

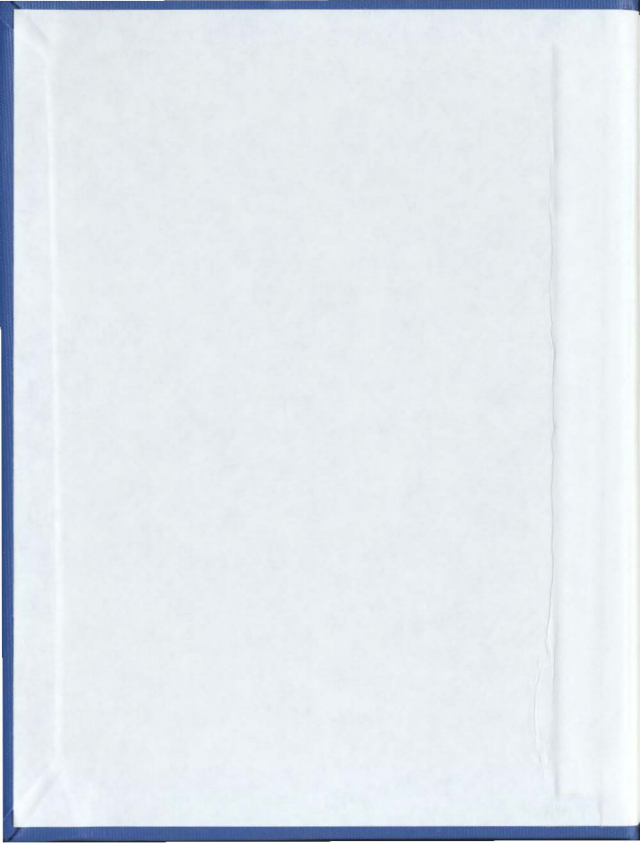
A TRANSLATION OF BARBARA FRISCHMUTH'S
DIE FERIEFAMILIE WITH PREFACE

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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MARIE A. STAMP



A TRANSLATION OF
BARBARA FRISCHMUTH'S DIE FERIENFAMILIE
WITH PREFACE

BY

© MARIE A. STAMP

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the School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
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ABSTRACT

This paper elucidates the narrative technique of the contemporary Austrian writer, Barbara Frischmuth, in the context of what it means to her to be a woman and a writer. Through a brief biographical sketch and inferences drawn from the author's personal statements, Frischmuth's world view is shown to be essentially ironic. The literary analysis centres on the use of irony in narration, with particular emphasis on two short works: Die Ferienfamilie and Die Klosterschule.

This analysis of Frischmuth's technique supports my suggestion that an effective reading of her work requires a willingness on the part of the reader to accept ambiguity and uncertainty in the text itself. The author invites the reader to adopt a sceptical attitude to the text, to challenge and explore the possibilities of meaning inherent in the very language she employs.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	page
ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR	
1.1 Childhood	3
1.2 Adulthood	5
1.3 The Writer: Barbara Frischmuth and Women's Literature	9
CHAPTER 2: IRONY IN FRISCHMUTH'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE	
2.1 Definition	16
2.2 Frischmuth and Narrative Irony	20
2.3 Irony in Women's Writing	25
2.4 Narrative Irony in <u>Die Klosterschule</u> and <u>Die Ferienfamilie</u>	27
CONCLUSIONS: A SUGGESTED READING	42
NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION	45
BIBLIOGRAPHY	48
 <u>A FAMILY VACATION: ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF <u>DIE FERIEINFAMILIE</u></u>	

FIGURES

	page
Figure 1: Structure of Ironies in <u>Die Klosterschule</u>	31
Figure 2: Structure of Ironies in <u>Die Ferienfamilie</u>	40

INTRODUCTION

Barbara Frischmuth made her literary debut in the midst of the turmoil of 1968. Her writing has assimilated the influence of that experimental period for young artists, and her career has continued to flourish throughout the upheavals of the last three decades. In the face of so much change, the author has nevertheless remained aloof from political movements and literary streams. She resists any label, preferring to maintain her independence and integrity. This distance does not necessarily bespeak a conservative stance. The author views political traditions and social conventions with an incisive scepticism. Her natural inquisitiveness, her independent intellect and her love of language are at the heart of a writing style most notable for its ambiguity, and it is her use of narrative irony that will provide the focus for an analysis of her technique.

This paper will first establish a context for the reading of Frischmuth's texts in her life experiences and in an overall discussion of women's writing. The term narrative irony will be defined and the usefulness of this technique will be considered. Examples from Die Ferienfamilie and Die Klosterschule will be used to

demonstrate the writer's methods. Inferences as to the author's intentions will be drawn from her own remarks, given in interviews for publication. In conclusion, a suggested reading of Barbara Frischmuth will be offered, supported by the foregoing analysis.

The scarcity and limited availability of critical secondary sources dictate a narrow sample of Frischmuth's work for the purposes of this paper. The two short works chosen are nonetheless well-suited to the scope of this study, as they each afford adequate examples of multiple narrative perspectives, and as they each demonstrate the manner in which Frischmuth allows herself to approach controversial issues, using irony, without revealing her personal point of view or compromising her independence.

CHAPTER 1: PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR

1.1 Childhood

Barbara Frischmuth was born in 1941 in Altaussee, Austria, and her childhood was marked by World War II: her father was in action when she was born, and was killed in Russia a year later. Throughout the war years her mother struggled to carry on the family business — a small lake-side hotel. There was little time for mother and daughter to share, and the child was raised by a series of nursemaids. The young girl became accustomed to the image of her mother as a distant but authoritative figure, and later attributed her practical brand of feminism to her mother's example (Serke, 181-182).

