

Michael Köhlmeier, *The Girl with the Thimble (Das Mädchen mit dem Fingerhut)*, Karl Hanser Verlag: München (2016)

Translated from the German by Rachel Stanyon

(pgs 7-16)

The man was her Uncle.

She didn't know what the word meant.

She was six years old.

He bent down towards her and explained for the last time what was about to happen. Again, she struggled to understand him. But she understood him. She had to repeat this and that after him. She did it. He gave her a push when the light turned green and she walked over the zebra crossing towards the market. She didn't look around. He had said she wasn't allowed to, that she should walk quickly. She walked quickly and kept her eyes on the ground and her hands in her pockets.

In the street between the market stalls, she squeezed past the men without slowing her pace. She kept her head sunk. The men were getting their stalls ready, sweeping, arranging the vegetables and the fruit. They dodged her or paused to let her pass. And no one wondered about her. Uncle had told her it would happen exactly like that.

It was early morning. The streetlamps were still glowing. The puddles were frozen.

She hadn't eaten anything since midday yesterday. She would get something to eat from Bogdan. Bogdan was a good man. Even if he scolded her, he was still a good man. He might scold her at first, but he would soon stop and he wouldn't scold her very badly. She shouldn't say that she was hungry. She shouldn't say anything at all. He would give her something to eat and it would be better than anything she'd eaten in her life.

In the shop, she stood in front of the counter and folded her hands behind her back and said nothing. She looked at the man standing behind the counter.

The man behind the counter will be Bogdan, Uncle had said.

Bogdan asked what she wanted. She didn't answer. If someone had sent her, who had sent her, if she was looking for someone, if she was waiting for someone. What her name was. How he could help her. She didn't answer.

He left her.

He fetched sausage, ham and cheese, and the jars with olives, artichokes, courgette and aubergine preserved in oil from the cold room and laid them out under the glass counter top.

She did what Uncle had told her. Nothing. She just stood there.

Bogdan sliced some bread, put meat and cheese on it and cut it into quarters. He lifted her up and sat her on one of the bar stools at the counter. He pushed the plate in front of her, poured yellow juice into a glass.

Uncle had said she should eat greedily. She ate like she always ate. She was more thirsty than hungry. Bogdan refilled her glass. He didn't ask anything else. Once she had eaten and drunk, he took a bar of chocolate out of a drawer and gave it to her.

He said: Now you have to go.

She looked at him silently. It was easy to look at him without saying anything. She wasn't afraid of him.

You have to go now, he repeated. You can come back tomorrow. But now you have to go.

He put her on the ground. She took two steps back into the corner next to the umbrella stand, folded her hands behind her back and kept looking at him.

Look, he said. It's no use, you have to go.

Go on!

She didn't say anything.

You're getting in the way, he said. When the first customer arrives you have to be gone. Do you understand what I'm saying? Do you understand my language? Don't you have any gloves?

She didn't move.

Bogdan stopped worrying about her. When he cut a piece of sausage - this is how he ate breakfast - he handed her a

piece, too. Or a pickled cucumber. He poured tea and put two cups on the counter. And eventually he sat her back on the barstool.

The first customer was the owner of the fish stall just up from Bogdan's shop. He had red hands, frozen from scooping ice. He asked who the kid was. If she was Bogdan's. He was joking.

She just showed up here, said Bogdan.

The man got his milky coffee at the counter with a plate of bread, sausage, cheese and hummus. He finished his coffee and ate something before asking: What do you mean? And to the child: Who are you? What's your name?

She doesn't talk, said Bogdan. She'll get picked up soon. I'm sure she'll get picked up soon.

What do you mean 'showed up'? asked the man.

I think someone left her with me, said Bogdan. Maybe her father, or maybe she has an older brother. Because it's cold outside and she was getting in the way, I don't know. He has to run an errand and didn't know what to do with her. It's a good idea, I think. Hopefully word doesn't spread. I'm not cut out to run a kindergarten. But she's cute, don't you think? Look at her!

