

The Forsaken (Die Verlassenen) by Matthias Jügler

Sample translation by Jo Heinrich

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The last time I saw my father was in June 1994. The thirteenth of June was a Monday; I remember it clearly. We'd slept in the cabin at our garden plot, and we'd had breakfast outside. Father had boiled us eggs, and he'd also laid out some warmed-up rolls, ham, cheese, three jars of jam and some smoked salmon.

'Who's going to eat all that?' I asked: normally all I ate was a roll in the mornings. I helped myself to some butter and a slice of cheese. He paused for a second before holding the plate of smoked salmon under my nose: 'You, who else?'

After breakfast he lay on the swing seat and called me over. I'd expected us to be in the car by then, so I could get to school at a half-decent time. But he didn't seem to want to go straight away. Over breakfast, I'd already said we should hurry, as I still needed to pick up my school things from home or I'd be late.

For a few weeks I'd really wanted to become a marine biologist. I'd seen a documentary about a Dutch marine biologist, who'd said how much he enjoyed travelling the world with his work: he had the best job he could ever imagine, and he wouldn't change places with anyone. Once the documentary was over, I went to my father in the kitchen and told him that when I was older, I'd like to be a marine biologist. He'd often asked me if I knew what I wanted to do when I was older, and I'd always shrugged.

'Marine biologist?' Father said. He folded his paper and looked at me seriously. 'Then you'll have to step things up and do better at school, you know?'

He often said I should do better at school, at least once a week, although I wasn't doing that badly. No grade-A student, but no cause for serious concern either.

I said I knew, and I stood there in front of him for a while. I'd spent a few hours watching TV, and now I felt like having a chat with him, but I didn't know what to say. We rarely exchanged more than a few sentences. I always made an effort to talk to him, and even if what I was telling him about was pretty boring most of the time, I'd keep on trying to get him to talk. A classmate had once told me how annoying it was that his parents took him out so often, and that his father even played the Nintendo with him. When he asked me if my father was just as annoying, I said nothing, and I was relieved when he stopped talking about it.

As I hadn't gone to him straight away, my father called me over again. He was still lying on the swing seat that he'd built in the eighties and that he repainted every year, and he still seemed not to have understood that we didn't have time. We had to go: him to work, and me to

school. I walked across the grass, past the round flowerbed my father had filled with the purple and blue delphiniums we both liked, which were just beginning to flower. He sat up, so I could take a seat next to him. Now we were both looking at the delphiniums.

'Beautiful,' he said, 'it's so beautiful,' and I got the impression he didn't actually want me to hear, as he was speaking so quietly. At this point I got angry.

'I have to go to school,' I said, but it didn't sound as angry as I felt, which made me even more angry. So I said it again, with more emphasis; now he couldn't fail to notice how serious I was. But he didn't respond. He put an arm round me and began to talk. And as he was talking, I noticed his earthy smell, which I liked as it reminded me of summer days we'd spent together in that garden, pulling up weeds, listening to the radio, going on bike rides to nearby villages and coming back, exhausted and drenched in sweat, to drink cold lemonade on the swing seat. As my father held me close, he talked to me about my mother, which he didn't often do, about writing and how comforting it was to have something you could do well, really well, in this world. He was jumping from one subject to another. I could hardly follow what he was saying, and some of it I didn't understand at all.

We sat there like that until noon, and I couldn't help thinking my father had spoken more in that one morning than he had all year. He hadn't let me get a word in edgeways, but even if he had asked me something, I wouldn't have wanted to reply, let alone talk at length. He must have noticed I was less than impressed.

At some point I'd managed to free myself from his embrace, I'd let out several deep sighs and demonstratively crossed my arms. He saw none of this, or maybe he hadn't wanted to see it. At around twelve, he stood up, went to get our things from the cabin and locked up. On the way to the car, he asked me if I was hungry and then he said, 'OK, let's go and get some food.'

As he was driving, my father put on a crime drama for us to listen to, one of the many he owned. We'd heard them all before; we listened to them over and over again, and it was something I always looked forward to. The voices were just as much a part of the trip to or from the garden plot as the surrounding fields were: the bleak landscape, the run-down houses in the villages that had suffered the misfortune of being split in two by a main road.

