



LUCIAN
by
Isabel Abedi

Sample translation

German title: Lucian

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Translated by Johanna Ellsworth, Eva von Waldenfels (part 2)

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Author: Isabel Abedi



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Isabel Abedi, born 1967, worked as a texter in advertising for 13 years. Meanwhile she has become one of Germany's most successful authors of children's books and novels for young adults. Her novel *Whisper* was nominated for the 2006 German Juvenile Book Award; her novel *Isola* was on the *Spiegel* list of bestsellers. Isabel Abedi lives in Hamburg with her family.

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“Are you following me?” The boy examined me with his eyes.

“No.” I glared at him. “No! Who are you anyway?”

Again the boy did not answer; this time he looked unsure of himself.

“Tell me, will you,” I demanded. “What’s your name?”

The boy lowered his head. “You tell me.”

“Tell you what?” I took a step back. “My name?”

“No. My name.”

Lucian

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[Extracts from *Lucian* by Isabel Abedi, translated by Johanna Ellsworth]

[Part 1, chapter 1 – set in Hamburg]

Wednesday evenings were reserved for us, for Janne, Sparrow and me.

Since I could remember the three of us had spent that evening during the week together and, apart from the holidays, always at the same place, too: at home on Rainvilleterrasse 9 in Hamburg.

It had been Sparrow's idea. Sparrow was Janne's live-in girlfriend. Shortly after she had moved in with us, Sparrow announced that Wednesday evenings were to be our Ladies' Night, and she even organized a crown for that special event. It was a plastic crown decorated with rhinestones in different colors; they sold those crowns in the toy section of the department store. Sparrow had a job in the toy section at the time.

It was also Sparrow who set the Rules for our Ladies' Nights: We would take turns wearing the Wednesday Crown and deciding how to spend the evening. The only conditions were that it had to be something we could do together, and it had to be something for free.

I was four years old when we had our first Ladies' Night, and I was also the first one to wear the crown. I felt like a real queen and appointed Sparrow and Janne as my personal maids. Janne had to make my favorite dish, crêpes with hot chocolate sauce. And I ordered Sparrow to draw fairy tale animals, dragons, unicorns and griffins that we later colored in together. Eventually we would lose or simply stop wearing the crown. But we kept up the Ladies' Nights, and over the years they turned into a ritual we only skipped whenever something serious came up.

Now I was sixteen, and that Wednesday it was my mom's – Janne's – turn to plan our Ladies' Night. The name of the game was: cleaning out the attic.

At first Sparrow and I moaned our protest when Janne opened the huge closet in our attic, but Janne had tapped her imaginary crown and announced, "To get rid of a bit of past can't hurt. So I don't want to hear any complaints, Ladies! Go on, sort out the clothes."

It was autumn, and outside a storm was raging. Its frozen fingers were drumming against the window panes but up here under the roof it was cozy and warm. Janne had lit some candles, the Moonshine Sonata by Beethoven, Janne's favorite composer, was playing, and the smell of fresh apple pie was wafting up from the kitchen below.

The attic made up the whole upper part of our apartment, separated from the bottom floor by a winding staircase. Dad had laid the old wooden floorboards bare when he was still here.

We loved that room. It was our family room; actually we would only use the official living room when guests came over. There was something from all of us up here. I had selected the large day bed with lots of pillows, on which we had spent countless Wednesday evenings watching our favorite movies. When I was born, Janne had bought the house plant; it was a lime-tree that was touching the slanted ceiling by now, and every week she would fill the big glass vase in front of the window with fresh flowers. Sparrow had contributed her old record player and the shelf filled with her enormous record collection. Our furniture consisted of assorted pieces, most of which Sparrow and Janne had discovered at antique markets, where Janne had done the sales negotiations and Sparrow had done the restorations that would follow.

The only inherited piece of furniture we owned was my Great-Grandmother Moma's old desk. That was where Janne used to write her expert opinions.

Next to the desk there was a birdcage attached to a massive brass chain hanging from the ceiling. This was the residence of John Boy and Jim Bob. Some former client had given the two budgies to my mom. By now they were thirteen and elderly gentlemen, and they got lots of TLC from Janne. Sparrow, however, hated it when animals were caged in. That was why she kept calling our birds jailbirds and kept getting nasty side glances from my mom every time she did it.

Jim Bob had tucked his beak under his wing and ruffled his feathers, while John Boy curiously stared down at us. We were bending over a mountain of old stuff, arguing about what we could spare – or rather not spare.

»Don't!« Sparrow screamed and dove for a grinning rubber dwarf with a blue cap my mom was holding in her hand. She was about to make it disappear forever in a big box marked *Goodbye Ladies*.

»Why not?« Janne asked in surprise, looking at Sparrow and then at the rubber dwarf.

»Because Anton was part of my happy childhood, that's why«, Sparrow cried. »Over my dead body will he be sold at the flea market.« She grabbed Janne's wrist and started to tickle her until my mom laughed so hard she had to give up, dropping the rubber dwarf.

»Come to Mommy, little Anton.« Sparrow picked it up and protectively held the toy in her arm. »Get away from the cold-hearted Wednesday Queen. Starting tonight...« she gave the dwarf a big grin, »... you'll reside on top of our TV set.«

»On our TV? Why should that thing sit on our TV?« I asked, flabbergasted.

»That *thing*?« Sparrow blew a dust flake off her nose and stared at me as if I had just turned into a rubber dwarf myself – and an evil one at that. »The ›thing‹ your mother wants to peddle at the flea market is not a ›thing‹ but a milestone in the history of German television!«

She pushed the dwarf into my face. »May I introduce the two of you to each other?« She made the head of the rubber dwarf wobble back and forth. »Rebecca, this is Anton, one of the *Mainzelmännchen Gang* and a star of the commercials of the Seventies. Anton, this is Rebecca, Janne's first daughter and my second daughter. Say ›Good Evening‹ to her.«

»Good Eeeeeevening,« the rubber dwarf squealed in Sparrow's voice, and I had to laugh. Janne pushed a blonde lock of hair out of her face and sighed. A black streak marred her immaculate looks. Under normal circumstances you could wake my beautiful mom, who had the body of a marathon runner, at three a.m. and she would still look perfect.

