In 1943, Abraham Maslow gifted the world with his list of five core essentials that every human being has in common. Today we call the chart Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, and it’s still a framework for how we understand and study much of human behavior today.

The list includes a few obvious entries, such as our physiological needs and our desire for love and affection. There are deeper concepts, too, like self-actualization and esteem. They’re just as important, but a bit harder for many people to understand at first glance.

But it’s the last item on the list that I want to focus on. It seems almost too obvious to be there, but at the same time, it has a bit of everything. It’s basic, yet complex. It straddles the line, and maybe that’s why it’s so important to all of us.

What is it? Safety. Humans like to feel safe. Our pursuit of safety is core to who we are as people. It’s not unique to humans, for sure—animals are very good at finding and building homes wherever they can—but it’s undeniable that safety drives a lot of our decisions.

And rightly so. We deserve to feel safe. One could argue that it’s a subset of freedom: when we are fully in control of our own lives, a portion of that control will always be diverted toward safety.

We find safety in many different places, though. We find it in a
group of friends, because, as every horror movie has taught us, there's safety in numbers, right? We find it in places, like work, our schools, and religious buildings—although those are admittedly much less safe today than they were a generation ago.

It's in our own homes, though, that we find the most safety. We nest there, in a sense. We build a cocoon around ourselves that protects us from the weather, from outsiders, and from harm.

Tragically, though, sometimes that's not enough.

**Welcome to the Neighborhood**

No one liked Andreas Gruber. They thought the old farmer was greedy, and the public perception of the man was that he was rude and cranky. He was an old, crusty farmer, and no one around him appreciated that very much.

Gruber was sixty-three, and his wife, Cäzilia, was seventy-two. They lived on their farm about forty miles north of Munich, between the small German towns of Ingolstadt and Schrobenhausen. It wasn't their farm, though. No, it belonged to their daughter, thirty-five-year-old Viktoria, who lived there on the farm with them along with her two young children. Her daughter, Cäzilia, was seven, and Joseph was two.

And it was Joseph's birth that really got the neighbors talking. Viktoria's husband, Karl, had left to serve in World War I in 1914 while she was pregnant with their daughter. According to all reports, he never returned and died there in the trenches. So who fathered Joseph?

Local gossip, fueled by a dislike of Andreas Gruber, claimed the boy was a product of incest between Viktoria and her father. The birth certificate, though, simply listed the initials L.S., leaving the boy's paternity a mystery to wonder and whisper over.

The farm provided ample privacy from the gossip, though. It sat in a large clearing in the thick German forest, close enough to nearby Kaifeck to be part of the village, yet far enough away to be outside the normal flow of life there. *Hinter*, as the Germans
would say. The farm was *hinter*, or behind, the village of Kaifeck, so most called it Hinterkaifeck.

They still interacted with the village, though. Young Cäzilia attended school six days a week there, the postman delivered mail to the farm regularly, and a local woman even lived with the Grubers as their maid. From everything I've read about the family, they seemed to be nothing more than ordinary. Sure, they were broken in certain ways—Viktoria's lost husband and Andreas's reputation as a greedy crank were hard to miss—but overall they were just one more German farm family doing their best to get by.

In the autumn of 1921 the Grubers' maid quit her job there on the farm. She claimed, of all things, that the farm was haunted. She'd heard noises when no one else should have been around. She'd noticed items that had been moved, items that no else would admit to shifting. She never felt alone.

It took a while to find a replacement, and in the meantime, winter arrived. Life on the farm became more insular. There were no crops to tend to, so the Grubers cared for their animals and stayed warm. But little things were beginning to happen that caught their attention. Things that shouldn't be happening, and it made them wonder if maybe, just maybe, their old maid had been right.

They began to hear those same noises in the attic. Andreas even found a newspaper in the house that he had no memory of buying. When he asked his wife and daughter, they were just as baffled. And then one of the house keys went missing. It was unsettling, to say the least.

In late March 1921, though, Andreas noticed the most unusual thing. He'd been outside the house, perhaps to fetch something or to check on the exterior of the house. The night before had given them another fresh layer of snow on the ground, so perhaps he needed to inspect the roof. We don't really know.

As he walked from the house to the barn, Andreas claimed he saw footprints in the snow. They started at the edge of the forest and covered the distance between the trees and the house, ending there. Perhaps a traveler had passed through in the night. Maybe
a local had been walking through the snow and gotten lost. It happened from time to time. But what was odd about the tracks to Andreas was that they didn't go back. They just ended there.

We know all of this because Gruber himself told some of the locals while he was in town the next day. He was clearly disturbed by the things he had seen, but none of his neighbors had experienced anything similar.

