***No Right to Live***

*Maria Lazar*

Translated by Florian Duijsens

O! you can kill, but cannot bring to life, not without love, which does not come from you, which you did not invent.

Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion, or, The Hermit in Greece*, translated by Ross Benjamin

**A leaf in the wind**

*Get up, up, out of bed! It must be half past six already. No time for even a quick bath. Where are my socks? Where’s my book bag? The tea’s too hot, it’s scalding my lips – no, no, it’s cocoa. The bell is ringing already, the plane is taking off, the beautiful shimmering airplane; the bell’s ringing and the classroom door’s closing. Nothing I can do about it, it’s too late, I’m late again*—

Ernst, the erstwhile schoolboy, wakes up and blinks around. From the bedside table, the luminous hands of the alarm clock are gleaming at him: 2:30 a.m. A pair of terribly long grown-up trousers are hung over a chair; clear to tell once his eyes adjust to the dark.

Herr von Ufermann, the head of E. Ufermann & Co., curls up again, pulling the blanket over his head like a child afraid of the dark. He still has seas of time; he can sleep for hours yet. This perpetual nervousness before every long journey, it’s just like before important days at school. There’s absolutely no reason he’ll be late. Katinka will wake him, she’s a very reliable girl, and Gierke will drive up to the house punctually as ever. Even if Katinka oversleeps, there’ll still be plenty of time. Not that he expects her to oversleep. Departure’s at 7:45 a.m. Tempelhof Airport. Don’t forget to bring cotton wool! Though he hates the way it feels in his ears.

All alone at night, a big blanket he can burrow under becomes like a giant pouch, hot and stuffy inside. God, if he could only sleep. A person should at least get a good night’s sleep before any important meetings. Sleeping pills? Those only dull the mind. And tomorrow he should be alert. Tomorrow he needs to prove to the gentlemen in Frankfurt that their existence, yes, *their* existence will be threatened if they allow Ufermann & Co. to wobble – oh, not just to wobble: to crash. *You’ll crash right along with us, understood? We don’t need your pity, kindness, or charity; all we need is a little solidarity. The loan is ridiculously small, you don’t seriously think that—*

Yes, if only the old man will understand. It is easier to reason with the younger guys, but the venerable Hebenberth dates back to the 1880s; he doesn’t even know what’s at stake these days, in the economy, the whole big system: the *global* economy. The old man may say there have always been liquidity problems and crises, but he’s got no idea that the economy has transformed, grown colossal, and the crises have grown right along with it. Someone should tell him: “Sir, we’re no longer living in 1887 or 88; it’s 1931, if you haven’t noticed.” But he never listens. “Be brave, my dear fellow,” he just says, and then calmly sends you off to walk into a swamp: Be brave, my dear fellow, and drown. He’s got a soft white beard, just like that principal who always patted him on the shoulder before his exams: *Be brave.*

It’ll be okay; even if everything does go wrong, the company will survive. Paul says so too, though Paul is firmly convinced that nothing can go entirely awry as long as he’s around. In that respect it’s not bad having him as a partner: he projects confidence, also towards the staff. And if things should go awry anyway, he’d just have to give up the villa, move into an apartment, nowadays that’s no longer as embarrassing – so many people have had to, after all – although it’ll be awful for Mama, at her age, plus Irmgard was planning to go to Davos in the winter. He’d have to give up the car and let one of the girls go, maybe even both. It’d be a shame about Katinka, and who knows if they wouldn’t have to move into a *rear* building; oh dear, Irmgard in a rear building, his wife, Frau von Ufermann—

Even his blanket’s big warm pouch doesn’t protect against such thoughts, although strictly speaking nothing bad can happen as long as Herr von Ufermann, head of Ufermann & Co., is inside it, his knees drawn up and his fists pressed to his eyes. At least he can still feel safe tonight. The house is fast asleep, probably Irmgard too. Her temperature had been back up to 99 that afternoon. If only *he* had a temperature of 99, or 101 or 102. Then nobody would ask him to fly to Frankfurt on an impossible mission to save the company, the family honor, its good name, or whatever else they call it. No one would send a sick kid to school either. Aspirin, cold compresses, doctors, more doctors, mortal danger! Then nobody’d be talking about business anymore, Irmgard would cry and even forget about her own fever, and when he dies she’ll wear a black veil, it suits her blond hair, and besides – good heavens, how silly only remembering it now – she’d also get his preposterous life insurance: she gets rich, the company’s saved, as are the car, the villa, and the girls. Wouldn’t that be easy, almost outrageously easy?