The man chewed and looked at her. He held some bread and hummus out in front of her mouth. She was full.

What will you do if no one picks her up? he asked.

I'll think about that this evening, said Bogdan.

Send her over to me. For lunch, said the other man. She'll get something from me, too.

I'll do that, said Bogdan.

Then the man said a few more things, and finally he said: You should call the police.

Then the child screamed.

Uncle had drilled it into her. She should pay close attention to words. If she heard a word that sounded like police, she should scream. He made her repeat the word over and over again. He rehearsed it with her. He cloaked it in different sentences. He said it casually. He exaggerated it. He mumbled it. Until she had understood. She should scream her lungs out, and then do it again and then stop. She hadn't asked what would happen.

Nothing happened. But the man left Bogdan's shop in a hurry.

Bogdan picked her up. He smiled at her. She didn't smile back. She watched him closely. Her hands were cold. He carried her to the

back where the electric heater stood. He sat her on a seat, wrapped his parka around her, tucked her hands and feet into the lining, pulled the hood over her head.

A woman entered the shop. She had a fur hat on her head and was pulling a shopping trolley behind her. She didn't notice the child. She wanted a special cheese with a name she couldn't remember, she pointed to it. The next customers didn't notice her either. At some point she began to sing. Bogdan's shop was now full of people, it was lunchtime. Some of them smiled at her, some didn't look over at all, others looked over but were distracted and didn't smile. No one asked anything. This reassured Bogdan. But he was still waiting for the fishmonger. To pick the kid up for lunch.

He did come. A bit later than promised. Bogdan's shop was dark, and it was even darker up the back where the child was sitting next to the heater, and outside the sun had started shining so the fishmonger had to get used to the dark.

Isn't she here any more? he asked.

Now he saw her. He carefully pulled the hood back from her head. When she recognised him, she screamed. She screamed until Bogdan picked her up.

The fishmonger said again: You should really call the police, Bogdan.

She screamed.

When she had calmed down, the fishmonger said: Should I call the hmhm? Someone has to do it. Otherwise there'll be trouble for you, Bogdan, I'd be careful.

Let's wait a bit longer, said Bogdan. Come back this evening. If she's still here, you can call the hmhm. Or I'll call them. Come anyway. If the hmhm do come, I'd like you to be here.

The fishmonger reached his hand out towards the child, whom Bogdan was holding tight.

This time she didn't scream.

In the evening, she was gone. She had slipped through the back entrance and run away. She had done it exactly like Uncle had told her to. Uncle was waiting for her. In the spot they had arranged. He had gone past the shop and whistled with his fingers. Nobody had noticed. People often whistled in the market. But she had noticed. Uncle took her by the hand and they got into the minivan with the other men.

The next morning, she was standing in Bogdan's shop again.

It went on like this for several days. In the morning she was there, in the evening she was gone. Bogdan got used to her. He didn't spy on her, either. When his day had come to an end, he acted as if he had something to do in the street in front of the shop. So that she could slip out through the back door. He didn't want her to be afraid he'd catch her and stop her leaving.

If anyone asked, he said the kid was his niece. His sister was visiting, he said, she had found work in the city for a while, he was looking after her kid for a while. If anyone asked what the little one was called, he said Evgenia. The fishmonger warned him again and again that it was risky and that something would happen. There were reasonable people in the hmhm that you could trust. There was sure to be a scandal and he might get himself mixed up in it. Soon, though, he stopped saying anything of the sort. Soon she stopped screaming when she saw him, too. Soon she even let him pick her up. Soon she laughed at him like she laughed at Bogdan. She talked, too. But neither Bogdan nor the fishmonger understood her. They had no idea what language she was speaking.

She came in the morning and went in the evening.

Bogdan gave her lined gloves and a lined cap with earflaps and little toys. She liked playing with a bus that had children's faces painted on the windows best of all. The fishmonger brought along a coat that he said his daughter had grown out of. A good, lined coat.