»Okay. As long as Anton's buddies are not hiding out in an ambush somewhere, he may stay,« she consented, bending over her box again. »What about this?«

Janne held up a red plastic trumpet, and I screeched, »Ohhh, Daddy gave it to me, don't you remember? After the kiddy party where Sören had thrown up half of his hot dog on my dress? I smelled like a pig and was all embarrassed, and in the evening Dad brought me that trumpet to make me feel better.«

Sparrow let out a *tada, tada* and gave me a wink.

»Hey guys, we won't get anywhere this way,« Janne complained. »This evening's activity is not playing but cleaning out. So throw it out or don't throw it out?«

»Don't throw it out.« I put the trumpet aside and opened the big book box. I fished out a couple of my old picture books of the mix of Janne's work books, Sparrow's art books and a few stained cookbooks.

My mom moved over, sitting close to me, and opened *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. »That was your favorite book,« she reminisced. »You were terribly afraid of the monsters Max visits in his dream journey. But you wanted to hear the story over and over again anyway.« Janne smiled at me. »You would close your eyes and imagine that you were sailing away with Max on his private boat. And I had to play the wild things for you. You wanted to hear their terrible roars and see how they gnashed their terrible teeth, rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws – until Max said *Be still* and tamed them with his magic trick. Do you still remember that, little Wolf Cubby? You used to know the story by heart.«

I put my head on Janne's shoulder and looked at the private boat where little Max was sitting in his wolf's fur. The pages had turned all yellow and had that undefinable smell of old books.

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»Yes, I remember,« I said, looking at Sparrow. »And you painted a picture of the ship for me. But it didn't have *Max* written on it but *Rebecca*.«

And that is how the evening continued. Each and every item we took out of the boxes had a story attached to it. There was the killer dirndl with the red apron my grandma had bought in Munich for my first school day. Hidden in the material right over the left shoulder blade there was a safety pin someone had forgotten to take out. The first and last time I had worn that stupid dress the needle had opened, and when some kid had shoved me in the schoolyard, the needle had been rammed deep into my shoulder.

Then there was the plastic good luck kitten; it was colored in gold and its paw was always waving at you. Sparrow had given it to Janne as a souvenir from Asia. That same day Janne had bought a lottery ticket and won thirty Euros. »Do you remember? We took Rebecca to the Dome in Hamburg and got lost inside the mirror cabinet...«

And there was Sharky, my old rubber raft. Sparrow had given it to me when I was four and could not swim yet. The raft came with the head of a shark. Its mouth was wide open and revealed huge rubber teeth. One time at the public pool I paddled towards an old lady who almost had a heart attack when she came face to face with Sharky's head.

A box decorated with a skull Sparrow had painted on it was crammed with her mother's Christmas gifts. Another box contained her cases full of insects. I took out the top one and opened it. The insect behind glass was one of Sparrow's first art objects: a pink and green octopus she had crocheted.

My second school year had just begun when Sparrow had started to work on that series. She had called it Sailors' Yarn and had crocheted sea anemones, star-shaped corals and octopi for months on end. She had let me put them inside the square insect containers and close their lids.

Now Sparrow was working on a box marked with *Knickknacks*. She put a shower radio in the shape of a subway, a silver hand mirror and a pink set of vampire teeth aside and pulled out a picture frame. »Look – the little mermaid from California,« she said and smiled when handing me the frame.

I must have been about five when that picture was taken. Two hands were holding my body on the surface of a lake, while I had stretched my arms out as if I was flying. I looked happy and content.

»That was in Lake Nacimiento,« Janne said. Her voice sounded soft and tender. She took the picture out of my hand and wiped the dust from the glass surface. »That summer you learned

how to swim. Your Dad had to hold you up into the air over and over again so you could jump out of his arms right into the water.«

I looked at my young face that was laughing with joy and realized that it had been the only time I had visited Dad's home. Actually I still remembered it, if only vaguely. I had called that lake the Dragon Lake. »What about this one?« I nudged her with my elbow, pointing at the picture. »Will you sell me at the flea market now?«

»No, I think that piece of the past will stay with us,« Janne said and put the picture aside. There was a shrill ringing coming from the kitchen.

»Ding dong,« Sparrow called out. »We have an important announcement to make: Little Apple Pie wants his mommy to pick him up at the cake shop...« She gave Janne an innocent look. I cracked up but my laughter was drowned by Sparrow's own laughter. Janne's girlfriend was very petite. She had short, mousy hair that was always ruffled and large golden brown eyes. Only her laughter did not match her dainty looks at all. She sounded like a bag full of empty tin cans dumped on the basement stairs when she laughed – and she infected anyone with her laughter, whether they liked it or not.

»Well, then mommy will have to go down there,« Janne said finally. She wiped the dust off her jeans and looked at the mess we had made in the last hour or so.

Sparrow needed her personal chaos that was even worse in her study. Daily things such as tax return forms or working on the computer were things she could not handle at all, while Janne had everything under control and hardly ever got flustered.

The only exception was a messy home. Objects that scattered around, dishes that had not been put away or crumbs on the kitchen counter would turn my cool mom into a nervous wrack.

»Don't worry,« I said when I saw the disgusted look on her face. »If you get the apple pie, we will clean up afterwards. Promise.«

Janne nodded gratefully and climbed over the scattered mess to go downstairs.

It did not take long before she returned with a full tray.

»Ladies, enjoy your meal,« she said, setting the plates on the large bamboo table. »But afterwards I don't want to hear another word. We will sort out this mountain of old stuff. No objections accepted.« She waved her knife in the air. »The box for the flea market will be filled within one hour!«

We ate the whole apple pie with vanilla sauce. I took care of one half while Janne and Sparrow shared the other half. Then we made Janne the Pie Queen of the Ladies' Night – and failed miserably when it came to sort out the flea market objects.