Sie hat mir Selbstbewußtsein gegeben. Das Selbstbewußtsein, daß die Frau alles kann. Es ist nur eine Frage des Wollens. (Gürtler, 92)

She soon discovered writing as a way of filling up the lonely space around her. When asked how she came to write, she answers quite plainly,

Ich bin schon als Kind dazu gekommen. Wie, weiß ich nicht. Ich habe schreiben wollen und auch schon als Kind geschrieben. Ich hatte das immer im Kopf... (Lorenz, "Ein Interview", 23)

Later in life she would seemingly compensate for the isolation of those lost years in a series of works for and about children, works that draw on her own ambivalent

experience of childhood. The clash between childhood innocence and the mundane preoccupations of the adult world is a recurring theme for Frischmuth, and is poignantly depicted in Die Ferienfamilie.¹

Between the ages of 10 and 14, the author attended a Catholic girls' boarding school in Gmunden. This experience provided the inspiration for her first novel, Die Klosterschule, which appeared in 1968. In 1958 she moved to Graz, where she studied Turkish and Hungarian, along with some English and Italian at the Dolmetsch-Institut of the university there. Her favourite children's book, The Arabian Nights (Serke, 1955), is an indicator of her deep-rooted curiosity about mysterious lands and languages. She earned a stipend for a year's study in Turkey in 1961 (Serke, 187), and this exotic experience provides the background for Das Verschwinden des Schattens in der Sonne, which appeared in 1973. Both Turkish and Hungarian characters are depicted with much cultural sensitivity in Über die Verhältnisse (1987).

¹Frischmuth has published several children's books, including Amoralische Kinderklapper (1959), Polsterer (1970), Die Prinzessin in der Zwirnspeule und andere Puppenspiele für Kinder (1972), and Grizzly Dickbauch und Frau Nuffl (1975).

1.2 Adulthood

The study of languages in Graz and her affiliation with the group of writers there known as *Forum Stadtpark*² strongly influenced Barbara Frischmuth's perspective on the writer's craft. The years in Graz brought the 20-year old Frischmuth in contact with many other precocious young authors of the time, including Peter Handke. She and Handke shared a close relationship, and there can be little doubt as to Handke's impact on Frischmuth's own regard for language. Handke's Publikumsbeschimpfung, a sort of experimental anti-play in which the audience is taunted and shouted at, achieved fame for him in 1966 (Glaser, 414). Handke's plays for voices are intended to draw attention to the world as it exists in the language we use, and to make us aware of the world we create in the way we speak:

... die Worte der Sprechstücke zeigen nicht auf die Welt als etwas außerhalb der Worte Liegendes, sondern auf die Welt in den Worten selber. Die Worte, aus denen die Sprechstücke bestehen, geben kein Bild von der Welt, sondern einen Begriff von der Welt. [...] Sie wollen nicht revolutionieren, sondern aufmerksam machen. (Handke, 525-526)

² Her literary career began with *Forum Stadtpark*, and in 1967 she read from her work at a meeting of the *Gruppe 47*, whose members included some of the most illustrious German-speaking writers of the day (Kaiser, 15).

The effect of this new view of language on Frischmuth was significant. Indeed, this was an important time of awakening for the young woman, who even began to see her previous convent school experience differently. She admits that while she was in the convent boarding school which was later to serve as the setting for Die Klosterschule, it had not occurred to her how language was being used to impose values and to keep the girls from thinking for themselves. She says, "als ich selbst dort war, sind mir die Zwänge überhaupt nicht bewußt gewesen" (Sauter, "Ein Interview"). This realization came ten years later, when she had awakened to the challenge put forth by the literary friends she made in Graz. She admits:

Der Zweifel an der Sprache und damit ein Verlust ihrer Verbindlichkeit griff, einmal ausgebrochen, um sich wie eine epidemische Krankheit. Ich erfuhr ihn auf zweierlei Weise, auf der einen Seite durch die Lektüre und die in den sechziger Jahren herrschende Stimmung in der Literatur, durch die Arbeiten der Kollegen im Forum Stadtpark[...]. Andererseits erlernte ich das Zweifeln in der Praxis während meiner Sprachstudiums. (Janetzki, 2)

Another study year abroad, this time in Hungary in 1963, brought her face to face with the practical reality of socialism. She shows no enthusiasm for socialist doctrines as a result of this stay. Instead, her political statements

reflect her independent nature, and abhorrence of restrictive partisan ideology:

Was mich aufregt an den militanten Vertretern einer marxistischen Theorie, ist, von den anderen die Veränderungen in ihrem Sinne zu verlangen und sie mit Gewalt zu erzwingen, die diese vorgeblichen Sozialisten selbst als veränderungsunfähig und veränderungsunwillig enthüllt. (Serke, 186)

Decidedly for Barbara Frischmuth, openness to language means also openness to the ideas of others. This openness prevents her from whole-heartedly espousing any political movement, including feminism, "if the term feminism is restricted to a socio-political stance" (Lorenz, "Creativity...", 36). This same trait is discernible in her writing style, in the way she layers points of view and simultaneously channels information to the reader from what appear to be various sources.

From 1964 to 1967 Frischmuth pursued Oriental Studies (*Orientalistik*) in Vienna, where she met her future husband, a sulky-driver named Grün. The marriage did not last, and the author found herself the single mother of a son, Florian, who became the focal point in her life. She began to divide her time between Vienna and Altaussee, in the way Nora does in Die Ferienfamilie (1981).

Frischmuth's experience of motherhood provided a wealth of inspiration for her writing, including Die Ferienfamilie, and refocused her attitude toward writing as a career. She set to the task of integrating this new experience of womanhood into the domain of artistic expression. She says:

Was noch schwieriger ist: die täglichen Verrichtungen eines Hausfrauen- und Mutterdaseins in die literarische Existenz zu integrieren, anstatt sie als durchaus legitime Ausrede für erlahmende Kreativität zu gebrauchen. (Gürtler, 51)

The persistent inequality between the sexes in the domestic forum as a challenge to artistic expression seems to be as much a concern for modern women writers as it was for women two hundred years ago. Charlotte von Stein wrote to Charlotte Schiller in 1798:

Ich glaube, daß, wenn ebenso viel Frauen Schriftstellerinnen wären als Männer es sind, und wir nicht durch so tausend Kleinigkeiten in unserer Haushaltung herabgestimmt würden, man vielleicht auch einige gute darunter finden würde... (Gürtler, 53)

In her dissertation entitled Schreiben Frauen anders? Untersuchungen zu Ingeborg Bachmann und Barbara Frischmuth, the Germanist Christa Gürtler conducts a thorough study of feminist critical literature in order to determine what, if any, characteristics may be said to define women's writing. Starting from the premise that women's social experience is

different, and at the same time under-represented in literature, she points out that women writers often claim to be struggling to find their own voice. "Die Suche nach einer neuen (weiblichen) Sprache wird von Schriftstellerinnen häufig als wichtiges Motiv ihres Schreibens angeführt," she maintains (Gürtler, 59). Language is the main structurer of the world (Ezergalis, 61), so any search for a new world order must necessarily be predicated on an alternative pattern of language. The challenge articulated by Barbara Frischmuth — how women's experience may be integrated into literature — is at the centre of women's writing.