Uncle took care of her. She had listened when the men in the place where they slept were speaking about her. She had understood some of it. She had understood when Uncle said: She has to get herself through the winter. She had understood that Uncle wanted to take care of her and that he didn't like doing it. The others didn't either. But they did it. She got the softest mattress, the thickest blanket and fattest bananas. The men didn't talk to her. Only Uncle talked to her. The men nodded at her. She thought that meant she was doing everything right. That made her happy. She didn't have to do anything and was still doing everything right.

And then one evening Uncle wasn't in the spot they'd arranged.

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(pgs 33-36)

The child hadn't eaten anything hot for a long time.

There was broccoli soup and white bread. From the way the child was eating the soup, the Sister thought she could tell the child hadn't eaten anything hot for a long time. She spoke with one of the women in the kitchen, asked if there was still anything left over from lunch: there had been meat with rice and vegetables, and a pudding with raspberry sauce for dessert. She asked to have some meat and rice warmed up. The child also drank a lot. She didn't like lemonade as much as just plain water.

She wolfed down the rice and the meat and had to vomit. She threw up on the floor, wiped her mouth quickly and in doing so knocked over her glass, it smashed, she grabbed after it, cut herself on a shard and sat there quietly, staring into space.

Her right thumb was bleeding.

The other children were quiet at first. Then they laughed. There were six of them. They each taunted her in their own language. She didn't understand the languages or the taunting.

But then she did understand something.

We don't want kids who spew here, one yelled.

He was fourteen already. He was big. He was wearing a tracksuit. Like the others. But his was red. The others had blue ones.

I won't do it again, she yelled back at him.

What's your name, he yelled.

I'm not telling, she yelled.

Do I know your mum? Do I know your dad?

I'm not telling, she yelled.

Tell me your dad's name!

I'm not telling, she yelled.

Haven't you got one?

I'm not telling, she yelled.

The big kid came over. But he walked slowly and looked at the Sister, not the child. He was very skinny and there was fluff growing on his cheeks and upper lip. He laughed a little and the child saw that he hadn't meant to be mean.

And what's your name? asked the child.

I'm not telling either, he said.

Will she do something to me now? asked the child. She meant the Sister.

When it gets dark, she'll gobble you up, said the big one and kept a straight face.

That's not true, said the child. She didn't dare move her eyes to look at the Sister.

The Sister shooed him away, waving her hand. She wound a tissue around the child's thumb, laid the thumb in her right hand and pressed it.

Hold it, she said, hold it tight! Hold it like this, like this. Tight. This is tight. Hold it tight!

She hurried to the kitchen, got a plaster and some scissors. She bound the wound and wiped the blood from the table.

I was just kidding, the big one called out, she won't do anything to you, nobody will do anything to you. If someone does something to you, let me know. Then I'll do something to them. Do you want me to look after you?

The child nodded.

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(pgs 38-48)

The big one woke her up. He whispered right in her ear. Don't be frightened, little one, he whispered. Do you want to come with us? I know my way around. I know something good.

She opened her eyes and sat up. She saw the big one wrapped in a coat kneeling by her bed, and he had a hat on his head that he had pulled down low over his brow. She might have been dreaming. She dreamt every night, and she liked dreaming because her dreams were always good, and she had often thought on waking that it hadn't been a dream at all but had really happened and she looked forward to it continuing into the day.

Another boy was standing at the end of her bed, smaller than the big one. She couldn't remember having seen him in the dining room. But in the dining room everyone had just been

wearing t-shirts and track pants and everyone had looked the same, except the big one. Now the small one was wearing a coat and a hat and gloves, too, and on his back was a backpack. His face was also tucked deep into his hat, a good hat, with fur lining and long flaps to stop his ears getting cold. She couldn't see much of his face, but he had thick eyebrows, she could see that. He came closer to her now, looked her in the eyes. He nodded like grownups do when they want to say hello without saying anything.