While a modest amount of Janne's work books, board games and CDs found its way into the flea market box, the heaps of stuff we wanted to keep were getting bigger and bigger. Sparrow happily stacked her old video tapes of Godard and Hitchcock movies («We *must* buy a video recorder before it is too late!«), I was sitting on a stack of old picture books and Janne was pulling something small and white out of the last box when I suddenly felt an unknown sensation. It felt like something was tearing ever so slightly deep inside me, as if someone had just pulled a tiny hair that had grown inside. One short pull and it was gone. What stayed was a strange feeling of emptiness I could not identify. I told myself it was only because it was so late – after midnight – and pushed it away when Janne put a small teddy bear into my lap. «That was your very first birthday present,« she said. The teddy was made of fluffy wool; it was pretty dirty and hardly bigger than Janne's hand. Its eyes were two dark brown circles of felt, its nose was a tiny black ball made of yarn, and its woolly white cheek was decorated with a chocolate stain.

«I'm sure you don't remember it« Janne continued. »Moma gave it to you when we took you home after you were born. The teddy was to guard your dreams but you wouldn't let go of it during the day, either. You took it everywhere, and one time, when we forgot it at the Greek restaurant, you wouldn't stop screaming until I called Mister Papatrechas in the middle of the night and made him send your teddy bear home in a taxi cab. You even had a name for it – what was it again... Li or La...?« Janne wrinkled her brow, trying to remember.

«Lu,« I mumbled. I had no inkling how that name had come to me. I could not even remember the little teddy bear.

A rattling sound came from the birdcage. It was John Boy who was eagerly sharpening his beak on the small sepia bowl. I stared at the green budgie without really seeing it. When he flapped his wings, it startled me for some unknown reason.

«Hey.« Janne gave me a worried look. »You're all pale! Is everything okay, Cubby?« I nodded but it was a lie. Suddenly I felt utterly exhausted.

«I think I should go to bed now,« I mumbled. »School starts with English tomorrow.« Sparrow gave me a sympathetic look. »Then tell your Mister Tyger next time he picks on you I will personally show up in school with this old trumpet and stick it up his nose.«

«Good thinking,« Janne growled. »We should have done that a long time ago.«

My English teacher was not one of our favorite subjects. Janne and Sparrow hated it when someone picked on me, especially without any reason.

I slowly got up and gave Janne a remorseful look. »Could I... maybe clean up my stuff here tomorrow?«

It was a rhetorical question. I knew there would be no traces of our activities left by tomorrow. No matter how late it would get, no matter how soon the next morning would break, Janne would never go to bed without having put everything into its proper place first, and if we did not do our share of the chores, my mother could get rather uncomfortable. But tonight she surprised me.

»I'll take care of it,« she said. »I'll put your things in front of your bedroom door, okay?«

»Thanks.« I gave Janne a kiss and nodded at Sparrow who was studying her video cassettes again. She was holding a cassette marked *Orfeo Negro* in her hand. »Great movie,« she mumbled. »We really have to get a recorder. There's something very romantic about videos.«

»Good night, Sparrow,« I said. Then I turned to the birdcage. By now John Boy had put his beak under his wings. His soft feathers were fluffed up, and his tiny chest was moving up and down in a gentle rhythm. »Night, John Boy. Night, Jim Bob.«

Sparrow waved at me with her mind somewhere else, and Janne smiled at me.

When I took off my clothes in my bedroom, I noticed that I was still holding the little teddy bear in my hand. I took it to bed with me and turned off the light. There was still that strange sensation in my chest. I couldn't place it; all I knew was that it had appeared from one second to the next.

My room was on the second floor. I heard the steps upstairs, Janne's distinct steps and Sparrow's pitter-patter. The rain had not stopped either. It was still drumming against the window pane. I loved that sound just as I loved the moment before I would fall asleep. I had always found those magic seconds when we shift into another reality very special. Sometimes it felt as if I was falling, sometimes it was like sinking down, but today it felt as if sleep was tearing at me with impatient, grubby fingers. I heard the horn of a ship somewhere in the distance. Then I was gone.

My dream overwhelmed me as if I had taken some strong drug. I was lying inside a room on a fluffy dark green rug. There was wood paneling on the walls; there was a bed with flowery covers; an awfully tacky painting of a hilly landscape hung over the bed. A chandelier hovered over my head, and I saw pieces of broken glass next to me. They were everywhere, on my stomach, my hands. There was a sweet metallic smell, and I gasped when I noticed it was blood.

Was it my own blood? I tried to breathe but there was no air in the room, or perhaps there was no air inside of me. I panted, I moaned, I wanted to move but I couldn't lift a finger.

Where was I? The room felt strange to me. What was I doing here? Was I by myself? No, there was someone else in the room; I sensed it but I could not make out a face. Please. Please don't... please... don't let me...

Even the words felt like glass shards, cold and sharp and scary. It was not until now that I realized I was begging for my life. The room, strange, ugly and impersonal, was expanding and then shrinking; the walls kept crawling closer. I was shivering and the air was thick with the smell of cold sweat.

My scream woke me up.

My mother was sitting next to me on the edge of my bed. Cradling me, she wiped my sweaty hair out of my face. I was damp with sweat and heard Janne's murmur coming through a misty wall. »Cubby, it was only a bad dream. Hey, everything's fine. It's over.«

I was struggling for breath. No, no, it wasn't over! I looked around the room, my bedroom that was so familiar to me. As if I had to make sure, my eyes took in everything. The black bean bag. My swimming trophies on the shelves. The scarlet red candy machine Sebastian had filled with M&Ms for me. My desk with Dad's old Apple, the huge metal plate on the wall. It showed a woman from the 1950s; she was wearing blue coveralls, and her sleeves were rolled up. Over her head it read *We Can Do It* in large print.

Okay, so this really *was* my room, and my mom was sitting next to me, talking in a comforting voice as if I was a little kid. I could smell her perfume; it mixed with the heat of her skin. But then why wouldn't my heart stop racing? The smell of my own sweat almost made me sick. Something had clawed itself in my chest, gripping tight. It felt like an iron hand and stopped me from breathing. The fear of not being able to breathe became so overwhelming that I panicked and began to pant hard. I could not feel my hands any more, and despite the fact that Janne was sitting right next to me, her face looked so far away it was bizarre.

»Rebecca? Rebecca...«

I tried to focus on Janne's voice, but even her words sounded distant.

