

**KRISTINE BILKAU**

**NEXT DOOR**

Sample translated by Alexandra Roesch

2

She can still sense that painful tingling in her fingertips. Astrid flaps first one hand, then the other. She should have put on mittens before scraping the layer of ice off the windows. After the unusually mild days, the cold has come back. The street in front of her glistens, damp and frozen. Her guess is that it's another six or seven kilometres. Given that she's been dragged from deep sleep, she managed to get up and moving very quickly. It's barely a half-hour since the emergency call came. That was just after four. Andreas got up with her and made coffee. He lay down on the sofa and turned on a radio play, saying he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep anyway. Before she left, he handed her a sandwich which he'd made and wrapped for her. 'See, we're both still in good shape for these night-time missions.'

A woman had died, nearly eighty years old. There was nothing the rescue team could do, and so Astrid had been had called for the death certificate. She rarely signs up for emergency duty any more, those days are over. Another year, then she would like to hand over the practice and, if possible, work there two days a week, as a transition, that's her plan. If by then she has found someone to take over the practice.

She dials down the heating and turns on the radio. When was the last time she drove through the night like this. She has to think of the children, grown-up men. Grown-up, this word still trigger amazement in her. She sees the sleeping boys in her mind's eye, how many night did she look in on them, thousands.

[...]

To drive through the night on her own and see all three of them in front of her mind's eye, it feels a bit as if she was guarding the boys' sleep again.

She narrows her eyes, far away the field seems to be covered in white spots, they shimmer through the darkness. She brakes a little and drives more slowly. Like a huge swarm of white birds that has settled down, or no, like countless small islands of snow, but it hasn't snowed. It looks strange. On a whim, she turns onto a farm track, turns off the engine and gets out.

The earth is frozen, she has to pay attention to every step lest she stumble in one of the rock-hard troughs. This silence, she hears her own breath, every huff and puff. What is she doing here? She should be sitting in her car, on the way to the emergency call, not stumbling across the field in the dark, all alone. The sea of white spots, it just looks too strange, tissues, it looks as if thousands of paper tissues were drifting across the field. Or perhaps it is paper, paper someone has discarded here. The bags got torn, and the wind distributed it here.

Now she realises, these are countless letters. She picks up a few, reads the names and addresses, all from around here. The postal stamp says 17 and 18 December, all this mail is over two weeks old. She is holding hand-lettered envelopes, good quality paper, Christmas cards and New Year's greetings, she imagines. They never reached their designations. Some letters are from debt collectors. Bills and reminders that people did not have to deal with before the holidays. To her surprise, one of the envelopes is addressed to the town and street where she grew up. It's the house opposite, that ugly yellow-brick building. She pockets the letter, she will take it to the people on her next visit to Elsa. "Hello, I found your letter on a field next to the road one night." She takes another look around, no car, no bicycle either. Nothing to indicate an accident.

She sits in her car, in two minds what to do, to drive off and leave this sea of letter just lying there doesn't seem right. For a moment she considers, then she

looks up the number of the nearest police station and calls. That's all she can think of right now. The female office who answers the phone says they'll send someone.

[...]

7

*The\_Darlings*, the five of them lie in bed, in pastel nighties and pyjamas, one belly is visibly bulging, an announcement is made to one hundred fifty thousand people and more that soon there will six of them.

*Little\_Wanderers*, four daughters in tulle skirts, even the one-year-old who can barely stand on her own little legs is dressed in pink lace, the touch of a finger will reveal where skirts, wallpaper and the doll-house that is visible in the background can be ordered from.

Stop that, put it aside, Julia tells herself, and still she keeps scrolling through the images.

*Mother\_Mary*, what a name, the woman is standing in the garden with her children, fresh snow all around, in the background you can see a wooden house with a porch and a string of lights, the infant is asleep in the baby sling, all have rosy cheeks.

*Linus\_and\_Mette* show three hundred and twenty thousand people and more their new-born, there are cherry blossoms in the vase, on the table a layer cake with cream and candied red beetroot awaits.

*Wildcrowd*; they believe in Jesus, family and home, and one photograph shows all their nine children, standing in a row, from big to small, it is evening, they're about to go to mass, somewhere in Virginia.

Put it away already, she tells herself again, and then keeps scrolling, unphased.

Rose's baby was born early, a tiny body fights to survive, eighty thousand people are being updated on liver function tests and fever, some send hearts, a cuddly toy has been arranged next to the incubator, you can order it from...

