

Ein ganz alter Trick

A Very Old Trick

by Fee Krämer

© 2020 Ravensburger Verlag GmbH, Ravensburg

www.foreignrights-ravensburger.com

© English sample translation by Anette Pollner



1

Not a single bone is sticking out. Pascal is particularly proud of that. He grins inwardly as Mr Mohnwald bounces into the room, just about to hurl his sporty backpack onto his desk, like he does every time.

But this time he stops in his tracks. The class holds its collective breath.

Because his desk is already occupied. Someone seems to have made themselves comfortable there. Someone in a plaid jacket, wearing a large straw hat on his head. This someone is sitting on the chair behind the desk, arms folded across the top, his head resting on his arms. He appears to be sleeping.

“Oh, sorry, I must have got the time of my lesson wrong. Are you in this classroom now?” Mr Mohnwald asks, rummaging around in his backpack.

The class is giggling. Mr Mohnwald looks around, irritated.

“Hello? Who are you anyway?” He cautiously approaches the sleeping creature and puts a hand on its shoulder.

And immediately shrinks back, startled, his eyes wide open. The creature loses its balance and slips off the chair, clattering loudly. Its lifeless upper body drops onto the arm rests, then onto the floor. Now the creature is lying underneath the desk. Not moving, bent into an unnatural shape, and surprisingly small, collapsed onto itself. Its straw hat has slipped off its head, revealing what was hidden underneath. A smooth white skull. A pirate would recognise it from his flag. But Mr Mohnwald is no pirate, he’s Pascal’s teacher and also the head of *Schloss Karlssee* school.

Pascal leans proudly back in his chair. It hasn’t been easy to prepare this prank. He had to remove the skeleton secretly from the biology lab, then sneak into the theatre storage room to choose

Ein ganz alter Trick

A Very Old Trick

by Fee Krämer

© 2020 Ravensburger Verlag GmbH, Ravensburg

www.foreignrights-ravensburger.com

© English sample translation by Anette Pollner



an outfit for Bones. Bones is what the students of the boarding school call the skeleton, and even some of the teachers have been overheard using the nickname.

The biology lab part of the job was easier than he thought, he had to admit that. Afternoons are quiet inside the school anyway, but yesterday the hallways were dead. The indefatigable rays of the sun had lured everyone out to the football pitch and the picnic corner, students and teachers alike. And so Pascal was able to just pull Bones out of the lab. He dragged him cautiously across the hall, crossed the schoolyard with the clattering skeleton and actually managed to get him into his room without encountering anyone. He'd actually prepared a nice little explanation for this transport of Bones. If he'd come across anyone, Pascal would have just claimed he'd been given the task of thoroughly dusting and washing Bones. In the gym showers. With soap and everything.

But this little excuse wasn't even needed. So, last night, Pascal was sitting on his bed, a little incredulous, while Bones was standing right next to him, grinning broadly, as always. As if he knew what Pascal was planning, as if he enjoyed taking part in his little joke.

But Pascal had to work a lot harder to get the outfit for Bones. The theatre storage room is always locked. Only three people have the key for the small chamber, overflowing with costumes of all kind. Pleated skirts, straight trousers with cross-stripes, wide hats with long feathers. Pascal loves that storage room but he hates the theatre. Or rather the theatre society. People who always know exactly what they have to say and how they have to say it.

One of these people is Sila. She's responsible for props and costumes, and has one of the keys, the performing arts teacher has another one and the third one hangs in the office of head teacher Mohnwald. So Pascal had to get at Sila's key. And he knew just how.

Schloss Karlssee boarding school has many things in abundance. Trees, rules, handicraft paper for creating all the every-changing spring, summer, autumn and winter decorations, as well as herbal teas in enormous metal jugs. There really is more than enough of all that. But only on chocolate

Ein ganz alter Trick

A Very Old Trick

by Fee Krämer

© 2020 Ravensburger Verlag GmbH, Ravensburg

www.foreignrights-ravensburger.com

© English sample translation by Anette Pollner



Tuesdays do you get a special dessert, a small delicious chocolate cake, consisting of a scrumptious liquid core encased in a fluffy crust. Every Tuesday, students wolf down their lunch to get to the small round cakes as fast as possible. On the Tuesday when he was planning to abduct Bones from the biology lab, Pascal didn't eat his cake. Instead, he wrapped it carefully in a paper napkin and unwrapped it again after the lunch break, directly in front of Sila's greedy eyes. "I just need the key for the theatre store room", Pascal said with a casual shrug.

