

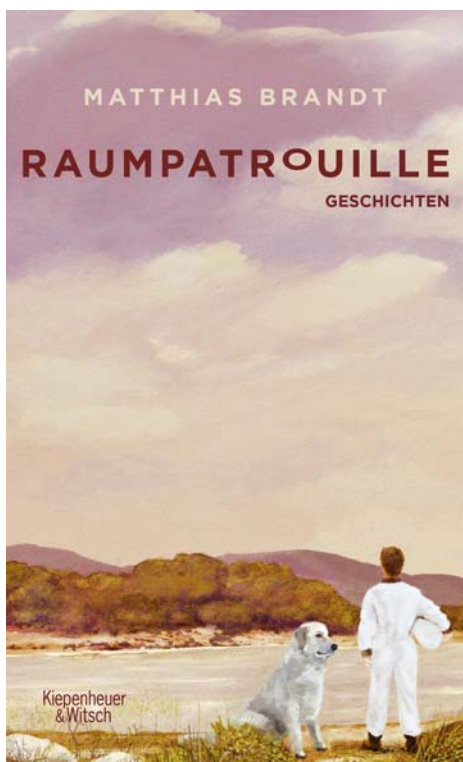
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Space Patrol by Matthias Brandt

Stories

Translated by Mike Mitchell

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Iris Brandt ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de

Aleksandra Erakovic: aerakovic@kiwi-verlag.de

Blue, Yellow and White

I switched off the ceiling light and drew the curtains to make my room darker. Eavesdropping on the grown-ups' conversation, I had learnt that it was soon to be my mother's birthday and they were wondering how to celebrate it. I at least, this much was clear to me, was going to surprise her with something that would take her breath away. What kind of performance, I wondered, would finally open their eyes and make them understand that, without realising it, they were living under the same roof as an artiste, and one of great skill at that. I could already see them sitting there, open-mouthed. They were going to be ashamed that they hadn't recognised my abilities before. However, my triumph had to be well prepared.

I had gathered together everything I needed for that during the course of the afternoon: my father's top hat plus a pearl necklace and a few rings I'd taken from my mother's jewellery box, stuffed into my trousers pocket, sneaked back into my room and now put on.

For Christmas I'd been given a conjuring set. On the lid it said 'Mister Magic' in a semicircle of red capital letters. Underneath them was the profile of a man with a top hat and moustache looking at you over his left shoulder. The box was open in front of me. It contained 'everything needed for more than fifty tricks' as it said in the instruction manual, that I now leafed through for the first time, without finding anything that appealed to me. So far I'd been too lazy and impatient to read the explanations and had just improvised with the bits and pieces from the box without producing any results at all. For example I'd tried mixing a few of the doctored playing cards with our regular deck in the living room to help me win at Switch. My attempt to cheat had immediately been discovered because the backs were a different colour. After that I went into a huff and lost interest; since then the conjuring set had been mouldering away in the cupboard.

But what I was now planning had nothing to do with childish games. I took the magic wand out of the box, that at least seemed usable, jiggled the cover off my quilt, threw it over my shoulders and tied the ends round my neck. My cape wasn't black, like Mr Magic's, but orange with brown spots, however I thought it looked OK.

In the box I'd pinched off the living-room table a few days ago I found a few half-burnt matches my father had put back after using them. With the charred ends I painted a moustache on my face.

Then I stood in the middle of the room, closed my eyes and started to whirl round like a dervish to make myself dizzy and get me in the right mood. When I stopped, I staggered, partly because I'd stepped on the cape, that was too long, but I recovered my balance by throwing up my arms in a

gesture of conjuration, though it wasn't clear to me who or what I was trying to conjure up. So I opened my mouth wide and rolled my eyes, hoping that was what the situation demanded.

