

## Sample Translation

By Translator Deborah Langton

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Sanne held up the packing case like a shield as she approached The Narrow House.

‘You’re here,’ said her mother, framed in the doorway.

Of course I’m here, thought Sanne. She smiled at her mother over the top of the packing case. The smile felt false.

Her mother turned aside to press herself against the wall while Sanne squeezed past, the cardboard scraping against her mother’s overall, not an inch to spare.

Her mother made to close the front door.

‘Leave it open,’ said Sanne over her shoulder. ‘There’s still a stack of boxes in my car.’

‘You’re here.’ Her father echoed her mother as he stepped into the hall from the kitchen.

Together they carried the packing cases into the house, her father one at a time, Sanne three or four in one go.

They put a few in the living room, leaning them against the wall between the glass-fronted cabinet and the sofa. There was a bit of space. They wouldn’t be in the way here. Sanne took those destined for upstairs to save her father the climb.

The rooms all looked the same internally as they always had. Odd that this surprised her. As if seeing it all for the first time. As if something fundamental should have changed.

What had she expected? Her parents to have got started? Gathered up and stacked the crockery? Maybe to have wrapped it in newspaper and spread it out across table tops and window-ledges? Taken down the curtains, rolled up the carpets?

She’d have to do all that. The parents would just help. As much as they could. It was because they couldn’t help much that Sanne had instigated the house move. You’re doing the right thing, Sanne, she told herself.

Gitti had grudgingly agreed to help. ‘Saturday? Absolutely impossible.’ Sanne hadn’t asked why the ‘absolutely’. ‘Sunday? Okay then.’

Gitti didn’t back Sanne’s plan. ‘You’re disempowering them, making decisions behind their backs. Look, they’re not senile. To me they’re still coping with the house pretty well.’

Sanne thought differently. But Sanne often thought differently from Gitti. Especially about their parents. After all, they were right under her nose. She lived the closest. A twenty-minute walk, a three-minute drive. She took care of the phone calls.

*Perhaps you could...Get something...We desperately need...*

And she was the one who’d taken care of everything when their mother had been so sick last winter. So, what does ‘take care of’ really mean? Sanne had called by daily, taken them food, changed the beds, shopped, got medicine and cleaned the house. Her father had watched her helplessly. He’d made a cup of tea here and there, held mother’s hand, and gone up and down the stairs umpteen times a day without knowing why.

When mother was able to leave her bed for the first time, and then only for an hour or so, her legs were so wobbly that she couldn’t use the stairs to get to her own kitchen.

‘You see?’ said Sanne, triumphantly. And felt so mean.

‘You should ask Petra if she can help with the packing too,’ added Gitti, once they’d eventually agreed on Sunday.

She stared down at the street far below as she sipped her drink. So bitter. That didn’t bother Petra. No option. So company coffee.

She watched the cars, weaving their way down the six-lane highway, some slotting neatly between vehicles in the adjacent lane, stopping at the lights, then setting off again. A lorry emerged from a narrow side road. She cocked her head to track it joining the six-laner then heading off among all the other cars, vanishing to the right and out of sight.

From up here everything looked as if controlled by some distant power. The triple-glazed windows swallowed every sound. No horns, no engine noise for Petra. Chaos for those driving in it.

Petra liked standing here, her cup perfectly poised at her lips, hands wrapped round it. When it was empty, she’d get another. When that was empty, break was over.

Her gaze drifted to the high-rise opposite with its reflecting glass. Sometimes she could make out a hazy figure walking about. Or gesticulating. She didn’t know what kind of work they did there. And they knew as little about Petra’s office.

But nobody would be any the wiser if they could see in properly. All offices looked the same, didn’t they? Monitor on every desk. Telephone. Work lamp. A house plant the only personal touch. Maybe a photo too. Husband, wife, family. Petra’s desk didn’t even have a plant.

She drained the first cup and went to the kitchenette. No one there. She resumed her position at the window.

Distance, she thought to herself. It’s the sense of distance that makes everything seem so orderly. She’d often come to this conclusion. Mostly when at the family home.

Petra was distanced from that too. Lived far away. Rarely visited.

When she was there, she felt like a guest, not a family member. Her parents always went to great lengths for her. If she offered to help, it was all *It’s okay. Leave that. I can do it.*

Conversations were heavy-going. Always stalled. What was Petra supposed to talk about? Her job? Her parents wouldn’t get it. Juergen? They didn’t know he existed.

She would go back to her own flat, always arriving with a sense of relief.

From afar the family seemed quite different. Warmer. More sincere. She would imagine conversations in which she got on so well with everyone. Even with Sanne and with Gitti.

It was always a while before fantasy turned into longing.

