding villages would be enormous. Only people like the woman who always carried two bags so as to be unable to raise her hand for the German greeting did not join in. These people, so it was said, would be taken one day: for now they were amused about the hectic commotion, but their laughter would disappear soon. The woman with the two carrier bags asked how it would be possible, practically speaking, for "that man" to pass through here. How could such an important

person with so many important operations possibly afford to waste so much time for such a detour. She would be right.

He really did not come.

Actually, nobody came. Polished, washed, the children in their white shirts and costumes, the grown-ups in their Sunday clothes, on a Wednesday in April the people were waiting since the early hours of the morning. By the roadside standing, in the trees, on the railing of the bridge and the lamppost squatting, they were waiting to see Him at close range. Some had waited already since the day before. The choir rehearsed a couple of times. In vain. Nobody came. No explanation, no excuse, nothing came to Lanz. Two women, who would be envied for their artful clear-sightedness and who would be praised in the highest tones by the Lanz *Courier* for their sympathetic understanding of “the highest intentions and thoughts,” went on their bicycles into the capital of the *Gau* ten kilometers away. And really! While the others waited in Lanz, they saw Him. Three times they had the “unbelievable luck to be allowed to hail Him,” reported the newspaper, whose journalists quickly found out to whom Lanz owed this disaster: enemies of the German People, reds, had faked the message about this visit in order to weaken the people’s belief in Him and the Party. One knew these people, and they would pay, when it was the right time.

Meanwhile, time went by as always; the war took place somewhere else.

And one day there was blood on the place under the big lime. The tree overlooked Lanz and did not suit the coniferous trees of the park, in the middle of which a bronze-statue of the Austrian monarch Joseph the Second was standing. Long black hair, which hung in the bushes along the edge of the place, cooled-off remains of liquid tar, whose smell was only slight in the air that morning, and white feathers of a pillow, which someone had torn into pieces and thrown into the bushes, were traces that nobody understood at first and that finally were doubted by everybody.

Because in the evening they were cleared away.

The rain in the afternoon washed away the blood.

Two days later a *Fieseler Stork*, a German spy plane, landed on a field outside the village.

The children ran to it, because this landing was a sensation. They knew the Stork from many reports. This plane was a legend and one of the many proofs demonstrating the superiority of *the German People*. Its soft, almost inaudible flight made it the best spy plane in the world. Besides, it was far ahead of the contemporary technologies of aeronautics because it took no more than two hundred meters for starting and landing. Only with such a plane could paratroopers, commanded by the Austrian Skorzeny, have freed Benito Mussolini in 1943 from the top of Gran Sasso, where the *Duce* was imprisoned in a monastery. It was supposed to be impossible for anybody, even in case of a deliverance, to be able to take out the prisoner from up there. But the stork had landed and started on top of the mountain.

So the children excitedly ran closer and were amazed at seeing the cockpit empty. The engine was still warm. Nobody there. The plane stood abandoned with open doors at the end of a wide field. The boys and girls had time to carefully stare and to touch it. They had not even dared to hope for the luck of ever seeing such a work of wonder at close range. Still, the boys seated themselves at the helm. The armatures, everything was much more magnificent than they could have imagined. The children had time. Nobody came. When they returned after lunch the plane was not there.

And then it was said that war was over.

Allegedly the pilot of the plane had brought the message of Germany's capitulation and the saving of the bridge to the *Ortsgruppenleiter*. The old bridge over the thoroughfare was allegedly meant to be blown up to impede the advance towards the West of the Eastern enemy, but that was cancelled by some "higher commando."

The war really was over. The children never forgot that a stork had brought them these glad tidings.

## II

I heard of Anna Jordan for the first time when I was a child.

My father sat in front, at the end of a row of wine-casks in the warm light of a cellar-lamp beside a friend carving figurines out of the vine stock. I squatted in the back, in the dim glow at the top step of the stairs leading down into this wine cellar and heard my father's friend tell about the beautiful widow Anna Jordan and her mysterious end on the place under the lime. I was ten years old, was drinking grape-juice and heard on that day also for the first time about the ten-year-old son of the widow. He and his mother had disappeared at the end of the war from one day to the next: allegedly, he was a witness to her end.

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*Translated from German by the author and Katie Thorpe.*