

Sample translation from

The Findling by Vonne van der Meer

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Translated by Eileen Stevens



It was night—the tower clock had just struck two and she was on her way home—when she heard wailing. She stopped and looked around. The noise hadn't come from an open window, and there was nobody in the street, no man or woman with a sling strapped to their chest. Could it be coming from a box of half-drowned kittens, or maybe a sack full of puppies? She could no longer ignore it. She turned to the underground waste container right behind her and pushed open the lid. She couldn't see anything, but the crying ceased; now the only thing she heard from the stinking hole was a soft whimpering. “There, there, I'm here,” she said, carefully reaching inside. Feeling around in the garbage she came upon a ripped-open plastic bag. A sour stench hit her, and worse, the smell of rotting meat; she could feel various packing materials but no fabric, skin, or downy hair covering a pulsing fontanel. She pulled the bag towards her and tried to reach around it with her other hand—but it was no use. The baby

must be farther down than the length of her arm. She wouldn't be able to reach it without help.

In the houses across the way, the lights had gone out, except for the odd blue flash from a display screen. She took a deep breath, but the odor of compacted garbage was stronger than the tangy autumn air. She tapped the emergency number into her phone and, while waiting for the police, went ahead and pulled a few handfuls of garbage out of the uppermost bag, so the baby wouldn't suffocate before help arrived. She knelt beside the container, and began talking to the foundling through the open lid, “Hang in there, please keep breathing.”

She'd long understood that, as a woman without a husband, no child was going to fall into her lap—fate had to be on her side for her to find one. Sometimes, on her wanderings through the city, she'd make a detour past a playground or schoolyard, in the hope of catching the eye of a child who would choose to be hers from then on. There were more than enough lonely children; and she could read on so many of their faces: What am I doing here? Nobody loves me. Will nobody come to pick me up? But as she got closer to the child, it never seemed quite as alone in the world as in that book by Hector Malot; Mother was just running errands, or Father was stuck in traffic.

“Don't be afraid, we can go home soon. Once we're there I'll give you something to drink, put you in the bath, pick the dirt out of your

nose. If you can't sleep, I'll sing you a song, I know Frère Jacques, and lots of others, even a few that I remember from before, like Boci, Boci, tarka/ Se füle, se farka. My mother knew a lot more, but I can't ask her about them anymore.”

The child started crying again. When the policemen arrived, they couldn't rescue the baby either, and decided to call in the fire brigade. All that time, she stayed as close as she could to the container's iron belly. “Look out,” she exclaimed when they took off the side, “be careful!” By the time the ambulance arrived, more people had gathered around the crying bin: a man with two bouvier dogs, a group of students dressed for a party. Time and again, she was in danger of being shoved further to the back. People didn't seem to notice her because of her short stature, but just as often her hunchback drew their attention, and they let her go to the front. It was one or the other. This time she elbowed her way through, and when at last the baby in its soiled Mickey Mouse onesie was pulled out of the filth, she was standing front and center, her arms folded into a cradle.

The cradle remained empty. The fireman strode past her and handed the infant to a paramedic in a neon-yellow vest, who wrapped the baby in a blanket and took it into the waiting ambulance. She objected that it was her foundling, that she'd been the first to hear the baby's cries, but a police officer took her by the arm and urged her to

remain calm. There was no point arguing any further, there were a couple of things he needed to ask her—the exact time she had discovered the baby, for one, and whether, by any chance, she'd noticed anyone fleeing on foot, or in a vehicle? And so the night she could have become a mother ended at the police station.

There, she did her best, talking calmly to the officer. In between questions, she explained that she was more than capable of looking after the foundling, despite her size. Nor could her being in her late forties count against her; after all, in Italy, gynecologists helped women older than her give birth. She had a house, work, and income—not large but steady—enough to support a child. After high school, she'd been an au pair for ten months and could provide references if required. But the officer answered that it wasn't up to him. If they couldn't find the parents, Child Welfare would become the abandoned infant's guardian and decide what to do with it.

She didn't find out it was a baby boy—only a few weeks old—until she read the next evening's newspaper. A temporary foster family had been found—there was no photo, and the article didn't even say what they'd decided to call him. She couldn't discover anything else. She did receive a call from a journalist who wanted to interview her. “If you hadn't walked past that container the poor little mite wouldn't have survived.” He called her a heroine and insisted on bringing her a

bunch of flowers on behalf of the paper; all he wanted in return was a picture of her holding the bouquet beside the waste container and a few quotes, but she most respectfully declined.

