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WHAT  
MOTHER  
WON'T  
TELL ME

A central illustration of a house made of teal brushstrokes with a stick figure inside. The house is composed of several concentric, slightly irregular shapes, creating a tunnel-like effect. In the center of the innermost shape is a simple stick figure with its arms raised. The entire illustration is set against a dark background with teal pine branches scattered around it.

IVAR LEON MENGER

TRANSLATED BY JAMIE BULLOCH



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**WHAT  
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**IVAR LEON MENGER**

Translated by Jamie Bulloch  
Adaptation editor Thomas Scholz



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*For my daughter, Ava*

She began to cry bitterly...  
for she could see nothing but water...  
and no way of reaching the land.

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

# **PART ONE**

# 1

Mother is in the kitchen baking a blueberry cake. The house smells of warm caramel, even though all the doors and windows are wide open. Outside, a blue bird chirps slowly. A summer wind breezes through the rooms, bringing a pleasant relief from the afternoon heat spreading through our prison.

I've put on an apron, and I help Mother wash up while Boy sets the table for coffee in the dining room. "What are we going to play today?" I ask, putting the clean mixing bowl back in the cupboard.

"Monopoly?" Mother replies, shooting me a mischievous glance. We know how Father has a fit if he lands on one of our hotels. The board goes flying, and it rains banknotes. Boy and I love it when that happens.

But we'll have to play something else today.

To make sure my plan works.

"Shall I get out Risk?" I say as casually as possible. Mother frowns. She hates that game. There's a reason she hides the cardboard box at the bottom of her chest of drawers in their bedroom. Probably in the hopes that my brother and I will forget we've got it.



“That’s a very silly game,” Mother says, putting down the drying-up cloth and crossing her arms. “Haven’t we told you that violence never solves conflict?” She looks at me seriously. “Peace and freedom are precious, Juno. Our family lives with enough fear as it is here.”

“But it’s such fun,” I lie, thrusting my hands in the sewed-on front pocket of my Sunday dress. My right forefinger is already wiggling like a worm in a bird’s beak. It’s done that since I was a little girl. Whenever I don’t tell the truth. I can’t control it.

“It also teaches us to think strategically. You have to make the right decisions when you’re attacked.” I’m getting into my stride. “In case the strangers appear on our island. Father’s keen that we can defend ourselves.”

“What am I keen on?” Father says, carrying a bundle of firewood into the kitchen. He puts on gloves, opens the firebox to the wood stove and adds another log. “That smells absolutely delicious.”

“Your daughter wants to play Risk,” Mother says.

“Great idea!” Boy says, rushing into the room, flinging open the cutlery drawer and taking out the cake server and four forks.

“I’m up for that,” Father says, putting my brother in a headlock. “But watch out, my son, I’m going to get you!” They tussle and tickle each other mercilessly.

I watch Mother untie her apron, lay it over the back of a chair and smooth the creases with her hand. I get the sense she’s not thrilled by my suggestion. She probably expected a different reaction from Father. She shakes her head. Maybe she’s just wondering why I suggested Risk—a game in which you can conquer the entire world if you’re lucky with the dice. Mother knows I hate board games as much as she does.

The egg timer buzzes; the blueberry cake is ready.

"I'll be green!" Boy announces, passing us the other colors. Mother's yellow, Father is black, and of course he pushes the box with the pink counters toward me. Unfolding the board, he sets it in the middle of the dining table. Mother cuts the cake into equal portions and hands everyone a plate. Boy immediately stuffs a forkful of blueberry cake into his mouth. Father shuffles the territory cards as I discreetly study the colorful map of the world.

Six continents, forty-two territories. My eyes flit over names such as Peru, Siberia, Greenland, Scandinavia, Brazil. Congo, Central Europe, India, Western Australia, and Ontario.

"World domination or mission?" Father asks, dealing the cards. Boy takes the dice out of the box and rolls them across the board. "World domination!" he cries.

Mother picks up her territory cards. I look at mine, too. We begin dividing our armies between the territories. I'm lucky as I've got a counter in almost every territory in Australia. Easy to defend, if I cared about the game.

"That's not fair!" Boy says, pointing at my purple continent. "The cards weren't shuffled properly!"

Father takes a sip of his coffee.

"Where's Venezuela?" Boy asks, holding a green token. Mother points at a yellow country. "Right next to Peru." The board fills with colorful counters. "And where's China?" Boy scans the various continents. Father shows him the light-green territory to the east of the map.

"Western United States?"

"Here, on the left," I say. Boy has always had trouble finding his countries. It's no different today. That's what I was hoping. I've put

almost all my armies out now, and I've only got two territory cards left. I stare at the board. Mother notices this and gives me a smile. "What are you looking for, Juno?"

