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Das man durch Belgien muss auf dem Weg zum Glück

(On the Way to Happiness You Have to Pass Through Belgium)

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English sample translation © Isabel Fargo Cole

He was trying to ride his new road bike in circles on the stone patio behind the house. It was supposed to look like stunt cycling, even if no one was watching. Over the hillside house the clouds reflected the sunset. The winter-bare garden left an unobstructed view of a boxy, six-foot-high rain barrel down by the fence. The two old apple trees in front of it barely hid its unsightly green plastic. In August his parents had spent hours arguing about it on the patio. Porta potty, his mother had groused, but because of the neighbors her voice was even softer than the creaking of the wicker chairs. Now the chairs were in the garage. It was New Year's Eve, and Leonhard was home alone. That was a little bit sad, but only when he thought about it.

Why don't you invite someone over?

I'll think about it, Mother.

Somewhere in the neighborhood someone was playing the trumpet. Leonhard leaned the bike against the living room's panorama window, took off his shoes and went inside in his stocking feet. In the kitchen he opened the street-facing window a crack. The last bus of the day pulled into the bay across the street. No one got off or on. Beyond the roundabout the bus vanished into the woods that separated the suburban bungalows from the city, accompanied by a high whining note.

Leonhard wore glasses and was taking his first semester of economics at a school not fifteen miles from home. He'd had his own car ever since high school graduation. He drove home every evening, not for lack of money, but from attachment or possibly fear, which is sometimes the same thing. There was a crane made of Legos still standing in his room. I'm going to keep it forever, he'd said when the family moved here to Stuttgart-

Frauenkopf from Gent. I'm going to keep it as a memento of my childhood. He was eight years old at the time.

Leonhard put on water for the pasta and opened a jar of pesto, and outside a premature New Year's firecracker ripped through the cold December air. Add a handful of pine nuts to the ready-made pesto, that'll give it that special something, his mother had said the morning after Christmas, trolley bag in hand. He let the spaghetti fan out in the boiling water like a handful of pick-up sticks. As it softened in the hot water, he pushed it all the way down with the wooden spoon, tossed in a handful of salt, set the timer, crossed the hall – lined with his mother's bookcases, double rows of mysteries, mainly in English and French – and walked out the front door to the garden gate in his stocking feet. Fabio, the loser, lived in the house across the way. Gravel pressed into the soles of Leonhard's feet. Soon it would be summer again.

There was no mail except for his father's business magazine. Two old ladies shuffled slowly past the fence. Hand in hand they took the air, strolling down the bike path which no one else used around here. One walked with a cane, the other smiled. *Late bloomers*, Leonhard's mother called their neighbors from the 70's bungalow by the roundabout.

Outside the house, two hours later, the darkness was long since total. He would run out of parmesan tomorrow, he realized as he turned on the television. On Channel One a butler's tailcoat with a stooped actor inside said *Same procedure as every year*, and tripped over a hearthrug, over a dead tiger's head. The actor was probably long-dead, and so was the laughing, unseen audience. Leonhard had turned eighteen in May. More fireworks were going up outside now, and the sky above had turned smoky, dirty yellow by the time he let his solitary fireworks hiss up from the necks of a few bottles down in the garden by the porta potty at the stroke of midnight. The bottles' necks reminded him of ballerinas, he wasn't sure why. He'd been to the opera only once, with his piano teacher, and he never went to the ballet. With the empty bottles under his arm he went back inside, hung his father's down jacket on the coatrack and read a text message full of typos. *Miss you!* His family's tipsy greetings from Belgium. Instead of replying, he went over to the grand piano, in his stocking feet again, corrected the height of the stool by force of habit, started playing as he'd done yesterday and the day before, and kept stumbling at the same places. He grew slower and slower each time, until all he was doing was spelling out the notes.

Any role models? the piano teacher had asked him recently. He looked young, maybe because he had a ponytail.

Role models?

Maybe Mozart?

Boba Fett, if anyone.

Who?

Boba Fett.

The teacher, in his Shetland sweater with its rancid smell of wool, got up from his chair by the piano.

Boba Fett from Star Wars? What do you want with him? He doesn't even have a soul.

Exactly, Leonhard said, sometimes I wish I didn't have one either.

Why is that?

The piano teacher paced up and down. The whole room smelled of Shetland and sheep.

The soul is just an eternal weak spot, Leonhard said.

Oh for Chrissake!

The piano teacher, with blue eyes dark as his sweater, reached over Leonhard's shoulder to play a chord.

Ok, now and then, and especially starting now, life can demand impetuous living. But that's no reason to play dead, Leonhard, he said.

Now Leonhard raised his head, gazing across the gleaming black surface of the piano and out the window. City lights glittered like stars all across the opposite hillside. Fireworks darted above them as though the universe were throwing a party. Up there as well, with nothing but rich people. For you three kids, Grandfather had said last Christmas, living here has meant a pretty carefree childhood, with the garden, the road, the forest, kindergarten, school, soccer field, am I right? Everything's rural, everything's so close and the big bad city's so far away. Grandfather's statement had sounded like a farewell; that occurred to him only now. To go with the colorful New Year's spectacle framed by the window, Leonhard played a silly pop song that usually made his mother turn on the vacuum cleaner or a kitchen appliance so she wouldn't have to listen. Not half an hour later he put on his striped pajamas, brushed his teeth and ran the half-filled dishwasher. Before going up to his room, he turned out the lights in the house and outside. That took care of everything there was to take care of that day.

In the morning the woman was lying in the hall.

He would have had to step over her to get to his cornflakes in the kitchen. He stopped on the bottom step and pulled up the waistband of his pajama pants. Fear coursed through him. In horror movies zombies took opportunities like this to grab the legs of the living who dared step over them. Was she dead? He crouched down on the bottom step. Was she breathing? The floors were unheated. Wasn't she cold? Why had she taken off her shoes and socks, and why did she have rings on three toes? Was she a burglar? Since when did burglars take off their shoes in strangers' houses and fall asleep red-handed? Was she a hobo, a borderliner, an alcoholic, something half human with animal urges, some creature that oughtn't to exist at all halfway up this hillside? But what was there up here that wasn't convertible into money? Even the bus would soon be done away with; just now it passed the house with its constant high bagpipe whine, and for the first time there was something comforting about it, a reassurance that the world Leonhard knew still existed out there. But in here a woman lay on her side, wearing dark-brown corduroys and over them a black, old-fashioned dress. Under her cheek, as a pillow, she had a rolled-up frog-green rain jacket.