»...Sweetheart, listen to me...«

I tried, I really tried to open my mouth but nothing would come out.

»Okay, Rebecca.« Janne's voice sounded louder now, more professional but still calm. »I want you to exhale.« She put her hand on my chest. »Do you feel that? Let your breath flow out here, good, another time, exhale and push the air down. It's working, can you feel it? Do it again. Good, that's perfect.«

»I...« I finally found my voice again. It was a miserable croaking. »I... I... dreamed I would die. There was this room, Mom. There was this green rug. And a bed. A chandelier. It was all so... so real.«

Again I struggled for air. I concentrated on Janne's face. »There were all these pieces of glass. And... and somebody was with me, right next to me. He... it... I couldn't...«

I stopped. Speaking didn't help any. On the contrary: It made breathing even harder.

Janne pressed my hand. Then she tried to get up. I heard her say that she wanted to open the window but I shook my head and grabbed her arm to keep her from getting up.

Janne put her hand back on my chest but now it did not feel good any more. Her hand was too heavy, and her voice was too high. »Sweetheart, it was only a dream, you hear?«

I heard what she was saying but I did not *feel* it.

»Rebecca.« Now Janne's voice sounded tender and urgent. »Is something bothering you? That thing with Sebastian? Or did something happen with Dad and Michelle? Dreams mean something, Cubby, and sometimes it can help to find out what they stand for.«

No, I was screaming inside. There is nothing. The thing with Sebastian was six weeks ago, and things with Dad are fine. I'm just fine, period!

Janne studied my face. Her inquiring eyes were filled with concern now, and suddenly I wished she would stop looking at me like that.

My mom was a psychotherapist and an expert when it came to dreams. Despite her habit to investigate anything and everything, I knew that she was there for me in every way – not in that »I'm-your-best-friend« way but rather in the protective way of a mother. I wanted to ask her if it was normal to dream about your own death and if a dream could really feel that real. But I did not say it because something suddenly told me that my mom could not help me. For the first time in my life I felt lonely.

»It's okay, Mom,« I croaked. »I'm all better now... thanks. I think I should just try to get some sleep now.«

I summoned all my willpower to focus on breathing more calmly, and ever so slowly I succeeded. »I'm okay,« I finally said in a firmer voice. »Really.«

»All right then,« Janne said, hesitating. »I'll keep the door to my room open. If there's anything you need, all you have to do is call me, okay?«

»Thanks, Mom. Sleep well.«

»You, too.« Janne hovered by the door for a few moments; then the door shut quietly.

I clenched my hands. No way was it okay. My panic was still lurking right under the surface like an animal ready to attack. I desperately tried to figure out what to do now. Janne had left

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the light on my room. I had never been able to sleep with the light on but the thought of turning it off made my fear stretch out its claws.

Determined I pulled the cover back to open the window after all. At least the night air would make that awful smell of sweat go away. While getting out of bed, I stepped on something soft. It was the small stuffed bear. Obviously it had fallen out of my bed. I picked it up, clasped it to my chest and staggered over to the window.

The rain storm was over. There was not even a breeze. Now it was foggy outside, the air was pale and humid. Our house was sitting at the end of our street, and I could see the Elbe River from my window.

In the distance I saw the lights of the *Queen Mary*, the huge cruise ship that had entered the Port of Hamburg yesterday. I had been there, together with Suse and about a thousand other spectators who wanted to watch the spectacle. We had eaten fish rolls, drunk hot chocolate, and Suse's silly jokes had made me laugh so hard I almost had a heart attack. I would have loved to be able to call my best friend now. Or Sebastian. Suddenly I missed him.

The street under my window was empty. It had to be late. All the windows of the houses were dark, and the fog was even creeping up from under the parked cars. Only the streetlamp in front of our home was shining dimly. It was a flickering light.

Then I saw him.

He was leaning against the streetlamp, a shadowy shape, and for one absurd second I thought it was Sebastian. But it wasn't. It was a stranger – I could not see whether it was an adult or a boy yet I was sure that it was a male.

He was leaning against the streetlamp, a slender and dark shadow, looking up at me. His face was hardly more than a pale spot, and his hair was darker than the night. His long coat looked as if it was a size or two too big for his lean shoulders.

He just stood there, as if he was frozen. The only thing that was moving was the light of the streetlamp flickering on and off, on and off. The stranger did not even move when our eyes locked; he just kept staring up at my window as if he had waited for me.

It was an extremely disquieting sight but, strange enough, I was not afraid in the least. On the contrary – I looked at the stranger under the streetlamp and felt something inside me settle down. My panic withdrew, claws and all, and all of a sudden I was very tired.

Without moving or doing anything I just stood there, looking at the stranger. And then I went back to bed, pulled the blanket up to my chin and closed my eyes.

This time sleep came ever so gently. Its soft shadowy fingers wrapped themselves around me. The window was wide open, and the last thing I noticed was the rain setting in again, whispering and murmuring like a lullaby.

[Extracts from *Lucian* by Isabel Abedi, translated by Eva von Waldenfels]

[Part 2, unanswered mails to Rebecca]

From: Susanna Rossmann <susanna-rossmann@gmx.de>
Sent: 21 November 2008 09:25
To: Rebecca Wolff
Subject: ???

Becky ???

Are you in LOS ANGELES???

And are going to LIVE there indefinitely???

Please tell me this is a JOKE – the WORST one I ever heard!!!

I try to call you like a maniac since yesterday!!!

Is your mobile signed off???!!!!

Sparrow gave me the no. of your Dad, but he says you won't talk to anybody.

He says you have a notebook in your room and that you will have access to your emails this afternoon. He says I shall mail you.

That's what I just DID!!! WHAT??? HAPPENED??? Is it about Lucian???

From upset Suse

From: Aaron Middlehaue <aaronmiddlehaue@freenet.de>
Sent: 24 November 2008 18:09
To: Rebecca Wolff
Subject: Homework

Mornin' Rebecca,

Is it true that you are in Amiland?

Suse said something in class today.

Awesome!

But ... eh ... what about our dialogue about this one-always-dies-to-soon-shit?

You were pro and I was con, or vice versa?

