

Mario Fesler: Nothing but Spies

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Nothing but Spies 1

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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Rough translation

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Trunks. Branches. Twigs.

A squirrel is sitting on one of them. It looks at him attentively, as if it wants to ask:

"What are you doing here, mate?"

He asks himself the same question as he sits up with a groan. He feels every single bone, every muscle aches and his soaked clothes make him shiver.

But it's summer, he thinks. Then he realises: That's the only thing he knows. An uneasy feeling runs through him, overlaid by the humming of his skull. He touches his burning forehead, feels something strangely soft, which he carefully removes from his skin and then looks at perplexed in the palm of his hand.

What is that?

It looks like one of those cheap suction cups that you attach bathroom towels to. Shaking his head, he puts the thing in the pocket of his jacket.

Why do I know what suction cups and bathroom towels are, but not who or where I am? He stands up on wobbly legs, leaning against a thin birch tree. (*Ah yes, so we know birch trees too.*) A steep slope rises up in front of him and a trace can be recognised in the mud. It leads to a log that lies just before the abyss.

Did I sit there and then fall off?

The idea of clumsily rolling down a slope in a deserted forest offends him. Even though he has no idea who he is, he knows that something like this shouldn't happen to him.

A wave of nausea distracts him from the thought. He bends to the side and throws up. When it's over, he sees something black in the colourful, ankle-deep foliage.

A cellphone. Thank goodness.

He jumps down, picks it up and curses under his breath. The thing is completely wet. It would be a miracle if it had survived.

Waterproof up to three thousand metres, whispers a voice in his ear. Even though he has no idea who would need such a feature on a smartphone, he presses the button on the side. It turns on without a hitch. He places his thumb on the designated field and fails at entering the required PIN. *The main thing is that Bug is fine*, he thinks. Then he wonders, who or what the hell *Bug* is supposed to be.

This must all be a nightmare. Seeking help, he looks to where the squirrel was sitting, but it is gone. He feels incredibly lonely and wonders why this loneliness seems so familiar.

Vincent. My name is Vincent Lurking.

The thought is like a drifting plank on a raging sea of cluelessness. He grabs it greedily and pulls himself onto it. At last he has something. Even if it's just a name. Then Vincent stumbles off.

As he leaves the forest behind, he sees a small river to his right.

The Neisel.

Another name, another clue. A little way upstream of the Neisel are houses. A town.

1.7 kilometres, reveals this spooky voice in his head, which is obviously pretty good at estimating distances.

The first thing Vincent reaches is a small industrial area. A large car workshop with a car dealership attached. A shut down factory which, according to a sign in front of it, once produced *quality German tyres*. A discount store that shares the car park with an electrical shop. Vincent's steps are firmer as he marches on. New data appears in his head, which he mumbles to himself quietly like vocabulary for an all-important test.

"Tatjana Lurking, 38, my mum.

Mark Lurking, 42, my father.

Siri Lurking, 9, my sister."

He has now arrived in the centre of this town. A market square with a fountain. Deserted. No wonder, in this cold drizzly weather. The small bookshop, the flower shop and the perfumery are closed. Vincent only catches a glimpse of a few customers behind the window panes of a café.

A tower clock chimes six times and draws his attention to the largest building.

The late Gothic church of St Gregory, says the creepy voice. Built in 1263, it is the oldest building in Trockenstedt.

The name of the city tears down a dam. Memories flood Vincent's head.

Trockenstedt, he thinks. But we haven't moved there yet!

At least now he knows where he is. Who he is. Where he has to go. He calls up the city map in his head, orientates himself and then walks to the newly built part of the town.

Flemmingkarree, he reads on the street sign. Very good. That's the right way.

House number 2: The Hagenbecks.

House number 16: The Cauder.

House number 25: Mr Frescher.

At number 26, he notices a face behind the window.
Celia Lopez. She looks at him like a ghost.

He only knows her from pictures. But she clearly seems to know more about him than just his face.

Lurking is written on a sign on the garden fence of the next house. Vincent looks up. The house looks exactly like the construction plans. The pool is also there, but the water has apparently already been drained. Work has already been done in the garden. There is fresh bark mulch on the flower beds.

The front door opens. Tatjana hurries to meet him.

"Vincent!" she calls out in a worried voice and grabs his arm as if he's about to collapse.

Mark is now there too, supporting him. "We were so worried!"

They bring him into the kitchen and place him on a chair in the dining area. Siri sits at the other end and looks at him scrutinisingly.

Vincent grabs the newspaper lying on the table. His eyes search for the date.

"Did you really do that?" asks Siri.

