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Translated excerpt

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Martin Baltscheit / Wiebke Rauers (Illustrations)
The Crow and the Bear

Translated by David Henry Wilson



Prologue

Overheard at the zoo:

“Hey, where’s the bear?”

“Standing against the wall, asleep.”

“Against the wall? Really? Does he stand there all day?”

“Only when he’s not lying down or eating.”

“Lying down and eating. Is that all he does?”

“What else should he do? Nice life he’s got.”

“And we have to clear up the mess.”

“There are worse things in life. Here, take the broom.”

“Look at the crow. She’s got it made. Eats all the leftovers and flies off wherever she likes. She’s got more freedom than we have.”

“I wouldn’t want to live like that.”

“Being free?”

“Always having to beg.”

Drowning

Sper-LASH! The crow has overreached herself and gone crashing down. She came like a feather and fell like a stone. Straight into the water. She missed her target. Hunger had made her heavy. You can't fly properly if you're really hungry. Hunger takes control, and sends out just one command: **EAT!** Anything! Anyhow! Anywhere! Even if there's a bear around.

The big bone lay in the sun, full of meaty bits and half rotten remains. It seemed to the crow as if the bone was saying: “Hey there, crow, the stupid bear has left something, so come and get me!” And the crow came, but the tailwind was too strong. In order not to break her wings, her only chance was a soft landing in the pool. So down she went into the water. The crazy thing, though, is that crows can't swim.

“Hey, you stupid bear! I'm drowning!

Help! Help me! Bear!

Come on, you great bag of fat...

Give me your paw!

I'll pollute the pool.

My dead body'll poison it.

Dammit!

Damn and blast it, I'm going under...!

Hey, you lazy, lumbering lump!

Have you no pity?

Have you...

I'm going...

...under...”

Going under

What a crow feels underwater, as it draws its last breath, may be described as follows: first it feels warm, although it must be ice cold. Then the creature is dazzled by a bright light, although its eyes are closed. And lastly it hears a choir of heavenly voices, although nobody ever sings in the bear's pool. The warmth, the light and the heavenly choir all help to give the crow a really nice feeling. It's

all over and done with – no more hunger, no more begging, and no more tomorrows in which to worry about where the next meal's coming from. And the less air the crow has in its lungs, the brighter shines the light at the end of the tunnel. When the brain also runs short of air, there will be time for one last thought:

“Yeah, OK.”

Getting acquainted

The story would have ended here if miracles didn't happen in stories. And this is the miraculous moment in our story. A tale of marvellous magic. The crow does not die. She does not wake up in heaven either, but in the bear's enclosure, on the hard earth full of sand and stones and more sand, and she spits out the water, coughs, blinks, and from behind her wet eyelids she can see a blurred bear wandering quietly round in circles.

“So did you want me to drown? Or did you have lead weights tied to your paws? What's so difficult about pulling a crow out of the water? Eh, you great eating machine? Can you hear me, or has your cushy life made you go deaf? Anyway, next time a crow's in danger of drowning, just remember...pushing down: bad. Pulling out: good!”

In fact, the bear had got sick of the crow's cawing and had pulled her out. That was all. Now he is furious because the crow still won't shut up.

“Will you stand still, you brown pile of poop!”

The bear stands still.

“Very good. Thank you.”

The crow shakes herself, stretches her wings, and gets her feathers back into shape. She is no beauty, and soaking wet she looks even more pathetic than usual.

“There stands the bear who saved my life. What's your name?”

“You're very impolite.”

“That's an unusual name.”

“You're very, very impolite!”

“Politeness is for the well-fed, you fat, furry fool.”

“I can't stand rude crows.”

“So that's why you wanted to kill me?!”

“I wanted a bit of peace and quiet.”

“And you'd kill a little bird for that, would you?”

“It was you who jumped into the water!”

“I didn't jump. I fell.”

“And my pool just happened to be in the way, and I forgot to mention it on the invitation?”

“What invitation?”

