

Laila Ingrid Rasmussen: A Murderer in the Basement

"Ladybird, ladybird fly away home," I chant, slowly and so solemnly that I scarcely recognize my own voice. It's so ... uncannily quiet on the back stairs between the third and fourth floors, as I sit there at the wide end of the tread under the window with my bare feet in a ray of sunlight and feel the heat blazing down, though only on one side of my face. Maybe people are out on Sunday visits, or maybe they're taking afternoon naps, some are probably flopped on couches with newspapers over their faces that lift at each breath.

I bring my finger all the way up to my eye and peer at the ladybird's little armoured wing-casings, its spots and the tiny black legs scuttling up and up; as soon as it reaches the tip, just as it's about to spread its wings, I tilt my finger down the way, raise the back of my hand and the ladybird keeps going, onwards and upwards, toddling along, over my hand and up my arm. It looks so funny. It's touching to see what a hurry it's in. I twist my arm and it crawls up the inside, where the skin is thin and it tickles and I can't help laughing, but promptly stop myself: I don't want any one to hear and come running. It draws level with my armpit and then suddenly it's gone.

I wriggle and it falls down onto the stair with a little click. It lies on its back, kicking its legs. "A-ha, there you are." I give it a nudge with my finger, a little boost to turn it right side up, and it's all set to move on, but my foot is in the way, it turns sharply, continues along the side of the foot and reaches the edge of the stair. To such a tiny insect it's the brink of a yawning precipice. But it doesn't falter, doesn't stop to consider its options, it simply carries on at the same rate along the edge, right on the edge in fact. On the very, very edge. I catch it between two fingers and lift it up, the sun shines on its back, the only spot of red amid all the greyness of the stairs, a teeny-weeny sphere which I place in the palm of my hand and close my fingers around like the bars of a cage.

I hear a noise. My eye flies to the door handle of the flat closest to me. Is there someone in the kitchen? Behind the door? Or behind the coloured glass pane in the toilet door? I listen. But all is quiet, the only sound I can hear is the plop of water in the basement, it sounds as if a tap has suddenly started to leak. And the sound swells and swells until it fills the silence completely. How could I not have noticed that sound? It's all around me. Echoing up through the stairwell. It's the sound of drops of water hitting the bottom of the big copper in the basement. It's dark down there, because there's only one narrow, little window facing onto a shaft and at the top of the shaft there's a grating.

The ladybird lies still in my hand. I hold my breath. I'm so afraid that it's not water that's dripping into the copper at all, that that's not what's splashing down in great, big drops, and that it's not the bottom of the copper the drops are striking, but that they're falling into a pool ... of blood, and that rings are spreading out from each drop that falls, and I find that I can't get up. I'm paralysed. I can't call out. It's like a nightmare in which you scream, but no sound comes out. You run, but don't get anywhere. I can see my sandals, and my feet on the step. I can see my hand, which wants to reach for my sandals, but I can't move a muscle. Only the dust dances in the ray of sunlight, drifting slowly past my eyes as if through a sea of emptiness.

There's a murderer down there in the basement. I'm sure of it. It's not a place of white sheets and soap suds, the domain of housewives, but a slaughterhouse. I can see the wooden bench spattered with blood. It's a place where innocent children are cut up, torn limb from limb, ripped to shreds, but why? I simply don't understand why, and then someone calls from the courtyard. I turn my face to the sun streaming through the window and the light is so strong that I can't see a thing, but for some reason I feel comforted anyway. I undo a hasp, push the window open and look down, leaning over the ledge. It's Little Susan, she's standing outside my back door, looking up at my kitchen window on the ground floor.

"I'm up here," I cry. She looks round and catches sight of me. I'm not where she expected me to be, but she doesn't seem surprised. She rattles a jam-jar.

"Are you coming out to collect ladybirds?" she shouts and at that moment I feel a scrabbling inside my hand. But there's a murderer in the basement, I'm about to say. Instead, I shut the window, slip on my sandals and bound down the stairs.

"Look how many I've got," Susan says and holds up the jam-jar. Ladybirds are crawling all over the inside. It sounds really weird when she turns the jar upside-down and all the ladybirds skitter down pell-mell to land in a heap on the lid, then *wheee!* back they slide when she turns the jar rightways up again. I'm quite mad with envy. There are hundreds in there, and I've only got one. I race straight back inside for a jam-jar, then return carrying my solitary bug. We race around the courtyard catching ladybirds. There are so many of them once you start to look.