15 October. Absurdly, Vincent feels like he has to laugh.

I don't know what you mean and whether I did it, he answers Siri's question in his head. *I honestly don't know*

what I've been doing for the last four weeks. A soft chuckle escapes his throat. As disturbing as it all is, there's something funny about it, he thinks.

"Is everything all right?" A woman and a man stand in the hallway with worried faces. The front door must have been left open when he was brought in. How unprofessional. *Lorena and Christian Lopez* are helped by his ghostly voice, which is probably his memory kicking in again.

"I think so," says Mark.

"The main thing is that he's back," adds Tatjana. "Our family doctor will take care of everything else."

"I was so worried about him." Siri sounds as if she's about to burst into tears.

"Well, then ... collect yourselves first. If you need anything, let us know. You know where to find us." Christian nods to everyone.

"Really, come over if you need anything," adds his wife in a kind tone. "In case you haven't noticed: You're a family that we really love."

She looks at Vincent, stunned, as he bursts out laughing.

"What's so funny?" asks Mark, perplexed.

Vincent just shakes his head and continues laughing.

That would of course be a true highlight if he were to speak the thought outloud, which is responsible for bringing out the laughter again and again.

We're not a family at all!

1



"Celia! Come on now! We don't have to be the last ones to turn up!" If it had been up to my mum, we would certainly have been the very first ones to step on the lawn of our new neighbours. But I didn't feel like stepping onto the lawn at all.

"I'm not turning up anywhere!" I shouted and locked my bedroom door, just in case. Less than five seconds later, the doorknob rattled.

"Celie! What are you doing? You're always moaning about being bored. Then something finally happens and shut it all out!"

Phase 1 in the mother-daughter conflict had thus begun. Characterised by audible disgruntlement, while still working with arguments.

The stupid thing was: Mum was right. After almost four years in Trockenstedt, I was so hungry for

everything that made life more interesting, that I would normally have been happy to go to *any* party. Well, except maybe to one of Siegfried Strötz's parties at the end of the street. But bitter racists rarely host parties anyway.

But even I didn't feel like celebrating today. School started again on Monday and the most exciting thing would be new books and a few new teachers. My parents had promised me ages ago that we would travel to "the land of our ancestors" (Brazil!). But once again, I could only look back on three weeks in Sweden. I couldn't stand looking at one more Köttbullar or cinnamon bun and I was completely depressed. I had turned fifteen five weeks ago, but I hadn't experienced anything in those fifteen years. Freedom! Fun! Adventure! None of that happened when you lived in Trockenstedt. Why had Mum agreed to this deal back then? We used to live in the centre of Berlin!

"Oh Cilly-Billy, please-please-please," my mum begged. Phase 2: As always, when the authoritarian tour failed, my mum opted for a whiny tone of voice and silly nicknames. "You can't let me go there only with Christian!"

Admittedly, that was a good point. Dad simply couldn't behave in company.

"And what am I supposed to tell Sophia?" Mum asked. "I'm sure she'll be disappointed."

Also a nice try. But I knew my best friend better than that.

"Soff is definitely not at this party," I clarified. I knew that Sophia didn't like parties - well, actually, she was even afraid of them.

Sophia was scared of pretty much everything and everyone. And besides, her father would never have let her go there. Kurt Cauder was the last person - apart from old Strötz perhaps - who would let new neighbours invite him to a party. Especially not when there were less than forty-eight hours between the event and the invitation. The Lurkings had handed out the invitation to everyone in the neighbourhood just yesterday - along with a bottle of sparkling wine and a (admittedly delicious) cake. A civil servant like Mr Cauder needed at least four weeks to be able to properly analyse the advantages, disadvantages and, of course, risks of such a celebration.

"Yes, Sophia's there!" Mum contradicted. "She's just stepped through the garden gate with her dad."

I swung my legs off the bed and walked to the tilted window, through which you could already hear the sound of laughter and lame swing music.

Sure enough, under the pear tree and the fairy lights, which were still switched off, I spotted Soff and her father. Mr Cauder surveyed the rather small crowd of guests.

Everyone stood around the pool with a glass of champagne, looking somewhat clueless, as if an alien could be hiding among those present.

Sophia looked up at my window. Her gaze said (or rather screamed): SAVE ME!

As a best friend, I could hardly ignore that.

"Celia, I can tell you..."

Before my mum could enter phase 3 - threat - I had already unlocked the door and opened it a crack.

"I'm going to change. I'll be downstairs in two minutes. Go on over there."

She looked at me in amazement and shook her head.

"Sometimes I just don't understand you."