'Shall we go,' Chris calls from below.

They get their bicycles from the garage, Julia can hear Lizzy whine quietly behind the door, but the dog is too old for a bike tour, they tried it once and even though they were going really slowly, Lizzy soon couldn't go on any more, Chris had to carry her back home.

'Just look how foggy it is,' he says, full of enthusiasm. They like tours in the fog, on this they are in agreement, they love cycling through the blurred countryside. Side by side they roll along the banks of the canal, their surrounding has a soft-focus look, a gentle grey, a muted silence envelops them. She takes deep breaths of the cool, heavy air, watches a freight carrier advancing along the canal like a dark, blurred giant.

She has to think of her neighbour Mona. They still haven't come back. She wonders again when she last saw Mona, when exactly, what the situation had been. Shortly before Christmas, on the other side, at the snack bar next to the ferry point. She thinks that was their last encounter. Mona sat at one of the tables with Luis, a bowl of chips in front of her. She looked like she hadn't slept, wore leggings and a wool jacket, her hair tied up in a messy bun. Luis sat on her lap. It was late morning. Julia remembered that she had taken Lizzy for a walk and had got a coffee from the snack bar. As she was waiting for her drink, she could observe Luis holding a single potato chip in his little fingers and nibbling it. It was raining that day, a cold, sharp spray. Mona seemed not to notice it, and Luis didn't seem bothered.

She just couldn't get enough of watching this, how content and lost to the world this little boy had appeared while he ate and watched ships. He held a nibbled bit of chips out to Mona, but she didn't react, seemed busy with her telephone. Julia recalls imagining holding the little body on her lap, talking to Luis,

holding his sticky hands. She exchanged a greeting with Mona, but once she'd paid for her coffee she went on her way, didn't turn back again. She was sorry that she had been so curt, possibly even appeared unfriendly. Sometime soon, at some point sometime soon this would be different, she told herself, soon she would no longer yearn for – and therefore run from – little children, soon that would change, she hoped.

She is sure, that was the last time she'd seen Mona and Luis, at the snack bar, just before the holidays.

Chris stops and takes out his phone to take a photo. A little way away they can see the railway bridge, a tall steel structure built in the same decade as the Eiffel Tower. The struts and arches almost disappear in the fog, from here it looks as if the bridge was made of thin threads.

After having rung the bell, she and Chris had walked around the house, Chris had thought the rooms seemed uninhabited. Very little furniture, the sofa and the table, on which there was something small and round, it looked like a ball but they couldn't quite tell. There were dishes next to the kitchen sink, not many, and the plants on the window sill hadn't been watered for a long time. She showed Chris the spot where she had found the note, it was still stuck underneath the door.

' "Don't think of the water anymore. I swallowed it", ' she now says out loud, 'have you had any further ideas about that?'

'Yes, I also thought of that again. But I still can't figure out what that note means,' he replies. 'If we actually read it right.' She just can't figure out what the meaning really was. Water; again and again the same images going round inside her head, she sees a child greedily gulping down a glass of water, she sees the paddling pool that had been put up for Luis last summer, she sees the canal and the surface of the water rippling in the wind, glistening blue in the sunlight, a dull grey in the rain, black as oil at night, she sees the photograph of the pool downstairs, in the cellar of the house. 'But if that's what it said, it doesn't seem imply a lack of

water. Rather that there was too much of it,' Chris says. 'The reference to water and saying someone needn't bother about it because someone else already took care of it. It seems to me that this message, for whatever reason, is – "don't worry."'

That would be a nice interpretation, she thinks. Don't worry.

'I could imagine that they moved. They just didn't make a big deal out of it,' Chris says. 'Perhaps they found a buyer for the house and it all had to happen quickly. One morning, while we were at work, they had a furniture van come and packed it all up. If that's well prepared and you have a removals company, that's a matter of a few hours. And they'll still come to pick up the last few items. Or the house is being cleared because they don't want the last bits anymore.'

'But wouldn't they have told us if they were moving? Would the girls not have told their friends? Like, that boy who stood in the garden?'

Chris shrugs. 'No idea, perhaps they weren't really friends with the boy. I mean, us at least, we didn't know them very well. We've been here for six months now. Getting to know the people from the village is taking much longer than I would have expected,' he says and gets on his bike again. 'And in any case, our neighbours weren't very friendly either. The guy in particular. He was pretty weird, actually.'

