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Andreas Steinhöfel
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Andreas Steinhöfel
Rico, Oskar and the Shadow Spooks

Translated by Alisa Jaffa

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Saturday – The Pasta Find

The piece of pasta was lying on the pavement. It was fat with ridges and a hole through the middle. Some dried up cheese sauce and dirt was stuck to it. I picked it up, wiped the dirt off and looked up at the old glass windows of our Dieffe 93 block of flats and the summer sky above. No clouds, and what's more none of those white jet trails. Anyway, I thought to myself, you can't open the window of an airplane and throw food out.

I let myself into the building, shot up the yellowed stairway to the third floor and rang Fran Dahling's bell. She had big coloured rollers in her hair, like every Saturday. 'Could be a bit of rigatoni. The sauce is definitely gorgonzola,' she declared. 'Sweet of you to bring it to me, darling, but it wasn't me that threw it out of the window. Go and ask Fitzke.'

She grinned at me, pointed her finger to the side of her head, rolled her eyes and looked up.

Fitzke lives on the fourth floor. I can't bear him and I didn't really believe the pasta shape belonged to him. Frau Dahling had been my first choice, because she often throws things out of the window - last winter it was the television. Five minutes later she threw her husband out, but just out of the flat.

After that she came to us, and Mama had to give her a sip of the right stuff.

'He's got a lover', she explained. 'If the stupid cow was at least younger than me! Pour me another please!'

As the goggle box was now in the garbage and her husband gone, by way of consolation next day she bought herself a really cool flat screen television and a DVD player. Since then we sometimes watch a romance or thrillers together, but only at weekends, when Frau Dahling can have a lie-in. During the week she works on the meat counter at Karstadt on Hermannplatz. Her hands are always bright red, it's so cold there.

While we watch television we eat salami and egg or smoked salmon rolls.

The love stories make Frau Dahling cry so much she gets through at least ten tissues, but when the film's over she always lets rip, saying so OK the bloke and the woman may have ended up together - but that's just when the trouble starts, and they would *never* show *that* in those films, a load of shitty old lies – another roll, Rico?

'Are we still on for this evening', Frau Dahling called out after me as I ran up to the fourth floor, two steps at a time.

'Sure!'

Her door slammed shut and I knocked at Fitzke's. You always have to knock at Fitzke's, as his bell doesn't work, probably hasn't since 1910 when the building was put up.

Wait, wait, wait.

Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle from behind the heavy, old- fashioned door.

Then at last Fitzke himself, in his dark blue pyjamas with up and down grey stripes. His crumpled face was covered in stubble and strands of hair stood up this way and that on his head.

I mean, how messy is that?

A musty, stale smell drifted out. Goodness knows what Fitzke keeps in there. In his flat, I mean, not in his head. I tried looking past him without him noticing, but he stood in the way. On purpose! I've been in every flat in the building, except for Fitzke's. He won't let me in because he doesn't like me.

'Aha! The little dimwit!' he growled.

At this point I might as well explain that my name is Rico and I am a lowly gifted child. That is to say I do an awful lot of thinking, but it usually takes me a bit longer than other people. It's not my brain - that's quite a normal size. But sometimes a few things drop out, and unfortunately I never know beforehand from which part. Besides that, I can't always concentrate very well when I'm talking about something.

Mostly I then lose the red thread, at least I think it's red, but it could also be green or blue, and that's exactly the problem.

Sometimes things rattle around in my head like balls in a Bingo drum. I go to play Bingo every Tuesday with Mama at the *Grey Bumblebees*, the old people's club. The bumblebees have taken over the communal rooms in the church. I've no idea why Mama likes going so much, they're really nearly all pensioners there. I believe some of them never go home at all as they're wearing the same old clobber every Tuesday, just like

Fitzke in his one and only pair of pyjamas, and a few of them smell funny. Maybe Mama just thinks it great that she wins so often at Bingo. Every time she goes up on the stage she beams, and collects some cheap plastic handbag for example – actually it's nearly always a cheap plastic handbag.

The pensioners hardly ever notice, many of them drop off over their little Bingo cards at some point or they just don't get it. A few weeks ago, one of them was sitting very still at a table until the last numbers had been called. As the others started to leave, he didn't stand up, and when the cleaning lady tried to wake him, he was dead. Mama wondered whether he might have actually died the previous Tuesday. I hadn't noticed him either.

'Morning, Herr Fitzke,' I said, 'I hope I didn't wake you.'

Fitzke looks even older than the pensioner who snuffed it at Bingo. And a real mess. Apparently he won't live much longer, that's why he only wears pyjamas all the time, even to go out shopping to the supermarket. When he does snuff it, at least he'll be wearing the right gear. Fitzke once told Frau Dahling that ever since he was little, he'd had a dicky ticker, that's why he was always short of breath and then one day it'll be KERBOOM! Seems to me that even if he is going to pop off soon, he could still dress properly or at least give the pyjamas a wash now and again, say at Christmas. I mean, I wouldn't like to be lying in a heap in front of the cheese counter at Aldi's smelling foul, even when I'd only been dead for a minute.