The clock’s luminous hands have a cautionary quality. They’ll have dimmed by morning.

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*You monster, waking me from my deepest sleep!*

Katinka reaches for the blue kitchen timer and stuffs it under her pillow so it doesn’t wake Grete; she’d so solemnly promised she’d do everything by herself, even making the master’s tea. Grete’s sleeping with her mouth open; since the window’s closed, the attic is stifling hot – but Grete never had it any other way; of course she’s a farmer’s daughter and used to standing in the kitchen all day, not a cultured bone in her body. The mistress only sleeps with the windows open; her room smells fresh day and night, while here it smells like feet and melted butter no matter how much lily-of-the-valley perfume she splashes onto the linens. What a life!

In front of the mirror, Katinka licks her fingertips to smooth her brows. She quickly runs the pocket comb through her hair, powders her nose, fixes her cap, apron: that’s it, good enough for this early in the day. The master hardly looks at her anyway. His mind is always otherwise occupied. Gierke thinks he’s not doing too well. These days even classy people have their worries.

And the Ufermanns are classy people, nothing to complain about there. A perfectly fine room with a built-in wardrobe, decent salaries, courteous treatment, and their afternoons off properly arranged. Every now and then the mistress even gives them an old evening dress or a handbag, to say nothing of the fun they have with the driver. What more can she ask for when other people are sleeping on the streets?

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“What were you thinking, Katinka? You’ve brought me an entire hangman’s supper!”

“But sir, it’s just your usual breakfast.”

“Very well then. Though you can take that bacon right back with you. I can’t stand the smell. And why the fresh toast? Hm, this tea’s too weak.”

“Should I perhaps—”

“No, no, just leave it. Is Gierke here yet?”

“Gierke is having breakfast in the kitchen.”

What’s wrong with the girl? What is she looking at him so curiously for? She didn’t even comb her hair, just tucked it under her cap. How blond she is, huh, almost as blond as Irmgard.

“My wife not up yet?”

Katinka smooths out her apron. The master’s got a screw loose today. “Shall I wake Madam?”

“What an idea! Just make sure that my luggage gets to the car. It’s not heavy. You can take it yourself.”

Katinka runs up the stairs to his bedroom. How strangely he’d looked at her. Had he noticed she hadn’t washed? How embarrassing. Because he’s not that bad a person really. Always well put together, though not exactly handsome: his nose too long, mouth a little pinched. And as for Madam – of course she’d get up. Men really are too naive. The case weighs next to nothing, so he’s unlikely to be away long. Gierke honks impatiently. It’s time. Herr von Ufermann steps out onto the white, mist-wet street. The vines on the garden fence are a dark red; they’re actually really appealing, he almost reached out to touch them. In the villa, everyone is still asleep behind the sleekly curtained windows, so it’s not worth turning around. Nobody’s waving him off.

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The autumn leaves have been swept from the avenues, not a scrap of paper sullies the asphalt. Early in the morning the whole suburb is like a large and comfortable house, tidied by well-trained servants. Gierke shoots past a milk cart by a hair’s breadth, which he likes to do, and looks over at his boss. But his boss doesn’t seem to have noticed, he doesn’t even see that his cigarette is about to ash on his trousers. What’s up with him? Is he still asleep?

“Hell’s bells! Open your eyes, you old donkey!”

Gierke swerves. He almost ran over someone there. The old man, white-haired and hatless, staggers back, leans against a tree trunk, and stares after the long blue car. So even at this time of day a person can’t calmly cross the street, even the peaceful dawn is becoming dangerous. Where are they off to in such a hurry? No doubt the gentleman’s coming back from his bit on the side, or maybe he has to catch a train, plant himself in the dining car and go traipse around the Riviera. Those people really do have it all. Even if the entire country perishes and dies, they’ll still have it all. And as for him, a respectable old post-office official with his board and lodging on his regular morning constitutional? They simply run him over, that’s the way they are, this rich set. To think: he joined a revolution and lost the war for *that*. A beautiful revolution. But just wait, things are bound to change; there’s something brewing among the people, there’s something brewing everywhere, and even an old postmaster knows it cannot go on like this if they cut his pension again – monthly deductions, they called it. Savings measures, right… How about you with your automobiles start saving yourselves, you shameless crooks!

