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Konrad, Felix und ich

Roman



verlag die brotsuppe

The wind gives the curtains fat tummies. Their tummies puff out and then in again, empty. The curtains are hungry too.

All morning a woman on the radio has been talking about lunch.

Mother says the radio has to catch the listeners' attention.

We're having fish fingers and potatoes.

Who is going to catch me?

The fish float upside down in the water with their tummies pointing up and are collected like that. Half of the catch is made into fish fingers, the other half into cat food. Grannie Ida went to the seaside once, she knows all about it.

The woman on the radio introduces a guest. The guest is good at cooking, the guest has been up a high mountain. Later in the programme they're going to tell us what he ate at the top.

The woman on the radio talks a lot. Her head must be very big. I've never seen her, you can't see into the radio.

We see the new neighbour nearly every day. I pull on the curtain and look out of the window. The neighbour is breaking her garden. She's pulling up bushes and throwing them into a huge shopping bag. When she bends down, her bottom grows up into the air like a mountain.

What is she doing with the raspberry bushes?

It's a full moon, Konrad said. When the moon's tummy is full, it lights our way behind the bushes.

The neighbour is breaking her garden.
Mother puts down the potato peeler, wipes a loose hair away from her forehead, and comes to stand next to me at the window.
Has she seen the weeds, asks Mother, and goes back to the potatoes.
I press my hands against the window and breathe onto the glass. The neighbour goes fuzzy, disappearing into the mist along with the weeds.
Mother, now chopping the potatoes, tells me to stop making her windows smeary.
The mist on the window fades away. The neighbour's gloves are red.

Does the blood come from the roots?
Mother shakes her head, strands of hair come untucked from behind her ears and fall into her face.

Is it the tulips?
Mother looks up, puts down the knife, and touches her neck.
Tulips, she says, and looks at her watch. Can't be.
The blood comes from the soil and dries in the air. In Andalusia, Father said, the soil is red. They dig more and bigger holes than here. The blood dries quickly in the hot air. In Andalusia, Father said, they hang sausages in the cellars, and whole animals with heads.

The woman on the radio tells us to enjoy our meal.
Her guest has nice cats. The cats are so nice that they
are allowed to walk on the table at home.

Mother flicks through a magazine. Lunch is ready
but we have to wait, and it'll get cold.

Food gets cold at the top of the mountain, says the
guest on the radio. He once saw an ibex slip and fall
into a crevasse. It was a shame about the meat.

You won't get bored with us, says the woman on the
radio. She orders us to ring her and ask for a song.

While the song is playing does she lie down under a
tree and get out her picnic?

Does she stuff sandwiches into her mouth?

In my head she is still talking, with her mouth full:

We won't get bored with you. You won't get bored
with you. We won't get bored with us either.

I'm bored without Konrad. If he gets really good at
football and goes to live Abroad I'll have to figure out
what to do.

Is Abroad covered in grass?

Are there gardens with raspberries there?

Does the moon's tummy get full Abroad?

The fish fingers have burned their tummies in the
oven. The dead fish float in the sunshine with their
tummies facing up, until they wash up in the har-
bour. I spread mayonnaise on the tummies of the fish
fingers and pretend it's sun cream.

The phone rings. Mother dries her hands on her apron, picks up the receiver, and wedges it between her ear and her shoulder. She takes a cup from the table, puts it in the dishwasher, chucks the tablet in, and slams the door shut. The machine makes a whooshing noise like the sea.

The neighbour has left her gloves and tools lying on the grass and gone into the house.

Did she need the loo?

Mother lets out a noise. She sinks to the floor and leans back against the dishwasher. She drops the phone, her hand clutching at and twisting her apron. I pick up the phone and put it to my ear.

It crackles and rustles like crumpled-up newspaper.

Is the inside of the phone a parcel?

Can you hear me? Can you hear me? Father hangs up and I hear the engaged tone.

Mother's chest heaves up and down. Her mouth is wide open like at the dentist. I feel her neck, it's sticky. The dishwasher sounds as if the sea is turning right around.

Above Mother's head a blinking orange light shows the amount of time left. I follow the numbers, starting at the top of the number one and tracing the two lines down, then I jump to the other number one, and climb up it. From there I jump to the number three and manage to get to the middle. I'm not sure which way to go from there.

The radio is playing a very sad song. The song is so sad that nobody can have requested it. It's in a different language, but it still makes us cry.
Are people ashamed of having to cry?