My moment has arrived.

"Where's *Northland*?" I ask, leaning right across the board. "And *Southland*? I can't see them anywhere."

Father puts his cup back down on the saucer and adjusts his glasses. I look over at Mother, whose face has turned ashen.

"You're right, Juno!" Boy says, hurriedly searching the entire board. "Why aren't they on there?"

Springing up from the table, Mother piles the used plates on her forearm and stomps to the door. She stops just before leaving the room and turns around to Father. Her neck is scarlet. "Now do you understand why I wanted to toss this game on the fire?"

Mother disappears into the kitchen.

## 2

**M**y name is Juno. I'm sixteen years old, and I've been living on this island for one hundred and forty-four months. Nobody knows that we've been hiding in the log cabin in the middle of the lake for these twelve years. The cabin behind the trees, behind thick trunks, heavy branches. No one knows, apart from the guards who brought us to the woods when I was still a little girl.

I love ducklings when they're newly hatched, buds in spring, globeflowers in my braided hair, blackberries as sweet as honey, the roar of elks at daybreak, the sparks that fly when birchwood is burning, the first snowflakes on my tongue.

And I like Boy, my little brother who secretly does those tasks I don't have the guts to do myself. Even though I'm much taller than him.

We lead a simple life here on the island. Every day is the same. In the mornings Mother gives us lessons in all those subjects we need for survival. Reading and writing, animals and nature, maths (I managed to persuade Father to let me do it, too), wound dressing, tracking, and

domestic science. That means I've learned to knit and crochet, do the washing, wash the dishes, make a fire, and cook vegetable soup. I can also identify all the creatures and plants we share the island with. My brother, on the other hand, is only responsible for sourcing food on Sundays. Because I still can't bring myself to kill.

We have free time before supper. We can draw, pick wildflowers, read the books in the sitting room, listen to records, or play on the big rock down by the shore. Boy and I have invented dozens of games. Although lately he can be a bit annoying sometimes, we play every day. Apart from on Mondays, when it's strictly forbidden.

Boy picks up a stone and hits the head of the rudd again and again until the little fish starts to spasm. One last blow and the eyes go glassy. Boy intently takes the kitchen knife, stabs at the heart, and lets the rudd bleed. Short and painless, like we learned. It's the only way to survive on the island. Once a month, when the full moon stands high above the woods, Father is allowed to row over to the other side of the lake and buy essentials from the guards' village. Like flour, sugar, eggs, milk, and coffee beans.

I look at Boy. My brother grins, removes the hook from the fish's mouth and drops our catch into the plastic bucket with the trout. My beloved beach bucket with the picture of a mouse in a spotted summer dress.

My only memento of our flight from Southland.

I cast the line out again. We need one more rudd for the patties that Mother will make us for supper.

"Why did you do that?" Boy asks, breaking the silence. "Because of you, we didn't have our Sunday game."

"Risk is a silly game," I say, because I can't think of a better answer

at the moment. In truth I've been feeling bad all afternoon because I know how much my brother was looking forward to Sunday. "Anyway, Mother calmed down again."

"But now we've got to wait another whole week!"

On the other side of the lake, in the shadows of the spruce wood, I detect a movement: two deer trotting through the undergrowth. Boy notices the animals, too. We watch them lift their heads and prick up their ears, ready to flee. For a brief moment, they are motionless, like in an oil painting. Then they peer over as if able to smell us.

Boy throws a stone into the water. At once the deer gallop away and disappear into the thicket.

He turns to me. "I've been thinking, Juno. It's something I've been considering for a long time. When Mother and Father are asleep, I'm going to row over there. Tonight."

"Are you mad?" I whisper. "You'll put us all in danger!"

"But you want to see what is on the other shore, too."

"No, I don't!"

Boy narrows his eyes and checks my right forefinger. "What about that drawing under your mattress?"

I clench my fist. He must have found the picture I drew yesterday afternoon on the big rock. Of houses towering into the clouds where a silver bird circles above a sea of sun umbrellas sprouting out of the sand like striped mushrooms and children play in the water.

I didn't draw any trees.

"I've been watching you, Juno," Boy says, moving closer and wagging his finger in my face. Then he puts the finger on my lips. "You're lying!" My nostrils are filled with a metallic fishy smell. "Say one word about my plan, and I'll show Father your picture."

I'd love to tell him that I'm not going to be blackmailed by a twelve-year-old, because the commandments are for our own safety, but my thoughts are disrupted by the wail of the sirens.