"What do you want there?" Sila asked.

"That's a secret!" Pascal grinned. "But I'm putting it all back again, promise!"

Pascal could see Sila struggling with her decision.

"Give it here", she eventually said, lunged frantically at the little cake and pressed the key into Pascal's hand.

Pascal stood in the theatre store room, sucking in the air of the overstuffed chamber, while Bones was waiting, bone naked, in his room. The storage chamber smelled musty and leathery. And of many possibilities.

Pascal quickly made his choice. The plaid jacket and wide black trousers. He even thought of shoes. But because he couldn't find men's shoes in the short time available, he just grabbed a pair of red stilettos for Bones.

But Mr Mohnwald doesn't even notice that today.

"Guys! Whose dumb idea is this?"

He surveys the whole class, his eyes lingering on Pascal for a particularly long time.

"This really is irreverent", Mr Mohnwald hisses. "Irre – what?" Lukas whispers to Yassin.

Everyone else is silent.

“I-R-R-E-V-E-R-R-E-N-T”, Mr Mohnwald repeats the unfamiliar word, pulling Bones from under his chair and laying him out carefully next to the blackboard. In the process, Bones loses one of his red stilettoes. Mr Mohnwald takes the shoe, using the heel as an extension of his index finger to point reproachfully at the class. “It means being disrespectful of something. For example, death.”

“What’s Bones got to do with death?” Lise wants to know.

“This is a real skeleton. It’s not made of plastic. These bones consist of calcium and phosphate. In other words, Bones was a person once.”

“WHAAAT?” Lukas screams.

“YIIIIIKES!” Lise squeals. “A person?” Mr Mohnwald nods.

Pascal swallows. He spent the night with a corpse in his room?

The huge desk takes up almost the entire space in Mr Mohnwald’s head teacher’s office. A big screen sits on one end of the desk. On the other end there’s an electric fan. But it’s still boiling hot in the darkened room.

“Why?” Mr Mohnwald sighs, running his hand through his light hair that sticks out from his head like small feathers. “Why do you always have to top your previous prank?” Pascal’s teacher rhythmically taps his pencil on the desk.

“First the rotten egg in Ms Klackermann’s handbag, then your ‘painting’ in the hallway in front of the grade one classrooms... Pascal. You can’t go on like this!” Mr Mohnwald frowns and clicks into his screen.

There we go again, Pascal thinks. ‘You can’t go on like this!’ He’s heard that phrase a hundred times before. But somehow he always does go on like this after all. Mr Mohnwald doesn’t seem to have noticed that.

“Your grades are actually alright, in every subject. You’re not exactly an overachiever, but you don’t need to be.” He takes his glasses off and rubs the back of his nose. “What can I do to make you stop, Pascal? What can YOU do?”

Pascal knows his way around these talks with Mr Mohnwald. He’s been sitting on the cushion with the frayed check pattern on a regular basis, the big desk stretching out between them like a thick wall. “It’s not easy for you, I know”, Mr Mohnwald says, trying to look Pascal in the eye. But Pascal isn’t interested in what’s coming next. The pity party. “But you’re not the only one in this situation. Everyone here shares the same fate, or at least a similar one”, Mr Mohnwald quickly corrects himself. “We’re here for you, Pascal. Talk to us! Talk to me, talk to Wanda!”

But talking isn’t what Pascal does. First because you can’t really articulate some things, and then also because Pascal thinks talking is silly. Those compassionate faces, that deep understanding, that caring tone all the time. He’s coping, why don’t they get that? Not even his boarding tutor Wanda understands that. Although, surely, she hasn’t been a grown-up for very long herself.

“I’m coping”, Pascal says. Mr Mohnwald leans forward. “Really?” ‘Yup”, Pascal mumbles.

Pascal always coped, somehow. In the past, when his dad left, first for a few days at a time, and then forever. And then when his mum didn’t get out of bed for weeks. And then when she did get out of bed and when HE suddenly appeared – even then Pascal was coping.

Because Pascal has a switch that others can’t see. It’s not a real switch, obviously. Not like a button on his back that you can press. Or a wire you can pull on his earlobe. It’s a switch inside Pascal’s head that he can use to switch his thoughts off or on. That’s very useful. If he doesn’t want to think about something – zap! – he turns it off.