Startled, my guinea pig rustled the straw in its cage in the corner. Perhaps at some point it could jump out of my hat like the rabbit of the conjurer I'd seen and admired when I'd been to the circus for the first time recently? But I had greater things in mind. I might come back to that later, if there was still time, and rehearse a little number with the pig for the beginning of my show, to get me and my audience going. I briefly thought about bringing in some reinforcements. How would it be if I dressed up Stine, my child minder, in a glitzy outfit with sequins ("get a glitzy outfit—where from???" was the thought that flashed through my mind) tied her to a turntable and threw knives to make her silhouette? Or should I put Frau Doerfel, our housekeeper, in a crate and saw her in two for everyone to see? Was there a crate that was big enough for Frau Doerfel? And if I did go ahead with this, what if something went wrong with the knife-throwing or sawing? Then I might lose the pair of them, whom I loved very much.

With my plans already at a dead end, I rocked back and forwards in the chair, picked up the matchbox and lit a match. I tried to see how long I could hold it in my hand without burning my fingers and threw it on the table at the last moment, where it went out, leaving a mark. With my fingernail I scraped the paint that had been softened by the heat off the table-top and poked around in the tiny crater, but inspiration still didn't come. Hoping to put myself in a mood of sublime creativity, I started to hum the Eurovision signature tune, that was always played before the quiz show *Only one can win*. Hardly had I got up than I dropped onto the floor, groaning as if I'd been hit by a deadly shot, a habit with which I'd startled my nearest and dearest a few times. The top hat rolled across the floor; I just lay there, staring at the ceiling. Still humming, I wriggled on my back over to the window, stuck my head through the drapes and looked out at the evening sky. Still holding the matches. I took one out, lit it and briefly held it too close, sending a little blue flame dancing up a fold to the top of the net curtain, where it went out. It was frightening but on the other hand very promising. Perhaps something could be done with it. I pulled myself up, put the top hat, that had rolled under the table, back on again, folding down the tops of my ears under the brim to stop the hat, that was much too big for me, from slipping down to my chin. Adjusting my cloak, I held my fingers with the rings on in the beam from the garden lamp that came in through a gap in the drapes. Things were slowly starting to happen and I waggled my fingers in the air, playing an imaginary piano, like Franz Lambert on his electronic organ and the diamond ring cast flashes of light on the wall and the drapes. My humming turned into singing, tentative at first but then bolder

and louder.

There were net curtains like those on which the flame behaved in such a wonderful way throughout the house, and I could perform the number with great effect in the living room, perhaps before guests in the drawing room. It might even eventually be possible, by means of remote ignition, the practicalities of which I would have to think about, to illuminate the house in several places at once and put my audience outside, on the terrace.

Carried away with enthusiasm, I lit another match, stepped over to the curtain, sent the flame flickering up, and threw the match behind me with a sweeping gesture. And then another. I hummed a fanfare as I lit the match.

This time, however, the flames didn't go out but started to spread along the upper edge of the curtain. Singing out loud now, I watched them slowly get bigger and their colour change from blue to yellow and white. There was already a stench as well and in no way did I want to draw attention to myself before the scene was properly worked out and ready to perform. So I picked up the bicycle pump, that happened to be lying around there, and climbed up onto a chair to blow out the flames. Remarkably, they didn't go out but grew bigger and started to crackle. I pumped even faster, sweating with the effort and the heat, my ears became moist and the top hat slipped down over my eyes. I couldn't see and kept on having to push it up while the flames were now spreading down, but much larger and brighter than before. There was a whistling and rustling inside my head, as if little bats were making a racket in my auditory canals. But my excitement was still stronger than my fear, everything was subordinated to the sense of being on the brink of discovering a spectacular act. As the fire by the windows began to spread, so did my doubts as to whether I could still keep the situation under control on my own. Ready to take up the challenge, I jumped down from the chair and tried to remember how the conjurer in the circus had performed his astonishing feats. After all, he'd made things appear and disappear at will, and that with a grandiose air. Where had that blasted magic wand got to? I talked to the flames, begged them to disappear. Which they didn't. Then I tore off the top hat, undid my cape, that is the quilt-cover, and swung it in the manner of a toreador, hoping that would contain or curb the fire. When that didn't work, I tried a friendly approach and once more implored it to withdraw, so that I could think over the whole business again, more carefully, at a better time when I wasn't in such a state and could start from the beginning again.

But the flames were quicker than my thoughts.

I was gripped with panic. My eyes filled with tears and when I wiped my arm across my face, the

snot erased the pencil moustache.

