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Dear Child

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Sample translation by Deborah Langton

On day one I lose my sense of time, my dignity and a back tooth. Instead I now have two children and a cat. I've forgotten their names but know the cat's Miss Tinky. I have a husband, too. He's tall with short dark hair and grey eyes. I look at him out of the corner of my eye as I sit close to him on the battered old sofa. Beneath his embrace the wounds that run the length of my back throb as if endowed with their own heartbeat. The cut on my forehead stings.

Sometimes I see only black, sometimes flashes of light. Then all I try to do is breathe.

It's hard to tell if it's really evening or whether he's just made it that way. Boards have been nailed to every window. He creates day and night. Like God. I try to convince myself I've been through the worst but suspect we'll soon be in bed. The children are already in their pyjamas. The boy's are a bit too small, while the girl's sleeves hang far too long. They kneel together on the floor, close to the sofa, holding their hands to the remaining warmth of the wood stove. The fire is now no more than a mound of dark ash, a vein of red still glowing here and there. The children's cheerful chatter mingles somehow with the abnormality of this situation. I'm not taking in what they're saying. I hear them as if through cotton wool while I think how I'm going to kill their father.

Matthias

4,825 days.

I've counted and cursed every single one. My hair's even greyer, my heartbeat more uneven. Every day of the first year, I retraced her last known steps. I had flyers printed and not a single lamp-post was omitted. I questioned her supposed friends and told a few their fortunes while I was about it. Several times a day I called up Gerd, Gerd Brühling, my old friend, and Chief Superintendent in charge of the search. I called time on that friendship when he didn't find her. At some point, when I started to feel useless, I wanted at least to stop all the lies. I gave a lot of interviews, fifty or more.

Lena's been gone 4,825 days. And nights. That's nearly fourteen years. Fourteen years when every ring of the phone could be bringing the piece of news to change everything. Your daughter's been kidnapped, now here's our ransom demand. Your daughter's been recovered from the River Isar, blue with cold, bloated beyond recognition. Your daughter's been found, raped, butchered and discarded like garbage, perhaps in another country, somewhere in the eastern bloc.

"Matthias? Are you still there?" Gerd's voice betrayed his agitation.

I say nothing, just try to breathe, the phone trembles in my right hand, clammy with sweat. With my other hand I feel for our hall table to steady myself. Everything around me loses definition, our stairs, the rug, the wardrobe seem to surge towards me as if swept up by waves. Beneath my feet the floor is unsteady. Karin's here now, woken from a deep sleep because I hadn't come back up, she's come stumbling down the stairs, plucks nervously at the belt of her towelling robe, whispers urgently, "What is it, Matthias? What is it?"

I'm choking on the lump in my throat, on this news and what it means, on fourteen years of hell. Karin and I had had Lena die in a hundred hideous ways, had tormented ourselves with thousands of possible endings. At some point we'd started neglecting this very one. What if the phone rings and someone tells us she's been found alive?

"Lena," I gasp.

Karin closes her eyes, takes a couple of uncertain steps back until she feels the wall and lets herself sink to the floor. She covers her face with her hands and begins to sob, nothing loud or dramatic, not like that, too much time has passed for that. The 4,825 days have left so little hope. It's more a sad, exhausted hiccup.

"No, no," is all I can say as I reach out to her.

"Matthias?" That's Gerd, down the phone.

"What d'you mean, 'no, no'?" That's Karin, propped up by the wall.

"They think she was abducted. But they've got her. She's alive." I can barely hear myself. I say it again.

"She's alive."

"What?" Karin struggles to her feet. I grab her arm as her knees buckle.

"Yes," says Gerd, his voice husky at the other end of the line.

The information he's given me is vague. I don't know whether he can't, won't or mustn't tell me more. Only this much. The missing persons' database has thrown up some matches. He's leaving early tomorrow for Cham district, on the border with the Czech Republic, to go to the hospital and confirm Lena's identity. Cham, only a two and a half hour drive from Munich. That close. Lena is so close, maybe she's been that close the whole time. And I didn't find her.

"I'm coming with you!" I roar down the phone. "Let's get going. Not tomorrow, now, right now!"

...]

We turn into the car park in front of the hospital. It's nearly 4 a.m.

Karin reaches for my hand. Hers feels cold and damp. She says something. I hear nothing but my own heart thumping. We don't break into a run, we're not storming it, this place, we take small, cautious steps.

