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Mission Kolomoro oder: Opa in der Plastiktüte

Mission Kolomoro, or: Grandpa in the Plastic Bag

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A story full of diversity set in urban Berlin

At the start of the October half term, six children have a chance encounter outside a supermarket. There's Katja, who has had a row with her dads. Polina, who only wanted to buy some baking powder. Fridi, Mustafa and Zeck. And Jennifer, who is accompanied by her miniature Pinscher and who is also carrying her grandpa's ashes in a plastic bag. When Mustafa tricks a biker in the car park, the children have to leg it. They have no phones and next to no money. But they do have an important mission: Jennifer's grandpa has to be laid to rest in Kolomoro. But how's that going to happen, when nobody has a clue where Kolomoro is?

- Winner of the first Kirsten Boie Prize for Children's Literature, awarded by the Hamburg Literature Foundation
- Delightful and warm-hearted - similar in style to Kirsten Boie or Erich Kästner

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A miserable morning

"I DIDN'T EAT THE STUPID CHOCOLATE KISSES!"

Katja Pfeiffer, big green specs and ponytail, is standing on one side. Dad is standing on the other. Between Dad and Katja stands the kitchen table. On the kitchen table stands a packet of ten chocolate kisses.

Dad points to the open packet.

"So why are there three missing? They can't just have walked off by themselves." As he speaks, his voice gets louder. Little globules of saliva fly out of his mouth, and a few of them land on the white table top.

Katja shrugs her shoulders. "Dunno."

Dad gives her a stern look. "Well, I didn't eat the chocolate kisses, and Tatusch is still asleep, and in any case he's not keen on stuff like that."

"No idea. Maybe a rat came and gobbled them up."

"Stop all this nonsense!" shouts Dad, and a veritable shower of spit pours down on the table. His face is bright red. The little veins in his neck are throbbing with anger. "And all this even before breakfast!"

Now Katja Pfeiffer has had enough. What have the missing chocolates got to do with her? She turns on her heel and storms out. Dad doesn't try to stop her.

In the hall she meets Tatusch. He's tired and smells of vanilla air freshener. His crinkly black curls stand out wildly round his head. He's just spent another night taxi-driving, because at the moment his art work is not selling too well. "Can you perhaps shout a little more quietly?" he asks with a yawn.

"No, I can't!" yells Katja, slips her shoes on, grabs her jacket, stuffs a few crayons in her pocket, and storms out of the flat. She has to get away from here and from this totally unfair accusation that she's eaten a few chocolate kisses!

Katja slams the door and runs down the stairs. Then she suddenly stops. The whole of Katja Pfeiffer stops and senses that there is something inside her that urgently needs to come out. She takes a crayon out of her left pocket. Ketchup red. It's exactly the same temperature as her trouser pocket. Immediately, energy shoots through her arm right down to her fingertips. She can feel an itching and a burning when she presses the crayon against the wall in the stairwell. It actually hisses, like sparks leaping from one place to another.

The crayon moves of its own accord. Her heart is racing. Her fingers are electric. In some places, the wall is a bit cracked and crumbly. She has to press harder, and tiny flakes of white plaster mingle in with the red. It doesn't matter. The rat's eyes flash. The nose sniffs. The legs and their claws twitch. For the body, she has to go down a step, then another, and then another. Now back up two steps to do the ears. And of course she needs to draw sharp incisors, nice and long and pointed. For the whiskers she has to stand on tiptoe. Then she goes down to the belly. It looks really fat – who knows what the rat might have inside it? Maybe three chocolate kisses. To do

the tail, Katja presses the crayon against the wall and jumps two steps down. Then she looks approvingly at the long tail, which hangs like a rope above the bottom stair.

One has to admit, this rat has character. There's a sort of flashing light in the eyes. Katja stands in front of the picture for a moment and waits. But nothing happens.

She sticks the stub of the crayon back in her pocket. At least she feels better now – in fact, a lot better.

It's a good thing that Katja Pfeiffer, the world's finest doodler, always keeps a few crayons in her pocket.