After that night, she made a decision: she'd give up finding. She was through with interminably walking through the city in the hope of spotting what someone else had lost. Every time she felt the urge to head out again, she pictured herself in the dead of night, kneeling beside a waste container. Never again did she want to yearn so badly for something she wasn't even allowed to hold.

ONE

Once she'd made that decision, Jutka Horvath had plenty of time on her hands; she had no idea how to fill the hours between getting off work and going to bed. How had it gotten to this? That question tended to run through her head at night when she was lying awake. She'd probably spent more hours on the streets than the average homeless person. In the notebook, the last one on a half-full shelf in which she'd chronicled her found objects, she'd also jotted down her first accounts: how, when, and with what the finding had begun. *My life is not a success story: it's not the story of my transformation from paperboy to millionaire, from refugee to prominent scientist or from ugly duckling to swan. It was more the other way around.*

But on a November afternoon in the late 1950s, luck had been there for the taking, half-hidden behind a bicycle beside the front door of a corner house: an oblong lady's handbag made of crocodile skin. Her mother Krisztina Horvath, Mama, or sometimes Anya, hadn't noticed

it yet, but she, the six-year-old child who lived closer to the ground, had pounced on it.

For God's sake, Jutka, leave it alone, her mother said in their own language, the one they spoke together and among compatriots. It sounded dramatic, even though back then, people hadn't yet been warned to stay clear of unattended property.

With her hands on her back, Jutka squatted near the bag and examined it as if it was a jackdaw that had fallen out of the gutter. Her mother reluctantly picked up the bag and rang the doorbell; she was in a rush, had to be at work in an hour. The small window in the door remained dark, and no lights came on in the room beside the entrance either.

Jutka asked if they should take the handbag to the police, but her mother pretended she hadn't heard. She'd rather get lost than ask a police officer for directions, and she even distrusted the mailman because of his uniform. She didn't want any strangers in the service of the government putting things into her letterbox and had rented a mailbox at the nearest post office. Whenever a letter arrived from back home, she'd first hold the envelope over the spout of a kettle to steam off the stamp, because behind that secret trapdoor, the sender would often leave a few words not intended for the censor's eye.

Back at their fifth-floor attic apartment in Amsterdam's Oud-West district, Jutka's mother dumped the bag onto the kitchen table, where Jutka was sitting ready, two cushions stacked on her chair to better survey the loot:

- *house key*
- *flat powder compact*
- *clean handkerchief*
- *white appointment book*
- *a torn ticket from the Tuschinski movie theater*
- *wallet*
- *small mother-of-pearl crucifix, no chain*
- *lipstick*

Jutka watched as her mother, a cigarette dangling from her lips, twisted up the lipstick and held it to the light: pale pink, not her color. She applied her fiery red lipstick before she left for work at night, as well as in the afternoons, in preparation for giving piano lessons, and every time she'd had something to drink. Her lipsticks dwindled faster than ice pops in the hot sun, and she might have pocketed this one if it had been her color. Once she'd ascertained that the money in the wallet was gone, she lost interest and started to get dressed.

As a rule, Jutka helped out by handing her mother the powder puff or flicking the ash from a cigarette, but that evening she didn't offer her services, mesmerized as she was by the treasures on the table. She pictured the woman who couldn't get into her house without a key, had no money to buy supper or call a friend from a phone booth. She'd roam the streets, hungry. When they'd arrived in the Netherlands two years before, after a long journey—her mother had had nothing with her but a knapsack, while her only possession had been an extra pair of shoes, the laces tied together and slung around her neck—even they had been able to count on a roof over their heads and a sandwich.

She shoved the appointment book under her mother's nose and pointed to the five-digit phone number. They were allowed to use the downstairs neighbor's phone in emergencies—and if this wasn't an emergency, what was? Jutka kept going on about the poor woman who had been robbed but her mother remained stony-faced until her glance fell on the mother-of-pearl crucifix. She seldom went to Mass, but candles burning in a chapel, the sound of church bells, crosses large and small, all stirred something inside her; it seemed as if she was being pulled. Without saying a word, she stubbed out her cigarette, slid an asbestos hot-pad under the pot of soup, and disappeared down the stairs, appointment book in hand.

The next afternoon, Saturday—Jutka had just come home from the then-customary half-day of school—the handbag’s owner rang the doorbell at the appointed hour. Jutka leapt up. “Already?” her mother shouted. She’d been working late and hadn’t yet got her make-up on. “Just a second, give me a couple of minutes, that woman can wait a while.” But Jutka had already tugged on the rope at the top of the stairs that opened the front door.

