

Translated excerpt

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Der Trost runder Dinge

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The Solace of Round Things

Translated by Ross Benjamin



Across the yard of Eduard Osbick Elementary School, past the large white bird statue, walked a small man. The low evening sun cast his shadow out at his feet, an elongated caricature of his body as a man on stilts. He held his umbrella in front of him like a bouquet of flowers. As he neared the school building and raised his head, the principal took a step back from the window.

Since the evenings were now getting somewhat colder but the heat wasn't on yet in the building, she had put on her jacket. This morning on her bike ride to work the air had already smelled like autumn, the earthbound scent of acorns and leaves. But all the foliage still hung from the trees, and the rush of wind as she rode was warm. A factory had burned down a few days ago, there were extensive detours, and Venus and Mars were in conjunction.

Before long there was a knock at her door. Michaela came in and said the name of her guest. The last of the three *laggards* who had been scheduled for this afternoon. He was forty-five minutes late.

They shook hands. A whiff of mushrooms wafted toward her. Herr Preissner was sweating.

"Thank you for actually..." the principal said, inviting him to take a seat.

"No problem," said Herr Preissner.

"Almost all the other parents came yesterday evening, but in this special case we have decided to really offer everyone the opportunity, and..."

Herr Preissner sneezed.

"Excuse me," he said.

He put his umbrella down on the floor next to him. What she had taken for the smell of mushrooms might have been the inside of a new car, the principal thought.

"Well, all right," she said. "You know, of course, what this is about."

He nodded. “The picture.”

“Right,” said the principal. “In our first letter to parents—and it’s very important to me to say this to every parent personally—our tone was somewhat too accusatory. We didn’t realize that until it was too late, and for this I’d like to sincerely apologize to you. And to your wife.”

“Oh, okay,” Herr Preissner said with a friendly nod. It didn’t seem to take much for him to remain calm.

“Great,” said the principal. “Well, for us it would be very desirable not to leave many questions unanswered at the end of this. And right at the outset let me assure you that, needless to say, it’s up to you what you purchase and what you don’t. But you did, that is, your wife did, I think...”

She handed him a piece of paper. His eyebrows didn’t rise as he read through it. Only at one line did he briefly use his index finger as an aid, also moving his face a little closer to the paper, but apart from that he showed no reaction.

“You’re right, my wife did put her name down here,” he said after studying the order list. “She takes care of the school stuff.”

“Aha. Well, you see, Herr Preissner, I know that you don’t want to be impolite and that’s why you’re...And please believe me, I’m grateful to you for it, really, some of the parents who were here before, they had quite a different...Well, okay, I understand that too. It’s simply an unfamiliar sight. A picture like this. Here.”

Even now, as she pushed the class picture toward him, he remained completely calm. At the edge of the picture, diligently airbrushed in by the photographer, floated the three-dimensional logo of Osbick Elementary: the lettering framed by two short wings.

“It’s about Daniel Grondl, isn’t it?” the principal asked in a friendly voice.

Her guest shook—somewhat too quickly, of course—his head. “No, no.”

“That’s not meant as a criticism, Herr Preissner.”

“We have our reasons,” he said. “It’s nothing against the poor kid there. The fact that he’s there in the picture too. I mean, I know it looks like I’m, like we’re...But the problem is, we just don’t want to purchase the picture, even though my wife put her name down on the order list at an earlier point in time. That’s all.”

“It’s fine, of course, if you don’t like the picture. But almost all the parents canceled their orders after they saw it. And yet you knew that Daniel would be in the picture.”

“Yes, of course.”

The principal turned the picture around. While contemplating it, she strove to make a face benevolently serious but not exaggeratedly tolerant. In this way she could signal that she was on an entirely equal footing with him and wasn’t planning any pedagogical tricks. She sensed this man was one of the good ones. Maybe she could get through to him on an interpersonal level.

“The apparatus,” she said, giving Herr Preissner a friendly look.

A faint reaction flitted across his face. “What about it?” he asked bravely.