We drove to a Chinese restaurant in Ammendorf and had lunch, with Coke as well. I'd expected my father to carry on talking during the meal. He didn't. We were the only customers, and we ate in silence, and I didn't know why. I didn't know why I wasn't in school that day, nor why he'd taken me to that restaurant. It wasn't like him. I looked at him as we were being served our desserts. I was still angry. I wanted to ask what was up. But he beat me to it, asking, 'What is it? Don't you like it?' The question made no sense as I hadn't touched my dessert yet; even he realised it, and we laughed, although it wasn't that funny, only a bit – but it felt good to be able to laugh with him, and I noticed my anger had died down. Suddenly my question seemed

unreasonable. What's the big deal, I thought, why not skip work and school and have a good time, just for once? So I said nothing. We ate up, he paid, and we left.

Father had sometimes seemed odd to me, for example when he was sitting in the kitchen after work, doing nothing for hours on end. He always looked as if he was waiting for someone, but no one ever came. On those evenings, I'd go into the kitchen, we'd nod to each other, and I'd say something like 'I fancy a chocolate milkshake,' or 'I'm still hungry,' because I felt the need to explain myself, and then he'd say something like, 'Yes, why not?' or 'Yes, good idea.'

We parked outside my grandmother's apartment, in the south of the city, in a five-storey building with windows I thought were much too small. Even in the summer, my grandmother's apartment was so dark you had to put the light on. She didn't seem at all surprised to see us. She hugged me first, and then my father. I'd already taken off my shoes and was waiting for him to do the same, so we could go and sit in the living room as usual, have a coffee and a chocolate milkshake, watch some TV and have a chat. But my father didn't take his shoes off. He stood there by the front door, looking at me in a way I didn't like. My grandmother went into the living room and closed the door behind her.

'Come here,' Father said, still by the door. When I got close enough, he pulled me, briefly and tightly, into an embrace, and then he pushed me back a little and held me by the shoulders. His eyes unsettled me, although I didn't know why.

'Take care, my boy.'

He went down the stairs, and I heard the main door slam shut. The TV was on in the living room. I waited for a minute, or maybe two, my eyes fixed on the doormat in front of me. Eventually my grandmother came out of the living room. She didn't say a word about my father going, but she was holding a bag of sweets. Twice previously, I'd been in hospital: a broken arm when I was eight, and a fractured kneecap just a few months later. Both times, when my grandmother came to visit me, she'd put a big bag of sweets on the bedside table, to make me feel better, she'd said. When I saw her then, with the bag in her hand and a pitying look in her eyes, that was the moment I realised he wasn't coming back. I began to cry. I would much rather have been angry, angry with my father, as angry as I'd been in the morning. But I wasn't.

It was only hours later that I composed myself. I got under my grandmother's covers. She gave me a sandwich and afterwards a handful of sweets, then she made some tea, the sort she drank to help her sleep. I asked her where he was and when he was coming back. She said he had to go away for a while, but he'd be back soon. She looked over my shoulder as she spoke. It wasn't hard to tell she was lying. But I said nothing; I drank my tea and ate a few sweets, just to please my grandmother, as they really didn't taste good this time. It was still light outside when I fell asleep.

From then on, I lived with my grandmother. In the first few weeks after my father's disappearance, I kept asking the same questions: why can't I just go home and wait for him there? When will he come and pick me up?

My grandmother was cagey whenever she answered. He wouldn't be on his business trip for ever, she was sure he'd ring soon. The words 'business trip' often came up in those first few weeks: whenever we bumped into neighbours or acquaintances while we were out shopping, or if I was crying in bed and my grandmother was trying to make me feel better, which often happened around that time. But I knew as well as she did that my father wasn't on a business trip. He worked for a company that sold paint, and every so often he'd actually spent a week in France or Belgium on business. When he did, I'd stay in our apartment on my own, and before he went away he'd always tell me to make sure no one could break in. He must have had no idea how much he scared me by saying that. The first time he went away, in October 1991, I was ten and he left me on my own for a week – although my grandmother had been keen to stress I could sleep at hers. In fact, I hardly slept at all at night, and if I did, I'd always wake up feeling nothing but pure fear that someone might target our apartment. Every noise from the stairs terrified me: the hum of the lift, heavy footsteps going past our door, the echoing voices of men I didn't recognise...