Tyger says it's my tough luck when my partner "emigrates to the barbarians".

That means: I'll get an F if I don't hand in.

So, have you started yet? (not with dying, of course :-))

It would be phat if you send me something.

Doesn't matter if pro or con.

Or maybe both?

That be cool.

Mail back, cu, Aaron

From: Marijanne Wolff <marijanne-Wolff@t-online.de>
Sent: 27 November 2008 20:15
To: Rebecca Wolff
Subject: White Converse

Beloved Rebecca,

On the flight home I sat next to a little girl. With her white Converse, she kicked against my shin all the time. Eventually I began to cry, but I couldn't explain to the upset mother that it wasn't because of her daughter. All I had to think about was that you had the exact same Converse shoes. You wanted to wear them on the playground on a horribly rainy day. I wouldn't let you because it was so muddy outside. You begged and you snapped, but finally you went to the playground with Spatz's wellies and your sand bucket. When you came back, you marched to the shoe cupboard with your full bucket, slapped a heap of mud on each of the Converse, and said to me: "That's what you get, you stupid Mum!" I had to laugh out loud and you were so furious, but sometime later you forgot why you were angry and everything was fine.

Little Wolf Cubby, I have started this mail about a thousand times and a thousand times I deleted it, because I am at a loss. I can't stop wishing that it could be that easy again, but I know at the same time that this time, no bucket full of mud would be large enough to make up for it.

What I did was the worst thing I ever had to do, and every try to give you the reason for my behaviour fails because I can't explain it to you for the very reason. It sounds so trite and so cruel that I get sick, and I know that with anything I write in this mail, I won't help you, I try to help myself.

But that's what I would love to do: to help, more than anything.

Dad's suggestion that I should fly back to Hamburg was probably the only right thing to do.

Rebecca, I love you, even though you hate me now.

I love you more than anything in the world.

Yours, Mum

From: Susanna Rossmann <susanna-rossmann@gmx.de>
Sent: 27 November 2008 20:20
To: Rebecca Wolff
Subject: I'm waiting!!!

Dearest Becky,

Your mother is back here again. She said that you are in Los Angeles for your safety and there is nothing more to say about it. Sebastian and I talked at her like crazy, but she keeps absolutely silent. WHAT HAPPENED???

And why aren't you taking my calls?

Your Dad says you are in your room and he would ask you to check your mails. Now!

I will stay at the computer and wait for your answer!

Yours, Suse

From: Susanna Rossmann <susanna-rossmann@gmx.de>
Sent: 27 November 2008 21:20
To: Rebecca Wolff
Subject: I'M WAITNG!!!

BECKY?
Hello????
REBECCA?
REEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEBEEEEEEEEEEEEEECCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA?

From: Susanna Rossmann <susanna-rossmann@gmx.de>
Sent: 28 November 2008 01:30
To: Rebecca Wolff
Subject: WHY?

Why are you doing this to me?
Do you remember, Becky, when you accused me of being not there for you? I am. Always!!!

Yours, Suse

From: Sebastian Goldmann <Sebastian-goldmann@web.de>
Sent: 28 November 2008 21:00
To: Rebecca Wolff
Subject: Your Mother

Rebecca,

Your mother called me yesterday.

I didn't answer her questions (if you are in touch with me, if I am in touch with you, if, if, if, if...)

I want you to know this.

I want to know how you are.

Not from your mother.

But from you.

S.

[Extracts from *Lucian* by Isabel Abedi, translated by Johanna Ellsworth]

[Part 2, chapter 21 – set in L.A.]

The first person I spoke to after twelve weeks and three days was my little sister.

I had just pulled the headphones out of my ears when I heard the soft whimpering behind the door to my room. The song from Sebastian's e-mail played over and over again from my I-Pod, and the laptop Dad had given me as a gift was sitting open on my desk. The e-mails from my friends were all still open and the lucky sponge, a gift from Sparrow, was sitting on my lap. Dad had followed Sparrow's instructions and put her Christmas present on my bed. That had been the day before he had brought me to the hospital.

This morning they had released me from hospital, and I had spent my seventeenth birthday here in this room that I consciously became aware of for the first time.

It was a beautiful room furnished in light shades, a tall and wide canopy bed, my own bathroom next door, a walk-in closet and a huge window front with a view of the ocean. A vase filled with sunflowers was sitting on a coffee table in front of a white couch. It was surrounded by a mountain of parcels and packages. I had been sitting at my desk all day, first staring at the sea, then at the monitor.

By now you could no longer see the ocean, and my birthday was almost over.

Again I heard a whimpering behind the door; this time it was a distinct sound.

»Hello?«

The sound of my voice startled me. My throat was scratchy, a strange yet familiar sensation.

Was that me who was talking? I tried again.

»Hello?«

The windows were open, and the leaves were rustling softly in the tree in front of my window. There was no other sound outside. A winding road framed by palm trees led up to the house that was sitting on a vast parcel of land.

Dad had told me sometime that the house had been a wedding gift from Michelle's father, a famous architect. He had never sent me any photos. His life in Los Angeles had always been somewhat abstract to me.

The whimpering got louder.

I went to the door, opened it cautiously and saw my little sister.

She was lying on the ground, rolled up into a small ball. She was wearing a white night gown, and her blonde locks were glistening with sweat. She was sleeping and obviously dreaming.

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A little cake with seventeen candles that had all burned down to stumps was sitting next to her. Strange, but that sight moved me more than all those e-mails from my friends.

Val looked like an angel fallen from heaven. I bent down to her, took her by the shoulders and shook her gently. When she did not wake up, I picked her up, carried her in my room and put her on my bed.

»Hey,« I whispered after I had taken a deep breath. Val was as light as a feather but it had been a long time since I had carried anything but my own body weight. »Hey. You're dreaming. Wake up. You're dreaming...«

Val opened her eyes. »You can talk?«

I nodded. And not only that – apparently I could hear as well. I mean *really* hear, not like through a cotton wall.

Val looked at my in disbelief. »Do it again. Say something.«

»Hallo,« I said. »You had a bad dream.«

Val yawned, opening her mouth wide and showing a row of pointed white teeth.