Autopilot. Through a door. Across the foyer. To reception. A woman's behind the desk. My mouth moves. I want to tell her we're the parents of Lena Beck, admitted as an accident victim. That we have to get to emergency. I don't know how I sound. Whether the sentences are coming out the way I've put them together in my head. Now the receptionist moves her mouth, too, reaches for her telephone. Karin pulls at my sleeve and moves me a couple of steps away from the glass screening while the woman makes the call. Karin's face is white, her hollow eyes quiver as she looks at me. I notice she's shifting from one foot to the other, so I hold her by the shoulders. I want to say stay calm and seem to manage that because she nods in return. A doctor comes, or an orderly, I don't know which, someone in a white coat. Next to him is a man in a grey suit. Names fly past me, someone shakes my hand. We follow the pair to a lift. It moves but I don't know which way. Time takes over. The lift stops, one of the men taps my shoulder, probably the signal to get out. Karin's grabbed at my hand again and holds it tight. Our procession advances half way down a corridor, then stops. Karin abruptly lets go of my hand. It's because this distracts that I snap back into consciousness.

The doctor is saying, "It would be better if only one of you comes in. She has had first aid but is still unconscious. We want to let her come round in peace, all the more because we can't rule out a state of shock."

"That means I can't talk to her." Like an idiot, I state the obvious.

The grey-suited man, a police superintendent, as I'd managed to work out, says, "First we need your help with a definitive identification. We'll discuss everything else afterwards."

I turn to Karin. "I'll do this." She nods. This is how we'd planned it, years ago. I would be the one to identify our daughter's dead body, lightly covered as it lies on the autopsy table. I would hold her hand one more time and leave one last kiss on her cold forehead. I would tell her we love her.

But we're not in some underground mortuary, we're in a hospital, and our daughter is alive. The doctor takes

me by the arm and guides me to another door which divides the corridor from a separate area. Behind me Karin's asking the superintendent what happens next. I don't catch any of his reply as the door shuts behind me and the doctor. Suddenly I feel uncertain, ask myself how she'll look beneath the probable injuries caused by the accident and by everything else. When she vanished, she was still doing her teacher training, a young girl who'd only just flown the nest. Now she's 37, a grown woman who, if she hadn't been snatched away from her life that night, would likely now be married with children of her own.

"Please don't be alarmed," says the doctor as we reach her room. His hand is already on the door-knob, but he hesitates still. "She has a few facial injuries, principally cuts. It looks worse than it is."

I can't answer. I feel suffocated. My chest is tight. The doctor turns the knob. The door is opening.

I close my eyes as the images flood in. My Little Lena, a precious bundle in Karin's arms. Three point four kilos, fifty centimetres long, a tiny hand grasping at my thumb. "Welcome to the world, my angel. Daddy will always take care of you." My Little Lena, with your gap teeth and the huge cornet of goodies for your first day at school. Little Lena, who now insists on being called just Lena, because anything else is babyish. Lena, who has dyed her lovely blonde hair black, sitting on our sofa with her knees drawn up, digging holes in her denim jeans with safety pins. Lena, who's blonde again and my pride and joy, radiant at the school leavers' ball, great results under her belt, her head full of plans. Lena, now a student and Lena, as she is the last time I see her before she vanishes. The way she jumps the last few steps in our front garden, turns once more and waves happily. Bye, Dad, see you later! Thanks again!

I go in.

Her bed's in the middle of the room. I hear instruments beeping. Her eyes are shut. He's right about her face. It's covered with cuts like tiny triangles. Its left side is bruised and swollen. She has a split lip. And it looks like she's had stitches above her eyebrow. But it's still easy to spot the small scar below her hairline on the right. And yet...

One look's enough. But its impact hits hard, hits home, in infinitely slow motion. My hand covers my mouth and I stumble back from the bed.

"That's not Lena," I gasp into my hand. "That's not my daughter."

The doctor takes me by the elbow, holds me up or hurries me out of the room, maybe it was both.

"That's not her," I say over and over.

"I'm sorry," says the doctor. I'm sorry. As if that says it all.

[...]