1.3 The Writer: Barbara Frischmuth and Women's Literature

According to Christa Gürtler, women's literature (*Frauenliteratur*) is essentially literature authored by women, although varieties of it may be graded differently by feminist critics, according to their own paradigms. For example, some women's writing will be seen as identifying with traditional male views of femininity and relegated to the heap of *Trivialliteratur*, while those that attempt to challenge or overturn patriarchal symbols will be judged as a more noble calibre of feminist *littérature engagée*. Gürtler takes the middle ground, being wary of male/female

stereotypes. She agrees that women have been writing under patriarchal paradigms for centuries, and that this has deprived women of their "eigene Sprache", a language distinctly their own. She observes that women are able to overcome this hurdle by using themselves and their own experiences as subject matter, and by discovering their own language (*Sprache*).

It may be more precise in English to understand the reference to *Sprache* in Gürtler's work as a concept that also includes the notion of "speech". In this way, the challenge to women writers may also be understood as a challenge to develop a "manner of speaking" that conforms less to the literary standard and is more evocative of the female experience and state of mind. At the *Treffen schreibender Frauen* in Munich in 1976, women writers clarified this point: the challenge is not so much a question of discovering a new language, as of how to use existing language differently (Blumer, 185). To illustrate, this manner of speaking might extend from vocabulary to structure, syntax and grammar, and draw on matriarchal references, myths and allegories. It is important to note that although these techniques may be employed to be gender specific, none of them is necessarily confined to female authorship (Gürtler, 37).

In an attempt to define women's writing, Gürtler asks the question: "Schreiben Frauen anders?" The answer is inconclusive. She argues that women's writing must be understood within its historical circumstances, and that this includes writing that fits patriarchal (traditional) norms.

Meine Fragestellung – Schreiben Frauen anders? – kann deshalb, generell formuliert, nur mit Nein beantwortet werden. Sie kann sinnvoll nur an einen eingeschränkten Kanon von Frauenliteratur gestellt werden und zwar an Werke jener Autorinnen, die nach einem weiblichen Diskurs, einer weiblichen Identität suchen, die ein 'anderes' – noch nicht definierbares, weil noch nicht entfaltetes – Frauenbild zu entwerfen suchen, und die dadurch [...] auf Widerstand stoßen. (Gürtler, 42)

Frischmuth, in her avoidance of any aggressive stance, assumes her writing cannot be interpreted as any sort of resistance (*Widerstand*). If she resists anything, it is the notion that she has any sort of duty as a woman writer to promote a particular philosophy: "Schon dieses Wort [Verpflichtung] treibt mir eine Gänsehaut auf" (Lorenz, "Ein Interview...", 28). She also opposes any interpretation of her work in the context of foregone conclusions about women's writing:

Was ich erwarte ist, daß wirklich von dem ausgegangen wird, daß möglichst offen an den Text gegangen wird und nicht vornherein schon von einer Theorie über weibliche Literatur oder dergleichen ausgegangen wird. (Lorenz, "Ein Interview...", 35)

When asked about the existence of a feminist standpoint in her work, Frischmuth replied emphatically that literature should not be weighed down with so many challenges. Certainly, literature and "feministisches Engagement" are not incompatible, she says, but literature should remain literature, not be used as propaganda.

...das wäre für mich eine reine Degradierung, weil ich sage, es bedarf nicht der Literatur, programmatische Forderungen zu stellen. (Lorenz, "Ein Interview...", 24)

Frischmuth's brand of feminism is of a practical sort. She has chosen to put feminism into practice in her personal life, and if it shows up in her work, then it is a point of fact, not a point of polemics.

Als Privatperson sehe ich mich schon engagiert in dem Sinne, das Frausein lebbar zu machen. Da gibt es unendlich viel zu tun. Nur ist mir jede Art von Fanatismus, von Ideologisierung und von Aggression fremd. (Lorenz, "Ein Interview...", 24)

Frischmuth "avoids absoluteness in any standpoint" (Lorenz, "Creativity...", 37), including feminism. For her, the barriers that exist between men and women are not "a struggle of the sexes based on biological and psychophysical differences" but a problem of mutual understanding resulting from "socialization and language convention and differing from culture to culture rather than being innate" (Lorenz, "Creativity...", 38). For Frischmuth, social roles

are at the root of the problem. The very down-to-earth challenge of being a writer and mother, the practical problems of putting high standards of womanhood into practice (*das Frausein lebbar zu machen*) are what concern her.

Frischmuth's writing rejects any notion of limitations on women. She is instead devoted to exploring all the possibilities that exist for women, their *Emanzipationsmöglichkeiten* (Gürtler, 71), and to the search for a full life. This search, also the basis of her interest in mysticism, is an attempt at a better understanding of her own life experiences, and is grounded in the conviction (after her mother's example) that women can do anything. For Frischmuth, if there is a feminist challenge to women's writing, it is to bring the point of view of a greater number of women to the forefront:

Das Experiment liegt für mich einfach darin, zu sehen, was dabei herauskommt, wenn Frauen schreiben, wenn sie ihr Geschlecht und den dadurch geprägten *Sehakt* in die Literatur einbringen. (Gürtler, 64)

Women's view of the world (the feminine *Sehakt*), inasmuch as it comprises a particular experience of oppression and deprivation, is the contribution many feminists would have women writers bring to world

literature. According to this paradigm, it should reveal "jahrhundertealte Beschädigungen" and expose the long-standing "Prozeß der Subordination des einen Geschlechts unter das andere" (Blumer, 186).