Fitzke just gawped at me, so I stuck the pasta shape under his nose. 'Is this yours?' 'Where d'you get it?'

'Pavement. Frau Dahling thinks it may be rigatoni. Any rate, the sauce is definitely gorgonzola'

'Was it just lying there,' he asked suspiciously, 'or was it lying in something?'

'Who?'

'Go get yourself a brain! The pasta, you dimwit!'

'What was the question again?'

Fitzke rolled his eyes. Any moment he was going to explode. 'Whether it was just lying there on the pavement, your stupid pasta shape, or in something! You know, dog poo.'

'Just lying there.'

'So let's have a closer look.'

He took the pasta from me and turned it over in his fingers. Then he put it – my very own pasta find! - in his mouth and swallowed it. Without chewing.

Slammed the door. BANG!

He's off his head! Next time I find a bit of pasta, know what I'll do? I'll roll it in poo, take it to Fitzke, and if he asks was it lying in something, I'll say no, that's meat sauce.

Man oh man!

Actually I'd meant to search the whole building with my bit of pasta, but now it was gone, vanished behind Fitzke's rotten teeth. I was really missing it. It's always the way when you lose something. Beforehand it's nothing very special, but once it's gone suddenly it was the best pasta shape in the whole world. It was the same with Frau Dahling. At first she was letting rip all last winter about her husband being a lousy cheater, but now she watches one love story after another and would be glad to have her husband back.

I was going to run down from Fitzke's to the second floor, but then I changed my mind and rang at the door opposite. That's where the new guy lives, the one who moved in two days ago. I've not seen him yet. Sure, I didn't have the pasta shape any more, but it was a good chance to say hallo. He might have let me into his flat.

I like going into other people's flats.

This one had been empty a long time, because it was so expensive. For a while Mama had even considered taking it, as it's much lighter on the fourth floor than the second and there's even a bit of a view as you can look out through the trees over the old flat roof of the Urban Hospital on the other side of the street. But when Mama found out what it cost she dropped it. Which is lucky as Fitzke would have been our neighbour. The greedy guts.

The new guy's name is Westbühl – it's written over the bell. He wasn't at home which was actually a bit of a relief. Saying his name would have been a problem. Because of the business of west and east. I'm always getting left and right muddled up, even on the compass. When left and right crop up that automatically sets off the drum in my head.

I felt cross as I ran down the stairs. If Fitzke hadn't destroyed my piece of evidence it would have been a brilliant day to play detectives. There were actually very few suspects. I could rule out the two super smart flats on the fifth floor at present. The Runge-Blawetzky's had beetled off on holiday yesterday, and so far there hadn't been a sign of Marrak who lives next door to them. He'd probably spent the night at his

girl-friend's who does his washing for him. Every few weeks you see him tearing through the neighbourhood with an enormous sack full of kit, out of the house and back again, then out again and back again, and so on. Frau Dahling once said young men today are a disgrace, once upon a time it was just their toothbrush they took when they went out, nowadays it's half their wardrobe. At any rate Marrak wasn't at home. All yesterday's flyers were still sticking out of his mailbox down in the entrance hall. That's why I prefer watching thrillers to smoochy films, because things like that stand out a mile.

OK, so cross off the fifth floor. On the fourth floor there's Fitzke and the new guy with the compass point name. On the third floor in the flat opposite Frau Dahling is Kiesling. I couldn't have rung his bell before evening anyway, as he's out all day slogging away as a dental mechanic in a lab in Tempelhof.

Next floor down: Mama and me, and opposite us the six Kesslers, but they're also away on holiday. The Kesslers own their apartment, and there's a staircase leading off from it to the flat below, which also belongs to them. Herr and Frau Kessler need a lot of space for all their children.

Most of all I'd like to have seen the flat on the first floor opposite the Kesslers, that's below Mama's and mine. That's where Jule lives with Berts and Massoud. The three of them are students. But without the pasta shape to hand unfortunately I didn't have any excuse for visiting them. Berts is fine. I can't bear Massoud, because Jule is in love with him instead of me. If only I'd started out there with my enquiries, or with old Mommsen the caretaker – he's on the ground floor.

Dead loss, the lot of them.

So down again to the second floor, back home.

As I went into the flat, there was Mama in the hall standing in front of the golden mirror with all the little angels and their puffed-out cheeks. She had her sky-blue T-shirt pulled up as far as her chin and was anxiously inspecting her breasts. I could see her thoughtful face in the mirror.

