Romy Hausmann: Perfect Day

Sample translation from the German
by Jamie Bulloch

It’s a Thursday when Ann dies – the most miserable of deaths. She lies on her back, her legs stiffly outstretched, pressing her trembling hands to the gaping wound in her chest. The men have removed her heart, they simply cut it from her body and took it with them. She wants to scream but can’t; other sounds are coming from her throat: gurgling, wheezing. Lights explode on her retina, which is a strain, such a terrible strain, and she just wishes it were over; she can’t cope anymore. So she lets go, she falls, closes her eyes, ready. Behind her closed eyes it’s a better place. There the sun glistens, the sky is blue and she sits on her father’s shoulders, waving her arms around as if she could fly. It’s many years ago now – she’s seven and Dad calls her his ‘little beetle’. He holds her tightly and securely by the legs; she doesn’t have to worry, not anymore.

So this is what it’s like, she tells herself. This is death.

And how quickly it can happen.

Just a moment ago this Thursday was just a Thursday. They were waiting for their dinner, a pizza delivery from Casa Mamma. Dad had put some music on, a Lou Reed record from the 1970s, before Ann was born. A time when her father was young, reckless and foolish. She would grin when he said such things. Dad foolish? – never! How preposterous was that? But all the same she liked the record, which played more often than any other; it had been a backdrop to the years of Ann’s childhood. Wood was crackling in the fire and it smelled as if Dad had lit it with paper. Ann hated this smoky tang with its hint of acute danger. As if the entire house could go up in flames at any moment.

‘Where’s dinner?’ came the typical whinge from Ann, which Dad poked fun at: ‘While you’re waiting why don’t you make yourself useful and fetch some more firewood?’ he said, handing her the wood basket. Ann pulled a face. When she was hungry, she wasn’t in the mood for jokes.

In the garden November had created shapes that looked even stranger in the twilight of the darkness and terrace lamps. The bushes bending under the weight of the snow seemed to be making for the mountain beneath which her old trampoline was hiding. Ann trudged over to the woodshed, tossed a few logs into her basket and returned to the house.

That’s when it began, the dying.

First the light coming through the window from the other side of the house, the front. Blue circles suddenly dancing in the room. Ann, standing there in bewilderment with the basket, and her father, joking about their pizzas now coming by express delivery with flashing blue lights, because the restaurant had sensed how distressed his little beetle was when she was hungry.

But then…

The front door bursting open and the men thronging in. Throwing themselves on Dad and wrestling him to the ground. There must be a whole lot of shouting because Ann saw wide-open mouths. But she heard nothing; all of them were bellowing silently under the high-pitched tone that filled her head like tinnitus. The men yanked her father, yanked him to his feet, yanked him towards the door. Ann clutched her wood basket. She saw Dad struggle backwards and turn to her. His utterly empty face. Then they took him away, out into the night. Two of the men stayed inside the house, trying to explain to her what had just happened. Their words sliced into Ann’s chest, gouging deeper and deeper until they finally got to her heart. Her circulation collapsed. The basket fell to the floor. First there was the

thud of logs, then of her skull. Her body began to convulse, to twitch, she wheezed, whimpered and it was bad until she got here: the world behind her closed eyelids, where her heart is still intact, where it’s summer and with Dad’s help she can fly. She’s seven years old, his ‘little beetle’, and Lou Reed is singing about a perfect day.

‘We need a paramedic!’ An unfamiliar voice cuts in from somewhere, getting louder. It orders Ann to breathe, breathing in on one, breathing out on two, and stay calm, as calm as possible.

‘Here, the asthma spray!’

She feels her head being moved. Rough fingers force open her mouth and push something hard inside. Her throat turns cold, her chest relaxes. She sluggishly opens her eyes. Someone is bending over her.

‘It’s good to have you back,’ says the happy fool who has no idea of hell.

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New lead in Berlin Ribbon Murders case: fifty-five-year-old arrested after thirteen-year manhunt

Berlin (JW): On Thursday evening a fifty-five-year-old man was arrested in relation to the series of dramatic murders dating back to 2004. The man is suspected of having abducted the victims, whose ages range from six to ten, taking them to various remote locations in the vicinity of Berlin and then killing them. The suspect left red ribbons to ensure the bodies were found. Most recently, the body of schoolgirl Sophie K. (7) was discovered in a cabin in

Königswald. The week before the girl had been kidnapped from a playground in Berlin-Schmargendorf. As police revealed, a witness statement led them to the fifty-five-year-old.

