



**Malvina Moorwood – The Mystery of Moorwood Castle (Vol. 1)**

Written by Christian Loeffelbein, illustrated by Julia Christians  
9+ / 320 pp. / € 15.00

English-language translation © Ruth Martin

A place that shares Malvina's name,  
Where shadows dance in every flame –  
See the shadows on the wall?  
In Moorwood there's a ghost abroad.

## Chapter 1

### The worst day of my life

The 16th of July could have been a wonderful day. School was over, three hours earlier than timetabled, the summer holidays were starting, and it was hotter than it had ever been. It was my birthday in three days, and I was going to turn eleven. Everything was great.

[...]

Of course, Tom and I were much too old for playparks. But not for a dare you could do there. A properly dangerous dare.

It went like this:

I got onto one side of the see-saw. Meanwhile, Tom climbed up the wooden tower right next to it. And then he had to jump off, onto the other side of the see-saw, catapulting me into the air. If Tom didn't jump right, he would hurt himself quite a bit. And if I didn't land right, I'd hurt myself a lot more. I thought a bit of nerve-tingling was always good, but Tom didn't. I could tell that from the critical way he always eyed the see-saw.

But Tom was my best friend, so I managed to convince him every time. Jumping and flying through the air weren't my only skills; I was also good at talking people into things.

I had just opened my mouth to start, when Tom threw his arms in the air. "Fine, Malvina. One jump! Just one. But then that's it until Christmas. At least!"

"Until the end of the holidays," I said.

“Until November,” Tom shot back.

“October!”

“Okay, okay.” Tom rolled his eyes and set off towards the wooden tower. I climbed gleefully onto the see-saw and waited for lift-off. And it came quicker than I’d thought. Normally, Tom dawdled about, but this time he jumped straight away and I sailed up into the sky, breaking my sailing-high-in-the-air record. I had butterflies in my tummy, my heart beat wildly and I was a bit scared, too. But only a bit. All in all, exactly the right mixture. Tom wasn’t exactly known for big emotional outbursts, but after our acrobatic feat, even he raised his left hand and slapped it against my raised right hand.

“Are you coming over to mine this afternoon?” I asked. “We can watch the horror film you found in your mum’s shop.”

When it came to horror films, Tom didn’t take much convincing. He usually only liked the kind of exciting activities you could do in a safe environment. Preferably while sitting on something soft.

[...]

Then Bernie pulled up at the bus stop by the old gatehouse and I got off. I waved goodbye. The old gatehouse was called that because there used to be a large gate here, and a drawbridge, but like everything on our land, the gate and the drawbridge were old and crumbling.

Exactly right, in other words.

Of course, the drivers of the cars that ended up in our moat didn’t think so. And because those drivers have more say in these things than an almost-eleven-year-old girl like me, my father pulled the gate down and replaced the drawbridge with a lump of concrete. Now only the gatehouse was left, mouldering away with silent dignity. There was an old transformer from the electricity company in there, so it had escaped being pulled down.

In the gardens I met Poldi, our dog. He had been trying to catch rabbits, but of course without success. Poldi was getting quite old, and the rabbits were much too fast for him. I picked a few little green pears and threw them in the air. Little green pears were much easier to catch than rabbits. Poldi leapt about wildly and let out a happy bark when he managed to catch a pear. Then we both remembered about lunch, dodged round the large, wild hazelnut hedge and ran towards our castle. In the summery gardens, with the blue sky above it, the old building looked even uglier than usual, and reminded me more of a shabby factory than a castle. That is to say, the wonky turrets, the crumbling outside staircase and the grey stone walls were particularly noticeable because everything else looked so pretty and romantic.

Our house, by the way, was called Moorwood Castle, and it was ancient. I’d once read in *Butler’s Lexicon of Castles and Palaces* that it was one of the top ten ugliest buildings in Britain, but of course that’s rubbish. Moorwood Castle isn’t *one of* the ten ugliest buildings in Britain, it’s the number one ugliest. By some distance. And for that very reason, it’s incredibly lovable. At school, when we were told to paint a place where we were especially happy, I always painted our castle. Even if my parents thought it was about to collapse at any minute. Poldi and I scooted past the front entrance, which was boarded up. The windows to the left and right of the door were barred and bolted, too. Dad had done that, of course. Dad was the Earl of Moorwood, and like many of the landed gentry in England, he was as poor as a church mouse. And so we didn’t live in the castle itself, but in an outbuilding where the coachmen and servants had once lived. Of course, it was a long time since there had been any coachmen here, and there certainly weren’t any servants. We did everything ourselves,

and our coaches were Granddad's old Land Rover and Mum's new Mini. Mum was a dentist, and had a practice in the little town of Moorwood, very close to the bric-a-brac and gift shop that Tom's mother owned.

[...]

Auntie Frida greeted me with her usual warm-hearted hug, and as usual I sniffed her blouse as she did so. Auntie Frida smelled mysterious. Although she spent a lot of time in the kitchen, she never smelled like it – I have no idea how she managed that. She was Granddad's much younger sister, and for a while she had lived in Ingolstadt, a city in the south of Germany where there were still real witches – at least, that's what Auntie Frida said. And I believed her. She had shiny, dark hair and huge green eyes, and she looked twenty-five even though she was sixty, or maybe even older, nobody knew exactly how old.

[...]

I started tucking my school things away right at the bottom of my wardrobe, and finding a lot of t-shirts, trousers and jumpers I'd spent ages looking for in the process.

