

Sample Translation

Lucas in the Snow

(Lucas in de sneeuw)

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The branches of the trees on either side of the lane to the dunes bend deeply under the weight of the snow. Lucas barely needs to stretch to reach them. He hits the branches with his hand. Free from snow, they spring back up.

Lucas sees a stick on the ground. It's just what he needs to reach the higher branches. After a while, he's had enough. He throws the stick through the trees and into the drainage ditch. The white of the snow makes the water look dark, as though the ditch is deep and dangerous. Lucas knows better. It's not very deep at all. In spring and summer, when the sun's shining, you can see the bottom.

Lucas likes to sit by the side of the ditch and watch the fish. Best of all he likes the brightly coloured rudd, with their fins as red as the comb on a cockerel's head. It's wonderful to watch them as they move, as though they are all just one body, like a pack of racing cyclists filmed from above, first stretching out, like an elongated ribbon, and then shrinking back into one large clump.

Where have all the fish gone now? Lucas wonders. Now that it's winter. Have they all hidden in the mud to wait for spring, the way the frogs do?

That's what the frogs in the pond in Lucas's garden do. Stupid frogs. They think they're safe there, but the temperature only has to go below freezing for a few days and the water in the pond turns into one big lump of ice. Bye bye, frogs.

Last year, Lucas scooped nine dead frogs out of the pond. It was a really filthy job. Their slimy frog bodies smelled absolutely disgusting.

It's started snowing again. You can clearly see the snowflakes in the light of the lamppost. Lucas catches one in his hand and one on his tongue, and then another one and another one. Feathers from angels' wings, that's what his grandfather calls them.

'When it snows, Lucas, then the angels are moulting.'

6

Lucas knew the girl would come back. And she did.

She brought cherries with her. She put the bag down between them, stretched out on the grass beside Lucas and popped a cherry into her mouth.

‘Help yourself,’ she said.

Lucas took a cherry.

‘Well?’

‘Well what?’

‘Do you know what my name is yet?’

Lucas didn’t answer.

‘Do you want me to tell you?’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll tell you anyway. My name is...’

Lucas quickly popped a cherry into her mouth.

‘My...’

‘Don’t talk with your mouth full!’

The girl spat out the stone.

‘What a very strange boy you are,’ she said.

‘Takes one to know one,’ Lucas said.

‘Me?’ the girl said. ‘Am I a strange boy?’

She looked at him the same way Miss Blanche sometimes did. As though she was laughing at him.

‘Well, you’re certainly strange!’

‘Then that makes two of us. We should shake hands on it, partner.’

Yes, Lucas thought. Yes, just the two of us. Give me your hand and close your eyes. Don’t move and don’t say a word.

Lucas produces a bottle of nail varnish and starts painting her nails, one by one, first her right hand, then her left hand.

‘Can I open my eyes yet?’ the girl asks.

‘Not yet,’ Lucas says and he starts painting her toenails.

‘Now,’ he says, as he finishes the last nail.

The girl opens her eyes.

‘Well?’ Lucas asks. ‘Do you like it?’

‘Red!’ the girl says. ‘My favourite colour.’

Lucas and the girl ate the cherries in silence.

‘What now?’ said the girl after a while.

‘What do you mean, what now?’

‘What’s going to happen now?’

‘Nothing,’ Lucas said. ‘We’ll carry on eating cherries, we’ll spit out the stones and then we’ll wait.’

‘What for?’

‘For the stones to sprout, of course.’

‘And then?’

‘Then they’ll turn into new trees and cherries will grow on them and we’ll pick them and eat them. Just like we are now.’

The girl fished two cherries from the bag. They were connected by a stalk.

‘Look,’ she said, hanging the cherries over her ear like an earring.

‘Ha, funny,’ Lucas said.

‘Funny? You’re supposed to say it looks beautiful,’ the girl said. ‘Wait a second.’

She dug around for another double cherry and when she’d found one, she hung it over her other ear. The girl looked at Lucas with a question in her eyes.

‘Nice,’ Lucas said.

The girl took a cherry, bit it in two, pulled out the stone, put one half of the cherry in her mouth and started painting her lips red with the other half.

‘So, what do you say now?’

‘Now I want to know what your name is,’ Lucas said.

‘Isabel,’ the girl said.

‘You’re fibbing.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Isabel Maybe,’ Lucas said, standing up.

‘Hang on,’ she said. ‘You have to have earrings too.’

7

It's still snowing. The snow will slowly erase Lucas's footprints. No one will be able to follow him. Not his mum, not his brother, not his sister, not anyone.

Are they still asleep? Thomas and Lea must be, but what about his mum? It's a miracle she didn't hear him just now. His mum usually hears everything, like when he goes to the loo in the middle of the night or when he's thirsty and goes to the bathroom for a drink of water.

'Is that you, Lucas?'

That was the question Lucas had been expecting to hear, but fortunately everything had remained silent behind his mum's bedroom door. It was as though she wasn't there.

Lucas slows his steps. Of course she was there. Where else would she be?

