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LENNY AMONG GHOSTS

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reading age: 9+, c. 192 pages,

Sample translation by Rachel Hildebrandt

**A fairly twisted story that includes
clattering, moaning and rattling.
Be sure to duck if something floats by.
If you have a head, that is.**

This story is only for readers who aren't squeamish and who have a sense of humor. Black humor. Pitch black. Here you will encounter people with holes in their stomachs, people without heads, and people who make mistakes. Lethal mistakes. Almost.

If you like stories in which characters dangle from ceilings or play with cleavers or tumble down 54 steps, then keep reading. If not, just set this book aside. But don't gripe later if everyone else has read it and you're the only one who can't talk about it.

Leonard Hohenklaue, known as Lenny the Second

[...]

“Darling, it’s going to be great,” my mother said that morning.

Whenever my mother says “darling” or “pumpkin” to me, it’s not only extremely embarrassing. It’s a sign that I’ll be forced to live with something that definitely doesn’t count as great.

“You’ll make all sorts of fantastic new friends there before you know it, pumpkin. The school’s in an old castle.”

One “darling” and one “pumpkin” - in less than sixty seconds.

“Boooooohooooo,” my father added. “And every night, the ancient ghost will...”

“Norbert, cut it out. You’ll frighten our little pumpkin,” Mom warned him.

Make that two “pumpkins.” Obviously, her guilty conscience had reached a new low. Didn’t matter though. I was still happy Dad had managed to screw everything up.

So here’s what was happening: My parents had been given the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to go on a research trip in the jungles of the Central Amazon. They would be hunting for a rare amphibian that belonged to the family of Asiatic salamanders. These critters aren’t very attractive, and they can’t really do all that much, but they are Mom and Dad’s great passion.

Sometimes when my mom wants to be really funny, she calls me “my little salamander.” I’m not all that ugly, and unlike the salamanders, I can actually do stuff. For example, I play soccer well, and I can make really cool firecrackers with my chemistry set. I can also make myself look so hungry that every hotdog seller secretly stuffs a second wiener in my bread.

While my parents were gone, I was supposed to stay with Aunt Lisbeth and go to school there, too. However, Dad was supposed to send in my application by a certain date, but he forgot because some kind of salamander had just hatched in the university lab. Whenever something like that happens, my father can’t remember anything.

Honestly, I’m so glad about that.

I’m a hundred times happier to be spending the next semester at some old castle than with Aunt Lisbeth. Every morning, she makes me some kind of slimy gray porridge and praises the disgusting stuff as the healthiest food on the planet. How can something be healthy if it makes you nauseous?

By this point, my parents didn’t have many options left, so they decided on Castle Shadowsnout. Although it was located about 400 kilometers away, they still had some openings.

“The last Knight of Shadowsnout was named Heribert, and he lost his life in the Thirty Years’ War,” Mom explained.

“He didn’t just lose his life. They chopped his head off,” Dad added. “Horrible.”

“True,” Mom replied. “However, Knight Heribert had already practically died of a broken heart because he wasn’t allowed to marry his beloved. She was just a village baker’s daughter, but she baked the best apple cake in the kingdom. She was also gorgeous, and had one blue and one brown eye. But she wasn’t from an aristocratic family, which is why the knight couldn’t marry her.” Mom sighed. She has a soft spot for romantic stories. “Anyway, the castle’s foundation walls date to the time of Heinrich the Strong. Isn’t that amazing? I bet it’ll so much fun to play around those ancient walls. And maybe you’ll find the legendary treasure of the Shadowsnouts. The knight supposedly hid it before he left for battle, but unfortunately never told anyone where he stuck it! This is going to be a marvelous experience, darling!”

Whenever my mother adds “marvelous” to a sprinkling of “darlings” and “pumpkins,” you have to be extremely careful. Ideally, begin every answer with “No.” However, in this case, it was too late. The deal had been long been done. Today, we were supposed to set off. I would now be a pupil at Castle Shadowsnout.

Even the name was a joke. How in the world had that Heinrich the Strong come up with the idea to call his castle this? Castle Wildburg would have been a good name, or Castle Schreckenstein or Castle Gallowfest. But Shadowsnout? He might as well have named it Slimysnot.

