

Translated excerpt

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Was vom Sommer übrig ist

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What remains of the summer

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Failings

It's that one question – it's like when we did dictation tests at primary school. At break time after we'd done the test I always knew which word I'd got wrong, and I used to ask the others, because I knew something wasn't right about that one word. And there was always something. And this time I come out of the theory test and think, hmmm, that one question, the one with the... wasn't that... and when the next person comes out and sits down on the steps by the door – I've never spoken a word to him, but now I talk to him, ask him if he could just tell me, and he's like: 'Nah, sorry, no idea.' And lights up a cigarette. And the next one to come out has her practice test coming up in five minutes, so there's no point talking to her. All she says is, 'At least I'll have a bit of time off if I've failed, my boss isn't expecting me until two.'

I feel like saying something too, like, yeah, I've got a boss like that as well right now, but they think I'm a stupid cow anyway, I can tell by the way they look at me. All right, I've never said a word to them before so I can hardly count on their support now all of a sudden. So I wait. The others smoke. I don't smoke, because I don't smoke. At some point the time's up and everyone's handed in their papers.

It's not as if the tests are really hard to mark. All they have to do is hold up a template next to them and look at it and put a tick and a cross, and that's it. And there's only... thirteen, oh, thirteen, not a good number. So there's only thirteen of us, and then Mr Kehrer does come out and looks around, and the girl who's got her practical test is like: 'AND?' – she practically shouts.

He nods at her. She can go and get ready.

'I'm afraid not everyone passed this time round,' he says, and I think, hey, I must have passed at least. I mean, anything else would be ridiculous. I know how many mistakes I'm allowed to make, and if that one question's the problem I'll still be fine.

Then he comes up to me and says, 'What happened with you, Louise, the braking length...' And I think, huh, what about the braking length? What's up with the braking length? And he asks a question, which I answer, and he says, 'See, you can do it. I suppose it was just nerves, eh?'

I don't understand what he's getting at. And then he says, 'Well, see you next time then, in two weeks.'

'What's in two weeks?'

'The test.'

'What test? The practical test? In two weeks?'

But the way he looks at me, I think, no, oh, the theory test. I. Have. Failed. I've failed and I look at my watch – I'd better get back to work then. In two weeks. I've failed.

And then I'm standing outside the baker's shop, then I'm standing inside the baker's shop, and it's so bloody hot in here again.

One electric fan on the counter, one out back in the staffroom, both swirling up hot air, but it doesn't do any good. And Angela says, 'Oh boy, the boss just left. So? How did it go?'

'What did he want?'

'Huh?'

'The boss? What did he want?'

'He forgot something. So go on then, how was it? Was it hard? I was in a total state when I did mine. But I'm no good at tests,' says Angela. And she fans herself with her hands. 'God, I think it's getting even hotter.'

'It's supposed to be 102 tomorrow,' I say.

'That's crazy. Maybe we should get the day off!'

Angela looks out the window. 'And when's your practical test?' she says suddenly. I shrug.

'Before the end of the school holidays?'

'I've never failed anything. Is there any coffee left?' I walk through to the tiny staffroom.

We've started keeping a pot of coffee in the fridge, with cold milk. Half a cup of coffee, half a cup of milk, and an ice cube in it.

I go back to Angela in the shop. She's got a customer, then another one comes in, and off we go, it's nearly lunchtime and then it'll get really crowded.

I've never failed anything. I've never got an E. I got a D once in my life, but only because I was ill before the test. I understand maths, I find it easy to remember things, I can memorize everything I want to memorize and have to: chemistry formulae, poems, names, dates. I've never failed anything. He said I failed, didn't he, no, maybe I was wrong, maybe he meant someone else.

It can't be true. I'm not the kind of person who fails things. And we've run out of baguettes.

Can she maybe get a couple later, one woman asks, she's having a barbecue tonight. So I ring the boss, and he says yes, says no, says, 'Yeah, no, how many does she want anyway?' Ten baguettes. All right, he can do that, tell her to come back at four, and how was the test, he asks. Difficult?

It wasn't even difficult. I've had more difficult exams before. I've had Latin vocab tests that were more difficult.

It was multiple choice!

