

Polina Borodina
theborodina@gmail.com
polinaborodina.com

editor of the English translation: Kay Rommel

Forest (Berlin edition)

a detective in 33 audio recordings

CHARACTERS:

HANNAH

INVESTIGATOR

HEIKE

KATJA

JURGEN

MAX

BRUNO

SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER

original version 2021, Berlin 2024

Recording №1

INVESTIGATOR. There was a show on TV yesterday. An investigator is out there recording everything with a recorder, to document everything that happens, so I decided to record my thoughts too. I always forget to write things down, and I keep losing all those notebooks — so much for investigative secrecy. So I thought: good idea, better with my voice.

It's 6:35 AM., Friday, September 11. The morning got off to a cheerful start. An old man cut off his neighbor's finger because he didn't want to pay his debts. I took the victim's statement as they were sewing his finger back on. Then it was paperwork — spent half the day writing indictments. An hour ago, a woman, Heike Schwarz, born in 64, reported her daughter missing. We started the search. The missing daughter's name is Hannah Schwarz, 21 years old, a student at Freie Universität. Clean record, no previous convictions. The mother says she hasn't been home for three nights. Not an outcast, it seems, she's a good student. Why didn't they file a missing persons report right away?

She'll probably turn up in a couple of days, once she runs out of money. According to statistics, at this age, 97% return on their own within a week. It's a common case. The coroner thinks it's all because of that electromagnetic storm last week. The coroner thinks it's all because of that electromagnetic storm last week. He says all crazies depend on the magnetic waves. I said to him: "Martin, you deal with serious matters and then you believe in that junk?"

Almost forgot, right after the woman, a man called the department. He was walking his dog in the Grunewald. He was cleaning up after the dog and found a phone. He thought someone had lost it and wanted to report it as lost property. But then he decided to call us after all. People watch too many TV series and dial 110 every time they find something. He'll bring the phone in tomorrow. Last week, someone even handed in a goddamn oboe, which was also found in the woods. I blow into it when no one wants to work. So really, we're not running a police station here, it's just a lost and found office.

Recording №2

INVESTIGATOR. 1:00 PM, November 12. We've just come back from the forest. We examined the place where the man found the phone. I gave it to the technical department, they unlocked it and got all the data out. Turns out it's the cell phone of that girl, Hannah Schwarz. The chats have all been deleted. There were still some photos on there: a selfie, a few strange landscapes, nothing special, girl stuff. And then a few voice recordings.

Recording №3

HEIKE. I left for work, Hannah was still asleep. You know, I work in the arms factory, at Diehl, the shift starts at exactly half past nine, so I'm always the first to wake up. I woke her up so she wouldn't oversleep. She grumbled at me, said she had to go to university later today, the morning lecture had been canceled. And that was it. Jürgen and I ate dinner alone. Well, Hannah usually doesn't sit at the table with him anyway, she takes everything to her room, but still... She didn't answer the phone.

At around 8, I called her friend Katja, the two of them study together. Katja said that Hannah had gone home after their two lectures. But then she remembered that Hannah still had to write an essay with Professor Stein, maybe she was with him. I thought that was strange: an essay meeting at 8 o'clock in the evening? Then I dialed the number of Max, her boyfriend. We have a strained relationship, I never call him just like that, something extraordinary has to happen. He didn't pick up. I couldn't reach anyone at the institute either. Jürgen, my husband, told me to call the operator's information line. They said that they don't provide call lists to parents of students over 18.

I didn't sleep all night, hoping she would come back by morning. I hoped she would come in the morning. Next day I wanted to file a missing person's report, but Jürgen said that's only possible after 24 hours. (*Silence.*) Oh, that's not right? Have the rules changed? Jürgen said he knew for sure. You know, she has asthma, she always needs her inhaler. And she only had one with her. That only lasts three days at most. And now it's already the fourth.

Recording №4

INVESTIGATOR. 11 a.m., Sunday, September 13th. I had a nightmare last night. The mother of the daughter whose things we found turned into some kind of mermaid. Not the kind you see in kid's books or Disney movies, but more like a drowned woman with a fishtail. It was like her skin came off and she grew scales. When she gave her statement yesterday, I saw a bruise peaking through the powder on her chin. Why didn't I say anything? The missing person's flyer is now all over town. We're questioning the girl's best friend today. The forest is a popular site for suicides, every year someone kills themselves there. I really hope this isn't another one of those cases.

Recording №5

KATJA. Hanna and I have been super close since childhood. We went to the same kindergarten, then to the same school. Even in the summer we often hung together at her grandmother's house. And then, as a joke, we both decided to study at the FU.