The letter that sealed the deal was sitting on the kitchen table. The sender, Director Theoderich Grünspan, was obviously a bit off his rocker.

The stationery looked as if Heinrich the Strong had written on it. The yellowed sheet crinkled drily, and Director Grünspan had filled it with old-fashioned cursive and looping letters that I could hardly make out. It was packed with bloated sentences like: *Your son Leonard should arrive on the Third of August, anno 2018, to take up residence in his chambers... etcetera, etcetera.*

It’s going to be a blast if everyone there talks like this, I thought. In my lousy mood, I didn’t even notice that something was off with the letter. Only later in the car did I realize what it was.

[...]

We were ready to leave.

Unfortunately, in all the excitement, Dad had managed to lose the car keys. The extra set was at his office, and it took him twenty minutes to bike there and twenty minutes to get back.

“We’ll still make it by twelve, easily,” Dad insisted once we were finally sitting in the car and he had turned the ignition.

With a lot of luck, we might have pulled it off, but only if Dad had known how to work the GPS in our car. If your list of potential destinations includes two different Hustenburgs, you actually need to know which one to choose.

After about 200 kilometers, Mom asked: “Are you sure, Norbert, that this is the right way? I thought the school was located much further to the South...”

“Absolutely, Lenchen,” Dad replied, driving on.

You couldn’t really describe what we were doing as driving. We were sooner chugging along, at foot speed, since we’d been stuck in traffic for some time by this point.

I was sitting in the backseat, bored.

Mom glanced back at me: “Darling, take a look at that letter again. What time are we supposed to be there?”

I skimmed the letter, which immediately filled the car with a musty smell.

I stopped short. I looked more closely: 00:00.

I hadn’t been wrong. 00:00 was what was written there: midnight.

“00:00,” I said.

“Darling, don’t be silly. No school director wants his students to move in at midnight.”

In this case, she was wrong.

I handed the letter up to her.

“00:00,” she murmured. “Norbert, it says 00:00. That’s midnight.”

“It must be a mistake. This Grünspan is getting up there in years, and I think... Finally!” Dad sighed and accelerated. The traffic was slowly letting up.

“It says 00:00 here,” Mom insisted. “Take a look.”

She held the letter up in front of Dad’s face. A letter in front of your face is never a good idea when you are driving a car. There was a neat *thud!* as our Volvo collided with the Fiat 500 in front of us.

[...]

When all was said and done, it took us almost thirteen hours to reach the right Hustenburg. Then an additional fourteen minutes to Groß Wandelstein, followed by nineteen more minutes to cover the last kilometers to Castle Shadowsnout. This last bit of distance took us over a country lane that dumped us onto an almost completely overgrown forest path. For the final stretch, we could only drive in first gear.

I know this for a fact because I was chatting with Moritz the whole time on WhatsApp. My parents don’t consider this as being online or count it as gaming, so I can usually do this without any restrictions. It bothers Mom, but Dad says this is just the way it is these days. Kids have to learn to work with modern communication forms. I have to give it to him. Dad might be scatterbrained, but he isn’t a dinosaur.

Anyway, for the last few minutes, the sides our car were scratched by blackberry bushes with thorns as long as my little finger. Okay, that’s not quite true, but they were mega long. That’s wasn’t all that big of a deal, though, considering the accident we’d just had.

“Well, they could tidy up a little around here,” Mom whispered.

Mom always says I have to “tidy up a little” whenever my messy room reaches the point of being accessible only with the help of jungle expedition equipment.

We all had the feeling that it would be best if we didn’t make any more noise than absolutely necessary (except for the roar of the engine, which was a little worse for wear because of the crash).

At that point, I received one final text from Moritz: *Those are killer blackberries. When you get out of the car, they’ll wrap around you and kill you with their poisonous thorns.* Fourteen horror smileys followed these words.