He stops. If he goes back home now, gets undressed and climbs back into bed, nothing has happened. And everything would be just as it was. He would be asleep, Thomas and Lea would be asleep and his mum would be asleep. No one would know that he had been outside. He would wake up in about an hour or so with Thomas standing beside his bed, squealing in excitement, 'Lucas! Lucas! It's snowed!'

His mum would dig the sledge out of the shed and they'd make a snowman in the garden. Mum, Thomas, Lea and Lucas. And look, Dad was there too. They were all together again.

All together...

They had never been all together... Lucas shakes his head.

He doesn't want to think about it, but still his thoughts go back to one evening, years ago. There were still only four of them back then: Dad, Mum, Thomas and him. It was late, he was already in bed and he could hear his parents talking downstairs in the living room. It sounded as though they were having an argument.

He got up and went downstairs. He stopped halfway. The living-room door was open.

‘Am I supposed to be happy about it?’ he heard his dad say. ‘If I’m not mistaken, you’re not that happy about it yourself, are you?’

‘You aren’t exactly giving me the chance to be happy,’ his mum answered.

For a moment, it was silent. Then he heard his dad swear.

‘You tricked me into it,’ his dad said.

‘You are such a nasty piece of work!’

‘What? You have the nerve to call me a nasty piece of work? Who’s being nasty here?’

‘You’re calling me nasty now?’

What was it all about?

Lucas’s mum started crying.

‘Oh great, here we go again. Am I supposed to feel sorry for you now?’

‘Go away. Please, just go away!’

‘Yes, and then later I’ll have to hear all about how I ran out on you and left you on your own with a child.’

A child? What did his dad mean about ‘a child’? There were two of them, him and Thomas.

‘What do you want me to do then?’ his mum said, crying. ‘Get rid of it?’

Lucas couldn’t remember afterwards whether he’d jumped or just lost his balance.

His dad had driven him to hospital. He didn’t feel any pain. He lay on the back seat and watched the light from the lampposts whizzing by. When he got to the hospital, he said he didn’t need a wheelchair and could walk by himself, but then he passed out.

His left leg turned out to be broken in two places. The plaster didn’t come off for months. That time his mum went with him to the hospital. She managed to combine it with a visit to the gynaecologist.

‘You’re going to have another little brother or sister.’

‘I heard everything, Mum,’ he wanted to say. ‘I heard all of your argument that night when I broke my leg.’

‘A little sister,’ Lucas said. ‘Sounds good to me.’

8

Lucas lay on his back in the long grass, waiting for Isabel. Not that he'd arranged to meet her. They never made any arrangements. He lay down in the grass and then she came and lay down beside him and started talking.

Isabel was staying with relatives, in a detached house at the end of the lane down to the dunes. Lucas knew the people who lived there. He'd often seen them going about their business, an older man and an older woman, always the two of them, as though they were each other's shadow.

He'd always thought they were a married couple, until Isabel told him they were brother and sister. 'Jacob and Dora. They're twins. With a month between them.'

'A month? How's that possible?'

'Jacob was born on 31 August, just before midnight. And Dora came along quarter of an hour later, on 1 September. Jacob and Dora are my aunt and uncle. Well, actually, they're my mum's aunt and uncle.'

Isabel didn't always come. Usually, Lucas didn't mind. He hoped that she was going to come today, but not for a while yet. First he wanted to fall asleep, and then she could come and lie down beside him, without him being aware of it. Then, a little later, he would wake up, look at the space beside him and Isabel would be the first thing he saw.

'Hello, Isabel,' he would say.

'Hello, Lucas.'

'I dreamed about you.'

'About me?'

'Yes, about you. Is that so surprising?'

'What was I doing in your dream?'

'You know very well what you were doing.'

‘How could I possibly know that?’

‘You were there, weren’t you?’

Isabel smiled at him very sweetly.

‘Come here,’ she said. ‘And I’ll give you a kiss.’

‘See! You do know!’

Lucas closed his eyes and soon felt something tickling his cheek. A fly, he thought, or a spider or a beetle. So annoying. How was he supposed to fall asleep? He shook his head a few times and brushed his hand over his face. The tickling didn’t stop.

Lucas sat up, looked around and, when he didn’t see anything, lay back down again. Immediately he felt that irritating tickle on his face again. What on earth was it?

Then he saw Isabel sitting behind him, hiding in the long grass.

She laughed.

‘Look at this, Lucas,’ she said.

She shone a mirror into his face.

‘I’ve caught the sun for you!’

Lucas screwed his eyes shut.

‘Stop it,’ he said. ‘That can make you blind!’

‘Then I can be your guide dog, can’t I?’ she said.

She put her mirror into her bag and crawled over towards him on her hands and feet. She was carrying a paper bag in her teeth and she dropped it on the grass in front of Lucas.

‘Woof, woof! Doggie’s done the shopping for master. Can I have a pat on the head now?’

She put one hand on his thigh and made whining noises at him.

‘You belong over the wall,’ Lucas said. He pushed her off and looked inside the paper bag. Isabel nearly always brought something to eat with her. Often chocolate, always plain.