Meanwhile, the car shoots past new housing and stubbled fields. A mill pops up and disappears. Houses start fusing together into endless stiff rows. An empty streetcar. A lonely couple on a bus-stop bench. The girl’s light blue dress peeps out from under her coat. The fog is lifting, a lukewarm sun shines on an apple cart. In a window, a man in a nightshirt stretches. The vast avenue engulfs the car, and countless such hungry streets converge on a central point. Where? The tired gentleman in the car jolts upright. Commercial buildings, cyclists, the distant thunder of the elevated subway. A policeman standing steadfast in his traffic tower: red, green, red, green. Shops are opening up; Berlin works hard, Berlin gets up early, Berlin never sleeps, Berlin is indestructible, Berlin devours its own. Depression? Unemployment? Despair? There are people who can sense a tremor deep under the sea of brick houses, under the canals, under the mole tunnels of the subway. Their nervousness can be contagious. Pessimists! But when you’re being driven on smooth tires over the glossy asphalt, over the shop windows’ glistening reflections in the soft autumn light, it’s obvious: Just take it! It’s all there, just grab it, be a man, there are unlimited possibilities, all for you, leaning back in your car, right at home, at home in this rushing, bustling, all-consuming metropolis – driving through streets like this, last night’s terrors disappear like distant ghosts from childhood. Old Hebenberth will be reasonable, of course. Founded in 1863, Ufermann & Co. won’t go under in 1931; it’s a temporary predicament, like all big old firms encounter at some point, etc. etc. What can really happen? What can happen to a Herr von Ufermann? Nobody will tear his head off. How nice that there’s no wind. It promises to be a wonderful flight.

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“That’s alright, my man, I’ll carry my little case myself. You can drive straight back, Gierke.”

“Yes, Herr von Ufermann.”

“And see if my wife wants you at 10:30.”

“Yes, Herr von Ufermann.”

“And do keep an eye on the dogs. Otherwise Katinka gives them nothing but porridge.”

“Yes, Herr von Ufermann.”

“Oh, and…”—What now? Gierke’s back in the car already, what else does his boss have to say?— “No, never mind, that’s all. Goodbye!”

Gierke stands at attention, salutes. And he’d have driven straight home if there hadn’t suddenly been such a crowd in front of the airport. Not only does that make it harder to get through, it also makes him curious.

“What’s up? What happened?” “Ah, nothin’. Probably some movie star just arrived, or a boxer.” “Ah, none of my business.” “Then what are you standing around here for?” “And you, sir? Do you have a plane ticket?” “What are *you* doing here, when any decent person is just heading to work?” “Work! Did you hear that? He’s talking about going to work.” “Get your elbow out the way!” “Excuse me, I’ve just as much of a right to be here as you!” “Not necessarily...” “If you want to get fresh with me...”

The situation’s getting unpleasant. Gierke decides to forgo seeing the film star or boxer or whoever else, especially since Herr von Ufermann is still standing at the entrance and suddenly turns his head.

He, too, is wondering: *What’s Gierke still doing here?* That very moment someone barges into him with their full weight: “Excuse me, sorry.”

“Honestly!”

It was a pale man with a goatee.

In the quiet, white hall, which always reminds him of a sanatorium’s waiting room, the travelers disperse. Now, where’s Frankfurt? Ah, there, quickly now. Ufermann reaches into his breast pocket, reaches into his breast pocket again. Empty. Passport, money, papers – but that’s absurd, it can’t be! To think, something like that happening to *him*!

“Aren’t you going in?” A liveried face looks at him questioningly.

