

# PASSION PLAY

by Nancy Holder

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Holder says this story was inspired by the Oberammergau Passion Play, which originated in 1634, during the Thirty Years' War. "Bubonic plague had spread all over Bavaria. The citizens of Oberammergau begged God to spare them," she says. "In return, they would put on a play about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus every ten years. The ravages of the plague ceased, and the Oberammergauers kept their vow. They still perform the play, most recently in 2000."

It was a chilly May morning, and Cardinal Schonbrun's knees cracked as he took his seat beside Father Meyer in the Passionspielhaus. Father Meyer heard the noise very clearly; he was acutely aware of every sound, smell, and sight around him: of the splinters in the planks of the large, open-air stage before them, the smell of dew, the dampness of his palms. The murmurs of anticipation of the assembling crowd, and those of speculation—and derision—when his own people, scattered among the thousands, caught sight of him. He was aware that he looked like a prisoner, wedged between his friend Hans Ahrenkiel, the bishop of Munich, and his nemesis, the cardinal. He was aware that his life as a priest would be over that day.

The cardinal scowled at Father Meyer and said, "Is it true what I've just heard?"

Father Meyer licked his lips. How had he hoped to keep it a secret? "That depends on what it is, Eminence."

"Did you give absolution to the wandelnder Leichnam this morning?"

Though his heart sank—someone had betrayed him—Father Meyer regarded the cardinal steadily. "Ja. Does that surprise you?"

Cardinal Schonbrun made a shocked noise. On Father Meyer's left, the bishop shook his head mournfully.

"Did it partake of the Holy Eucharist?"

The cardinal was a much younger man than Father Meyer could ever remember being. Blond and blue-eyed, vigorous and vital. Filled with New Ideas for the New Church. The kind of man Rome wanted to lead her flocks into the twenty-first century.

The kind of man Father Meyer, gray and aged, was not.

Father Meyer raised his chin. "The Church has always offered her mercy to the condemned. Ja. I did it."

The cardinal's face mottled with anger. He opened his mouth, glanced at the swelling audience, and spoke in a harsh, tense whisper. "Think what you've done, man! Polluted the body of Christ. You've made a mockery of the Sacraments, of your own vows—"

Father Meyer spread open his hands. "All I know, Your Eminence, is that Oberammergau, my village and that of my ancestors... that this village made a vow to God. And that now, four hundred years later, we're shaming that vow with what we are doing today."

Bishop Ahrenkiel touched Father Meyer's arm. They had sat in the rectory together, drinking ancient Benedictine brandy and discussing the New Ideas. In companionable silence, they'd listened to Father Meyer's collections of Gregorian chants, gone through scrapbooks of Passion Plays through the centuries. Father Meyer had hoped that Bishop Ahrenkiel, at least, would understand. But he, alas, was a New Bishop.

"I thought we had gone through all that, Johannes," he said now, for the obvious benefit of the cardinal. "These are not living creatures. They have no souls. The Vatican has spoken on the matter and—"

"The Vatican is wrong." Father Meyer turned anguished eyes toward the young cardinal. "Everyone is wrong. Your Eminence, I've spent time among these Leichname. I—I feel they are my ministry. They aren't merely corpses, as science would have us believe. I hear their hearts, though they cannot speak. They seek the Father, as we all do. They hope for love, and mercy, and justice."

"Father Meyer," the cardinal began, but at that moment, the single voice of the Prologue, a man dressed in a simple white robe with a band of gold around his forehead, called them to order:

"Bend low, bend low..."

Those same words had rung through the Passion Meadow for centuries, as once again the Bavarian village of Oberammergau renewed its covenant with God: the townspeople would perform a play glorifying the suffering and resurrection of Christ—the Passion—if the Lord would spare them from the ravages of the Plague. In 1633, it had worked: no more fevers that shook the body; no more pustules that burst and ran; no more deaths. After the vow, grace.

Oberammergau was not unique in this bargaining: in the 1600s, many villages, towns, and cities promised to put on Passion Plays in return for survival. But in

all the world, Oberammergau was the only village that still honored its pledge. The villagers pointed to this fidelity as the reason the town had also been spared the horrors of the more recent plague, the one that turned men and women, even tiny babies, into hellish monsters—the walking dead, rotting, slathering, mindless. What terror had run throughout the world.

Now, of course, the zombies were contained, and could even be controlled—as they would be today, on the Passion stage. Such a gift from God, such a miracle.

