

Marlene Röder: Melina and the Secret of Stone

Chapter 1: What a First Day of School Should Not Be Like

I run down the stairs and am all excited, because the first day at a new school is a special day. But there are no flowers on the breakfast table. The table isn't even set yet. Suddenly my legs feel completely heavy, and my arms, too, and all the rest of me. Mom forgot.

She simply forgot to get up. I try to be understanding like pops wants me to. "Mom will get better soon. We have to be patient," I say out loud in the empty kitchen. I say it extra loud so that maybe she'll hear it and notice what a grownup, understanding daughter she has.

But the only one who hears me is Pippa. "Super, then we'll have Nutella today!" she cries and climbs onto the counter. Panting, she shoves the glass toward me.

My parents think too much chocolate is unhealthy, so we only get Nutella on the weekends. At least that's the way it used to be. Since the trouble with Jonas there have been a lot of Nutella days.

Pippa tries to use the knife, which is much too big for her. I shoo her away and she runs away giggling, leaving little chocolate footprints all across the counter.

I eat standing up. Disappointment and the overly sweet bread glue my mouth shut. "I somehow hoped things would be different with the new school," I say to Pippa. "Stupid, isn't it?"

"Hope isn't stupid." Pippa, who has come closer again, lays her plastic hand on mind. "All will be well, my mouse." Mom should have said that. It's not the same to hear it from Pippa's little mouth that always smiles.

I breathe out slowly to blow the leaden feeling out of my body. "Let's go," I say to Pippa and stick her in the front pocket of my denim dress. I make another Nutella sandwich to eat at school and pack it into my cool, new school backpack.

Outside, the flowers in the front garden look exhausted. The faded plastic eggs still hang in the hazelnut bush. Mom hung them up at Easter, back when everything was still okay. They sway in the September breeze.

Upstairs in a second floor window, a curtain moves. "Look, she's waving," says Pippa.

"Nah, that's just the wind," I answer and turn away.

Then I get myself to school.

At the corner, Jessica Muth is waiting for me, just like pops arranged with her mom. Jessica and I weren't asked, because we both would have said we wanted to go to school by ourselves. Even though we are neighbors, we don't play with each other. Not since the afternoon with the monster Barbies.

Pops had brought me there right after the incident with Jonas. He talked quietly with Jessica's mom and I felt his warm hand on my back, pushing me into the unfamiliar foyer. Then the hand was gone, and pops, too.

Jessica had brought her Barbies out into the yard. But they weren't your ordinary Barbies with pink ballet dresses and wavy golden hair. No, their hair was nothing but matted, short-hair helmets because Jessica's attempts to style their hair had gone wrong.

These Barbies had tiger stripes painted on their bodies with mud. They had swum through rain barrels. They had been thrown out of windows with tissues as parachutes. Even their smiles were wild.

"You can call me Jessie," Jessica had generously offered, and held out a one-armed Barbie. "Do you want to play expedition?" Although Pippa, who loved expeditions, was jumping around in my pocket with excitement, I shook my head. The Barbie just looked too disturbing. Then I ran to Jessica's mom in the living room, where I watched cartoons on television until pops came back to get me.

Since the Barbie day, Jessica must think I'm the most boring person in the world.

I'm sure she doesn't play with dolls anymore, either. Instead she has a soccer ball that she dribbles along in front of her. Barbie-blond wisps curl out of the thick braid that swings behind her neck. She ignores me completely until we get to the entrance to the school.

"Here we are. Don't expect me to be your babysitter!" And with those parting words she kicks her ball onto the playground and disappears into the crowd.

I was already here with pops yesterday. There was an introduction for the new fifth graders and the principle gave a friendly talk. They showed us the classrooms and our homeroom teachers.

Now it's different. I'm standing in a maze of hallways, surrounded by strangers. It smells like discarded sandwiches and the grey plastic floor, where the kids' tennis shoes leave black stripes. It is too loud and too strange.

I hide in the girls' bathroom with Pippa, where I lock myself into one of the stalls. There it's at least quieter, even if it doesn't smell particularly good. I'm glad when the bell rings for first period.

We have art with our new homeroom teacher, Mrs. Rose. She's kind of old and has a chest that looks as soft as pillows.

