

Sample translation from

**Lukas Hartmann**

*Martha and Her Kin*

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translated by Ruth Martin, March 2024

I

## Hardships

In this house, a small child can simply vanish in the night. No one knows where to. It's eerie in the dark, you can't see your hand in front of your face; only when it gets light is it revealed again, and then Martha lies unspeaking beside Frieda and Klara. Well, they do live in Finsterboden; darkness is in the placename itself. The mattress is hard and narrow. Little heat rises into the attic room in winter, so it feels good to snuggle against your sisters. But sometimes Klara whispers frightening things into Martha's ear, about the headless giant who creeps around before daybreak. You can't see him. Then Martha locks up her ears; she has learned how to do that. On the next mattress, their three brothers lie under a darned blanket, two with their heads at the top end, one at the bottom, and he sometimes gets the other boys' feet in his face, prompting laughter or angry words. Emil, the eldest, sometimes even swears out loud. When their father was still on his feet, he used to beat Emil for that, you mustn't blaspheme. But for a long time now, Ätti has had to lie downstairs by the stove. He complains of pain, can barely move. But the stove doesn't get very hot; despite where they live, they are short of wood. The kindling that the children gather in the forest isn't enough.

"We should use coal," their mother says, "but coal is too expensive for the likes of us."

Sometimes someone comes in the middle of the night,  
but I can't see him. He makes noises, though,  
very quiet

and yet louder than the wind outside,  
louder than Ätti's breathing.

When their father was still in good health and went about finding water with his divining rod and building wells, the farmers gave him money for it, coins both large and small that he would show to the children. Then one day he was trying to blast a shaft into the ground, as he'd often done before, when the explosion came too soon and knocked him down. It hurt his leg, which stayed crooked, he can't stretch it out any more. Since the accident, they've had scarcely any money coming in. "Medicines are too expensive," their mother says, "we can't afford the doctor." But she makes poultices for their father out of healing plants that stop the pus. She helps neighbouring farmers with their laundry in exchange for bread, sometimes a piece of meat, and the older boys tend the livestock in the fields and are given a coin in return. Or they pick up windfalls in the farmers' orchards that they are allowed to keep and are reluctant to share with the younger ones, except Karl, who almost never speaks; Martha is his favourite. She is the second youngest, but the smallest of the children, two fingers shorter than Frieda.

Ätti often groans, and sometimes Martha sits with him, holds his hand for a while. That does him good, he says; he even smiles like he used to when he would tell the children stories of dwarves in the woods who argue and push each other into the stream, and then run away from a young fox. He did the dwarves' screams in a high voice and made the children laugh. Now he's too tired for such stories. He might die soon, Klara once whispered to Martha at night, but she didn't want to hear it and pretended not to. Martha used to love it when Ätti stroked her cheek with his rough hand, when he picked her up as if she was as light as a feather, and rocked her back and forth. They all wanted to be picked up, even the bigger children, and they accused him of favouring Martha, it wasn't fair. "He does it," Emil said, "because you're so little and delicate." But at seven years old

Martha is tough, too, and she has learned to read from the older ones, sitting at the kitchen table with them as they taught her the letters. Martha liked the round O, but also the M, her initial. Writing then seemed to happen all by itself. The teacher up in the schoolhouse was amazed to discover that Martha knew her letters already – but she is miserly with her praise, so everyone says, and she doesn't tolerate any prattling. And so Martha lowers her head and presses her lips together when Miss Bigler stands in front of her, checking her writing. The letters are written too hurriedly, the teacher chides her, but even when Martha makes an effort, they are never straight enough.

I would like to write the M

Across the whole page

Like a door opening.

But then I would be given lines.