Flowers appeared in the stairwell, a blue-rinse hairdo, a pair of harlequin-framed glasses, the ample collar of a fur coat. The visitor started thanking them before she'd even made her way to the top of the stairs, while Jutka's mother, worried about the impression she'd make with her hair undone and her colorless lips, clutched her throat and croaked something about having the flu.

But the woman with the blue hairstyle, Mrs. Schols or Scholz, only had eyes for her handbag and could talk about nothing else. She'd been waiting for the tram on the windy Koningsplein, and just for an instant had put her bag down on top of her groceries while trying to keep her hat from blowing away. That's when it had happened. Such terrible luck, but how fortunate it had been found by such honest people. All the Hungarians she'd met until now had been decent folk, adding quickly, “You *are* Hungarian, aren't you, Mrs. Horvath?”

While she was talking, Mrs. Schultz inspected the contents of her handbag, but neglected to look in her wallet. Jutka's mother casually asked if there'd been much money in it, but the other woman sidestepped the question with a vague shrug. Instead she brought up Queen Juliana, who at the time had given a speech on the radio to welcome the Hungarian refugees. Had they known about that, had they by any chance heard that exceptional address?

Jutka wasn't paying much attention to the answer, because her thoughts were still on the empty wallet. Was it possible the woman didn't care how much money had been stolen, or did she prefer not to mention the exact amount? Mrs. Scholz was doing her best not to look around, which helped Jutka to see the attic through her eyes. The furniture, donated by the city council, was undamaged and in good order, but the walls were bare, save for a foot-painted art calendar, and most of the bookshelves were practically empty. Her black ballet leotard was hanging to dry on the frame of a large mirror they'd picked up at the flea market on the Waterlooplein. Ballet was expensive and it was only because the teacher had also come to Amsterdam as an émigré that she was able to take lessons. The two women had struck a deal: her mother would provide piano accompaniment for the exercises at the barre, in exchange for free lessons for her daughter.

If her mother had been harboring a secret hope that Mrs. Scholz would mention a reward, she kept it to herself. “It’s actually my daughter you should thank,” she said as their guest was getting ready to leave; she spoke with the heavy accent that would cling forever to her Dutch. “It was Jutka who found your bag. She wanted me to call you.” Surprised, the woman now turned her attention to her, bent forward and placed a hand on her head. “You’ll be hearing from me.”

At the time it seemed like nothing out of the ordinary to Jutka—strangers often laid a hand on top of her head—but the turn her life took after that meeting made the gesture seem, in retrospect, like a blessing.

When she got home from school on Monday, there was a bulky package waiting on the table: For Jutka. She ripped off the giftwrap before she’d even taken off her jacket. The words Winter Book were emblazoned on the cover, in big letters surrounded by snowflakes. Icicles dangled off the “t” and “k,” so realistic they made her shiver. In Budapest, those icy daggers would be hacked off of roof gutters before they could skewer someone.

She saw at a glance that the book didn’t tell one continuous story, but was a collection of tales, rhymes, songs, and games; there were diagrams for turning an empty date box into a steamboat. But she

hated getting glue on her fingers and enjoyed puzzles even less, and so she started to read the first story right away: “Nick and the Fish.” It seemed to have been written just for her. That story would accompany her the rest of her life.

A little boy was walking along a boulevard with his parents. There was sunshine, a blue sky, and in the distance, a glittering sea. At a souvenir stand, he was allowed to pick something out. His mother pointed to a brightly colored pinwheel, his father to an inflatable ball, but Nick's gaze was drawn to a fish made of orange plastic. That's what he wanted, he was sure; the fish seemed to be looking at him.

On the following page, Nick was sitting in the bathtub with his fish, and the words—sometimes divided with hyphens—explained how he did that every Saturday night from then on. The rest of the week, the fish lay beside him on his pillow, the boy and the fish becoming in-sep-ar-a-ble, until one day, when he emptied the bath, the fish accidentally slipped down the drain. By the time Nick noticed, it was too late, and no matter how long he stood there in his striped pajamas, his hands stretched towards the drain, the last dregs of bathwater spiraled down clockwise, faster and faster, the fish was gone.

The drawing on the next page was one that Jutka—years later—could still call to mind. The fish, transported through a dark and narrow pipe, ended up in the sewer. Although these weren't realistic images with turds and strands of toilet paper, his journey through the brown bowels of the city still made her shudder. She felt a mixture of sorrow and delight, because she knew what the fish was going through. The illustrations showed her something she recognized, albeit from a period she found difficult to remember. The sound of a railway car being decoupled in the middle of the night at a station—she wasn't sure where, it might have been Germany, the Netherlands—someone calling out that they might be sent back.