How could I have failed? It's not like I'm stupid. I revised! I slept! I ate! I don't take drugs, I've never even smoked! So I say, 'I failed,' and I hang up, and I ask, 'Yes, what can I get you?'

'Oh no, Louise! Failed?' says Angela.

I make like a hand gesture, still looking at the customer. 'Yes?'

'Oh dear, failed?' asks the woman.

'She had her theory test today,' says Angela, even though she ought to be serving.

'Oh! My son had to take every test three times over! He only ever passed the third time round!' Yeah, but your son's probably a complete idiot and you just don't realize because you like him too much. Your son can fail whatever tests he likes five times over, I don't care, but I! DON'T! FAIL! ANYTHING!

'You'll be fine next time,' says Angela.

And the woman's like: 'Three times! Every time.' And I give a little sigh, I mean it's hot, isn't it, and I look past the woman and see the other customers, who've all heard that I, me, the nice girl doing a holiday job before she takes her exams, that she's fallible too. And then I see her, right at the back of the queue: Constanze.

Intensive care

They had a phone-in on the radio today about where to go to escape the heat. Cinema, supermarket, museum, that kind of thing. Because it's so hot again, no, not just hot, it's really boiling. Mum left all the blinds down and I'm not supposed to open any windows so the hot air doesn't get in from outside.

It's still hot in here though.

And it's worse out in the garden. The trees aren't even proper trees yet, they're much too small. And the neighbour trimmed his trees back last year. And there's not a breath of wind. And because it's so boiling hot and although it's so boiling hot, I decide to go out. In a hat. In a big straw hat, it's got this really broad rim, it's like lugging my own sunshade around on my head.

I get myself a can of lemonade at the newsagent's, but it's empty before I get to the end of the block. I swear I'm going to explode, I've been drinking so much in this heat. So I go into the supermarket to buy a big bottle of water. But I haven't got a bag with me, that's annoying.

So then I'm standing in the queue and I think maybe I should get some chewing gum as well, like mini air conditioning inside your mouth, and I wonder which flavour tastes the coldest. The one in the blue packet, I bet. Anything with mint in it.

So then I get to the till and I haven't chosen any chewing gum so I just pay for the water and turn around and I'm stuffing my change in my back pocket. And then someone calls me, because, there's Mia at the next till, with someone else or on her own, and she's over to me quick as a flash, and I'm still there because I didn't manage to run away in time.

So then she's standing there and looking at me all sad, and she's not even a friend of mine, she's just in my class. But she acts all friendly. And why? Because Mia had a crush on Tom, when he jumped/fell/landed. And because Tom once said three words to her.

Like, 'Do you know what time the bus is due?' or 'Is Mrs Steinke still off sick?' or 'You're in Jana's class, right, can you give this to her?' and not, 'Mia, hey, listen, I really like you, do you wanna be my girlfriend?' or 'Mia, I've only just noticed you! How could I have walked the earth without noticing how beautiful you are? From now on every day I have to spend without you will be torture!' and not even, 'Fancy a snog?'

Not even that. Mia starts crying again. She cries after three words.

'Hi,' says Mia.

'Yeah?' I say.

'How are you?' she asks. And not like you ask, you know, you all right, everything OK at your end? More like, 'How are YOU?'

Because SHE's the one who's suffering. 'Fine. And you?'

She looks away a moment. Kind of breathes in much too much air and then out again. Then she looks at me, stares me in the eye really intensely. 'Not so good. I've made a site. For me and Tom. To help me deal with it all.' Pause.

'How... how is he?' I shrug. Mia doesn't go to the hospital, you see. Because she can't stand it, she says.

'I'm going there now. Do you want to come with me?' I say much too quickly, thinking, Oh shit, what if she says yes?

But I'm in luck, because Mia says she can't deal with that yet, she's not strong enough.

I see. Well, I'll be off then. 'I'll send you the link,' she says, and I say goodbye and I don't even know what she's talking about. So then I really do go to the hospital, just so I wasn't lying. And the hospital's another good place where it's not hot, where you can almost stand it – at least the temperature.