She doesn't know her mother as well as she does her father; her mother has so much to do, and sometimes she looks into the distance through the children, as if they were invisible. The girls help her with the laundry and folding the trousers and skirts once they are dry. But sometimes it seems she doesn't notice their help at all, as if someone inside her is keeping her transfixed. Frieda tries to pull her this way and that by the hem of her skirt, the bigger boys moan when they aren't allowed to do something, and suddenly she will start shouting at them, while their father lies silent on the couch. Only rarely do you hear him sigh. Recently, when Martha is sitting by him and holding his hand, he has started telling her to warm him up, but his hand makes her own so cold that it frightens her.

There is now scarcely any meat floating in the soup that the children eat in the evening; it's thin, with no droplets of fat, and tastes of salt – they still have enough of that. But it doesn't fill you up. Nor is it clever to pick

unripe apples on the way to school and bite into them. The older ones warn her against it, but sometimes Martha is so hungry that she eats them anyway, and gets a stomach ache afterwards. Brigitte, a neighbour from the next but one farm up the hill, sometimes brings them a bowl of porridge, and that is almost a feast for the children, especially when Brigitte has sprinkled it with sugar and cinnamon. The six children divide the porridge fairly, counting the spoonfuls according to age, they are all very good at adding up. Martha gets seven level spoons, Karl eleven, but when he's full, he gives some of his to the younger ones and is pleased at how grateful they are.

“We have to stick together,” he says then, and they agree. Their mother stands silently by, and no one knows if she is still eating anything. She is getting thinner and thinner, Klara whispers to her sister in the dark; they should pray, then the Good Lord will help them. They murmur their evening prayer almost inaudibly but, as the following days show, it does no good.

A man from the parish drops by one Saturday in autumn, he avoids the puddles in the front yard, a watch chain dangles across his belly. He shoos the children outside, saying he wants to speak with their mother. Then the two of them stand inside by the window, you can see their outlines, hear a murmur, their father is too weak to get involved. Then the stout man leaves, he seems angry; now he even steps in the puddles. “He wants to give you away to other people,” the children's mother tells them, “and I don't want that.” And then she adds, though they can barely hear her: “But we will get alms from the parish now.” She opens her fist, and in her hand are two large coins. Fivers, Karl says almost reverently. One fiver, Martha knows, will get you two large lebkuchen and two bars of chocolate at the forest festival, enough for the whole family to share, for that is what they are, the Nydeggers, a family, even if – as the almoner apparently said, they are a drain on the parish. “Now we need flour and sugar,” Klara says. “We

still have salt. We could do with vests for the winter as well, but the money won't stretch that far." Klara and Martha will go to the upper village and buy the most necessary things from the grocer. It's almost as if they have taken charge, because their mother says nothing, just nods. The children stand around their mother, their father seems to be listening in, but he says nothing either; he has become largely mute, all you hear from him is an occasional cry of pain, which Martha cannot bear – she would like to take the pain from her father, who is also smelling worse and worse, but she can't. The sisters wash him, he shrinks from the cold well water, tries to fend them off, but they unbutton his shirt, clean his upper body, and for the necessaries their mother slides a shallow bowl under his behind with some effort, then empties it outside on the rubbish heap. There is no proper dung heap. In the beginning they still had rabbits and chickens, but the animals disappeared months ago. The truth, as Martha knows, is that her mother sold them to the neighbours.

Sometimes I held the young, the chicks  
in my hand, they were so soft  
and warm.

Their hearts were beating, my fingers felt it.

I laid them back in the nest. They  
protected me.

It was two days ago that their father stopped breathing in the morning; he is no longer with them, their mother says, when Martha follows Frieda down the steep stairs from the upper room. "Perhaps it's better this way," their mother murmurs, and then she murmurs something else that might be a prayer. "The parish will have to be informed," she says then, and sends Karl, who knows his way around, to give the death notice to the parish

hall. The children don't know what to do with themselves, Frieda and Klara start to cry, they reach for each other's hands, hold them tight. Martha stands to one side, unspeaking. The hours that follow, the two days that follow are busy. A man with a bald head and glasses appears, it's the doctor, who has to fill out the death certificate, and then the pastor comes, a man they've never seen before, and says a prayer in a loud voice that hurts Martha's ears. He shakes the children's hands, tells them to do as their mother says, and soon disappears – they have nothing to offer him, no schnapps or sweets. Then the carpenters arrive with the coffin, into which they put the children's father, the closest neighbours come, including the old man with the white beard who lives further up in the gully, and express their sympathy. Kind Brigitte from the next farm but one brings a little bunch of flowers, asters from her garden, which she lays in front of the open coffin. In it lies Ätti in the one suit he owned; he is lying on a white sheet, you could lie down beside him, embrace him one last time. But people would be horrified.