The last time I saw her was at Uni. On Tuesday, no, I think it was Monday. I wasn't there on Tuesday. I had something to do. Well, I had to go somewhere ... buy something for the apartment and you know. Yes, I told Ms. Schwarz that we were at the lecture together on Tuesday morning. No, that wasn't a lie, it was, well you know. something else. How am I supposed to know why she's calling me and what's going on between Hannah and her mother? They have... a complicated relationship. I just played it safe, I didn't wanna get Hannah yelled at. Another student also said that she actually was at university that day. Hannah didn't write to me at all, by the way, she didn't ask. I could have had a fever, or was dying or whatever... So I didn't write to her either, I thought we'd see each other on Wednesday anyway. But she was already gone on Wednesday...

She's been acting weird over the past few weeks. She was kind of withdrawn, always making weird jokes, like making fun of me or something. We didn't really talk at all. That wasn't intentional. There was no argument, nobody was

offended or anything. It was just ... “mutual”, I guess. I really like Hannah, I always have. I think sometimes that just happens when people's interests change or something... Otherwise, I really have no idea why.

Recording №6

INVESTIGATOR. 11 AM, Sunday, September 13. I listened to the cell phone recordings. It scares me how similar Hannah and I are. She kept an audio diary like this too. She probably didn't think some complete stranger would end up listening to it.

Recording №7

HANNAH. Great, just great! I decided to ask a guy that Max works with when they were coming back from Berlin. He works with him as a train conductor and the two of them usually travel together. I wanted to surprise him and pick him up from the station. Max told me he had gone to Cologne. But now it turns out he actually had the day off. Isn't that just great? My boyfriend has the day off and I'm sitting here waiting for him to get back from Cologne. Fuck, and now I'm sitting here alone missing him like crazy, listening to a playlist of stupid love songs on repeat. Then I thought of another romantic surprise for him and drove to Neukölln to see him. I bought him flowers as a joke. I've always wanted to give a guy flowers, I think we should be fighting those stereotypes. I get there and see him making out with Kat in front of the house. They looked simply stunning together, a really cute couple. I didn't say anything and climbed up a tower in the children's playground and just watched them from there. They didn't even notice. I've decided I'm not going to say anything to them. I can't wait to see how they'll try to deny everything. Let them live in peace and harmony, just like my grandma used to say.

Recording №8

JURGEN. I'm actually from Kotka. I really don't get the Berlin lifestyle you guys got out here. If my son had just left home like that... Yeah, I have a son from my first marriage. I raised him not to run away from home.

Hannah and I got along fine; I do a lot for her. I'm not gonna recall every good thing I've ever done for her, but whenever she asked me for something, I've done right by her. But when you don't have a father, you know, that shapes a person. There's this whole difficult story with Hannah's father. Heike will tell you about it if she has to.

Of course, we also had some problems. I didn't like her boyfriend. I'm an old-school kinda guy, you know. I was once in the navy for 10 years, served as a boatswain. I'll have you know I'm a pretty sharp guy, but this Max, he ain't got nothing in his head. I was suspicious of him right from the start. I think he's a real idiot. He didn't even shake my hand when he first met us, stank of weed, red eyes. I told Hannah straight away that he wasn't the right man for her. She got angry and said: I'm not her real father, I have no right to tell her what to do. She always reminds me when something doesn't go her way. Of course, it's the way her mother brought her up that's to blame for that. Heike was always way too soft with her and let her get away with way too much.

They had a serious fight last week. Hannah was asking her questions about her father and Heike didn't want to tell her anything. Why should she? Why does a kid need to know that stuff? You become a father by bringing up a child, not by just fathering it. Besides, he isn't a good person, this guy, so why would you want to meet him at all? Heike's pretty happy now, as you can see that. No need to dwell on the past.

I was at home on Tuesday. Yes, I'm technically unemployed. But I'm doing all the housework. In the evening, I cycled to Obi to buy some tools. We had a broken pipe. The bike broke on the way, it's Heike's. I then had to walk home. I don't even want to know how many times I told Heike to get the bike repaired. The chain kept coming off. But no, she always says she's got too much to do. Unfortunately, you can't fix other people's heads as easy as you can fix a bike. Well, as for Hannah, I think she's probably hanging out with her friends somewhere. I'm sure Max can tell you more about that.

Recording №9

INVESTIGATOR. Tuesday, September 15. I talked to Jürgen, Hannah's stepfather, today. The guy's a liar. He's never worked as a boatman, we checked. In fact, he's probably never really worked anywhere. This Heike pays his alimony. The power went out out of the blue at the management office today, for no apparent reason. We were sitting in the dark. I've noticed that I can think better in the dark.

