

Susan Kreller: HANNA'S RAIN

Hannas Regen

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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Chapter 1

Hanna begins in the rain. She ends in the rain, too—not now, later, no need to rush. It’s a wet October morning when she pops up in my life for the first time, out of the blue—although it’s actually more of a gray day. A cloudy sky hangs over the city and makes everything seem even more dreary than usual—the bus stops and the houses and the old cider mill, even the showy towers of the Future Technology Inc. building—everything on my way to school looks blurry, as if none of it were intended to be seen by anyone.

The rain washes away all traces.

It washes away all people.

Hanna—though she’s not called that yet—is walking through the pouring rain a few feet ahead of me. She’s stomping through the puddles and causing outrage everywhere she goes—I can tell from the movements of the outraged everywhere she goes. I don’t know what they’re yelling at her; the rain is louder, it falls onto all the noise, waters it down.

I’m sure Hanna is able to hear what they’re saying, but she doesn’t let it bother her. She keeps plodding along the wet sidewalk, happily splashing everyone who doesn’t get away fast enough. But maybe I’m wrong, maybe she’s not doing it on purpose at all—to be honest, it’s more like the rain doesn’t even exist to her, as if the rest of us are just imagining it, like an ache in our big toe or a burglar in the middle of the night or a run-of-the-mill mirage.

That’s what it is.

She’s walking in the rain with complete indifference, as if it’s just that the morning hasn’t been cleaned properly, like it’s still got some streaks left on it, but she doesn’t try to buff them away—she just leaves them as they are. Hanna is the only person on the street who doesn’t have an umbrella or a raincoat—she doesn’t even have a name, she’s just a girl I’ve never seen before who is letting herself get rained on in front of me, a strange, drenched little Shih Tzu that unsettles me and that might make a left at any moment and go trotting out of my

field of vision, only to disappear forever.

But I'm getting it wrong.

Hanna doesn't pop up in my life.

Right from the start, she dives down deep.

And it's not that she's acting as if the rain doesn't exist. To her the rain seems to be much more than just water. I can tell just by looking at her from behind, I don't need to see her face. No, Hanna isn't walking in the rain indifferently, that's the weird thing—she's paying more attention to it than anyone else, in fact; she hides inside it, wears it like a cloak.

As the raindrops pelt onto my umbrella like a crackling barn fire and I hear a siren in the distance, Hanna, who is still walking in front of me, becomes one with the rain, surrenders her contours to it, holding her head high. She doesn't hunch like all the others, even though they are shielded by their umbrellas and raincoats. Everyone seems to have their head ducked down, even the cars that cast their floodlights onto the wet streets as they come rushing by.

Everyone except Hanna.

And I think there are about three million different ways of walking in the rain. Slaloming between puddles, with nervous little steps or irritated strides. With the morning paper draped over your head. On tippy-toe. With a clearance-rack umbrella flipped inside out by the wind. With your hood pulled way down over your face. Swinging your arms. In the kind of thin raincoat that looks like a big trash bag. In rolled-up jeans.

There are countless different ways of walking in the rain, and almost all of them are fast or about keeping the water at bay. But Hanna has opted for the one way that's slow and wet. She's chosen to dive in, moving in a cloak made of rain, and I realize how relieved I am that I don't have to know this girl walking out in front of me, reflected in the wet pavement like a weary old monarch.

'That's Hanna,' Miss Mattai whispers. She's telling me because she's my homeroom teacher and she's responsible for the welfare of new, dripping

students. I don't know why she's whispering. 'Hanna Kiesow,' she continues. 'It's her first day. Josefin, I'm counting on you.'

The classroom is noisy, Geography hasn't started yet, but one of the boys seems to have heard; he yells across the room, 'Guys, listen up! Josefin here has won the jackpot!'

Unfortunately, he's the only one who was listening. And who is listening to himself. All the others just look over sleepily; a few of them giggle quietly, and I wonder if Miss Mattai will be introducing Hanna properly later or if she's thought better of it, just so no one will get any funny ideas. Even though that doesn't make any sense, because she never gives us any ideas anyway—funny or otherwise.

The jackpot, who has a name now, is standing in front of my desk and raining. Hanna must be soaked to the bone; the water runs down her heavy, dark hair and drips from the sleeves of her jacket—she's caught out in the rain. In her own rain.

There's already a puddle forming underneath her. I notice it, and Miss Mattai notices it too, because she hurries off, furtively wiping a few drops off her skirt as she makes her way to the front.

Hanna sits down next to me, starts rummaging around in her backpack and then, with a single furious tug, pulls out a book—a crumpled paperback, which she flings down onto the desk in front of her but clearly has no interest in reading: *Gothic Churches in the Light of Day*. The churches must be comfortable, because the book is a pillow onto which Hanna now lays her soaked head, her back is sleeping, gray and hunched, the rain her blanket.