Mama often gets goggled at in the street, especially by men. Not that she goes out with her T-shirt pulled up, of course not, but she just looks smashing. She always wears an ultra short mini-skirt and cropped top with a plunging neckline. And high-heeled strappy gold or silver sandals. She has her shiny blonde hair loose, long and glossy, and lots of tinkly, clinking bracelets, necklaces and ear-rings. Best of all I love her fingernails, they're very long. Every week Mama sticks something new on them,

like tiny sparkling fish or a single little ladybird on each nail. She's always saying that a lot of men like that, and that's why she's so successful at her job.

'One of these days they'll be droopy boobs,' said Mama to the mirror and to me. 'I give them another two years, three at best, and then they'll be victims of gravity.

Life's a damned tear-off calendar.'

Gravity wasn't a word I knew, I had to look it up. I always look up words I don't know in the dictionary, to make myself a bit smarter. And sometimes I go and ask Mama or Frau Dahling, or Wehmeyer, my teacher. Then I write down what I find out. Like:

Gravity: If something is heavier than you are, it pulls you to it. So as the earth is heavier than practically everything, no one falls off it. Gravity was discovered by a man called Isaac Newton. It's dangerous for bosoms and apples. And maybe for other round things as well.

'And then what?' I asked.

'Then I'll get new ones,' said Mama firmly. 'After all, it's down to my working capital.' She sighed, tugged her T-shirt down again and turned round to me. 'What was school like?'

'O.K.'

She never refers to the remedial learning centre by its real name, because she knows how I hate it. For years Wehmeyer has been trying to sort out the Bingo balls in my head, but no luck.

I did once consider suggesting that perhaps he should stop the machine first before dealing with the balls, but then I gave up. If he doesn't hit on it himself, then too bad for him.

'But why did Wehmeyer actually make you show up again?' said Mama. 'I thought yesterday was the last day?'

'Holiday project. Have to write something.'

'You – write something?' She wrinkled her forehead. 'What is it?'

'Just a composition,' I muttered. It was more complicated than that, but I didn't want Mama to know about it before I'd managed to try it out.

'Right'. Her forehead smoothed out again. 'Eaten anything yet –kebab or something?' She ruffled my hair with her fingers, bent forward and planted a kiss on my forehead.

'Nope.'

‘Must be hungry?’

‘Sure.’

‘Okay. I’ll do us some fish fingers then.’ She disappeared into the kitchen. I threw my rucksack through the open door leading into my bedroom, then I followed her, sat down at the table and watched her.

‘I have to ask you something, Rico’, said Mama as she melted butter in the frying pan. My head automatically sank down between my shoulders. When Mama asks me something and uses my name, it means that she’s been worrying about something, and if she’s worrying there’s usually something serious going on. When I say serious, I mean difficult. And difficult means Bingo balls.

‘What is it?’ I ask carefully.

‘It’s about Mister 2000.’

I was wishing the fish fingers were ready. Even a dimwit could work out where this conversation was going. Mama opened the fridge and scraped and poked about with a knife in the freezer compartment, where the packet of fish fingers was frozen fast under a coating of blue ice. ‘He’s set a child free again,’ she continued. ‘This one’s from Lichtenberg. The fifth one now. The one before was from...’

‘Wedding, I know.’

And the three before that were from Kreuzberg, Tempelhof, and Charlottenburg.

Mister 2000 has been keeping the whole of Berlin on tenterhooks the last three months. On the TV they said he’s probably the most cunning child kidnapper of all time. Some people also call him the ALDI kidnapper, because his prices are so low. He lures little boys and girls into his car and drives off with them, and then writes the parents a letter: *Dear Parents, if you wish to get your Lucille-Marie back, it will only cost you 2000 Euros. Such a ridiculously small sum- so think carefully before you inform the police. Because if you do, you’ll only get your child back bit by bit.*

Up to now none of the parents informed the police until after they’d paid out and their child had turned up in one piece. But the whole of Berlin is waiting for the day when some little Lucille-Marie or Maximilian doesn’t come home in one piece, because the parents screwed up. Could be that some of them are quite pleased their child has been kidnapped, and so they don’t cough up a cent. Or they’re poor and only have about 50 Euros. If you only give Mister 2000 50 Euros, then all that’ll be left of a child may be just one hand. The fascinating question is what he might send back, the

hand or the rest. Perhaps the hand, as it's less noticeable. Apart from that, an enormous parcel with child remains in it will probably cost all of the 50 Euros to post. As far as I'm concerned 2000 Euros is a huge amount of money. But Berts explained to me once that in an emergency, every one will somehow scrape up the dough if they really want to. Berts is doing an Em Bee Ay, which is something to do with money, so I expect he knows.