Recording №10

HEIKE. Yes, that's right, I didn't tell you why we argued that night. She asked me about her father again. You know, I looked after Hannah on my own until she was a teenager, only then did Jürgen come into the picture. I told her that I didn't want to talk about it again. I said I was really uncomfortable with the subject, I didn't want to know anything about this man, he treated me terribly. First, he persuaded me to have a baby and promised that he would help out. Then, when Hannah was three months old, he borrowed money from me and just disappeared. I was left alone with the baby. I think I have the right not to talk about it. What was I supposed to tell her anyway?

Recording №11

HANNAH. I was rummaging through some old stuff in the cellar and found a photo: There's a guy holding me in his arms. We have the same nose. On the back it says: 2003, Michael and Hannah. So mom is lying. I really think everyone in this town is a liar. I went into the woods, I wanted to scream for a bit. I thought I was alone out there, but I think I made a new friend just now. I told him everything, about the photo and about Max. I'm sure he won't tell anyone. Sometimes I wish they'd all disappear. But that's not gonna happen. It's easier if I disappear myself.

Recording №12

INVESTIGATOR. Wednesday, September 16. We just got back from the forest. This time we had Fortuna, our German shepherd, to search the entire area. At first she kept running around in circles, then she stopped at a tree and dug up the girl's inhaler, her mother recognized it immediately. The tree looked funny, by the way, like it had big stomach. I don't like how this is shaping out. I'll talk to her boyfriend, Max, the day after tomorrow. I'm just not sure which new friend Hannah was talking about in her audio diary.

What do we really know about our own children? Not a damn thing. They have their own lives, we have ours. We're completely disconnected. Who am I to my daughter? A weekend dad, that's it. Dad this, dad that, my cell phone is broken, can you help me? At least she lives with her mother, so they can talk about girl's issues. She's just sent me a heart on Whatsapp, saying thank you. I hope nothing happens to her, God forbid.

Recording №13

MAX. I was on the train, at work. I hadn't talked with Hannah at all for three days. She'd been in a really weird mood all week, getting mad at me for no reason, saying "you don't love me" and stuff like that. I thought: Fine, then if she's not gonna text me, she doesn't want to talk. And then yesterday Kat calls and says we have to meet. I was like: How do we meet? I'm at the International Hotel, in Cologne, next to the train station. Everyone at Deutsche Bahn, train drivers, conductors and so on, are staying there. And she's like this: I know I'm outside the hotel, come out. So I come out and there's Kat. I thought, what's going on, why did she drive all the way to Cologne? Why didn't she just call? My cat once had this operation and the doctor came into the waiting room with this look on her face ... I knew immediately: everything was over, cat dead and all. That's pretty much what Kat looked like. She said they'd found Hannah's things and, the most important thing, the inhaler. She never goes anywhere without it. Hannah was cool, she was real chill. But sometimes she pulled some really weird shit. Once she called me in the middle of the night, she was completely drunk, said: "Get over here, I'm at the Cozy Club", and

hung up immediately. What the fuck? What kind of cozy club? I googled it, it's somewhere in the middle of nowhere, on the outskirts of Lichtenberg. So I took my bike and went there. And she's partying there with some drunk Russians. Karaoke. Some weird song. Everyone sings the chorus together: "They Not Gonna Get Us". It was all really weird. I almost couldn't get her to leave, she really wanted to finish that song. I didn't even realize what was going on. The next morning she didn't know how she got there either. I told her: "You always listen to indie and ambient music, you know, you have pretty good taste, but what was up with that music last night? Then she said something creepy to me, something like "there are several personalities in each of us". I said I'd rather not meet that personality again. Her relationship with Jürgen, that's another issue... How are you supposed to get along with someone who leaches off your mother? He even punched Heike a few times. Because he thinks he's the man of the house or something. Hannah said he once forced her mom to wash all the dishes again because of one smudge on a plate. All of them! Just to show her who's boss or something. She really washed everything again. Hannah said that Heike then yelled at her. She said that her Mom did everything Jürgen told her like a trained dog. But he never touched Hannah. She said to him right at the beginning: "I'll call the police if you touch me." Sure, it was just words, but it must have worked. There was another nasty story. Jürgen is registered with Hannah's mom. That's not the problem either. But once Heike had to go on a business trip and he wanted her to give him power of attorney for the real estate, the apartment and grandma's house in the country. Just in case, he said, so that he could rent everything out if something happened. And she almost signed it. Hannah then saw the note on her desk and made a scene. She said she would leave home if Heike signed it. Heike didn't think it was such a great idea either. Jürgen hasn't liked Hannah at all since then. He always stares at her all pissed off, takes revenge for every little thing and is always snitching on her to her mother. I don't know what else to tell you. She really liked the forest. Whenever there was something going on — off to Grunewald.