The stories of her mother and of the fish flowed together like streams of watercolor paint and, in the blur they formed, Jutka could see something that until then had remained hidden. She didn't know the word for it then, but it was as much a part of her as her name.

They'd ridden to Győr at the break of dawn in a truck with about ten others. That's where Granny lived, and they'd had to say goodbye to her. Later that afternoon they traveled with another group to Csorna. About ten kilometers from the border, some bother broke out among the leavers. The Hungarian guards had been ordered not to shoot their compatriots, but that had been the week before. Who could say for sure if the order still held? Half the group decided to

continue on foot, and they paid a farmer who was well acquainted with the area to take them across the border into Austria. The frost had transformed the swampy fields into solid, bumpy ground, slick from the snow and ice, and their guide wasn't sure if all the mines from the previous war had been cleared. That's why they had to follow in his footsteps, duck when he ducked and, most of all, not step out of line. One minute Jutka was riding on her mother's back, the next she clung to her mother's chest like a baby chimp. She was carried for stretches of time by unfamiliar men, strange hands, chins like sandpaper, a different smell, not her mother's jacket, or her mother's skin. When she later asked about the journey—had she been scared, tired, hungry?—her mother would brush aside the questions: don't think about it anymore, it's all in the past. But Jutka did think about it again when she read the story of the fish who had traveled through the pipes and drains to end up in the sea, where many other strange-colored fish were swimming around. They circled the toy fish and nudged him with their fins, surprised by his lack of response.

Whenever her mother did feel like talking about their escape, she preferred to focus on happier memories. How Granny, with foresight, had buried a sack of gold coins in her garden but had dug it up again before the frost set in and hid it in a hollow tree. At the last minute, she'd sewn a few of the gold pieces inside Jutka's undershirt—twelve

all told—to help them get through the first period in their new fatherland. Your golden suit of armor, her mother had called that shirt, and she was sure it had protected them, maybe even brought them good luck. At their first shelter in Austria they'd been given something to eat and a straw mattress. The only ones permitted to travel on to the Netherlands were families with a breadwinner, as well as unmarried men, provided they were healthy. A single woman with a child was exceptional, but because her mother spoke fluent English, in addition to German and French, she could become an interpreter. A higher-up from the Red Cross had put in a good word for her.

And the fish? One stormy night he ended up in a large net with a lot of other fish who were all gasping for breath. He, the phony, was plucked out and tossed back into the waves. He was fished up again later, this time by a recreational fisherman, who never threw anything away unless it was broken. The fisherman set the toy aside, just in case.

They knew right off where they wanted to go. During the years of starvation following the First World War, a cousin had gone to live with a foster family in Holland; everyone knew someone or other who'd been cared for there. Holland had a good reputation, and once again they were given a warmer welcome than they'd dared to hope for. When their train pulled into the station at Venlo, a marching band

was playing the Hungarian national anthem, and they were given chocolate and cigarettes before continuing on their journey. From the station in Utrecht they walked, once again in single file, to a large building where, on bunk beds, they tried to fall asleep surrounded by total strangers. There was a loudspeaker hanging over their heads, calling out “attention, attention” at regular intervals throughout the night. Attention was one of the first words Jutka learned in her new language, along with every possible variation on the word for thanks—dankuwel, dankuzeer, dankubeleefd. The word “lousy” soon followed because the Dutch are always complaining about the lousy weather. The word itself sounded funny, or “neat,” as she later learned at school.

After first identifying with the fish, Jutka then put herself in Nick's shoes. In the following illustration, he was seen kneeling in his shorts beside a curb, inspecting the storm drain. She hastily flipped the page and saw how Nick—by then an adult wearing a necktie and fedora—was walking past shop windows when all of a sudden he came face to face with the fish he had lost as a child.

There was no picture to illustrate what the pair felt at their reunion, and none was needed, because Jutka could feel it in every fiber of her being. She strode into the shop alongside Nick, pointing to the aquarium in the window. When he shook his head “no,” she did too—

they didn't want to buy a goldfish or an ornamental sort that looked like it was made of colored glass, they wanted that one, the one hanging from a thread above the fish tank, the one made of plastic. And so the young man and the toy fish were reunited forever, with each other, but also with her.

She didn't feel the need to read another story that afternoon, because, by the time Jutka closed the book and rested her hands on the cover, she knew she'd found her destiny: from now on, she would find things. She would become a findling.

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