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**Opening Extract from...**

# Block 46

Written by Johana Gustawsson

Translated by Maxim Jakubowski

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JOHANA GUSTAWSSON  
translated by Maxim Jakubowski

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*Thursday, 7 November 2013*

*The light from the three electric torches stripes across the pit.*

*A perfect rectangle. One metre thirty in length, fifty centimetres in width. Made to measure.*

*He picks up the spade, gathers earth and spreads it out in the hole. A single shovelful and the legs are already covered; all that sticks out are the toes. Toes as smooth as pebbles, as cold as ice, that make him want to touch them with the tips of his fingers.*

*Smooth and cold.*

*He throws another pile of damp earth over the stomach. Some lands just below the thoracic cage, around the navel; the rest slides down the sides. A few more spadefuls and it will all be done.*

*It had all been child's play.*

*All of a sudden, he lets go of the spade and brings his muddy gloves up to his ears.*

*'Just shut up, will you?'*

*He spits the words out, his jaw frozen with anger.*

*'No, no, no, no! Stop shouting. Stop!'*

*He kneels down beside the pit and places his hands against the colourless lips.*

*'Shh. Shh, I said...'*

*His nose brushes across the ice-like cheek.*

*'OK... OK... I'll do it... I'll sing your little song. I'll sing you "Imse Vimse", but you must remain quiet. Is that understood?'*

*He stands up and shakes dirt from his trousers.*

'Tsy bitsy spider climbs up the waterspout...'

*He takes hold of the spade and throws another lot of earth across the torso. It sinks into the wide-open gash running down from the chin to the sternal notch.*

'Down came the rain, and washed the spider out...'

*A spadeful over the face. The earth spills across the forehead, obscuring the hair, dripping into the eye sockets.*

'Up came the sun, dried away all the rain...'

*The dirt rains across the marble whiteness of the body to the rhythm of the nursery rhyme.*

*He packs the final layer of earth tight and smooths it out, then arranges a bunch of brown winter leaves across the top with exaggerated, arrogant artistry. He walks away backwards, his eyes still fixed on the grave, then retraces his steps and kicks a few leaves around with his foot.*

*He cleans down the spade with his gloved hand, replaces the electric torches in their bag, takes his gloves off, shakes them free of dirt, then one at a time places his tools inside the bag.*

*Just as he pulls the bag over his shoulder, he hears the chatter of the parakeets. He'd heard somewhere that the exotic birds had escaped from the Shepperton film studios, in Surrey, during the making of Bogart's Oscar-winning 1951 film *The African Queen*. But the truth was, no such bird was used on the set, and the film had actually been shot in the studios at Isleworth. So where had the damned birds come from, then?*

*He stops for a moment and searches the depths of night for their apple-green plumage. All he can hear is a nearby rustle.*

*He really needs a second pair of binoculars with night vision. Just can't work by torchlight any more, much too dangerous. He has to get himself better organised and avoid such imprudence.*

*He pulls one of the torches out of his parka pocket, and, keeping its beam low, gets on his way.*

*Home of Alexis Castells, Hampstead Village,  
London, England*  
*Saturday, 11 January 2014, 15.00*

THE FOX WAS BASKING in the solitary band of sunlight that had reached the garden. He'd slipped in through the bushes twenty minutes before and hadn't moved an inch since. Three gardens along, two small girls were running around barefoot, their curling, ginger hair animated by the breeze. It made you wonder how they never caught a cold.

Sitting in her study, its windows overlooking the series of gardens below, Alexis stretched, adjusted the cushion under her backside and switched the tape recorder back on. Rosemary West's monotonous voice spread through the room.

Two months earlier, sitting facing Rosemary at Low Newton prison, in Northumberland, Alexis had stared at the killer's small, dainty hands; hands that had beaten, strangled, raped. Hands that Rosemary looked down at as she told Alexis how she had killed her own daughter.

For a brief moment, Alexis was startled. The blurred features of her parents had appeared on her screen. She paused the recording.

'Can't you see you just don't know how to do it properly?' Her mother was irritable. 'This is where you should click, look.'

The window went blank as the connection was lost. Alexis, with a grin on her face, called them back.

'Hi,' she said, as her father's face filled the screen.

'Oh ... be quiet, Mado! Look, she's here now, our baby girl. Alexis, my love, how are you?'

Thirty-seven years old and she was still his 'baby girl'.

'Why aren't you outside, darling?' Her mother took over, her mouth now moving closer to the webcam. 'They say the weather in London is beautiful today. Well, in a manner of speaking, meaning you probably have a couple of rays of sunshine peering through the clouds. If you don't take advantage of it now, you might not have another opportunity this year!'

'She's not outside because she has to finish her book, don't you see! Remember, her publisher is expecting it in two months.'

'But she needs some fresh air. Look at her face.'

Alexis rolled her eyes. *What's wrong with my face? How rough can I look?*

'So, where are my niece and nephew?' she asked, moving the conversation on.

'They're playing with their presents.'

'Presents?' What are you celebrating?'