»I know,« she said in a light voice that sounded as if she was singing. »I often have bad dreams.«

»What about?«

»Monsters.«

»Do they want to eat you?«

»No.« Val rubbed her eyes. They were big and dark blue with long, thick eye lashes. »I want to eat them. They are real little monsters. They are afraid of me. And when they start shaking, I also get afraid. Does that sound stupid? To be afraid of yourself?«

I shook my head. »No.«

»Good.« Val looked satisfied. »I don't think monsters taste all that good anyway. I brought you a cake.«

I nodded. »I know.«

»Go get it.« Val's singing voice had taken on a rather strict undertone.

It was a chocolate cake with chunks of banana and nuts. Val insisted I should cut it, and each of us ate a small slice. The cake tasted overly sweet and I only hoped it would not spoil my stomach.

»Are you fine now?« Val wanted to know.

I turned the corners of my mouth into a smile and realized surprised that even smiling was hard work for me. I had trained the muscles in my arms and legs but not my laughing muscles.

»Yep,« I tried to smile again. »I'm my old self again.«

»I was in a hospital once, too,« Val declared. »That was when I fell off the tree house into the fence. Poof – and then I was subconscious!« Val threw herself back on my bed. »Were you subconscious, too?« she asked with wide eyes.

»Something like that,« I said since that really hit it on the dot. I had been unconscious from the pain for three months. Sebastian had meant well by sending me the song by Linking Park but the lyrics did not nearly hit it on the dot. Even I could not find any words for what had happened to me. The pains had started in the plane and had gotten stronger and stronger the longer I had been here.

I had not refused to eat and talk because of spite, anger or despair. Had I opened my mouth, I probably would have done nothing but scream without stopping, just like the pain had never stopped.

It had held me hostage in its claws like a hungry monster. I had been helplessly at the mercy of that monster that wiped out any other thoughts and feelings a human might have.

It was strange but the hospital everyone had urged me to stay away from had saved my life. The day Dad brought me there the pain had become so unbearable that I would have done anything to make it stop. I probably would even have committed suicide if I had had a chance. When I was rolled up in my hospital bed, I noticed how busy everyone around me was suddenly getting. Whatever the physicians had given me that day – it helped. From then on my condition was improving one tiny step after another. At first I was fed intravenously but eventually I could eat again. My body struggled to remember that it had muscles and was capable of applying them. At the fitness room and in the pool I got my physical strength back, and when my dad had picked me up today, the physicians had said that I had recuperated physically. They could not evaluate my emotional condition. Even I could not do that because when the physical pain had subsided, I had found another way to blend out dangerous thought.

I owed that way to Sparrow. Even though I had not even read her e-mail at the time, I remembered the part about the toxic resistance very clearly. It had turned into some kind of mantra I would tell myself every time those forbidden thoughts threatened to rise to the surface of my conscious mind.

»Have you turned speechless again?« Val inquired. She was sitting in front of me on my bed, studying my face. Her look was as intense and evaluating as if I were a parcel of goods she had ordered and was inspecting now to decide whether to keep them or send them back.

»No,« I said and tried again to smile. »Thank you for the cake. It's really delicious.«

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Val did not even blink.

»Well, I think you look just like my dad,« she finally said.

I wondered if she considered that to be an advantage or a disadvantage. Unlike me, Val did not look anything like our dad.

»Because mom doesn't think so,« Val continued. »She says all you maybe have are Dad's flaws. What are flaws?«

»Your mom can perhaps explain that better than me,« I said but Val was already occupied with her next question.

»Will you unwrap your presents now?« Her eyes were sparkling.

I glanced at the heap of gift boxes. I did it for Val who eagerly ran over to the heap of boxes. She tore the wrapping open and tossed the gift ribbons through the air. Then, as solemn as if *she* were the birthday kid, she handed me one gift after another. I mechanically accepted them. A digital camera, a coupon for driving lessons and a gorgeous coffee table book about Los Angeles were gifts from Dad. Sebastian had sent me a survival package, a first aid box filled with my favorite candy and a collection of CDs he had recorded himself.

Suse had sent me a scarlet bathing suit and a silver bracelet with a charm. It was half a heart with the inscription *Forever Friends*.

»And what was inside this one?« my sister inquired. She pointed at a small open box that had the words *Spongilia Beatificae* printed on it.

»A lucky sponge,« I said quietly, looking over at the desk where I had left it. The last package was from Mom but when Val wanted to open it, I stopped her by grabbing her hand. »Not that one,« I said. »Don't you think it's time for you to go to bed? It's pretty late.«

»Not yet!« Val said and held out a thin package. »First you have to open my own present.« I tried to smile at my little sister; it was much easier by now. »But you already gave me the birthday cake.«

Val looked at me in surprise. »A birthday cake is not a present! Come on – open it!«

I complied. The package contained a portrait of Val. It was a pencil drawing, and it was beautiful. Val was sitting by the open window, she was wearing her white nightgown and her light curly hair was cascading over her shoulders. Her large eyes with the thick eye lashes looked directly at me. She looked very serious, still, completely balanced. Whoever had drawn that picture had discovered something inside her you would not notice at first glance. But that was not the only thing that made the drawing so unusual. The outlines on the left side of the portrait were double; the second line was very thin and fine, merely hinted.

»What's that supposed to be?« I asked Val.

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She shrugged. »I don't know,« she said. »Faye just painted that there.«

»Faye?« I knitted my brow.

»My nanny,« Val explained. »She's real cool. She can make herself disappear so nobody can see her. Do you like the picture?« She studied me with a rather critical look. »You have to say thank you. I had to sit still for a long time for your present.«

»Thank you,« I said and embraced Val. »I love it. It's absolutely wonderful. But now you must get some sleep. You have to go to school tomorrow, don't you?«

Val sniffed. She sounded shy for the first time. »Can I sleep in your bed with you?«

Her eyes were so pleading I conceded.

As trusting as a puppy dog my baby sister slipped under the covers of my bed und snuggled up to me. Putting her cold toes on my warm legs, she fell asleep at once. I listened to her quiet, rhythmical breathing that was interrupted by a tiny sigh from time to time, and tried to fight sleep the same way I did every night.

