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Gone-Girl-meets-Room thriller.” —*Parade*

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DEAR
CHILD

A NOVEL

ROMY
HAUSMANN

DEAR CHILD

ROMY HAUSMANN

*Translated from the German by
Jamie Bulloch*



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For Caterina, of course

Nothing is sadder than the death of an illusion.

—*Arthur Koestler*

Student, 23, missing in Munich

Munich (LR)—The Munich police are searching for clues relating to the whereabouts of Lena Beck, 23, from Munich-Haidhausen. According to eyewitnesses, the student was at a party on Tuesday night in the Maxvorstadt district until around 5 a.m. On the way home she telephoned a friend. Her cell phone has been switched off ever since. A police search of Munich on Friday produced no leads. Lena Beck is 5 feet tall, petite, and has blonde, shoulder-length hair. She was last seen wearing a silver top, black jeans, black boots and a dark blue coat.

On the first day I lose my sense of time, my dignity and a molar. But I do have two children now and a cat. I've forgotten their names apart from the cat's—Fräulein Tinky. I've got a husband too. He's tall, with short, dark hair and gray eyes. I look at him from the corner of my eye as I sit huddled next to him on the threadbare sofa. In his embrace, the injuries running right down my back are throbbing, as if each of them had their own heartbeat. A cut on my forehead is stinging. From time to time everything goes blank or I see white flashes. Then I just focus on trying to breathe.

It's hard to tell whether it is actually evening, or whether he's decided that's what it is. Insulation panels are screwed over the windows. He creates day and night. Like God. I try to persuade myself I'm already over the worst, but I can't stop anticipating that we'll be going to bed together soon. The children already have their pajamas on. The boy's are too small, whereas the girl's sleeves go way over her wrists. The children kneel on the floor several feet from the sofa and hold their hands up to feel the residual warmth of the wood-burning stove. The fire has burned down to a black heap, with only the odd ember still glowing red. The high-pitched voices with their jolly chitter-chatter blend into the sheer abnormality of this situation. I can't understand exactly what they're saying. It's as if I'm hearing them talk through cotton wool, while I contemplate how I'm going to kill their father.

THE NIGHT OF THE ACCIDENT

HANNAH

It's easy to begin with. I straighten my back and take a deep breath. I climb into the ambulance and travel with it. I tell the men in the orange coats Mama's name and that her blood group is AB negative. AB negative is the rarest blood group and it doesn't have any antibodies against groups A and B. That means Mama can have blood from all the other groups. I know this because we talked about blood groups in class. And because it's in the thick book. I think I've done everything right. It's only when I unintentionally think about my brother that my right knee starts trembling. Jonathan will be frightened without me.

Concentrate, Hannah. You're a big girl now.

No, today I'm a little girl and I'm stupid. It's cold, it's too bright and it's beeping. I ask where the beeping's coming from, and one of the men in the orange coats says, "That's your mom's heart."

My mom's heart never beeped before.

Concentrate, Hannah.

It's a bumpy ride and I close my eyes. Mama's heart is beeping.

She screamed and there was a bang. If my mum's heart stops beeping now, those will have been the last sounds I heard her make: a scream and a bang. And she didn't even wish me goodnight.

The ambulance does a little jump then comes to a stop.

"We're here," the man says. He means at the hospital.

A hospital is a building where illnesses or injuries are treated with medical assistance.

"Come on, little girl," the man says.

My legs move automatically and so quickly that I can't count the steps. I follow the men pushing the rattling stretcher on wheels through a large glass door beneath the glaring sign that says "Accident and Emergency," and then down a long corridor.

As if by command, helpers swarm from both sides and lots of voices all talk nervily at the same time.

“You can’t come in here,” a fat man in a green apron says, nudging me to the side when we arrive at another large door at the end of the long corridor. “We’ll send someone to look after you.” He points at a row of seats along the wall. “Go and sit down there for the moment.”