In the entrance hall there's a smell of potato crisps. Her stomach feels pretty empty. As she goes down the stairs, she thinks longingly of the packet of chocolate kisses on the table. After all, there are still a few left. Suddenly she stops.

Katja hesitates. She's actually a bit high up. Never mind. She jumps down the last six steps. The tiles are damp, her shoes slip from under her, and the next moment she lands fair and square on her bottom. And now there she sits, on the floor of the entrance hall. Of course, it's Monday today, and Frau Schleuss always washes the steps on a Monday. Dad is scared stiff of her. If Frau Schleuss discovers the giant rat when she washes the steps next week, there'll be trouble. Big trouble! But when all's said and done, it's Dad himself who's to blame. Katja heaves herself up. Anyway, there's nothing broken. Just her bottom feels a bit sore.

She opens the front door and wipes her hand on her trousers. The stink of the metal handle always sticks to the skin. Even if you only hold it for a split second. Her hand doesn't smell of the warm crayon anymore, but of dirty water, detergent, and door handle. What a miserable morning!

The front door creaks. Katja Pfeiffer blinks in the bright sunlight and she screws up her eyes.

Then she straightens her green glasses.

The next moment, her heart does a little leap: right opposite, in the supermarket car park, is Zeck.

Musti in trouble

Katja slips out of the door. Zeck's back – the rest of him is hidden by two enormous Dobermans – is dressed in an olive-green parka, for which the weather is actually too warm, but Zeck doesn't care about things like that. He has to wear his parka. And his cap. Can't do without them, he says. And peeping out from behind the green parka is Fridi. There's not much of him to be seen. Just occasionally a strand of blond hair or a bit of green T-shirt, depending on Zeck's movements. Zeck and Fridi are both in the same class as Katja. Fridi's actual name is Fridolin, but he doesn't like it very much. Katja can't remember Zeck's real name – and in any case Zeck says it's best to choose your own name yourself, and then you know who you are and nothing can go wrong. As Katja strolls across the road to join them, she looks up at the kitchen window. Of course Dad is standing there.

So at least she won't have to tell him where she is and who she's with.

“Hi,” says Katja.

“Nice to have holidays at last.”

Fridi and Zeck nod, but it’s obvious that their thoughts are elsewhere.

“My parents gave me money for my last maths result.” Zeck grins. “I’ve already spent two fifty, and now I want buy something with the rest, only I don’t know what, and Fridi here isn’t much help.”

Zeck pokes Fridi in the ribs. Fridi shrugs his shoulders, looking embarrassed.

“Maybe I can help you,” says Katja. “We’ll see.” She’s really great when it comes to spending money.

Zeck has precisely three euros fifty. Strangely enough, it’s really hard to decide what’s the best way to spend the money. Zeck’s in favour of two bags of chips, one definitely with onion rings, and a bottle of Coke. Fridi is keen to get chewing gum, Coca Cola crackers, center shocks and lemonade sticks. And naturally Katja Pfeiffer would like a packet of ten chocolate kisses.

Zeck says you always have to throw away half the lemonade sticks, because eventually your spit will make everything sticky and the fizzy powder turns into crumbly lumps. Whereas chips and Coke are nice and straightforward.

Fridi has to be home for lunch on time. He’s scared his mother will smell the onion rings, but Katja thinks that’s stupid, because she’s almost certain the smell won’t stay in the mouth for so many hours. The fact is, Fridi’s scared of anything and everything, including lunch itself. Today it’s broccoli pie with sheep’s cheese. And Fridi already knows he won’t be able to get even a spoonful of it down him. He doesn’t eat anything that’s green, apart from lemonade sticks and chewing gum.

It’s no good. On this glorious first day of the autumn break, each of them wants something different, and so negotiations grind to a halt. Actually, Fridi doesn’t really count anyway. To be honest, it all depends on Zeck and Katja.

Zeck gazes up at the sky. Katja takes a crayon out of her trouser pocket and draws a little rat on the asphalt. This time it’s Cola red. The rat seems to give her a little wink, as if it already knows what Katja doesn’t yet know. Or maybe she’s just imagining that.