Moritz watches a lot of horror films, mostly on his phone. When he does this, he sits at the bus stop with huge earphones on. Sweating profusely, his eyes grow glassy and he starts making strange noises. Moritz’s father isn’t scatterbrained, but he’s a dinosaur. Mr. Möhre has simply never checked into the fact that you can do almost anything with a smartphone, except wipe your butt. But that function’s probably already in the works, too.

The connection died with the killer blackberries. My bars disappeared completely, and there wasn’t even a little spark of reception. No, my screen even said: *No network*.

Suddenly, the undergrowth parted, and an open area spread out in front of us. About a hundred meters away, the track ended at a tall wall that obviously surrounded the castle. The ominous building was only visible as a shadowy shape in the billowing fog.

At exactly 23:57, our one-eyed Volvo with its crumpled bumper rumbled over the last meters to the wall, and - *pffffgurgelpffff!*- the engine gave up the ghost. We would have to go on by foot.

The first gate was standing open, behind which stretched another flat area bordered by a wide moat from which the cottony fog was lifting. We crossed the wooden drawbridge and entered the courtyard.

It was pitch-dark. Not even a little twinkle lit up the coal-black windows. The night was starry, and the silvery full moon seemed to be stuck to one of the the castle’s four massive towers. Nonetheless, not a single moonbeam reached the inside of the castle’s courtyard. Castle Shadowsnout was not as much a castle, as a fortress. The drawbridge, the moat, everything here brought to mind a true knight’s castle.

“Maybe we should come back in the morning,” Mom breathed, still speaking at a volume level that left you guessing at her words.

“Where should we sleep?” Dad asked.

We hadn’t seen a single person walking around when we’d driven through Groß Wandelstein. The only hotel, which bore the name *At the Headless Knight*, had been boarded up.

“We’ve spent the night in the car before,” Mom whispered.

“True, but that was before my herniated disk,” Dad whispered back.

“Should I knock?” I asked, trying to speak in my normal, firm voice.

My words echoed through the dark emptiness. With a jolt, we quickly huddled closer together.

“Should I knock?” I repeated my question, this time much softer.

Mom shook her head emphatically and said: “Yes.”

Dad nodded and said nothing.

So, I stretched out my hand toward the massive, rusty metal knocker. It was shaped like a lion’s head.

This was the moment things might have taken a different course. One last chance. I held it in my hand. Literally. In my hand.

The lion’s head grew warm, then hot. I released it. The wild cat’s mane shimmered briefly, then vanished. For the fraction of a second, the face took on the features of a boy. A scar stretched from the left corner of his mouth to his left eye.

“Furzikato, at your own risk though,” he hissed.

Whoa, what kind of greeting was that?!

“What is it?” Mom asked.

She hadn’t seen anything because my body had blocked the knocker.

“Uh... the lion...”

The lion stared at me with snarling jaws, once again flashing its sharp teeth at me - just like he’d done only a moment before. The boy with the scar was gone.

“Uh, nothing. I...”

At that moment, a voice rasped nearby: “What can I do for you good people?”

My mother’s jaw dropped down to the general vicinity of her belly button. “Where did that come from?” her lips mouthed.

As if out of nowhere, a haggard man had materialized in front of the locked door, his shoulders hunched up. His skin was pale, his eyes tiny black pin pricks in deep, shadowy crevices, fuzzy ash blonde hair hung down on either side of his gaunt skull. He was bald at the top and was wearing a black suit, and somehow he reminded me of someone.

“Riff Raff,” my father mumbled.

Exactly: Riff Raff from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, one of my parents’ favorite films. This was precisely what the man looked like who was standing in front of me.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he spat. “I existed long before that...” He hesitated and snarled the word with great distaste. “... actor! Pah!”

Mom and Dad nodded.

In that film, a man and woman get lost in the middle of the night, and land at a spooky castle in which this Riff Raff is a servant. Moritz says the film is silly and not scary at all. Besides the actors sing and dance throughout it, because it’s a musical. So it can’t be all that scary.

However, I found this guy to be totally scary, especially since he’d appeared out of nowhere. As he spoke, he rummaged around in his jacket pockets.

“You’re the new boy, right?” That didn’t sound all that promising. “ High time you got here.”