The woman on the radio crosses her fingers for everyone who is on the road. Traffic jam on the motorway because of a cyclist. Traffic jam because of an accident, there's a diversion. Traffic jam caused by watermelons in the road, she says, and tells us that the watermelons come from Italy and are rolling in the road like split-open heads.

In between the traffic jams the tummy aches will go back, promises the woman on the radio.

How does she know I have a tummy ache?

Doesn't my tummy ache know where it comes from?

Is that why it can't go back?

The woman on the radio forgets to say that watermelons can give you tummy ache. You are careful not to swallow the seeds, but they get stuck in the flesh and are slippery. If you have too many seeds in your stomach, the ache disappears, but so does everything else. It's not just watermelon seeds you have to watch out for, sometimes it happens with tangerine pips too. Tangerines are worse than watermelons; the pieces have bits of white skin stuck to them that you're not supposed to eat. Once I gave a tangerine to Miss Böni to see if she knew how to peel it properly. She must have learned that in her teacher training. But she wouldn't. You can do it yourself, she said. Most peo-

ple eat tangerines without peeling them properly. I think that if your tummy ache goes away then you're not there anymore either.

Soon a lot of people won't be there anymore.

The woman on the radio doesn't say that there are tummy aches lying in the road.

She forgets to say that everyone always goes out on the road at the same time. Granny Ida says that people get in each other's way. They all want to get away quickly to some other place. They don't like it where they are. They don't look at anything. They beep their horns and speed up, they take pot luck. They curse the watermelons and the cyclists. They curse the people on foot. They forget that they have feet too, but they look after their cars as if they were freshly painted toenails. Granny Ida has flown in an aeroplane before, she saw how many cars there were, glinting in the sun.

Sometimes the woman on the radio tries to catch our attention with words I've never heard before. Like clocking-off.

The guest has gone home to talk to his cats and brush them. We always invite interesting guests. Tomorrow is going to be a lovely summer's day, don't miss it.

Mother has forgotten to turn the radio off. I turn it off, but the voice is still there. We mustn't miss the lovely summer's day.

Father comes home without Konrad. He doesn't take his shoes off and doesn't sit down. He puts his hands

on Mother, but his hands slide off her. Father presses me to his face, his stubble is prickly.

How much does a whole car prickle? You'd have to ask Konrad.

We can't ask Konrad anymore.

How much a whole car hurts.

Did he play football with a watermelon?

Has he already gone Abroad?

The woman on the radio asks lots of questions.

You can collect Felix, she says, as soon as he's feeling better.

We'll collect Felix as soon as he's feeling better, Father tries to say, but then he can't say anything. I rub my cheek with my fingertips where he pricked me.

The parents are like survivors from a shipwreck drifting on a plank of wood in the open sea, says the woman on the radio. Has she rehearsed that specially so that she knows what to say when we are sad?

We have never been so sad before. My parents lie on Konrad's bed. They cling on to each other so that neither of them slides off. Mother doesn't look as if she would be able to swim anymore. She's got spray in her face, says the woman on the radio, the sea has turned around, the parents are floundering.

Sea water is salty, it stings your eyes. That's what Granny Ida told me, but now I can feel it for myself. Dear God, don't let my parents go under, Amen. Or, dear God, let them take me, take us, with them.

Konrad's school satchel is on the chair, the back of the chair is touching the top of the desk. No one is allowed to sit on the chair, and no one is allowed to sit on Konrad's satchel. No one is allowed to open the satchel. Konrad doesn't have to go to school anymore. Has dear God made Konrad's things electric so that I'll get a shock if I move the chair away from the desk and touch the satchel?

No, he hasn't. The satchel has dents and scratches on it. The fur that was on the outside flap has been scraped off.

Did Konrad fall onto his back?

Did Konrad fall onto his satchel and slide across the tarmac?

The little stones with sharp edges that stick out of the road have bitten the fur off the satchel.

Isn't there a dentist to pull the road's teeth out?

Do the teeth fall out themselves?

If the street has starved, we'll clock off.

The clasps are smashed in, they don't fasten anymore. I lift up the flap: that's not allowed. No one is allowed to lift up the flap and look into the satchel. The inside of the satchel smells like leather and paper and coloured pencils. That's what my brothers smell like when they come home after sharpening their pencils. If a pencil falls on the floor, the lead snaps and the tip gets wobbly. That's what my brothers used to smell like.

