

Gudrun Pausewang
A Bank Robber at the Table
and other great stories

The Bank Robber

Hardy came home last week. His real name is Leonhard, but everyone who lives in our building has always called him Hardy. He was in the same grade as my big brother, even though he's almost two years older than Alex. That's because he had to repeat two grades.

Hardy's mother lives below us, in the ground floor apartment. Back when Hardy was sent to jail, his father still lived there. But he died a year ago. Died of drinking, says Mom.

Hardy was in jail for more than four years. I can't really remember the whole story. I was only eight back then; I'm twelve years younger than my brother, Alex. But I do remember all the turmoil. It was in every newspaper: an armed bank robbery, and one of the people who worked at the bank was shot.

At first, no one thought to connect Hardy with the robbery. But one day the stairwell was filled with police officers. In my mind, I can still see them leading Hardy away in handcuffs.

The people who live in our building stood on the stairs, curious. Mom was one of them. Everyone wanted to see Hardy being shoved into the car with bars on the windows. No one spoke with his mother, who stared after the car.

I wouldn't have recognized Hardy. He looks much older now than he used to, like a real man. Now he has a three-day beard.

No one in the building talks to him. When mom happens to be whispering with Mrs. Kopp on the stairs and Hardy comes by, they act as if he didn't exist, even though he always greets them. It must be awful to not get an answer to a simple "hello." And afterwards, they gossip about him.

"When's the next bank job?" I recently heard Granny Plettich in the fourth floor call down to Mrs. Schallmeier in the third floor. She yelled so loud that even Hardy's mother could hear it. And she had to hear even more: "And unemployed, too. He'll never get a job. Who wants someone like him? Suddenly they'll find a pistol held in their face. Well, it's true!"

I've run into Hardy on the stairs, too. Just me and him, alone, in the entire stairwell! I have to admit, I wasn't comfortable with it. I'm not a scaredy cat, but I'm not brave like a lion tamer, either. He looked at me. I couldn't look away! I got so nervous and confused that I even grinned at him. And he smiled back at me.

Alex is a student at the university in Frankfurt. When he came home on Friday for a long weekend, Mom told him about Hardy right away, that he had served his sentence and was living with his mother again. She is two or three years older than our mother, and the only one in the building who is close to Mom's age. But ever since Hardy robbed the bank, our mom has never talked with Hardy's mom again.

"I'll go down and say hello to him," Alex said.

"You'll do no such thing!" Mom exclaimed. "He's a no-good scoundrel, you can tell just by looking at him. Those eyes! And that stubble all over his face!"

"But I have a three-day beard, too," my brother said cheerfully. "Am I a scoundrel?"

"He smiled at me," I interjected.

"What do you know about bad people?" Mom replied indignantly. "You still think all's well with the whole world. Don't get involved with that guy, you two, or he'll get his hopes up. He could use you two as accomplices!"

"He needs hope," Alex responded, "or else he'll be lost."

He talked about Hardy. Way back in elementary school the misery started: Hardy stuttered. Probably because his father came home drunk so often. Hardy was scared of that, because some of those times he would beat his mother, and give Hardy a thrashing, too.

In school, everyone laughed at his stutter, and he became insecure. He didn't think he could do anything right. He failed a grade and had to repeat it. Then the kids made fun of him not only for stuttering, but also because he had failed. That tipped him over the edge and he repeated another grade.

"In my class they were really terrible to him," Alex reported. "I can't imagine what would have become of *me* if I had been treated that way. And in the end he got involved with the wrong crowd, just because he felt like they took him seriously. The police were already familiar with his friends..."

"He shot at a bank teller!" Mom cried, outraged. "It was all about the money, nothing but the money!"

"Of course he was after money," Alex said calmly. "He was unemployed and couldn't buy himself anything. And his father drank away everything he earned. His mother couldn't give him anything, even though she would have liked to. She was struggling to make ends meet with what little she earned cleaning the supermarket. Our whole society is focused on money, Mom. Us, too. Yes, even you. We have enough money because you have a good job and Dad wasn't stingy when you two divorced. You were lucky. Hardy's mom and Hardy were not.

But I think Hardy wanted something besides money. He wanted power. He wanted to be one of the important people who gives orders – and if it was only to order everyone to lie on the ground..."