This longing would become a need whenever Petra noticed she was thinking of her parents and sisters increasingly often, at the oddest moments and in the most unexpected places.

Then it wouldn’t be long before she’d decide to take another trip to Rotshausen.

Petra tilted the cup for the last mouthful. But it was already empty.

In a couple of hours she’d be switching off the computer, pushing her chair under the desk and locking the drawers. Then she would walk along the corridor to the lifts, the carpet muffling her every step, and glide to the ground floor. Whenever the huge glass door at the main exit opened,

the din outside would take her by surprise. She'd brace herself and make haste to the U-Bahn.

It was only when Gitti had said she should ask Petra that Sanne had even thought of her. She never told her sisters about any event at the family home. Neither minor nor major. Not even when their mother had been so ill. It hadn't even occurred to her.

Petra lived so far away that spontaneous help was out of the question. *Perhaps you could.* I can't think straight, thought Sanne.

In fact Petra's whole life was far removed from Sanne's. Her sister always lived in fabulous apartments. A whole series of them. Petra was always moving. Each new place a bit more stylish than the last with fewer items of carefully selected furniture in spacious rooms. You can do that when you live alone.

Have I even got her current address? Sanne wondered.

Everything was always immaculate at Petra's. No children leaving mucky finger-marks all over the place there. She had a cleaner, that's for sure. Someone who'd do the place while she was out. Just like their mother used to clean 'for our betters'.

When had she last been to Petra's? Ages ago. If they did ever see each other, it was at the family home. The Narrow House. And the unease took a while to dissipate. As soon as it did, Petra would leave again.

When did this unease first appear? When Gitti arrived in the children's room? Or later? When Petra had left home to study and set up house with Uwe? When their lives had completely diverged? Sanne had no answers and in any case no time for such complex questions.

Gitti's comment alarmed Sanne a bit. But she'd batted that away. Inwardly.

Petra never lifted a finger here. Had everyone waiting on her hand and foot. Even if she did make a move to do something, their parents would immediately say, 'It's alright, leave that, we'll do it.' They'd do fine without Petra.

Petra never took the escalator in order to avoid being stuck on the one step and unable to get away from whoever was behind, breathing down her neck. If need be she would move and, in doing so, get too close to whoever was two steps lower down.

She hurried down the staircase, overtaking everyone on the escalator.

Opposite the foot of the stairs sat a beggar so she dropped a euro into his outstretched paper coffee cup. She always kept a couple of coins in her outside pockets. If it meant delving inside her bag for her purse and fishing out the right change, no beggar would ever get anything from her. She found the whole thing so awkward. So condescending. She couldn't look them in the eye. And knew that in itself came across as condescension.

She often recalled going to the shops in Lahnfels, her mother holding her by the hand. How old had she been? Four? Six, maybe? They'd walked straight past a man sitting on the pavement. Petra was curious and wanted to stop to look at him. 'What's that man doing, Mummy? Why's he sitting on the street?' Her mother had pulled her away. 'He's begging,' she'd said, her nose in the air. 'You're not to give anything to his kind. D'you hear? They only spend the money on strong drink.' Petra was impressed by her mother's knowledge but also thought she'd glimpsed fear in her eyes. As Petra turned back for another look, the man gave a wink, smiled at her and waved.

Even though they'd given him nothing.

Back then there were still hawkers too. They'd go door to door, selling odds and ends. Shoe-laces, polish. Mouse traps, wire brushes. Soap too, sometimes, and cleaning cloths. At The Narrow House they were swiftly repulsed and the door firmly shut. Another tug at the handle. Was the door locked properly? Sometimes her parents didn't even open up if they'd spotted the hawker coming up the garden path. They'd stand behind the net curtains, mouthing, 'We're not home.' Hawkers had been scary.

Petra was easily reading age when she'd spotted a sign on a house wall in Lahnfels. 'No beggars. No hawkers.' She wondered if any signs like that were still around. Hawking had died out long ago. But not begging.

Petra pushed her way through the crowd, got jostled and jostled back. Four thirty on a Friday afternoon, the platform was packed. At this time of year many were in T-shirts, others in padded jackets. Most stared at their mobiles. A few were on calls to people bawling on speakerphone. Others were talking, cables drooping from their ears, and gazing into the distance as if talking to themselves.

Amid the throng a young couple were embracing, oblivious to the world. Petra was touched but quickly looked away when the girl met her glance.

Behind her the train going in the opposite direction pulled in. On her side the display showed '1 minute'. Petra stared at the wall opposite and listened as the woman next to her announced her homecoming. 'I'll be there in fifteen. Do I need to get anything?'