The autumn sun is warm and mild. The wind is coming from the left. Whenever the wind comes from the left, the car park smells of vapours from the chocolate factory, slightly bitter with a hint of marzipan, and then you get a funny taste in your mouth. But above all you’re all the more eager to have something sweet.

Katja thinks about it. It’s Zeck’s money, and so Zeck can make the decision, whatever it is. That’s logical. Katja’s only chance is to arrange things so that all of them suddenly have an irresistible desire for chocolate kisses. Especially Zeck.

“When I think of that white filling,” she gushes, licking her lips with her tongue, “how sweet and foamy it is, and how it melts so stickily in your mouth, and that crunchy, crispy wafer underneath...”

Katja herself immediately feels an irresistible desire for chocolate kisses. But Zeck just glances sideways at her, with a frown on his forehead. Fridi doesn't understand a word. Damn. So obviously that hasn't worked.

Katja has another quick think. Just how is she going to get the others to do what she wants? Then a new idea flashes through her mind like a bolt of lightning. "Whoever manages to eat five chocolate kisses one after the other will get something from me!"

Katja Pfeiffer, what a crazy idea!

Especially because she need have no fears about the result. Fridi will manage one and a half at the most. Zeck three at the very most. But Katja will have no trouble at all swallowing five. Even six would probably be OK, and a seventh would certainly find its way down somehow.

Zeck looks at her rather suspiciously. "Depends what it is."

"I don't know yet – but something great!" Katja shrugs her shoulders.

"You can talk big," says Zeck, "and then afterwards it's nothing but two eggs again or a few trouser buttons. Nah, that won't work."

Once during a school trip to the zoo, Katja had in fact bet with Zeck on which of them would dare to be the first to pinch two euros out of the goldfish pond, and Zeck had won by a mile. Because while Katja had struggled and strained to stop herself from falling in, and had eventually only managed to get 20 cents – plus two wet sleeves as a bonus – Zeck had gone right in and picked up every one and two euro coin within reach.

"The prize has to be worth the risk," he'd said. "I'm not going to get myself soaking wet for two euros and a load of trouble."

On that occasion, Katja had paid her debt with two boiled eggs which Dad had given her as part of her packed lunch. Initially, Zeck had been annoyed, but luckily Zeck never stays angry for long, because generally he then gets a new idea. That time, too. He swapped the eggs for two bags of Chinese noodles from Mustafa, and then he swapped these for a BiFi roll from Simon. He actually ended up with a bar of chocolate and a Capri Sun, and gave half of each to Katja. "After all," he said with a grin, "they were your eggs."

After that, they'd taken the fished-out thirteen euros to Burger King and had some veggie burgers. Zeck was a vegetarian in those days.

Katja sighs. It's not going to be so easy this time.

Fridi is still standing there with hunched shoulders. He's obviously scared that his mother might be watching through the window. It's so warm that he's tied his jacket round his waist. He's wearing his Cookie Monster T-shirt again – the one with the furry blue face, stuffing a huge biscuit into its mouth. Above the face it says: I am a Cookie Monster. And underneath: I love biscuits.

Katja thinks about the situation. Dad certainly wouldn't like her hanging around the car park. Fortunately, however, his long-distance vision isn't very good.

Zeck is probably thinking about how his chips and Cola can come out on top. His feet are already wearing heavy winter shoes. His jacket is open, and the wind makes it flap like wings.

Katja needs to think it all through. Zeck is pretty clever. And in a very special way: if someone in the class has lost something and the teacher asks: "Do you know who this belongs to?" first he'll smell it, and then generally he'll know at once.

The last time it was a pullover belonging to Jennifer Klar. "Clear case of soft and cuddly and 1960s," said Zeck, and he was right.

Jennifer's mother drives a 196 bus, and whenever there's no one Jennifer can stay with, she accompanies her mother on her shift. She stays on the bus all night as it goes round the district, does her homework, eats chips, and listens to her MP3 Player. Of course her pullover smells of the 1960s. Although there's something else, too – not just the smell of bus and of fabric softener, but something extra.