My father would tell me about those business trips weeks in advance, and he'd buy masses of frozen and microwave meals, far more than I'd ever get through in a week. He laid out clothes for me, for good weather and bad, and made lists of the weirdest phone numbers, such as the poison control hotline or a number to ring to block his debit card. I didn't have one, of course; I didn't even get regular pocket money. At first I thought the list was a joke, but Father's face told me it was deadly serious.

The more I thought about my father, the more I was convinced there was something fundamentally wrong with him, as if something had unhinged him, never to be put right again. At that point, I still didn't know why my mother had actually died, why my father always kept talking about writing even though I never saw him writing, and I certainly didn't know anything about a brother, or all the other things I found out about later.

I had often thought that something wasn't quite right with him, but every time I'd ended up feeling ashamed: it made me feel like a traitor. This wasn't a nasty neighbour who could simply be brushed off; this was my father.

My grandmother was a small woman. I was thirteen when my father disappeared, but I'd already been towering over her for quite some time. My grandmother's most distinguishing

feature was her good nature. She rarely said a word about the things I would get up to over the next few years.

I'd got into the habit of opening her drawers and cupboards to see what was in them. It was mostly insurance documents, invoices or letters from her friends, which I soon gave up trying to read as they were so boring. I was never looking for anything specific, but I knew it was something I shouldn't be doing, and that I was intruding into a part of my grandmother's life that was none of my business. And that was what gave me a furtive pleasure whenever I opened the drawers or cupboards and took out a new folder. One day while she was out, I found a photo in her papers showing my mother in a wedding dress and my father in a suit. I was certain my grandmother had hidden this photo from me, as I'd never seen it before.

I suddenly lost all desire to keep looking through her things, and for once I didn't go to the usual trouble of putting everything back as it had been so she wouldn't know what I'd been up to while she was out. I left the folder open on the carpet. I hoped it would upset her and I'd get my own back. I got dressed and left the apartment, although I hadn't arranged to see anyone and didn't know what to do. I walked into town, which must have taken an hour and a half; I went in a few shops, looked at some books and magazines, and then at some point, I walked back home. I should have been home for dinner, but I didn't get back until nine o'clock. Instead of telling me off, all my grandmother said was that next time I shouldn't be so late.

The following week, I smashed a pane of glass in her display cabinet in the living room. I'd wanted to find out how much force it would take to break it, as it was incredibly thick. I saw it as a challenge. Afterwards, when she was putting a dressing on my left hand and trying to get the blood out of the carpet, which took quite some doing, and even when someone came a few days later to put in some new glass, and when she had to sign the invoice afterwards, she behaved as if nothing had happened. I knew I'd done something stupid, so why on earth wasn't she punishing me?

Months later, a van pulled up outside my grandmother's. She'd asked a company to pick up my furniture from my old room. With this, the matter was closed, and I don't remember the words 'business trip' ever coming out of her mouth again. Until that day when the two removal men brought everything they could find in my bedroom, we'd spent every evening lying on the sofa watching TV. She'd taken the phone from the hall and put it on a glass table next to the TV. I knew we only kept watching TV for hours so we could stay by the phone. But it never rang.

I don't know what happened to his things; in any case, I never saw them again. I was angry with my grandmother for some time, as there were a few things I would have liked to keep. Father had bought an expensive record player just a few months before he disappeared, as well as masses of records, most of which, to my surprise and my father's, I'd liked. We'd even spent a few evenings together in the living room, which we never normally did, and we put on

The Doors, The Velvet Underground and Curtis Mayfield. I couldn't understand any of the lyrics, but I liked what I heard. When *L.A. Woman* came on, I started dancing, which amused my father; he laughed, rubbing at his beard. Whatever I did, every move I made went with the music, and like him, soon I was in fits of laughter while I was dancing, over-excited and jerking around. Just before the song finished, my father started dancing too, and for the first time in my life I was actually having fun with him, and I was sure he was having fun with me too. We did it all over again for a few evenings, until suddenly one day he didn't want to any more. From then on, he went back to sitting in the kitchen in the evenings, the newspaper he'd finished hours before still in front of him, and I went back to killing time in my room until bedtime, unsettled and embarrassed, feeling I'd done something wrong, and I was certain Father had now realised it simply wasn't a good idea to be with me.