The bear turns, heads straight for the crow, screws up his little eyes, scratches the dusty sand with his paws, and snorts:

“Dear Crow,

Please come to my **bone party** and help yourself. But be careful because the pool is hot and will bite you!”

“Are you in a bad mood, or what?”

“Are you out of your mind, or what?”

“I never **HAD** such an invitation!”

“I never **SENT** such an invitation!”

And he really hadn't sent such an invitation. It's meant to be a joke, and the bear can hardly believe his own ears. Because he never cracks jokes. And especially nasty jokes. The crow hops a few steps further away, still dripping from every feather.

“OK, OK, I get it...Just carry on roaring and my feathers will soon dry...No need to go on and on about it. I'll soon be out of your way, you fart factory.”

“**WHAT?!**”

“There's me fighting for my life, practically dead...I saw the light at the end of the tunnel...no hunger, no enemies, nothing but love.”

The crow leans her head to one side. She often does that – it's an old crow custom. In this case, it's doubly useful, because it enables the water to flow out of her ears.

The bear looks at the bird.

“So why didn't you stay there?”

“I **wanted to live!**” caws the crow.

“Then for heaven's sake go on living – and get out of here!”

Silence.

The bear continues his walk. In the usual direction. Circular. He has said all there is to say. He couldn't care less what happens to the crow.

“You haven't got a towel, have you? I'm as wet as a frog. I can't fly like this. And if I can't fly, the dogs will eat me...You stupid thunderblunder...”

She stretches her wings again.

“Ah! Ouch! I think you've broken my wing. Typical bear – strike first and ask afterwards. Never share anything, and finish up dying all alone. I know why they lock you up. You go to the supermarket for a jar of honey, and knock all the shelves down with your fat bum, and you're probably colour blind as

well and run through traffic lights when they're red. They lock you up because you're a bad example to everyone. As for your teeth – they're weapons of mass destruction. You'll order three scoops of ice cream, and gobble up the ice cream man at the same time..."

The bear grabs the crow by the throat and squeezes.

"Are all you crows so ungrateful?"

"Uglugurgle..."

"I saved your life."

"I can't breathe...lemmego..."

"Say please."

"Please."

The bear lets go.

"Thank you."

"Thank you."

The crow coughs and makes sure there is plenty of space between herself and the bear, who puts an end to the meeting.

"Now get out of here! And don't let me ever see you here again! Never ever!" Those are his farewell words to the crow, who doesn't even hear the final sentence because she's flying up into the evening sky.

"Light at the end of the tunnel? What a load of crowcrap!"

Freedom of choice

A bear in a zoo snores gently and evenly. The night has passed without anything special happening, and the morning begins like a thousand mornings before it. A bucket is left in the enclosure, full of meat with bones and bones with meat.

The sound wakes the bear, who would have woken up anyway because his dreams are even more boring than his life. Now he asks himself whether it wouldn't have been better to have a boring dream than a boring breakfast, but all the same he wanders over to the bucket because eating is the last and only thing he can still enjoy.

"Well, what do you say?"

"I'm not saying anything. I'm eating."

"Say something anyway."

"What for?"

"For me."

The bear looks at the crow out of the corner of his eye. The bird is sitting on the wall. She has a good view from there. Of everything. The enclosure, the paths, and whatever might be left of the food.

“How about: ‘Good morning, dear crow, so the dogs didn’t get you. What a stroke of luck!’”

“Who for?”

“For the dogs, of course. There’s many a sweet poodle has met a sticky end through us. Too many feathers.”

The crow hops a few stones closer.

“How does it taste?”

“Good.”

“What is it, then?”

“Something very tasty.”

“Can I have a bit?”

“No.”

“Fine, then I’ll go and see the lions.”

“Give them my best wishes.”

“The lions are sure to get a lot more than you...”

“...and they’ll leave even less than me.”

“Less is better than nothing.”

“Are you a sharecrow, eh?”

There it is again. Bear wit! Still not friendly, but a bit less angry than before.