I want to say something, but the words won’t come out, and in any case the man has already turned around and disappeared through the door with the other helpers. I count the chairs along the wall—seven. He—the fat man in the green apron—didn’t say which one I should sit on. I’ve started chewing my thumbnail without realizing it. *Concentrate, Hannah. You’re a big girl now.*

I sit with my knees up on the middle chair, picking pine needles and small brown bits of bark from my dress. I got quite dirty this evening. I think of Jonathan again. Poor little Jonathan who stayed at home and has to do the cleaning. I imagine him crying because he doesn’t know how to get rid of the stains from the carpet in the sitting room. I’m sure we’ve got the right cleaning fluid in the store cupboard, but Papa’s put two padlocks on the door. A precautionary measure. We need to have lots of these. You always have to be careful.

“Hello?” A woman’s voice.

I leap to my feet.

“I’m Sister Ruth,” the woman says with a smile, and takes my hand to shake it. I tell her my name is Hannah and that it’s a palindrome. A palindrome is a word that reads the same forward as well as backward. To prove it I spell my name, first from the beginning and then from the end. Sister Ruth is still smiling and says, “I understand.”

She’s older than Mama; she’s already got gray hair and she’s slightly round. Over her light yellow apron she wears a colorful cardigan which looks nice and warm and has a sticker with the face of a panda on it. It says, “Be Happy.” That’s English. The corners of my mouth twitch.

“You haven’t got any shoes on, child,” Sister Ruth remarks, and I wiggle the big toe of my left foot through the hole in my tights. Mama stitched it up on one of her good days. I bet she’d be angry if she knew that I’d made the hole in my tights again.

Sister Ruth takes a tissue from the pocket of her apron because she thinks I’m crying. Because of the hole in my tights or because of Mama. I don’t tell her it’s actually because I’m blinded by the harsh light from the fluorescent tube on the ceiling. I just say, “Thank you, that’s very considerate.” You always have to be polite. You always have to say please and thank you. My brother and I always say

thank you when Mama gives us a cereal bar, even though we can't stand cereal bars. We don't like the taste. But they're important because of the vitamins. Calcium and potassium and magnesium and Vitamin B for the digestion and blood formation. We eat three of them every day unless we've run out. Then we have to hope Papa comes home soon and has been shopping on the way.

I take the tissue, dab my eyes, blow my nose, then give it back to Sister Ruth. You mustn't keep anything that doesn't belong to you. That's stealing. Sister Ruth laughs and puts the tissue back in her apron. Of course I ask her about Mama, but all Sister Ruth says is: "She's in the best hands." I know that's not a proper answer, I'm not stupid.

"When can I see her?" I ask, but don't get an answer to that either.

Instead Sister Ruth says that she's going to take me to the staffroom to see whether there's a pair of slippers I could wear. Jonathan and I have to wear slippers at home too because the floor is very cold, but mostly we forget and our tights get dirty. Then Mama gets cross because it's not washing day, and Papa gets cross because Mama hasn't cleaned the floor properly. Cleanliness is important.

The staffroom is big, at least fifty paces from the door to the wall opposite. In the middle are three tables, each of which has four chairs arranged around it. Three fours are twelve. One of the chairs isn't straight. Someone must have been sitting there and not tidied up when they left. I hope they got into trouble. Because tidiness is important too. The left-hand wall of the room is filled with a metal cupboard with lots of individual lockable compartments, but there are keys sticking out of almost all of them. There's also a loft bed, which is metal too. Straight ahead are two windows. I can see the night through them. The night is black and there aren't any stars. To the right is a kitchen unit. There's even a kettle out on the work surface. Hot water can be very dangerous. Skin burns at one hundred thirteen degrees. At one hundred forty degrees the protein in the skin cells congeals and the cells die off. The water inside a kettle is heated to two hundred twelve degrees. We've got a kettle at home too, but we keep it locked away.

"Why don't you sit down?" Sister Ruth says.

Three fours are twelve. Twelve chairs. I have to think, but I'm distracted by the black night without any stars beyond the windows.

Concentrate, Hannah.

Sister Ruth goes to the cupboard, opens one compartment after another, then closes it again. She says "hmm" a few times, drawing it out, and the metal doors clatter. Looking over her shoulder, she says again, "Come on, child, sit down."