Recording №14

INVESTIGATOR. I had a chat with the boyfriend of Gone Girl. I don't understand, aren't there enough young men in the world? She's pretty, this Hannah, you

can see that from the pics. Her eyes are lively. Why him? Maybe it's youth, but more likely it's more about his life stance: goes wherever invited, doesn't refuse anything. Drifts along. Doubt he's hiding anything... I don't think he started the affair with the friend. Just didn't resist. He even didn't realize that his girlfriend figured out that he was screwing around. Or what do you call it these days: an open relationship? Although... an open relationship is what it's called when everyone agrees... So it's more like just screwing around. I just don't get it: why didn't she break up with him right away? She probably wasn't too attached to him. No long-term habits, not ten years of marriage, no joint obligations. Rivalry with Katja? It don't see jealousy here, more like pain. Probably, it was more like morbid curiosity: how long will it last? Whether they still had a conscience? But what does that have to do with her disappearance? It annoys me how deep I am in this story. In the end, it's just relationship stuff, nothing else, very ordinary. I've an appointment with this philosopher at the university, Professor Stein. The mother mentioned him right at the beginning. Oh, I almost forgot: Today is Friday, September 18.

Recording №15

PROF. STEIN. Yes, I taught the introductory course, they were pretty weak students. No, I haven't been here long, it's my first year. I used to teach in Potsdam, but that didn't work out... *(Silence)* Because of the schedule, you know... To be honest, I don't know how I can help you. Yes, that's right, I teach the beginners course, along with the lectures. Hannah. I remember this girl, of course. She was the best in the course, calm and conscientious. It was only in the last few months that she slowed down a bit. I mean her interest in the subject, some sort of... concentration. Maybe it was the influence of this friend, Katja Zvereva. She's Slavic, I think: Russia, Belarus or Poland, or whatever. A very average girl, she follows Mrs. Schwarz wherever she goes. But you can tell what she's like: going out partying, late nights... Yes, maybe it was her bad influence. The last time I saw her... Hm. It must have been on Friday, in the seminar. Ms. Schwarz wrote a paper with me, about Berkeley. Do you know Berkeley? Of course, everyone only ever knows Nietzsche and Kant. Berkeley was a great philosopher, even if he wasn't German. Kant and Fichte owe him a

lot. I was real happy that she wanted to write about him. Lately, most pick topics where they can easily ask chat GPT to do all the work. Berkeley, the founder of subjective idealism, had a very interesting fate. He was born in Ireland, in County Kilkenny. "Oh my God, they killed Kenny...", I'm sure you know that one, don't you? No? Really? But you know the beer, don't you? It's a famous beer! (*Silence*). Not that I drink it often, but everybody knows that beer... Well, I guess there are exceptions. Berkeley famously equated being with being perceived: "esse est percipi". He liked to illustrate this with a fly. Let's say there is a fly, and here I am, seeing and hearing it. The fly only exists as long as someone is aware of it. As soon as I leave the room, the fly ceases to exist for Berkeley. Or it actually remains there, because someone else perceives it all the time. Berkeley meant God, of course. Ms. Schwarz wrote her thesis about this. And now I'm telling you about the last time I perceived her. Don't you think that's funny? (*Silence*). As for Berkeley, there was this strange story. One day he had an idea: he wanted to found a college on the Bermuda Islands to proselytize and teach the wild natives. Some aristocrat funded his trip, and parliament also supported the project. But something went wrong, and the ship got lost in the Bermuda Triangle. Everyone thought it had sunk and Berkeley had drowned. But then, a month later, he was back in Ireland as if nothing had happened. How had the crew survived that month on the open sea? When he got home, he couldn't get more funding; they told him they spent it on other projects while mourning him. What had happened in the Sargasso Sea? Nobody knows.

No, I never met her outside the university. I make a strict distinction between my professional and my private life. Oh, you don't know how much the students start to get on your nerves as soon as you offer them your friendship. That's out of the question. However, Hannah actually added me on one of those social networks. I don't like it when students do that. I don't want everyone to read what I write. Of course, I accepted the friend request anyway. Just to be polite, of course. (*Silence*). Well, maybe Hannah will come back home after a while. Maybe after a month? Like Berkeley?

Recording №16

INVESTIGATOR. Hey, can you please bring me a coffee from Starbucks? I can't drink this shit anymore. Thank you. And please close the door behind you. Shit, is the voice recorder on? Sorry, you can go on talking.