Martha doesn't sleep much over the next few nights, thinking she can hear her father's footsteps like she used to when, before daybreak, he would go to the stove and feed it – that was the word he used. He didn't want his six children to freeze, and he wanted the stovetop hot so they could warm milk on it. The older children had gathered the branches in the forest and tied them into giant bundles, with permission from the owner of the forest, who also owns their small tied-house, for which they pay him rent, too much rent, as their mother complains. The owner's name is Hirschi, he is nice to the children, particularly the two girls, patting their heads or ruffling their hair, but he wants the rent paid to the last hundredth of a franc, he won't give any leeway, he says, a contract is a contract.

The funeral takes place three days later, and for those three days their father is laid out in the house. "Lucky it's cold," Emil says, "or he'd start to smell." Their mother boxes his ears for that, and he offers no resistance.

My brother is right; the dead cat  
that lay outside the house smelled, too;  
Klara and I buried it in the woods.  
Perhaps the Invisible killed it  
because it was sick. He only comes inside at night,  
for there is no light anywhere then.

They have to go up to the village for the funeral, thank the Lord it doesn't rain. A few relatives have come whom the family were no longer in touch with, their father was ashamed at how poor they'd become after his accident, when he lost his income. Martha hasn't seen Uncle Alois for a long time – he is her father's brother, a joiner by trade, but looks nothing like him and says almost nothing the whole time he's there. Afterwards, Martha's mother says at least he has been sending them money from time to time, and after the service today pressed a ten-franc note into her hand. And that, she says, is not something that is expected of him.

In the church, the pastor speaks just a few sentences, and Martha doesn't understand what he's saying, doesn't understand the prayer, either. The organ, which she has never heard before, scares her at first, but then she enjoys listening. The bells that she usually hears in the distance ring much too loudly afterwards, it's a chaos of notes, she wants to put her hands over her ears, but Frieda stops her. When the coffin is lowered into the grave in the small cemetery, she hears her mother's loud weeping and doesn't know what might console her. The parish has paid for a plain wooden cross, as Emil knows, but there isn't even a name on it – that would have been too expensive. Nor do they go to the inn for the usual wake afterwards: no one is prepared to cover the cost. They should have asked, Emil says later, but their mother was too proud. She also knows what will happen next: the



children will be taken from her, they will go to local farmers, which is the custom in such cases, and will have to help on the farm after school, or sometimes before. In return they will be given food and a bed or more likely a sack of straw, and they will be in the charge of the almoner, who is supposed to make sure that these half-orphans are well-treated. The children whisper this to each other in the evening, they have heard some things and worked others out, they stumble over the unfamiliar words. Their mother is slumped in her chair, saying just a few words now and again: “You will have a good life, and we’ll see each other on feast days.” Where will the children go now? Their mother herself – the children find this out, too – is to work in a laundry in a suburb of the town, as an assistant; it’s where she was employed before her marriage. But what she will earn there certainly won’t feed six children and herself as well. And the parish will only make a small contribution. Their mother is lucky she is being allowed to stay a while longer in the old tied-house.

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### **The indentured child**

They are collected, one after another, by people who are kindly-looking or sullen. A man from the parish is there each time. The children have to go, even if they don’t know the people – some are from other villages, but they are all men. The children are indentured, and that is another new word for Martha. Later she will think the word is right, this arrangement has teeth.