'The Kings. *Els Reis Mags*,' her father replied in perfect Catalan. 'The youngsters must be taught to remember where they came from. They are, after all, a quart—'

'A quarter Spanish ... I know, Dad.'

'No. Catalan! A quarter Catalan. So, baby girl, how's the book going?'

'Five pages further down the road than yesterday, Daddy. I have to leave you both, get on with it, you know...'

'Do you want me to keep some of the *fideuà* I made for you, darling?' her mother asked. 'I can freeze it and you can eat it next time you're over? By the way, when are you planning to be here next? Have you bought your tickets yet?'

'I'm not sure when, Mum...'

'You don't want any of my *fideuà*?'

'Of course I want some of your *fideuà*, Mum, but I'm not sure when I can come see you next, yet. I really have to get back to work ... Give everyone kisses from me.'

'Don't you want to say a word to your sister and Xavier, at least...?'

‘I only spoke to them yesterday, Mum ... Anyway, have a lovely afternoon.’

Alexis blew a few kisses towards the screen to interrupt her mother’s protests and disconnected from Skype.

She dragged her feet to the kitchen, poured herself another cup of coffee and picked up her mobile phone, which, when she happened to be writing, sat all too temptingly by the fridge. She only allowed herself to consult it whenever she stocked up on caffeine or cheese.

Alexis opened her eyes wide with surprise. Seventeen missed calls from a London landline and four messages. She called the number straight back.

‘Alexis Castells, you tried to call me...’

‘Alexis, it’s Alba...’

Normally, Alba Vidal, a Spaniard whose temperament was as colourful as her apparel, gave you the distinct feeling that she was embracing you as she spoke. But right now her voice seemed to have lost all its warmth. It was dry – splintered with anguish.

‘I’m calling from the store’s phone, I wanted to keep my private line free in case ... No, no, no! Keep your hands off that window display!’ Alba was clearly in a foul mood.

A few words of protest, mumbled in response to her outburst.

‘I’m the damned public relations director, and I’m telling you not to touch the window display, for heaven’s sake! So sorry, Alexis ... it’s total madness here. You try for months to get things properly organised, and on the day it’s always the same bloody mess...’ Alba sighed heavily. ‘*Dios mío*, Alexis...’

‘What’s happening, Alba?’



## *Germany*

*July 1944*

THE TRAIN SLOWED DOWN as it began its ascent.

With an animal grunt, the prisoner pulled on the wagon's door. The others greeted the cold air, stretching their necks, as if this unexpected pool of breath could quench the thirst burning their throats.

He waited for a few minutes, like a sparrow delaying his flight from a branch, then disappeared abruptly into the ink-dark night. As the train came to a complete stop, other prisoners began to jump out, too.

A succession of muted sounds broke out and, all of a sudden, the forest was a blaze of yellow stains: the floodlights positioned on the turrets heralded the manhunt. It broke through the bushes, the tangle of trees, the undergrowth.

*'Ich habe sie! Ich habe sechs von ihnen!'*

The shouts were quickly followed by the staccato ballet of the machine guns – the orders shouted out in German mingling with the explosions, until a silence more terrifying even than the barrage of shots surrounded the convoy like a wreath.

Erich Ebner wondered how many men had fallen. How many had managed to escape. How many were slowly dying in atrocious pain from their wounds. Maybe it was better this way, his erstwhile neighbour had whispered in English. Because, anyway, hell awaited them at the end of the journey. Erich was dubious: how could anything be worse than being in this cattle cart, deprived of air or water as the outside temperature reached twenty-five degrees? The wagons

had been designed to carry forty men, or eight horses. There were one hundred and forty-two of them. At any rate, one hundred and forty-two had begun the journey alive.

The old Spanish man had been the first to die, barely a few hours after the convoy had departed. His son had burst into tears as soon as he had realised his father had ceased breathing. He'd wiped the foam from his father's chin and taken him into his arms, moaning, the purple features of the dead man swinging from side to side in a *danse macabre*. The son had then started banging against the wagon's walls, before turning to his neighbour. He took his shoe off and hit the poor guy with the heel. No one moved, barely reacting to the assault. And the fight came to an end as suddenly as it had begun. Exhaustion had overcome the madness.

Since then, others had succumbed, but they were standing so tightly together that the dead passengers were held up by the mass of bodies. Erich couldn't actually see the dead, but he could smell them. The putrid scent of death permeated the wagon, mingling with the smell of sweat and emptying bowels. The pestilential odour of man reduced to an animal state. They only had a single bucket and it hadn't been emptied since their departure, thirty-six hours earlier.

Ebner pivoted on his foot. The prisoner next to him was trying to extricate himself from the tight embrace of those around them. Just before the escape attempt, the very same man had licked the pearls of sweat running down Erich's neck. Erich saw him now, inch by inch, approach the bucket, and lap the urine spilling from it, his face all the time crumpling with disgust. He was interrupted by the crunching of gravel under the boots of the Nazi soldiers.

Two SS officers stood in front of the now open doors of the wagon. The one on the right stepped forward, a hand on the grip of his pistol.

