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Löwenherz (Lionheart)

Excerpt translated from the German by Lucy Jones

I

This was my brother Richard:

When he was walking, he was thinking about lying down,
when he was sitting, he was thinking about lying down,
when he was standing, he was thinking about lying down,
even when he was flying, he was thinking about lying down.

Always thinking about lying down.

He sauntered about at random wherever his crooked legs took him. His head guided his legs, as unlike his feet, rough terrain didn't slow it down. He picked up flat stones and skimmed them across water: he liked being near water. He stooped to pick up an adder, put it on his bare arm and hummed a tune – *Going Down the Country* by Canned Heat. Imagined he was in a faraway jungle where the adder's bigger brothers and sisters were spreading panic and fear. Someone with crooked arms had told him that adders could tell the difference between speaking and singing, as could snakes. Even fish, he'd said, came swimming up if you sat down on a shore with a cassette recorder and the right music, as long as you were quiet.

My brother stared up at the sky all day, and when the adder fell from his arm as he did, he paid it no more attention: every man or animal for himself. He looked like the cute brother of Alan Wilson, the singer from Canned Heat, who was already dead by then, having taken his own life at 27. Richard would do the same when he was 30. A stray dog followed him – one whose mixed pedigree was plain to see, a shaggy creature that just about reached his knee – and they instantly hit it off. It followed him until dusk when the bushes started to look like ghosts. In front of the building where he lived on the second floor, Richard stooped down to the dog and spoke to it in a tone that was first like a teacher to a pupil, then like a priest to an

altar boy, and finally, like a comedian to his sidekick: ‘Stay with me! Don’t go away! I’ll call you – what should I call you – what should I call you – I’ll call you Shamash. You are my sun god. Be a guest in my hut, and if possible, don’t shit in the corner.’ The future would take its course, one way or another. For man and animal alike. Small obstacles could always be laid in its path.

Up in his room, which was small, he looked around for a spot where Shamash could sleep. He decided the dog should lie on the floor at the foot of his bed on an old, disused winter coat that he’d already given me three times and I’d already darned three times. Then he trained the dog, both of them lying down, Richard on the bed and the dog on the floor. Not only adders, snakes and fish could tell the difference between speaking and singing, but also some mammals, as he soon thought he had found out.

From then on, wherever Richard went, the dog went too, following Richard’s legs wherever they took them. Richard cracked four eggs in a pan and shared them with Shamash. He trained the dog to look sensible. That was important. When he stooped to stroke his fur, he realised the dog stank. Tomorrow, tomorrow he would take him to the lake with some shampoo and give him a proper wash. A good shampoo in case Shamash had sensitive skin under his shaggy coat. Pretending to be blind, Richard went into a supermarket where dogs weren’t allowed, stuck a bottle of expensive children’s shampoo into his trouser pocket which was at the same height as the dog’s muzzle and walked past the till without paying; he kept a rigid, empty look in his eyes, his free arm stretched in front of him and the dog on a short lead. Shamash played along, looking sensible and responsible.

A week later, the dog could do everything Richard thought a dog should be able to do. Out of gratitude, he smoothed his sheet, pushed his bed cover to one side against the wall, and on the other half, laid a woollen blanket he’d washed in the lake with the same shampoo he’d used on the dog. That was where Shamash would sleep. ‘You’ve passed the trial period,’ he said. The dog understood and curled up on the spot.

‘He’s completely housetrained,’ he told me, ‘a sophisticated dog. Even refrains from farting until we’re out on the street.’

Both of them slept long and soundly, and in the morning, they both smelled the same. They woke up for breakfast on Sunday and went straight back to bed afterwards. Richard had a job lined up. He was a sought-after expert and avant-garde member of the working class. But that wouldn’t be until next Sunday. Seven more sleeps, then he’d go to work.

