

Sample Translation by Lesley Schuldt

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Luca is missing. For months they had been afraid of exactly that, they had caused it because of their conversations, letters, dreams. They had alerted the police and gotten the authorities involved, even asked the neighbours for help, and still: now it has happened. They have stumbled, plunged suddenly down into an unknown darkness.

They just fell into each other's arms at the Südkreuz railroad station. Luca had energetically reached out for Nils as soon as he spotted him on the platform in the crowds of people. Nils took him out of the carrier and hugged him. "My big boy," he said softly, then kissed Laura. The setting sun lit up the city, the mood on the train was relaxed. The Tempelhof Field passed by, full of people, colorful stunt kites, picnic blankets, barbecue smoke. Laura leaned her head against Nils's shoulder. He had Luca on his lap. That's how they travelled home. Finally, so it seemed, finally they were safe.

The broken glass from the bottle protrudes in pointed spikes. They don't take it from him. You can see that Nils isn't a threat any longer. He is at the end of his rope. His pants are saturated with dark red stains and the scraped skin on his knuckles is peeling and bloody. He sits on the bench in front of the veterinary clinic below their apartment and the officers stand around him, enormous, seemingly puffed up in their uniforms, with billy clubs and guns in their belts.

Rotkäppchen Champagne it says on the bottle. Usually, he never drinks champagne. In general, he rarely drinks alcohol. It's almost as if something has shifted. They are at rock bottom now and Luca is gone.

Is he really gone? Laura doesn't want to believe it. She's shivering all over, sort of like after Luca was born when she could barely touch him because she was trembling so badly. She's shaking, but she is quiet.

Earlier she had cried out, stricken and louder than she ever had, so much, that she fell to the ground. The shriek bounced off the fireproof walls in the backyard and came back to her from every side. It lured the neighbors to their windows, it was never quiet here; here there was always something to see, but this, this was new. She hadn't even noticed it. She screamed and inwardly, she cheered Nils on, kick harder, go faster, show her, get him out of there. She hadn't doubted for an instant that he was doing the right thing.

The police work him over. Talking and questioning. Where had the officers been in the months before when they had called for the police again and again? Now they're taking notes on their ridiculous scratchpads. Is Nils even listening? They ask him why he had been so sure. Why did he think Luca could only be here, in this apartment, on the ground floor, with...what was her name again? Is it true that she doesn't even live there anymore, that she broke in through the window? They are wasting time. Why are they still not doing anything?

The window left ajar, the destroyed door, the garbage everywhere because no one ever cleans up. Why had he looked for Luca here of all places? Nils remains quiet. He simply sits there, curled up inside himself. His gaze is empty.

Second Floor

1

An old building on a side street that doesn't have much traffic, almost 1,000 square feet, three rooms, in the back of the house, near a small park.

As Laura slipped her shoes off, she glanced into the bathroom which was to the right, off of the hallway; it was flooded with light, had a shower, and there was also a corner bathtub in an alcove next to the window. Nils had talked her into it, he'd gotten the flat swap request and had already been enthusiastic about it before he had even scrolled through all the pictures.

"But look where it is," Laura had said. "Tempelhof would have already been amazing. But Mariendorf?"

A cat stared at her through narrowed eyes, a second one came marching out of the living room at that instant. The air was stale, a sweet, old smell.

"Ernie and Bert," said Manuel, who remained standing somewhat hesitantly behind her and Nils. "They won't bother you."

Laura smiled. "Is that parquet or laminate?"

"Parquet."

Real wood. Not bad. Fifteen minutes by bike, she thought, peering through the bathroom window into the backyard, to the sandbox that was there, and the small swing. Twenty minutes, at most. Straight down Mariendorfer Damm, past the Tempelhof Harbour.

"Patrick's in Scotland now and Marie's at a concert," Manuel says. "And then there are the kitties, of course. It would be important for them to be allowed to live in the new place."

"That's not a problem," says Nils.

“Nothing against Marie, she’s super, but we just want to be alone now. Without roommates. And this place is simply too expensive for just the two of us.”

“Understandable,” said Laura.

“And you two?”

Nils pointed to Laura’s belly. “We’re about to become a trio.”