And as through the centuries, people from all over the world came to see God's miracles. Nearly half a million souls flocked to Oberammergau in the course of each decade's one hundred summer performances. But this year, the numbers were doubling—tripling—because of the introduction of the new element—a Newer way to glorify the agony and suffering of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Death from the sinner I release" sang the Prologue figure. And the crowd stirred—in eagerness, Father Meyer thought bitterly, at what was to come. But if his plan worked, they would leave this place with their bloodlust unsated.

"Sir," Father Meyer began, but a stalwart hausfrau behind him tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Hsst!"

The Prologue soloist sang on. It was Anton Veck, whom Father Meyer knew well. Anton had been an altar boy, was still busy in the parish church of St. Peter and St. Paul in a thousand helpful little ways. Anton, Anton, he thought, was it you who told them? Anton had been there. And he had not approved.

And, most damning of all, he was a cousin of Kaspar Mueller.

With a sigh, Father Meyer bowed his head and pulled his rosary from his pocket. He would not watch the play, though he, like every other Oberammergauer, counted his life not in years but in how many Passion Plays he had either performed in or seen. At sixty-five, this was his sixth cycle.

And though until this year, he had held the position of second-in-command on the Council of Six and Twelve, the committee that oversaw every aspect of the play, including the most important one: choosing the actors who were to play out the Passion of Christ.

He'd known the rules; they had to be Oberammergauers, or to have lived among the native-born for at least twenty years. In the case of the women, they had to be virgins, and young—cast-off restrictions reimposed during the cycle of the zombie plague, in the hope of pleasing God more fully.

He'd known the rules: the most prominent families must be represented.

And he hadn't disregarded the rules. He'd simply answered to a higher law; and that was why, after today, he knew he would be defrocked. No matter. He would continue in the work without the blessing of his Church.

Without the blessing. His throat tightened. Thumb and forefinger slipped over the worn wooden beads of the rosary his father had carved for him.

"Put that away," the cardinal whispered angrily. Rosaries were not appreciated in the New Church.

Father Meyer covered the rosary with both his hands. His lips moved as he mentally counted the beads. Carved with love, in rosette shapes to honor the

Virgin. It was a beautiful thing, and should be in a museum. Like the Old Church, he thought, with Her compassion and Her love.

His thoughts drifted back to the choosing of the roles. It had been a foregone conclusion, at least to the others, that Kaspar Mueller would play Christ. He had done so for three cycles, and no family in Oberammergau was more prominent, nor more powerful, than his. But to play Christ for a fourth Play? Thirty years older than when he began? Father Meyer had pointed out, correctly enough, that women over the age of thirty-five weren't even allowed in the play. Should a sixty-three-year-old man portray a man almost half his age?

"That doesn't matter. It's his spiritual qualities that matter most," Adolph Mueller, who was on the Council—and another of Kaspar's cousins—had asserted.

But the fact of his health remained. He was older, frailer. The part of Christ was grueling—each Passion Play lasted eight hours, with only a break for lunch; and then there was the matter of hanging on the Cross—

—and then there was the matter of Kaspar's falling from his front porch and breaking his ribs.

Father Meyer had assumed that would end the discussion; they would have to choose another, younger man. But Kaspar let it be known that he wouldn't hear of it, wouldn't share the stage with anyone else. Nor would he allow his understudy to take over the role.

The priest was concerned, and let that fact be known to the Council. And in deference to his office, the discussion continued. But Father Meyer should have realized the weakness of his position: the Muellers were one of the founding families of Oberammergau, and they owned the largest hotel, two restaurants, and four taverns. They also donated generously each year to the village's State Woodcarving School. Father Meyer's family hadn't arrived until near the end of the nineteenth century. To most Oberammergauers, the Meyers were little better than interlopers. And of what benefit would it be to please the parish priest over the largest employer in town?

Yet finally, after much deliberation, Kaspar announced he would allow the placement of a double of himself upon the Cross during the crucifixion scene: one of the zombies, the wandelndere Leichname—changing corpses—as they were called in German, changed yet again, to look like him.

"Think of it," Adolph Mueller had exhorted the Council. "At last we can depict the true Passion of Christ. We can drive nails through its palms, and pierce its—"

"Father, really, you must watch or people will talk," Cardinal Schonbrun said as he stood.

Father Meyer shook himself. The sun was high in the sky. The stage was empty, the curtains closed. It was the lunch interval. Four hours had passed.

It was time. He called upon the Virgin for courage.

