

Tamara Bach: Leaving There

Von da weg

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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Rough translation

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Kaija

1

Kaija stares at the sign next to the school gate.

New grammar school is written there. Behind the gate, behind the schoolyard, she can see the school building. It doesn't look new.

Kaija stands there and others walk past her through the gate, stopping outside to chat and greet each other. They look around to see if they see anyone they know.

Not Kaija. Kaija takes a deep breath, as if she is taking a running start. As if breathing in would give her courage. New, she thinks. You're not new, she thinks, meaning school. I am new.

She tries again with a deep breath, then the bell rings and the first ones go off.

It's not yet eight o'clock, the ringing is just a warning shot.

She now takes a few steps further inside. Inside means the school area, behind the gate. She stops once more, under a chestnut tree that must have been planted when the grammar school was actually new.

Kaija leans against the wall by the chestnut tree and watches the crowd move. First a few, then more, stroll, hop and traipse towards the entrances.

She goes through all the synonyms for human movement in her head.

Kaija doesn't move. She thinks: I am waiting. I am lingering. I am pausing.

The bell rings for the second time.

Kaija realises that she is clenching her hands into fists.

Her fingernails have left red crescents on her palms.

She rubs her hands together and the marks remain.

Kaija starts walking and her head counts her steps to the school building, she goes through the door with others pushing past her, keeps counting, keeps walking, up the stairs, looks at the steps, has one hand on the banister. First floor.

Kaija walks down the corridor and finds the door to her new class.

The door is still closed, others are waiting in the corridor. A few are hugging, others are laughing, talking. Kaija stands against the wall a few metres away and looks at her phone as if there is something there (there is nothing).

Then a man comes along in long strides on long legs, with a jingling bunch of keys in one hand and a leather bag in the other.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen!" he calls as he unlocks the door, "Come in, let the fun begin!"

Someone grumbles, others laugh, everyone moves into the room.

"You!" he says as Kaija pushes past him. She pretends to be deaf, slips into the classroom and looks for a seat. All the desks are facing the blackboard,

the room is full. There is a single table by the window at the far end near the wall. Kaija sits down quickly, then rummages in her bag for things until everyone is seated. The seat next to her remains empty. When Kaija looks up, she sees: All the tables are occupied.

I am the odd number, she thinks.

The teacher stares at her. Kaija looks at her notepad. Then he starts talking, loudly: "Mesdames et Messieurs, Damen und Herren, welcome to another year at this school. May it be a good one. I hope you've all had a good holiday, yes?

Fine? Great. They're over now, now it's time for education."

Game show host, thinks Kaija.

She squints at her plan, Mr Rehberge. Of course he doesn't introduce himself. They probably all know him already, Kaija thinks.

"And we have a new guest in this round! You in the back." 32 heads turn to Kaija.

"Introduce yourself, who are you, where are you from, what brought you here?"

Kaija looks at her hands, then looks up, over their heads, at the teacher. She half coughs. A few giggles.

"Kaija," she says.

"Louder," he says.

"KAIJA!" she shouts and now some are laughing.

"What's her name? Liar?" says a voice in front of her, one of 32 others.

"And what else? Star sign, shoe size?" says the man in the front.

Kaija shakes her head and looks at the table. The first ones turn back to the front. Mumbling

"HEY!" shouts Mr Rehberge, referring to the mumbling. Kaija waits. When she looks up again, she sees that he is reading the class register.

"Maybaum?" he says, looking at her.

She nods.

He looks, then asks: "Is your mum...?"

"Yes," says Kaija.

"Okay." He nods. He looks at her for another second, then closes the class register loudly. "Let's continue."

"What about her mother?" whispers one person loudly to their neighbour. She shrugs her shoulders.

"Lena! Quiet! Is this starting again like last year! We had an agreement!" shouts Mr Rehberge.

Lena giggles. "Sorry!"

"Yes, yes, just play with my feelings."

Kaija pinches a piece of skin on her forearm for a long time, looking forward. Counts until the pain is no longer pain.

And how was your first day?, the parents will ask. Have you gotten to know anyone yet? Do you like your class? What are your teachers like, they'll ask.

Kaija is standing in a corner of the schoolyard where no one else is.

Have you approached the others? You have to do that, you know?