But of course that doesn’t work with things he can see right in front of his eyes. Like for example Mr Mohnwald right now, ruffling his hair behind his desk. “Well in that case I will have to utter a serious threat to you.” The head teacher takes a deep breath.

Ein ganz alter Trick

A Very Old Trick

by Fee Krämer

© 2020 Ravensburger Verlag GmbH, Ravensburg

www.foreignrights-ravensburger.com

© English sample translation by Anette Pollner



Mr Mohnwald's threats don't scare Pascal. Mr Mohnwald is one of these teachers who have a real interest in their pupils. And these are the most exhausting ones. Because they never loosen their grip on you and they try to find that switch inside your head. And in order to find it, they care and worry, they follow up and encourage. But the one thing they're not good at is punishing you. "Just one more incident like this, Pascal, because I know that you were the one who did the prank with Bones", Mr Mohnwald corrects himself, "with the SCHOOL SKELETON. Ms Klackermann saw you yesterday, pushing the skeleton down the corridor. She thought you were carrying out a task! But never mind. Just one more action like this and there will be serious consequences for you."

"Ok", says Pascal, pushing his chair back.

Just what he'd expected.

2

When he's on his skateboard, Pascal feels as if he can fly. After his talk with Mr Mohnwald he's flying through the fields surrounding *Schloss Karlssee*, past the vineyards and the uniform family homes, more of which are being built up here all the time. The big yellow crane always stands somewhere on the hill, swinging new prefabricated walls through the air.

Pascal can never ride down that hill fast enough. The airstream hits him so hard he can barely breathe. He doesn't brake until he reaches the old phone box that was already out of order when Pascal arrived at the boarding school two years ago.

He comes to a stop behind the duck pond, tucking the skateboard under his arm.

Pascal likes these ducks. They don't talk much either. And also, in winter, they can waddle across the frozen pond without their flat feet freezing to the ice. Obviously that's not a skill you absolutely need, particularly not if you're human, but Pascal is impressed nevertheless. His favourite duck is the one

Ein ganz alter Trick

A Very Old Trick

by Fee Krämer

© 2020 Ravensburger Verlag GmbH, Ravensburg

www.foreignrights-ravensburger.com

© English sample translation by Anette Pollner



black one with the white neck. It's always alone among the many blue-green and brown specimens. A loner, just like him.

But today Pascal isn't alone at the duck pond. He can see an old woman sitting on a bench on the far side. She must be from the Residence, the old people's home on the other side of the village. *Sunbeam Residence*. That sounds almost as nice as the name of the boarding school, *Schloss Karlssee*.

The people of this village just distribute everyone who's not wanted onto those two hills, Pascal muses. The old ones to the left, the young ones to the right. How convenient!

The old lady is crouching over her book. She's probably fallen asleep because there's no way she can read in this position. Right next to her and just in front of the pond there's a Zimmer frame. That thing the grandmas and grandpas always push in front of them, like a shopping cart.

Pascal runs around the pond, rummaging in his pockets. He's always got a few breadcrumbs from breakfast with him. The black duck swims closer. It looks curious.

"There you go", Pascal says, crumbling a little bit of bread into the water. "Thin pickings today, unfortunately. Sorry."

And then he discovers it. A second black duck. It keeps its distance, not swimming directly towards him. But it's there."

"Ah. You did find someone after all", Pascal mumbles to the black duck next to him. It stings a little. He's not sure why, it's just a stupid duck after all.

Even before Pascal makes it all the way round the pond, he can hear a loud rumbling. It comes from the old woman on the bench. She's snoring. Her breath stops briefly from time to time but then she gets back into the rhythm with a sudden grunt.

Pascal is standing next to the bench by now, looking at the Zimmer frame. What a terrible colour, that mouse grey. If he should ever need something like that, it would look very different. He

Ein ganz alter Trick

A Very Old Trick

by Fee Krämer

© 2020 Ravensburger Verlag GmbH, Ravensburg

www.foreignrights-ravensburger.com

© English sample translation by Anette Pollner



would paint a few flames onto the sides of it and pep up the basket at the front. Maybe with a few stickers. And why does this thing even have brakes? It can't be very fast, can it.