He reached into his bag and pulled something out. It was a thimble, it was made of brass and looked like gold. He held it in front of the child's face, moved it back and forth, first in front of one eyes, then in front of the other, slowly. He took the child's hand and stuck the thimble on the thumb with the plaster and pushed it down tight. The child buried the thumb and the thimble in her fist.

Do you want to come with us? the big one asked.

She nodded.

Then get dressed! But be quiet. And don't cough!

She didn't dare ask a thing. She got out of bed cautiously and stood in front of the big one in her underpants and t-shirt and bare feet. The big one had already taken her things out of the box. He helped her get dressed. Two of everything. She had to carry the shoes in her hands.

Don't say a word, said the big one again, and don't cough!

They crept through the dormitory. It wasn't the entrance that the big one led them to, though; instead he took them to one of the narrow doors on the opposite side. Behind one of the doors was the washing room, where the trough stood in the middle and the towels hung on the walls, and beyond it was the cupboard for the mugs of toothbrushes and soap. This door was half open.

There was no-one in the beds at the back of the dormitory. That was lucky.

The other door was locked. But the big one had a key. It wasn't actually a key, just a bent wire. He couldn't handle it very well, it was noisy and took a long time until he finally unlocked it. She and the small one stood close to the

big one and looked on. They also looked at each other. But they were careful not to say anything or cough. She thought the small one was just as scared as she was. Maybe even more.

It was a storeroom for brooms and cleaning materials. Up near the ceiling was a small window. It wasn't barred. The big one locked the door behind them and stuck the picklock in his pants pocket. You would have to be really skinny to crawl through that window. It was narrow in the room, and dark.

The big one dragged a box over to the wall, opened the window and lifted the child up.

Feet first, he said quietly, or else you'll fall on your head.

He pushed her legs through the window. He didn't know what was on the other side. She should just let herself fall, he whispered in her ear.

Nothing'll happen to you, he said. Don't be scared. Tuck your chin in and put your hands over your head. Then move over and wait for us!

She didn't answer. She held her body stiff so that it was easier for the big one to push her through the window. Once her whole body was through the hole and just her arms and head were still jutting into the room, which was completely dark now because she was filling up the whole window, she was indeed scared and she whimpered. The big one hissed and gave her a push.

She fell.

She fell into some bushes.

The big one pulled himself up onto the window sill and poked his head outside.

All good? he asked. Hey, little one, you all good? Is everything OK?

She nodded. A street lamp was casting a pale light over her so the big one could see she was nodding.

Then he helped the friend. He was also scared and he whimpered, too. Once he was outside and had freed himself from the bushes he looked around for the child and took her by the hand. They waited like this for the big one. He took a long time. There was no one there who could help him. First

he tried with his legs in front. But he couldn't do it like that. It didn't work with his head first, either, because his arms got stuck in the window frame and he couldn't push his body through. Finally he tried with his arms first. The little one and the friend took his hands and pulled.

They ran into the night, the friend and the little one behind the big one. It wasn't snowing any more, but a sharp wind was rushing around the corners and down the streets, stinging their faces like needles. The sky was clear. If you wanted to, you could see the stars. It was very cold. When you lifted your head up, your neck froze. You could easily slip on the pavement so you had to be careful. It took many hours until the sun rose.

The friend had bread and lemonade and bananas in his backpack. The friend had stolen them along with a blanket. The big one explained this to the little one. The big one knew his way around. He led them to an underground station. He spoke to the friend in one language in words the little one didn't understand. Then he spoke to the little one, and the friend didn't understand anything.

Stay close, he said to the little one. You can hold on to me if you want.

He ran ahead, ran down the stairs to the tunnel of the underground and ran quickly, the other two behind him, his eyes scanning the walls and ceiling for cameras. He stopped behind a pillar and pulled the others over to him.

Breakfast, he said in the friend's language.

Breakfast, he said in the little one's language.

