

There was no hairdresser in Seilersfeld. The sleepy little village, located between Landshut and Passau in Lower Bavaria, with only eight hundred inhabitants, had only a bakery, a tavern cum inn and a small grocery store, which offered a modest range of drugstore and household items as well as stationery. Public facilities were almost non-existent, apart from the parish church, located in a community hall, a grammar school with an adjoining kindergarten, and a small town hall—on the ground floor of which was the office of Hubert Förster, Seilersfeld's district commissioner of the police department.

For everything else, such as a hair salon for example, Seilersfeld was simply too small. The women of the village had to drive to the county seat to have their hair done up in an elaborate coiffure for those special occasions like weddings, baptisms or funerals where it was necessary. When it came to everyday hair-care, however, most of them called on Birgit Förster, the wife of the village sheriff, as her husband was affectionately called by the villagers.

Birgit Förster had been a trained hairdresser. She'd given up her job in a salon of the county seat when she got pregnant for the first time and her husband took up his post as police commissioner at Seilersfeld's town hall. Now she offered her skills to the local women in her own kitchen, and in so doing was able to augment

the household income.

There was another, very practical reason why hairdresser appointments in the city were rare. In the early sixties, very few women in Germany had a driver license. In Seilersfeld, there was not a single one. In addition, not many of the villagers owned a vehicle. The Berggruber Bakery had a small van, used for the business. The Kranz family, the owners of the grocery store, and the Heuslingers who operated the tavern/inn, each had a car, but the number of private cars in Seilersfeld at that time was still very small.

This afternoon, Hilde Kranz, her son Bernd and the bakery's Ruth Berggruber, were sitting in the small kitchen of the policeman's wife/hairdresser. For the sixteen-year-old high school student, these gatherings at Frau Förster's were not just dead boring, but also exasperating: for months now he had been wishing he could get a mop-top haircut just like the famed Beatles from England. And although he once had wheedled a half-hearted "It's all right with me" out of his father, his mother still vehemently vetoed this literally hair-raising idea.

As a result, the young man had to deal with his frustration when Frau Förster cut his hair to the length that jutted out over the short teeth of her comb. So, after a hopeful and anticipatory period of growth, once again he ended up with neatly-exposed ears and an accurately drawn side-part. So, Michl Holzgärtner would remain the only boy in the village who was

allowed to wear a Beatles haircut. After all, he was a farmer, or rather, he was the sixteen-year-old offspring of the farmer Gustl Holzgärtner. And a farm boy's appearance was not something that had to pass middle-class muster. In addition, his mop-top hairstyle looked that way simply because he only occasionally got a haircut; thus, his head looked rather like an actual mop. Therefore, he was not viewed by the parents of his peers as a pioneer of a new and—for that reason alone—repulsive fashion, but simply as what he was. A farmer.

This afternoon, though, Bernd "Berni" Kranz for once didn't fight his boredom and frustration. On the contrary. He feared that his heightened interest in the conversation of the three women might be revealed unintentionally by the sudden and intense reddening of his earlobes. He strove, therefore, to put on the same bored expression he usually presented in Frau Forster's kitchen. They were talking about the new arrival in the village.

Three weeks ago, she'd moved into the extension that Gustl Holzgärtner had built onto his own house many years ago for his aging parents. After his widowed mother died, the building, which had a separate entrance, had remained uninhabited. Now someone was living there again.

Since the end of May.

The new woman in the village.

Yvonne Schmidt.

And this Yvonne Schmidt quickly became the topic of intensive conversations around the village among adults—and at the same time of late-night fantasies of adolescent boys such as Berni Kranz.

On her first day in Seilersfeld she strutted through the town in high heel shoes, which made her long, slender legs appear even more elongated. Those legs were covered only minimally by a blue-and-white mottled dress whose hem barely reached her knees and, being extremely tight, emphasized her swinging hips and the apple-like roundness of her buttocks. The worst (or most exciting, depending on one's point of view) was what presented itself above the waistline.