In the opinion of the culturalist and critic Arnold Blumer, this is the contribution achieved by Frischmuth in Die Klosterschule, a short novel that brings to light the insidious ways in which language is used to indoctrinate convent schoolgirls in the precepts of a patriarchal institution. The author's own claims are more modest:

Für mich war einfach die Darstellung dieser Art von Sprache wichtig, nämlich wie mit ganz bestimmten Redeweisen aus Kindern etwas gemacht wird oder gemacht werden soll. (Sauter)

The manifestations of women's oppression through the nuns' instruction are nonetheless pervasive. For example, once married, the girls learn, they are "dem Gebot unterworfen, [dem] Gatten zu dienen und ihm untertänig zu sein" (Frischmuth, Die Klosterschule, 43).

Blumer argues that the experience of womanhood remains, in many ways, the experience of an outsider, of a "kulturelle Fremde". The sense of belonging to a disadvantaged sub-group within society is certainly ironic

in essence, and it is this sense of irony in Frischmuth's writing that will be examined next.

CHAPTER 2: IRONY IN FRISCHMUTH'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

2.1 Definition

What is narrative irony and to what effect might it be used? To answer these questions, it is necessary to first address the concept of narrative perspective.

The issue of narrative perspective has given rise to much deliberation among literary theorists. Different theoretical approaches offer a variety of terms to describe it (perception, voice, point of view), but theorists generally agree that it is a vital reference point in the writing and reading of texts (Chamberlain, 3). Essentially, narrative perspective is a matter of the involvement of a narrator or narrators in the events being described, and the relative credibility of the statements made from that position of involvement. The choice of narrator (of perspective) may be seen as a question of the relationship between the author and the events in the story. Implicit in this relationship is the author's need or purpose for telling a particular story, and the author's concern for how the story will be perceived from the point of view of a particular narrator. In other words, the author's relationship to the events, coupled with the underlying purpose of a particular act of storytelling, will influence

the author's choice of perspective. Narrative perspective is one way in which the writer "prefigures" the text to be eventually "figured out" by the reader (Chamberlain, 151). The reader has to "appropriate the world of the novel just as the novelist has to appropriate the world through the novel" (Chamberlain, 109).

In the choice of narrator, the writer must confront the problem of the narrator's credibility, and if the narrator is a player in the story, he or she must have an obvious personality — biases through which his or her understanding of events is filtered. Each decision to filter information this way (the degree of involvement in the events, the personality and the credibility of the narrator) opens the gap between what is actually said and what may be understood. When this gap exists in the narration of events (not merely in dialogue or in the speech patterns of some speaker other than the narrator), narrative irony is created. With this technique the writer demonstrates his or her awareness of the existence of ambiguity — an awareness that there may be more than one interpretation of events, more than one level of understanding.

Irony is always the result of a disparity of understanding. In any situation in which one person knows or perceives more — or less — than another, irony must be either actually or potentially present. (Scholes and Kellogg, 240)

Irony exists when there is a gap between what the writer knows about the events in a story, and what the narrator knows, which is less. This disparity is what the post-structuralist critics Scholes and Kellogg call an "ironic gap" (Scholes and Kellogg, 240). Many other ironic gaps may also exist within the text in the voices that intervene in relating the events: dialogue may be used to narrate events (revealing gaps in what individual characters know about an event or gaps in what the narrator knows about the characters), or the author may choose to comment on what the narrator is saying. "Irony is a principal function of point of view" (Scholes and Kellogg, 241).

Scholes and Kellogg insist that in any narrative there are essentially three ironic gaps: those of the "characters, the narrator and the audience". When a writer distances him- or herself from the narrator (e.g., when the narrator has a personality apart from the author's), a fourth level is added: "narrative irony is a function of disparity among these three or four viewpoints" (Scholes and Kellogg, 240).

In the writing of Barbara Frischmuth, a sophisticated fifth ironic gap is introduced: social versus individual understanding. Characters in a story employ language

according to social conventions, and in their attempts to communicate their individual messages they are thwarted by the array of implicit other messages in the language they choose. Frischmuth is able to demonstrate this gap by exposing the events of a story from varied points of view. A range of messages and meanings are revealed, and language is shown to be both manipulated and manipulator. She says:

Ich glaube, daß die Sprache durch die Jahrtausende, in denen es Sprache gibt, und in die Jahrhunderte, in denen sich Nationalsprache entwickelt hat, schon ein Eigenleben bekommen hat, eine Macht, eine Gewalt über den Sprechenden ausübt. (Lorenz, "Ein Interview...", 26)

The contradiction between the individual desire to create new meaning through language, and the resistance of language to such contrivance — as a social phenomenon it is already intrinsically imbued with meanings — is a paradox that plays a key role in Frischmuth's writing. Social versus individual meaning is a dimension of ironic disparity that is especially perceptible in her works concerned with the relationships between adults and children — where adults are socialized and children are not.

2.2 Frischmuth and Narrative Irony

Barbara Frischmuth is keenly aware of the ironic nature of her world view which, simply stated, is that our perception of the world is not complete. She values an open-minded curiosity in learning to understand more about the world than is readily perceptible, she explains, because she "gern mehr wissen würde als [sie] wissen kann" (Lorenz, "Ein Interview...", 27). She also attempts to stay aloof from the groups she has been associated with:

Ich fühle mich schon als Außenseiterin. Insofern daß ich, wie mir scheint, nicht einer Strömung zuzuordnen bin. (Lorenz, "Ein Interview...", 29)

The importance of asking questions and remaining open-minded is a view that permeates her writing.

Frischmuth makes us aware that language is weighted with the assumption that there is a collective conventional wisdom that is more valid than the individual point of view. She makes us aware that language may be used to reinforce traditional beliefs and values in the form of culturally-loaded clichés, maxims and precepts from the collective consciousness of society.