First I think I ought to go for the chair that's not straight. But that wouldn't be right. Everyone needs to tidy up after themselves. Take responsibility. *You're a big*

girl, Hannah. I nod at nothing in particular and count to myself, eenie, meenie, miney, mo. There's one chair left over, which would give me a good view of the door and which I'll put back neatly later when Sister Ruth tells me the time to sit down is over.

"How about these?" she says with a smile, turning to me with a pair of pink rubber shoes. "They're a bit big, but better than nothing." She puts them by my feet and waits for me to slip them on.

"Listen, Hannah," she says as she takes off her cardigan. "Your mom didn't have a handbag when the accident happened. That means we couldn't find an identity card or any papers belonging to her."

Grabbing my arm, she holds it out straight and fiddles the sleeve of her cardigan over my hand.

"So now we don't have a name or an address. And no emergency contact number either, unfortunately."

"Her name is Lena," I say to be helpful, like I was in the ambulance. You always have to be helpful. My brother and I always help Mama when her fingers tremble. Or when she forgets things, like our names or when it's time to go to the toilet. We go with her to the bathroom so she doesn't slide off the toilet seat or do anything else silly.

Sister Ruth is now on to the other arm. The warmth that's still in the cardigan spreads cosily across my back.

"Yes," she says. "Lena, great. Lena without a surname. The paramedic already made a note of this." When she sighs I can smell her breath. It smells of toothpaste. She tugs on my chair, which scrapes across the floor, until she can squat in front of me without knocking her head on the edge of the table. Table edges can be very dangerous. Mama often hits her head against the table when she has one of her fits.

Sister Ruth starts fastening the buttons of the cardigan. On my thigh my finger draws the zigzag pattern of her parting. Right, straight, left, straight, left, straight, left again, like a jagged lightning bolt. Sister Ruth suddenly looks up as if she'd sensed me staring at her head.

"Is there anyone we can call, Hannah? Your papa, perhaps? Do you know your telephone number by heart?"

I shake my head.

"But you do have a papa?"

I nod.

"Does he live with you? With you and your mama?"

I nod again.

“Shall we call him? Surely he should know your mama had an accident and that the two of you are in hospital. He’ll be worried if you don’t come home.”

Right, straight. Left, straight, left again, like a jagged lightning bolt.

“Tell me, Hannah, have you ever been to a hospital before? Or your mama? Maybe even this one? Then, you see, we could look in our really smart computer for your telephone number.”

I shake my head.

“In an emergency, open wounds can be sterilized with urine. It disinfects, coagulates the proteins and relieves the pain, full stop.”

Sister Ruth takes my hands. “You know what, Hannah? I’ll make us some tea and then we’ll have a bit of a chat, you and I. How about that?”

“Chat about what?”

★ ★ ★

I see, she wants me to talk about Mama, but I can’t think of anything to say to begin with. I just keep thinking of the big bang when the car hit Mama and the very next moment she was lying on the cold, hard ground in the beam of the car headlights, her arms and legs all twisted. Her skin was far too white and the blood flowing from all the little cuts in her face far too red. Crimson. The glass of the headlights shattered on impact and flew straight into Mama’s face. I sat on the side of the road, closed my eyes, occasionally blinking in secret until the flashing blue lights appeared in the darkness: the ambulance.

But I don’t have to tell Sister Ruth all of this. She already knows that Mama had an accident. Mama wouldn’t be here otherwise. Sister Ruth stares at me. I shrug and blow ripples on my tea. Rosehip, Sister Ruth said, and she told me it was her daughter’s favorite when she was small. “Always with a big spoonful of honey in it. She had a real sweet tooth.” *Sweet tooth*. I don’t believe there is such a thing, but I like the sound of it.

“I think we urgently need to speak to your papa,” Sister Ruth says. “Have another think; maybe your home telephone number will come to you.”

“We don’t have a telephone.”

“What about your address, then? The name of the street you live in? Then we could send someone by to pick up your papa.”

I shake my head very slowly. Sister Ruth can’t understand.