A willowy waist widened to a significant, solid and prominent bust, whose ability to draw attention was surpassed only by the youthful beauty of a face such as the young in Seilersfeld had never seen—and the old had only ever seen in the movies.

Large, dark-brown eyes, together with a delicate nose, clear and slightly tanned skin, high cheekbones and full red lips, made for an angelic face, which was complemented by an open mane full of black hair, which spilled over her shoulders and back in natural waves.

The first impression on that first day that many of the villagers in Seilersfeld might have had was that a famous international film diva had lost her way and ended up here—if not for seven-year-old Paul who accompanied her, and who this stranger clearly

intended to register that very same day at the Seilersfeld grammar school. And although the fact that she was indeed a mother could have helped to generate feelings of reassurance and tolerance, it was precisely the fact of her motherhood which caused daily-increasing and noticeable disapproval from the village community.

Because she was without a husband.

And so Yvonne Schmidt, on her very first day in Seilersfeld, strutted directly and without deviation into the fantasies of the boys, into the very bloodstreams of the men—and into the bile ducts of the women. Had those women discussed topics other than recipes, celebrities or the peculiar way that Frau So-and-So was dressed at the last church service—for instance their own sex lives (which was unthinkable, of course)—they would surely have noticed that their men had slept with them more frequently than usual in the first days following Yvonne Schmidt's arrival.

But that was not something one talked about.

For Berni Kranz this strange woman was an enchanted being, a goddess. There was something so unreal about her, something ethereal, that he stood frozen at the bus stop when he got off the school bus at midday saw her coming toward him on the sidewalk. With each of her gentle, almost sashaying steps, her hips swung back and forth, throwing small waves into the shimmering light of the muggy June air, and

spreading around her body to create an aura which seemed to make time stand still.

Even the sparrows, flying from treetop to treetop, seemed to be able to poise in mid-air like buzzards, in order to get an undisturbed view of her and drink in her magic, which nature manages to cultivate only at very special moments. As she got closer, Berni could see the spot on her neckline where the top of her bosom appeared—and again, small waves billowed at every step. Like jelly, when one bumped into the table. And when she reached the bus stop, a gracious look issued from her big warm eyes and gentle smile from her promising lips. Then she was already past him, leaving a hint of lavender in her train.

That night he took a long time to get to sleep.

On the following Sunday the pastor had given a sermon from his pulpit on the topic of beauty. Not Yvonne's beauty in particular. God forbid! Just on the subject of beauty in general. That it was, of course, just like everything else on God's green earth, created by our loving Creator and thus a good and divine thing. But then he found an elegant slant on this issue. Because, as with other seductive attractions—for example, power or property—beauty is vulnerable to being abused by the devil to lead the righteous into temptation.

He elaborated on the question of how a believer could recognize whether beauty was being offered to

him in a divine form, or whether the diabolical grimace of Satan was hiding behind it. To this end, he read from Matthew, Chapter 7: Ye shall know them by their fruits.

Good trees bear no bad fruit and bad trees bear no good fruit. Verify, when you look upon the face of beauty, what kind of fruits it has exposed, created, or borne. He actually used the term “borne.” Are they godly fruits—or such as have arisen from sin? By their fruits ye shall know them, and then judge the beauty at whose face you are looking.

This sermon, thought Berni, presents itself with a certain kind of beauty.

Amen.

Now, while Frau Förster cut his bangs, he kept his eyes closed in order to avoid having any hair fall into them. Thus he was able to listen in—with great interest—as his mother, Frau Förster and Frau Berggruber talked about the new woman in the village. Even though it was clear to him that this could hardly be characterized as a conversation. Rather, it was mutual expressions of outrage.

“Whore!” he suddenly heard his mother say.

“Hilde, the boy!” admonished a shocked Frau Berggruber.

“Oh, don’t worry; this young man can certainly hear what his mother thinks about her,” she replied and rumbled her son’s hair, so that Frau Förster had to create his side-part all over again.