He carefully tries to get the Zimmer frame moving but has to release the brakes first. That thing is rolling quite smoothly now. He looks at the old woman on the bench. She's still snoring. Her hat has slipped off her head, a packet of cigarettes lies on the bench next to her. She has several gold rings on her fingers. Her hands look like gnarly old roots. Decorated old roots.

Pascal cautiously starts to roll the woman's walking frame back and forth. That rig is pretty light. Maybe it's aluminium. Maybe it could even float. Pascal looks over to the pond. The two black ducks are now swimming close together, their white necks touching.

Something hot is brewing in Pascal's belly. It feels like a ball of fire, racing through his body. That fire has to erupt somewhere. Pascal gives the Zimmer frame a strong shove forward, in the direction of the water. Almost with a dance-like grace, the vehicle rolls over the round pebbles and the grass at the water's edge, then plummets into the pond with a heavy splash. The old woman grunts.

"Are you crazy?" her voice creaks, startling Pascal. He hasn't noticed that she was waking up.

Just as he's wondering which direction would be the fastest escape route for him on his skateboard, he can hear Wanda's voice as well.

"Pascal", his boarding tutor shouts from the other side of the pond.

She's trudging along the edge, headscarf fluttering in the wind. Wanda always tames her wild dreadlocks with a colourful scarf, and so you can recognize her from a distance.

The old woman on the bench next to him pulls her hat straight and sits up laboriously, using Pascal's arm for support. He doesn't like that at all. But the woman's gnarly hands have a surprisingly strong grip. He can't get away.

Ein ganz alter Trick

A Very Old Trick

by Fee Krämer

© 2020 Ravensburger Verlag GmbH, Ravensburg

www.foreignrights-ravensburger.com

© English sample translation by Anette Pollner



“Where is it now?” the old woman asks. Her voice is deep and scratchy. As if there’s a frog in her throat she has hasn’t been able to clear out. “In there?” She leans forward a bit to get a better look into the pond.

Pascal doesn’t like being touched like that. In the past, just two or three years ago, adults used to grope him all the time. They would stroke his head or pinch his cheek or even, yes, really, kiss his face. Who would do something like that? It’s disgusting!

But now that Pascal is a bit older, people don’t touch him any more without asking. On the contrary, they take small step back when they see him. That’s how Pascal likes it, and certainly better than all that groping.

“I can’t see anything. You’ll have to dive in!” The old woman detaches herself from Pascal and gives him an encouraging little shove.

“N-now?” Pascal feels ambushed. But there’s no time to think about it because Wanda’s already standing right next to him.

“I saw it all!” she tells the old lady, trying to placate her. She only shoots Pascal a brief, fiery glance. “Please allow me to apologize to you. I’ll make sure that you get your Zimmer frame back straightaway.” She looks at Pascal, as if willing him to do something. What’s he supposed to do? Climb into the pond?

Absolutely not!

“Pascal?” Wanda now asks in a tone that’s probably meant to sound threatening. But all it does is make her sound desperate.

Pascal shrugs. Wanda has the same issue as Mr Mohnwald. She can’t assert herself in his residential group either. It’s definitely worth waiting it out a bit.

Wanda looks around helplessly and gives a nervous laugh. The old woman next to Pascal is laughing, too, but she doesn’t sound nervous at all. She sounds happy.

Ein ganz alter Trick

A Very Old Trick

by Fee Krämer

© 2020 Ravensburger Verlag GmbH, Ravensburg

www.foreignrights-ravensburger.com

© English sample translation by Anette Pollner



So all three of them just stand there for a few seconds that feel like minutes. At least for Pascal. But apparently also for Wanda, because she suddenly grabs a thin branch, bunches up her skirt and wades into the pond. She pokes around in the water. “Are you trying to fish my Zimmer frame out of the lake?” the old woman asks and laboriously sits back down on the bench. “That would be the first time it takes the bait.” She pats the free space beside her. “Sit down, boy, someone seems to be doing your job already.”

Pascal would rather run away but he stays, as if frozen in place.

The old lady observes Wanda’s efforts in the pond and murmurs to Pascal: “Quite convenient when others are doing your job for you, isn’t it.” Pascal still stands in the same spot. Now he would actually prefer to poke around in the pond himself. At least then he would have something to do.

“Well keep standing there then”, the old woman mutters. “You should stand up as much as you can anyway while you can. And run! And skip! And...” She looks at the skateboard under Pascal’s arm. “And roll around on that kind of board! What’s it called?” ‘S... skateboard’, Pascal stutters. He’s astonished that the old lady is so nice to him.