After she greets us Mrs. Rose says, “I think it would be nice if we got to know each other a little better. So each of you should draw a picture of yourself. Divide your drawing paper into four squares.”

The boy next to me apparently can't wait to get started, because he pokes the guy in front of him with a pencil.

“Maik, please put down your pencil until I've finished explaining. Imagine the board is my paper.” Mrs. Rose draws a big chalk circle on the board and divides the green space into four squares.

“In one square, write your name,” she explains and writes “Christa Rose” in the top right corner. “In another, draw your family. In the third square you'll draw your friends. And the last one is for your talents. What do you like to do and what might you be especially good at? At the end of the period we'll look at your pictures together, and those who want to can tell us a little about theirs. Does anyone have questions about what you're supposed to do?”

No one says anything. “All right, then get started!”

I take my protractor and draw a cross with a pencil. Four blank, white squares sneer at me.

Name: “Melina Bender,” in my fanciest handwriting.

Family: I draw myself with brown eyes and chin-length brown hair. Next to me is pops holding his briefcase. I draw my mom lying on the green sofa and sleeping. I want to draw my little brother in a dream bubble above her head. But maybe the others will laugh then? You don't have to draw dead people, do you?

Friends: Pippa wants to draw herself, but I won't let her. Someone could see her. Pippa has brown hair and round, brown eyes and a pink dress. How do you draw someone who's four centimeters tall and has the name of a company and the year she was made on the soles of her feet? I draw a small pink dot in the middle of the rectangle. “Well done!” Pippa whispers from her peephole in my pocket.

I'm still on the third square and thinking about what I should draw when the boy next to me, this Maik, pokes me in the side with his elbow. “You don't have any friends, or what?” he whispers extra loudly, grinning meanly. The other kids sitting near us look over to my paper with curiosity. I block their view with my arm and try to fill the next square, but everything gets all mixed up in my head. What were we supposed to be drawing? Talent, something I can do well.

I'm good at waking people up. I already know what this Maik would say about that: “Ha! Anyone can do that!” I didn't even manage to wake up my mom this morning. But it's different with me. I'm good at waking up things that shouldn't even be living.

“She doesn't have any friends and she can't do anything!” Maik says loudly and a couple other kids giggle.

“Idiot!” Pippa peeps from the pocket of my dress. But her voice is so quiet, no one but me can hear her.

Fortunately, Mrs. Rose comes over right then. She takes a look at Maik’s paper and says, “Oh, I don’t see very much on your own sheet yet. You should get started, Maik. I’m sure Melina can manage without your tips, can’t you?”

I nod. Pippa is definitely nodding too, secretly. Mrs. Rose bends over my shoulder. “Okay, let’s think about this together. What can you do especially well, Melina?”

I want to say drawing, but after Maik laughed at my picture I don’t trust myself anymore. So I shrug my shoulders.

Mrs. Rose thinks about it and says, “Hmmm, we haven’t known each other very long yet. But it looks to me like you can draw pretty well. You can also draw the things you like to do. Do you have some ideas?”

Relieved, I nod and bend over my paper again. I draw a magnifying glass, because I like to have a very close look at little things that I find in the garden with Pippa. I draw a bowl of popcorn (popcorn is hard to draw!) because I love to make popcorn with my mom and watch movies about animals on television. I draw a book because I love stories. I like to read them, but it’s even better when someone tells me some.

“Very nice,” Mrs. Rose praises, tapping on the almost empty square (the one with the little pink dot) with a smile that’s just for me. “You’ll see, soon there will be someone you can draw in this square.”

Chapter Two: A Pink Dot

Pippa was the first one I woke up, right after the thing with Jonas. Jonas, my baby brother.

Sometimes babies die. Just like that, while they are sleeping. No one knows exactly why. It isn’t anyone’s fault. That’s what pops explained to me. He explained it to mom, too, I heard his voice in a soothing murmur in the living room. But mom didn’t believe him. Her sobbing burned its way through the walls, I didn’t even have to eavesdrop. “No, I shouldn’t have covered him so warmly, it’s my fault, all my fault.”

She started to sleep on the couch in the nursery. As if she was afraid she wouldn’t notice if something happened to Jonas. But his crib was empty.

