

Translated excerpt

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Kleine Monster

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Jakob is standing in front of the school when I drive up. His bike is leaning against the railing. I drove from work, he from home.

"I don't remember either," I reply, when he asks what the teacher had said on the phone, and realize how irritated I am. I feel his hand on my back and have to pull myself together. He means well. But that's how I've always been: when in doubt, don't touch. We find Mrs. Bohle in the faculty room and follow her into an empty classroom. The desks have been arranged in the shape of a U. Mrs. Bohle gestures for us to take a seat. Jakob hesitates; the chairs are for small children. I sit on one of the tables and cross my arms in front of my chest.

"She says, it's happened more than once," Mrs. Bohle concludes her report. She has taken a seat at her desk in front and we are facing her.

"Are there any witnesses?" I ask.

"Witnesses?" Mrs. Bohle repeats with a frown. "Did anybody see him do it?"

Mrs. Bohle shakes her head. "It was during recess. The other children were in the playground. The two of them were alone in class."

"Isn't it your duty to keep an eye on things?" My voice is tinged with anger.

Mrs. Bohle looks at me.

“We’re not really in the loop yet,” Jakob tries to calm the situation.

“You don’t believe me? Girls don’t just say things like that,” says Mrs. Bohle.

“No, that’s not what I ...”

“As a school, we take the incident seriously. Even if it’s part of life at that age to try things out and test boundaries.”

“We also are taking it very seriously,” he says.

Mrs. Bohle inhales. “Did Luca perhaps see something that might have confused him?” she asks.

I’m starting to feel petulant. “We close the bedroom door when we sleep together,” I say dryly.

“Pia,” whispers Jakob.

“Is he sometimes alone with other adults? An uncle, for example, or a neighbor?”

“No,” says Jakob.

“He’s alone with you,” I say. “You’re a man too.”

Jakob looks at me in horror.

“May we speak with the children?” he asks, turning to Mrs. Bohle. “With the girl?”

She shakes her head firmly. She had already spoken to her and one of the after-school teachers has as well. They believe her. Of course, they believe her.

“And what did Luca say?” asks Jakob.

I can imagine Luca saying nothing. Pressing his lips together and not opening his mouth. Locked up, keys thrown away.

“He hasn’t said anything yet,” says Mrs. Bohle, and adds that she doesn’t automatically interpret his silence as an admission of guilt; she knows what he’s like. Her voice is now lighter. A pivot from minor to major. For a brief moment, she’s Luca’s friendly teacher again.

She’s not fooling me; I lean back without returning her smile. The accused has the right to remain silent.

I kneel down so Luca can run into my arms, as always when I pick him up. Soon he’ll be too big for that and I’ll embarrass him. But today he lets himself fall into my arms and I catch him.

The school secretary was with him, while we were speaking to the teacher. I nod to her on the way out.

We get into the car. Jakob in the back seat, me in the passenger seat. Only Luca sits in his usual spot. It’s a funny image, as if our old Ford were a getaway car and we were bank robbers waiting for the driver to return. We’re waiting for somebody who knows where we’re going. Luca has lowered his eyes, his shoulders slumped.

“What exactly happened?” I ask.

Luca starts chewing on his lower lip.

“Come on tell me,” I say, casually, the way I usually talk to him. But there’s something a bit forced about it.

“Nothing,” Luca whispers almost tonelessly.

“Well, we didn’t have you picked up for nothing. Mrs. Bohle said...”

Jakob puts a hand on Luca’s shoulder. There’s something comforting about the gesture. It annoys me. We’re supposed to all be angry.

“Let’s go to Hammer Park,” Jakob suggests. “Shall we meet there?”

I nod. We get out of the car. Jakob unlocks his bike. He’s the kind of guy who always locks his bike. That’s why it has never been stolen. I hurry back to the driver’s seat; the car is a safe space. I start the engine and drive off.

“Are you mad at me, Mom?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Our eyes meet in the rearview mirror, before I hit the brakes.

I brake suddenly. “Fuck!”

Luca gasps for air. The seatbelt roughly squeezing his chest. I almost missed a red light.

We wade through leaves, yellow, red, orange. Our shoes disappear in them. I lift my eyes, the foliage doesn’t look sparse. The tree crowns are plump, full and colorful. The golden autumn light and this very special air, still warm but with a hint of cold. You want to take off your jacket in the sun and wear a hat in the shade. We walk past the pond with the ducks. Luca runs ahead to the playground. He climbs to the top of the Jungle Jim, which looks like a spider’s web. Jakob and I stand silently at the edge of the large sandbox; our hands in our jacket pockets. Today is a most unusual day; Luca has given up trying to guess what will come next. He has shaken off his worries, only occasionally casting a hesitant glance over his shoulder.