Laura tried to picture how they would set up the apartment. The first room on the left could be a bedroom and office; it was large enough for a bed, a desk, her easel. The room behind it would be for Luca. The only window looked out at a fireproof wall as high as a house, but with the right lighting, she’d be able to make something out of it. Just like the tubular living room which connected the two rooms to the partially open kitchen. There was even a small pass-through in the half-wall separating the kitchen and the living room. Nils was excited, “Imagine,” he said as he looked from the kitchen into the living room at Laura, “I can stand here and make coffee and then pass it to you from here for our guests. Cool, isn’t it?”

“Haha. For our guests,” Laura mimicked, but then she laughed too; he was right. The apartment had something. Would this smell ever go away, she wondered, taking pictures with her phone.

“In the rooms, all you hear is the cooing of the pigeons from the courtyard. But the best thing,” said Manuel, “is the rent. And we always get a grand back every year with the utility bill. The neighbours above us pay 300 euros more.”

“Crazy,” said Nils.

“Speaking of neighbours,” asked Laura, “how are they?” Nils wanted to set up his studio here and she needed quiet, too, if she was going to paint again.

Manuel hesitated. “The caretaker can soundproof the door for you. He’s already done it for the one across from you. Because of the stairwell and such. It’s a bit noisy. Other than that, it’s completely quiet here as I mentioned.”

“In my apartment too,” said Nils quickly. “Only on the weekends is there anything going on, the quarter is popular with the tourists. I’m assuming you know what you’re getting into.”

Manuel laughed, fiddled with his hair, long brown curls peppered with a few strands of gray. He must be in his late twenties. In a few years, they’ll probably want an even bigger apartment for themselves, Patrick and he. “Sleep on it. And if you really like it, then we can check yours out.”

“I don’t think we need to sleep on it,” said Nils and looked expectantly at Laura.

Laura was tired, her contact lenses felt dry. She glanced at her watch; her yoga class began in half an hour. “I don’t know. Let’s talk about it later, okay?”

Nils seemed disappointed. “You go on ahead. I’m going to take a few more pictures.”

Two women with cat carriers on their laps sat on the bench in the yard talking, obviously they wanted to see the veterinarian who was housed on the side wing here. They broke off their conversation when Laura walked past and stared after her. Laura felt a twitch in her temple. She held her hand up in front of her face to block the sunlight. Apart from the bathroom, it was so dim in the apartment that she’d almost forgotten how bright it was outside.

She pushed her bike out of the courtyard toward the street. Someone had put old clothes in an open crate in the archway.

Outside, the pounding and drilling on the construction site on Mariendorfer Damm enveloped her, in the distance, and yet so close that the ground shook. Over the summer, a thick sewage pipe had burst; the work was dragging on. “But don’t worry,” Manuel had said, “it will be done by December at the latest.” He had also printed out a couple of articles about a construction project that was set for the next few years. All lines had to be replaced, sewage pipes up to a yard in diameter, power lines, and gas lines. Nils skimmed the articles and nodded, yes, he had heard about them already, but in all honesty, he didn’t see anything that would pose a problem, quite the contrary. In the end, there was even a new bike lane planned. He winked at Laura, see, then you’ll be in Neukölln in no time. But Laura had some doubts about that. As if something was rotting down there, she thought with a sudden shudder, and for a brief second, she thought the ground under her feet was sinking a little more with each step.

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They ate the rest of the pizza for breakfast, then cleared the walls, taped the trim and electrical outlets, and spread tarps out. Nils set out several paintbrushes and the telescoping pole and stirred the paint while Laura put on rubber gloves and reached for the cleaning bucket. She was a little envious; she would have preferred to paint and let Nils clean, but the paint fumes weren't good for you if you were pregnant. Painting, for example, wasn't optimal anyway. If she were honest, the fumes even came in handy. She used it as an excuse over and over. Maybe so as not to have to figure out what it was that was holding her back.