Hilde Kranz was by no means a personable woman, and she fought constantly for her unshakable belief that she was always right. Her hairstyle of grayish-blonde interspersed with reddish streaks might actually be described as a “moptop,” except for the fact that, on a woman it was called a bowl cut. The pale, slightly sickly skin of her round and plump face also had reddish streaks. She tried—mostly in vain—to cover these streaks up with too much powder, while she had Frau Förster intentionally insert them in her hair.

Discussions with her were always a little unpleasant, because her lower lip was significantly thicker than her narrow upper lip, which gave her a somewhat uppity appearance. Anyone who did enter into a conversation with her (her husband had not done so for years) always had the feeling that they had to choose their words very carefully; her mouth just naturally expressed such skepticism that one intuitively gave a great deal of thought to the words before uttering them.

This effect was reinforced by two small, venomous eyes that were deeply embedded between her fleshy cheeks, and a thick ridge above, giving her eyebrows the look of frazzled grass atop two sand dunes. In fact, her eyes were so deeply embedded that they were permanently squinty, as though some hidden spirit was ready to spring out at her opponent at any moment if latter said something wrong.

Nevertheless, this energetic woman was appreciated



in the village and was well-liked; she was always to be found at the forefront when it came to organizing school, kindergarten or religious festivals, to which she usually contributed significant amounts of treats from the store. Moreover, she would generally extend credit when the end of the month approached.

Normal conversations with her, concerning the usual banalities of interest to the women of the village, were thoroughly enjoyable and humorous. Often it was Hilde Kranz who was the first source of the local news, such as a pregnancy in town, a pending engagement or the like, which was also a reason that most women were glad to spend their time on a short or long chat with her.

So while casual conversations with her were not unpleasant, and even enjoyable, serious debates were something that one generally sought to avoid. And such was now the case in the room.

Although today words like *hussy*, *obscene*, and *half-naked* had been tossed around in Frau Förster's kitchen, the word *whore* was of an altogether different nature, which threatened to transform the current, stimulating conversation into a discussion. Because the shopkeeper made clear with her tone of voice, that she had not used this particular word as a simply disparaging and insulting term, but as a precise designation of "that woman's" profession.

And as far as the other two were concerned, that was going too far, especially since there was no valid

evidence underpinning such a claim. In addition, the very idea frightened them. On the one hand, they were concerned about Berni, who was sitting right here and being confronted, probably for the first time in his young life, with the sinful abyss of a natural God-given morality unimaginably abandoned; but there was another fear.

A deeper one.

A fear that threatened them and their world in a very fundamental way. And even if this threat at first appeared quite vague, and could not be immediately justified with hard evidence, the consequences of a genuine, in-the-flesh prostitute living in the village would soon become clear. Even if they banded together, they would not be able to prevent their children from growing up with the knowledge of marketable sex, with all the consequences that would have for their moral development and their views of women. To make matters worse, the unfortunate son of this woman would be significantly compromised in his psychic development, since the epithet *son of a whore* or the equivalent would be certain to be applied to him. In addition, there was the fully-justified assumption that their beloved Seilersfeld would be vilified in the surrounding communities, openly or behind closed doors, as *Harlot Town*. Quite apart from the aspect of constantly increasing numbers of strangers coming to Seilersfeld to seek out Yvonne Schmidt at her Holzgärtner apartment—some of whom were bound to

be shady or even dangerous characters. And the very notion was downright shocking when one realized that the whore would be serving her customers in the evening, while in the next room seven-year-old Paul was trying to sleep.

The biggest threat, however, concerned their own marriages. Yvonne Schmidt was no worn-out, ugly old whore, but rather a young, extremely attractive seductress who was already the subject of much talk by the regulars at the local tavern.

Even if none of the Seilersfeld men should succumb to this temptation, there was still the danger that the weekly card-players or the skittles-players at the Heuslinger Gasthof, for example, would not be able to resist such lewd come-ons.

Why are you grinning?

Have you just come from her place?

The women knew from years of experience that such remarks could quickly generate rumors that had the potential to be repeated and spread more widely.