“Nah! I’m a throwcrow! So throw some food into my beak!”

She laughs, but she is up against a furry brick wall. The bear chews and champs and chomps as if he hasn’t eaten for weeks. He gnaws the bones till they are bare, and he sucks every blob of gristle as if it were the last morsel of food in the world.

“Is that your final word?”

The bear hardly even hears her through the noise of his own crunching and munching, and he doesn’t want to hear her anyway, because he has no intention of sharing. Why should he? There sits the crow, young and free, trying to get something from a poor old prisoner locked up for life, when all she has to do is fly outside and hunt for herself. Those are the bear’s thoughts, and why should he ruin his appetite by even looking at her?

“So tell me, you bare-bone gristle-grinder, when you go running round in circles, where do you think you’re heading? I see you from up in the sky, and I ask myself: Why does he spend the whole day marking out eggs in the sand? Is it a signal? Send me an omelette? Will it soon be Easter? Ah, I know what it is. It’s egg as in *ego*! Egotistic, egocentric, egomania. Share my food? Ova my dead body!”

“WRONG! There is no egg! I am a well rounded bear. When I choose, I walk around, stand around, or lie around. It’s called freedom of choice. AND I CHOOSE NOT TO SHARE MY BREAKFAST AROUND!”

That simply has to be that. Surely even the stupidest crow will get the message. But the crow is not stupid. She just pretends that she hasn’t heard.

“I went home on foot and had a hot bath. Then a masseur came and put everything back in place. When I land, it still hurts a little – here, you see, just here it hurts, but I’ll be OK.”

The crow spreads her wings, takes off lightly, glides into the enclosure and lands a few paces away from the bear.

“Um...will there be any leftovers?”

“That’s it! Get out! WILL YOU GET OUT OF HERE!!”

The bear roars, the crow caws and flies away as fast as a bone breaking in the jaws of a bear.

“But we’ll meet again. We’ll meet again.”

The bear growls and hopes they will never meet again. He kicks the now empty bucket, and then starts out on his morning walk – tracing the old circles with renewed strength.

Dreams

After uneventful days, the bear dreams uneventful dreams. After uneventful days, the crow goes on flying at night. If you’re hungry, you can’t sleep, and so crows are very familiar with all the noises of the night. The violins of the crickets try to seduce the girls, frogs croak their pious prayers and hope that all storks will suffer nasty diseases of the throat. And there’s another sound that crows particularly like to hear.

“I love the zoo at night. It’s paradise in the dark. The bear snores in and out, to the accompaniment of the crickets by the pool. And oh...there are the remains from the breakfast bucket. I’ll go get ‘em.”

She takes off and lands in the sand.

The bear is dreaming, and he suddenly starts to speak:

“Little crow, don’t go...Please don’t go, little crow...”

The crow freezes and stares at the bear. His eyes are closed. He is talking in his sleep.

“I’ll give you a towel, little crow. Do you hear? Dry yourself before the dogs come...Crow! You must fly away before they catch you. What use is a bird that can’t fly? Fly away, little crow, fly to freedom. Freedom...”

The bear quietens down, and starts snoring again.

“Did he mean me? How many crows does he know? Hey, teddy bear, did you mean me?”

The crow is not quite sure, but she would like to believe it.

“I think he meant me.”

For a moment she even manages to forget about the bucket as she gazes at the bear.

“All animals are beautiful when they’re asleep. As beautiful as children. The fact is, you’re a good bear, and it’s not true what these little earthlings say about you: bears only love themselves and would rather burst than share. They say bears are the stupidest creatures, and they’ll find the gateway to heaven is shut because they don’t believe in anything except the next breakfast.”

The heavy, sleepy bear turns over, and between his great teeth drips a long thread of saliva.

“Just don’t let that spit out. Dream something nice about me again...It’s lovely when someone thinks of you, and cares about you.”