Vom ersten Buch an, ihr ständiger Versuch, die Sprache aus dem Zwang vorgegebener Interpretation zu befreien, sich selber lösend an unverbrauchten Möglichkeiten. (Serke, 179)

We must use conventional language to relate as individuals, but we may in fact be coerced into a form of deference to a set of values that is not our own when we use language indiscriminately.

In Die Klosterschule, the oppressive presence of a societal authority is made known through the countless disciplinary exhortations repeated mindlessly by the narrator, who rarely inserts her comment on what has been said. The effectiveness of this technique has been questioned by some, "denn durch die Imitation vorgegebener Sprachmuster wird über Regeln und Verbote noch keine Herrschaft erlangt" (Stamer), yet society in Die Klosterschule emerges from this account characterized at least as well as any individual player in the story. The motives and objectives of this invisible overall authority are clearly understood.

Whereas Handke and others sensitive to the political content of everyday language assumed the tactics of frontal assault (Kaiser, 168), Frischmuth's approach is much more diplomatic. Her independent nature precludes any dogmatic approach to the challenge of norms in language. The result is infinitely more readable, as critics assert:

... [sie] hat viel aus der sogenannten experimentellen Literatur gelernt: sie füllt aber nicht bloß fleißig Sprachmuster aus oder spielt innersprachliche Entdeckungen durch. Sie bringt das Gelernte am Gegenstand zum Funktionieren, begnügt sich mit genau dem sprachlichen und imaginativen Aufwand, den ihr Gegenstand erfordert, so daß sie weder langweilt noch verwirrt. (Bisinger)

Frischmuth addresses the difficult issues of language and society not through a negation of meaning, like Handke, but through an exploration of meaning in her use of irony. Her skilful use of irony in narration brings a multiplicity of meanings and perspectives to light within a single text:

Within one text, two or more positions are counterbalanced, all retaining some degree of justification. One standpoint illuminates the other, relativizing itself as a result of its inherent narrowness in the process of a dialectic interpretation. (Lorenz, "Creativity...", 37)

The effect to which narrative irony may be used is inextricably linked to the broader question of why storytelling and the vicarious experience of literature are so important to human culture. Frischmuth's personal views on the subject were revealed in an interview published in Weimarer Beiträge in 1981. She believes that literature provides "eine gewisse Hilfestellung bei einer Identitätsfindung [...], einfach ein Genauer-hinschauen-Können" (Sauter, Weimarer Beiträge). She declines a more

abstract or academic definition of the art, stating simply her belief that literature makes us more aware of our environment and of how we fit in. Literature offers the possibility of seeing the world from the point of view of others. She says:

Für mich ist die Literatur [...] eine Lebensweise, die meine Sinne schärft, die mir Erfahrungen ermöglicht, die weit über das hinausgehen, was ich als Individuum ohne diesen Anreiz haben könnte. (Sauter, Weimarer Beiträge)

For Barbara Frischmuth, who learned four foreign languages in an attempt "die abgenutzten Worte wieder ursprünglich zu erfahren" (Serke, 179), it would be difficult to enter into any sort of partisan affiliations or to espouse any one point of view. Irony is for her a way of exploring life from many angles, and she uses it to challenge readers to re-examine their own beliefs and values. The result of this challenge may be disorienting, and it places heavier responsibility on individual shoulders. Destroying old value systems has its risks. In Frischmuth's 1984 novel Kopftänzer, the journalist Dinah gives voice to this dilemma when she says:

Ich möchte meine eigene Version von Wirklichkeit haben, und riskieren, daß ich mich irre, und zulassen können, daß mich etwas berührt, an dessen Vorhandensein ich eigentlich nicht glaube. (Frischmuth, Kopftänzer, 152)

The risk of being mistaken is one that the individual must assume if he or she is to live fully, and Frischmuth would postulate that if we are to develop to our full potential (the process she calls *Identitätsfindung*), we must be aware of all the possibilities that exist for us. This can only be achieved through what is certainly a perplexing act of questioning and self-examination. It is far more tempting, as Nora explains to Fenek in Die Ferienfamilie, to look for someone else to carry this burden.

»Weißt du,« Nora sah auf, »das wünschen wir uns alle voneinander, größer zu sein. Wir wünschen uns, daß jemand größer and daher für uns verantwortlich ist, und so geht das bis hin zum lieben Gott.« (Frischmuth, Die Ferienfamilie, 54)

In her use of narrative irony to present many-layered points of view, Frischmuth expresses her belief that the individual conscience ought not to abdicate in favour of more widely-held or traditional views. Her use of irony is a way to shed light on a subject from another angle, to change perceptions and even to redress injustice. Used in this way, irony affirms the existence of a basic conflict which is an integral characteristic of the writing of women.

2.3 Irony in Women's Writing

In The Divided Self, the Germanist and literary theorist Inta Ezergalis documents "some of the ways in which women react to the male tradition" (Ezergalis, 59). She describes the inherent conflict between woman's real self and her social role as a kind of identity crisis, and demonstrates how some women writers search for their real selves through a return to a more "naive" or innocent (less indoctrinated) state:

Irony is a clear measure of the divided personality. It shows a split in the author's consciousness and speaks to a corresponding division in the reader. (Ezergalis, 29)

Yet, says Ezergalis, if one is aware of its existence, one may use irony to positive ends. Use of irony is a way to bridge the gap; it can be used as "the bootstrap by which to try and lift oneself out of the divided self" (Ezergalis, 30). Writing in the ironic mode is a remedy for the ailment of being an outsider, a way of reconciling oneself with an unsatisfactory world. In writing, there is salvation, a way to make order from chaos. The inexactness of language can be exploited in a positive way, allowing the writer to incorporate his or her inner contradictions with the tangible world.

This hypothesis can be tested for Barbara Frischmuth in an example from Die Klosterschule. In the following excerpt, irony is used to demonstrate injustice toward innocent young girls, and toward women generally. A young girl is trying to grasp the notion that women's menstruations make them "unclean" as the Bible says. She says to her friend:

Du bist unrein. Es steht geschrieben. Auch ich bin unrein, [denn] du hast mich berührt. Was dann?