"I've never seen so many in my life," I say. They're on the ledges. They're sitting on the rubbish stand and on the fence of the yard next door. They're in the air, they swoop down and land in a flurry on the tarmac or cannon into our foreheads with a smack. They're crawling over the washing hung out to dry. On one yellow top there are an awful lot. We gather and gather, pick them out of each other's hair and catch them as they fly past. It's not easy getting them into the jar. When you open the lid some of them try to get out. And who has the most? We have to measure, chink our glasses together, laugh and say cheers, but she still has more than me. "I've got the most," she says. "Boo-hoo for you, you'll never catch up with me. There's no way you can. I know, because I've been at it all morning and you've only just started."

I look at my glass, I can no longer tell my lone bug from all the others. They all look the same. They're seven years old and they're all clambering over one another. Each and every one is trying to work its way upwards, but

somebody's got to be at the bottom. Some of them have to be at the bottom, otherwise the others can't get to the top.

"That's downright cruelty to animals," says a grown-up passing through the courtyard. "They can't get any air. They can't breathe inside a jar, you know. Did that never occur to you?"

"But we open the jar now and again to let some air in," Susie says.

"It's cruelty to animals. You should let them go again."

But we don't want to do that. I certainly don't.

"I still need to catch some more," I say to Susie and carry on collecting them. There are some in the crevice where the tarmac has cracked, on the doorsteps and in the basement stairwell. On the steps down to the basement door and at the very bottom, among all the muck around the door. Here you can scrape them up. With your hand, and your fingernails buried in the muck that comes up with them; down into the jar with them, muck and all and the lid back on fast as you can, before they can escape.

"Come on down here," I call from the stairwell. "There's masses down here, but it's really filthy too." I wipe my brow with a corner of my top, it's the new one with the holey pattern and there are black marks on the sleeves, along the crocheted scalloped edging.

"But Hell's Angels don't give a damn about that," I say. "Phew! This place is like an oven, it's sweltering." It's the bricks in the stairwell that retain the heat, not a breath stirs and there's a smell of something rotten. I can hardly breathe.

Little Susan stays where she is, next to the banister at the top of the steps with her head in the sun, and gazes at her jar. It's covered in sticky fingermarks.

"D'you think it is cruelty to animals?" she asks. I come up out of the well and take a deep breath. We look at one another and our jars, in which the ladybirds are crawling all over one another.

"Nah," we both say. Because there's still a whole band of air at the very top.

"But what about the ones at the bottom?" she says. She pauses. Stands side-on to me and peeks into the jar, taps it with her finger. "D'you think the ones on the bottom are breathing?" We shake the jars to enable the ones at the bottom to come to the top for a breath of air.

"They look like they're alive," I say.

"They're crawling about - they all are."

"And where there's life there's hope." I give her a push in the back and run off, shaking my jar.

"And Hell's Angels don't give a damn!" I cry.

Because there are so many of them. It's a real ladybird summer. There are thousands and thousands of them. They're all over the place, we're out catching them on the street and over in the next-door yard. Other kids are catching them too. When we meet we compare how many we've got, together Susie and I have the most, but she still has more than me.

"They eat everything," she says. "And when there's no more to eat they fly on to some other place to find more food, and if they find something there they eat that too, every last bit of it and then they fly on again ... and so it goes, on and on."

"But there's nothing here to eat," I say.

We stop for a moment, alongside the basement window. I can hear the tap dripping, I can hear it even though both the window and the door are closed. For these are the only sounds: the falling drops and the scrabble of ladybirds in the jam-jar.

"I've got more than you, I say, even though I know it's not true. I'm half a head taller, she barely comes up to my upper lip when we stand face to face. We're not at the same eye level, she has to lean her head back and look up. Then the sun is in her eyes and she has to squint at me.

"We could tip them all into one jar," she says.

But that's absolutely not on, because I'm bigger than her and stronger too. A ladybird lands right in front of her foot. Quick as a flash I bend down and pick it up. Before her. But the next one that lands she catches ...

though only because she pushed me and stepped on my toes at the same time.

"You stepped on my toes," I complain.

"I didn't mean to," she says and backs away as she unscrews the lid and stuffs the ladybird in on top of the others. I take a pace towards her and put out my hand.

"Give it to me."

"No."

"But it's mine, I saw it first."