I could hardly remember the time when slumber had been refreshing. Each night I would dream that I was dying. It was the same nightmare about death I had had in Hamburg that Wednesday. It had returned my very first night in Los Angeles and had not gone away at the hospital, either.

I was lying in this strange room with the fluffy green rug, the flowery day bed and the shaking chandelier over my head. Next to me, on my stomach, my hands had turned to broken pieces of glass, and the metallic sweet smell of blood was wafting up to my nose. Night after night I would struggle for air that was not there in that room and keep pleading for my life in desperation. Please, please don't... please... don't let me...

I was holding Sparrow's lucky sponge in my hand, and Val's small body had become hot. She snuggled up to my belly like a big hot water bottle. I felt the softness of the fine hairs on her body, smelled the sweet strawberry scent in her hair, and eventually I felt that I, too, could no longer resist sleep. My body twitched a few more times, then I was gone.

I woke up from bright light behind my closed eye lids, and blinked confused. The sky in front of my window had the color of watery milk. Had I really slept through till morning?

Obviously so.

I was still holding Val in my arms. Dad was kneeling in front of my bed. He was looking down on us as if we were some supernatural apparition. Streaks of silver glimmered in his curly black hair, his face looked drawn and his eyes had dark rings. But now they lit up. He was about to say something when an excited voice came from the corridor. »Did you find her?«

The sound startled Dad. He hastily jumped up and ran to the door. »She's here,« he called softly. »In here with my... with Rebecca. She's sleeping like a baby.«

»Then wake her! Dammit, she already missed the first morning lesson...«

Dad closed the door.

He came back to my bed, kissed me on my forehead. Then he ran his hand tenderly over Val's blonde locks. »Hey, Sleepy, you have to get up. We're very late.«

Irritated Val mumbled something, ground her teeth, then she turned over to face me and buried her head in my shoulder.

Gently Dad pulled back the covers. »Val, Sweetheart, get up. You have to go to school.«

»Don't want to,« Val protested still half asleep. »I'm sick. I'm staying home.«

Dad sighed. »Come here, my little princess.« He put his arm under Val's body and picked her up. My sister started to hiss like a kitten, squirming and hitting thin air. Her small fist smashed into Dad's nose.

»Hey, don't do that«, I said. »That's not nice.«

Dad gaped at me in shock.

»You... you... you were talking just now,« he stuttered.

Val opened her eyes and grinned. »But she talked to me *first*.«

Something in Dad's face broke. He started to cry like a little boy. Val kissed him. »Dad, you don't have to be sad,« she whispered. »She's talking to you, right?«

Dad looked at me as if he still couldn't believe it.

Michelle's shrill voice was coming from somewhere in the house. »Alec, it's a quarter after eight– if we don't leave in ten minutes, Val will miss the second lesson as well!«

»I'll just bring your sister down to Michelle, then I'll come back right away,« Dad said.

I shook my head. »That's not necessary, Dad. I... I think I would rather be by myself for a little while.«

»Oh, of course. That's fine, no problem. I understand,« Dad said grinning overjoyed. He seemed to be so overwhelmed to hear words come out of my mouth that he probably wouldn't have cared if I had cussed at him.

»But I'll stay home, just in case you need me.«

Again I shook my head. »Please don't,« I struggled to say. »I'll be fine.«

Dad seemed unsure of what to do. »Okay, I'll leave the number of my cell phone downstairs,« he said. »As soon as you wake up or want company or anything, call me. I'll be right over!

Okay?«

I nodded. »Fine.«

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Finally Dad left. The front door opened and shut. I took a deep breath but not from relief. Every syllable of our conversation had cost me a lot of strength. My senses felt as if someone had peeled a protective skin off them. The noises were more distinct now. The outlines were sharper. The smells were more intense. I had literally woken up, and I realized I could not stay in that room another second.

Sparrow's lucky sponge wouldn't be powerful enough any longer. I had to get out of here before the forbidden thoughts could worm their way back into my conscious mind.

Suddenly I couldn't wait. I ran into the bathroom, showered and tore the doors to my walk-in closet open. My eyes scanned the shelves, I saw my shirt with the snap buttons I had worn the last time when – stop it!

I ripped it off the clothes hanger, stuffed it behind a stack of sweaters and yanked a purple t-shirt out of a shelf. When I put on my jeans, it slid off my skinny hips at once. I searched for a belt, closed it three holes tighter than usually and fled outside. In the hallway I paused, listening for Dad, for Michelle, for Val. Everything was quiet; obviously they had already left. I had the whole house for myself.

I went through each floor, opened every door and glanced into all the rooms.

How long had I been there before I had to go to the hospital? Five weeks, six weeks? It seemed incredible to me.

I really had been cut off from everything that was happening, and that was a good thing. Everything new was good, and everything about this house was new. Any architect would probably have described it as a modern dream of glass and light. All the rooms had huge wall-to-wall windows that reached from the wooden floors up to the high ceilings.

The house had three stories. The upper floor was Dad's and Michelle's domain with several walk-in closets – one of them just for shoes. I entered each one of them, then I continued on into the marble bathroom and the bedroom. Its window front revealed a view of the mountains, rolling hills with greenery on it and here and there a path.

My room was on the second floor, which also housed a guest bedroom and Val's refuge. It held a climbing wall, a giant aquarium and countless toys.

The living area was on the first floor. Here the window fronts covered two sides so that on the left you could see the mountains and on the right there was the backyard that was more a park than someone's yard. In the distance you could even see the ocean. The furniture was expensive and impersonal. Coffee tables made of glass held large volumes filled with glossy prints featuring modern art, photography and interior decorating. They did not look as if anyone had ever opened them. A Steinway piano filled one corner of the room. A huge

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Buddha bronze was sitting in another corner. A chrome vase filled with lilies was sitting on a high stand, and on the wall above the stand there was a mirror with a chrome frame. The room had no book cases, instead there was a huge flat screen and black shelves full of DVDs. They were in alphabetical order from *American Beauty* to *Zorro*.