One Monday during that wonderful summer, before the start of the school holidays, which Richard observed all his life like an eternal schoolchild, he found a bathtub near the gravel pits on Lake Constance. Perhaps it had been used as a trough so that the horses didn't drink the water where mothers were bathing with their children. It was early in the morning, only nine o'clock, and at that time there were no bathers, mosquitoes, or horses peeing into the water as they drank from the bathtub. Summer was already well advanced and there was a fragrant smell of baking bread in the air. He took off his shirt and jeans, tied them in a knot and hid them behind a willow tree. My brother never wore underpants, not on principle, or even practical reasons, but just because he never found any in his drawers, although mostly he just forgot to put them on and only remembered once he'd pulled up his jeans. The bathtub was the colour of eggshell and this gave him an idea: he'd once wanted to illustrate a children's book in which a little dwarf with a blue cap sails far out to sea in an eggshell. The battered parts of the bathtub were covered in rust and the enamel had grown rough. At the bottom was a brown puddle of rain. He broke off some branches and used them to clean out the tub. A children's dinghy had been left behind. It was deflated, smeared in mud and full of snails – but still, a paddle was lying inside. That should do it. He dragged the bathtub into the water, found his balance standing and after a while sat down. Shamash jumped in after him. There must be a current, he thought – an incredibly light current, but a current all the same – because from one side of the lake, the Rhine flowed in and on the other side it flowed out, and without a current that wouldn't be possible. If he lay down, just lay down in the white tub with his dog under his legs, then he would drift across the huge lake, past Rorschach, past Constance, past Reichenau Island with its fruit and vegetable plots, past the abbey, all the way to the Rhine Falls in the Swiss canton of Schaffhausen. There, he would plunge down the waterfall in his metal tub and perhaps even survive. I, his sister, had a photo of the Rhine Falls stuck on my fridge door and he always looked at it when he visited me.

My husband Michael – my second husband, to whom I am still married – knew Richard very well. Soon after we met and fell in love, the two of them became friends and I think Michael knew him better than I did. After Richard's death, he said to me: 'I don't know anyone who cared less for life than Richard.' I asked him angrily why he was saying that now of all times: I didn't want to hear those kinds of things. He answered: 'He was more interested

in plunging down the Rhine Falls in a bathtub than it was important to survive.’ This kind of sentence was typical of my brother – Michael was quoting him.

Richard was thin and had a slender build. As a child, he’d suffered from rickets, ‘the English disease’, perhaps due to too little calcium or Vitamin D. When he walked, his legs turned inward. It didn’t look ungainly: it looked laidback. As if he had no particular place to go. As if his legs had no particular place to go. As if he were never in a rush. His head had a place to go, but only sometimes. We once watched a Western with John Wayne on my little black-and-white television and when the hero slouched across the dusty street to the salon, I said: ‘That’s how you walk, Richard! Exactly like that!’ Not exactly, but almost.

It would certainly have been difficult for him to keep his balance in the bathtub. He knew that soon, where the old gravel pits lay below, the lake would become very deep. If he tipped over, he’d have to swim and he couldn’t swim very well. He’d say: ‘I am a good swimmer, but only in places where I can stand.’ In other words, he couldn’t swim. Nor can I. We would never have admitted this: we’d sooner have drowned. I find this hard to write even today. Richard tipped over and fell out of the bathtub. Perhaps he wanted to pretend he was a pirate, like Jim Hawkins from *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, which was one of his favourite books. He’d stolen it from a book shop on Lindau Island. ‘It would have been a scandal to buy it on the mainland, and pay for it, too! he’d said. He wanted to play Jim Hawkins in the part where he climbs up the mast and chases after Israel Hands with a knife clamped between his teeth. Richard was an adult but half the time he wasn’t Richard the typesetter, but someone he’d thought up to drown out dull reality – or to drown in it. He fell into the water. Flailed his arms about. Spluttered, snorted, swallowed. Shouted for Shamash, who watched him from the bathtub, a private God who didn’t help, and who may have been able to tell the difference between singing and speaking, but not between speaking and shouting. Like many other times in the past and that were still to come, that might have been the end of my brother.

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But it wasn’t.

Because there was a young pregnant woman, a toddler between her legs, its back leaning against her belly, sitting on a gold foil rescue blanket. It had been given to her by a nice young man doing his national service at a hospital where she had been rushed five years

ago, on her first made-up emergency – ‘blackmail shivers’ – when she was just fifteen. The young man fell in love with her, and she met up with him, became pregnant, had an abortion, chased him away, treasured the gold blanket and had treated it ever since like a trophy. In any case, this young woman saw Richard. Floundering for his life. And she could swim. She put her toddler down, giving the child orders to stay exactly where it was and wait for Mama, and to watch what Mama was now going to do very closely because there were a few things to be learned. She wrapped the child’s little legs in the gold blanket, taking her time. Because as long as the person out there was shouting, he hadn’t drowned, and saving someone in dire need was like saving them twice over. She threw the child’s air mattress into the water and swam out to my brother and now gave him orders. Orders, namely, to cling onto the mattress and lie on it, chest down. Which he immediately did. And he immediately smiled at her – the pregnant woman with the tanned skin called Kitti – Katharina to be precise, but Kitti sounded more exotic to her.