"People already talk, Eminence," he said. "The talk hasn't stopped since I stepped down from the Council."

"Which is why we're here," the cardinal cut in, gesturing to the bishop and the many priests assembled around them. "To prove that the Church approves of these

proceedings, even if you do not.”

Bishop Ahrenkiel put his arm around Father Meyer. “Come. Let’s go have some sausage and a beer. The cardinal would surely not object?”

Father Meyer’s heart jumped in his chest. Now was the moment. Goodbye, his soul whispered to Holy Mother Church. Forgive me.

“I’m—I’m not hungry,” he stammered, his fear showing. “If I may be excused to go to my house for the interval?”

The cardinal regarded him. “I think not. I think you should eat with us, Father.”

He forced himself not to panic. “But I’m not feeling—”

“Nein. You must come with us, Father Meyer.”

Father Meyer sagged. The cardinal must have guessed his plan to slip backstage and free the ten Leichname the village had purchased. Why had he dreamed it would be possible? He was a fool. A cursed old fool.

“Father Meyer?” Cardinal Schonbrun pressed, gesturing for him to walk beside him.

Father Meyer forced back tears. Perhaps he could find another way. He could not believe that in four hours they would actually crucify the pitiful thing.

“It’s done in movies and things all the time,” Bishop Ahrenkiel murmured as Father Meyer plodded slightly behind the cardinal. “It has been approved by the various humane organizations, the unions, the—”

“Don’t speak to me.” Father Meyer turned his head away from his old friend.

“But, Johannes—”

“Don’t.”

They sat in the crowded rooms of the Mueller Hotel, among the tourists, who were titillated by the presence of live zombies in their midst. Though long ago the contagion had been stopped, still people held the old fears.

Maria Mueller, Kaspar’s daughter, brought the priests large mugs of beer and plates of pork ribs and sauerkraut. Though in her forties, she curtsied daintily to the bishop and the cardinal, but pointedly turned her back on Father Meyer. No one in the village had spoken to him since he’d resigned from the Council.

“It goes well, does it not?” Bishop Ahrenkiel asked her. “Everyone must be so proud.”

She frowned. “This is our holy obligation, Your Eminence. We don’t do it out of pride.”

Father Meyer pursed his lips. One of the Lord’s own creatures would be made to suffer horribly this afternoon, for another’s sin of pride.

They had told him the zombies had no nerve endings.

Father Meyer sat hunched in his seat with tears running down his cheeks. He clutched his rosary while he watched the creature writhe in agony as they stretched open its palm and slammed the nail through.

“The movements are being directed with a remote control device, Johannes,” the bishop reminded him, with a hint of pride in his voice. “It really doesn’t feel

anything. It's only made to look that way."

The other palm. The sound of the hammer on the nail echoed against the baffles on the walls. Blood spurted in the air and streamed over the end of the cross and onto the stage.

*Chang, whang whang whang!*

The creature struggled. Its mouth opened, closed, opened.

The hausfrau behind them moaned.

"Do you see?" Cardinal Schonbrun said to Father Meyer. "This reminds everyone of the suffering of Our Lord. It brings them nearer to God. I've never felt such emotion during a Passion Play. The scourging... that was excellent, Bishop Ahrenkiel, was it not?"

The bishop grunted, neither assent nor dissent.

Father Meyer brought his rosary to his heart as they hoisted the cross upward. The zombie swayed, then fell forward, pinioned in place by the spikes in its hands and feet. Blood flowed in rivulets from the crown of thorns, some into its mouth. The blue contact lenses gleamed as its—his—eyes gazed toward heaven. Such monumental pain. Father Meyer doubled his fists, feeling upon his own flesh the whip marks, the holes in his hands, the thorns digging into his scalp.

Unable to suppress a sob, he remembered what he had done that morning:

Dawn had been hours away. In the high Alps, in his beloved, unheated church, it was freezing.

He looked at the unmoving figure in the darkened confessional, closed the curtain, and rested his hand against the side of the booth. The swell of an ancient chant, *Rorate caeli*, masked the thundering of his heart. He inhaled the bittersweet odor of incense and gazed at the crucifix above the altar, at the gentle face carved five, six hundred years before by one of the Oberammergau faithful. The wounds, as fresh and red as at Calvary; the agony, the love.

"Most wondrous Savior," Father Meyer whispered, "if I'm doing wrong, forgive me. Please understand, oh Lord, that I believe this to be a child of Thine, and if it—if he—is not, and I do pollute Thy body, as the Church charges... if I offend Thee, I am heartily sorry."