"Mum, you don't understand me most of the time. Don't worry about it. I hear that happens very often between parents and children my age."

She grinned, pinched my cheek - which nobody likes, neither at five nor at fifteen - and then skipped down the stairs humming.

"Finally," Sophia whispered to me as I sat down next to her on the beer bench. "I thought you weren't coming at all."

"Sorry, you're the last person I expected to see here. It certainly wasn't your idea. Which brings us to the even bigger mystery of what brought your father here."

Mr Cauder was standing at the salad bar next to the huge gas grill. He was obviously thinking very carefully about which dish was least likely to be poisoned.

"Model making," sighed Sophia. "Mr Lurking saw one of Dad's model ships in our hallway. That's when they got talking shop. The prospect of being able to take a look at the collection here must have enticed Dad somehow."

I couldn't suppress a nod of approval. The new neighbour had probably found the only button that could entice Sophia's father to an event like this.

"Oh, what a lovely jacket!" whispered a stranger's voice. A little girl with her arms wrapped around a stuffed hedgehog suddenly stood in front of us. Even though I normally found children one thing above all - annoying - I had to admit that she looked quite cute with the two pigtails hanging over her shoulders. It was really tragic that this sweet thing suffered from an advanced loss of taste. Because my friend Sophia was probably the only teenager in the world who had chosen grey as her favourite colour and was therefore called "little mouse" by the idiots at our school.

"Thank you," said Sophia, beaming. She loved children.

Probably because she felt safer with them. A need that I somehow didn't recognise at all.

"What's your name?" Sophia asked, almost chatty. She really was unrecognisable when children came into the picture.

"Siri," said the girl.

Now that Siri knew us, she seemed to think she could make outrageous demands.

"Do you want to play with me?"

I certainly didn't want to. Unfortunately, Sophia shouted "Of course!" faster than I could come up with an excuse. At least, Siri really did have a lot of toys. Lots of cuddly toys, Harry Potter fan merchandise, dolls, Lego, Playmobil and much more. I almost regretted no longer being a child. But Sophia was even better at reviving the child within. That's why we were still in Siri's room five hours later when we heard a voice coming from the door: "Oh, there you are! I was about to report you missing."

"This is my room!" Siri protested. "Where else am I supposed to be?"

The blond boy in the doorway slapped his forehead exaggeratedly. "Right," he said. "Makes sense. You're just more clever than I am."

He came into the room, dropped down on the floor next to Siri and stroked her hair. She gave him a flattered smile.

I suppressed a gag reflex. I've always found older brothers who are totally nice to their little sisters pretty creepy in movies. He had to be her brother, even if they didn't look much alike. She was dark-haired with Asian-looking features. He had a nose that was far too small, was blonde and handsome in a dull way that Sophia was probably melting over by now. He reminded me of someone, but I didn't know who.

"That's Sophia and Celia," crowed Siri.

"Vincent," he said, holding out his hand first to Sophia and then to me.

Sophia shook it reverently and I shook it reluctantly.

"So, how's the party going out there?" I asked, as I had to make polite small talk for Sophia and me.

"Pretty good, I think," he replied. "But a whole load of new faces. It's actually too much for me."

"I can imagine," whispered Sophia, who already found shopping in the kiosk a social challenge.

"Don't worry," I said. "Too many new things is a phenomenon that you won't experience too often in Trockenstedt."

He grinned. "You sound less than thrilled."

"It just depends on what you expect," I continued.

"If you want to know what a peaceful retirement feels like before you come of age, you've come to the right place."

"I like it here," Sophia interjected weakly.

"A bit of peace and quiet is good for our family," explained Vincent. "We've been moving from country to country for the last few years. First the USA. Then France. Dubai. Chile. It's nice to make a home somewhere."

"But you've stupidly made a home at a place that even Google Maps has trouble finding," I remarked pointedly. Perhaps because I was jealous of Blondie's globetrotting life.

"Why did you have to move so often?" asked Sophia, for whom his CV probably sounded like a horror story.

"My parents are architects. Mainly large-scale projects - hotel complexes, airports, that sort of thing. They're often needed on site." He sighed: "Thank God that's over."

"Are they no longer architects?" I asked.

"They are, but - what's the name of the neighbouring town again? Hinterwald ...?"

"Hinterforst," I corrected. "It's almost fifty kilometres away, though. Doesn't really count as a 'Neighbouring town'."

"Well," he continued, "anyway, they've opened an office in Hinterforst, where they build smaller houses. But at least we finally have one of our own."

"And what a great house," Sophia sighed. "It's even got a pool!"