That was the last time anyone saw the old farmer alive.

The Scene

The first clue that anything odd was going on, at least to the people of Kaifec, was when little Cäzilia failed to show up for school on Saturday, April 1. The next day, the entire family was absent from church, where they attended—pardon the pun—religiously. Cäzilia missed school on Monday as well.

Finally, when the postman arrived on Tuesday, he found Monday's mail still on the porch where he had left it. This drew his suspicion, and he mentioned it back in the village. The people there put the pieces together and decided something had to be amiss. So later that day, a group of neighbors gathered together, and they quickly set off to visit the farm.

You know how muffled and quiet it can get outside when there's a lot of snow? As if the sounds of the world around you have been muted and hushed? I imagine that those men were keenly aware of that unnatural silence, standing there outside the Gruber farmhouse that day.

One of the men shouted out for Andreas or anyone else in the house to come out and speak with them. They just wanted to make sure everyone was safe and well. But no one answered. Just more of that muted, snow-covered silence.

Not giving up, one of the neighbors—a local man named Lorenz Schlittenbauer—led the group to the barn. It was daylight, so perhaps Andreas could be found working in there with the animals. But when they opened the door, they were greeted by a grisly sight.
There, on the straw-covered floor, lay the bloody bodies of Andreas, his wife and daughter, and young Cäzilia. It was clear that something horrible had happened to the family, and Schlittenbauer quickly walked from the barn to the house, which were connected by a door. Inside, he found more bloodshed.

Maria Baumgarten, the new maid who had started work on the farm the previous day, lay dead in her own bedroom. Little Joseph, last to be found, had met the same fate. It was a scene of devastation and gore, and it left the men stunned.

Within a matter of hours, investigators from Munich arrived to go over the scene and gather evidence. They wanted to piece together what had happened, to discover the story, and to find clues that might point to the person or people responsible. What they did uncover, though, was far more disturbing than answers.

It appeared that each of the adults in the barn had been led there one at a time. Whoever the killer had been, they had appeared to call each person into the barn alone, where they executed them with a farm tool known as a mattock, a sort of pickax used for cutting. Each blow to the head was powerful and deadly, and each victim most likely died instantly.

The bodies inside the house had the same type of wounds. Maria and Joseph were found in pools of their own blood, their skulls crushed by their attacker. As far as the police were concerned, whoever wielded the weapon knew how to use it, and did so without hesitation. This was cold-blooded murder, without a doubt. The trouble was, the weapon seemed to be missing. It was just . . . gone.

Other aspects of the crime didn’t seem to line up with logic. For one, there seemed to be no motive behind the actions of the killer. It was known to a few in the village that just weeks before, Viktoria had withdrawn all of her savings, borrowed more from her dead husband’s sister, and brought the cash home. She told people that she planned to invest in the farm. She even made a large 700 mark donation to the village church.

All of the remaining money was still there, in the house. The killer hadn’t taken it. Nor had they taken any of the other valuables that filled the farmhouse. Nothing was stolen. Whoever had
called the Grubers into the barn—whoever had swung the pickax and ended all of their lives—hadn’t been interested in money.

Another detail that seemed odd was the condition of the house and farm. In most instances, a killer will flee the scene after the crime has been committed. But here, there were signs to the contrary. The animals in the barn appeared to have been fed and watered throughout the weekend. And not by an amateur, either; whoever had tended them knew his way around a farm.

But most disturbing of all were the reports from neighbors that smoke had been seen rising from the chimney of the farmhouse all throughout the weekend. Food had been eaten, and one of the beds had been slept in.

It was hard to believe, but the facts didn’t lie: the Gruber family’s killer hadn’t run. Instead, he had stayed in the house long after their bodies turned cold, as if nothing had happened at all.

**Theories**

The question, of course, was a simple one: who could do such a thing? But this was 1922. CSI wasn’t a thing that existed yet. There was no DNA analysis available to the investigators. Even fingerprint identification was too young to have reached the farmlands of German Bavaria. But even if there had been better tools, there were other obstacles to uncovering the truth.

The local men who initially stumbled upon the bodies, led by Lorenz Schlittenbauer, had disturbed much of the crime scene. While the maid and young Joseph had each been covered with cloth by the killer, the bodies in the barn had been stacked like lumber. On top of this macabre pile, the killer had placed an old door, and then hay had been scattered all over it in an attempt to hide it.

So when Schlittenbauer entered the barn with the others, he actually lifted the door and began to move the bodies, making a full and accurate investigation impossible. According to those who watched him, Schlittenbauer lifted and moved the corpses with no emotion or hesitation, as if the sight of it all didn’t bother
him. Or wasn't new to him. And it was that, along with some other subtle clues, that quickly moved him to the top of the list of suspects.