For a few weeks mom was almost invisible. Pops did everything then. He had dark rings under his eyes and sometimes he broke off when he was reading me a bedtime story, as if he didn’t know how the story continued.

That’s why I always picked the same book. I had stopped liking surprises.

“Something like this only happens rarely, and then only to very young babies. Not to you, I promise. You’re my big girl,” pops said when I called for him again and again and asked for a glass of water.

But just like mom, I didn’t believe him anymore. I had learned that bad things could happen. Even if your parents were careful. Even though you’re still a kid.

That’s why I stood up all my Playmobil people around my bed before I went to sleep, an army that was supposed to protect me. Silly, I know, but it helped me be less afraid. With my favorite figure in my hand, I tried to stay awake.

Sleep is strange. You don’t know what’s happening around you and who you are anymore. You don’t even know you’re alive anymore. You fall into nothingness.

At some point I must have fallen asleep anyway.

I woke up with a start in the middle of the night. It was black all around me; the darkness crept into my nose and suffocated me and muffled my scream. I couldn’t call out for pops. I thought I would die. Then suddenly I felt something in my hand moving, twisting itself out of my grip.

A little figure ran across my arm as if it were a bridge, climbed up the white mountain of my pillow and stood still in front of my nose. It was my favorite Playmobil person, the girl in the pink dress. She smiled at me with her printed mouth. Then she continued crawling, and I could feel the tiny plastic hands on my face. She pulled herself up on my hair, which must have been like thick ropes for her, until she was perched on top of my head. And I knew that she was keeping watch up there and making sure nothing happened to me.

I smiled and fell asleep.

When I woke up the next morning, I thought it had only been a dream. The disappointment made it hard to lift my head off the pillow. But then something tiny slid down my nose.

There she stood. Tiny as a pink dot, but full of life. Pippa.

Chapter Three: Brothers

After school, I stand on the playground watching the older kids play soccer. Jessie storms ahead. She is the only girl, half the hair is falling out of her braid, and she has the ball.

She doesn’t even look in my direction.

“What do we do now? Are we going home?” Pippa asks.

“Nah,” I say and kick a rock in front of me, just like Jessie did with her ball. “You know how she is on days like this. She just lies on the couch, and we have to be quiet, as quiet as if we weren’t there at all, and make ourselves noodles with ketchup for lunch.”

Mrs. Rose would probably cook something delicious for her kids, and ask them how things had gone at school.

“I know! We’ll go visit Jonas,” Pippa suggests.

“Without mom?”

“Come on, we know the way. It isn’t far. And even dead people need visitors once in a while. Especially little brothers.” Pippa pauses for a moment and then adds, “You didn’t draw him with your family. Have you forgotten him?”

Jonas with the plump baby hands, with his drooling and giggling and his weight in my arms that let me know I’m his big sister.

My face burns with shame, and my eyes burn, too. “I didn’t forget him. I never will. But it’s all so complicated.” I point to the older boys who are still chasing the soccer ball. “I wish I had a living brother. Maybe an older one.” These boys don’t look like they would just die in their sleep.

“If you’re unlucky you’ll get a jerk like that Maik! And then you’d really be in trouble.” Pippa’s attempts to cheer me up sometimes take some getting used to.

“No, I’d trade him in for someone else. I want one who tells jokes, and is cool, and can make real spaghetti sauce.” I sigh, because I only have a little brother, and he lives at the cemetery. “Let’s go see Jonas.”

It’s peaceful at the cemetery. Even the old women with their watering cans who mom and I usually meet aren’t there today. Probably because it’s starting to drizzle. The rain fills the air with fine pencil marks. I pull the hood of my jacket over my head.

Along the way we do run into someone. I named him the Owl because he’s always sneaking around the gravestones. The old man has a grey ponytail and wears a dirty raincoat. The last time we were here mom dragged me past him quickly.

The Owl is putting up red and white striped tape around a gravestone that pokes up out of the ground like a crooked tooth. “This one has to be propped up or it will fall down soon,” he grumbles when he notices that I’m watching him. He smells like wet dirt and smoke.

I quickly move on. I can feel the man’s gaze prickling at the back of my neck. Children probably don’t come here alone very often.

“It’s a little bit creepy here,” I whisper to Pippa.

“Don’t be silly, it’s pretty,” she whispers back. “Listen!”