Their mother has packed for them, rolling each sibling’s few clothes into a bundle. Her eyes have grown even redder and quite swollen. She hugs each

child before they leave, following the man who is taking them into his family. She says softly: “We’ll see each other again soon.” Martha is the last to go. The man who fetches her is called Bürgi, he takes Martha by the hand and carries her bundle in the other. He came in a horse and cart, a two-seater, and he helps Martha climb up.

“If you behave yourself and work hard, you’ll have a good life with us,” he says, steering the horses with the reins. His head is a long way up, his voice booms almost like a low organ note. Until a few years ago, Martha’s family also had animals, and because they needed so many medicines after her father’s accident, they had to sell them. If two sympathetic neighbours had not given them beans and cabbage and left milk outside the door, they would have had to beg. Their mother cleaned the little milk churn with great care and left it outside the door again in the evening gleaming. It seemed to Martha as if a good spirit was filling the milk churn, but really she knew who it was. And she would have liked to give something to Brigitte, who had such beautifully plaited hair, a drawing perhaps, because Martha loved to draw, but she had no coloured pencils.

I would paint flowers in every colour,  
if I could,  
especially red and yellow, but the sunflowers  
are too tall for the back of a calendar page.

And in the night I see nothing,  
I only hear noises.

Bürgi’s farm is half an hour away, and like Finsterboden it lies on the edge of a sunken stream, but everything is bigger than it was in Martha’s home, moneyed, as people say. On the other side of the pasture, where a few cows

graze, the wooded land falls steeply away. You can't see where the slope ends, the foliage is too thick.

It is lunchtime when they arrive, the horse whinnies, a woman about the same age as Martha's mother comes out of the house wearing a long black skirt and holding two small children by the hand. It turns out that she also has three older children. "We're about to eat," says the woman, whose name is Elsbeth. She gives Martha a long look and then says to her husband, "She's thin, and small. But she's eight already?" The man, Berthold, nods, pats his coat pocket: "All the papers are here. They told me the girl is clever, but shy." They are talking about Martha as if she isn't there or doesn't speak their language. She goes with them into the kitchen, where the children are sitting expectantly at the table. One of them is taller than the others, with a broad, flat face, and at the sight of her he emits whimpering sounds that don't alarm anyone but Martha. There is also a servant, who smiles to himself, and a maid who blinks constantly. Martha is the tenth person – she counts them up – at the long table, and has to sit at the end, on a chair not meant for a child, so that her head only just reaches above the tabletop. "We've already prayed," says Elsbeth, "we don't need to repeat it." The farmer nods, sits down at the head of the table and folds his hands for a moment all the same. He is served by the maid, who puts boiled potatoes on his plate; he takes bacon and sausage from the platter she holds out to him. The food travels from place to place, down to Martha, for whom two small potatoes are left, one of them hollow, the flesh gone. This is how it will always be, she thinks, I am last in line. The tall boy with the broad face says something loud but unintelligible, he seems to be protesting. But no one takes any notice of him. What is wrong with him? Martha wonders. Is he handicapped? She knows the word from Emil, the cleverest one in her family. And quite unexpectedly she is overcome with a homesickness that brings tears to her eyes, which she wipes away with her sleeve.

The farmer drinks two glasses of fresh cider, which no one else gets. At the end of the meal, he says: “I have picked Martha up today, she has lost her father and will be staying with us. I expect you to treat her well.” The children nod – they are used to nodding, Martha thinks, and she sees the two boys diagonally across from her stealthily jabbing their elbows into each other’s ribs. They have strange names, she later learns: Eusebius and Bartholomäus. The two girls, the youngest children in the family, are Friederike and Leonore. The peculiar one, the one who doesn’t speak properly, is called Severin. Martha has never heard these names before, but she remembers them at once, much to the wonderment of Elsbeth, the mother. Once Severin has calmed down, he stares at Martha incessantly – but he isn’t hostile, just openly curious, and so focused that a string of drool runs from the corner of his mouth, which Martha finds funny and a little repellent at the same time. After the meal Elsbeth shows her where she is to sleep; it’s a little chamber behind the larger rooms, where she barely has space to stretch out. There is no window. It probably once housed the farm dog, she thinks, it smells of animal in here, and she says to herself: it’s lucky they aren’t chaining me up. She can wash outside at the well, just like they did at home in Finsterboden. The privy is larger here, you don’t have to crouch, you can sit down and close the door, and there is cut-up newspaper for wiping and water from a bucket for flushing, which you fill back up from the well. Elsbeth impresses this information upon the new girl, not unkindly, but very firmly.