“Shit,” I say. I’m whispering, even though we’re nearly alone on the playground. The area for small children is next to us, a few other mothers are there, a father too, but we’re the only ones here. I turn to Jakob. Jakob is chewing on his lower lip. When he does that, he looks like Luca. It saddens him that everybody says Luca takes after his mother. The blond hair, the gray eyes, the fair skin. But the facial expressions, the gestures, are the same between them. The one difference: when Jakob chews his lip it usually means he has something to say — something unpleasant.

“Frau Bohle said children don’t do things like that for no reason.” He gazes at me from below, it’s a mystery how he manages to do that even though he’s taller than me. “Why would he do that?” he asks. The teacher’s remark worries him.

I wave my hand defensively. “We don’t even know if it really happened. A girl told a story and now everyone’s in a tizzy.”

“Do you think she made it up?” Yes – that’s what I think.

I pause for a moment.

Do I really believe that?

You have to believe women – no ifs ands or buts about it. Too many women don’t dare say anything for fear they won’t be believed. That’s why you have to believe them, always. I believe that implicitly. I picture Luca’s tiny fingers; how as a baby he needed a whole hand to grip my index finger.

“He needs to tell us what happened. His perspective. I want to hear it from him,” I say.

Jakob sighs.

When Luca is frightened, he gets very quiet. When we scold him, he hunches his shoulders and lowers his gaze. Like a snail that withdraws into its shell. He doesn’t even defend himself when we punish him unjustly. That’s why we’ve grown so cautious.

“Didn’t you read Jesper Juul?” I ask.

Jakob laughs. “That was a hundred years ago, Pia. You told me to stop reading manuals on parenting because it ruins your intuition.”

“But now I’ve got no intuition,” I say.

We both look at Luca simultaneously. He's clinging to the ropes like a monkey. His blond hair hangs down. These are the thoughts I've had ever since he was born: I imagine him falling asleep and never waking up. How the pram will roll down to the busy street because I didn't set the foot brake properly. How he gets an incurable disease. I imagine the pain. The numbness. The denial. The irrepressible desire to turn back time and the despair because it isn't possible.

I see the dangers; I imagine him falling from the Jungle Jim and breaking his neck and I bear it without intervening.

Luca always wants to pray in the evening now. We have to kneel in front of his bed. It annoys Jakob no end. I tell him it's just a phase; if we leave him alone and ignore it, it'll stop by itself. So for a few weeks now, it's just me in with him for the evening ritual. I play along. I fold my hands. But today I didn't close my eyes. Luca's lips form soundless words.

"Can I ask you something?" I say, after he loudly shouts 'Amen!' and climbs into bed.

"Does God know everything?" Luca looks at me.

"Or do you tell him what happened when you pray?" "He knows everything," says Luca.

"And then what do you tell him?"

I rub my nose against his cheek. I know him better than anybody. But the hours he spends without me, all the things he experiences without me increase the older he gets. That's how it has to be. He doesn't belong to me. He belongs to himself. And yet I wish he had a built-in camera, like some of those modern cars that are able to rewind the tape after a traffic accident and determine who was at fault.

"That's a secret," he whispers, with solemn seriousness. Suddenly, I am so endlessly tired. I turn off the light.

Luca's breathing is steady, he's fallen asleep. I reach for my phone on the bedside table. I've been googling all afternoon. "Children with behavioral problems", 'children's

sexuality', 'getting children to talk'. My head is spinning from all the pages and forums. I open the parents' WhatsApp group. No messages have come in and it reassures me. Now I see why. I've been removed from the group.

2

"So, then don't", I shout into the phone and hang up without saying goodbye. That I'm trembling makes me even more furious. So, too, the puzzled look on Jakob's face. He couldn't hear what Sophie had said; he only heard my side of the conversation. I'd love to hurl the phone on the floor; out the window, at the flickering TV. Jakob turned off the sound when I came into the room earlier, I had raised the phone up, as though it were evidence. We checked and Jakob also isn't in the parents' group anymore. He doesn't want to grasp what that means. He thinks there's been a misunderstanding. But I know better. It means that all of the parents are talking about us and Luca behind our backs. That's how it starts. Jakob's attempts to put everything into perspective are no help. It was his idea to call Sophie. Sophie is Mattis' mother. Mattis is Luca's best friend. She's a single mother and German. I like her Berlin dialect and her directness; I like talking to her. Sometimes, not often, but sometimes we have a real conversation instead of just exchanging niceties. Besides, she also doesn't really belong because she's German. Not with any of the others or the parents. We don't belong either. Jakob doesn't mind, I'm glad about that. Nobody says anything; but we both know I'm the reason. There is something that separates me from the others.