“Nobody must find us,” I whisper.

LENA

The air just after it's rained. The first and last squares of a bar of chocolate, which always taste the best. The aroma of freesias. David Bowie's Low album. A curry sausage after a long night out. A long night out. The hum of a fat bumblebee. Everything the sun does, whether it's rising, setting or just shining. A blue sky. A black sky. Any old sky. The way my mother rolls her eyes when she has a spontaneous visitor and the washing-up hasn't been done. The old Hollywood swing in my grandparents' garden, the way it squeaks and sounds as if it's singing a weird song when you swing back and forth on it. Those silly tablecloth weights that look like strawberries and lemons. The summer wind on the face and in the hair. The sea, the sound of it roaring. Fine white sand between the toes ...

"I love you," he moans, rolling his sticky body off of mine.

"I love you too," I say softly, doubling up like a dying deer.

"... Serial rib fracture on the left-hand side involving the second to fourth ribs. Subperiosteal hematoma..."

HANNAH

"Are you saying you're not going to tell me where you live?"

Sister Ruth is smiling, but it's not a proper smile, more like half of one with just the right side of her mouth.

"My daughter loved to play games like this when she was small."

"Sweet tooth."

"That's right." She nods, pushing her cup to one side and leaning slightly farther across the table. "And of course those games are fun. But you know, Hannah, I'm afraid it's not always the right time for games. Like now, when it's really quite serious. When someone has an accident and is taken to hospital, we have to contact the relatives. That's our duty."

I try not to blink when she looks at me in this very particular way. I want her to blink first, because that means she's lost.

"Sometimes, when someone's badly injured, like your mama, we have to make important decisions."

The person who blinks first loses. That's how the game works.

"Decisions that the injured person can't take for themselves at the moment. Do you understand that, Hannah?"

Sister Ruth has lost.

"Oh well." She sighs.

I put my hand up to my mouth and pinch at my bottom lip so she can't see me grinning. You should never laugh at anyone, not even if they've lost a blinking

competition.

“I just thought we might have a little chat until the police arrive.”

The police are an executive organ of the state. Their task is to investigate punishable and illegal acts. And sometimes they come to take children away from their parents. Or parents from their children.

“The police are coming?”

“That’s perfectly normal. I mean, they have to work out how the accident happened in which your mama was injured. Do you know what ‘hit and run’ means, Hannah?”

“‘Hit and run’ describes the unlawful disappearance from the scene of an accident by a road-user after a road traffic accident which is their fault, full stop.”

Sister Ruth nods. “It’s a crime the police have to investigate.”

“Does the man involved get into trouble, then?”

Sister Ruth narrows her eyes. “So it was a man driving the car, was it? Why do you ask, Hannah?”

“Because he was nice. He sorted everything out and called the emergency services. And he gave me a coat when I felt cold while we were waiting for the ambulance. He didn’t actually leave until just before the ambulance arrived. I think he was just as frightened as Mama and me.”

I don’t want to look at Sister Ruth anymore.

“And anyway, the accident wasn’t his fault,” I say with my mouse’s voice. Papa invented the mouse’s voice for Mama’s bad days, because he thought she would get upset if we talked too loudly. “Mama needs her peace and quiet,” he would always say. “Mama’s not feeling so well today.”

“What do you mean, Hannah?” Sister Ruth says. She seems to know the mouse’s voice too, because she’s speaking like this now as well. “Whose fault was it then?”

I have to think carefully about what I say.

Concentrate, Hannah. You’re a big girl.

“My mama sometimes does silly things by accident.”

Sister Ruth looks surprised. Surprise is when you hear something unexpected or when something unexpected happens. It can be a nice surprise, like a present someone gives you even though it’s not your birthday. My cat Fräulein Tinky was that sort of surprise. When Papa came home and said he’d got something for me, I thought it might be a new book or a board game I could play with Jonathan. But then he showed me Fräulein Tinky. She’s been mine ever since, just mine.

“Hannah?”

I don’t want to. I want to think of Fräulein Tinky.

“Have you got problems at home, Hannah?”