They ate and drank, and the big one told the little one what the friend already knew, that was, about the house that he knew of even if he hadn't seen it yet, but that he knew everything about, and that they were on their way to this house that was empty during winter and where there was a freezer full of good stuff and automatic heating and a TV and a computer with Internet. He spoke with his mouth full. The little one listened to him and believed him.

They kept close to each other on the platform. They were the only people there. The big one kept looking around, he was restless, he explained that children on their own got caught and taken away. That he knew it was like that but he didn't know why. Three children together, on the other hand, were not so suspicious. Children on their own got chased. Three children were like a family.

They had eaten all the bread and drunk all the lemonade. The big one always had to say everything twice. It wasn't good that they'd eaten everything, he said, first to the friend, then to the little one. Now he'd have to come up with something else. In two or three hours they would definitely be hungry again. They should've at least left some lemonade. But he wasn't mad, he'd had just as much to eat and drink as the friend and the little one. The little one had crumbs in her hood and her mouth was sticky from the lemonade. The big one had a packet of tissues with him. He tore one down the middle, put one half back in the packet, spat on the other and rubbed the little one's mouth and chin. The little one lifted her face up towards him and screwed her eyes shut. He brushed the crumbs out of her hood with his hand.

Can you read? he asked the little one.

She shook her head.

The little one clung to the big one's sleeve. He put his arm around her shoulders. The friend kept some distance. He pulled his hood down even further over his face. Now you couldn't see his eyebrows any more. He didn't talk. He nodded or shook his head. He had a five Euro note. He showed it to the little one and grinned.

The big one grinned, too. The friend stepped towards them so that he was touching the little one on one side and the big one on the other.

It's his, said the big one, it's his. He won't give it up, it's all his.

And he said the same thing in the friend's language. The friend nodded. He put the note in the little one's hand any-

way. So that she could touch it. He took it away again immediately and pocketed it.

The big one put his other arm around the friend.

The train pulled into the station. It brought a cold wind with it. Their hoods fluttered. The big one knew it looked less strange for a fourteen-year-old to have his arms around two children than for three children to be standing there on their own. But he didn't know why.

In the carriage, the three of them sat together. The big one in the middle. He put his arms around the friend and the little one again. Two men got on at the next station. By the station after that there were already a dozen people.

Where are we going? asked the little one.

It was the first thing she had said to the big one. And she whispered it so softly that the big one didn't understand.

The friend said something in his language, so the little one didn't dare repeat what she wanted to know. A woman sat down opposite them. She needn't have. There were plenty of empty seats. But the woman wanted to get a closer look at the three of them. She had a tall fur hat on her head. The friend turned to the big one and pressed his face into his arm.

When I run, run after me, said the big one. In one language and in the other.

Lots of people got on at the next station. They were tucked into coats and hats and gloves. The big one lay in wait. Just before the train door shut, he jumped up and ran out onto the platform, the friend behind him.

But the little one didn't make it. She had been startled and forgot that she was supposed to run after the big one. And when she slipped from the bench, it was too late. The door closed and the train started.

The woman kept staring her in the face. She didn't say anything. She didn't smile. She didn't grin. She didn't show any sympathy. She was tired.

The little one was smart. The big one had promised to look after her. There was no reason to doubt his promise. She got

off at the next station. She acted as if she was going with the others. But she just went in a circle and turned back to the platform. She waited there. She knew what a train was and she knew that the next one would come soon. And she had no doubt that the big one and the friend would be sitting in the next one. She looked at the thimble, pulled it off her thumb, stuck it back on. And pulled it back off and tried it on every finger. It was too big for all of them, it only fit on her thumb. Because of the plaster.

The big one and the friend were sitting in the next train. Because the big one was smart, too.

She got on and sat next to them and everything was like it had been a few minutes ago before she lost them. The big one put his arms around the friend and the little one. But his eyes were restless again and he turned his head about in every direction. The little one fell asleep next to him, her cheek on his thigh. He didn't wake her.

They went to the last stop. When they got off the train, the sky was grey. And it was snowing again. They had arrived at the end of the city. But it was still a long way to the woods.