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Marta, Asleep

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Sample translation by Jamie Bulloch

My angel,

I've written you dozens of letters and, today more than ever, I regret that I've never sent a single one of them...

This might be my final letter, and I can only write it in my thoughts.

Today is the day I am to die.

Just like her.

Nadja

Kaupen. I know the term from a TV documentary about the Spreewald. Tiny, isolated sand islands, emerging from the water like the backs of diving aquatic animals. The *Kaupen* support the houses of the settlers who've lived there since the seventeenth century. Some of these houses are still not connected to the network of paths and can only be accessed by boat. Not this one, thank goodness, seeing as what I've transported here in the boot of the car. I keep driving until the house is in sight, but according to Laura I'll have to walk the last few metres across a narrow, weather-worn bridge that leads directly to my destination: a small, old log cabin, surrounded by greenery. It used to belong to Laura's grandmother, but has stood empty for several years now.

As I park my heart is pounding. Laura can't be here yet, because she would have had to park by the bridge too. We'd decided to drive separately – me in her Land Rover and her in her husband's Porsche – to avoid any potential witnesses seeing us together en route. I remove the key from the ignition and get out of the car. The air is clear and I take a deep breath. But it doesn't help; I still feel sick. The trees sway all around me and inside my head Aunt Evelyn says: *What on earth have you done, child?*

I haven't done anything, I want to reply, but she doesn't believe me. *You've been nothing but trouble, Nadja, from a very early age. Even when you were learning how to walk I suspected that one day you'd be the ruin of the lot of us.*

But I was only a child, I protest silently. *And didn't I get better after Janek was born because I wanted to set a good example to my little brother?*

You were just pretending, Aunt Evelyn says and her laughter sounds bitter. *Everybody knows what you're really like, Nadja Kulka.*

Panting, I make a dart for the bridge just a few paces away, brace my arms against the railings and look down. Beneath me the water cuts a swathe through the rampant greenery. A devil's furrow, if you believe Herbert's legend. I ask Aunt Evelyn what she would have done in my place. The dead body, lying there on the expensive white marble in the van Hovens' living room. The expensive marble that wasn't white anymore, but

red, red all over, and even more red, the deep-red stains that had worked their way through the material of a grey T-shirt. I approached the body tentatively and was shaking as I lifted the T-shirt and saw four stab wounds.

'I don't know how that could have happened,' I heard Laura say as if from far away. 'It was like I blacked out. All of a sudden I was standing there with the knife in my hand and my nightie soaked with blood.' She swallowed. 'What am I going to do now, Nadja? My life is ruined.'

Yes, it was.

'Vivi... I'm going to lose Vivi.'

Yes, she would.

'Please, Nadja, say something!'

The dead body, the eyes. Clouded-over eyes, wide open, staring up at the ceiling.

'Nadja!'

Laura clutched me from behind; I gasped for breath. I couldn't escape those eyes. I imagined they would now pursue Laura for the rest of her life. She would see them in her dreams and even when she was awake. Every person who looked at her in the future would do so with these very same eyes.

'You're right,' a voice said. It was mine, though it sounded unfamiliar. 'You're going to lose everything. Your daughter, your husband, your home. You'll be left with nothing, nothing at all.'

Like me. So – what would you have done in my place, Aunt Evelyn?

Aunt Evelyn doesn't say anything. Obviously she doesn't because she's not here. I'm alone. Just me and the body in the boot of the car.

...]

May 2014

(five years earlier)

Paul Heger knew nothing for sure yet apart from this. The moment when Simone stood by his bed and told him the police were there, something decisive had happened, something he might not have much influence over. As if dumbstruck, he put on his dressing gown, a Christmas present from his wife – thick, dark-green towelling. She'd wanted to get him something cosy in his favourite colour and she'd even had his initials embroidered on it. The police officers were waiting for him in the dining room, and he walked down the stairs to the ground floor as if on the way to the gallows, dragging his heels, one stair at a time. Each seemed to represent an anecdote, and together these made up his story as a husband and father over the years.

The third stair from the top, which creaked so treacherously. In the past, when Simone and he still used to

occasionally go out, they would always avoid this step when they got back home – giggling, tipsy on wine, in love and horny for one another – so as not to wake the little one.

Another stair halfway down, the one with the tiny spot of blood on the edge, which you wouldn't notice unless you knew it was there. That's where Julia had fallen and hit her head when she was three years old. Whenever he recalled the episode he at once felt her small, limp body in his arms, heard her whimpering and himself comforting her. He saw his wife, as white as a sheet, a reflection of his own feelings in a moment when he'd realised how quickly things could happen, how fragile life was.

The entire staircase which his daughter, now fourteen, stormed up in a pubescent rage when Paul forbade her from meeting her friends during the week, or when Simone refused to buy her the jeans you had to wear to be part of the 'in' crowd in her class.