Hannah

Sometimes I lie in my bed at night and wish my night sky back. I reach up as far towards the ceiling as I can and wish I could touch the stars. Like before. I imagine Mummy's hand on mine as she guides my outstretched finger from one star to the next until all the dots are joined. Then she says, "That's a very famous constellation, Hannah. The Plough." And she smiles at me. I smile back, although I've already read in the big book that knows everything that The Plough isn't really a constellation in itself but is composed of the seven brightest stars that make up The Great Bear. When I think about that, about Mummy and the stars, then my heart aches and aches with the sadness that gnaws away at it.

I don't like being in this children's hospital. I miss my family and Miss Tinky with her clumsy little paws and her soft fur.

I don't like my room at all. The ceiling's far too high, I can't reach it, however hard I try. There are no stars

up there. And there's nothing to see from the window either because the blinds have to be down the whole time. I threw a chair at a window, but all it did was make a noise. And a lot of trouble. Frau Hamstedt always claims she's a doctor, but I've never seen her in a white coat. She's in charge here. I've told her I'm not ill and so don't belong in a children's hospital, but I'm still not allowed home. I'm not even allowed to go to the toilet when I need to, and am expected constantly to talk about what I'm scared of. But I'm not scared of anything. I just don't like it here. And that's why I don't want to go on waiting, I want to go home, right now.

[...]

I've got to get out of here. This is no children's hospital. They just call it that, but it isn't. Nothing they say is true. They're all liars and wicked people. This is a really bad place.

My grandfather agrees. He visits me every day and comes to the appointments I have. We've already been together to the dentist, who gave me a star sticker because I've got such good teeth, and to other doctors who say I need lots of vitamin D. Vitamin D is important or you don't grow. You get Vitamin D from sunlight. But they don't let me open the blinds in my room. I asked why but only got "It's very complicated, dear," in return. But there's nothing complicated about it. Grandfather explained it to me quite simply. "Your eyes need to get used to the light, Hannah. Otherwise the retina could become detached." The retina is the nerve tissue that lines the inner surface of the eye. If the retina becomes detached, the eye no longer functions properly and can go blind. That's why I still have to wear sunglasses all the time when we go to the appointments. But I don't like the sunglasses. They make the whole world brown. The trees, they look brown, the sky, it looks all brown. But the sky should be a canvas with pictures of snowy white clouds on a blue background. And the city looks completely different behind brown glasses and smells bad. The houses are tall brown crates. If you look up at them, your neck aches. My grandfather sometimes ask me if he should drive more slowly on the way to appointments, so that I can take time to look at the city. But I tell him it's better to drive faster. Paris was nicer, I'm not missing anything here.

My heart aches, every day, every moment. I'm sad but think grandfather is the only one who really understands it. Yesterday he promised he'll take me home. He tells me I just need to answer the questions so that Frau Hemstedt, her staff and the police are satisfied and I can get out of sooner. Jonathan can't answer any more questions, that's for sure. The blue tablets have made him so dozy that he's forgotten how to speak. He doesn't say a word any more, not even to me. My grandfather says, "It's all up to you now, little Hannah darling." I'd definitely answer their questions but all they ever want to know is what happened to Mummy and where she is, and I can't find an easy answer to that. The last time I saw her was that night at the hospital. But when I tell people that, they just shake their heads and make a face as if I'm telling lies. They all think I'm a liar. Frau Hemstedt once almost lost her temper with me. She didn't actually get angry, but I could see it in her face. She said there are two worlds for me. One, which is inside my head, and the right one. She also said this wasn't a bad thing, but her forehead wrinkled and her eyebrows were drawn so close together that it looked like she had a funny great big 'V' right above her eyes. I shouldn't have told her anything about the excursions. Unlike Sister Ruth, she had passed everything on to the police and the man in the grey suit came back and asked me about it all. He had a big 'V' above his eyes, too, and wrinkles across his forehead. He just doesn't believe what nice times I had with Mummy. He thinks we were locked up the whole time, like animals in the zoo.

"You're such a clever girl, Hannah," he said to me. "Maybe even the cleverest girl I've ever met. That's why I think you know perfectly well what went on in your home. And you definitely know that the lady in the hospital can't be your real mum, don't you? Her real name's Jasmin, anyway. Pretty name, don't you think?"

Go on, tell me how you got to know Jasmin, would you?"

"I prefer Lena," I said, then fell silent. I don't speak to people who think I tell lies.

[...]

Jasmin

The sequence goes like this. Three short, two long, knock knock knock – knock – knock.