The whole room was cool and immaculate and suffocating. Apart from Val's room, only the kitchen looked like somebody was really living here. It contained enormous refrigerators, a bar, a gigantic stove and a pantry, but on the sparkling clean chrome counter I discovered half-empty coffee cups next to a box of cornflakes that had been tipped over.

Behind the kitchen there was the yard. It was enclosed by tall trees and had something of a park that was well tended to. The heart of the yard was the pool. Suse was right: It would definitely be tempting to stick my big toe into the water, and suddenly I would have loved to. Swimming would have been just the right thing now because after having toured the whole house I had no idea where to escape next. There was only one problem: The pool was dry. That very moment I realized that I could no longer run away from things. Before my stay at the hospital I had been occupied with my pains. At the hospital I had been busy with recuperating. Now the pains were gone, now I had my physical strength back. Last night Val had even broken my silence. And now the forbidden thoughts were rising dangerously close to the surface.

It was only then that I noticed the small cottage. It was sitting at the other end of the yard, framed by flowering lemon trees.

As soon as I had turned the door knob, I realized this was Dad's domain. It was a single room covering two levels. The upper level, connected to the ground level by a winding staircase, consisted of a large mattress on the floor. The rumpled sheets clearly betrayed that it had been used a lot lately.

The ground floor had a fireplace. A thick soft carpet with huge cushions was lying in front of the fireplace, and newspapers, tall stacks of books and Dad's guitar that had been a birthday gift from Janne many years ago were scattered around. The largest piece of furniture in the room was a desk about fourteen feet long and seven feet wide. Dozens of rocks and shells and lots of photographs in picture frames were placed around Dad's computer. One frame contained a picture of Michelle sitting with flying blonde hair on a carousel horse. She was blowing a kiss at the camera and laughing. In that photo she was not only laughing with her mouth but also with her eyes – *happy in love* was written all over her face. There was no doubt who had taken the picture of her.

Three photos showed Val, the rest – about ten pictures – showed me. I was laughing in almost all of them. I quickly looked away; I could not stand my cheerful face. It was too dangerous to think about that.

My glance fell on a yellowed etching that leaned against Dad's computer. It looked rather old. Though *London 1912* was written in the right-hand corner on the bottom, the dainty signature could not be deciphered.

The picture showed two men of about forty and a strikingly beautiful young woman, who was standing between them. They were posing in front of a pavilion while the background was only vaguely suggested.

The woman was really beautiful. Her black hair was tied into a ponytail and her big dark eyes sparkled. She reminded me a bit of Audrey Hepburn in the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. She looked graceful, somehow fragile and had a very straight posture. The man on her right, blonde and good-looking, seemed familiar to me but I could not say where I knew him from. He had his arm around the woman's waist. The gesture was proud and possessive, and he was beaming into the camera with a lot of self-esteem. The man on the woman's left had dark hair. His brow was high and his eyes that were also looking straight at the camera were alert and very serious.

My eyes wandered back to the blonde man, and then it hit me where I had seen him before. He was William Al – my great-grandfather.

»Don't get startled,« a light voice behind me said.

I turned around so quickly that I dropped the picture. I had expected Michelle but the girl standing in the open door to the cottage was a stranger. She was dainty and pale, and at first I thought she was a friend of Val's. But when I looked closer, I noticed that the girl was older than Val, about as old as me, maybe a bit younger. Her outfit was pretty awesome. She was wearing a black beret and an old-fashioned dress in the same color as her eyes – a silvery grey.

»Who are you?« I heard myself ask, still surprised that the words were tumbling out of my mouth without any effort on my side.

»My name is Faye.« Her voice had an outdated accent; she did not sound like an American. She studied me with a smile. »And you? You're Sleeping Beauty?«

Sleeping Beauty? That startled me. I felt a spark of defiance typical of the person I used to be, a person who would not take a remark like that sitting down.

»Rebecca,« I answered. »My name is Rebecca.«

The girl that called herself Faye smiled again. Then she took a step towards me and picked up the etching.

»Have you seen that?« She pointed at the dark-haired man, or at least I thought she meant him. But then I realized what she wanted to show me. The back of the dark-haired stranger's hand and the back of the young woman's hand were touching. But there was even more. Their pinkies were intertwined. It was like one of those pictures where you have to find tiny details. Only if you looked real close, did you discover this tiny detail. Yet it gave the picture a whole new meaning.

»Wouldn't it be interesting to find out how it went on from there?« Faye asked.

»What?« I stared at the strange girl. »What's that supposed to mean? What kind of crap are you suggesting?«

Faye shrugged. »I don't mind if we change the subject,« she said. »I heard you had to go to a hospital? How was it? Was it nice? Did you get to meet other crazy people?«

She cocked her head. She did not seem sarcastic in the least but rather sincerely interested.

I gaped at her. »Have you gone nuts?« I asked upset. »What are you doing here, anyway? If I got it right, you're Val's nanny, not mine. Or —« I got suspicious, so I took a step back, »— or are you here because of me? Did my dad ask you to spy on me?«

»No,« Faye said.

»Okay then,« I grunted. »Why don't you get lost and leave me alone!«

»Alone?« Faye smiled; she seemed amused. »I really didn't want to disturb you. I only wanted to leave a note for Michelle and then drive to the beach. Then I saw that the door to the cottage was open. Well, then...« Again she smiled. »See you. I'll leave you alone.«

Before Faye left the cottage, she took her black beret off. When I saw what had been tucked under the cap, I felt electrified. Her long curly hair that came down to her waist was so red it seemed to be on fire.

»Wait,« I uttered. »Wait a second. You said you... were heading for the beach?«

Faye turned around. »Yes —?« It sounded like a question.

Last night I had dreamed about being at the beach with you. I didn't know where that beach was. But it was rather crowded. There were surfers in the water; a few boys were playing volleyball, and a girl was sitting next to us. She had long curly hair the color of fire and was wearing an old-fashioned dress. Its color was a silvery-grey. She was drawing a picture of a little boy, and we watched her working on it.

Val's present. Her nanny had painted it.

I stared at Faye. The energy that was circulating through my body could be compared to an overdose of adrenaline.

»If you don't mind,« I said breathlessly, »I could maybe... join you?«

Faye shrugged as if it did not matter to her. »Sure, why not?« she said.