She hasn't looked up at me once, which is just fine with me—it's almost as if she's not even there. It's almost what I wished for on my uncomfortable walk to school. I don't notice just how much she isn't there until class begins and Miss Mattai sends us off into the desert, *one-fifth of the Earth's surface is desert*, as is an interminable fifth of this year's geography curriculum, unfortunately.

Because as Miss Mattai is talking about stony deserts and rocky deserts, about salt deserts and sand deserts of the driest kind, a tidal wave is inching toward me and my stuff from over on my right. Like a small deluge it creeps out from underneath Hanna, flowing treacherously across the desk toward my binder and my geography textbook and drawing a watery boundary between me and this strange girl, who is now no more than a big gray boulder, *a surface consisting of rocks and rubble*.

We're sitting in the back corner, right by the window, and I move myself and my stuff so far away from Hanna that I'm all but pressed to the glass that the rain is still beating against outside—now I understand what the radio host meant this morning when he talked about *heavy downpour*. All I can see outside is water, blurs of light and shadowy figures. A wind that I didn't notice earlier reaches into the black trees. The mottled world outside has changed into one giant rushing, *you can often see desert varnish on the stones*.

Hanna's own heavy downpour seems to have let up—just sometimes, when she shifts, a rivulet splits off from the main puddle and heads in my direction, aiming for my papers. And I notice something else: Hanna's hand sticking out from this balled-up person, with five fingernails that are each a different length.

And yet I don't think Hanna messed up clipping or filing her nails. Despite the tiny white spots and the different lengths these nails look perfect—no polish, but they're pink, with rounded edges. They look like their owner knows exactly what she wants, or worse, like their owner is someone who never, not even for a single second, wishes she had a life other than her own. Who never longs to be a completely different person, or even a *slightly* different person—just someone other than herself.

Once I realize this I start feeling embarrassed around Hanna, around a stranger who I might just as well have never seen again if she hadn't turned right in the wrong place, i.e. exactly where someone happened to put up our school building at some point. I feel embarrassed because Hanna has to sit next

to *me*, the most boring girl in the class, someone who hasn't even managed to get a nickname yet.

Which is especially tragic in the case of my name, a name which was really only invented so that other people could carefully chop it up into nicknames, like Josie or Fini or some other affectionate moniker. But not even my parents call me anything but Josefin, because right before I was born they read in some book that nicknames only serve to belittle a child rather than raising them up.

By the time my younger brother Carlo, whose real name is Carl, turned up, they'd probably forgotten all about that book, but no matter: I've never been able to get away from the whole Josefin situation, at home or anywhere else.

I'm an *I'm counting on you* kind of person.

I'm the person you call when no one else has time to talk.

I'm one of those people on the sidelines who end up in the shot by accident.

Now Miss Mattai is calling out from the front of the classroom: 'Guys, come on now, I want to hear the *word!* There's only one word for this type of rock, and I want to hear it!' It's the best thing for her to be saying, because it means that it won't be long until class is over.

It's always the same: right before the bell rings we have to identify a rock, no matter how rocky or not-rocky the subject we're dealing with. When someone complains, she'll say she's preparing us for the real world. With rocks. With dead, colorless lumps!

Someone shouts 'feldspar,' someone else shouts 'granite,' neither of which seem to be the word invented to denote this rock, you can tell from Miss Mattai's mildly appalled facial expression. And while others are shouting other words, more wrong words, the lifeless, colorless lump next to me regains consciousness, lets out small noises and sits up. I don't look directly at the newly awakened stone, but there's enough room in the periphery of my vision, room

for this strange girl. And over there I can see that Hanna is slowly turning her head toward me and giving me an unusually long look for a stone.

When eventually I stare back, I find myself caught in the darkest gaze in the whole class. I can stand it for a while; I try to make my expression as repellent as possible, water-repellent, stone-repellent, *leave me alone*. Then I pick my binder and the geography textbook up off the table, in triumphant slow-motion, they're still dry and that's my small victory, I have saved them from Hanna's rain.

She understands immediately.

And before I can put my small paper victory into my backpack, she gets up and starts shaking herself dry, but not like a damp little Shih Tzu, more like a soaking wet Saint Bernard who's getting on in years. First she only shakes her head, but then her upper body too, shaking and shaking, and everything gets wet, my geography book, my desk, even me, even Hanna's *Gothic Churches*, which were already warped before. Hanna keeps shaking herself until all her rain has fallen.

Then, suddenly, she stops.

Turns to face me again.

And smiles a tiny, crooked smile.

Chapter 14

I still don't know why I was so dead set on inviting Hanna to international dinner night, whether I was just trying to be nice or if I was trying to finally get something to change. There are some things in life you never understand. But I know one thing: ever since the exploded cherries things have been much better between her and me, even when our Liechtenstein theme night came to such a sudden, stony end.