The friend replies:

Meine Mutter sagt, es sei anders. Die Natur hilft sich selbst. [...] Es ist natürlich, daß wir unrein werden, darum sind wir gar nicht unrein. Es sei denn in Geist und Gedanken. (Frischmuth, Die Klosterschule, 81)

Struggling with disparate levels of understanding from the Bible and her own conscience, Frischmuth's young narrator protests. An innate sense of fairness is expressed in the almost indignant "Was dann?" The other girl offers a different interpretation: they may become "unclean", she thinks, if they commit some wrongdoing, but they are not inherently so. In this excerpt full of irony, the author reveals a paradox: the real evil is to preach that female nature is abhorrent. The author has bridged the gap between

her "divided selves", by exposing the underlying cause of the identity crisis Ezerгалis describes. In Frischmuth's skilled use of narrative irony, resolution of the crisis is a problem shared with the reader:

... multiple layers of exposition are the result. Choice of perspective is left up to the creativity of the reader who is required to participate intellectually in the meaning of the text. (Lorenz, "Creativity...", 37)

2.4 Narrative Irony in Die Klosterschule and Die Ferienfamilie

The effect to which narrative irony may be used is, as stated previously, a function of the author's relationship to the events and the author's purpose in telling the story. It is also implicitly a function of the author's relationship to the potential reader, and of what the author supposes the reader's perspective to be. The author will make certain assumptions as to the reader's attitude toward the events being related, and will choose a style of writing best suited to bridging the presumed gap between what readers are likely to think, and what the author wants them to think. Theories in the study of how readers may be influenced by various speakers who relate the events, or "the way discourses are constructed in order to achieve

certain effects" (Eagleton, 205) derive in fact from the ancient art of rhetoric. This critical stance in the study of language and literature, advocated by the Marxist philosopher and critic Terry Eagleton, is the natural consequence of such sceptical attitudes to language as advanced by Barbara Frischmuth.

Narrative irony is at the heart of Frischmuth's rhetorical skill. It is most remarkable in the interplay of internal and external narrative perspectives of her characters, as she works to achieve that perspicacity she calls *Genauer-hinschauen-Können*. It is especially noticeable in Die Klosterschule, where a complex interplay of speakers draws our attention to the way language is used to transpose traditional social values onto the minds of children. Die Klosterschule demonstrates this repeatedly when the girl-narrator speaks in the first person plural ("Wir [...] beten täglich und gerne": Frischmuth, Die Klosterschule, 7), full of assumptions of conformity among the wir reference group. By exposing the manner in which casual, conventional, seemingly harmless modes of speech insidiously override individual thought in children, Frischmuth challenges us to respond emotionally and morally to culturally-loaded language.

Critics have noted the feigned naivety in Frischmuth's work concerned with children, how she uses these characters to challenge her readers' points of view, and have warned that Die Ferienfamilie is "keine Zuckerwatte" (Kirsch), and that in Die Klosterschule, she "mit unschuldiger Miene böse Dinge [schreibt]" (Widmer). The interplay of points of view is a strategy that allows the author to distract us from a judgemental perspective vis-à-vis the text. This may be illustrated in the following example from Die Klosterschule:

Wir nehmen die Gebete ernst, wie wir das Leben ernst nehmen, in dessen Kampf wir gestellt sind und in dem zu siegen uns nur mit Hilfe der erwähnten Gebete und dem Ernst bei der Arbeit, mit der wir die verbleibende Zeit ausfüllen, gelingen kann, steht doch geschrieben: *ora et labora!* (Frischmuth, Die Klosterschule, 8)

Who is speaking in this text? The words appear to belong to a group of young convent-school students identified on the first page (the first person plural: *wir*), but perhaps it is one girl assuming to speak for many. And are these really her own words? They sound too mature (the notion of life as *Kampf*), perhaps they are the words of the teacher which the girl is repeating. Yet this statement, with its Latin quotation, points to a source beyond an individual nun. In this passage the Church speaks through the teacher(s), speaking through the student(s), speaking

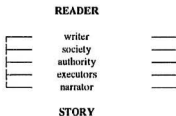
through the author. These are layers of perspectives, or layers of irony, used by the author to convey an important aspect of the convent-school experience. The result is that the reader is sensitized to the manner in which young girls are conditioned to think according to certain patterns. The author is able to achieve a serious social commentary by a very indirect route: the words of a child.

In Die Klosterschule, Frischmuth uses narrative irony to criticize patriarchal use of language: she demonstrates how language disseminates ideology, and shows how language is used to resist (Gürtler, 131). The act of questioning ("Was denn?") is important to Frischmuth, so that other points of view are revealed, understanding is deepened, and intellect is freed to find its own truth. Essential to this approach is the exposition of multi-layered narrative perspectives of an experienced reality, which I will call a structure of ironies.

The story matter, the experience of convent school education, is related to the reader through multiple levels of perception: the child-narrator's individual point of view, expressed through use of the pronoun *ich*; the collective point of view of the group of girls through the use of the pronoun *wir*; the point of view of the executors

of the school experience, the nuns, through the excessive use of the pronoun *ihr*, and the static point of view of the social institution (the Church) having designed the school experience, made known through the quotation of written words, Latin phrases, references to saints and to the Bible, and the pronoun *es* ("Es ist durchaus gestattet", 37; "Es ist dies der Weg", 45; "Es steht geschrieben", 81). In this way, the story (the events in the convent school, in this example) is channelled to the reader through a text that is structured something like the following diagram, representing a chain or ladder:

Figure 1



Structure of Ironies in Die Klosterschule

This ladder represents the text, and illustrates the layered interfacing between the events of the story as they transpired in Austria at a certain point in time, and the event of reading about them by someone who was not a participant.