Gierke, Gierke was just here a moment ago. Maybe he has some money on him, maybe he can testify that—

But then he’s all alone on the sidewalk. Gierke is gone, the car is gone, and people are looking at him strangely, even a policeman. It’s like he’s completely naked. The pale man with the goatee is getting into a taxicab. Perhaps he should stop him, cry out: “Arrest that man! He stole my wallet!” But maybe it wasn’t that man, how could he even prove such a thing? And now the taxi’s driving off. It’s cold. He’d best button up his overcoat. Above, a beautiful shimmering airplane is taking off, the clouds parting like thin blue veils.

To hell with it, old man Hebenberth would never have given in anyway.

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Ufermann takes a few tentative steps. Where to? He decides to follow in the general direction of everybody else. The morning’s all his now, not the company’s. No matter how many people call the office: he’s on a business trip, sorry, he’s not in. No need to inquire after Irmgard’s health, no letters to dictate to busy Fräulein Preisel, nor would he have to see old Boss, who knows everything that a confidential clerk *can* know but won’t trust himself to say anything. Nor does he have to decide when and where to tell Gierke to pick him up; he doesn’t need a car, he’s just going for a walk, like the great unwashed, the unemployed. It’s almost bright and warm out, a nice day to drive into the country, to some small, hidden lake where a few wild ducks quack past and the dry pine needles still smell like summer.

He only skipped school once, one blazing hot day in June. They’d scorched off on their bikes to just such a small lake, him and Paul, and only returned home late at night, exhausted by the sun and water. The consequences had been humiliating; Paul had blabbed and thrown all the blame on him. Not entirely without reason, since Paul would never have come up with an escapade like that on his own. But it wasn’t a nice move from a friend. A friend? Had Paul ever been his friend? Is Paul a friend now? In any case, Paul’s his business partner and his advisor; he should at least tell him about his misadventure. Paul’s eyes will pop out of his head: But where have you *been* all morning?

Ufermann flags down a taxi. After all, he can’t just be going for walks when everything’s at stake: his money, his honor, his company, his wife – why his wife? Well, it’s somehow all connected.

The driver asks where to. To the center of town for now; Potsdamer Platz, let’s say. It’s definitely too early to go back home, Irmgard will still be asleep. Besides, it won’t be easy to get her to understand what happened; she’s so tidy, she never loses or even misplaces anything. She’ll be horrified, not to mention the fact that there were 900 marks in his wallet – Christ, does he even have any cash on him, enough for the cab?

Yes, there’s some in his pocket: a 10-mark note, a three-mark coin, a mark, another mark, and 20, 40, 60, 80, ah no, only 60 pfennigs. Maybe count it again—

The car stops in front of a flower stand on Potsdamer Platz: asters, dahlias, leaves painted candy red. It would be wisest to drive on, to Paul, for example, but he could also try calling first. Maybe from a café. Who knows if Paul’s still home at this point. And anyway, it would be good to get something warm and substantial inside him after the pathetically weak tea Katinka had served him.

The phone booth smells like two-day-old smoke.

There’s a crooked heart scrawled on the wall. “Bavaria 2709,” it says. Ufermann will ask for the Bavaria exchange. But that’s nonsense, what’s in Bavaria for him, what does that heart have to do with him. No, Paul has a completely different exchange. And now the connection goes through.

“Hello, good day Fräulein Koehler. Herr Hennings still at home?”

“No, Herr Hennings just left.”

“Ah, that’s a pity. So he’s not in the office yet?”

“No, surely not. Who am I speaking to? Is that you, Herr von Ufermann?”

Drat. Ufermann hangs up. That’s all he needed, to get into a conversation with Fräulein Köhler. After all, she knows about his Frankfurt flight *and* why he was going. Housekeepers always know everything.

“Waiter! Coffee and scrambled eggs with ham, please. And the newspapers.”

The large mirrored windows of the café look out onto Potsdamer Platz. The policeman up in the traffic-light tower seems to be looking directly at him. Ufermann finds a seat facing the crimson wall.

It strikes the waiter that the gentleman with the travel case (he must have been on a trip, although the case is very small) is quite nervous. He’s not reading the papers at all, just flipping through them. And now he suddenly flinched. What’s the matter with him? He’s turning green about the gills. As long as he doesn’t faint; it’s pretty busy, and the regular breakfast crowd really doesn’t like people dropping to the floor. To make sure, the waiter moves behind the conspicuous gentleman’s chair and peeps over his shoulder at the newspaper in his hands.