“The apparatus is necessary. Without it Daniel would...”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Herr Preissner nodded as if he had heard all this many times before.

“I know that it’s an unfamiliar sight. But your Jessica, for example, she sees the apparatus every day. She learns to deal with such differences in everyday life. That’s what the integrated classrooms are for.”

“Certainly.”

The guest’s eyes wandered to the ceiling, but it was largely uninteresting and fresco-less, and so they soon returned to the heart of the unpleasant situation.

“Now, what I’m trying to say,” the principal said, “and please don’t take this as an attack...”

“It’s nothing against the boy,” Herr Preissner said impatiently. “We just don’t want the picture. An order list like that is not a contract.”

“Of course not. It’s only a nonbind...a binding...”

“Yes, I’m sorry,” he cut her off. “I know that you’ve gone to a lot of trouble with the photographer and so on. It’s nothing against Daniel.”

Herr Preissner’s mustache had an unusually large gap in the middle, lending his face a peaceable quality. The principal took pains not to stare the whole time at the hairless patch of skin directly over the indentation of his upper lip. But like a cat’s bellybutton, the spot radiated the strange attraction of a vanishing point.

“Does the apparatus frighten you?” she asked.

“Pardon me?” A perplexed face, though feigned and with the wrong life span.

“That’s quite natural,” said the principal.

“No, it doesn’t frighten us.”

His voice now sounded somewhat different, more masculine and controlled. A slight change of style, a hesitant turn toward growing impatient.

“It frightened me the first time I saw it,” the principal said calmly. “I can still remember clearly. For a moment you can’t imagine that the apparatus contains a child, who needs it to stay al—”

“It’s not that,” Herr Preissner said in a tone that was now—a clear sign of progress and possibly the first small breakthrough—slightly worn down. “It’s just...I know how this is going to sound now, okay?”

The principal made a silent, understanding *Go-ahead*-gesture. Her guest breathed deeply in and out.

“There is, in my opinion, a line,” he said, slowly cutting with the side of his hand into the wood of the desk. “There’s some boundary between a still-somehow-recognizable human form and...Ah, okay, you see? Now I sound, now you think I’m a...”

The principal held up her hands. “No, no. I’m not here to pass...”

“But you’re doing it, of course.”

“No,” she said gently. “Please go on.”

Herr Preissner rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair. “I know,” he said, “that it’s relatively easy for you to abstract from the circumstances here. That goes with your profession. You see this thing here and think to yourself: Okay, it contains...somehow...a child, who can participate in class too, as long as he’s in there and as long as you don’t switch the thing—Ah, you see? Now you’re looking at me like that.”

“I’m not, Herr Preissner.”

“For you it’s easy. You probably see things like that every day. You can handle it. But I just can’t quite manage to. It makes me queasy—sorry to be so blunt. You’re constantly asking yourself: Where does it end?”

He fell silent. She could tell by looking at him that he felt defeated. He had entered her office fully expecting to emerge the victor from this conversation.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Where the human...The form, the...Two arms and legs, a face...I mean, this here can’t even make eye contact, it looks like an electrical outlet!”

There was an uncomfortable pause.

“I know exactly what you mean,” said the principal. She strove to keep the tone of her voice free of all blame. He was already floundering; she had to proceed delicately.

“The thing gives you nightmares.”

Now he was going a bit too far, she thought. But he was beginning to feel free. Perhaps it was time to step up her strategy a little.

“And what does your Jessica think?” she asked. “Wouldn’t a class picture make *her* happy?”

Herr Preissner seemed to honestly have to ponder this question.

“Well,” he said, “you know how it is at that age. Girls in general. They always think they’re too thin, too fat—it starts really early. She would never hang a picture of herself in her room. Anyway, her walls are already completely covered with all sorts of...”

Interesting, thought the principal, how he immediately restricted himself to that scenario: in *her* room. Not in the apartment, in the dining room or anywhere else, no, if his daughter wanted the picture, it would also hang in her bedroom. Still, she told herself: He’s one of the good ones.