Tom hasn't got a room to himself. They said it might even be better if he's not on his own in

his condition (in HIS CONDITION). There's another guy in the bed next to him, lying there like Tom and he's been there much longer too. So long that the whole of the wall by his bed is covered in pictures and postcards, and there's an MP3-player with earphones, and there's stuff everywhere to remind him of things.

He jumped as well. Or fell. He fell out of a fourth-floor window and landed on the ground. And landed up here.

So there's this woman here today, who comes quite often. A woman with cherry-red lips and black hair – she looks like Snow White, she's really beautiful, she looks like winter. And she holds his hand in hers again and doesn't talk. Sitting there, one earphone in her ear, the other one in his. It's very quiet, I can't hear it at all. She looks at him, and sometimes she gives him a really quick smile, so quick it's over faster than I can look. And then she sits there again with his hand in hers and two ears and a song to share and a cable between them.

And I don't want to stare at her, so I just gave her a quick nod when I came in, said hello quietly.

It's almost always this quiet here, except when Mum and Dad come, and then they're much too noisy. As if Tom's deaf or something. Like in the old days, when they used to shout him out of bed when he didn't want to go to school. He had to get up sometime with all that yelling.

He can stay in bed now – it's the holidays.

I open my bottle of water, as quietly as I can. I unscrew the cap really slowly, and it fizzes, and my hand gets a bit wet, but I do it so slowly that nothing spills, it just fizzes, fresh and cold, and it makes me even thirstier.

I didn't even look at the picture on the wall by the entrance, when you come into the ward. Right at the beginning I thought it was a child's drawing, but then I realized it was too good for a child, just all scribbly like someone had drawn on the paper with a black felt-tip pen. And then Dad saw it one day and shook his head, and said, 'How can they?' But he didn't ask anyone how they could, how they could hang up that picture of the tall man on the stripy horse and the small round man on a bunny/deer/squirrel thing that's supposed to be a donkey. And the crosses that aren't turning. Windmills.

And you can't even say 'art' or whatever, because Dad shook his head and said, how could they?

So I always look at it when I walk past, and I think about Dad shaking his head.

Not today though.

And I drink and close the bottle again and I hold it with both hands to my tummy, my chest, a

litre and a half of refrigeration up against me.

How she's sitting there.

And then I move the chair up closer and look at Tom. Tom's lips are all dry. He's got white flaky stuff round his mouth and nobody wipes it away for him. And no tongue to give it a quick lick. No one says Tom, you've got something on your mouth, so he opens his eyes and says, 'Where?' And the funny thing is that people always rub away on the wrong side and then at the right one, and when you say, yeah, it's gone now, they still keep rubbing away just to make sure.

Snow White can't see me here, now I'm leaning over Tom like this.

'Tom, you've got something on your lip,' I say. And he doesn't rub and doesn't ask, 'Where?' and doesn't rub/lick at the wrong place and doesn't keep on doing it.

And he's got crumbs in his eyes, sleep. Dream dust.

I wipe it away. Really carefully. And then I fumble my lip salve out of my pocket and put it on his lips, so they don't get chapped. He won't notice. It's not bad or anything. Right. And then I laugh for a moment, because I think of Mia and I think how funny Tom might find it, how he might laugh now, might make jokes with me, like in the old days when we were little. But maybe he'd get angry, maybe with Mia, he might say, Who does she think she is, that little kid, that little girlie. But maybe Tom doesn't ever say things like little kid and girlie, maybe he'll be angry with me because he doesn't think Mia's that bad, because he thinks it's nice of her to be sad about him, and there's no need to laugh about it so nastily, and I'm the little kid, the little girlie, I'm the stupid one around here.

And I can't think of anything else. At least those two over there have a few songs, two earphones and a cable between them.

And there's nothing nothing nothing I can think of to say or do, and I don't know if Tom would laugh about Mia, so that's why I leave really quickly then. And quicker. And I'm angry with him because he might be angry with me because I think Mia's crap and stupid and annoying, because I wish I could punch Mia in the face – she doesn't even know Tom. But neither do I and I leave and I run, and the picture's only hanging on a hook so at least Dad won't have to shake his head when he comes round later.