“Industrialist shoots himself and his wife.” That’s the headline. And underneath – the waiter cranes his neck – it says: “Ebel company collapses,” or is it “Abel”? Was that all? Why, that stuff happens every day. Maybe he was an acquaintance or business associate, then it always hits a little harder; although these days people really should be more inured to it. Or maybe the gentleman works for the company? Those big bosses love to shoot themselves, whereas their employees tend to bite the dust more inconspicuously.

Ufermann stares at his scrambled eggs. What must Ebel have looked like when he put the gun in his mouth? Tall, powerful, self-confident Albert Ebel. His head will have burst, everything spurting out, brains and blood everywhere; “horribly mutilated corpses,” it says, “disfigured beyond recognition,” and Alice, little Alice with her pretty curls, “fearing destitution,” it says, did she really agree to it? But of course: “suicide pact,” it says, “bankruptcy,” “absolute bankruptcy.” If even Ebel saw no other way out—

Maybe it really had been the smartest thing to do. Alice certainly couldn’t have borne poverty, that wouldn’t have suited her at all. So Ebel had put three bullets through her temple.

That can’t be the best way. Couldn’t you just walk into some lake, a small lake in the woods somewhere, and start swimming until your body gives out? If you don’t leave any note, it wasn’t necessarily suicide – people have accidents all the time, a heart attack or something – and that would be that; neat and tidy, so to speak. Wouldn’t that be easy, almost outrageously easy? He wouldn’t have to take Irmgard with him, like Ebel had Alice; she would actually become an incredibly rich woman, because the life insurance—

“Check please!”

“Yes, sir.”

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Since he doesn’t have much cash left, he has to economize (what a hideous word), so Ufermann is on foot for now. Not walking home, of course, but Lilo’s studio is just around the corner. And why shouldn’t he visit his girlfriend in the morning for a change?

She’ll be surprised. She’s hardly ever seen him this time of day, probably still asleep, so just as well that he has the keys; he won’t have to ring the doorbell.

It’s strange how gray and worn-out the building looks in the daylight. The carpet on the stairs is in shreds, though he could never tell in the evening. It reeks of cabbage and celery, he’s almost excited to smell Lilo’s vulgar perfume instead – although it often gets on his nerves, she absolutely doesn’t want to give it up. She’s usually a compliant girl though, always gentle and patient and chipper, never reproachful or in a bad mood. He can safely tell her everything, she’ll soothe him, she’ll comfort him; when he’s with her all his stress and anxiety just evaporates. Plus, she’s so untidy herself: she’s liable to lose her own garter belt! She won’t be surprised at his not having had the presence of mind to stop the pale gentleman with the goatee immediately, so as not to embarrass himself in front of the policeman. Maybe the pale gentleman wasn’t the thief at all, maybe his wallet wasn’t stolen at all; although he’d had it on him during the drive into town, he remembers reaching for it three times. The whole thing only happened because he hadn’t wanted to go to Frankfurt, and Lilo will understand that too, or at least pretend she does.

Very quietly, he opens her door. A salmon-pink dressing-gown hangs on the coat hook, stockings and towels are strewn around the bathroom, and the tub is full of greenish water. In the studio, Nöcke, Lilo’s cat, is on the sofa between a few scattered pillows. There’s no one else there.

Ufermann looks around for a moment, as if expecting Lilo to jump out from behind the flowered curtains, then he sits down next to the cat, exhausted. There’s a hole in one curtain, and the pattern is much too busy, and cigarette butts are on the floor. The saucer of milk must be Nöcke’s, but the cat is too lazy to move that far; he’s hardly moved at all since Lilo had him castrated. How horrible of her. Now the animal’s nothing but a pillow, a black pillow with green eyes.

