

Translation: Eulenspargel

It was the end of January, soon after the Christmas holidays, as the fat child came to me. During this winter I began to lend books to the children of the neighbourhood. On a given day, they would fetch the books or return them. Naturally I knew most of these children. But occasionally some came that did not live in our street. And while most of them stayed just the time needed for the exchange, a few sat down on the spot and began reading. Then I would sit at my writing desk and work while the children sat at the little table near the bookshelves. Their presence did not disturb me, I found it agreeable.

The fat child came on a Friday or Saturday, at any rate not on a day reserved for borrowing. I had intended to go out, and was just carrying a little snack I had prepared into the room. The company I had had shortly before must have forgotten to close the front door. So it came about that as I set the tablet on the desk and turned to bring something else from the kitchen the fat child suddenly stood before me. It was a girl, maybe twelve, dressed in an old fashioned loden coat and black knitted leggings, and carrying a pair of skates fastened with a leather strap. There was something familiar about her, but then again not really familiar. And her noiseless arrival had given me a fright.

Do I know you? I asked astonished.

The fat child said nothing. She just stood there, laid her hands over her round tummy and looked at me with light, watery eyes.

Would you like a book? I asked.

The fat child gave no answer. But I was not too surprised at that. I was used to children being shy, that they had to be coaxed. So I pulled out a couple of books and lay them in front of the unknown girl. Then I proceeded to fill in one of the cards on which the borrowed books were recorded.

What's your name? I asked.

They call me fatty, said the child.

Should I call you so? I asked.

It's all the same to me, said the child. She did not return my smile, and I think in this moment I detected a grimace of pain on her face.

But I did not react to it.

When were you born? I asked further.

Under Aquarius, she said quietly.

I was amused by this answer and entered it on the card, for fun so to speak. Then I turned back to the books.

Do you have any particular wish? I asked.

But I saw that the child showed no interest in the books, her eyes rested on the tablet on which my tea and sandwiches stood.

Maybe you would like something to eat, I quickly added.

The child nodded, and her assent expressed something like piqued astonishment that this thought had only come to me now. She began to eat the sandwiches one by one, and in a specific manner for

which I could only account to myself later. Then she sat again, searching around the room with dull, cold eyes. And there was something about her that filled me with anger and aversion. Yes, for sure, I had hated this child from the beginning. I found everything about it repelling - its sluggish limbs, its pretty, fat face, its way of speaking - at the same time sleepy and pretentious. And although I had decided to give up my walk for its sake, I treated it by no means friendly, rather heartless and cold.

Or would you judge it friendly that I now sat at the writing desk and concerned myself with my work, and told the child over my shoulder to read a book, although I knew well enough that she did not want that? Then I sat there and wanted to write and could not bring anything to paper because I experienced a strange feeling of torment, of the kind you might experience when you have the task of guessing something and are unable to find the answer, but you know nothing will be as it was until you do find it. I endured this for a short while and then I turned around and commenced with a conversation, but I could only come up with foolish questions.

Do you have brothers or sisters? I asked.

Yes, said the child.

Do you like going to school? I asked.

Yes, said the child.

What do you enjoy the most?

Pardon? asked the child.

Which subject? I asked despairingly.

I don't know, said the child.

Maybe German? I asked.

I don't know, said the child.

I rolled the pencil between my fingers and felt a horror spreading in me that was not explainable by only the appearance of this child.

Do you have friends? I asked trembling.

Oh yes, said the girl.

One of them is surely your favourite? I asked.

I don't know, said the child. And as it sat there in its hairy loden coat, it looked like a fat caterpillar. It had eaten like a caterpillar, and like a caterpillar it now again sensed around the room. Filled with a queer feeling of vindictiveness I thought: you won't get any more. But then I did go out to bring some bread and sausage. And the child stared at the food with a dull expression and began to eat, in the manner in which a caterpillar eats, slowly and uniformly, as if obeying an internal compulsion. And I observed it inimically and remained silent.

By now the point was reached at which everything concerning this child began to to upset and anger me. The child unbuttoned its coat after having finished eating and I thought, what a silly white dress, what a ridiculous stand-up collar. I went back to my work. Then behind me I heard the child eating noisily, and this noise reminded of a black heron somewhere in the woods - it brought all the watery and dull, the heavy and gloomy sides of human nature into my consciousness and quite displeased me. I thought: what do you want of me? go away, just go away. And I had a strong desire to shove the child out of the room with my hands, the way you would chase off a bothersome animal. But I did not shove her out of the room, instead I spoke to her again, in the same cruel manner.

Are you going onto the ice now? I asked.

Yes, said the child.

Are you good at skating? I asked, indicating the skates that still hung from its shoulder.

My sister is good, said the child. And once more its face displayed the expression of pain and mourning, and again I ignored it.

What does your sister look like? I asked. Is she like you?

Oh, no, said the fat child. My sister is very thin and has black curly hair. During summer when we're in the country and a thunder storm breaks out she gets up at night and sits on the banister of the upper floor and sings.

And you? I asked.

I stay in bed, said the child. I'm scared.

Your sister isn't afraid, is she? I said.

No, said the child. She is never afraid. She jumps from the highest springboard. She dives head first and swims far out . . .