Katja is a little envious of Jennifer Klar. She'd also like to spend the whole night going round the town, but although Tatusch drives a taxi, she's not allowed to travel even half an inch with him. "No way," says Tatusch. Katja sighs. At least one chocolate kiss wouldn't be bad at this moment.

At the rear of the car park is Mustafa. He wanders slowly across, head down. He's swishing his trainers through the dust, maybe kicking something in front of him – it's hard to tell exactly what. When he sees them, he heads towards them. He's wearing his Juventus-Turin jersey, which is a bit small for him and is tight across his chest. He's No. 7, Ronaldo.

"Hi, Ronaldo." Zeck grins. Generally Mustafa likes being called Ronaldo, but not today.

"What's the matter?" asks Katja.

"Shit's the matter," says Mustafa. "I've just killed our budgie."

The children look at him wide-eyed. "But hell, it was pure accident!" says Mustafa, when he sees their horrified expressions. "I only wanted to hold him for a bit, sort of stroke him, then he bit me with his beak right through the skin. I was so shocked, I swear, I just squeezed him a little."

Mustafa pauses and stands there, shoulders drooping.

"It was nothing big," he says after a while. "I didn't press hard, honestly. It's just that I'm so strong." He looks at all of them. Fridi swallows so hard that they can all hear it.

"It was just a budgie," says Zeck, putting his hand on Mustafa's shoulder.

"Yeah, man, but my Anne will kill me." Mustafa looks as if he really thinks this is possible.

"Not just for a little bird," says Katja comfortingly. She knows Mustafa's mother: she's short and tubby, like Mustafa, makes the most wonderful gozlemes in the world, and insists that the first thing any visitors must do is sit down and eat them.

Musti scratches around in the dust with his trainers. "Everything was OK at first. Such a sweet little bird, really cute, but he never did anything all day. Too boring for me. And so loud, I swear.

He woke me up every morning. And left his muck everywhere – little feathers and so on. But my mother always petted him, peeled potatoes and veg next to him, talked to him, fed him, and she even built him a special little house to bathe in and was even more delighted than he was when he flew in there. I'll swear she loves him more than she loves me."

Zeck and Katja both start to laugh.

Fridi is a bit scared of the strong Mustafa, who can now quite accidentally squash birds to death, and so he thinks it's best not to laugh.

With his small but well padded hand and chewed fingernails, Mustafa brushes his thick black hair off his forehead.

"I'll swear I'm as good as dead," he murmurs, "but how was I to know that he had no resistance, that he'd drop dead at the slightest touch?" Mustafa puts his hand in the pocket of his jogging trousers, and the children stare goggle-eyed at the thing lying between his fingers when he takes his hand out again: a turquoise blue budgerigar.

Zeck is the first to regain his power of speech. "Are you crazy? Why are you dragging the dead bird around with you?"

Mustafa lowers his eyes to look at the budgie. "I didn't know what to do with him! I was so scared that my mother would come in and see him, so I stuffed him in my pocket and told her I was going downstairs. I said I was going to look at TV, watch Monster Trucks, or have a little gamble, play Play Station." He strokes the blue feathers with one finger. "I couldn't just chuck him in the rubbish bin."

They can all understand that.

"No," says Katja, "you couldn't do that."

"Course you couldn't." Zeck nods. "You did the right thing to bring him with you."

"Has he got a name?" asks Katja.

Mustafa shakes his head. "He's just called Bird."

Katja takes a handkerchief out of her jacket and smooths it out. "You can wrap him in this," she says.

Mustafa nods and rather clumsily wraps the bird in the handkerchief. "Why did you hurt me?" he asks quietly. "Oh God, you could still be alive." Then he adds with a sigh: "And me, too."

They stand next to one another and look at the little white bundle, from which only the claws are now visible underneath. Musti groans. "I swear I'm going to get into BIG trouble because of you."