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Ann

Berlin, 24/11/2017

(Six weeks later)

It’s as if the city has been emptied; I can’t see a single car or person, not even a stray dog. The shop windows are black, the entrances obstructed by roller shutters. Berlin is dead, everything is. Except for me. The last survivor, the only person left after the end of the world. Only me and Berlin and the festive lighting hanging everywhere, which flashes deceptively in rhythm, as if the city did have a heartbeat after all, a last hint of life.

I’m in a hurry, my steps are rapid and ungainly. Slush splashes up to my knees. So what? My trousers ought to have been washed a while ago. I used to be vain, but that’s in the past now. Zoe changed the locks to our flat and just left a small travel bag for me on the landing. From time to time I imagine her sitting at uni in my dark-red velvet jeans or wearing my golden sequin top on a date. It’s OK, or as Saskia E.’s father recently said in an interview: *The pain threshold shifts*. At some point things that used to seem like a flesh wound only feel like a scratch. Saskia E. was victim number seven, murdered three years ago at Christmas 2014.

I quicken my pace, chasing away shadows and footsteps that aren’t there. Sometimes there’s a splash of blood instead of snow. Saskia’s father was right about this too in his

interview: *Inevitably you go a bit mad*. He does the rounds of the media as a distraction. I have a distraction too, but it’s work. Although I’ve no idea who’s going to drift into a grubby fast-food joint like Big Murphy’s today of all days – they would have to be very, very lonely. The truth is, the city isn’t dead. It’s still alive, of course, and how. It has merely withdrawn into its warm, lovingly decorated sitting rooms. It’s sitting at tables laden with food, folded napkins and the best cutlery. It’s giving each other presents and revelling in eyes that light up. It’s happy, this city, and those who are left over today are those right at the bottom. It’s Sunday. And Christmas Eve.

‘There you are! Finally!’ Behind the till Antony is waving his arms around. He’s Cuban, just turned twenty-one and he’s been in Berlin for two years all on his own, without his parents or four siblings who still live in Moa, an industrial city on the north-east coast of Cuba. He needs the money he earns at Big Murphy’s to finance his studies and his room, but most of all for the transfers he sends home every month via Western Union.

I close the glass door behind me and look around. A single table is occupied, by an old man whose face appears to be nothing but eyes and a beard. He’s wearing a dirty brown coat and as he bites into a floppy burger I can see fingerless gloves full of holes. Ketchup drips out of the bun like thick, red tears.

‘Yes, thank God, given the rush on here,’ I mutter as I wander past him and into the changing room.

My uniform consists of a short-sleeved, green polyester shirt and brown trousers that open at the sides: ventilation slits you come to appreciate when, in the cramped kitchen, oil at 180 degrees is bubbling in five deep-fat-fryers at once.

It’s not the best job in the world, but it was almost criminally easy to get. No written application, no references, no CV. Just a phone call and the next day a job interview using my

dead mother’s maiden name. The manageress liked me at once; I came across as uncomplicated. Working hours, overtime, even the salary: I didn’t care. All that interested me was having my wages paid in cash. And that was fine so long as I signed for it. After some rudimentary training in hygiene, infection control and accident prevention, I was shown the ropes.

Today there are only three of us here: Antony, who’s looking after the till and the drinks; Michelle, who’s preparing the burgers in the kitchen; and me, who right now is helping her, because nobody’s coming to the drive-in that I’m responsible for. Of course not: it’s Christmas Eve.

‘You alright, Ann? You’re so quiet today.’ Dear, sweet, simple Michelle. How concerned she sounds. She’s in her mid-forties, her hair dyed a yellowish colour, and always heavily made up, which at the start of her shift makes her look at least five years younger, but later, when her make-up has gathered in the wrinkles around her yes, has the opposite effect.

‘Sure, everything’s fine,’ I say, for no reason poking my finger into the container with the tomatoes.

Michelle nudges me in the side to cheer me up. ‘I find Christmas depressing too, if that’s what’s bothering you. For three whole days everyone behaving as if all was right with the world. Peace, love and light a candle. Like hell.’ Michelle is a single mother of two teenage boys and a grown-up daughter. Her eldest hasn’t celebrated Christmas with her for years, and the boys are with their father this year. ‘What about yours?’