Boy yelps. I drop the rod, leap up, grab my brother's arm, and run with him through the vegetable garden. Past the tall loudspeaker masts, and we're almost at the house. The shrill cry of the warning sirens pierces my ears. I trip over the handle of a shovel. Boy pulls me back to my feet. Mother is waiting for us in the doorway, her eyes wide open, clapping her hands. "Come on, children. Quick!"

We race into the hallway as the front door slams shut behind us. Mother bolts it and follows us into the kitchen. Father has pushed the dining table to one side and rolled back the carpet.

A gaping hole in the floor.

Boy climbs in first, then Mother and Father go down. I take a step toward the trapdoor.

"For God's sake, Juno! What are you waiting for?" Father barks.

My heart is hammering like a hungry woodpecker. I move closer to the hole in the ground. Heat surges through my body. I wipe my finger on my dress, put my left foot on the ladder. Then my right.

"Come on, hurry up!"

Grabbing the sides of the ladder with both hands, I climb down. A cool draft wafts over my legs. I keep going until the tips of my toes feel the ground. Father squeezes past me and closes the heavy wooden door above us. The cold in our dungeon wraps itself around me like an invisible cloak.

"Turn the light on, please!" I whisper, as I hear Father lock the trapdoor with the metal bolt.

"Sit beside me, Juno," Mother says. I follow her voice from the other end of the room. She takes my hand and sits me on her lap. I

cuddle up to her bodily warmth. I'd really like to crawl deep inside her, back inside her belly.

"Secured!" Father calls out. The click of a light switch comes as a huge relief. The bulb flickers on. A tear on Mother's cheek.

"Are they going to kill us?" Boy stammers. He's snuck into the corner of the safe room, his arms around his legs.

"We have to be quiet," Father whispers, looking up at the trapdoor. "Four strangers, dressed in black. They're already on the lake." Father picks up the rifle from the wall mount and wanders to the middle of the cellar where he sits on the armchair they discarded from the living room. The green checkered one we used to sit on when Mother read me *Thumbelina* in front of a crackling fire on those first few nights when I couldn't get to sleep.

Father gives me a nod. I understand what he's trying to say. I creep over to Boy and pick him up. Boy is shaking all over.

Mother gets up and goes over to the shelves that run the length of the wall and which are filled with the most essential supplies. More than fifty tins, a basket of fresh apples and pears, five bottles of high-percentage alcohol, three sacks of potatoes, a box of long candles, matches, jam jars of soused fish, a gas cooker, and fifteen canisters of water. Our survival rations for two weeks. Mother takes the first aid box off the shelf and sits on the floor beside us.

"What did we learn, children?" She unfastens the clasp on the green plastic box. "What do we have to do if there's no way out?"

"So they can't torture you?" Father says, looking again up at the bolted trapdoor. He takes a bullet out of his trouser pocket and loads it into the rifle.

"Many years ago your father took on a very heavy burden when he testified in front of the tribunal. He opted to tell the truth. And in



doing so put justice above the welfare of his family.” Mother flips open the lid, opens a packet of compresses, and cuts a square of material with a pair of scissors. “It was through Father’s testimony alone that the most dangerous villains of Southland were arrested and thrown into prison for decades.” Mother wipes the tears from her eyes with the cloth. “That’s why they’re searching for us all over the world.”

“To take revenge.” Father cocks the rifle. “On me and my family.”

“But the guards of Northland are still protecting us, aren’t they?” Boy asks, taking hold of my hand. His fingers are cold and clammy. I squeeze them gently and imagine bright, warm light flooding my body.

“Of course,” Mother replies, stroking his hair.

“Why are they not coming, then?”

“We live too far out,” I reply. “It takes the guards hours to get to us from the village.”

“Can they hear our sirens so far away?”

“The alarm is just for us,” I say. Sometimes Boy still behaves like a little child. I give his hand a firmer squeeze. “So that we all go to the safe room. You know that.”

“Father has switched the sirens off now,” Mother says, reaching into the first aid box again. Only now do I realize how silent it is.

“Don’t worry, children,” she whispers, pushing a number of ointments, syringes, and bandages to one side. “Father will protect us until we’re rescued.” She hesitates for a moment. Her hands tremble as she pulls out the long tube of pills. “Because we love you more than anything on earth.”

“If I don’t survive the attack or they try to get to you in the safe room,” Father says, adjusting his glasses and looking up at the ceiling again, “you know what to do to protect yourselves, don’t you?”

"Juno and I take the comfort pills," Boy says.

My heart leaps for joy. This is the moment I look forward to most.

"Correct." Mother unscrews the cap. Boy and I put out our palms. Only one pill each. I'd love to stuff it straight in my mouth; the pill that's meant to soothe our souls tastes sweeter than the ripest cherries.