Reading this diagram from the bottom up, we see that the reader learns about life in a convent school (the story) from the point of view of one of the participants, which is a tale of how confusing it might be to learn one's own mind in such circumstances: "Ich habe das Gefühl, aufstehen zu müssen" (35). We learn the point of view of the executors of the experience, including those that have a sincere vocation, which tells something of how they feel about their task: "Seid, wir bitten euch allen Ernstes, bereit, wenn Gott euch zu diesem Dienste der Liebe beruft..." (33). We sense the perspective of the authority that sanctions, even commands the events (the Church in its goal to spread throughout the world): "Betet zu Gott, damit er Priester und Ordensleute in ausreichender Menge beruft..." (32). We learn of the society that fostered the development of this form of education, that it appeared hostile and hopeless enough that women should prefer a sheltered life, fostering such observations as : "Nur unter uns sind wir sicher, ganz sicher..." (79). The decisions are all made by a writer,

according to a particular plan (explicit or implicit) of rhetoric.

A similar, though less complex effect is achieved in Die Ferienfamilie — a story about a modern, reconstituted family. The traditional definition of family (the monogamous two-parent family) is stretched and reshaped to make room for those groups of adults and children that need and care about each other. The children of three broken marriages find themselves spending the summer in the country with the central character, Nora, who is mother, ex-stepmother and aunt to them.

The story is narrated from the perspective of an omniscient third person reporting the actions, thoughts, and speech of the characters. Much of the dialogue is transcribed as direct quotation, yet the characters also speak through the narrator who uses their words to describe things (such as *Vater eins*, and *Scheißweib*). The author also employs indirect speech, and the traditional ploy of reporting internal dialogue. Even internal dialogue is subject to "multiple layers of exposition" in Die Ferienfamilie. In the following excerpt, a worried Nora is beginning to panic as to the whereabouts of the children who are late coming home:

Wenn die einfach alles vergessen, dann können die was erleben. Ich bin doch nicht blöd. Aber wenn wirklich etwas passiert war? Sie hatte ja doch die Verantwortung... (Frischmuth, Die Ferienfamilie, 30).

The first two sentences are reported as the character thought them in that specific moment, in the present tense and in the first person. This is followed by a change in perspective as the narrator takes over from Nora in reporting her thoughts. This distancing gives a more credible voice to the rational side of Nora's internal dialogue, as she tries to determine her course of action.

This same technique of shifting viewpoints is achieved in the service of humour when it involves children, as in the following excerpt. Just after Fenek's accident, everyone is more preoccupied with Fenek's condition than with anything else, even the little boy Pu, who came away from the accident with a bad bruise to the heel:

Auch Pu hatte ein bißchen was abbekommen, wie sich herausstellte. Einen riesigen Bluterguß an der Ferse, und wenn er daran dachte, mußte er erbärmlich humpeln. (Frischmuth, Die Ferienfamilie, 128)

Children learn very quickly how to get attention, and how to act on their lumps and bruises to draw the sympathy (*Erbarmen*) of their parents. The bruise surely hurt the

little fellow, but he was too worried about his half-brother to complain much. When he did remember his injury, he also remembered to display it in that childish way that would gain the most attention. The narrator presents the two points of view: the boy was really visibly hurt, and needed to limp, but he also knows how to make himself look as pitiful as possible.

The internal dialogue of the children in Die Ferienfamilie is reported in subtle ways, and we see how children construe the speech used by adults to explain the world or to encourage certain behaviour. The following excerpt provides a humorous demonstration: Nora's son Pu (a nickname that refers to the Winnie-the-Pooh character in children's literature) has just been told he will not be allowed to sleep in his mother's bed for the summer, and will have to let his mother enjoy her own room.

»Wieso?« schrie Pu, obwohl er wußte, daß es ohnehin keinen Sinn hatte, weiter auf alten Rechten zu bestehen. Wie hatte Fenek gesagt?
 »Zuerst schicken sie dich aus dem Schlafzimmer, dann aus dem Haus.« (8)

Multiple levels of understanding (ironic gaps) are evident in this brief passage. The little boy's own sense of what happened is determined by what he believes to be another boy's wisdom in this case. The other boy had made

this judgement based on his observations, which are in turn, as the reader quickly determines, based on his father's experience of two failed marriages and have nothing to do with Pu's predicament. The irony here is that children's experiences may be defined by a third party, and what they experience is falsified in this way. Children lack rational ability: their linguistic performance (through imitation of others) is out of step with their own linguistic competence. As explained in the comprehensive literary analysis published by the German philologist H.L. Arnold, it is worth noting that:

...Kinder bestimmte Typen von Sätzen zwar imitieren, aber nicht gleichzeitig verstehen und spontan produzieren können. (Arnold, 410)

Frischmuth's experience as a mother has led her to this same realization. It has also reinforced her understanding of the authoritative power of unchecked, conventional ways of speaking, and in Die Ferienfamilie she exposes the negative impact that careless words can have on children. In the following passage, her ex-brother-in-law asks Nora how she can cope with the responsibility of the three children:

»Wie kommst du denn so zurecht mit den Dreien?« fragte Lajas Vater Nora. »Da hast du dir ja ganz schön was aufgehalst.« Nora lachte, u.³ Fenek schluckte wütend. Daß die nie anders von ihnen

reden konnten als mit Worten wie *am Hals haben*, *aufgehalst* und so weiter. (43)

By providing a voice for the point of view of the eleven year-old Fenek, Frischmuth obliges us to come to terms with the offensive selfishness in this generation's attitude toward the care of children.

Another technique used by Frischmuth to draw attention to the various connotations of words is the use of print itself³. In *Die Ferienfamilie* she uses italics to draw our attention to the insensitive use of the word *unterbringen* and to the impact such a word might have on a little boy.

Und wenn es einmal nicht ging, dann hatte sie ihn eben wo *untergebracht*. [...] Nun hatte ihn also Vater eins den Sommer über wieder bei Nora *untergebracht*, und er war überzeugt, daß er es fertigbringen würde, über kurz oder lang auch einmal ihn und Pu bei Sylvie *unterzubringen*. (22-23)

The adults who used this word, the parents, most likely did not intend to convey the impression that the boy was an encumbrance to them that had to be dropped off somewhere whenever his presence became inconvenient. By drawing attention to the word using italics, the author obliges the reader to examine the choice of term. This unfortunate use of idiom, combined with the fact of moving from place to

³See the extensive use of upper case type in *Über die Verhältnisse* (1987).

place like so many children of divorced parents, is very likely to contribute to the boy's feeling unwanted and hurt.