You're definitely going to find someone who shares your interests.

Nobody waited for Kaija when the first two hours were over. Nobody came up to her and said, hi, I'm Lalala, and you're new, come with me, I'll show you everything here. How things are done. I'll show you where to stand during the break. Where you can buy something to eat. I'll show you the best toilets that don't stink, where you don't have to queue. I'll introduce you to the others and then I'll ask you what you like to do and tell you about me. And then we realise that we have a lot in common. How nice, thinks Kaija.

She opens the group chat, takes a photo of herself with her bread, slaps a sticker on it and sends it off.

Nobody answers.

Kaija writes *First day at school without you*. A GIF with a crying toddler.

She stares at the chat. No one comes online, no sign, no like.

She sighs. Then she puts her phone in her pocket. You have to show the others what a great girl you are, Dad will say.

So great, thinks Kaija.

In front of her is something like grass, the remains of grass.

A few dried clumps with lots of dusty soil around them.
You're definitely going to make lots of great friends here.
Settle in.

And then you won't want to leave. Strangers
are just friends you haven't met yet.

Kaija sighs once more, then the bell rings for the next
lesson.

Is that possible, Kaija thinks, during math class with
Mikesch, is it possible to just stay alone? That you never get
to know anyone? That you just keep to yourself at school?
Is that possible? she thinks, as German is being taught by a
woman with short hair and black glasses who hasn't
said her name because the class already knows her.

Kaija has the timetable in her pocket.

Does that make you invisible?

During the next break, Kaija sneaks to the place she knows
from the first break. The staff room is on the other side of
the school building. She knows that.

Just come by during the break if there's anything wrong,
Mum said.

Kaija looks to the left, towards the rest of the
schoolyard, where it's noisy. She looks to the right, towards
the bikes.

Looks at her phone. Nothing.

Two more hours.

Kaija bites the inside of her cheek.

She outlines five times nine squares on chequered paper and colours in the individual squares.

She counts seconds.

She hears herself breathing and tries to be quieter.

Hears that the last two lessons have been cancelled.

Hears how happy the others are.

Hears things being packed up, everyone leaving, chatting. Laughing too.

Kaija puts all her things back in her bag, closes it and hangs it over her shoulder. She walks out, not passing anyone, because everyone has already left, including the teacher who was just sitting there, invisible, Kaija thinks, it happens quicker than you think.

This is the way home now, thinks Kaija. If you turn it around, it's the way to school.

Kaija walks the same route home that she walked for the first time in the morning.

Looks again at the houses by the side of the road, the street signs. The garden fences, garage entrances.

Letterboxes. The front gardens. The nameplates.

Kaija snorts.

The next street is hers.

She arrives where she is supposed to be at home.

Struggles with the front door. Rings the doorbell. Waits.

Tries the key again.

At some point, the lock clicks and the door opens.

"Hello?" Kaija calls into the house. The house doesn't answer.

She goes into the kitchen, where the blackboard hangs that also hung in the old kitchen at home on Elsenstreet.

We're at the doctor's, food in the fridge, it says in Dad's handwriting.

You could have texted me, Kaija thinks.

She goes to the fridge, opens it and looks to see which food is meant for her. She sees a plate and wrinkles her nose.

She closes the fridge, takes an apple from the fruit bowl and goes to her new room.

The door won't close because of the boxes.

Kaija still has her schoolbag in her hand and is standing in the doorway.

The floor is not lava, the floor is rubble. An obstacle course. She sighs, pushes the first box halfway out of the way with her shin, squeezes through between two others, makes it to the bed and throws herself onto the mattress.

I could unpack, she thinks. Kaija yawns.

She rolls onto her stomach and looks at her room.

But there's no furniture, she thinks. And closes her eyes. Just for a moment.

The front door is loud when it slams shut. Mum calls out that she is home and Kaija is awake again and confused. She looks around, the room, the new one, the boxes, then Mum's voice again.

Kaija calls out that she is upstairs. Nothing more from Mum. Kaija looks at her phone and sees that she has been asleep for over two hours. She sits up, rubs her eyes, fishes for her bag, for the water bottle and empties it.

Then she stands up.

"What are you doing?" Mum calls from downstairs.

Kaija shrugs her shoulders. Then shouts

"UNPACKING!".