She means my daughter. I’d called her Diana, because I couldn’t think of anything better when I was put on the spot. Diana, after the Roman goddess of hunting – not, as Michelle thinks, after the dead princess. But basically it doesn’t matter what my daughter’s called. She happened when I was just eighteen, happy-go-lucky and naïve, one of those silly

young girls who’s just not careful. Now I’m twenty-four and I have to earn money for her, just as everyone here at Big Murphy’s has to earn money for someone. All I say is, ‘With her father too,’ and fiddle with the tomatoes again. I don’t want to look at Michelle.

‘What are you giving her?’ is the next question, and the first thing that comes to mind is: ‘A trampoline.’

Just like the trampoline I got for Christmas when I was Diana’s age. The box containing the frame was brown and so huge that it would have needed several rolls of paper to wrap it up. So my father simply wrapped a large red ribbon around it. As soon as it was spring and the sun had sucked up the last dampness from the soil left by the snow, he would construct it in the garden with his fingers that were all thumbs, the touching clumsiness of an academic. He would position it so that when he sat at the desk in his study he only had to peer out of the window to see me jumping. I liked my present, I really did. But then, in the depths of winter, I couldn’t do anything with it. So I asked him to take the metal rods out of the box, then I climbed in and put the lid on. My father found this interesting, astonishing, strange. With that look of his which is always keen to analyse everything, he asked me what I imagined when I lay in my box, as quiet as a mouse, perfectly still and with my eyes closed. He thought it might have something to do with my mother. That I was trying to find out what it was like to lie in a coffin. ‘But Dad,’ I countered, ‘that’s not a coffin. It’s just a box and I lie in it.’

‘Great!’ Michelle looks really excited, then a second later her face assumes a touch of sadness. I know she’s worried her sons might take after their father, who’s already served time twice for assault. ‘Enjoy it while Diana’s still young.’ Sighing, she wipes her sweaty brow with the back of her hand. ‘The moment they reach twelve they don’t want to know you

anymore and start stealing from your purse to buy grass.’ When she takes her hand away from her face I see brown streaks and her left eyebrow is slightly paler than before. Now she’s laughing again, like she always does when she realises that there’s no better make-up than frying oil. But maybe she’s also laughing to hold back the tears. I know the feeling, but I feel ashamed nonetheless. So many lies. Perhaps Michelle would understand if I explained. Perhaps she wouldn’t judge me; she is a good person, after all. On the other hand, that’s what I thought of Zoe too.

‘Earth to Ann. Ann, come in, please!’ Putting on a voice, Michelle speaks into her fist as if it were a radio. I suppose that’s what mums are like. When their children are young they get used to doing silly things they never grow out of.

‘Sorry, I was lost in thought.’

‘I noticed.’ Grinning, she points to the monitor showing the pictures from the drive-in. A car has just come past. ‘Customers.’

I hurriedly slip on the headset and take a deep breath before pressing the button that connects the microphone to the intercom outside. ‘Happy Christmas and a warm welcome to Big Murphy’s burgers and fries.’ I can’t believe how friendly I sound, how unfazed. It seems that like my headset I’ve also got a button, an inner button, that switches me into a different mode if I press it hard enough. *You just function*, Saskia E.’s father said in the newspaper, and he’s right.

‘May I have your order, please?’

I can only hear static at first.

‘Hello?’

Puzzled, I stick my head out of the window. The intercom is five or six metres away. Only when customers have given their order do they move up to the serving window. At this

distance, however, all I see is the silhouette of a car, its headlights stamping two bright circles in the late-afternoon darkness.

The static goes silent and a man’s voice crackles, ‘You didn’t really think you’d get away from me that easily, did you?’

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Us

I know you’re used to better. The big beautiful house. The lovingly decorated children’s room in the attic extension. The big garden with the pool… You’re a real water baby, aren’t you, princess? In summer I watched you wearing your plump armbands, splashing around in the pool and squealing with pleasure. Your lips had turned slightly blue; they probably ought to have been stricter, made you get out of the water and wrapped you in a thick towel. But seeing your enthusiasm, that innocent, genuine liveliness which only a child can exude, made me forget my misgivings and plunged me into the moment. No, I didn’t have to worry about you; you weren’t stupid. You would get yourself out of the pool when you began to freeze and no longer felt comfortable. I secretly hoped that wouldn’t happen for ages; I wanted this moment to last forever. The sun laying itself over all the colours like a filter, making them rich and vibrant. Your unrestrained joy. Drops of water flying through the air as if in slow motion. I felt as if I were watching a film; I was desperate to press ‘Pause’ and forever freeze the image of you looking so happy.