What does your sister sing? I asked, curious.

She sings whatever she wants, said the fat child sadly. She makes poems.

And you? I asked.

I don't do anything, said the child. And then it stood up and said, now I have to go. The child lay its fat fingers into my outstretched hand, and I am not sure what I felt. Something like a request to follow her, an inaudible urgent call. Come by again sometime, I said, but I did not mean that seriously. And the child said nothing and looked at me with its cool eyes. And then it was gone, and I ought to have felt relief. But the instant I heard the lock of the door snap shut I ran into the corridor and I donned my coat. I ran quickly down the stairs and reached the street just as the child disappeared around the next corner.

I thought, I simply must see how this caterpillar skates. I have to watch this fat dumpling getting around on the ice. And I quickened my steps not to lose sight of her.

As the fat child had come into the room it was early afternoon and now dusk was drawing up. Although I had spent some years of my childhood in this town, now it was no longer that familiar to me. And fairly soon I lost track of where we were heading. The streets and places that appeared were completely unknown to me. I sensed a change in the air. It had been quite cold, but now a sudden thaw set in, and so dramatically that the snow on the roofs began to drip and foehn clouds were moving across the sky. We reached the edge of town where the houses have spacious gardens around them. Fairly soon there were no more houses. Then the child disappeared down a bank. And instead of the expected glittering skating area with lighted booths and arc lamps, full of noise and music, I saw a quite different scene. Down there lay the lake of which I had believed that its banks had long since been built-up. It lay there quite secluded, surrounded by black woods exactly as I could remember from my childhood.

I was so drawn in by this unexpected view that I almost lost sight of the unknown child. Then I saw it again. It squatted on the shore and was trying to get one leg over the other, and pull a skate onto a foot with one hand and turn the key around with the other. She dropped the key a few times. Finally she let herself fall onto all fours and slid around on the ice, giving the impression of a peculiar kind of toad. The light faded. A dark pier jutting far into the lake was only a couple of meters from the child. The water gleamed silvery but some patches here and there were darker, a result of the thaw. Impatiently I called, hurry up, and the fat child actually did move quicker. Though not because of my urging, but because someone beyond the end of the pier, a nimble light figure circling around,

was winking and shouting "Come on, fatty". It occurred to me this must be the sister, the dancer, the thunder storm singer, the child after my own heart. And I was immediately convinced that nothing else had lured me here as the wish to see this graceful being. At this moment I heard an ominous groaning, those deep sighs which the lake utters before the ice begins to break, and the danger the children were in dawned on me. These sighs run through the depths like a gruesome lament. I heard them and the children didn't.

No, surely they did not hear them. Otherwise the fat child, this timid creature, would not have striven ever further outward with her scratchy, clumsy strokes. And her sister would not have beckoned and laughed and swirled around on the tip of her skates like a ballerina between carving out figure-eights. And the fat child would have avoided the dark patches that she crossed after pausing a moment before them. And her sister would not have suddenly straightened up and have skated off further and further away towards one of the small lonely coves.

I could perceive it all because I was walking along the pier. Even though the planks were iced I progressed faster than the fat child below. And when I looked back I could see that its face had a dull and yet longing expression. I could also see cracks now rapidly beginning to appear everywhere with water foaming out, like foam from the lips of the raving. And of course I saw how the ice under the fat child broke. That happened at the spot at which her sister had been dancing, only a few arm-lengths before the end of the pier.

I have to add that this beaking into the ice was not a lethal danger. The lake freezes in a couple of layers, and the second layer is only a meter beneath the first, and still seemed intact. All that happened was that the fat child stood a meter deep in water, admittedly in icy water surrounded by crumbling floes. But if she would wade a few steps through the water she could reach the pier and pull herself up. And I could help her. Yet I thought that she would not manage that. And, seeing how she stood there, scared to death, attempting only a few clumsy movements and the water flowing around her, and the ice under her hands breaking, I thought, Aquarius will now pull her down. And I felt nothing, not the slightest compassion, and made no move to help.

Then the fat child raised her head. And because night had come and the moon appeared from behind a cloud I could clearly see that her face had changed. On the one hand the facial features were the same, on the other they had a new quality. They had a new aura of will and fervour, as if in the face of death they were drinking all of the life, all of the glowing life of the world. I must have believed that death was close and this was the last act. And I bent over the railing and looked onto the white face below. It was like a mirror image reaching me out of a black flood. Then the fat child managed to reach a pile of the pier. It stretched out its hands and began to pull itself up. Quite adeptly it grasped the nails and hooks jutting out of the wood. Its body was too heavy, the fingers were bleeding and it slipped back down, only to try anew. It was a long struggle, a terrible fight for deliverance and transformation, like the breaking open of a shell or a cocoon. And I looked on. Now I would have wished to help the child. But I knew there was no need - I had recognized it . . .

I do not recall my way home this evening. I only remember telling a neighbour on our steps that some parts of the lakeside still had meadows and woods. But she replied, no, not any longer. And that I found the papers on my desk in total disorder, and somewhere in the heap was an old photo of me, in a white woolen dress with a stand-up collar, and light watery eyes and very fat.

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