One evening, it was a rainy day in late summer, Chris was on his way home from the ferry when he had spotted Luis on the road, about a hundred yards from the garden. Luis, barefoot, in t-shirt and nappies, and crying. He must have got onto the road through the open gate without anyone noticing. Chris carried the child home, comforting it and making it laugh. Chris carrying Luis, she remembers exactly how that sight pulled at her, how much she wished that that was finally their life. Then Erik stood in the garden and barked at Chris, 'What are you doing carrying my child?' And Chris replied, drily: 'I found him on the road, should I have left him there?' Erik had not noticed that his child had escaped. The next days he knocked on their door with a box of wine to say thank you, and he had added a leaflet. 'You can order this wine from me. Feel free to pass on this info to friends and colleagues.' He told

them he was in the process of building a wine distribution business and needed support. That evening they opened a bottle, the wine was sweet and musty, they didn't like it. From then on they felt guilty for not buying anything from Erik. A few weeks later he'd put another leaflet in their letterbox. They found this odd, and a little uncanny. It seemed like an explicit request. Go on, order something. As if Erik was monitoring the fact that they still hadn't bought anything.

Luis beamed every time he saw Chris. He has such an easy way with kids, she envies him that. It was owed to his large family, three siblings, eight cousins, several nieces and nephews. Every year another baby was added, it seems. In his childhood and youth there had always been other people around him, he never had to spend time on his own. Holidays with grandparents or great aunts, together with his cousins, all the same age. Each family reunion a big, noisy celebration, halls were rented, buffets ordered, tables laid. She likes these festivities where everything appears uncomplicated because the atmosphere does not depend on the mood of any one single person. There's always a quarrel going on somewhere, but that doesn't seem to matter, it's par for the course. She herself knows only the opposite. No siblings, parents divorced, every day after school she was home alone. To this day she doesn't really understand why her mother had called an end so early. 'A child and a marriage. I could not have coped with both,' was the curt answer. Family, her mother never cared for that. She is choosing who to connect with herself, she says, after Julia has told her for the first time how much she enjoys being with Chris' numerous relatives.

[...]

16

'It's me, don't take a fright,' she calls into the corridor, but Elsa doesn't reply. No radio either and that is usually on in the kitchen. Astrid immediately begins to worry. Last night, in the middle of the night, the phone had rung. Still half asleep, she had

told herself, in an effort to calm herself, that she was no longer on emergency call. Then she shot up in bed and immediately thought of Elsa. She ran down the stairs, looked around for the cordless thing, preparing for a call from her aunt, her strength failing, asking for help because she had fallen. Or, worse yet, a call from the hospital to say something had happened. At last she found the bloody thing, on the sofa, underneath a newspaper. There was a beeping noise from the receiver, like from a fax. Fax machines, dialling the wrong number at three in the morning, apparently that happened.

She has tried several times to reach her aunt. She casts a quick look inside the kitchen, then the living room, down here there's nobody. As she climbs the stairs she pictures a lifeless Elsa in bed. The tip of her shoe catches on a step, she stumbles, barely manages to catch herself on her hands, bumps her knees, almost loses her balance. 'Yeah right, why don't you fall down the stairs, that'll help in this situation!' she scolds herself.

Elsa lies in bed, her chest rises and falls, Astrid can't look away, the chest rises and falls, rises and falls in a regular rhythm.

Good grief. She feels like she'll start crying, what is it with her all of a sudden. She herself breathes out, a long, snuffling breath. Tears well up in her eyes. Quietly she steps closer and studies Elsa's face. The thick eyebrows, with very little grey, the lines between her nose and the corners of her mouth that give the impression of a smile even when Elsa is in a bad mood. How odd that Elsa hasn't heard her ringing and calling. She sleeps like a teenager who's been partying all night. It's just after ten, normally her aunt would have been up long since.

She looks around the room, there are still some crates at the back. A few boxes and piles of old bed linen have joined them, Elsa still seems to be sorting things. Downstairs in the living room, she has also seen crates and boxes. She's not sure what to think of that.

'So, are you going to keep standing there?'

She flinches. Her aunt peers at her.

‘How about you go downstairs and make some coffee. I would have liked to sleep another hour. But had to come barging in here like the rescue squad. Except that you didn’t feel my pulse and test my pupils.’ She lets out a soft chuckle.

‘I was worried,’ Astrid says, slightly annoyed.

‘Then call next time before you come here.’