Why would he do this? Well, he told one of the men that he moved the bodies because he was looking for his son. Think back for a moment. Remember the questionable parentage of young Joseph, whose birth certificate simply listed one L.S. as the father? Numerous neighbor testimonies made it clear that Lorenz Schlittenbauer was that man.

And that went along way toward explaining why he'd led the searchers from the barn into the house: he'd been looking for his son, Joseph. But according to some of the men with him that day, the door between the barn and the kitchen had been locked. They knew that because Schlittenbauer pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. Which was more than a little curious, seeing as how Gruber had mentioned in town that one of his house keys had gone missing.

One final bit: the family dog was seen by the postman on the day before, where it had been tied to a corner of the barn. When the men arrived on Tuesday, though, they found it in the barn, wounded but alive. When it saw Schlittenbauer, the animal barked uncontrollably.

All of the clues seem odd and out of place. They make your mind perk up and feel like something deeper was going on, but at face value they prove nothing, and that's the frustrating part. The dog might have just been barking because of the bodies. Schlittenbauer might have had a key simply because he was the Gruber's closest neighbor. Like I said, these clues were subtle. And that's why he was never formally charged with a crime.

As for motive, some people believe that Viktoria had sued Lorenz for support, and the man had refused. Clearly, Viktoria needed money shortly before the murders, as her bank withdrawal suggested. But historians are doubtful. The most likely reality, they believe, is that Joseph's father was none other than his grandfather, Andreas, and the arrangement with Lorenz was simply an effort to save face in the village.

Alternative theories have also been suggested. There are some
who believe that Viktoria’s husband, Karl, did not, in fact, die during World War I. No body was ever recovered or sent home, and a friend of Karl’s even testified later to seeing him alive in the mid-1920s. Some people wonder: could Karl have had a hand in the murders, perhaps out of anger toward Viktoria’s relationship with Schlittenbauer while he was away at war?

I’ve even read another theory that claims Andreas had been waiting for an important letter of some kind. I can’t find more than a mention of it, but what if the killer and the letter were connected? That might explain why he stayed in the house for days after the murders. He’d been waiting to intercept whatever the letter contained.

One last thought: by all accounts, the killer had been in or around the Gruber home many times before the events of March 31. The Grubers’ former maid had quit her job because she said she felt the place was haunted. There had been the unrecognized newspaper. The odd noises. The missing key. Weeks and weeks of unusual activity that eventually led up to the day of the murders.

The day, mind you, that the new maid started working there. Maria Baumgarten had been killed just hours after arriving for her first day on the job. It makes you wonder: did her arrival upset the plans of whoever it was that seemed to be stalking the Gruber family?

Did she see him, and pay with her life?

A SAFE PLACE

Hinterkaifeck has the feel of a cabin in the woods, the centerpiece of many a horror film and novel. A place of retreat, far from the demands and prying eyes of the outside world, where we could go to get away. A place where we can find safety in the middle of an unsafe wilderness. A home away from home.

We want to feel safe, and thankfully most of us do. But there’s just enough risk on the tails of the bell curve that we’re always left wondering, “What if . . . ?” And that’s how fear works. It sits in the dark corner at the edge of our minds and watches. We know
it's not going to step out into the light, but we can feel it glaring at us from the dark.

I can't help but wonder if the Grubers ever had that sensation during those last few months. If maybe there had been times when Andreas just couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching him. Did Viktoria have moments when she felt like she wasn't alone? We'll never know the answers to those questions, unfortunately.

One more tiny mystery: the physician who performed the autopsies on all six victims had their heads removed and sent to Munich for further study. Some reports claim that a clairvoyant was part of that research, but I can't find proof of that.

Their bodies were buried nearby, in what is now modern-day Waidhofen, but their skulls remained in Munich, and were eventually lost in the chaos of World War II.

Today, the farm in the woods is little more than a memory. All that is left today is a small memorial. But over the year that followed the tragedy there, it stood empty, like a crypt in the middle of that clearing in the forest, a constant reminder to the neighbors who passed by of the people they lost, and of the violence that had visited their small village.

That might be why they finally tore it down in 1923. Maybe they couldn't stand to look at it again. Maybe it needed upkeep that required going inside, and no one was willing to do that. Maybe they just wanted to move on and forget.

Whatever the true reason was, it was only after the farm was torn down that the murder weapon was finally discovered. One of the men found it among the debris at the top of the pile, mixed in with items that had been in storage.

It had been hidden inside the house all along, in the last place anyone would look: the attic.