In the middle of my rummaging, the doorbell rang. That could only have been Tom, whose curiosity had brought him over here earlier than expected. I leapt up, rushed downstairs and opened the front door.

"Has the tornado come through here already?" I asked – Tom looked a bit of a mess.

"What tornado?" Tom wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I ran here," he explained.

He looked at me, and the glittering of his eyes told me he didn't want to go on talking about the weather. He was more interested in the horror film in his rucksack.

"And did you really find a video player?" he asked.

I pulled a mysterious face and whispered: "Just wait and see." Then I started telling Tom about Auntie Frida's incredible roast pork, and my plan to make a secret hiding place for the two of us in the old gatehouse, and while I was doing that I piloted him up the stairs to the first floor. There, we turned down a long hallway that led to the little spiral staircase you could use to get up to the second floor if you didn't want anyone to see you.

"Where are you taking me?" Tom asked.

"Shh!" I replied, and for once I kept my own mouth shut too, to set a good example. I walked down another hallway with Tom, in the dark. When we reached the end, I switched on the torch on my phone and shone it into an alcove.

"That's a rubber plant," Tom said. He didn't sound especially enthusiastic. "I thought we were going to watch a horror film, not look at pot-plants that..."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted him. Because I had recently discovered a narrower passageway behind the rubber plant – a passageway into our castle! If you pushed the plant and its big pot a little to one side, two small, thin children could squeeze through. Okay, Tom wasn't small or thin, but he was still a child, and he would just have to suck his tummy in. He didn't enjoy it very much, but finally we made it through.

"We're very nearly there," I whispered to Tom, and switched the light on. The windows were all boarded up, so no one would twig that we were in there.

"Hang on, are we in Moorwood Castle now?" Tom sniffed.

"You're quick off the mark," I replied.

"But..." Tom said, looking around, "but we're not allowed, are we?"

"To come over here, you mean?" I beckoned at him to follow me.

"Yes," Tom said, "I thought it was dangerous, because the castle might fall down."

“Oh, come on,” I muttered, which wasn’t a real answer, of course, but I didn’t want to have a discussion about things not being allowed right now. Because unfortunately, Tom was dead right. We were in the east wing of Moorwood Castle, and the rooms here were actually off limits – while the rooms in the main house and the west wing were *strictly off limits*, and the attic *very strictly*. And the cellar was so strictly off limits there wasn’t even a word for it. Apparently, the last gardener who ever worked for the Moorwood family had been killed by a falling brick there thirty years ago. And ever since, it had been scary down there. In other words, it was supposed to be haunted – at least, that’s what my brother, Tristan said. But of course, that was rubbish. Why would ghosts, who could float through walls and closed doors, stay put down in the cellar? They were obviously haunting the whole castle! And of course, there wouldn’t just be one poor gardener’s ghost in a building as ancient as Moorwood Castle.

It was home to a whole lot of other spooky figures. There was the Red Baron, for example, and Harry the Hangman. The Spider Lady, and the Drowned White Man. The Crawling Child and the Dancing Gravedigger.

Although I must admit, I’d never seen any of these creepy housemates. Unfortunately.

[...]

“Along here,” I said to Tom, beckoning him again. This time more energetically, because Tom was now a bit hesitant about putting one foot in front of the other.

Was he scared?

It was slightly creepy here, it’s true. The lights on the wall flickered, and the wallpaper in the hall we were walking along came from the last century and probably didn’t make anyone feel very cheerful then, either. The swirling pattern looked like grinning skulls, and I could well imagine that Harry the Hangman liked to roam around here at midnight. I led Tom to Dad’s old study and switched off the light in the hallway again. For a while, we stood there in the warm, damp darkness.

Tom wheezed again, while I felt my way over to Dad’s desk. There, I put the lamp on and then gave an excited “Ta-daaah!”. At the same time, I pointed with both hands to the old television beside the desk. It was on a trolley, together with the video player. The TV looked like an oven, and the video player like a lump of metal from the scrapyard.

Tom opened his eyes wide.

“Not bad,” he said appreciatively, getting the video tape out of his rucksack. The cover said *Dracula* in blood-red writing, with a picture of a ruined castle and a vampire prince with a mocking grin on his face. Very promising, and the perfect film for the last day of school.

“Does this set actually work, then?” Tom asked.

I nodded: I’d already tried both machines out with Tristan. But just as I was about to switch the TV on, my eye fell on the paperwork lying on the desk.

New paperwork.

Paperwork that hadn’t been there last time I visited.

Paperwork that wasn’t a sign of anything good – I sensed that straight away, because there was a very good reason why it was lying around here and not in Dad’s usual study next to the kitchen: it was paperwork that I wasn’t supposed to see. Tristan and my two sisters probably weren’t supposed to see it, either.

“What’s wrong?” Tom asked. He sounded worried.

I muttered something indistinct, because I was busy staring at the paperwork. The paperwork no one was supposed to see.

Tom came up beside me and helped me with the staring. I was glad he was here, because I suddenly felt like someone had punched me in the stomach and thrown ice-cold water over me at the same time.

“Bloody hell,” Tom whispered, a phrase that he had picked up from his father, and which he didn’t use lightly. *Bloody hell* was reserved for unusually terrible things.

Things like this paperwork.

“Do you know what this means?” Tom whispered.

I nodded.

Of course I knew.

“Your Dad has sold your castle,” Tom said.

I took a deep breath to stop myself bursting into tears.

“He certainly has,” I said. “To this Mr Bommel.”

The 16th of July could have been a wonderful day.

But it was the worst day of my life.