‘Saved,’ she said. Nothing more.

Not for as long as they were in the water. She tended to chatter. But she was working on her character. On being silent – mysterious, in other words. She herself didn’t think she was mysterious, but who does? It was enough if others did. She showed her small teeth that suited her small hands and looked like milk teeth but they couldn’t be because Kitti was twenty years old. ‘But,’ Richard said, ‘at heart, she’s at least thirty, probably forty, if not fifty or even sixty and more.’ Her blonde hair was now a watery grey and plastered to her pretty round head. Below her perfectly round forehead, her eyebrows were also a watery grey, and her eyes were so blue that Richard said, ‘she would scare the hell out of Africans.’

‘Thank you,’ he said.

She swam back to the shore. Perfectly content with herself. A lifesaver *and* mysterious. I still have every reason to thank her – and when I say *still*, I mean at this point in the story.

‘Can’t you swim?’

‘Of course I can swim.’

‘So why couldn’t you swim just now?’

‘I swallowed a tadpole.’

‘How?’

‘When I was swimming. Diving actually.’

He was lying in the water, propped on his elbows in the gravel on the shore. He lifted his head, saw the sky over the bushes and thought: Close shave. He didn’t want to take his belly or legs out of the water. It was his territory, the land hers. That way, he thought, he wouldn’t have to keep on thanking her for saving his life.

‘I semi-dived and a tadpole came along.’

‘What does semi-dived mean?’

‘It’s a technical term.’

‘I’ve never heard that term.’

‘It’s a French term translated into German.’

‘I don’t believe that. And then?’

‘And then I swallowed a tadpole.’

‘How?’

‘Just swallowed it. The way you swallow a tablet.’

‘Did you have your mouth open when you were diving then? So that the tadpole just swam in?’

‘To breathe out, yes.’

‘Why do you breathe out when you’re diving?’

‘That’s what you do when you semi-dive. It’s the way you semi-dive, yeah.’

‘I don’t believe that. Why would you do that?’

‘Less buoyancy, that’s why.’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘That’s what it’s called.’

‘Another technical term?’

Fickle Shamash had instantly climbed out of the bathtub and was already sitting next to the toddler on the gold foil rescue blanket. He tugged at the packed lunch and ate the salami from the roll held out to him by the child. No one was bothered by this.

‘That’s not a pretty dog,’ Kitti said.

‘That’s relative,’ said Richard.

‘What’s relative about an ugly dog?’

‘Where this dog comes from, it’s considered very handsome.’

‘I can’t imagine that. Where’s it from?’

‘Timbuktu.’

‘I don’t believe that. I’ve seen plenty of dogs like that. You see them peeing on every corner.’

‘True, they look like the ones from Timbuktu. But they’re completely different.’

‘And what can it do?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What do you mean by “nothing”?’

‘It can’t do anything. Nothing at all. It’s just a dog.’

‘If it can’t do anything, why didn’t you just get one from around here?’

‘I could say it’s a stray.’

‘So why don’t you say that?’

‘Because it’s not true. Do you want to know the truth?’

‘Not really. I don’t think I’m interested. I’m not interested in the whole dog thing.’

‘What do you mean when you say that, at heart, she’s at least thirty, probably forty, if not fifty or even sixty?’ I asked Richard when he told me about Kitti, but unfortunately, that was much later, when it was already too late for most things.

He didn’t answer. But I could have answered before I’d even met Kitti. What he meant was that you couldn’t fool her. His stories didn’t work on her. He couldn’t charm her the way he could charm everyone else. He couldn’t scare her when the lights were out. She didn’t

believe that he turned into a serial killer or a werewolf at night – something he himself was afraid of. She didn't buy any of it. She didn't believe that Shamash was part African wild dog, part hyena or that he'd bought him from a dealer for the price of a mid-range car; a sniffer dog that could not only pick up the scent of drugs from afar but also of the police. She didn't get annoyed when he spun his yarns. She just said: I don't believe that. Nothing more. So many girls and women had already fallen for my brother, and some men too, all because he had charmed them with his stories, in which he got carried away. And even if they didn't believe his stories, they were captivated because they all thought, what a poetic character! And they thought such a character needed help and wanted to give him that help, preferably exclusively. My brother didn't have a lot to offer apart from his stories. No money and no desire to have any either: no ambition. He was a nice-looking young man with nice dark curly hair. His face was slimmer than Alan Wilson's but he had the same lack of fashion taste as the musician, who went on stage in baggy slacks with a houndstooth pattern, while his bandmates flitted about in black latex trousers. Richard smiled at women, showing his crooked front tooth, but he never bothered with them.