His stairs, his house, his family, his life.

Paul trudged to the dining room, where he stopped in the doorway. Two men sat at the table, both in plain clothes. Paul didn't know whether this was a good sign. Simone stood by the window at the far side of the room. She had her back turned to him, which momentarily made him more nervous than the presence of the two men. He really wanted to be able to read her face.

'Banzbach,' the elder of the policemen said, getting to his feet.

Paul nodded.

'And this is my colleague, Hartwig. Please sit down, Herr Heger. We'd like to talk to you about an accident near Suckow. Does the name ring a bell?'

'Yes,' he replied hesitantly, staying standing in the doorway. 'It's on the A24, isn't it?'

Banzbach nodded.

'Correct.'

He looked at Simone, then back to Paul.

'If you'd prefer, we could continue this conversation in private.'

Simone turned around, her arms crossed and face devoid of expression.

Paul cleared his throat.

'That's not necessary. I don't have any secrets from my wife.'

'All the better,' Banzbach said, gesturing to Paul. 'So please take a seat now.'

Obediently, Paul sat down and clasped his hands on the table. Now it was Hartwig's turn. He reached into the inside pocket of his denim jacket and took out a small notebook.

'Do you know a Nelly Schütt?'

Simone narrowed her eyes.

Paul stared at his hands, which had done so many bad things. He'd touched Nelly with these hands, with these fingers he'd typed messages to her, the same fingers he'd crossed when swearing to Simone he'd never see Nelly again.

'Yes.'

Hartwig leafed through his notebook.

'Three days ago Nelly Schütt was found dead, Herr Heger. On a woodland slope bordering the A24 at Suckow. We're assuming that she fell down the slope, seriously injuring herself in the process.' Hartwig cleared his throat. 'But in the end she was strangled.'

Paul stared at his hands, which swam before his eyes.

Nelly. Was dead.

The room started spinning, faster and faster. The centrifugal force tore him from his chair and dashed him against the wall. From somewhere far away he could hear Simone sobbing.

'What have you done, Paul? What the hell have you done?'

[...]

From: Attempt #28

Today my therapist asked how I was getting on with the letter. The truth would have been to tell her that is no letter, only these pitiful attempts. Scarcely an evening goes by without me sitting at my kitchen table, a pen in hand and a fresh piece of paper before me. And I do write, I write well into the night. But in the end, when I read what I've written over the past few hours, I realise once again that there are simply no words to say what I really want to tell you.

Only today my therapist looked so hopeful, and for some reason I suddenly had a terribly bad conscience because of all those hours I've sat silently opposite her, just sluicing back litres of her coffee. So I said, 'The letter's almost finished,' and smiled. A lie, but what does it matter? After all, that's all people have ever seen me as: a liar.

'What happened at yours on 17 June 1999?' they kept asking, but what could I have told them apart from the fact that Marta was sick and I'd stayed at home from school to look after her? And I really tried my best. I just wanted to do everything right.

After she fainted I hauled her out of the bath and took her to bed. Then I went into the kitchen to boil some

water for her tea and a hot water bottle. I was worried, of course I was, but I also remembered the supposed flu she'd had a few years earlier and how that had turned out alright in the end.

When I went back into the bedroom she was staring at the ceiling. Some years back a leak had sprung in the apartment above ours and ever since there had been a brown pattern on the ceiling: a butterfly flitting about and a fish with a stunted tail, then something that looked like a lightning bolt, a battle-axe and the outline of a mini Africa.

'Camomile,' I whispered, putting the cup on the beside table. 'It's very hot.'

She didn't respond; she hated tea. She thought it tasted of being ill and she hated being ill too. Unlike me. I'd had pneumonia when I was in the third year, and I still remembered how she'd sat on the edge of my bed and held my hand, and the strawberry taste of the penicillin. I'd loved both.

'I know, I know,' I said, smiling. 'But if you want to be back on your feet again soon then I suggest you drink up.' I briefly stood beside the bed, unsure as to what to do, then – 'Oh yes!' – I remembered the hot water bottle under my arm, wrapped in a tea towel. I placed it carefully on her tummy and crept into the bed. Being close – isn't that what people always said? – being close and love sometimes worked better than any medicine. Pointing my right index finger at the ceiling I asked, 'Can you see that shape right beneath Africa? It looks like a heart, don't you think?'

She didn't reply. Her eyelids had flickered shut. Sleep would undoubtedly help her recover quickly too. I pressed my nose into the hollow between her neck and shoulder. There was something about her smell that perplexed me, but I thought no more of it. I was tired too, so unbelievably tired. I closed my eyes and murmured, 'Sleep well, Marta.'