So she gets up and sits down in the middle of the room between two boxes.

Her left knee is now in the sun, her right in the shade.

There is a box in front of her. The lid is taped shut.

The knife must still be somewhere. Her hands scan the radius around her body. Nothing.

She shifts her weight to the right and reaches under her left buttock. Nothing. Nothing on the right either.

She stands up. Looks down. Sees the knife. Then she stands there and sighs and looks out of the window.

It is bright and warm.

The door opens and Mum looks in. "Well?" she asks.

Kaija doesn't answer, just looks at Mum.

"Warm," says Mum.

"Mmmh."

Mum looks at the boxes. Says nothing. The boxes

are everywhere. 80 percent boxes, 20 percent floor.

(And the bed. And the desk.)

Kaija grumbles quietly and opens a window.

"Unpack a box and then we'll go to the bakery and get some pastries, shall we?"

"Okay," Kaija says at some point.

Mum nods, then closes the door.

The phone is on the bed. Kaija climbs over three boxes and almost gets stuck on one, so she drops onto the bed. Looks at her phone. Nothing. She takes a picture of the boxes. Posts it in the group chat. Writes *This is my life now* underneath.

No answer. Maybe they're still at school, she thinks.

"Eeny meeny miny moe," she says, tapping the boxes in the air, "Catch a tiger by the toe." She laughs briefly.

"If he hollers, let him go. Eeny, meeny, miny, moe."

Her finger lands on a box. She stands up and opens the box, which has **stuff** written on it, just like all the other boxes.

"We can paint the walls," says Mum.

She is walking arm in arm with Kaija and tries to keep up with her.

"You promised you'd stay just as small as me," she says, nudging Kaija with her hip.

"Sorry," she says.

"It's your father's stupid genes."

"No cake for Dad," says Kaija.

"Exactly," says Mum and stops in front of a bakery. As she opens the door and steps inside, a bell rings.

Mum looks up at the bell when the woman behind the counter says "Ruth?".

Mum stops and clutches Kaija's arm.

"Yes?"

The woman behind the counter grins broadly.

"Well, well," she says, "I haven't seen you in ages!

What are you doing here? Visiting? Where are you living now?"

Mum is standing in the doorway, and if someone would want to come in right now, she's right in the way. Kaija pulls Mum towards the woman.

"Here," says Mum.

"Here?" asks the woman. Mum nods.

"That's some news! Since when?" Mum shrugs her shoulders. "Now?"

Kaija moves even closer to the display, and the woman who had just shaken her head looks at her.

"Your daughter?" she asks Mum, who finally takes a few more steps until she is standing next to Kaija.

"Yes," she says, stroking Kaija's back with one hand. "We wanted to buy pastries."

"Pastries, wonderful," says the woman.

When she turns around, Kaija says "Wonderful" to Mum, who pushes her in the side.

"Which pastries would you like?" asks the woman, turning round and grinning.

"Who was that?" Kaija asks outside, as Mum takes her arm again and pulls her back the way they came.

"I have no idea." Mum raises her hand to the window and waves to the woman inside.

"Let's get out of here quickly," she says.

Then she stops abruptly. "Shit. This is our bakery now," she says, staring at the floor. Then she sighs, stomps her foot, turns to Kaija and says, "It's no use, I should have known."

They continue walking.

"So, how was school?" asks Mum, and Kaija says "So, how was school".

Mum doesn't look at Kaija, she scratches her nose.

"Then let's talk about something else," she says.

Kaija can't think of anything.

Mum is silent, but hums softly and looks at the houses on both sides of the street as if she is looking for something.

She shakes her head, then suddenly runs off. "Come on," she calls over her shoulder to Kaija, "whoever arrives last has to do the washing up!"

Kaija sees Mum running. We have a dishwasher now, she thinks.

The aunt looks at the plate. Mum tears open the bag from the bakery and puts apple pie, plum tart, doughnuts and a Danish pastry on the plate.

The aunt makes a noise. Like a dog when it's not allowed to bark. Then she gets up and groans, shuffles to the patio door and goes outside.

"Man," says Mum and looks after her.

Kaija takes the plum tart, quietly slides it onto her plate and then licks her fingers.

"Thomas!" calls Mum. She listens into the house but gets no answer.