Vincent smiled proudly. "Yes, we filled it today, so we could all use it together for the first time. I'm a bit disappointed that no one has jumped in yet. Everyone seems a bit too embarrassed."

At that moment, a splash was heard from outside, followed by a loud cheer.

"Oh," Vincent remarked. "Looks like someone dared to jump in after all."

I didn't even have to go to the window to know who it was. My mum's horrified "Christian!" shortly afterwards confirmed that it was Dad, of course.

2



The last guest left the party at 12:31 a.m.. Erwin Frescher, the widower from number 25, had held out the longest and had clearly consumed too many alcoholic drinks.

Siri had completely overlooked this tendency in her research into the future neighbours. Vincent knew that it bothered her. The thought made him lively flick the dishwasher shut, which began its quietly rustling work. Unlike conventional dishwashers, it didn't just remove food residue from plates, cutlery and bowls. First, ultraviolet light was used to scan, save and - if possible - match all fingerprints. The sensor in the air filter also determined whether there were any germs or pathogens on the tableware. In fact, it did find something. One guest had probably caught a nasty cold, which prompted all Lurkings to immediately take a preventative medication cocktail

that the supposed coffee machine had already prepared.

Siri had already been sent to bed for everyone to see two hours ago with affectionate teasing. Now she was happy to be allowed to get up again to take her medication. She hated that her role profile dictated age-appropriate sleeping behaviour and enjoyed every exception. Of which, in Vincent's opinion, there were too many anyway.

The chiming of the old-fashioned pendulum clock snapped him out of his thoughts. It was now 12:35 a.m. and the clock had no reason at all to deliver its concert.

"Of course, a meeting. It would be too nice if you could just lie on your arse," Tatjana grumbled.

Vincent wondered how else Tatyana thought her employer should be kept in the loop. For security reasons, virtually every form of surveillance or recording of employees was avoided. After all, these were just traces left behind for the enemy.

"I'll be upstairs," Mark announced cheerfully and disappeared into the bedroom.

As a *puppet*, as people like him were disparagingly labelled internally, he only had to take part in meetings with Midnight if it was explicitly requested.

Today - the clock had only struck twice - that was not the case. That suited Mark and Vincent wondered how anyone could have so little ambition. But Mark wasn't the only frustrated actor to forgo a career in the spotlight. These people were happy to receive a generous salary and put up with plastic surgery without complaint, even if it meant leaving friends and family behind forever.

"Trust me: nobody needs friends and family when they have a purpose." Hieronymus had once explained this to Vincent in class when he asked about it when he was seven or eight. Vincent believed him and was a little ashamed that he missed his mentor. Hieronymus would have categorised this as a sign of an "emotional attachment", which he considered to be one of the most dangerous pitfalls in the life of an agent.

Vincent followed Tatjana and Siri into the living room. It was located in the centre of the house and was the only room on the ground floor without windows. However, the dark lighting conditions were not used for family cinema evenings or as the perfect setting for watching World Cup matches on the flat-screen TV. The Lurking family appreciated having a place for their actual work that could not be seen from outside. Where they could keep to themselves.

Vincent closed the door behind him and drew the three arrows

from the dartboard. He hit the 3 and the 5 without looking, but had to look up briefly for the bull's eye.

"Show-off," whispered Siri. "You can just stick them in."

The transmission mode was activated. Three beams of light shot out of the wing holders of the arrows and converged above the glass-topped living room table. There they formed a three-dimensional image through the electromagnetic field of the glass plate: The ORGA logo rotated in the room with majestic deliberation. It was an omega - the last letter of the Greek alphabet. Slowly, it turned into a keyhole and back again. A symbol for the fact that all secrets were revealed in the end. The organisation's motto was written in gold letters above and below the logo:

NON ROGAMUS

RESPONSA INVENIMUS

We don't ask questions. We find answers.

As always, Vincent felt a sense of awe at the sight, which immediately made him stand up a little straighter.

"If I'd known how long we'd be waiting here," nagged Tatjana, "I would have gone to the loo..."

The logo disintegrated into white particles of light, which reformed to a floating figure. It seemed to be made of transparent silk sheets that

fluttered lazily in the air. The cloths covered the figure's head and only hinted at the bony features. Only the unnatural green glowing eyes were clearly visible.

This portrayal of Midnight as some kind of tasteless Halloween decoration was probably meant to be funny. Vincent simply found it inappropriate for the chairmanship of ORGA. But humour was one of the few characteristics in which Vincent always scored below average in his monthly character analyses.