I tiptoe across my hallway then wait a bit as a precaution. A floorboard creaks outside the door to my flat. Clear off, go away I snarl inwardly as I picture Frau Bar-Lev, her ear pressed to the other side of the door, as she tries to make out sounds in my flat. Not today, you old cow.

Yesterday I was so hungry that I opened the door too quickly and gave her the dismal thrill she hoped for. Since then I've been picturing her serving coffee to a reporter in her living-room. "The poor girl's in a terrible state. Far too thin. She's stopped washing her hair, goes round in a mucky T-shirt and baggy jogging bottoms. You can see it." What she means, as her dentures suck on a biscuit, is that you can see what's happened to her just by looking. The reporter eagerly makes notes. About kisses and touches that can't be washed away, that cling to my face and body, and how I've given up showering and scrubbing my skin red raw because I've lost all strength and you can't get rid of the penetrating smell of fear. A last remnant of reason left in my stupid head tells me that Frau Bar-Lev would never do anything like that, but the images are persistently vivid. Her pension's small, a bit of pocket money would come in really handy. Stop it. Today's read: Exclusive interview with shack victim's neighbour. Stop it!

My stomach rumbles. The smell of a freshly cooked meal wafts under the door, must be hotpot. The hall floorboard creaks again and I hear footsteps on the stairs. Frau Bar-Lev walks slowly, hip trouble. For a moment I feel mean. Every day since I came home, this amazing old lady has climbed the stairs to my flat. To her it must be like being forced to scale Kilimanjaro. She could have talked to reporters ages ago. Instead she stands at the stove with her bad hip and cooks for me in her own kitchen. Shame on you.

I wait until I hear the door close two floors down, wait just a little bit longer to be absolutely sure all is quiet in the communal hallway. I turn the key in my own door, push down the handle, seize the little casserole from the doormat, shove the door shut and turn the key again; best time yet, barely three seconds. Still holding the casserole dish, I lean for a moment against the closed door and breathe like I've done a marathon.

Everything's fine, calm, be calm, I implore my racing heart. Then I lift the lid. Goulash. I could have sworn I smelled hotpot.

I could have sworn I struck your husband just the once.

I carry the casserole into the kitchen and put it on the stove.

I'd fixed him so that at first sight it wasn't clear whether the murder weapon – as they call it – really was a snowstorm globe. Obviously the officers had searched the cabin for other possible weapons, but found no hammer that could have explained the force of the impact and no knife that could have made the deep gashes. Well, okay, of course there were hammers, various tools, knives, including really sharp ones, the kind used for gutting animals. But they were firmly locked away and indisputably beyond the scope of my reach. It was only the final medical report that gave unequivocal confirmation of the snowstorm as murder weapon.

Apparently they'd even pieced it together again, almost in its entirety, but one piece is missing, untraceable. Your husband is dead, Lena.

Your children are in the madhouse.

I should be feeling better, a survivor, the winner, grateful and eager for the life I doggedly fought for over

four months. The reality is different. My flat stays darkened. The blue skies I'd longed for, the sunshine, the birdsong, I can't endure any of it. My doorbell is disabled, I react only to a knocking signal. I've even pulled the plug on the landline. The mobile stays on so I can be reached by the police and my therapist. I respond here and there to the questions the police seemingly can't let go of, and I tell my therapist I'm fine. I got myself to the corner shop today, all on my own, well done me. I'm just getting myself something nice to eat, then I'll catch up with the latest Gilmore Girls. I'm so sorry, I can't make the next session because my mother or close friends are calling round. My mouth is stuffed full of lies.

Do you want to know what my days are really like? I still wake at ten to seven, my right arm stretched over my head, this was the only way, chained to the bedpost, I could ever sleep in the shack. Sometimes I try to rebel and shut my eyes again. I shift position, want to turn over and go back to sleep. But that doesn't work. I have to get up, get breakfast for the children. It has to be on the table at seven thirty sharp or they get restless. They chase around the living room like bouncy balls gone berserk, their shrieking shreds my nerves – children, please, not so loud!

It has to be on the table at seven thirty sharp or he yells at me. What kind of mother are you, Lena? What kind of monster?