Mum opens the patio door. The aunt is sitting in her chair and smoking.

"Where's Thomas?" asks Mum.

"What do I know about where your husband is?" The aunt puts her right hand under her left armpit and smokes with her left.

Mum goes to the shed, the aunt looks after her and sits and smokes.

"Thomas!" calls Mum. Then Kaija can no longer see her.

You're lucky, I had 10 hours of school today, Remi wrote.

I'm so lucky. I have cake and finished school early, thinks Kaija. So lucky. And you're six hours away. She looks out the window and sees the aunt staring at her.

Kaija reaches for her cake and takes a bite.

Before Dad can ask, Kaija goes into her room and continues trying to unpack her boxes. Before Dad can ask, Mum goes to her desk and says that she still has some work to do.

No dinner for mum, the aunt smokes outside, the aunt doesn't need food. Kaija is hungry but doesn't want to talk to Dad about school. No food for Kaija.

Remi is the only one texting. Lysette has put a thumbs up under Remi's comment. Nothing from Antonia, Grischa. Janne.

Kaija holds her breath. Counts until she can no longer hold it, until her lungs pull at her, until they force, beg Kaija to breathe. If she were under water.

The lights are off and it's dark.

Kaija gets up and walks to the window. It sounds like summer outside. There's a tree.

She hears Dad laughing loudly and Mum squealing.

The bedroom door is slightly open. The aunt shuffles past, down the corridor, Kaija hears her door open and close.

Then Mum's footsteps on the stairs as she hops upstairs, carefully opening Kaija's door further.

"Hey," says Mum.

"Hey," says Kaija.

Mum is standing in the doorway, a shadow cut against a dark yellow light. "Do you want to come down or are you tired?"

"Yes," says Kaija.

Mum laughs quietly and waits.

Kaija breathes loudly.

"Maybe sleeping," she says at one point.

Mum's shadow head nods. She comes in, sits down by the bed, pulls Kaija close and strokes her forehead.

"Tomorrow," she says.

"Tomorrow," Kaija says quietly.

Then Mum gets up and closes the door.

Kaija lies down, but she hasn't brushed her teeth,

hasn't put on her pyjamas, she lies on her side and is able to look out the window, behind the tree the evening sky, hears the sound of late summer, the birds that are not yet tired.

Smells mown grass and hot tarmac. Tomorrow,
Kaija thinks and then bites into her pillow.

2. Dad has made breakfast. Kaija is sitting on the bench at the kitchen table and isn't hungry.

"Are you OK?" asks Dad. She looks up. Dad looks from her to Mum. Mum grins as if she has a toothache.

"I can also make you sandwiches for school?" he asks.

The aunt stands on the patio with a cup in her hand and walks along the flowers.

Mum's foot bobs under the table. "Shall I leave first?" she asks at one point.

Kaija looks at her.

"Well, it's embarrassing to arrive at school with your mum!" Mum pushes her plate away from her. She's probably not hungry either.

"You didn't think of that earlier?," asks Dad. He stands at the worktop with his back to them.

"I couldn't have known," mumbles Mum. Then she jumps up. "I think I'll ... I'll leave now. Yes."

Dad turns around and puts a loaf of bread in her hand.

"Don't forget to eat."

Mum kisses Dad on the corner of the mouth and walks off. Kaija thinks about school and holds her breath, counting.

Dad turns back to her when Mum is out the front door.

"Well?" he asks.

Nineteen. Twenty. Twenty-one.

"Breathe, Kaija," says Dad. As she exhales, he puts a Tupperware box on the table. "Bread and an apple. And a little chocolate." Dad winks at her. Then he looks outside at the aunt.

"It'll be fine," he says quietly.

Kaija tries to nod, but he doesn't even see it.

Kaija walks so slowly that she almost walks backwards. The way to school is the way home, she thinks again. The direction is responsible for the name. The destination. She laughs briefly. Not at all: The journey is the destination.

The destination, Kaija thinks and stops because she has to think. So the journey is all about the destination. She wonders if that's true. A cat is sitting in the window to her left.

Black and white. Judgy, thinks Kaija.

She starts walking again. Asks herself how famous you have to be before what you say is turned into quotes.

Before you are quoted.

Or who has to write it down. Who decides what constitutes a quote.