The raindrops rustle on the leaves of the old trees. It sounds like voices behind a closed door you can hear talking quietly before you fall asleep. Birds hidden somewhere in the branches chirp. I take a deep breath and feel myself getting calmer and this whole stupid day is discarded inside the gates of the cemetery.

Pippa and I find Jonas's spot right away.

His stone isn't ready yet, that's why he just has a simple wooden cross. "Jonas Bender" is written on it, with two numbers next to it. The dash between them hadn't even lasted half a year.

At the foot of the cross is the stuffed dog that mom sewed for Jonas. It always sat in his crib. On that night, too. In my dreams the dog sometimes comes to life, a yellowed rag with graveyard dirt in its mouth.

I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole.

The sewn-on buttons that are its eyes stare into nothingness. That dog scares me. So I quickly look at the flowers that mom and I planted last time we were here. They're still blooming.

"Hi Jonas. It's your sister, you know, Melina," I greet him. It feels stupid to talk to a wooden cross. "We didn't even bring him anything, Pippa!"

I feel like kicking something now, maybe my own shin. Pippa rummages around in the bushes. Her little body is hidden in the wet grass, I can only see where the stems move and shiny raindrops fall to the ground.

"Wait, I have something!" she suddenly cries. "Oh, yes, this is pretty!" I bend over to her and Pippa places something in my cupped hand.

It's an empty eggshell. A delicate blue, very fragile thing, sprinkled with brown spots like freckles.

"This is for you, Jonas," I whisper and settle the eggshell on the dirt under his cross, as far away as possible from that horrible dog. "I'm sorry I didn't draw you in that picture this morning," I say quickly. The cross is silent. A blackbird sings somewhere. Maybe it's the one that hatched from the eggshell in spring. "I'll see you soon," I assure him quietly. "Say hi to mom for me when she sees you in her dreams."

Then I let Pippa climb into my hand and we get out of there.

Chapter Four: Will

Pippa and I wander all over the cemetery with no plans and nowhere in particular to go. There are mausoleums along the outer walls. Those are houses for whole families that have died. Gruesome. But some of them are really pretty, with pictures made of tiny bits of blue and gold glass, or statues watching over them. Pippa and I make a game out of finding the most beautiful statues.

“This one!” Pippa points with her plastic arm to a woman made of dark metal holding a small harp in her hand.

“She looks like she has a toothache,” I contradict her. “Better that one ...or no, the angel over there, look!”

I run to the grave I pointed at. On a high pedestal sits a life-size boy made of white marble. One of his legs dangles down, the other is bent, and his head is resting on it. The boy looks as if he were waiting for something. The bus, maybe. Only instead of normal clothes, he’s wearing a flowing robe.

“Willhelm Osterbaum,” Pippa makes out the inscription on the pedestal. “1898 to 1911. He only lived to be thirteen years old.”

I study the face of the marble boy. He doesn’t look like someone who would make fun of someone else just because she doesn’t know what she should draw in a blank square on a piece of paper.

“Do you think he looks nice, too?” I ask Pippa excitedly. “Like a big brother. Only with wings.”

The wet marble glistens. My hand is drawn to it. Maik’s voice drones in my head, constantly repeating: “She doesn’t have any friends and she can’t do anything, doesn’t have any friends and she can’t do anything...”

“No!” Pippa warns. She has climbed up the ivy that curls around the pedestal and the statue, and tries with all her might to push my hand away.

“I just want to see if I can still do it,” I mutter, pushing Pippa aside. “It probably won’t even work...”

I stretch until my hand touches the bare marble foot of the statue. Pippa has often asked me what it feels like when I wake something up. It’s if I were feeling my way around a dark pool. Sometimes I can feel something move deep down there – then I pull it up to the surface.

But this time nothing happens. The statue remains smooth and cool and lifeless. “See?” I say to Pippa. “I can’t do it anymore.”

At that moment I sense something buried in the stone. I bring it up to me...the foot of the statue is moving under my fingers!

I scream and fall down backwards into the wet bushes.

The marble boy stretches like someone waking up from a deep sleep. Slowly he brushes the ivy vines from his shoulders like I do with my blankets in the morning. Pippa and I stare at him. Everything about him is white, as if he were dusted with powdered sugar. He looks like a ghost. A young ghost, who is quite confused.