KATJA. So, this job. I needed money for a snowboard, and then Hannah and I wanted to go to Prague. It's really weird, but she'd only been abroad once or twice in her life or something. So we found an ad on the internet, on a job board. It was for some event, a conference or something. It was really funny what it said: "Auxiliary personnel wanted". We laughed our asses off. "Young women, attractive and well-groomed appearance, up to 25 years old." Don't get the wrong idea: it said that it was all one hundred percent without, you know, intimacy. Then two of them picked us up in a car and took us to a house. It looked like an industrial building from the outside, but inside there was a loft or something. I don't really know where it was, somewhere far out, I think. They drove us in circles at the beginning so we wouldn't know where we were going. And it was already dark. They took our phones so we couldn't take any pictures. There were no women there at all, only men, which was unsettling at first. Then we saw only one woman who was standing with her back to us: her hair was extremely long, it went down to the floor. Nothing special happened there, but it was weird why all these people were gathered there.

Our job was to help with the banquet, carry things back and forth, make small talk. You weren't allowed to talk about sports or politics, or anything from your own life. Everyone was drinking a lot the whole time. You weren't allowed to talk about sports or politics, or anything from your own life. Just the standard rules of etiquette, they said. Then Hannah was suddenly gone with some guy for at least half an hour. I went to look for her and suddenly Mr. Stein, our professor, came out of a room. I was extremely shocked, I couldn't even say hello to him. I was about to go back, but then Hannah came out of the same room. I asked her if she was really in there with Stein. She said I'd only imagined it, that Stein wasn't there at all. But I definitely wasn't imagining it. I wanted to know from her all night what she was doing there, but she wouldn't say anything. She was kind of quiet the whole time anyway.

Recording №17

INVESTIGATOR. Saturday, September 19. Honestly, these two have no concept of self-preservation. They get into a car with strangers in the middle of the night and just take off somewhere? Some sort of secret supper, fucking hell... For that little bit of money? When I was their age, I used to put ads in mailboxes when I needed money. Who are these people? There's nothing in the database and Mr. Philosopher is playing dumb. Runes? That woman with the hair? Man, what a load of bullshit. The tail of a mermaid? That's such crap. This guy is so full of shit too. I can immediately see in his eyes what he wanted from her. Certainly not an essay. And then he emphasized the students' ethnic background. I thought everyone at universities was on the left these days, but he gives off a hard right vibe to me. Well, maybe he just said it like that so we know who we were talking about, I don't know. No real clues, my intuition is silent. None of them strike me as murderers. Yes, they're all kind of dull and indifferent, that's true, but you don't go to jail for that.

Recording №18

KATJA. Mr. Stein once told us about his theory of “singular abstractions”. According to this theory, only abstract concepts can retain singularity. When I got home, I googled the whole thing and lo and behold — it was all made up. I then realized that he always makes up these make-believe stories and then passes them off as real. But sometimes he also says scientific, like real things. And then you never know exactly where the line is between fake and real theory. The problem is that most students — well, actually most people — like stories with more fantasy than truth. I thought I had to tell you something. Well, I don't know, maybe it's important. But please don't tell Mrs. Schwarz anything, she won't understand. On Tuesday, when Hannah disappeared ... I wasn't at the university then, you know, I was with Max. Well... you know (*Crying*). Hannah didn't know anything. I mean, I definitely didn't tell her anything and neither did Max. I really don't know how it happened. I mean, it was just ... it just happened. I liked him from the beginning. I didn't want to hurt her, honestly. We just talked like that and thought we'd better not tell her

anything. We thought it would only happen once. But we're drawn to each other, you know? It's something you can't control. So you just kind of get into a like, a magnetic field or something of a person and that's it. Did all this really happen because of us? I did something bad, didn't I? Do you think I'm a bad person? But you can't own a person. I love her and I love him, both of them. Does that mean I killed her? *(She cries, sniffles)*. Yes, thank you very much. *(Drinks water)*. Max will kill me for telling you all this.

Recording №19

HANNAH. I bought a book at the Boxi flea market, "Undine" by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué. I don't know why. A mermaid wants to get a soul and marries a knight for it. So that means if you want to lose your soul, you have to marry a merman? *(Laughs)*.

Recording №20

INVESTIGATOR. Friday, September 19. Started doing door-to-door rounds. Nothing. We held hearings in Eichkamp, right by the spot in the woods where we found the backpack. None of them wanted to talk to us. Almost nobody can remember this Hannah. They live with blinders on, don't know each other and don't want to know anything about what's going on outside. Sometimes I really think we're all fucked. Well, there was at least this one lead. A neighbor said we should talk to this guy, the son of a former forester from the local department. His name is Bruno. He practically grew up in the forest and runs around there all the time. His grandfather was also a forester and supposedly even his great-grandfather. It seems to be a real dynasty of foresters. Oh, the backpack. It was a black one, pretty tattered, there was nothing in it except ants. The mother recognized it right away. Apart from fingerprints and photos, we didn't get anything out of the boy at first, he is deaf and dumb. We then called a sign language interpreter. Turns out he's just talking nonsense. Then we searched him and look, he had a photo of the missing person with him, in front of a lake. On the back, in her handwriting, it says "Mermaids have no soul". He also had two books with him: "Handbook for the healing effects of herbs and trees",