Now we’re here and I know you don’t particularly like it. You’re the princess from the big beautiful castle; you don’t belong in this dump. But sometimes you simply don’t have the choice, and surely the most important thing is that we’re together. Just as you are everything for me, I am everything for you. Only through me can you stay alive; if I abandon you, you’re dead.

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Recording 01

Berlin, 7/5/21

– To be honest, I’d imagined you to be quite different.
– Really? How?
– Well, I mean, I’ve seen photos of you, of course, but… I thought you’d have some evil aura about you. I thought it would be perceptible somehow. Do you understand?
– Oh dear!
– Yes, it’s silly, isn’t it?
– Oh well, I suspect you’re rather nervous. You have been after me for years, I suppose. So am I right in my assumption that this is going to be the grand finale? You and me and all our cards on the table, hmm? The end of the hunt, the hunter trapped.
– Is that how you see yourself? As a hunter?
– No, as a matter of fact, but I get the impression you like things to be a bit dramatic. People like me are supposed to have difficulty reading others. But do you know what? I always had a good inkling of my opponent’s needs. You learn what people want,

their longings, fears, desires – basically all of these are mere templates you can interpret according to a fixed pattern.

– So you’re more of an actor, then?

– Yes, and I think a rather good one at that. By the way, does your mother know what you’re doing here? Isn’t she worried about you?

– My mother? I don’t know what my mother’s got–

– Calm down. You want me to share my secrets with you. It’s not something one does with any old person, is it? I’d like to get to know you.

– I… alright, I don’t have a mother anymore. She’s dead. But if she were still alive I’d tell her she needn’t worry.

– (grins) But I’m a killer. And I’ve got nothing to lose.

– Are you threatening me?

– Is that how you feel? Threatened by me? Intimidated? Inferior?

– (audibly swallows) I didn’t come here to play games, but because I wanted to know who you are.

– ‘Wanted’? Are you saying you do know now? Well, that was quick, I take my hat off to you.

– No, I… I mean…

– Good God, why don’t you relax and let’s get this done with a modicum of dignity. It is the grand finale, after all! It would be a real shame if after all the effort you’ve made you failed now, wouldn’t it?

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Ann

Berlin 25/12/2017

Meeting my father – in this concrete room with the neon ceiling light that flickers nervously and the sparse furnishings, a table and two chairs, in this cold, bleak place he bloody well doesn’t belong – feels like being crushed under foot. Mentally it wrestles me to the ground, this feeling, it assaults me with blows to the stomach so overpowering I can barely stop myself from retching. Opposite me, slouched, is a man who used to sit upright, his back always straight. He was tall and dignified, his short grey hair neatly parted and combed.

‘I’m so pleased to see you, my little beetle,’ a stranger says with sunken, narrow shoulders, hollow cheeks, messy hair and vacant eyes. It doesn’t sound as if he’s pleased; there’s no trace of emotion in his voice, monotone like a machine’s.

I say, ‘Dad,’ and start to howl because I’m so horrified at what’s left of him. Only then does his dead face stir.

‘How are you?’ he asks. ‘Tell me. No need to be brave.’

I shake my head because this isn’t about me. *I’m* not the one who’s been framed and locked up. *I’m* not the one being accused on ten counts of murder. ‘Ludwig told me you’re refusing to cooperate. You’re not saying where you were when the crimes were committed, nor are you making any effort to explain the evidence. But you’ve got to, Dad. Listen to me!’

I look around uncertainly. This isn’t the first time I’ve seen my father since his arrest. But we’ve never met without a prison warder in the room. Today, though, I’d be grateful for a reprimand or at least a clearing of the throat when I stepped onto forbidden territory. I’m not allowed to talk about the charge, but I’ve got to try and make my father break his silence. I don’t want to do anything wrong, especially as all conversations between prisoners and

visitors are recorded on video. ‘I know it all seems so stupid. You must think it’s ridiculous to have to clear yourself of something so absurd. But please believe me, your pride isn’t going to get you anywhere here. On the contrary, you *must* tell the police you’re not the killer, you just *have* to.’