The bear’s paws twitch, and he goes on dreaming:

“The doorbell’s ringing! I must open the door, but I can’t because I live in a house without doors...! What are these people doing in my room? They’re coming towards me. What do they want? They say I must move – they say I should be happy – they say that anyone as lucky as me should dance...! But I don’t want to dance and I don’t want to see any people. I only want to see the crow. She was funny, a bird full of clever ideas...Oh, if only the crow would come again. I could laugh with her, and I could dance with her...laugh and dance, dance and laugh...”

And then the curtain falls on the bear’s secret dreamland, and he snores as loudly and as wordlessly as only a bear can do. But the crow has heard something incredible, and now she is the proud possessor of a mission.

“Laugh? With me? You know something, you fat brute? Sometimes dreams come true.”

The Fortune Teller

Days begin early in the zoo. Keys open locks, chains are set free, and the great gate opens. A class of schoolchildren enters and scatters according to personal preferences. Monkeys, elephants, penguins all have their fans and become objects of attention. Even the crow is among the early risers and quickly seeks out her favourite animal.

“Ding dong!”

A few stray sheepish clouds give promise of a fine sunny day. Everyone is awake and moving around – except the bear.

“Ding dong! Ding dong! Ding dong! Ding dong!”

One bear eye opens halfway.

“What...what d’you want?”

“To wake you up.”

“Mission accomplished.”

The crow comes straight to the point.

“Thank you,” she says, without actually looking at the bear. “Thank you for saving me. It wasn’t the obvious thing to do. Not for anyone. And certainly not for a bear...Are you listening? I’m saying thank you! If someone had been filming us we’d be Internet heroes now...Don’t you understand? You’re a bear and I’m a crow. You rescued me. For no reason at all! Think about it! We’re rival predators!”

The rival predator swallows a large lump of meat and licks his snout with his blue tongue. Then he takes a deep breath, opens his mouth and lets out such a huge belch that the lions, baboons and hyenas can all smell what he is having for breakfast. Then he puts the bucket on his stomach and eats with both paws as if this were the last meal before the winter break.

“We’re not rival predators. I eat, and you watch.”

“But we’re not the same species. You reached into the cold water...”

“The water wasn’t cold.”

“...and pulled me out. Like a brother, a friend, a...

She hops one step nearer.

“...lover.”

The bear splutters, coughs and wheezes. **Lover?** He almost vomits with disgust.

When he has finally calmed down after the shock of this undesirable intimacy, he starts eating again, and ventures a sideways glance at the crow. Now that she’s dry and properly groomed, she doesn’t look nearly as ugly as before.

“I just wanted to say thank you. So, thank you...”

“OK.”

It’s all right if she just wants to say thank you, and he doesn’t want to seem rude.

“OK.”

“Please can I have some of that meat?”

“So long as you don’t fall in the water,” sighs the bear to his own surprise.

“Oh come on, we crows are fast learners.”

“Good.”

“Good yes or good no?”

“What will you give me in exchange?”

“Hmm, I’ll fly into the sky and tell you your future.”

“Fly, then.”

“*Jump into the garbage while it’s still warm*” is an old crow proverb, and so the crow immediately flies into the sky. She doesn’t take long, and the bear can’t help admiring her technique. Strong and graceful, swift and sure, she seems serene. But it just doesn’t go with her non-stop chattering beak, thinks the bear.

“Well, what can you see?” he shouts.

“I can see a town full of houses. A river.

Two shores joined together by a bridge. I can see trains going in all directions, and buses full of people – probably coming to the zoo to see a bear.”

“What else?”

“Nothing else.”

“Can you see a way out for me?”

“No. There’s no way out.”

“OK. Come back down – you can have the bone.”

“All of it?”

“Can you manage with just half?”

“I’d prefer to have it all. Is there much meat on it?”

“Half a leg.”

“You’re my hero!”

This time the crow does not miss her target. She grabs the bone as she flies past it, and races away with her beak full.