Then we wait. Listen to the silence. Wait for the front door to be smashed in. Or a window. I breathe through my mouth. Count to ten. Mother dabs the bead of sweat on my brow with the piece of lint. Nobody says a word. Father checks his watch. I close my eyes and concentrate on every sound. Hear my heart pounding in my chest. I can even feel my pulse in my ears. Boy pulls his legs up more tightly to his body and leans his head on my shoulder. I can feel his hot breath on my arm. A strange rustling. A few meters above us. Were those footsteps in the kitchen? Have the strangers reached our island already? I stare upward, look at the beams that Father fixed to the wall with metal screws. It took him almost half a year to construct our safe room. Now it's full of spiderwebs. Fine sand trickles down onto us. I scrunch up my eyes and rub the dust from my lids. When I open them again, I can see white dots floating in the room. Like dancing elves, I think, come to protect us.

"I'm so proud of you," Father says, slapping his thigh. "Brilliant, as ever." He stands up from the armchair. "That was just a drill. Don't worry children, no strangers are coming to get us." Father hangs the rifle back up on the wall. "You did that so well!"

Boy breathes a sigh of relief and lets go of my hand. "I knew it all along!" I don't believe him. Even though I'd also hoped that it was just a practice, too. Without warning, like we have every year. But Mother's tears unsettled me; they were genuine.

“Can we still have this?” I ask, squinting at the amber-colored pill in my hand. Mother nods. I’m just about to put it in my mouth when Father interrupts us. “First I want to hear the seven commandments again.”

On cue, Boy and I recite the commandments. We could do it in our sleep.

“We have to hide when Uncle Ole comes.”

“We must never lie.”

“No one’s allowed to enter Father’s library,” Boy says, sneering at me. I only took a few old photo albums and Mother’s favorite novel off the shelves. The one with the beautiful woman on the cover, in a tight embrace with a dark-haired man. I’d just sat at the desk and read the first chapter of *Juliette*, or *The Love of my Life*, when Father suddenly appeared behind me. I’d felt so embarrassed, caught red-handed. A page of the book must have gotten torn. Mother was so angry about this that we’ve been forbidden from going into Father’s study ever since. Even though I still think that’s unfair. It was only a tiny rip.

“When we hear the siren, we have to go to the safe room straight-away. No matter what we’re doing.”

“We mustn’t eat any berries we’re not sure of,” I say, remembering the time when Boy was in bed for three days with a fever and cramps. For security reasons, we couldn’t call a doctor from the village, so we prayed to God every night for his survival. The fifth commandment was introduced when Boy got better.

“We must always kill quickly and painlessly.”

“And the seventh and most important rule: We’re not allowed to leave our island without Mother’s or Father’s permission,” I say, glancing over at Boy. “Otherwise, both of us will be punished.”

“To make sure we look after each other,” Boy snarls back.

“Well done, well done.” Father is satisfied. We stuff the comfort pills in our mouths. I close my eyes and let the fruity jelly mixture of ripe wild strawberries, elderflower, cherries, and sour cranberries linger on my tongue before swallowing the fat, tasteless pill hidden in its sugary coating.

I wish we had a drill like this every week.



After supper I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling. My mind is churning; I can't help thinking of my brother. The ticking of the alarm clock makes me jittery. I turn over to my bedside table where I can see the clock, my lucky black stone, Father's carved elk, and a vase of wildflowers. My eye focuses on the second hand. It's half past eleven. Is Boy really planning to break one of the commandments tonight and row over to the other side?

Pushing the duvet aside, I put on my slippers. The door squeaks when I open it and go out onto the upstairs landing. Boy's room is at the end of the corridor, right beside the bathroom. I creep over to his door. The wooden floor creaks beneath my feet. If Father wakes up and finds me here, I'll just dart into the bathroom. I carefully push Boy's door and go in. It smells of damp pine needles and twinflowers. A breath of wind caresses my face; I stare at the open paned window. The hoot of a small owl echoes through the night: an alarm call. Hopping over to the window, I scan the shore of the lake. The moonlight dances on the water like a finely woven carpet of diamonds. My eyes wander to the big rock. And then I see it. Father's boat, still beside our jetty. Relieved, I turn around to Boy's bed.

He's asleep. In my panic I hadn't noticed him. I close the window and kneel by his bed. Putting my hands together I hurriedly mumble an "Our Father" and thank God that my brother hasn't left me alone on the island. I stand up again and pull the duvet over his shoulders. For a moment I watch him as he sleeps. Even though we don't look much alike, we both share the same wish.

Very soon, my little brother, the two of us will embark on our adventure and discover the forbidden world out there. I promise you this.

However many strangers are lying in wait for us.