Ufermann stretches out on the sofa, sticking his feet into a corner so as not to disturb poor Nöcke. Then he pulls out the tartan travel blanket he’d given Lilo for her birthday. The wool smells of her vulgar perfume. Where had Lilo gone? No need to wonder too much, she always lies anyway. Girls with sleepy eyes and big wet lips like that always lie. But if they are otherwise pleasant, friendly, and obliging, never burdening a busy, anxious man with added responsibilities, what more can you ask for? How could little Lilo have known that one morning he’d show up at her cold and messy studio longing for her warm and tender hands? It’s not her fault that she is not at home, probably not been home all night, she usually doesn’t get up that early; she probably thought, if he’s flying to Frankfurt—

Behind the dusty and crooked windowpanes, the sky looks murky and overcast. Ufermann pulls the travel blanket over his head, despite Lilo’s perfume. Now he can sleep without last night’s terrors; nobody is waiting for him, nobody needs anything from him, he doesn’t have to be up anytime soon, though at Frankfurt airport they’ll be wondering – but that doesn’t matter either.

He drops into a dull, detached unconsciousness, and probably would’ve stayed under for a long time if a veritable barrage hadn’t suddenly woken him. An autumn shower rattles the crooked windowpanes. Nöcke’s in the middle of the room, in front of his milk saucer. It’s already getting dark, it must be very late; Lilo’s probably not coming home. Perhaps there’s something to eat in the kitchen.

A pot of jam, no bread, no zwieback, two eggs, and a half-moldy tomato: is that all? Ufermann checks the drawer, but there’s only cutlery, a single pen swimming amidst the spoons (such horrible old tin spoons Lilo has...), and a bottle of ink in the back corner. Under the bottle is a small stash of money: four 20-mark bills. That’s no place to keep your money; Lilo really is criminally untidy.

There seems to be nothing left but to head back home for a decent meal. And then off to bed, immediately to bed. He feels miserable, hungry, freezing, and his suit is totally rumpled, as if he hadn’t been lying on a sofa but on a bench in the park; all his limbs feel fractured, and he’s supposed to go out into the rain like that? He doesn’t have an umbrella either, maybe he’ll order a taxi after all; he can still afford that much. Now where’s his coat? And if he’s going home anyway—

He picks up the ringing phone: “Yes?”

“Hello!”—Ah, it’s Lilo!—“Harry, dear, thank God you’re there. I’m coming right away, just wanted to make sure. You haven’t heard yet! Harry, my dear, my legs are shaking... One second, I need to pull up a chair. Oh God, I can barely hold the receiver. It’s just too horrible, too horrific. You can’t even imagine... Really, you have *no* idea. So, imagine: Ufermann – you remember, he was flying to Frankfurt today – Ufermann crashed! Along with the plane, of course, the whole plane crashed and burned. Ufermann’s dead. Well, he’s a lot more than dead: there’s not even a body left! All the passengers were burnt to cinders, the newspapers say. Hello? Harry, can you still hear me?”

“Yes.”

“So? Have you ever heard anything like it? I only saw him two days ago, and he was the same as ever, no one could have predicted it… Hello? My teeth are chattering. I’ll make sure *you* never get on such a ghastly plane. I’ll be right there, I have so much to tell you, because Harry, I haven’t even told you the best part! Hello?”

“Yes?”

“Just think, Harry, the guy was rich! Much, much richer than he ever told me. It’s incredible. His wife gets a life-insurance policy worth millions, Harry. Millions, and in dollars! She’s come out of it all right, I’ll say. What do you think, Harry? What should I do now? Maybe I’ll go see Hennings – you remember, Harry, Paul Hennings, his business partner. Or I’ll have to do something else. It’s already in all the papers; special editions, of course. I’ll bring them for you. And they’ve already got a picture of him too. How on earth did they get one so quick? … Are you there? Harry, Harry? Hello?”

“Sorry, fräulein, you must have a wrong number.”

Ufermann puts down the receiver. He stands perfectly still, all alone in the world. The studio feels like a sealed box that has detached itself and is floating out over the sea of buildings towards some dark, infinite expanse. Slowly he grabs his arm, feels this arm of his, feels himself, his breath, his blood. How miraculous it is. He didn’t crash and he wasn’t burned. He’s alive.

The phone rings again, keeps ringing. No, my dear, nobody’s there. Because I’m dead, not even a body left. Just keep calling until your Harry arrives.

He turns to head out the door only to turn around again, take the four 20-mark bills from the kitchen drawer (better a thief than a charred pile of bones), and then rush down the creaky stairs. At the front door, he runs into a man. Could this perhaps be Lilo’s Harry?

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