Konrad steps onto the zebra crossing and a car speeds towards him. Konrad is on the zebra crossing but the car doesn't stop. Felix is at the side of the road and sees it all. Felix looks like Konrad, but different.

I switch on the bedside lamp. The girl standing in front of the bulb is wearing a green felt dress and has messy hair.

The light is dazzling. A glowing beetle scuttles over the panelling on the ceiling. The twins' face flashes up in front of me. First I see more of Konrad in it, then more of Felix. After a while the ray of light gets weaker, the countenance fades, and I can't remember what my brothers looked like.

With my eyes closed I watch the sun setting. It only gets really dark when you die. Then you go into a tunnel where there are no more streetlights. The first car that comes runs you over. The second one runs you over too, even though you've already been run over. The third car runs you over too, and so on. The cars can't see if you're still walking or already on the ground, it's so dark. After the holidays I'll ask Miss Böni if I should also wear my reflective sash for sleeping.

The woman on the radio keeps asking, do you want to say hello to anyone, for example your parents, your brothers and sisters, your grandparents? I say hello to my parents, I say hello to my grandparents, I say hello to Konrad. And Felix. I blow my nose on the end of the duvet, then I lie still under the covers. My head is humming like a fridge.

Today, the radio stays turned off. I imagine what the woman is saying: what have we got for you today, how are you today?

Next to Father on the patio there is a rose bush. It has lots of drooping heads.

A wasp is flying around in the empty watering can that is standing in the corner, it can't find the exit. There are two ways it could get out, through the big hole or the small hole.

Is it looking for another entrance, one that leads even deeper into the watering can? Father's toenails look as if a mouse has been gnawing on them.

The water that spurted up on Konrad's bed has given Father red eyes and a fat nose.

He pulls the corners of his mouth back and says: We're going to the funeral parlour, have you cleaned your teeth?

Is the funeral parlour like an ice cream parlour?

Konrad is not here anymore, but his toothbrush is; it's still in the beaker.

The woman on the radio says the car was going very fast, Konrad didn't have time to fetch his toothbrush.

Will he get new teeth in heaven, or will he always have the gaps?

Does a tooth fairy who has died give out toothbrushes in heaven?

The bristles on Konrad's and Felix's toothbrushes are bent exactly the same way. The bristles on my tooth-

brush are straight, I'm brushing straight up and down with it now.

Has Mother forgotten that I can fasten my shoes myself?

How hard she is yanking the laces. I nearly lose my balance.

She looks up at me from the floor and asks if I am brave enough to go. It would help me remember.

The more carefully you look, the better you remember.

Or how do you have to look to have a good memory?

How tight she pulls the bows. Then she says: come on.

With no brothers in the car it doesn't make sense to sit in the middle. I sit on Felix's side. I don't dare to sit on Konrad's side.

Are the houses going past us or are we going past them?

It's like in a cartoon. I really want to watch it, but I'm a bit scared. Something bad always happens in cartoons and Mother worries that I won't be able to get off to sleep. Every evening, when I'm lying in bed, I imagine Konrad being run over.

I already know what he looks like.

Have I been watching too many cartoons?

The funeral parlour is just a house but with a really high roof.

Father says that the roof is so high so that there is enough space for the soul to linger for a while. The

soul comes out of the throat. But it's not definite that it gets to go to heaven, so first it has to fly around in the attic.

The door of the viewing room is not locked.

Does dear God watch those who try to come in, and if someone comes who's not allowed, does he press the remote-control lock button?

Is the viewing room a fridge for people who have been run over?

Did dear God choose these clunky chairs?

I sit between my parents and let my feet dangle, knocking my ankles against each other, harder and harder, until it hurts.

Father reaches across my lap for Mother's hand. He stands up to swap places with me.

Mother's eyes are wet sponges.

I walk slowly over to the viewing window. Behind the glass Konrad is lying on a narrow bed dressed in white.

Do I dare to look at him properly?

Just look quickly, to see how he looks, for the memory. He is pale. But he is smiling. He is wearing a sparkly bow tie. I would like to touch the bow tie. You can't see whether his soul is still stuck in his throat or whether it has already fluttered up to the ceiling.

On the glass is a patch of breath that keeps growing and shrinking as if it were alive. We wait a long time, but Konrad doesn't move. Mother screws up her eyes, drops fall onto her chest. I climb onto her lap, her cheeks taste salty, as if she had just come out of the sea.