“You’ll have to be registered at the school,” she tells her. “I’ll go in with you in the morning, I’m sure Ätti must have brought your baptism certificate.”

Martha says nothing; she doesn’t know. Then she helps in the kitchen with the washing up, together with Leonore, the younger of the two girls.

In bed then, when it’s dark, Martha is overcome by misery. She has managed to hold it down all day, but now it catches up with her and shakes

her to her core. Not even when her father was dead did it hurt so much deep inside, and although she clamps both hands over her mouth, sounds come out of her that can be heard in the large parlour. The door opens, and Mother Elsbeth is standing there in the light from outside and asking, “Is something wrong, Martha?” Elsbeth saying her name just makes everything worse; Martha bites the back of her hand to get control of herself and shakes her head vigorously. But Elsbeth bends down to her, lays her cool hand on Martha’s forehead and says quietly, “It will all come good, you have no need to be afraid.” Martha longs for everything familiar, misses her brothers and sisters. All the same, the hand on her forehead is a comfort, Martha is only sniffing now, and after a while Elsbeth withdraws.

But the other one is there, the Invisible,  
he snuffles, he makes noises,  
perhaps he’ll protect me from the new one;  
he has come with me, he won’t hurt me.

The next day is a Sunday; Martha hasn’t thought about this. There are long prayers at breakfast, you have to lower your eyes, fold your hands nicely, or Leonore, who sits next to you, will rap your fingers in silent reproach. The father’s prayers, most of which Martha doesn’t understand, seem to go on forever, until everyone joins in with his Amen. Severin alone makes strange snorting noises and moves about restlessly, but no one takes any notice of him. Then they all sing a song that Martha doesn’t know, neither the words, which include “great God”, nor the melody – it’s a chorale, Leonore whispers in her ear, before her mother puts a warning finger to her lips. They sit down together at lunchtime as well, but in the parlour this time, and sing songs, and in the afternoon guests come to the house. They drink water from glasses, and a man who doesn’t take off his black hat reads from the Bible for a long time, and once again there is a lot that

Martha doesn't understand, especially the long lists of strange names, then there is more singing. "We are all brothers and sisters in Christ," Mother Elsbeth says quietly. She sits opposite Martha and smiles. This is the usual Sunday gathering of their congregation, she explains patiently; it gives them strength and courage for the whole week. Severin suddenly lets out a wail, and has to be calmed, but afterwards he laughs boisterously again; someone has slipped him something sweet.

When the guests have gone, Martha has to help tidy up, and dry the washed glasses without dropping any – they are expensive, she hears Friederike saying. So much is new to her here, new and strange, frightening in fact, and she is glad that, when it's dark and she has had her perfunctory wash outside, she can withdraw to her cubby hole where all the noises are suddenly muffled and less threatening.

"School tomorrow," Mother Bürgi has told her. "You will go with the others, and the teacher will know what to do with you." She must have forgotten that she was going to walk Martha to school on her first day. "And in the afternoon," the mother says, raising her voice a little, "You have a job to do here – you're to watch Severin and make sure he doesn't do anything silly."