Jakob wants to know what Sophie had said. I try to tell him as accurately as possible. The way she had picked up the phone. I could tell from her voice it must have been an accident. She had probably seen my name light up on the display and briefly forgot there were problems at school. She tried to play it down, but then admitted they were writing about Luca in the group. "But nothing really awful," she said. "They just need to let off a bit of steam." She wouldn't tell me who the parents were; who the girl was. Instead, she said that emotions can run high in those kinds of chats. She advised me to stay calm and ride it out. How confident she sounded. How simple. I'd like to believe that we didn't need to do anything, that everything would pass without leaving any scars. But then she

asked me if it was true, what they had been accusing Luca of. I said no, of course not, and that she should please tell me exactly what they had said in the chat. Even without naming names. Supposedly, she didn't have time for that at the moment. I asked her for screenshots. She asked what good it would do, and I couldn't answer. The silence hung between us, our voices so close, our bodies in completely different spaces. She awkwardly sidestepped my suggestion to pick-up Mattis from school the next day, saying it wouldn't be a good fit that week; and that was proof that the whole thing had indeed made a difference, that it wouldn't just blow over like a thunderstorm.

"None of them have a clue!" My voice got loud. "They are seven-years-old. It was a game; we all did those things. He's a child, not a child molester!"

"Sophie said that?"

"Sophie's a fucking coward."

Jakob takes me in his arms. I am wondering why, then I notice the warm tears running down my cheeks.

Who's the girl? I think about it feverishly. Which girls are in the class? Two Emmas, a Lisa, a Siri, an Anna, an Alena, a Mila, a Karolina, an Emeshe – who else? Luca prefers to play with the boys. With Mattis and Nael and Oliver and Finn. It makes me furious that we've simply been excluded from the group without no further ado. That nobody has the courage to ask us directly. Instead, people prefer to talk about us. It's not just unfair, it's cowardly.

3

Jakob slides close to me. We're lying in bed, neither of us can sleep. He reaches for my hand. We'd had a serious fight earlier. He comforts me when I cry; it's like a reflex for him. Kissing bruised knees, finding the right words, being a shoulder to lean on. He takes a step back and takes on the role of consoler. I've often benefited from that; for example, when Luca threw himself on the floor during his so-called autonomy phase. He had been completely overwhelmed with fury, and my nerves were stretched to breaking

point. Finally, it was Jakob who'd knelt down on the floor with him and absorbed the small blows, while repeating the mantra: "All feelings are okay; all feelings are okay." Because he took care of things, I could cover my ears, or go into the other room; but still. Even if Jakob hadn't been expecting praise, it annoyed me how smug it made him. Jakob, who is as unshakeable as a rock and as comforting as a cuddly toy. Just not in the right way.

After I had released myself from his embrace, and he was certain I was okay again, he said we should talk. The fact that I didn't feel like talking didn't stop him. He told me how he saw the phone call. I was already quite hostile when we had spoken with Frau Bohle. No, he didn't put it that way, he used the word "uncooperative" – that's a word Jakob prefers to use. He thinks I'm exaggerating.

"Are you okay," Jakob's voice asks in the darkness. I nod, though he can't see me. I answer, "Toilet."

I know what it's like when people talk about you. I know how dangerous it can be. I resent him. I don't like his warm body next to mine. I don't even like the way he smells.

I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and look at my face. Pale skin, gray eyes. I see Jakob in Luca's facial expressions. I see the others in him too. When he sleeps, I see my father. My mother. But most often I see Linda. From the very beginning. When he was a tiny newborn and they had put him on my chest – when he was still in my belly – I thought: Linda.

Jakob thinks that's nonsense. I'm not sure what it is that annoys him when I compare Luca to Linda. He says I look like my sister; nonetheless Luca doesn't look like her, he looks like me. The DNA of siblings differs less than with parents and their children. That's good if you ever need an organ donation, but it doesn't guarantee closeness. Jakob rarely calls his sister who lives in Tyrol. She leads a similar life, nonetheless they are distant.

I turn on the light in the bedroom. Jakob shields his face with his hands. The light is harsh; it blinds me too. I switch it off again.

“Sorry,” I say. The darkness is now even darker than before. But I can hear Jakob has sat up.

“I can’t sleep,” he says. “Me too.”

“Shall we talk now?”

I crawl under the comforter and sit next to him. His body seems familiar to me again, no longer demanding, but like a buoy that I can hold onto in the dark.