"First day at Operation TROJA," Midnight summarised the initial situation as usual without a greeting. The voice alternated between different tones so that it was impossible to tell whether a man or a woman was speaking. "Reportable incidents?"

"None," replied Tatjana, who, as the eldest, had to answer unless someone else was specifically asked.

"Assessment?" Midnight turned to Siri.

"It was boring. I had to spend the whole evening playing with Lego and dolls and other knick-knacks like a toddler. I hate that baby stuff!"

Vincent found it inappropriate that Midnight laughed at this expression of personal sensitivities. A reprimand for unprofessional behaviour would actually have been in order.

Fortunately, suppressing personal feelings was one of Vincent's many above-average skills. That's why his voice didn't give anything away when he was asked for his opinion.

"Positive overall. All requirements were met. Trust was built up, sympathy was aroused. We just need to think about whether we are overburdening Siri with the profiling. I don't remember us reading anything about Mr Frescher's very obvious problem with alcohol."

"I can only create the profiles based on what I find online, legally and illegally," Siri hissed. "The man is over sixty. He still goes to the bank to transfer money! Someone like that doesn't blast everything that's on his mind out into the world as a story or newsfeed!"

"Siri's right about that," Midnight explained. "Character profiles are always incomplete. As a team member, you have to handle that with confidence, Vincent."

The warning undertone didn't go unnoticed by Vincent or Siri. He apologised, which the ghost acknowledged with a nod.

Siri made no effort to hide her grin.

"Then let's see if your assessment is more accurate than Siri's character profile of Mr Frescher."

Midnight's figure, hovering over the tabletop, turned to Vincent's supposed sister. "Siri, please get the snitch."

She reached into the worn pocket of her unicorn pyjamas and pulled out the desired utensil.

"I knew it would be used today." She threw the winged golden ball, known to Harry Potter fans all over the world, into the air.

The wings immediately began to beat at one hundred and twenty beats per second. A lens was now exposed in the centre of the golden ball. A rectangle appeared next to Midnight, showing what the Snitch saw: the three ORGA agents, who took turns watching the high-performance drone and the footage it was filming.

"I'm curious to see what your new neighbours think of you."

It seemed rather excessive to Vincent to use valuable technology for a bit of neighbourhood gossip. But he refrained from commenting and instead opened the living room door a little. He didn't want to give Midnight another reason to doubt his loyalty.

"OBSERVE: Flemmingkarree 1," Siri commanded and the drone made its way through the door gap.

The spectators raced along the street with her, right to the beginning. Siegfried Strötz lived in the house that looked like a greyed box.

The drone automatically followed conspicuous sound signals at the target address. It therefore flew to the bedroom window, attracted by a thunderous snore. The camera switched to night vision mode and showed that the occupant was doing what people usually do in bedrooms. Sleeping.

"You didn't make any particular impression," Midnight remarked.

"We couldn't. The man wasn't there," explained Tatyana.

"Which, by the way, is exactly what I predicted," Siri interjected with a snooty look at Vincent before sending the drone on its way again. "OBSERVE: Flemmingkarree 2."

There, the result was very much in Vincent's favour. The cheerful pensioner couple Hagenbeck were getting ready for bed and reminiscing about the evening while removing their make-up and taking care of their teeth.

"That girl is a real cutie. I would always have liked to have had one like her," explained Adele Hagenbeck, while her husband gurgled to himself. "But the boy has stature too. I would have been delighted if our Torben had been so polite and well-groomed back then!"

"I'd be delighted if Torben were as polite and well-groomed *today*," Sigmund Hagenbeck sighed after spitting into the sink.

"OBSERVE: Flemmingkarree 3." Siri, who was supposed to shadow the Hagenbecks, was obviously in a hurry. Of course, she didn't like the fact that her supposed brother was so well received by them. Vincent grinned.

The snitch flew all over the street. The result was the same in all the houses where people were not yet asleep: People were full of praise for the new neighbours, who were so nice and also knew how to party. Even Mr Frescher at number 25 shared the same opinion.

"You would have liked her, Annette. Well, you liked everyone. But they really would have deserved it."

As Mr Frescher lived alone, he spoke to the picture of his deceased wife that stood next to his bed.

"Looks like Vincent has been right with his assessment so far," commented Midnight. "Let's just hope that's also the case with our hottest lead."

Vincent had few worries about that. If this performance had scored points with anyone, it was probably the Lopez family next door. After all, a lot of effort had been made for them. Vincent had not only had his hair bleached blonde, but also had his nose reduced in size so that he looked like the lead actor in a series that Celia Lopez suspiciously often googled. So he relaxed while Siri ordered "OBSERVE: Flemmingkarree 26".