‘Oh…’ He gives a feeble shrug. ‘They’re not interested in protestations of innocence here. They’ve made up their minds, they’ve got a clear picture. Like the prisoners in Plato’s Cave.’ Again something darts across his face, maybe the memory of how only six weeks ago he was still giving lectures, trying to make the great philosophers accessible to his students. He taught at the university for thirty years, was invited to all the big conferences, and received countless international accolades. He’s a luminary in the field of philosophical anthropology, a branch of the philosophy of human nature. Professor Dr Walter Lesniak, the former renowned anthropologist who since his arrest has seemingly been paralysed with shock, and has forgotten one of the basic human skills: speech. The ability to explain yourself. To protest.

‘Dad, for God’s sake,’ I say, grabbing his hands, which feel limp and cold. He lets me take them without squeezing mine back. ‘Don’t you understand what your silence is doing? They see it as an admission of guilt! You’ve got to help Ludwig refute the evidence! He can’t do anything for you if you won’t cooperate. For Christ’s sake make a bit of an effort, even if it isn’t easy.’

He stares at me through narrow slits, as if on drugs, an understandable feeling. I’ve often felt like I was on a bad trip recently. But his eyes are unnerving. They’re both dreamy and somehow piercing.

‘What about you, Ann? Are you making an effort? Or are you still frying burgers instead of going to university?’

‘I’ve already told you, Dad. We’ve got other problems to deal with right now.’

Ten other problems, to be exact. Ten girls that the killer kidnapped and took to a variety of secluded spots in the Greater Berlin area. He brought them to woods, industrial sites or abandoned construction sites, where there was always a hut, a shed, a cellar or some deserted room that was ideal for his purposes. Ludwig said the girls died of blood loss from deep cuts, according to Forensics. I don’t know any more than that; Ludwig’s keeping the details from me and there’s no more to be got from the papers. They say only that the police are withholding certain details for reasons related to the investigation.

‘Dad, there’s a killer running around freely out there. All he has to do is change his methods or hunting ground and he’ll be able to continue committing his crimes unchecked, because you’re in prison for him, and for the rest of your life too. If you don’t cooperate, the truth won’t come to light and–’

‘*Truth*. Most if us experience the world only in the way that their own perspective allows. ‘*Man is*…’

‘… *the measure of all things*. Protagoras, I know.’ I now understand Ludwig’s despair. Time for another attempt, I’ll try him with a mind game. More girls are going to die because he’s obstructing the investigation with his silence. ‘They’re wasting their time on you when they ought to be hunting the real killer. Do you realise what that means?’ My father doesn’t react; his drugged expression drives me crazy. ‘It means you’ll be complicit if another girl dies.’

Nothing.

‘Please, Dad! I know it’s hard. But if you don’t want to talk to the police or Ludwig, then at least talk to me. I’m still your little beetle, aren’t I?’

He gives no more than a faint smile. A smile that’s unfamiliar, as if he’d copied it from someone else because he’s forgetting how to do it himself. Where are you, Dad? I want to ask the stranger. And: Don’t you remember us?

Walter and his little beetle.

That’s not just the plaits and goodnight stories, tea and chocolate to help with tummy aches or an alibi when a moped has been scratched. It’s Walter explaining to his little beetle why she hasn’t got a mummy anymore like the other children do. Treating little beetle’s wounds and not allowing her to lie torpidly in her cardboard coffin. Teaching her how to be happy again. Walter, who has always been there for his little beetle, and little beetle, who now realises it’s time to return the favour. Because they’re a team, a most exclusive club – probably against the rest of the world.

‘I’m sorry,’ a prison official interrupts us as he enters the room. ‘Your time is up.’ My father has to go back behind bars. Hugging him as tightly as I can, I whisper, ‘I love you, Dad.’

‘In that case, stop frying burgers, Ann,’ he replies with a crooked, unfamiliar smile. ‘You’ve got the rest of your life ahead of you. Don’t throw it away on my account.’

I nod and I mean it. Don’t worry, Dad. I’ve got another job now. I’m going to get you out of prison.