I had to think of Mrs. Schallmeier. I had once heard her say, "It seems to me that Hardy just wanted to get his name in the newspaper once!"

Mom wanted to say something, but Alex interrupted her. "Of course, Hardy had no right to do what he did. But now he's served his time. End of story. And now

I'm going down to see him. I should have paid more attention to him when we were in school. But then I went off to college and was busy all the time. And then I just pushed it out of my mind. That's wasn't right, Mom."

Mom looked at Alex in astonishment. She thinks a lot of his opinions.

On Sunday morning I hung out in the stairwell and saw Alex ringing the Frankenbergs' doorbell and disappearing into their apartment. After a while he came back out, with Hardy. They went down the stairs and out the front door. Mrs. Kopp, who was just coming home from the bakery, stopped in her tracks and stared after Hardy and Alex. I wanted to follow them, but waited until Mrs. Kopp was in her apartment. But when I dashed out to the street, Alex and Hardy were nowhere to be seen.

After two hours, they came back. I walked towards them. They were deep in conversation.

"Where were you?" I asked.

"Rowing," Alex replied, showing me his hands. They were full of blisters, Hardy's hands, too.

"It was great," he beamed.

"Come up to our place for a bit after lunch," Alex said to him. "Then we can keep talking."

"Happy to," Hardy replied.

When Mom heard that Alex had invited Hardy over, she got incredibly nervous. "You can't possibly do that!" she cried. "In *our* apartment!"

"If you don't want him to come here, I'll go to his place," Alex said.

But Mom didn't like that, either. She looks forward to every weekend when Alex can come home.

The rest of the day turned out really well. First Hardy and Alex sat in his room and had a heated discussion about rights and justice. That was too much for me. But then they started playing music. I liked that. I joined them and listened along. Then they told each other what they had experienced in the years since they left school.

Alex called out to Mom, "Hey, come join us! Hardy's telling us about the training program he did in prison..."

When she heard the word "prison" Mom almost collapsed. But then she did come sit next to Alex. Hardy was just explaining that there had been a theater group, too. At first he hadn't dared to join, but then he tested the waters with a small part, and then later had a leading role. He hadn't been prepared for so much applause!

"People put on plays in jail?" Mom asked, amazed. She learned that there was also a choir, and a library, and people play chess. She asked a lot of questions.

Suddenly she looked at her watch and left the room. Soon it smelled like coffee. It wasn't long before she called us to the table, where she had set out afternoon coffee and cake. I counted the places. There were four! And then we sat around the table

and Mom poured us coffee. Now I was curious and wanted to know more about life in prison, too. And soon our conversation was as lively as if it had never been interrupted.

When the coffee pot was empty and Alex and I had polished off the last two pieces of cake, Hardy said, "But now I really have to go," and stood up. "My mom is all by herself downstairs."

"Maybe she'd like to come up and join us?" Mom asked. "Then we could sit and talk for a while longer..."

Alex and I stared at her, completely astonished.

"Oh," Hardy said eagerly, "she'd be happy to. She spends a lot of time alone. She doesn't get many invitations..."

At first Hardy's mother was very shy and hardly said a word. But when Mom went into the kitchen to make tea and sandwiches for supper, she helped her. She knew how to cut radishes into beautiful flowers. Then we sat together at our table again, this time five of us. Hardy's mom really came to life and invited us to come down to their apartment one night soon.

"But I can't offer you anything fancy," she said. "My pension isn't much."

"That doesn't matter," said Mom. "That doesn't matter at all."

"You were amazing, Mom!" said Alex when Hardy and his mother had left.

"Me?" Mom asked. "That's just no way to be. You're right – I should have been looking out for Mrs. Frankenberg a little bit all along. Everyone in the building will talk, of course. But I'll convince Mrs. Kopp. And when she's on board, Mrs. Schallmeier will be on our side, too."

"I'm in, too," I said.

That was the day before yesterday. Last night we were invited to the Frankenbergs, and we sat together for a long time.

This morning Alex had to go back to Frankfurt. But we'll manage on our own. The ice has been broken. This morning Mom talked with Mrs. Frankenberg in the stairway for a long time, so long that everyone who went up and down the stairs had to hear it.

This afternoon I'm going rowing with Hardy. I can't wait.