*'Ausziehen!'*

Nobody moved. Most of the men piled up in the wagon did not speak German.

*'Nackt, verdammte Scheisse!'*

Erich knew that, if he translated the soldier's orders, he ran the risk of being shot on the spot. He began to undress as fast as he could manage being stuffed tight between so many other bodies.

His neighbours quickly followed his example. Numb and embarrassed, they protected their genitals with their hands.

*'Die Anziehsachen zur ersten Reihe weitergeben!'*

His companions glanced at him sideways to see what they should do now. Ebner passed his clothing along to one of the prisoners standing in front of the officers.

Once the clothes had all been piled on the ground outside the train, the soldier pulled out his Luger, placed the muzzle against the forehead of the prisoner facing him and pulled the trigger. The detonation was masked by the cries of sheer horror coming from the other men as they were showered with pieces of brain matter and bone.

*'Kein Entkommen mehr.'*

The second SS officer closed the wagon's door and the train departed again.



The convoy arrived in the station the following afternoon.

The shrieking of the brakes melted into the overall clamour – a mix of ferocious barks and orders shouted out in German.

The wagon's door opened and revealed a group of soldiers. Three of them held the leashes of froth-mouthed German Shepherds, aching to rush towards the new arrivals.

*'RAUS! RAUS!'*

The first row of prisoners moved hesitantly forward. Like sudden and heavy rain, rifle butts and thick wooden bats fell across the heads, shoulders and the hands raised in protest. The dogs were set loose on those who were unable to get up again.

*'RAUS!'*

As fast as the prisoners could exit the wagon, the dead fell across

the platform like rag dolls. The bodies were trampled by those hoping to survive, and trying to avoid the storm of blows.

The rubber truncheon only made contact with Erich's shoulder and knee; he escaped the dogs and joined the waiting line of survivors.

The walk to the camp seemed to take forever. Erich stumbled along with the column of limping men, five abreast, under the oppressive copper sun, moving to the rhythm of the orchestra accompanying them.

None of this made any sense. The journey. The dead. The cruelty. The music. The naked bodies. No one even tried to conceal their nudity any longer, as if each and every one of them had already abdicated their humanity. And, above all reigned the silence. The silence of unconditional surrender lurking behind the inappropriate music. The guards had not ordered them to be silent, but no one dared to speak. Fear paralysed their senses: it had replaced pain, thirst, hunger and extreme fatigue.

Where were the sons, the daughters, the wives of these men? Where were Erich's parents? And his friends; his university colleagues? What was the destination of this hellish journey? He'd overheard the SS officers mentioning Ettersberg Forest. That meant they must be close to Weimar, in Thuringia; close to the hill where Goethe enjoyed walking amongst the beeches, thinking of Charlotte von Stein.

The soldiers came to a halt in front of a gate. The one leading the column read aloud the inscription carved above the metal doors:

*'Jedem das Seine!'*

To each his own. *Suum cuique*. As if these men, on the threshold of death, were in a position to appreciate the irony of such a philosophical statement.

All of a sudden, someone screeched loudly.

Erich looked to his left and noticed a soldier standing tall, his hand raised. A naked man was moaning, curled up on the ground.

*'Aufstehen!'*

The man remained where he was, his body shaking with spasms.

*‘Aufstehen, du verdammte Rastte!’* The soldier’s arm fell across his victim.

Erich then realised what the hand was holding: a stone. The Nazi hit the poor guy until the stone was lodged inside the shattered skull, then stepped around the body and rejoined the head of the convoy.

The walk resumed, to the enduring rhythm of the periodic beatings and the sprightly music.

Erich tried to swallow down the ball of fear growing inside his throat. He looked down at his bloodied feet, wondering when, if ever, they would be provided with food and drink. He was already salivating at the thought of a stream of cool water running down his throat.

Ten minutes later, they stopped in front of a large shed. Rest must be coming.

But when Erich entered the building, he could see neither the piles of clothes nor the meal they were expecting. He froze in shock, aghast. A prisoner standing behind him nudged him forward towards a brown-haired man wielding clippers. As the implement ran repeatedly over Erich’s skull, his delicate straw-coloured hair fell with painful grace to the ground, where it joined the darker curls already spread there.

Finished with Erich’s head, the man took hold of a razor and ran it over his armpits, his arms, his torso and his legs. When the blade reached his penis, Erich closed his eyes. The humiliation had drained all his energy. He meekly positioned his head when his ears were inspected. His mouth was held open, revealing his parched throat. His lips were dry and bleeding by now.

He was then led, under a barrage of truncheons, towards a gigantic water tub. A strong kick to his backside pushed him into it. He immediately recognised the smell of phenol. He felt as if his skin was catching fire. He dunked himself under, as ordered by a smiling SS officer, closing his mouth and eyes, then exited the liquid the moment he got the nod. When he reached the jet of cold water that came next, he couldn’t help but open his mouth, forgetting how his whole body burned.

The guy from the train had been right. It was indeed hell that was greeting them at the end of their journey. But a thoroughly well-organised hell.