At some point, he answered: 'She's younger than me but she's been through a lot more. I'll never catch up with her.'

Why did he want Kitti if she wasn't charmed by him? He once said to me: 'I'm not interested in sex.' I asked him – a strange question, admittedly – 'Why doesn't sex interest you?' He answered: 'Too little surprise.'

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Kitti picked him. Even in the water when he was kicking and snorting and shouting to his dog for help, she added him to the list of men who were potential replacement fathers for her unborn baby and toddler on the gold foil blanket.

'Come out of the water,' she said. 'Now that you're saved. Come and join us on the blanket.'

Richard was embarrassed because he was naked.

Kitti took off her swimming costume, a one-piece. Her swelling belly was already pushing out her navel and not everyone had to see that. 'Now you can see me as I am,' she said, 'and I'd like to see you as you are.'

And so, they stood naked in front of each other. The swimmer and the non-swimmer. The thin man with white skin and the tanned woman with a belly like a ball trying to get out. She also undressed her child, whom she called Putzi; the little girl was only wearing a red woollen slip, and her head was like a little black ball of wool, underneath a little brown face and flashing eyes, which gave her a slightly angry look. But she wasn't angry, not one little bit.

'Come on, Putzi,' she said, 'stand next to Mama!'

And then there were three of them, naked, like a family early in the morning, laughing in the bathroom, a family looking forward to the baby that was in Mama's belly.

'I don't have a husband,' Kitti said.

'Lots of children don't have fathers,' Richard said and was about to spin another yarn, the way he was used to, getting carried away. 'Luckily I have one. He's a strange man. One of his legs was amputated when it froze in the war, that was in Russia ...'

She interrupted him.

'Putzi 1 would like a father,' she said, 'and Putzi 2 here in my belly too.'

Didn't alarm bells go off in his head at that point at the latest? I asked my brother. Well, he said. He got dressed very slowly, whistled Shamash over. He wanted to leave; after all, he'd already said thank you and whether she'd really saved his life, that was a matter of opinion. He'd probably have made it to the bathtub somehow and held on. He was used to women wanting to take care of him. Some showed him in one way, others in another, Kitti had her methods. It was just a harmless thing that happened on a harmless Monday morning in a harmless summer with the smell of baking bread in the air.

'Hey, stop!' she shouted before he'd even turned around to leave. 'I don't have your address and I don't know your name.'

And then Kitti explained – they had known each other for less than a quarter of an hour – that she needed someone to look after Putzi 1 while she was in hospital giving birth to Putzi 2. Could he? Because she had saved his life after all.

He wrote his address in biro on the inside of her arm. And she stretched her belly out towards him and touched his belt buckle, and he clasped her face between his hands, just because it seemed logical somehow.

‘Logical,’ I sighed, resignedly.

Nothing more happened. ‘I swear! Nothing more!’

There was a little more. Kitti said to Putzi: ‘Give Papa a kiss,’ which Richard found amusing, nothing more, nothing more.

The little girl held up her sweet brown face and shut her sweet black eyes. He stooped down to her and touched her lips with his index finger.

And Richard? He strolled off on his crooked legs wherever they took him. Now he had a job. It didn’t pay badly, but not well either. He was a typesetter. Typesetters normally earned more than he did. He liked his job. He liked everything about it – the smell, the dirt, the noise. His job gave him a sense of dignity. But actually, he was a painter. When he lay on the floor of his flat and painted – he only painted lying down, how else? – then I’d have said, if someone had asked me, that he was happy. And if someone had asked me what I meant by that, I’d have answered: When he painted, he didn’t think of anything. Definitely not about himself. When he was painting he didn’t think about drinking, eating, smoking, never about women anyway, or about his civil duties or ghosts, which he believed in because he wanted to. I always thought: it’s good that he trained to do a job. It’s like an air mattress on water. Some very clever people back then had already predicted that the respectable job of typesetter would soon die out. Because we were on the threshold of the computer. On the threshold of the computer era. And soon we were all standing on that threshold.

And then Kitti was standing in the upper part of town on the second floor, on the threshold of my brother’s flat, toting her pregnancy before her like a chest of drawers. A nice man had opened the door for her downstairs. With her broad mouth, painted very red, her hair set in curls and coloured honey-blonde, in combination with her belly, she looked innocent. Did he remember her? She was the one who had saved his life.