'Have you got 2000 Euros?' I asked Mama. After all, you never know. If the worst came to the worst, I might allow her to break into my globe. You slide your coins into a slit in the glass dome. I've had it forever, and my savings might just be enough for an arm or something. For twenty or thirty Euros Mama would at least have a little reminder of me.

'2000 Euros?' she said. 'Do I look like it?'

'Would you be able to scrape them together?'

'For you? And if I had to kill for it, my darling.' There was a crunch and a thick lump of ice landed on the kitchen floor. Mama picked it up making a noise that sounded like *Pooh or Pfff* and threw it into the sink. 'That freezer compartment really needs defrosting some time.'

'I'm not as little as the other children that have been kidnapped so far. And I'm older.'

'Yes, I know.' She tugged at the packet to open it. 'All the same I should have taken you to school every day and collected you these last weeks.'

Mama works until early morning. When she comes home she brings me a roll, gives me a kiss before I shoot off to the learning centre, and then she goes to bed. Usually she doesn't get up till the afternoon, long after I'm back home again. It would never have worked, her taking me there and bringing me home again.

She paused for a moment and screwed up her nose. 'Am I an irresponsible mother, Rico?'

'Course not!'

For a long moment she looked at me thoughtfully, then she tipped the frozen fish fingers out of the packet and into the pan. The butter was so hot it spat. Mama jumped back. 'Blasted things! Now I'll smell of the stuff.'

Mama would be taking a shower in any case before she goes to the club this evening. She always showers after fish fingers. The most expensive perfume in the world, she once said, doesn't last as long as the smell of fish fingers. While the fish fingers were

hissing in the pan I told her about my pasta find and that Fitzke had demolished it, so that now I couldn't discover who it belonged to.

'Stupid old git', she muttered.

Mama can't stand Fitzke. When we moved into Dieffe 93 a few years back, Mama dragged me through the whole building to meet the neighbours.

Her hand had been quite sticky, gripping me tightly. Mama is plucky but not hard-hearted. She was afraid the people might not like us because she was not a lady and I was a little backward. Fitzke answered when she knocked and stood there in his pyjamas. Unlike Mama, who didn't bat an eyelid, I grinned. That was probably a mistake. Then Mama said something like Hi I'm new here and this is my son Rico. He's a little soft in the head, but he can't help it. So if he ever gets up to anything... Fitzke screwed up his eyes and pulled a face as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. Then without a word he slammed the door shut in our faces. Ever since then he's been calling me dimwit.

'Did he say dimwit?' Mama asked.

'Nah.' After all her getting angry doesn't help.

'Stupid old git', she said again.

She didn't ask why I really wanted to find out who the pasta shape belonged to. To her that was just *one of Rico's ideas*. There was no point asking about it.

I watched her as she flipped the fish fingers over. She was humming a little tune to herself, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. In between she set the table. The sun was pouring through the window and the air smelled delicious, of summer and fish. I was feeling good. I love it when Mama cooks or does something huggy for me.

'Blood slosh on them?'

'Sure.'

She put the ketchup bottle on the table and pushed my plate across to me. 'So no taking you to school?'

I shook my head. 'Any way it's the holidays now. Maybe they'll catch him any day now.'

'Quite sure?'

'Ye-ees!'

'Right.'

She was really shovelling down the fish fingers. 'I've got to be off in a tick,' she said in answer to my questioning look. 'Going to the hairdressers with Irina.' Irina is Mama's best friend. She works at the club too. 'Strawberry blonde – what do you reckon?'

'Is that red?'

'No. Blonde with a slight hint of red.'

'What's that got to do with strawberries?'

And what kind of hint?

'Strawberries are bright red.'

'Only when they're ripe.'

'But before that they're green. What kind of hint?'

'Just a phrase.'

Mama doesn't like it when I keep on and on, and I don't like it when she says things I don't understand. Some things have pretty stupid names, so surely you have to be allowed to ask why they're called what they're called. Like I sometimes wonder why strawberries are called strawberries, even though they're not made of straw.

Mama pushed her empty plate away. 'We need some things for the weekend. I could go and buy the stuff myself, but...'

'I'll do it.'

'You're an angel.' She grinned in relief, stood up and fished around in her trouser pocket. 'I made a list, half a mo'...'

Mama's trousers are always so skin tight, I'm afraid that one of these days I'll have to cut her out of them. I ask myself why even so she stuffs things in her trouser pockets. She's won at least ten plastic handbags by now but she never uses them. She doesn't even keep them, but sells them on e-Bay.

'There isn't much.' At last she handed me the crumpled scrap of paper. 'Money's in the drawer. Toothpaste's the most important. I didn't put butter down, but we've run out now. Can you remember that too, or shall I...'

I speared the first fish finger with my fork, and acting very cool dipped it in the blood slosh.

'I'll remember.'

I hope.