He's not here, I know that perfectly well. He's dead, I killed him. I know that. The police found his body. But I still don't feel it. And when I told my therapist, all she could say was, "That's perfectly normal. That takes time." She doesn't listen properly, I can tell you. Time has no role in my life now. I lost that on day one in the shack. There is only his time. He creates day and night. Like God. Even now.

Of course, I don't prepare any breakfast, after all, there are no children here, only me, in my flat, in freedom ha ha. And yet every morning I'm there in the kitchen at seven thirty. Even if all I do is cling to the work surface and try to breathe over the voice raging in my head.

You're ungrateful, Lena. Ungrateful and bad.

I'm good, is my pitiful defiance. I'm good at getting from the bed to the sofa or to my worn out armchair. I'm good at reading books I don't understand. "The river was there. It was a hot day," Hemingway writes. I'm alright so far. Then the letters start to dance before my eyes and the river he's on about takes an arc, turns savage, an uncontrollable current snatches me away, while the warm day changes to an intolerable, boiling heat which sucks sweat from my pores and tears from my eyes. I'm good at snapping books shut and tossing them to one side. I'm good at bolting down the food left at my door by old Frau Bar-Lev and then throwing it back up in streams. And still, still, even now I'm good at fitting my most basic needs into his timetable. The toilet is to be used at seven in the morning, then twelve thirty, and again at five p.m and ten p.m.

What's left of anyone who has to hold back taking a dump just because it's still only half four? What's left of me?

I often stand in front of the knife block set in the kitchen, and sometimes my hand finds its own way to a handle. Not the biggest knife in the set but the sharpest. My mother gave it to me one Christmas. "Cuts everything," she said. "Vegetables, bread, raw meat." Raw meat, Lena.

I am a void apart from this one, very specific feeling. It's got a hold, and I can't shake it off. It burns in my stomach, it grips my temples like a vice that tightens a little each day. My therapist sees this as normal, too. She says it takes time to work through everything that's happened, first getting it in some sort of order and then comprehending that it's really over.

I think she's wrong. Even the police don't know about it. It took energy and pretence to get myself out of hospital. I'm afraid they'll take me for insane and lock me up again.

You must know I was moved to a secure ward after the first two nights in emergency. It's for patients who present a risk to themselves or to others. The rooms have no door handle, just a small grip. I don't know

whether they really fear I'll do something to myself or others. And if they do, I wonder why it hadn't occurred them to look in the travel bag my mother brought me. I could have done it, Lena. Thanks to your daughter, I'd have had everything I needed to do it. So I prefer to think I have been put in this room to enable me to feel secure – as the medical staff like to say – and to keep uninvited guests at bay. Over-eager reporters, for example. I probably don't need to explain to you the effect this so-called protected place has had on me. How I thought I heard footsteps going back and forth outside my door all the first week, footsteps other than those of security staff. Of someone who would come to get me, would punish me. How I felt newly imprisoned by this secure space, while everything round me screamed 'freedom', the end of martyrdom, what irony. This freedom doesn't make up for my being held captive. My therapist feels it's important I meet your children. But I can't. I can't look them in the eye now I've killed their father.

So, is that what it is, Lena? This feeling that crushes me like a vice? Is it – guilt?

I take painkillers for the three ribs broken in the accident. I always take half a tablet more than I need in the hope it'll dull the other pain. I'm so alone, Lena. And yet somehow I can't pick up my phone and ask for company. I think of my father and of Kirsten, and how wonderful it would be if one or other of them were suddenly there, knocking at my door. Three short, two long. But that won't happen. They're gone, both of them, irretrievably. My father died when I was seven. Car crash. He took my mother to the grave with him but in the strangest and most complex way. She lives in Straubing, less than fifty kilometres from here, and is in the best of health. But after my father's death, she never sat on the edge of my bed again to sing me pretty songs. And when she picked me up from hospital last week, she simply shook hands when we met. And Kerstin hasn't been able to stand me since just before I was taken. So you see, Lena, your husband couldn't have picked anyone less suitable for his sick little family drama. I was the worst possible casting for your role. Although in the last few days I've kept asking myself whether your role was ever really clear. I don't mean what your husband imposed on me. I mean you, Lena. I've started reading newspaper reports on the internet about your disappearance. I can't stick at it for long, the words dance, the glare of the screen brings tears to my eyes, the constant photos of you, and the similarity between us leaves the bitterest taste. Who are you? Who are you, Lena Beck?