Her own train swept in, obscuring the advertisement for the supermarket chain that 'loves food'. Petra always wondered if you could work there if all you wanted was a job. Earn cash. Doing whatever. And she wondered whether she loved her spreadsheets. Love was a very big word. Petra didn't like using it. Not for things. And not that much when it came to humans.

Sanne opened the boot. Before unloading the last of the packing cases, she paused. Leaving the lid up, she turned to lean against her vehicle, arms folded, and looked at the house. With its narrow front, it stood set back in the large garden. Her parents' lifelong dream and yet so confined and so unprepossessing. Over the years a gnarled nut tree had surpassed it in height. Her parents had always said she'd seen the house grow. Told her she'd cheered from her pushchair at every new line of bricks. Sometimes Sanne believed she did remember all this. But could a one year-old really recall all that? And wasn't everything about childhood a fiction? Images in the mind that may or may not derive from something glimpsed in an old photo album? Memories that may have been fashioned from repeated family anecdotes? *You were like this... You always used to... If I recall, you ...*

Her mother probably did wander over to the building site with her in the evenings. A snap-tin, a sandwich box, or both, stowed in the net that hung from the pushchair handlebars. Because father didn't come home at knocking off time. And home wasn't home then, anyway. Just a room and a bit with the grandparents. In a wonky rental block in the shadow of Rotshausen church. On Sundays the church bells would set the crockery rattling in its glass-fronted cabinet.

The money they'd saved was invested in bricks and mortar. And roof tiles. And windows. And doors.

In the mornings father had gone to work, in the evenings to the building site and then straight to bed. Dog-tired.

Sanne hadn't quite turned two when she was moved into a bedroom with fairy-tale wallpaper. Before that she'd occupied the cot at the foot of her parents' bed. In the new house it was in the same spot. But occupied by the new little sister, Petra.

Everything had been far too big. The room. The bed. The wallpaper had both enchanted and frightened her. Especially the wolf in the story with the seven little goats. He had looked ferocious. Had she cried? Had her parents comforted her? Let her climb in with them? Sanne couldn't remember but was sure her childhood fears hadn't been fussed over. Children's feelings in particular were never fussed over. Especially not if they could be simply be given something. More than the parents had ever been given.

Even when The Narrow House was finished, father didn't come home after work. He was busy on other construction sites, helping workmates build their own homes now they'd helped him build his. Moonlighting, too, if it came his way. Earning cash. Sanne saw little of her father. When she did see him, he was often tired. Asleep on the sofa. Or on the garden bench. 'Stay quiet. Papa's sleeping.' Part of the soundtrack to her childhood.

And Sanne had stayed quiet. She'd never have dared wake this sleeping father, even by mistake. Once she'd clambered really close to study him in detail. Swarthy, stubbly skin. His mouth slightly open, gently whistling. A strikingly deep crease between his eyebrows. Like a burrow. She'd looked up his nostrils and seen the dark hairs that seemed to grow longer the more she looked. Like caverns hiding the unknowable.

Then along came mother and pulled her away. *What d'you think you're doing here?* Sanne remembered the relief. As if her mother had rescued her. How old had she been then? Five? She recalled her legs being too short to dangle over the sofa edge.

When awake her father had been a good-natured, gentle man. With large, worn hands capable of anything. Making something fun from wood. Repairing toys. Even her delicate china dolls. He still seemed gentle even giving one of them a thrashing. He would handle the stick as he handled his tools. With a natural precision, leaving no doubt as to the task. What had to be done, had to be done.

Thrashing was common back then. In every household. Often you knew beforehand. That'll be a thrashing. You're late home. You've ripped your trousers. You've burst the ball.

'You just wait 'til Dad gets home.' The mothers would gather all the facts and present them to their husbands in the evening. The boys got more thrashings than the girls. Harder, too. Sanne sometimes felt she was getting a boy's thrashing.

It never did us any harm, the parents used to say when it came up in conversation. Childhood anecdotes, chuckled over. 'D'you remember that time you fell in the stream? You really got it that time!' They were punished even for accidents. 'Why weren't you more careful?'

Gitti had far fewer thrashings. The youngest. The zeal for discipline wanes with each child. Now a parent herself, Sanne knew that. Back then she'd felt only the injustice.

Now her mother was waving and calling from the kitchen window. Sanne checked the time. Ten. The bells began to chime. Nothing had changed. They'd already marked a quarter to eight. And they'd ring again at six. A remnant from village days. Rotshausen had long expanded into Lahnfels.

Sample Translation „Childhood Home” (Ute Mank)

Or had Lahnfels expanded into Rotshausen? Whatever. For years now her childhood village had been part of something bigger.

‘Shall I make some coffee?’ asked her mother.

‘Let’s just get started,’ said Sanne.