“I understand where you’re coming from,” she said.

“Were you there that time on the class trip?” Herr Preissner asked suddenly.

Oh, that whole thing. The principal nearly rolled her eyes. But she controlled herself. “No. Which class trip do you mean?”

“I mean, I wasn’t there myself either,” said Herr Preissner. “My wife told me about it. She said the moment when the whole contraption...the apparatus rolled down the hill, vibrating more and more, like...like those videos of washing machines that are in the middle of the spin cycle and someone throws a brick in the drum, so that it...Have you seen those videos?”

“No.”

“They’re everywhere on the Internet right now, crazy stuff. This total chaos, well, you know what I mean, this rapid rotation and then this tiny tangle of little wires in the grass. My wife said it looked like a refrigerator had exploded. Down the whole hill. And then of course the support teacher...”

“Frau Triegler,” said the principal, half out of pleasure in completion, half out of the necessity of to some extent stemming the flow of Herr Preissner’s speech. His cheeks were flushed, making him look young. Young and afraid. But he still wasn’t ready.

“Triegler, right,” said Herr Preissner, “the teacher who then ran to him with her tools and gathered up all the parts, and then that screaming, the shell, the shell...I don’t remember exactly. In any case those terrible seconds when everything is lying scattered, and everyone is watching. My wife was really distraught that day, you know? But Jessica said it happens every so often.”

“Pardon me?”

“Not in such a spectacular fashion, of course,” said Herr Preissner, “but little things, sometimes a piece breaks off, or a wire stops working. It often smells of burnt rubber, my daughter...”

“Herr Preissner, I can assure you that...”

“No, I don’t mean at all that you’re doing anything wrong, I...Oh God, this is all so hard. There’s simply a line, okay? That’s what I meant. That’s all I wanted to say. There’s a line. And when it is crossed...”

“Yes, you said that already.”

“I just mean,” said Herr Preissner. “To say that’s still a child...”

Now these bitter words too had been spoken. How often had she heard them over the past few days? This mantra that was apparently repeated in the parents’ heads each day when they

picked up their kids from school and saw the ramp and the modified Grondl family car, then the rickety contraption, supported by a cluster of springy PeriBalls, being pushed up the ramp and the children waving their heartiest goodbye to the contraption. Unprejudiced little creatures, future of humanity. And the monstrous, roughly egg-shaped vehicle for a wretched being they accepted as one of their own.

“What sort of parents build such a thing?”

“Herr Preissner, please.” The principal raised a hand.

She wanted to spare him from steering the conversation in this direction.

“No,” he said, and his face was sincere and sad, “I really would like to know. What sort of parents do such a thing to their child? There’s a line, isn’t there? At some point life ends, doesn’t go on. Someday all of us must...I mean, you know how it is...”

“Yes.”

“Would you do that to your children? Build such a thing and control it remotely from home?”

“I don’t have children.”

“Even so,” he insisted. “Would you?”

“Herr Preissner, I don’t think it’s my place to condemn the decisions of other parents, just because they’re not my own.”

“So that means you wouldn’t do it?”

“I didn’t say that,” she replied as gently as possible.

“I wouldn’t either.” Herr Preissner shook his head firmly. “I could give it to you in writing right here and right now. That thing, that weird box is something I would never...I mean, once I can’t even tuck it in at night, then it’s not a child anymore.”

He broke off. Red blotches on his cheeks. The pitifully hairless patch over his upper lip. Downcast eyes. He must have suddenly realized that he had gone too far. This was the moment for her to act, the brief window of his guilty conscience was open, and without further ado she could now get him to purchase the class picture after all. But unlike when she'd had other opportunities the past few days, this time the principal hesitated, and for some reason a small weather vane, which could be made out on a the roof of a distant house, fleetingly caught her eye. A filigree object whose job it was to turn toward the wind and give the neighborhood pleasure with its familiar creak. She thought of autumn days, brownish red leaves in the driveway. Tucking in, at night.