There was dust on the heated towel bar in the bathroom. Laura climbed onto a chair, luckily, even in her ninth month she was still fit enough, and sprayed cleaner on the bars. The window was wide open. She felt the warm breeze on her skin and let her eyes wander into the backyard which was actually quite beautiful, yellow shuttered windows on the ground floor, a small sandbox with a swing. In a few years, Luca would be digging here in the sand, she thought. Mama, he would call, I'm thirsty. In the neighborhood where she grew up, there had also been a small playground under the apartment building. Anna had the balcony door open, upstairs on the fourth floor. Anna, she had called her that even back then, but it had been embarrassing in front of the other children, she had called M-Anna, or Amma, so the others wouldn't notice it. She had already realized that the language was a traitor. She tried. She spoke almost as cleanly as Peter Lustig in on the children's TV, which she was sometimes allowed to watch. She understood her parent's dialect still but didn't master it anymore and that was too bad, but as Laura realized

nowadays, it was also a privilege. She would never have to dissemble to Luca, never have to alter her voice in front of others, never pretend. Of course, Luca would call her Mama, he should feel the closeness it opened up, which she had never felt as a child. Mama, I'm thirsty, and she would come to the window: wait, I'll be right down. Ivy climbed across the walls, between it a colorful string of pennants. It moved gently in the wind.

Then she saw the woman. She stood beneath the pennants, right by the bench in front of the veterinary clinic, and stared up at her.

Irritated, Laura turned her gaze away. When she looked down again, the woman was still standing there. Only a few yards separated them from one another – Laura, who stood on the second floor at the window, a wet sponge in her hand, and the woman below, under the pennants. Like an apparition. Not particularly tall, but powerfully built, athletic clothing, the tanned face framed by straw-colored hair. She wore hiking boots. But this gaze, electrifying and full of determination, was focused on Laura as if speaking to her, more even, as if they knew each other. Laura felt it immediately: if she returned her gaze for too long, only a second too long, it would burn her. She lowered her eyes.

“Everything okay?” asked Laura drying her gloves on her pants.

The woman didn't answer.

Laura climbed off the chair and called to Nils. “Hey, there's a strange woman in the yard.”

“What?” Nils came out of the kitchen; he already had a couple of white spots on his pants.

“A strange woman. In the yard.”

Nils went to the window. The woman was still staring. “Can I help you?” asked Nils.

The woman didn’t answer but she didn’t move either.

Nils closed the window and shrugged. “Maybe she’s just lost.”

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Nils got a glass of water from the kitchen and glanced out of the window in passing. A woman with a small shaggy dog sat in front of the veterinary clinic, she talked softly to the animal while she stroked its back.

The dog looked a little like Kiki. A small Westie like in the dog food commercials. His former girlfriend Lisa had found the dog somewhere and kept it, even though in her apartment, pets were expressly forbidden. Nils had had sweaty hands every time he had to go through the stairwell with the yapping animal tugging on its leash. Back then, they had applied for the apartment with an apple pie. The landlord was 85 and had said, “That’s a very good pie, but you have a terrible salary. You have to think more about your wife!” Nevertheless, they had gotten the apartment. They were overjoyed, in the centre of Ehrenfeld/Cologne and Lisa had giggled over the sentence: “You have to think more about your wife!” She began to say it whenever something didn’t suit her. A harmless bit of fun, but for him, at some point, it became more than that.

Nils sat at the computer, undecided as to what he should do. He was supposed to be unpacking boxes, putting together furniture. He had promised Laura. Until a few days ago, their lives had been neatly separated from one another. They had each had their own apartment. Now they were attached to one another, were connected as if by an invisible thread. When one pulled, the other fell. And if he were completely honest, that’s what he had been hoping for. That’s how his parents did it, so did his brother Matze. But then he thought again about what the previous

landlord said, he didn't know what his name was anymore, "you have to think more about your wife," the subliminal uneasiness that the statement had triggered in him at the time, even though he earned 2200 euros. Not bad for a junior copywriter. What would Lisa say if she knew that today, almost ten years later, he still wasn't a creative director, he didn't even want to be one? And that, even though there was a baby on the way?

"I told you, in the bathtub."

Nils jumped. The voice sounded so close, almost as if it came from inside the apartment. He had left the door to the studio open, an old habit, only closing it during important phone calls. He stood up and checked the hallway; of course, there was no one there, or in the living room. He looked out of the window; it was only ajar. Until yesterday it had been very mild, almost too mild for the middle of November. Today the icy air stung his face. The yard was deserted, the woman with the dog gone.