He is pale. But he is smiling. He is wearing a sparkly bow tie. I would like to touch the bow tie. You can't see where his soul is.

I hang the picture on the wall in my head.

Mother yanked my shoelaces. I don't need to watch any more cartoons.

Father says that the smile on Konrad's face was made by hand. It doesn't mean that he was smiling when the car ran into him.

How Mother glares at him.

Made by God's hand, says Father.

Mother looks even crosser. God comes, he grabs her and shakes her.

Father puts his arms around Mother and has serious words with God.

He also appears in cartoons, and it is not always clear if he is a goody or a baddy.

In the cupboard with the photo albums it smells of leather and schnapps. The twins' album has a green cover and is as thick as my album, but heavier. In every photo the brothers look pale, and Mother has fat red cheeks.

Had she been to the dentist's?

Father has nice teeth and a proper beard. When the photos were taken, my soul was still in the air and didn't know which throat to go into.

Mother hovers over me like a cloud. She takes the album out of my hands and claps it shut. She puts the

album in the cupboard, she almost disappears into the cupboard.

At first I don't notice Felix, then I see him sitting cross-legged high up on a bed. He's holding a gadget that looks like a TV remote control.

Felix is pale, but he smiles at us. He presses buttons on the gadget without looking at it. The bed comes down with a whirring sound, and the top part bends to make a back rest. Felix puts the gadget down and lets our parents hug him. Mother is shaking.

Is Felix electric?

Is Felix lightning?

I go over to the bed too and we hug each other. Mother looks at us as though she needs to go to the dentist again.

The door opens and a man in a long white coat comes in. He shakes our hands, then strokes Felix's head.

Do they have a secret?

The doctor says a few words to Felix first, then to me, and lastly to my parents. I make a happy face so he doesn't think badly of us.

The door opens again and a woman in a light-blue trouser suit comes in. She straight away holds out her hand to me and tells me to go with her. She wants to show me something.

She shows her teeth and reminds me of a horse.

The sun shining through the windows makes a pattern on the shiny floor.

In the long corridor it sounds as though the woman is wearing horseshoes.

I have to tell her something about myself.

My name is Nora and I'm on holiday.

The woman wants to know what I like to draw the most.

Flowers and letters.

She pushes her fringe to one side and claps her hand to her forehead. She puffs out her nostrils.

Is she disappointed that I don't like drawing horses that much?

She wants to know if I've ever fallen off my bike and if I always wear a helmet.

I tell her that once I had a bad crash on my BMX and broke my arm, which isn't true at all.

I always wear a helmet.

That's true.

The woman stops and points her finger at me. She says that I swallow my words: if you don't speak more slowly I'll have to take you to hospital.

Does she mean the words are seeds that slide down into your tummy?

We come to a blackboard on which she wants me to draw something. I draw a daisy, but I don't try very hard. The daisy is purple and wilting. I write my name underneath, but I write the N and the R backwards so that the R's tummy is pointing in the wrong direction.

On the way back she asks if I know that my brother, that one of my brothers is not coming home anymore. I hope she can find the right room again.

The woman goes up to the doctor and whispers something to him.

A secret?

The doctor writes it in his notebook and asks: Nora?
He smiles.
The light-blue woman tells the doctor things.
Is she looking right through me?
It's because she was so used to being around the brother, the brothers, she says and, addressing my parents: think of a mountain stream when a thunderstorm is forecast.
I don't dare to say, you are also a thunderstorm, no, a horse in a thunderstorm. I'm almost one of the brothers; we were almost born together, as triplets.
The woman clicks her tongue.
The doctor holds the door open for her. I wipe the hand which she had been holding on my trousers.
Is a car coming?
Is nothing coming?
Are you sure? Father squeezes my hand.
You have to twist your head around like a bird, but when you look down at your feet to take your first step it's already too late, and you have to lift your head up and twist it round again. When you're finally on the crossing, everything spins all around you, and the cars come from all directions.
In cartoons, birds that fly too low over the road get run over. The birds turn into colourful transfers.
Father swings me across the road. We are lucky, no cars want to run us over today. We wait for Mother and Felix, they are standing hand in hand on the other side of the road. Mother wants to take a step and pull Felix along with her, but he doesn't move.

The woman on the radio makes a nasty comment,
and I don't know if that's what I'm ashamed of.

Translated by Caitlin Stephens