"The Magical Rites of the Ancient Germanic Peoples". Then he talked about some kind of transition. At first I thought he meant crosswalk, but the interpreter said they have a different name for that. Tomorrow is the psychological examination. Oh, and then there's this strange story with the professor: I now know where it all came from with this mermaid tail or whatever. It's the Irminsul! We even had it at school once. Irminisul — it's a sacred tree, the Germanic tribes worshipped it. As a symbol, it actually looks like a mermaid's tail pointing upwards. I read on the Internet that the tree is also called the world ash tree. It said that the worlds that the tree carries embody the powers of the universe; the gods live in the crown and the realm of death is in the roots. Of course, the Nazis also used this symbol. And then I started reading more about the forest. There are a lot of legends. For example, that this mermaid lives in the Devil's Lake: she drags fishermen to the bottom and drowns them. Allegedly, someone wanted to kill the mermaid with silver bullets, but then she disappeared under the water and never showed her face again. Then there was something about a princess who was cursed by the devil: she sank into the lake together with her castle. On the night of the summer solstice, she emerges from the water, sits on the shore and weeps. Why on earth did I start reading this garbage? But somehow it's really hard to stop.

Recording №21

HANNAH. Today, I looked at myself in the mirror and thought: I look older somehow. My eyes are different. I wonder how that happened. . I don't know how to explain — it's not about age. I can't talk about everything here. some things you shouldn't even say out loud to yourself. Because, as we know, there's always someone watching you (*laughs*).

Recording №22

FEMALE VOICE. Rapunzel, February, Violet, Lynx, Tear, Tomcat, Triangle, Star.

INVESTIGATOR. Just a moment, please. Did he really just say all that?

FEMALE VOICE. Yes.

INVESTIGATOR. All that so quickly with just his hands?

FEMALE VOICE. I have interpreted everything exactly.

INVESTIGATOR. All right, then please continue. But please do so literally, without embellishing, you know, be exact.

FEMALE VOICE. The trees always recognized Hannah immediately. I know it sounds strange, but trees have a memory. Whenever something happened, whenever she was in trouble, she came to the forest. She stood there and hugged Rapunzel. I gave the tree this name because it is pregnant. Rapunzel is growing inside it, waiting to come out. Some guests visitors think it's the Cosmic Tree. There is this legend that there is a tree in the forest that can predict the future and open the portal to another world. Trees are like people, they don't just differ according to their species. We have pines, oaks, beeches, birches, lime trees, willows and alders. They have different ages, different biographies, different bark and different diseases. Hannah trusted the trees. She felt them. She often went to Teufelssee when she wanted to think about something. We never made an appointment. I'm in the forest almost around the clock. I often met Hannah by chance. Especially in places where most guests don't go. We always joked: "Mermaids have no souls." Hannah and I were friends, she was my only human friend. Otherwise I always spend my time with trees, humans don't like me.

After that night when she disappeared, all the trees by the lake had cracked bark in the morning, like a burn. At first I thought it was those idiots again who poisoned eighteen trees last year. They drilled deep holes in the trees and injected poison into them. An 89-year-old lime tree died, I couldn't save it. But this time there were no holes, no traces of people, no scratches or chips. The bark was just cracked, like it had burst open. I thought maybe they had a new method, sprayed the trees with something... But then I realized: there was only one tree that was intact, Rapunzel. I put my hand to the bark and felt that it was pulsating: tum-tum-tum, like a heartbeat. Then I heard someone shouting by the lake. I turned around and saw that the water was trembling and making circles, as if someone had just dived in. Very strange. I once told Hannah this story. I got it from my father and he got it from my grandfather and my great-grandfather. And he saw it himself.