I'd stopped singing. In no time at all I'd plunged from euphoria into the depths of despair. I felt I was going to die, if not from the fire, then from remorse. There were, it seemed to me, only two ways of avoiding the humiliation this disaster would bring. I could lock the door from inside, throw the key out of the window and, since I'd forfeited the right to live, let myself be consumed by the flames. In my mind's eye I could see my distraught mother collapse at my grave. Or I could quietly leave the room, lock the door from outside and run away, as far as possible, facing an uncertain future with no prospect of ever being able to come back. Here again an image appeared in my mind: me, alone, in tatters and emaciated, dragging myself along a country road in my footcloths, a stick with a bundle tied to the end over my shoulder.

Coughing and quivering with fear, hopelessness and the hatred of a person who is aware of his own guilt, I stood in this inferno and my only wish was that someone would come and rescue me. Or at least someone I could point to as the guilty party.

Why couldn't I simply undo my mistake? Until a few moments ago I'd been convinced that everything I thought up was, by that very fact, real and not just something that could become real. Now I sensed, without being able to describe it, that some psychological shift was taking place inside me. The way an apparently safely secured ship's cargo starts to slide in a storm and eventually pulls the ship down into the depths. I'd thought everything could be reversed and forgiven. This moment, in which I realised that was not the case, was the most terrible one I had experienced so far. It filled me with far greater fear than the fire, for it made the certainty, that my life had been founded on until then, crumble. Although the situation was getting more and more threatening, I just stood there, paralysed.

I briefly found hope in the idea of turning my shame into a success by using the catastrophe I'd caused myself to rescue the family from it! What if I behaved as if I had *discovered* the fire? If I sounded the alarm, warned the others and thus, by saving them, became a hero after all? Then no one would ask how the fire had started.

Desperate as I was, I could already see myself at the front door, welcoming the officer in charge of the firemen, in his uniform with the shining silver helmet, and coolly and clearly informing him about the situation as we dashed up the stairs. The others would still be utterly confused whilst I'd had time to face up to the situation resolutely. Once we'd finished, I'd sit on the engine with the firemen, perhaps they'd even let me climb up the ladder. We'd drive round and round, ringing the bell and celebrating because, thanks to my presence of mind, everything had turned out all right in

the end. The situation was hopeless but the idea still made me smile.

Suddenly the door behind me was flung open. The fire flared up, I heard a scream, turned round and my mother and I were staring at each other with, for quite different reasons, looks of horror on our faces.

I don't know how I got out of the burning room, she must surely have pulled me out right away, but immediately afterwards there was much hectic shouting and running in the corridor. A chain was formed, buckets of water passed along it, eventually Herr Konopka used the fire-extinguisher that was kept on the stairs and I watched him save us.

As the only one not involved in fighting the fire, I stood there like a stuffed animal in the remains of my disguise, following everything from a distance which, even though I didn't move, seemed to get greater and greater.

Later my mother demanded an explanation, scolding me loudly as she took her pearl necklace off me. I slipped the rings off my fingers and handed them to her, stubbornly keeping my eyes on the floor, drawing imaginary eights with my right foot, until she took my head in her hands and lifted it up so that I was finally looking her in the eye. I took my revenge by looking straight through her so that, despite her closeness, she was nothing more for me than a noise and, at most, a shadowy figure that never coalesced into a real image. A trick I'd thought up at some time or other to distance myself from such predicaments. I would have liked to tell her how and why this disaster had come about, that I was deeply sorry about what I had done and had set fire to our house with the best of intentions, but I couldn't utter a word. At the same time I was furious because this was all about my failure and not about what I'd actually wanted to do. Surely that was more important?

For a long time afterwards whenever I laid my head on my desk at school and stuck my nose into the crook of my arm, I could still smell the smoke in the pullover, that had since then been washed umpteen times, and remember the life I had lost in which everything had been possible.

[...]

What it is

Since I'd set my room on fire with a conjuring trick that went wrong, it had to be redecorated.