Of course, that man with the grin on his face would have a verifiable explanation for his state of bliss on hand. He got a raise today, he was soon to be a father, or he had at last been able to purchase the TV that he had saved up for so long. But this "Just come from her place, eh?" teasing would become a habit, perhaps even a standing joke among the half-drunken men at the tavern, and the recipient would not always be able to

claim a child on the way or announce that he just got a raise.

If Schmidt remained in the village long enough, even the most credible of men wouldn't be able to prove that they had never had anything to do with her. And this fundamental inability of denial would slowly but surely corrode any sense of trust.

Rumors were allegations that were probably false, but nevertheless possible. Simultaneously accurate and yet not accurate. This ever-increasing uncertainty as to whether something was true or conceivable—or even believable—would insidiously make its way into more and more marriages.

Trying not to speak of it, agreeing to smother the general suspicion in a mutually-agreed silence, would inevitably keep the unutterable alive—for it was precisely the silence that fed and gave weight to that-which-cannot-be-said. And what would ultimately be silenced were precisely those married couples who promised themselves that silence would be their savior. The mere presence of a prostitute in the village would bring about consequences which were of the most perfidious type that a harmonious and hitherto functioning community would have to deal with.

Again, they were not immediately aware of these consequences in all their specific details, but they felt the danger instinctively. And that was certainly the reason that they at first so violently disagreed with Hilde Kranz, even though direct opposition was

usually something that one avoided if at all possible—especially if it was expressed vehemently.

But on this day they contradicted her. It simply couldn't be as bad as all that. She was disappointed this time in the expectation that her friends would, as usual, go along with her with her typically dogmatic vehemence. Hilde Kranz remained calm, first shooing her son from the kitchen chair (around which Birgit Förster then swept up the fallen scraps of another futile yearned-for Beatle haircut), and then sat smugly in his place because she was next in line.

Then she spread the facts out before them.

This Schmidt woman had rented the Holzgärtner apartment, but obviously did not work. She had no job in Seilersfeld, and she hadn't made any effort thus far to find one. She also obviously didn't work outside the village, because she didn't seem to own a car, and she spent all day in the apartment, the only exceptions being her rare visits to the bakery or in Hilde's store. And although she seemed to have no source of income, this Schmidt woman always had an unusually large number of banknotes in her wallet when she opened it at the checkout counter. At the school, she had called herself a *housewife* when asked her profession. So what did she live on? And where was the boy's father? She was surely too young to be a widow. Of course, you could never know for sure. An accident, a terminal illness. Naturally, such a thing is conceivable. But it was not highly likely, right?

Maybe she didn't even know who the father was—given all her “contacts.”

Birgit Förster and Ruth Berggruber sighed audibly. Berni however, tried to act as unconcerned as possible, leafing through the pages of the *Passauer Neue Presse*. He was afraid that his mother would send him home at any moment, but she seemed to have forgotten him completely. And then she presented her stunned listeners with a piece of information that only she had known until this moment—with the exception of her husband, from whom she had heard it.

Every evening, Peter Kranz took his van and supplied the surrounding farms, small villages and other isolated areas all those necessities from his shop. He had noticed something which his wife, as soon as she heard it, knew just exactly what was going on.

There were evenings when, just after sunset, he drove out of Seilersfeld and noticed a luxury car—obviously not from the village—parked in front of the Holzgärtner apartment. And when he returned to Seilersfeld after completing his rounds, he saw a single gentleman exit the apartment, climb into the parked car and drive away. The really remarkable thing was that on these evenings there were different men with different cars. Once it was a Mercedes from Munich, another night it was a dark blue Opel Rekord from Augsburg, then there was a black Porsche from Passau.

Birgit Förster and Ruth Berggruber each let out short, frightened sounds, and Hilde Kranz basked for a

moment in the glory of having been completely correct.

This afternoon, something had happened in Birgit Förster's kitchen which had never happened before: the hairdresser began working on Hilde Kranz's hair, and all three women kept silent, lost in thought.

They would definitely need to talk with their husbands.

For Berni, it was as though the Queen had been dethroned. He felt disappointed—but also strangely excited at the same time.