"My daughter is dead. She's underwater."

The voice came from somewhere outside; had someone else left their window open? Nils held his breath. He couldn't help conjuring up an image; he saw the lifeless body of a young woman, feet drained of blood on the edge of the bathtub. But was that possible, had he heard correctly? His heart pounded wildly against his chest.

"Why don't you do anything!"

Yes, why didn't he do anything? If what the voice said was true, then he was a witness, he had to act! He reached for his cell phone; the police, in cases like these, you called the police.

"Yes, yes, yes. She's dead, dead I tell you, in the bathtub, I've had the proof for a while. I already told you yesterday. The woman from the office also knows."

Nils stopped short. The voice continued talking, loudly and yet calmly, she didn't seem to wait for the answers from her counterpart, she came back to her daughter over and over. Like a tape recording, thought Nils, that kept jumping back to the same spot. He leaned out of the window a little farther. It wasn't until then that he saw the open window below him on the ground-floor apartment.

He had come because he wanted to ask if everything was okay. Now he didn't dare. The door was exactly one floor below his, Nils just now realized that even though he had to have seen it often in passing, heavily yellowed, in places the paint was peeling. He turned around, was just going to take the stairs back up when there was a crack and the door sprang open.

Her straight straw-colored hair was peppered with white strands and her dark green eyes quivered like pond water into which someone has tossed a stone. Nils recognized her immediately as the woman who had recently been in the courtyard.

“Oh, hello,” he said taken by surprise. “I just wanted to ...”

The woman raised her hands defensively. “You all think we're nutcases anyway.”

Then she slammed the door shut again.

Laura arrived two hours later. He recognized her steps in the stairwell, they were heavy from the pregnancy. Even though she was past her due date, she was almost constantly on the go. As if she were afraid the baby would chain her to the apartment once he arrived. Or was it something else, was it maybe the apartment itself. Nils's stomach clenched into a small inexplicable knot.

Laura tossed her bag on the floor and snuggled up to him. She smelled of sweat and dust.
“Are you still mad?”

He stood up, rested his head in her hair, and cupped her stomach with his hands.
Sometimes, if he was lucky, he could feel the baby too. It didn’t have much room anymore. His movements had become slow. “I’m just a little tired,” Nils whispered, “maybe I’m getting ill.”

Laura leaned against him, putting her hands on his. “I’m glad we’re here now. Honestly.”

They had an appointment with the gynecologist the next day. Laura sat down on a box to tie her shoes. Nils saw how she struggled with the shoelaces, her belly in the way. She should have unpacked her boots long ago so she could just slip into them. It was getting colder, in the mornings, you could even see the frost on the lawn.

“Here,” Nils said kneeling, “let me.” He put her feet on his thigh and tied a bow for her.

When they went past the apartment door one floor below them, it happened again. There was a crack and the door sprang open. The woman must have been waiting for the right moment. Nils grabbed Laura’s arm and tried to pull her away, but Laura freed herself and extended her hand toward the woman.

“Laura. We live on the second floor now.”

The woman didn’t take her hand. “And the others who were here before?” the woman asked suspiciously.

“What about them?”

“Are they gone?”

“Yes, moved out.”

“The one with the long hair, too?”

“Yes.”

The woman was quiet. Her gaze slid over Laura’s stomach. “Is that a real baby in there?”

Laura nodded.

“May I touch it?” She had already put her hand on Laura’s stomach. A small fleshy hand. Her eyes lit up faintly. Laura took a step back. Instinctively, Nils grabbed her by the arms and pulled her to him.

“Should have been here last week,” said Laura, “but he’s taking his time.”

“A boy?”

“Yes.”

The woman didn’t answer. Nils felt her gaze on his back when they left the house. Outside he put his arm around Laura’s shoulders.

“Great,” he said, “you were great.”

“Yeah, right?” Laura smiled stiffly, as she casually stroked her stomach. “But she’s a little strange. “Tell me,” she hesitated and he held his breath, “don’t we know her from somewhere? That woman in the courtyard, remember?”

Nils shrugged his shoulders. The small knot in the pit of his stomach was there again. “I think she’s harmless, though.”