About every 70 years, when there's an electromagnetic storm, the kind where you can see auroras, the transition takes place in the forest. A young woman turns into a tree. To be precise, it doesn't happen all the time, but only under very special conditions. At first I thought it was all just a fairy tale. My father said it could only happen to a woman, it couldn't happen to men. At midnight, she has to go to the cosmic tree in the forest and perform the rite of passage. She has to read out a spell. If she says everything correctly, she becomes a tree. If she makes a mistake, the devil takes her soul and turns her into a mermaid. My father had this piece of paper where he wrote down the spell, just like my grandfather dictated it to him. He showed it to me and said that he wouldn't live to see the day of transition, that he didn't need the saying anymore... That's how it was. Those are the words: "Now that I have looked around me, I pass from the forest into the forest, from the gates into the gates, from the woman into the tree. My skin becomes bark, my hands become branches, my hair becomes leaves, my torso becomes a trunk, my head becomes a crown. The gods have sown me, the roots, deep in the earth, hold me upright. I am a tree, like all other trees, the gods give me purpose and strength. With every year my trunk grows and I grow with it, beyond myself. The gods give me purpose and strength. I stretch out my branches and reach for the other trees, for the sky. My songs are my leaves. They fall to the earth that I have outgrown, they free the space for time and the future. This is a children's forest. This is the forest of the children of gods. Every tree is the image of a god, so this is the forest of the gods. We are the trees, we live for today and always. We are free from the passions of man." The transition releases so much power that the bark of the trees nearby can burst open. Father said the transition is necessary because the cosmic tree needs this power. It keeps in mind the evil that used to be in this forest. Much has happened in the forest...If there is no new soul to surrender to it, the evil will return. There is a rumor that there is a devil's altar under the Grunewald. Allegedly, the American listening station was deliberately built on this spot to block the entrance to the altar. They say that Hitler wanted to build part of "Germania", the university city with a gigantic Parthenon, in Grunewald for the same reason. So assuming all this is true, there is so much evil here that it could destroy the whole city. The trees have always been there for the people, they protect the city. If the forest disappears, the town will disappear too.

I told Hannah about the ritual, just for fun. And then she wanted to see the paper with the words. I thought she would find it funny, she likes anything unusual. So I gave it to her. Then when the bark of all those trees burst... I saw a missing person's report with Hannah's photo and immediately knew what had happened. I thought it was all just a fairy tale... If I had known it was true, I would never have told her. She was my only human friend.

Recording №23

INVESTIGATOR. Wednesday, September 23. Someone sent a letter to the head office with a cut-out page from the "Berliner Zeitung", from 49: "October 14, mysterious tree death in Grunewald". I really thought someone was trying to make fun of me. Of course, I immediately went to the archives, for whatever reason, and rummaged a bit in the files from 49. In October, a girl disappeared in the forest and there was a manhunt. Then I read all sorts of things about this radio station from the Cold War. And then something weird about radio waves. It turns out that radio transmissions and auroras are generated by the same electromagnetic waves. So one can amplify the other, or something. When they affect the Earth's magnetic field, they can even open up a kind of portal in space-time. At least that's what some physicists think. Of course, their opinion is not recognized by most scientists. This whole story...I'm starting to completely lose my mind. That guy there, Bruno, we let him go. His story is pure BS, of course. Well, this tree really exists, I've seen it myself. And it's true that these assholes poison trees, he didn't make that up. He really has a bit too much imagination, that kid. I checked out a new crime scene today. A guy beat up his sister in an inheritance dispute. Finally something normal again.

Recording №24

HEIKE. I sometimes go into her room and switch on the night light. She has a night light that she really wanted for her birthday, with little stars and planets. It turns and the light shines on the walls. I switch it on and look at these stars. Sometimes I sit like that for hours.

Recording №25

JURGEN. Yesterday I saw a report on TV about killer plants. We all know hogweed, but who would have thought that this stuff is so common? And then azaleas, daffodils, there's even a type of maple that kills everything around it. It must have been brought in from America, the parasite. And then there was another plant... yeah, it was mistletoe. They use it to make wreaths at Christmas in the US. One woman gave her sister one of these wreaths. The dog nibbled on it and died. So that also happens. I then said to Heike: Look, Heike, what doesn't exist? She said she wasn't interested. I don't care, she said. Then I said: And what do you care about, Heike? She just kept quiet.

Recording №26

MAX. Hannah sometimes asked me weird questions, out of the blue. Like, how would you want to die? How do birds see the world? What would a real alien look like? Which superpower would you rather have: would you rather be invisible or be able to read minds? Nobody else ever asked me such crazy questions. I've now started asking myself those questions. I'm basically Hannah and I'm conducting an interview with myself. No idea. It all feels really strange.

Recording №27

KATJA. I found a white cat on the street yesterday, a small kitten. Max is mad at me, all I want to do is I just talk about this cat all the time. I don't know, I just like it when there's someone to look after... This cat is female, she has a black spot on his tail. I called her Xena. Like "Xena — Warrior Princess." Alex said, "But she's white. And Xena was a brunette." I said, "Who cares, things in life never fully match up."

Recording №28

HEIKE. If I want to make a judgment about a person, I always look at their shoes first. Are they clean or dirty? Are they new, colored, laced? Are they sports shoes or boots? I think I only do this because I'm afraid to look people in the eye. I find it easier to talk to a pair of shoes than to a person.