I have a strong urge to run away, but Pippa hisses, “You can’t just take off now! You’re responsible for him. Make him go to sleep again! Go on, touch him while he’s still groggy, quick, before he gets into any trouble!”

Pippa is right, it would be a good idea to put the marble boy back into a deep sleep immediately. But I can’t do it. I don’t want to.

“What are you waiting for, Melina?” Pippa urges, hopping up and down agitatedly on my stomach. “He’s a bit too big for you!”

That’s true. I’ve never woken up anything nearly so large. It’s as if I have brought a real person to life. As if I have superpowers. If only my parents could see this now, Maik and Jessie, the whole rest of the world! I don’t pay attention to Pippa, who is still chirping dire warnings. Instead I stand up and slowly step in front of the pedestal where the boy is crouching. He stares in my direction, but I’m not sure if he can see me. Even the ring around his pupils, which is brown in my eyes, is white in his.

“Hey...” My voice sounds high and shaky. “I’m Melina. I...um...I woke you up. There’s no reason to be scared.” Maybe I am saying that more to myself than to him.

Now he moves up there, and all at once I’m afraid he could jump on me. But then I see how he stretches out his legs and feels for the firm ground with his feet, like a swimmer gathering all his courage before sliding from the safe shore into unfamiliar waters.

I take a step back and in the next moment he crashes down into the bushes in front of me. Clumsily he tries to get up on his feet amidst the crushed ferns. He tips over again because his wings are pulling him backwards.

Pippa giggles. “Okay, he doesn’t look very dangerous.” She’s right. The way the boy moves reminds me of a newly hatched stork I saw on television not long ago.

“You want to stand up, right?” I ask. “Wait, I’ll help you!” I lean over him and grab his marble hands. “One, two...three!” With all my might I pull his stone weight upwards.

“Watch out!” Pippa cries anxiously. “You two are about to fall on top of me and squash me flat!”

But we don't fall. Swaying, we stay upright. The stone boy is a head taller than me. I'm panting from the effort. I can't even tell if he is breathing. But now I'm pretty sure he can see me, at least, because he's looking right at me.

"Now we're going to walk a few steps," I announce with more confidence than I'm actually feeling.

I hold his cold hands and walk backwards, while the stone boy follows me, staggering. Pippa has climbed up on my shoulder and chirps directions: "Lift your left foot, just like that, and put it down again..." Sometimes he threatens to fall down, then I have to support him. But by the time we reach the gravel cemetery path, he is walking better and better.

"Wonderful!" I praise him and carefully let go. "Now you're good enough to try it on your own." I wouldn't have thought that a statue could look scared, but this one does. "Just a few little steps, look, I'm not going far away."

Slowly, with his gaze focused right at me, he comes toward me. I continue to move backwards and he manages at least five meters all by himself.

"You can walk!" I cry with excitement. This must be how moms feel when their babies take their first steps.

Then the stone boy stands still and lifts his head. He looks around as if he were seeing everything for the first time: the trees, the gravestones, me and Pippa. The rain has gotten stronger in the last few minutes, and it splatters and patters all around us. The stone boy turns his face up toward the cloud-covered sky and catches the raindrops on his white tongue. It's astonishing that he has a tongue, since the sculptor made him with a closed mouth. Was it hidden inside the stone? Or did he just get one at the moment he came alive?

I stick out my tongue, too, and sense the taste of autumn, the raindrops on my skin. I laugh. Because even though the cold and wet are slowly seeping through my jacket, nothing has felt this good for a long, long time.

The marble boy laughs too, without any sound, probably the way stones laugh. "You need a name! Someone who can laugh and walk needs one." I glance back at his pedestal and read the name that is chiseled into it. "Willhelm... I'll call you Will, is that okay?"

At first I think I must be mistaken, because I hear something like an echo. But then I realize that the stone boy is repeating his name, rolling it around his mouth to test it out.

"Will... Will... Will." His voice sounds raw.

"You have to go back to sleep now, Will," I explain to him. "I have to go home. But tomorrow I'll come after school and wake you up again, I promise."

I lead Will back to his pedestal and help him climb back up. When he is up top, I touch his foot for a moment and send all my tiredness into him.

He hardens into stone before my eyes.