‘Chocolate makes you happy,’ she’d said the first time she brought some.
‘And I want to be happy. Don’t you?’
Silly question, thought Lucas. Who doesn’t want to be happy?
This time she’d brought grapes, white grapes.
Lucas put one in his mouth.
‘Good?’ Isabel asked him.
‘Delicious,’ Lucas said.
‘Shall we see who can put the most grapes in their mouth?’
‘You really do belong over the wall,’ Lucas said.
‘What do you mean by that?’ she asked.
Lucas pointed over his shoulder.
‘The madhouse is over the other side of that wall.’
‘You call it a madhouse?’
‘Well, it is full of mad people.’
Isabel said nothing. She took the mirror out of her bag and studied her face for a long time.
‘Lucas...’ she began. ‘Lucas, do you think I’m mad?’
He looked at Isabel.
‘Why do you ask?’
‘Because... my mum...’
‘Your mum what?’
‘Because... the thought sometimes scares me.’
‘You’re not mad,’ Lucas said.
‘That’s a relief.’
‘You are strange, though.’
‘Strange isn’t so bad,’ Isabel said. She stuck her tongue out at her reflection.
‘That’s a beautiful mirror,’ Lucas said. ‘At least it will be when I’m reflected in it. Give it here.’
Isabel passed the mirror to him. ‘My mum gave it to me.’
The mirror was small and round with glass beads all around the edge.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Lucas said.

Isabel sat down behind him and looked over his shoulder. Her cheek very gently brushed against his. ‘It’s twice as beautiful now,’ she said.

Lucas walks past the house that belongs to Isabel's aunt and uncle. It's a detached house with a ditch in front of it. Up and across the wooden bridge and you're in the garden.

Was Isabel still there? She'd been there at Christmas. She came round to see him, with a present.

Isabel's aunt and uncle have thrown the Christmas tree out early. It's lying on the bridge, stripped bare.

Lucas takes hold of the handrail. It's a pretty steep bridge. He has to hold on tightly to stop himself from slipping on the snow. When he reaches the top of the bridge, he takes hold of the Christmas tree. There's still some tinsel in the tree and red and green ribbons sticking out here and there amongst the naked branches.

Lucas shakes the snow from the Christmas tree.

A light goes on in one of the upstairs windows, as though the house has suddenly woken up and is staring at him with one eye.

A shadow appears at the curtain.

'Isabel...' he whispers.

For a moment, he hopes that the window will open and that Isabel will call out to him, but the shadow disappears, the light goes out and the window looks just as it did before, when Lucas stepped onto the bridge.

A hollow eye socket in an empty face.

10

Lucas was supposed to go to the cinema with Henk that day. Henk had managed to get free tickets for the matinée. Lucas was already on his way out of the house when the phone rang. It was Henk with some vague story about an unexpected visit from his grandmother.

‘Sorry, Lucas. But I’m not allowed out now.’

Suddenly Lucas had a long and empty Saturday ahead of him. He was alone in the house. His mum had taken Thomas and Lea swimming and he didn’t know where his dad was. Lucas went outside to lie in the long grass, in the hope that Isabel would turn up. With chocolate or without.

After waiting for a little while, he gave up. He decided to pop round to see Miss Blanche instead.

He hadn’t been to her place for a very long time.

‘I never see you these days, Lucas,’ she’d said to him when she recently bumped into him in the street. ‘That’s a real shame.’

And she smiled at him. The way she often used to smile at him. Lucas could feel himself blushing. Fortunately, Miss Blanche soon went on her way. Lucas didn’t really like meeting Miss Blanche out on the street. He wasn’t exactly sure why himself. Miss Blanche belonged at home amongst her books, with a cigarette between her blood-red lips.

As usual, he walked around to the back of the house. Miss Blanche never locked her gate. He lifted the latch and went into the garden. She was at home. The back door was open and summery music came floating outside.

Lucas walked down the garden path. He stopped when he reached the pergola. Miss Blanche wasn’t alone. She had a visitor. He was about to turn around when he saw that it was his dad sitting there in her living room. Why was his dad visiting Miss Blanche?

He was sitting at the table, with his back towards Lucas. Miss Blanche came into the living room with two glasses of wine. Lucas hid behind the pergola. His

dad stood up and Miss Blanche handed him a glass of wine. They clinked glasses and both took a sip of their wine. His dad said something. Miss Blanche laughed.

She put her glass on the table and then took Lucas's dad's glass and did the same. Then she went and stood in front of him and put her arms around him. Lucas's dad put his hands on her waist. For a moment they stood there like that, and then they leant towards each other.

Lucas turned around and ran out of the garden.

That night, Lucas didn't go home for dinner. It was dark by the time he finally showed up. And he was soaking wet. He'd been in the dunes, where he'd run after catching his dad with Miss Blanche. He'd sat there all that time, even when it started raining, determined to remain there forever or at least never to go home again. But finally he'd got up and walked back home.

'Where on earth have you been?' his dad asked. 'Do you know what time it is?'

'At Henk's.'

'Don't lie to me,' his dad said.

'You're a fine one to talk.'

'What do you mean by that?'

Lucas looked at his dad, then at his mum.

'Nothing,' he said and he went upstairs.

He didn't need any dinner.