He stepped into his side of the confessional and drew the curtain. He sat, took a deep breath, and, crossing himself, began.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been..." He hesitated. Who could say, how long it had been, for the one who sat in silence on the other side of the screen?"

"...it has been some time since my last confession. These are my sins." He swallowed hard and thought for a moment. How to proceed? It had been so clear last night, when he'd resolved to do this. So obviously a divine inspiration. But now, now when he was doing it, really risking it, he felt alone, untried.

But thus had our Savior felt, he thought, and was comforted in his fear.

"I have had... thoughts, Father. I have had thoughts that were other than those Our Lord would have us think. I have wished for things..."

He leaned his damp forehead against the screen. Such monumental pride, to speak for another! To dare to dream what was in another's heart. A heart that didn't even beat, not really. A mind that didn't think.

Nein, he didn't believe that.

"Listen," he whispered to the silhouette he could see through the screen. "I absolve you and forgive you of any sinful thought or deed, in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, amen." He squinted through the crosshatches. "Do you understand? Go in peace. God has forgiven—"

"Father," came a voice, and Father Meyer started violently. It had spoken! Praise be to God! He knew, he had always believed, he had prayed—

"It's Anton," the voice went on, and he realized it was the Veck boy, standing just outside the curtain. "The cardinal and the bishop are at my cousin's hotel. They're asking for you."

Father Meyer looked now at the figure on the cross. The figure he had dared to forgive. The stage was set for the climax of the Play, the Passion and the suffering of the Lord. The three crosses had been raised—on the other two, the actors playing the Thieves hung supported by belts beneath their loincloths, as Kaspar Mueller would have been. The Holy Women in their veils and robes clasped their hands and wept. The Roman Centurion stood to one side, pondering. The players gazed up at the wandlernder Leichnam, nailed to Kaspar Mueller's cross while the old man hid behind a pile of rocks, which would be used later in the Resurrection scene. They spoke to the zombie, and it was Kaspar who answered, in his quavering, old man's voice.

Behind the cross, Kaspar cried out, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!" and the Pharisees reviled him for calling out to the prophet Elias.

And the figure on the cross, pale and slight, panted and looked up, then down. Reanimated corpse, Father Meyer's head insisted.

His heart replied, An innocent man, doomed to suffer like this ten times. For each zombie was to be used for ten performances: they had devised ways to fill the holes in its—his—hands with wax, to stitch up and conceal the wound in his side. Ten times they would do this to it. For the glory of God.

And the glory of Oberammergau.

The soldier offered the sponge of vinegar to the creature when Kaspar Mueller cried out, "I thirst." And it tasted the bile. Father Meyer was certain of it.

"Mother, behold thy son," Kaspar Mueller gasped.

The zombie looked down at Krista Veck.

Father Meyer gripped his rosary. He could not let this continue. His holy office required he speak the truth of God as he knew it. As long as he was a priest, he was compelled to act on behalf of the Shepherd's lambs—

"It is over," said Kaspar. The ribcage of the zombie worked furiously. "Into Thy hands I commend my spirit." Its head drooped forward.

"Ah," murmured the cardinal.

A low, ominous rumbling filled the theater. It was the time in the Play for the earthquake and the rending of the Temple. The crosses jittered on the stage. The

zombie's palms began to bleed again.

"It is God's hand on us!" cried the actor who played Enan.

Blood streamed from its side and hands. Its—his—head bobbed. Father Meyer could abide no more. He rose to his feet and cried, "Ja! It is!"

"Father!" the cardinal said, grabbing his hand.

Father Meyer shook him off and crawled over him. He ran down the stairs to the front of the stage. Before anyone could stop him, he leaped on it and grabbed the wrist of the startled Centurion.

"You cannot do this! As a priest of God, I order you to stop!"

"What? What?" Kaspar demanded, appearing from behind the rocks. He was dressed as the risen Christ, in pure white robes.

"Blasphemer!" Father Meyer shouted at him. He thrust himself away from the Centurion, pushed Krista Veck and the other Holy Women out of his way, and scabbled onto the rocks. "Help me get him down! For the love of God, help me!"

"Get down from there!" The cardinal's voice rang over the rising voices of the crowd and the actors. "Get Father Meyer off the stage."

"Father, please." Rudi Mangasser, the Centurion, grasped Father Meyer's ankle. The priest yanked his leg free.