Hanna didn't say a word about it later, and I didn't ask. Just once she

inquired what had become of the cherry stains, whether they'd come out in the wash, if we'd been able to salvage my mom's pretty glittery sweater. I told her that, while unfortunately the stains are very much still there, it does have a nice new color, a unique shade of lilac that is sure to be the hottest color in fashion by the spring season if not sooner, and that it wasn't glitter anyway, just wool with metallic thread, and a bargain at that.

And that was the end of that.

I didn't tell her anything else.

I didn't mention to Hanna that on Liechtenstein theme night we'd spent a long time sitting in stunned silence around the living room table, taking turns shaking our heads, which weren't working properly anymore since they were all gooey with strings of melted cheese, inside and out. At least that's what it felt like to me.

My mom and I were the only ones who had some idea about what might have caused Hanna's mom to lash out like that, but we didn't tell Carlo or my dad, probably because we finally understood that we actually know nothing about Hanna, nothing at all, and that we don't have any proof, that so far we've just been stitching the story together for ourselves.

And we're starting to run out of thread.

Because we spent so long just sitting there, the cherry stains had enough time to seep into our clothes, making them impossible for my mom to get out, no matter what she tried to use: vinegar, toothpaste, salt. However, she did manage to get that detective gleam out of her eyes, who knows what she used for that—for the first time she looked like she was actually interested in Hanna.

I think stories change the moment they get a beating heart. When they turn into real people. When they're no longer made up of thoughts and ideas and what ifs, but suddenly get swinging arms, a darkness beneath their eyelashes, an almost fathomless smile.

And someone who says *No contact!*

That night I saw in my mom's eyes that Hanna was no longer a

Scandinavian crime drama to her, no Sunday night murder mystery, no made-for-TV movie with that actor who seems to star in every single one and yet never ends up being the one who did it—what I saw in my mom’s eyes wasn’t curiosity or a side hustle as a private detective.

What I saw in her eyes that night was Hanna.

And genuine concern.

In the two weeks that follow the Liechtenstein theme night, Hanna and I end up on the steps of the observatory building no less than three times, each time without a single star, each time without a single fight and each time with cold roasted almonds that we bought at the Christmas market earlier. We’re always the only ones there, no suspicious men anywhere in sight, this lookout is just for us.

A few times I’m on the brink of pleading with Hanna to divulge her secret or finally tell me that there *is* no secret, not even a little one—that she just had a bad day, a single, ongoing bad day that started back in mid-October.

Asking someone for their secret.

Like you’re just asking them for a pencil or a piece of paper.

No—never.

Even though it would be so easy, everything would be easier if you could just tell people what they urgently needed to know, or if you could ask them what *you* urgently needed to know. It would be so easy if you could tell someone that you liked them and that you no longer felt lonely with them around, and it would have been so easy if we’d just used mouthwash on the salty cherry stains, but you only ever learn about that kind of thing afterwards.

Nothing’s ever easy.

And sometimes I’ll say Hanna’s name just to see how many times it takes before she responds, but it’s always different, it probably depends on the time of day. Once, on one of our walks home, I even see her house from the outside, I walk her all the way up to the gate and we stay there for a moment, because I can’t come in, *no contact!*

It's a modern house, one of those perfect white cubes inside which everything is new and nothing is creaky or squeaky and there aren't any doors that stick, I'm sure of that, I don't need to go in to know. It's the kind of house I'm normally dying to spend time in. But Hanna's house doesn't make me feel that way. What I see doesn't feel like a cozy home.

More like a giant sugar cube.

It's starting to feel more and more Christmassy in town. One time it even snows. But it's the kind you immediately forget again, because it's a disappointing snow. Sleet. Gone before it's even hit the ground.

It's a cold and warm and peaceful time, and because Hanna talks a lot but still doesn't tell me anything about herself, I read all kinds of things at home about people in the witness protection program, I listen to podcasts and I even watch crime dramas about the subject, but after the third one I realize that just before the credits roll the carefully-protected witness always ends up being shot anyway, right when no one's expecting it, except for the camera man.

At night I read about underworlds and upper worlds and everything in between, I read about a family that had to go into hiding because the grandfather, rather than sitting in his armchair with his pipe and slippers, testified against a money-laundering operation that he happened to have been a part of until right before the trial, I read that even after the trial they all had to go on living their new fake life under their fake names and had to keep on dealing with the witness protection folks from the government, and who knows, maybe that's still how it is now.

I even read that the protected witnesses aren't allowed to make up their fake life stories, that they get given them by the government, and then they have to learn them by heart like the complicated biography of a dead poet. I read so much my head starts spinning and I recognize and don't recognize Hanna and her parents in all of these stories, and the days go by and the stories go by, the observatory hangouts and the roasted almonds go by, it still hasn't snowed

properly, my dad has started using names from the nativity play when he picks up the phone, and then, on the last day before the Christmas vacation, for the first time Hanna doesn't show up at school.

And no one knows why.