"A ladybird can't be anybody's," she says.

We stand for a minute clutching our jars, in the wedge of sunlight that reaches into the courtyard at this time of day and this time of year, when the sun is at its highest. Soon it will disappear behind the gable end and you'd have to go further up the back steps to be able to see it.

"Give me that ladybird ... or I'll tell."

She puts the jar behind her back.

"Tell who?" she asks.

But I don't know who. I really do not know. Because we're the only kids in the yard. The others must be out in the street, or in other yards, or maybe their mothers have called them in. I glance round about, but there's no one to be seen, all the windows are shut. We're totally alone ... and there may be a murderer down in the wash-house. I can hear the drops falling into the pool and making rings.

"But I want that ladybird," I say and step towards her, forcing her to move back into the shade.

"You can have the lot," she says, stretching out her hand and quickly handing me the jar, before she can change her mind.

So now I have two jars, one in each hand. I bend down, unscrew both lids and tip the contents of the one into the other. A stream of ladybirds. A red and black wave.

"I don't want them anyway," she says. "I think it's a shame for them. It's cruelty to animals, so it is." She stands with her hands behind her back as if she doesn't know what else to do with them now that she's stopped catching ladybirds. I put down the empty jam-jar and eye my own jar triumphantly. It's chock-full of ladybirds. Full to the brim.

"I'm off home now," I say. I turn away and head for the back door.

"It's cruelty to animals," she says. "They can't breathe."

"Okay," I say, pausing on the top step, just outside the door. "I'll tip them out then." I unscrew the lid. Slowly and with narrowed eyes. The ladybirds immediately try to crawl over the rim of the jar. I hold it at arm's length, tilt it slightly while keeping my eye on Susan, studying her face and the hands which are no longer clasped behind her back but have flown to her mouth, she bites her knuckle as a few ladybirds drop down onto the stone step and the tarmac at the foot of the steps. They make a clicking sound when they land. Some walk off straight away, others lie where they are. A number manage to ease open their armoured casings and unfurl their wings.

"Yeah, let them go," she says.

I tip them out.

"Then neither of us will have any."

All the ladybirds are on the ground now, scuttling and scurrying and scrambling away, they keep getting in each other's way, but they've got to get out of here, they're off in all directions, all of them: away, they just need to get away, and some actually do, some of them manage to take to the air and fly off, looping and swooping; we can follow their progress for a little while and then they disappear from view. It's impossible to keep track of them, they all look exactly the same, but I've never seen so many at once before. I'd never thought there could be so many ... in the whole world. Then I notice Susan, she is hunkered down with a jar in her hand, picking them up ... and I don't know what makes me do it, the devil gets into me. I step forward and bring my foot down on a whole bunch of ladybirds, in the midst of all the ones that are still down on the tarmac, that are still

crawling around in all the dirt, veering this way and that in bewilderment, all of those who haven't managed to get off the ground, to lift their red casings, unfold their crystalline, translucent wings and take flight, those that haven't succeeded and who will never succeed. There's a scrunching sound and I hear someone shouting. I take the next step and the next again, I stamp and stamp. The ground is bright red now and slippery with slime, wing casings and dots smashed to a pulp, wings, legs too. Scarlet blotches blossom on the spot from which the wedge of sun is gradually retreating. The scrunching is so loud. I can hear Susan shouting, but she sounds very far away, she's crying and tugging at my arm. Now we're going to fall out, I think to myself, as I stamp and stamp. Now we're really going to fall out ... but Hell's Angels don't give a damn. And I go on stamping until there are no ladybirds left. They've all either flown off somewhere else or they're dead. Little Susan has stopped tugging at me. She just stands there howling, with her eyes closed and her hands by her sides. Her cheeks are streaked with dirt. I see her, but I'm in a frenzy and there's nothing I can do about it. It's like I'm paralysed. My body is acting of its own accord.

And then I'm sitting on the stairs between the third and fourth floors. The dripping noise in the basement has stopped, but tears fall from my eyes and splash onto the dusty stair, and I'm still scared. I'm cold, trembling all over. I'm crying and I don't know why. I have a ladybird in my closed hand. I feel it stir ... and where there's life there's hope. I undo the hasp, push the window open. I reach my hand into the sunlight and uncurl my fingers.

"Ladybird, ladybird fly away home. Your house is on fire and your children are ... gone ..."

Translated into English by Barbara J. Haveland