‘I tried.’

‘Really,’ Elsa says in surprise, ‘Oh no, the phone is discharged, that thing won’t ring.’ Her aunt stifles a yawn and smiles.

‘I brought lunch for later, vegetarian chili soup,’ Astrid says. She feels relieved, nothing happened, in a moment they will both have some coffee downstairs, all is as usual.

‘The kitchen. It’s a mess! Be warned.’

Astrid puts on some coffee and places the scattered cups, plates and bowls into the dishwasher. Two saucepans are encrusted, so she soaks them; apparently Elsa has cooked her porridge – her breakfast ever since Astrid can remember, oats, milk and raisins – in these many times without washing up in between. There’s very little in the fridge. A jar of jam, carrots and broccoli in the vegetable drawer. Two opened tins of sweet corn and peas. She doesn’t know how much and how regularly her aunts eats, she never gets a clear answer to her questions.

She opens the pantry. Elsa would be offended if she saw this scrutinising look. In contrast to the fridge, the shelves in here are still overflowing, quite incomprehensibly so. A few months ago Elsa had announced she would now order her food online and have it delivered by the supermarket. Astrid would not have to do any shopping for her anymore. But her aunt seemed to have been ordering for a large family. Five boxes of cornflakes that have been there since November, and there still are, she counts, ten packets of UHT milk, numerous packets of spaghetti, a few jars of tomato sauce, as well as biscuits and chocolate. A selection that reminds

Astrid of the days when her sons were still little and would spend their weekends here, or their holidays. Cornflakes, spaghetti, biscuits. She wonders who Elsa has ordered all this for.

She sits down at the kitchen table. In front of her, several issues of the weekly rag pile up, advertising as well, she throws most of it in the paper bin. Underneath the newspapers is a letter, it looks crumpled and dirty. She reads the sender's address, a law firm in Frankfurt. The letter is not addressed to her aunt but to Monika Winter, house number three. It's the letter she found in the field. Elsa forgot to take it to the people. How embarrassing. How long has it been lying here now? Way more than two months.

She pulls on her coat, leaves the house, crosses the street and hurries up the driveway. The garage is open. She rings the doorbell and as she waits, she rehearses her explanation, how in a moment she will describe how she found the envelope and why she is only now showing up here with it. The letter box is overflowing. Like the last time she was here.

Like the last time, she casts a cautious glance through the kitchen window. Nothing has changed. Dried plants on the window sill. The dishes next to the sink. She looks more closely. It really seems that nobody is home. Photographs and a drawing, coloured circles drawn with crayons, are stuck to the fridge. Actually, it looks like nobody's been here since January. Or even longer. The bulging letter box, the dishes, the dried plants, the picture on the fridge. It all seems odd to her. Who moves out and leaves behind dirty plates and a child's drawing? What kind of a move is this, when you leave some of your things behind? Sure, you may leave a dried-up plant. But a picture, drawn by your own child, she would not leave that stuck to the fridge. She looks around, next door lives the woman who called her practice that one morning when Elsa had gone wandering through the garden. She could knock on their door, finally offer her thanks in person and while she was at it, ask whether anybody was still living in the brick house. The neighbour ought to know.

[...]

She rings the bell and hears a deep, rough bark. Saturday afternoon, not a good time anyway, most people are out doing their shopping for the weekend. She waits for a moment and then returns.

Elsa is sitting in the kitchen with a cup of coffee, the radio is on.

'You're up. Are you feeling better?'

'I wasn't feeling unwell, I just wanted to sleep a little.'

Elsa is wearing one of her housedresses. Astrid always imagines this word as having two parts, ever since her aunt pronounced it that way. House. Dress. Today, Elsa has chosen the dark red one, and she's done her hair in a long braid. Side by side and seen from behind, the two of them would look funny. Two women, both with a long, dark grey braid. One tall and strong. The other small and lithe.

'You forgot to take the letter across the street,' Astrid waves the envelope.

'What letter?'

'The one I found in the field. At night. Early January.'

'Oh, that.'

'What's with the people, do they still live there or no?'

'You've asked me that before.'

'Yes, the letter box hasn't been emptied in a while. But there are things in the house. I'm going to open the letter now. This all seems odd.'

'What seems odd?'

'The house looks as if someone lives there – and it doesn't.' She takes a knife and uses the tip to carefully open the letter. There is no protest from Elsa, she just looks at her, waiting.

[...]