I was moved to another room while the work was being carried out and when I returned after it was finished I found not the disorder I was used to but a so-called 'young person's room' created by my mother together with an interior decorator. Now it felt as if I were a visitor to myself. My mother felt hurt because I wasn't pleased with it. The thing was, I had no idea who lived here. Certainly not me. Over the previous years I'd covered the walls from top to bottom with felt-tip and crayon drawings. The wardrobe wouldn't close since a hinge had been wrenched off one of the doors which had then developed a life of its own, constantly falling open with a creak, as if there were a noise-maker in the room with me. I'd been trying to swing on it from my desk chair to my bed, setting myself the task of not touching the floor as I did so. In which I succeeded, only the wardrobe had gone the way of all wardrobes. There were piles of toys and equipment for all kinds of sports I'd never played, the guinea pig's cage was in one corner, the tortoise box in another, which meant that the whole floor was covered in sawdust, hay soaked in pee and mouldering lettuce leaves. On the window-ledge stood the battered model of the Saturn V moon rocket my parents had brought back as a present from a trip to America. It had been damaged when I'd tried to attach the above-mentioned guinea pig to it with a rubber band from a preserving jar. My intention had been to use a clothes line to whirl the rocket and rodent round as fast as possible, thus reproducing an experiment in a simulator to test astronauts' ability to cope with the effect of great centrifugal forces. Initially I had intended to carry out the experiment with my tortoise because it already had a kind of space-suit of its own—all I'd have had to do was to think about adding a helmet made from half a table-tennis ball that could have been stuck to its shell with glue. However, the tortoise had been damaged shortly before that because the dog had thought it was a bone on legs. Which, in a way, it was. Fortunately I'd seen what was going on before the dog finally managed to break it open. Now, however, there was a hole in its shell and it was convalescing, which meant that the pig had come back into consideration. The beast was, however, a pathetic failure since it thrashed its legs about while it was being fixed to the rocket, scratching the American flag and, moreover, squeaking so loud it alerted Stine, the au pair, who put a final end to my experiment.

I would have preferred my room not to have been changed at all, the marks of the fire to have been left. But everything that there was had immediately been cleared away. The supposedly much improved room was at the beginning of a long corridor. If the door was closed, as it was at the

moment, I could hear nothing of what was going on in the house. Sometimes I was afraid I'd be forgotten.

Both my mother and Stine were out but I knew that my father was at home. Coming back from my friend Holger's house I'd been overtaken by the line of cars. At home my father had obviously gone straight to his room. When I got back he was nowhere to be seen. I lounged about, bored, in my new abode-out-of-the-catalogue, glanced at the book my mother had been reading to me in the evening during the last few days and missed the ritual. Father was always occupied with important things, to ask him seemed unthinkable. After a while I put on my light-blue slippers, picked up the book—you never know—and went out into the corridor. Perhaps I would run into him and could then decide on the spot whether I dared ask him. At first I hung around in the kitchen and the empty corridor for a bit before approaching paternal territory.

The door to his room was, as usual, closed. Behind it was his living space, two little, wood-panelled attic rooms—study and bedroom. This part of the house was more alien to me than any other. There was a separate entrance on the left-hand side of the house, so it could happen that my father came and went without anyone realising. Despite my usual curiosity, I rarely went into these rooms. I just occasionally slipped in when he wasn't there, to spin round and round on his desk chair until I was dizzy.

Cautiously I put my ear to the door and listened to see if anything was going on behind it. That was pointless since it was actually the door to an ante-room to his study. If the next door was also shut no sound would come out into the corridor. Slowly I pushed the handle down and opened the door a little. As I suspected, the other door was also closed. That my father was there I could tell from the tobacco smoke that had come into the ante-room. I stood there for a while, I could still retreat unnoticed. But the temptation was too great and I cautiously entered the dark gateway to the paternal world and quietly closed the door behind me. Stood in the darkness listening, sniffing. Then, muffled by the closed door, I heard soft snoring. Feeling my way to the next door, I put my ear to it and heard the sound more clearly. Summoning up all my courage, I knocked hesitantly, so that if necessary it could sound as if the noise had come from elsewhere, just as you look away when someone you've been secretly watching turns to face you. By the time my father reached the door I could have long since made my escape. No reaction to my knock.