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

And then she’s gone. She knows a thick bush behind the tapir enclosure. It’s a secret hiding place. There she can eat her fill without being disturbed. No one sees her land, and she sets to work closing the jaws of the hunger monster down in her stomach. It really is a wonderful meaty bone, and she can hardly believe her luck. She reckons she deserves it, though.

The bear is still looking up at the sky, and he has no idea whether the crow will ever come back. He has never shared anything before in his entire life.

“If she had lied, I’d have twisted her neck. But she told the truth, and no one should be angry at being told the truth.”

The Wall

The crow doesn't come again. Not for a whole week. It is the longest week in the bear's life. It's as if the walls of his enclosure are growing higher and higher. When he raises his nose in the air or strains his ears in the hope of hearing a crow approaching, he finds himself looking into a tunnel of black light. He only walks in semi-circles now, and can find no escape from his melancholy.

"Well, how are you?"

"This must be a daydream," thinks the bear, but he answers as if he has never missed the crow.

"What does it look like?"

He could have said: "Oh, how nice to see you again!" But unlike the crow, the bear doesn't dare to tell the truth.

"You stand against a wall and feel helpless."

"And what's on your mind today?"

"Hunger?"

"Anything else that's new?"

"Yes, they fed the giraffe to the lions."

"MARIUS?!"

The bear knows Marius.

When he stood on the highest rock, they could see one another and would exchange greetings. They had never spoken. But the giraffe knew the simplest rules about good manners and would give him a friendly nod. Animals in the zoo, following their daily route to nowhere. Always going in circles.

Sometimes the bear and the giraffe would greet each other two hundred times a day.

The bear liked Marius.

"Why did they do that? Was he ill?"

"No idea. But he was certainly dead before the lions had him."

"Why did they do it?"

"Maybe he'd been staring too long at the wall."

The bear turns to the crow.

"At least the lions didn't have to kill him."

The crow laughs.

"What's the matter with all of you? No desire to hunt? To lie there waiting, baking in the sun for hours, sharpening your claws and teeth...And then at last putting out the light of a living, bleeding fellow creature. Aaaaaargh! Ha ha ha!"

The crow acts out a brilliant piece of theatre. A lion hunt.

No text – just using her body. She mimes the whole thing, and it really looks as if she is killing and eating a whole zebra with her beak. Then she pecks and hacks little stones to death, and uses her talons to scratch secret signs in the dust.

When at last she finishes, the bear purses his lips and asks: “Did you get anything?”

“From the lions? No.”

“So that’s why you’re here...”

“Because I’m hungry and nobody will treat me to giraffe and chips.”

“Nothing for you to crow about then!”

Now the bear laughs.

“And you? Why are you here?”

“Because every walk finishes after seven steps. A polar bear can cover a hundred kilometres in a day, but I wouldn’t do that in an entire lifetime.”

“Can’t you fly?”

“Can you swim?”

“I could build a boat for myself. We crows are clever. When we find a hard bread roll, we dip it in a puddle.”

“Show me the puddle that can soften a wall.”

“Your walls are paradise. Have you never thought about it? Three meals a day, a large pool, and a wall to protect you from lions.”

“I’m not afraid of lions.”

“The wall also protects you from elephants.”

“It doesn’t protect me from crows.”

The bear walks a circle. He exchanges the work of pointless standing for the work of pointless walking.

“Do you still want your food?”

“No!”

“Can I have it?”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ve only come here to get at my food.”

“But all I want is a piece of bread.”

“It hasn’t gone hard yet. Come back when you want to talk to me.”

“OK. And then I’ll get...”

“Come for my sake!”

“All right, then. I’ll come for my sake and for your sake.”

“And bring a puddle for the wall.”

“Was that a joke?”

The bear grins.

It was a good joke, and he’s pleased at the crow’s expression.

“OK. I’ll laugh as soon as I understand it. Got to go now. Hunger gives you wings...See you tomorrow!”

The crow flies away.

The bear stays behind.

He is not staring at the wall.

He watches the crow flying away.

And he smiles.

“OK...See you tomorrow...”