Wanda’s already knee deep in water. She stirs the pond with her stick as if she was cooking a gigantic soup.

The old woman giggles. “What a spectacle! It’s too amusing...”

Wanda calls out from the pond, still stirring. “Pascal, why did you do that? I just don’t get it.”

The old woman grunts. “I’d be interested to know that, too.” She looks directly into Pascal’s face. Her small eyes are grey-blue. They’re covered by a milky veil and small red veins make their way through the white bit. But in spite of all that, these old eyes sparkle with curiosity.

Pascal shrugs.

“Angry?” she asks, so quietly that Wanda can’t hear it.

“Most of the time.” Pascal nods.

“I can understand that“, the old lady says. “Anger is a splendid, authentic emotion.” She smiles. “By the way, my name is Ingelotte.” With that, she turns back to Wanda and the spectacle in the pond.

“You’ve got her well trained,” Ingelotte mumbles so that only Pascal can hear it. “Who is she that she gets you out of the trouble you caused?”

Ingelotte giggles at her own words.

“She’s the boarding tutor of our residential group“, Pascal answers. “Up there. At *Schloss Karlssee*. The boarding school.”

„So you’re from the other side“, Ingelotte grins. “It’s quite clever of them, don’t you think? When they don’t want us, they lift us up on the mountain, so that they don’t have to see us.”

Ingelotte is saying what Pascal was thinking just now.

Kneading her gnarly hands, the old woman is watching Wanda fishing for her Zimmer frame. Pascal is watching Ingelotte covertly out of the corner of his eyes. It somehow seems as if she isn’t entirely unhappy about Pascal dumping her Zimmer frame into the pond. As if she’d been sitting on this bench, waiting for something interesting to happen.

“You can’t be serious!” Mr Mohnwald towers behind his desk. “As soon as you leave my office, you’re already embroiled in the next mess.”

And so Pascal is again sitting on the check cushion in front of Mr Mohnwald’s desk. He’s got a feeling though that the head teacher won’t just look at him with compassion this time. Mr Mohnwald is really pissed off. Wanda is sitting next to Pascal, pushing her dreadlocks out of her face. “Really, Pascal. That’s not on! You can’t just take an old lady’s Zimmer frame away!”

“Take it away? I wish!” Mr Mohnwald snorts. “He pushed it into the lake!”

The head teacher takes a deep breath and scrutinizes his pupil through narrowed eyes. As if Pascal had pushed HIS Zimmer frame into the pond, not old Ingelotte’s.

Ein ganz alter Trick

A Very Old Trick

by Fee Krämer

© 2020 Ravensburger Verlag GmbH, Ravensburg

www.foreignrights-ravensburger.com

© English sample translation by Anette Pollner



“Our school holidays start next week”, he continues. “You’re not going to participate in the summer programme this year.”

Pascal heaves a sigh of relief. He can easily live with that. Not many students spend their summer holidays at the boarding school. Only those who can’t go home. Pascal is one of them. The other students spend the summer months with their families, on giant rubber flamingos in hotel swimming pools, milking cows in the Alps, on various camping grounds, counting lice. The summer holidays in *Schloss Karlssee* have little in common with that. The carefully designed programme of competitions, cooking classes and reading groups doesn’t leave much room for real holidays. So no problem if Pascal won’t be allowed to take part.

Mr Mohnwald leans across the big desk. Pascal can smell his sweat.

“Instead, for four weeks, you’re going to help out in the *Sunbeam Residence*.”

“What?” Pascal jumps up. “Why?”

The *Sunbeam Residence* is the only place where Pascal has even less desire to spend his school holidays than at *Schloss Karlssee*. A holiday in the old people’s home?

That can’t be right!

Mr Mohnwald closes his eyes, then opens them again. “You’re disrespectful towards others”, he says, staring at Pascal. “And we’re hoping that being around older people will teach you some respect.” Pascal’s thoughts are racing.

“What do you mean by ‘being around’?”, he wants to know. “What do I have to do there? Read to them? Make tea, or what? Cleaning their dentures, most probably. That’s what old people have, don’t they?”

“PASCAL!” Mr Mohnwald shouts, collapsing into his chair, totally exhausted. Wanda sighs.