Recording №29

INVESTIGATOR. I drank another Starbucks coffee yesterday. I've been drinking it for years. The cup was still on the table... I always get in trouble with younger colleagues because of the cups. They say it's not "sustainable". Well, you have to allow yourself a few sins, don't you? So ... I took a closer look at the logo on the front: A goddamn mermaid! I've never noticed that before, all these years. We never see what's right in front of our eyes.

Recording №30

MAX. The day before yesterday, I bumped into an old classmate of mine at Alexanderplatz. We were both waiting for the bus, which of course didn't come for an extremely long time. We were talking, and she admitted to me that she used to be in love with me. All through school, since first grade. And I didn't have a clue. Now she's got a boyfriend from Switzerland and she's doing really well. I don't know, I felt really sad: she was in love with me and I'm only finding out now that it's too late.

Recording №31

INVESTIGATOR. Thursday, October 8. Thought I should start writing down my thoughts here, not just work stuff. Like I have no life outside of cases. I was cutting meat yesterday, cut my finger. Made me think of my grandma. On my mom's side. Her name was Agnes. Villagers would come to her when a kid got sick or a cow or something. She knew all kinds of spells. It helped some people,

"placebo effect" I guess. Anyway, I cut my finger and remembered this one incantation: "As the sky is white, as the wound is white, let the blood of God's servant Matti not flow". I said it, and it seemed like the blood clotted faster.

Recording №32

HANNAH. Somehow I always thought the scariest thing was betrayal. Scariest than Freddy Kruger or, I don't know, the alien, scariest than any disease. When you can't tell your mom anything because you don't know what she'll do with it afterwards? When you can't trust your boyfriend or your best friend. And then you realize that there's actually something inside you, like there's no voice or something. I've noticed my voice has been quieter lately. Only in the forest can I still be loud. (*Laughs*). At first I thought the asthma had got worse because of all the stress and stuff. But then I realized: no, it only happens when I'm with other people. As if my life depends on what mistakes other people make! Everything around me breaks down and suddenly I'm only speaking quietly. Above all, I must have somehow decided this myself, nobody forced me to do it.

A few days ago, I had a thought like that. I'd just taken the newspaper out of the letterbox and there was something about another murder in Görlitzer Park, I think, or in Grunewald. And I thought, there are always these crimes that happen in the forest or, how should I put it, all these strange things. Well, at least since Robin Hood or, well, what's her name, Ronja the Robber's Daughter. And all this time, there are always the trees. All this happens, but the trees don't get worse, well, or, I don't know, the type of wood doesn't change, the bark structure... They remain free of foreign crimes. It was somehow such a great feeling. Like back then... When you walk along this building site and you have "Agent Cooper" on your headphones, and you feel good, you can't hear the construction noise and you wish everyone could hear your music. Or when I met this extremely cool boy on the tram: he had a peel-off tattoo, a unicorn on his arm, from his little sister, and pink fingernails, which his sister had also done for him. I thought it was really nice that he didn't remove it. I didn't even ask him what his name was. We just sat in the back of the tram and played "Where is this passenger going?". Or that whole thing with Max, that was right

after we met. He had this super-cheap apartment at the end of the world, in Marzahn. The neighbors flooded it from above. Then there was this huge yellow, ugly stain on the ceiling. So we always looked at it and tried to recognize a shape, just like kids do with clouds: A dinosaur, maybe, or Little Red Riding Hood and the bad wolf having sex or a bird with an iPhone in its beak or some guy's face... Or like when I'm standing on Dragon Mountain and then there's this whole green sea and behind it Berlin, spread out in front of me, close enough to touch, and the horizon curves like this and the world — like a bowl.

And the mountain, Bruno told me, consists of the rubble of the bombed-out city. All this rubble, the stones, the bricks —it was once someone's home. And everyone only ever goes up this mountain to see the beautiful view. So you're standing on top of this mountain and someone else is lying inside it forever. And you stand there and think that you yourself are made up of the shards of all your broken relationships, your dreams, and at the same time you are there — whole. And it's kind of sad, but at the same time you're so happy. That was the feeling.

Recording №33

INVESTIGATOR. Maybe she really has turned into a tree? Or a mermaid? (*Laughs*). Or is it my professional helplessness? The first time I don't want to touch a cold case. Screw the check mark. Sometimes I think Hannah is like that fly that shady philosopher told me about: she only exists as long as you remember her. I'm just afraid they'll find the body in the lake one day. It would be easier for the relatives then, of course... People always want closure, they can't cope with uncertainty. No, bloody hell, she'd better put down roots. (*Silent, breathing*). I really think I need to delete these recordings. Otherwise someone will find them and think I've completely lost my mind. (Strange rustling).

THE END