“Sorry,” she said. “What did you say?”

“Oh, nothing,” said Herr Preissner. “Didn’t mean it like that. Right off, it all sounds so…”

“No, no,” she said. “You said: When you can’t tuck it in, then it’s not a child anymore, right?”

Herr Preissner stared at her. He felt ashamed and didn’t know how to make up for the faux pas.

“May I ask what gives you that idea?”

“What?”

“How do you know that at night he’s not...I mean, are you just assuming, or…”

Herr Preissner hunched his shoulders, looked away. “Maybe my daughter mentioned something along those lines.”

“What?”

He gave a dismissive wave of his hand. “Ah, no clue. You know, of course, behind others’ backs kids can sometimes say cruel...” He cleared his throat.

“What are you talking about?”

“Well. The garage thing.”

“I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

“Really?” Herr Preissner seemed surprised. There was even something slightly accusatory in his look, as if he just couldn’t conceal his astonishment that she knew so little about the private lives of her own students.

“A bed,” he began cautiously, “is, well, so to speak, no longer necessary.”

“You mean for Daniel?”

“Yes,” said Herr Preissner. “After all, he doesn’t have to...So he can be...”

He hinted at the rest of the sentence by making an oddly rectangular drawer-closing gesture.

“Now, I don’t know what everyday domestic life looks like in such a special case,” said the principal, “but...”

“We just don’t want the picture,” said Herr Preissner. “Can’t we leave it at that?”

It was a sort of peace offering. The principal felt she had missed her chance. The image of a dark garage now passed through her mind, cool and ominous, and goose bumps announced themselves, but, thank God, remained just under the surface. The need to open the window, however, all at once became very strong.

“Have you ever actually seen Daniel?” asked Herr Preissner.

“Of course. What do you mean?”

“I mean, can you open it, or...”

“Herr Preissner, now that’s somewhat tasteless, don’t you think?”

“No,” he said, and his face had a disconcerting honesty and transparency. “I mean, it’s a legitimate question. Yes, during the nativity play the thing played a Christmas tune in the middle of the stage, and his parents bawled horribly, but…”

“He interacts,” the principal said, imbuing her voice with an impatient tutoring tone. “That’s all that matters. You can work with him. He takes part in life, in his way.”

“So does a hydrant,” said Herr Preissner.

Before she had time to react to this disturbing sentence, he had picked up his umbrella from the floor. He didn’t look at her but pretended he was brushing a few invisible specks of dust from the webbed skin.

“I would say we should consider ourselves lucky,” the principal said, “that we have no concept of that pain. To nearly lose a child completely is not something that normal people like you or I can so easily imagine.”

He still didn’t look at her. But the red blotches had vanished from his face.

“We know nothing about it,” she went on. “We have no concept of such pain and also no concept of the relief that…We know only everyday life, where everything functions, where everyone is always healthy.”

“My daughter has asthma,” said Herr Preissner.

“Yes, she has, of course, she has…”

The principal pretended she had an unpleasant tickle in her throat and had to cough, but she had a hard time covering up the sudden irrepressible flare-up of laughter in her. Herr Preissner wasn’t laughing. The principal felt pierced through. By a clothesline stretching between Venus and Mars. She coughed into her fist.

“Excuse me,” she said, taking a sip from the glass that had been standing untouched in front of her the whole time.

“For a moment,” Herr Preissner said to his umbrella, “you almost convinced me, really.”

She waited a little while before she replied. “It was never my intention to convince you, Herr Preissner.”

“No,” he said, standing up.

The principal stood up too, sighed, and, as if she had gotten her hands dirty from the conversation, wiped them off on her sleeves. But Herr Preissner interpreted this as a gesture of shivering.

“Yes,” he said, “it’s starting to get cold. A noticeable drop in temperature.”

“We all feel it,” she said.

“Not all of us,” said Herr Preissner, looking at her.

Then his hand was coming toward her. It was warm, and the handshake was firm, almost affectionate.