That makes Martha worry before she falls asleep. Severin is a head taller than her, much stronger and prone to moods, and dirty as well, he smells bad – what is she to do if he defies her? Still, she falls asleep quickly on her mattress, wearing just her vest, as she learned to do at home. Now, too, she tries to keep her mind far away from Finsterboden. And then in her dream she is there anyway, but the house is empty – except there are cats walking around inside, and that scares her, especially because they are miaowing so loudly. When she wakes, for a long time she doesn't remember where she is and what brought her to this unfamiliar place, but suddenly tears are streaming from her eyes and Martha can't hold them back.

She could not have found her own way to school. She is wearing a pinafore that was in her bundle, and clean socks, because her mother impressed upon her that wealthy people are horror-stricken by nasty-smelling socks. She will wash the ones she's worn in the well.

Where the path is wide enough, Friederike and Leonore walk with Martha between them; the boys go on ahead. The walk to school takes twenty minutes, the girls inform her. Their mother has a pocket watch that tells her when the children need to leave. There are many bends in the street that leads to the bridge before you can see the water, and on the other side it climbs more steeply than on their own. The girls ask Martha if she's good at reading, and Martha doesn't reply, because she doesn't know. She likes to read, she could have said, but she keeps that to herself. They are talkative, the pair of them, one and two years older than Martha respectively, and so they feel like old hands, warning the new girl about the big boys from the village, who like to tease and pull the younger girls' hair.

“You have to pretend you don't care,” they advise Martha. “That will put them off. And if they say we're sectarians, then just don't listen to them.” Sectarians, they explain, is what the people from the official Protestant church call the others who belong to the evangelical community, like their family. So much is new; Martha hopes she won't get it all confused. Halfway down the hillside, the houses cluster together, and other schoolchildren are going the same way, sizing up the new girl. One of them asks, “Who are you? What's your name?” And Martha replies, as she has learned: “My name is Martha Nydegger, I'm eight, and I'm in the second class.”

“So you can read and write, then?”

Martha nods. There are, she hears, a few older children from remote farms who always stutter their way through their letters. Friederike and Leonore, who have linked their arms through Martha's, smile to themselves. For

them, reading is as easy as breathing, they say, and then they sing the ABC song, which is new to Martha.

The schoolhouse is visible from a long way off, with its little bell tower. Beside it is a climbing frame with five bars. Its purpose also has to be explained to Martha. The schoolhouse is divided into three: the lower school, the middle and the upper school. The lower school, where Martha is taken, is taught by a man, which is unusual, as Martha is later told. The man is quite young, and he stands in the doorway greeting the children with a handshake and the odd one with a pat on the shoulder. He asks Martha in friendly tones where she comes from, and she says Finsterboden. He doesn't ask any other questions; perhaps he already knows that Martha is the Bürgis' foster child. She sees how clean-shaven he is; the other men she knows usually have stubble. As soon as the children are seated, he gives them written exercises so that he can check what level the new girl has reached. At first Martha hesitates when he gives her a page from the reading book, but then she pulls herself together and reads the passage aloud at the right speed and without a single error.

“Goodness me!” says the teacher. “You should be with the more advanced children. Are you this good at mathematics as well?”

“I think so,” says Martha, and solves a mental arithmetic exercise that he gives her without thinking for too long. “You deserve praise,” he says. “So small and already so proficient.” That smile again, which makes her feel good. Then he sends her, the little one, to sit with the third class. “I think this is where you belong, let's see if I'm right.”

The others listen, wide-eyed. No one from the second class has ever been put straight into the third before.

“I would like you to treat Martha well,” says the teacher, “or I will be displeased with you.”



“But she’s younger than us,” a boy with remarkably protruding ears objects.

“Yes,” says the teacher, “but she’s more advanced than many in your class.”

Martha thinks she hears a murmur of discontent, especially from the older boys, but they obey the teacher, whose name is Räber, as Martha learns at break time on the second day.

“You’ll get used to it,” he says. “We are not all equal before the Lord.”

Martha is now in the same class as Friederike, though Friederike is older, and more troubled by this than she would like. On the way home she asks Martha several times why she can read so well, and Martha herself doesn’t know, except that reading comes easily to her.