Finally, as carefully as possible, I pressed down the door-handle and opened the door a little. I peeked into the room, towards the desk, and saw him sitting there, his head on one side and slumped forward onto his chest. He was snoring regularly, his head going up and down a little each

time. His spectacles had slipped down and were just held on by the tip of his nose. I stood in the doorway for a while, looking at him. On the desk were files that were carried along behind him in a fat briefcase. As well as that there was an ash-tray and a glass with a brown liquid in it and some ice-cubes that had almost melted; I would have liked to lick them if it hadn't been for the taste of the revolting drink. Cautiously I went into the room and sat down on the sofa beside the door, watching him. I had to resist the impulse to go over and see if the hair of which, without him noticing, I'd made a detailed study a few days ago, was still sticking out of his nose. Now I would at last have had the opportunity to pull it and, if he should wake up, hide behind him. Perhaps I could also keep turning his chair on its axis until he woke up, to see if he got dizzy in his sleep. I did none of this, instead at some point I opened my book and started to read. His regular snoring had a pleasantly soporific effect on me and the words began to blur before my eyes. It must be nice to stretch out on the sofa. Over the armrest was the disturbingly soft camelhair blanket that I had only stroked, not unfolded, whenever I slipped into this room when he was away. I was about to reach out for it when he suddenly woke with a start and opened his eyes without giving me the impression he could see anything. "Hva er det?" he said, addressing his question in Norwegian to the room in general. "What is it?" Only then did he notice me, seemed surprised. My first impulse was to run off. The idea that I'd done everything wrong, that my being here was was an intolerable violation of a sphere where I didn't belong, flashed through my mind and I went bright red.

"Yes?" he asked. I didn't know what to say to that so in my embarrassment remained silent. We looked at each other for a long time and then, with no idea where I'd got the courage, I asked hesitantly, "Can you read to me?" A furrowed brow, as if he had to make an effort to understand the question. Without a word he stood up and went out. I was so ashamed I wished the ground would swallow me up and was sure I'd made a big mistake that could never be rectified. Since, however, standing up and running away was something I'd forgotten how to do, and because nothing mattered any more anyway, I simply stayed sitting where I was and fiddled with one of the leather buttons on the sofa. Underneath my velours pullover a drop of sweat slowly trickled down from my left armpit to my waistband. It was a long time before he came back, by then I'd given up all hope. But now he had a glass of red wine in one hand and one of milk in the other. He put both of them down on the coffee table and sat down on the sofa beside me. For a brief moment he looked as if he were trying to remember who I was. Then he did remember and asked me where I'd stopped reading. I just stared, he had to repeat his question. I showed him the place, he picked up the book and started to read. Though only to himself, not out loud. He seemed to like what was in it for he smiled. But what

I'd been asking for was different and I wondered how to attract his attention.

During the last summer holidays I'd once been sent to wake my father, who'd dropped off in the deck chair, and tell him lunch was ready. I'd stood there, spoken to him several times but in vain, and eventually, not knowing what to do, had, for reasons that were immediately inexplicable to me, given him a firm and, as his shriek indicated, painful kick on the shin. That brought me the first and only slap on the face of my life.

Now I looked for a more elegant method of drawing his attention. But then all at once he put his left arm round me and started to read out loud. I could hardly believe what was happening. He read for a while, looked at me and asked a few questions about the story of the propeller man. When I explained the background to the story, he laughed.

Cautiously I snuggled up closer to him. Then, after a brief hesitation, with my head first on his shoulder, then in his lap, I looked up, saw his leathery cheeks with the black and silver stubble and was briefly tempted to touch them. But I definitely didn't want to spoil the moment. Millions of tiny wrinkles round his eyes, as it seemed to me. As he turned the pages I could see the yellow tips of the index and middle fingers of his smoking hand. His spectacles with the tiny windows at the lower edge. I positioned myself so that I could produce optical distortions by changing my angle of vision, saw eyes of different sizes, whose colour I still hadn't established. Now would have been an opportunity to do so, had I not been gripped by this blissful heaviness. The large pores on his nose turned it into a landscape of craters. His voice was vibrating somewhere in my stomach and it sounded even better than that of Pa in *Bonanza*.

I didn't want to let go of all that and while I was thinking about it, I fell asleep.