How it started,

it's hard to say now really. But when – I know that, because I was a bit surprised because it was just before the February half-term holidays. One of those days when everyone's a bit

more relaxed, because none of the teachers is going to spring a test on us, because there's no homework to do, because you just have to sit through a few more lessons before everyone goes home, because it's half term. And it was just the same as usual really – he was sitting next to me, like he had been all school year, because that's what we'd agreed in the summer holidays. Because we were friends, because I wanted to help him pass the school year, not have to repeat again. That was why he came to sit next to me, and I gave up my seat by the window for him, because Constanze and Janina didn't want to sit next to him. And it went fine like that for a few months, he managed it, I explained all the maths for him, we were friends. Sometimes he distracted me but that wasn't the end of the world. And no, it wasn't love, not for either of us, you couldn't say it was anything to do with one of our hearts or the other or with pride and stubbornness or revenge or unrequited stuff or anything. It's just that the wind changes sometimes. And I thought at first it was just because of his girlfriend or his parents or something, that he turned up that day and didn't say hello. I thought he was just in a bad mood, maybe I made a joke, and maybe it was the joke, but maybe it wasn't. But that was the first time, the first thing Paul said that came like a gut punch. And I knew he could be like that. Just that he never did it to me. But then. And the people in front of us heard it, and the ones behind us too: Constanze, Janina. And they were all a bit scared of him, so they all held their breath a bit before the first one burst out laughing.

And maybe you can say now that I should have answered back right then, something like DON'T GET OUT OF ORDER or DON'T TALK TO ME LIKE THAT. And if it was one of those stories that makes us all come out a little bit cleverer and more grown up at the end, someone else would have stood up for me, would have shown a bit of courage, told him to watch what he said, and who he said it to. But nobody had the guts. Not in my class. Nobody ever dared to say anything, and if anyone did then it was me. And I didn't that time. And when you've turned a blind eye once, because you thought everything would be back to normal after the holidays, then it's easier for more words like that to come. And at some point it's not just words, it's kicks under the table. And a Coke emptied out over my bag, accidentally on purpose. And then it doesn't take long for the others to start laughing sooner. And suddenly the wind changes. And you're still thinking, oh, it'll sort itself out. And the teacher says, 'Louise and Paul, quiet over there!' because you hit back under the table. And the teacher thinks no more of it and neither does the next teacher. And if those two in the third row insist on messing around all the time then they just have to intervene, verbally, just take note, communicate, and then everything's fine. And then on to the next unit. And he still wants help with maths but there's no thank you any more. And he whispers as loud as he can,

so loud that everyone hears him, whispers, 'Dumb but useful.'

And when he's not there, because he's sick or acting sick, then you notice for a while, because he leaves a vacuum, that everyone's just wondering if he won't pop up after all so they'll have something to look at again. But because he doesn't suddenly pop up, they look at me again. And then it's back to Louise. And not Paul any more.

You still get invited to parties but you don't want to go any more, maybe you'd rather read a book or watch a DVD or do some revision. The only laugh that wasn't loud was Constanze's. Janina didn't matter, she was never someone you could count on. But with every word or every kick, there was no reaction from Constanze, and she stayed silent even once the others had started laughing.

It didn't get any better. There were quiet days and there were hellish days. And there was one day when I didn't sit down at my place any more – I sat in the back row. Changing places at some point is just a logical reaction. Constant Paul drives away Louise. Everyone saw it, there was no avoiding that, and one teacher thought it was some kind of hysterical teenage separation drama, but he didn't do anything about it because there was no real disruption. And that's where I stayed, and at some point nobody looked back at me any more. Constanze moved up a space. Janina too. Nobody asked me to come back. I didn't explain maths to him any more, and he managed it somehow without my help. I don't know how.

And one time I did go to a party. And he was there, and other people were there too. I danced until my neck and my feet ached, and at some point I saw Paul and Constanze in a corner, kissing. She already had a boyfriend though, and he had a girlfriend. And even that doesn't explain anything but maybe it does a bit, and on the Monday after that everyone was talking about how I got off with a boy from another class. But no one mentioned what happened between Constanze and Paul.

And at some point the only one left is you. If a party only used to be any good if you were there, that's different now, and the phone doesn't ring after school any more, and your weekends are free, and you can read a book at break. You have plenty of time, and nobody needs you. And that's not even all that bad.

It's not the end of the world.