"For God's sake, Rudi! I baptized you. Help me!" Father Meyer pulled at the spike in the middle of the Leichnam's palm. It was hammered in all the way to the bone; blood pooled around it, smearing Father Meyer's fingers.

"Help me. Help me." He stared at the audience, which had leapt to its feet. Angry faces. Looks of horror. Some were backing away, others rushing forward. Others were crying.

"He is a being! We cannot do this!" He reached across the limp body and yanked off the crown of thorns, bringing skin with it.

A sudden, piercing chorus of screams erupted from the onlookers. Startled, Father Meyer froze and looked at them. Fingers pointed toward the stage—at him, he supposed. He dug his fingers into the zombie's palm, straining to pull out the nail.

The head slowly lifted. Who had the remote control device? Father Meyer wondered vaguely. But the screams grew louder. People turned to run from the theater. The cardinal and the bishop crossed themselves and sank to their knees.

The head wobbled. Father Meyer took hold of it beneath the jaw to support it. The flesh was hot.

Hot—

The head turned. It was covered with large, red sores from which pus flowed like blood.

"The Pest!" someone shrieked. "It has the Plague!"

Shaking, Father Meyer stared into the sightless eyes. New sores exploded over the zombie's body even as Father Meyer watched. They ruptured in a jagged line along the wound in its side; they traveled over its chest, its stomach.

The heavens filled with a rumbling. The earth—not just the stage—began to shake.

“It’s a trick!” someone shouted. “The priest has the control box!”

There were cries of outrage now. Krista Veck tore off her veil and shook her fist at Father Meyer while Rudi Mangasser scrambled onto the rocks and pulled him down.

“Idiot!” Rudi shouted, slapping Father Meyer across the face as they both fell to the stage floor. “What are you doing, you crazy old man?”

“I? I?” Father Meyer pushed Rudi aside and knelt in front of the zombie. He made the sign of the cross and folded his hands. Two red sores bubbled from his own palms.

Stigmata. But stigmata of a different sort. Of the New Church. And a New sickness, he supposed, which would cripple the world, as the Old sickness had four hundred years before.

He burst into tears and opened his arms. “The covenant is broken. God has spoken through one of His children, to tell us of His great displeasure.

His wounds dropped onto the boards. “A changing corpse? My beloved, my brethren, we are all changing corpses! All!”

“Get him off the stage!” Cardinal Schonbrun shouted again.

“No, don’t touch me! I have it already!” Father Meyer warned, but he knew it was too late.

Then, as one being, the throng roared and flew at him. A hundred hands grabbed him, hitting, punching, crushing. They kicked his shins and aching knees. Someone slammed a fist into his side. A woman he had never seen before wrapped her fingers around his clerical collar and choked him, choked hard until he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see.

Then the face of the woman swelled with boils. He watched, horrified, as they burst and a thick, oozing pus ran down her face.

“She’s got it, too!” shouted a man beside her.

She grabbed her face and wailed. Sores rose on the backs of her hands, exploded, splattering the man’s face; and everywhere the infection touched him, pustules rose, crusted, split. The man fell to his knees, shrieking.

The contagion engulfed the crowd like a flood of forty days and forty nights. Cries of terror shattered Father Meyer’s ears. The sky pounded with thunder, the hoof beats of four horsemen; timbers and scenery fractured and crashed. The stage split open, and the ground beneath it, and people screamed and flailed wildly as they tumbled into the pit. All, all tore asunder.

A jag of lightning slammed into the cross on the stage, igniting it at the base, bonfire-hot. Hellfire-hot. The zombie opened its mouth once, twice. Its head lolled to the side, and its sightless gaze moved, moved.

It fixed on Father Meyer. Seemed to look at him... yes! Froze there, staring at the priest of the Old Church, the Old love.

Behold thy son. Behold him.

Father Meyer raised his hand and blessed him. The zombie bowed his head. The flames engulfed him, and he was gone.

“He did this to us!” Cardinal Schonbrun cried, and three men grabbed Father

Meyer, pulling at him, beating him, weeping with rage.

Father Meyer stared at the fire as his arms were wrenched from their sockets, as blows and burning splinters rained down on his head. New sores erupted, burst, ran over his other wounds. No pain could be worse; no agony—

No. No pain could surpass that in his heart.

No fear could be greater than the fear in his soul.

He raised his gaze to heaven. “Father, forgive us,” he whispered, with the last breath of his body. “We didn’t know. We really didn’t.”