The central character, Nora, becomes more aware of the harm done by careless language when she starts to consider certain statements from the children's point of view.

»Du hast dich also für eine gewisse Zeit geopfert?...« Wie das klingt, dachte Nora, *sich opfern*. Langsam begann sie an all diesen Formulierungen zu verzweifeln. Kein Wunder, daß die Kinder hellwach waren, wenn im Zusammenhang mit ihnen ständig von *sich opfern* die Rede war. (75-76)

It is in fact the layering of points of view of both adults and children that illuminates the central message of this short work. Frischmuth challenges the conventional definition of a family by showing us the workings of a group of related adults and children from their point of view. In the conversation between Nora and Lajosch, the latter is attempting to understand how Nora could feel responsible for a child that was not hers. In response, Nora answers that she herself was not raised by her parents, yet never felt she lacked the love she needed (103-104).

The case against harsh judgements by outsiders is made most compelling when the author presents the point of view

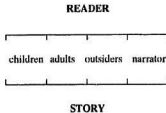
of the boy Fenek. The family group — Nora and her ex-husband, her son, her sister's daughter and Fenek (the son of her ex-husband from another marriage) — is walking back to the cottage after supper in the village. Fenek takes the other two children into his confidence:

»Hört her, [...] wenn jemand im Ort euch fragt, so sind wir eine Familie. Vater, Mutter, Kinder. Habt ihr verstanden! [...] Man kann ihnen erzählen, was man will. Wir sehen aus wie eine Familie, also sind wir eine, und basta. Nur nicht anfangen etwas zu erklären. Dann nimmt die Fragerei kein Ende, und wir haben nie unsere Ruhe.« (11)

Fenek's mother was the first of his father's three wives. The boy is not the cause of his father's marriage trouble, but from this statement it is obvious that he has had to contend with unpleasant comments and interference from people who believe themselves to be in a superior position.

The story — which in this case is the development of relationships between children and the adults that care for them — is channelled to the reader through a text that is structured something like the diagram devised for Die Klosterschule turned on its side:

Figure 2



Structure of Ironies in Die Ferienfamilie

The structure of ironies in Die Ferienfamilie resembles the illustration in Figure 1, with an important difference. The points of view of each of the characters are expressed in parallel, not in a hierarchy. Whereas the hierarchy of points of view in Die Klosterschule is well suited to the depiction of the highly-regimented experience there, the side-to-side shifts in perspective from the adults to the children are more appropriate to the give-and-take that prevails in family relationships.

In Die Ferienfamilie, Frischmuth uses irony in a manner that appears light-hearted in that it allows her to effectively convey the sometimes comical misunderstandings

between adults and children. On another level, this short work offers a social comment that is just as serious as that formulated in Die Klosterschule. When we learn the point of view of the children of these broken marriages, we are obliged to question the traditional wisdom that any marriage, even a bad one, is a better environment for children than the alternative. Some light is shed on the damage a bad marriage can cause, and on the fact that blood relations do not necessarily create the complete caring environment that children require. Frischmuth shies away from advancing any direct social or political comment. Instead, she facilitates a certain questioning in the minds of her readers, as to whether what we have been taught to think is indeed the position we wish to maintain.

The intellectual participation by the reader, comparable to an impartial jury hearing different sides of the same story, is Barbara Frischmuth's main achievement. Ironically, she does not offer substitutes for the conventions or points of view she challenges. That would defeat her purpose, which is the process of questioning and the exploration of possibilities.

qualities. She is writing for readers who, like herself, must know all the angles, must question authority. Any intimation that her writing should serve a purpose other than her own, would meet with Frischmuth's blunt disapproval: "In dem Moment, wo mir irgendjemand erklären möchte, was Literatur zu sein hat, fühle ich mich eher versucht, das Gegenteil zu machen" (Lorenz, "Ein Interview...", 29).

Frischmuth will allow readers to make up their own minds about a story, preferring to keep her personal point of view as much to herself as possible among the multiple perspectives she controls. There is some contradiction in this effort, and it is not entirely feasible, since the author's personality and biases cannot be disguised completely, even in the voice of a child. Her apparent concern for privacy is at odds with her vocation, but without it the free-thinking author would feel less at liberty to change her mind.

Barbara Frischmuth is not prone to snap judgements, and is sceptical as to the power of literature to change people's minds. Instead, she sees reading as a form of education integrating various points of view, and as an aid to generally improve our quality of life:

Literatur kann diese sanfte, leise Veränderung in den Denkgewohnheiten leisten. Vor allem kann sie auch Freude machen auf einem ziemlich hohen Niveau. (Lorenz, "Ein Interview...", 33)

She does not write to change our minds, or to support some ideology. She writes to educate herself about her world and to achieve a better, fuller quality of life — a life that is aware of itself (*aufmerksam*) and aware of the relativity of all consciousness.

An effective reading of Barbara Frischmuth demands a certain amount of honesty with oneself, a willingness to question the reliability of one's perceptions and point of view, even a willingness to challenge the text itself to find meaning in it. Reading Barbara Frischmuth means questioning Barbara Frischmuth, and it is with this act that *Werden* begins — not in finding the answers.

NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION

Barbara Frischmuth's free-flowing and original style in Die Ferienfamilie presents several challenges to the translator. The overall tone is conversational and informal: the text is punctuated by dashes, parentheses and half-sentences, the speech used by the characters is often careless or even slang, and the integration of several Austrian words adds local colour.

The informal tone of the original text has been captured in the translation through the use of contractions, idioms and neologisms, and by remaining loyal to the author's unusual punctuation. Local colour has been sacrificed, to some extent, in the German references to little-understood details of the Frog-Prince story, and in the vocabulary used by the farmer's wife. In the latter case, to maintain any sense of town-and-country juxtaposition on the semantic level would have required that the translated story take place in some particular rural setting more familiar to an English-speaking audience. This translation avoids any such complications, and the reader must infer from scant references to the Alps and to Vienna that the story takes place in Austria.

Ease of reading was the criterion on which decisions about this translation were based. This principle led to the English rendition of the children's song *Ein Schnitter kam gezogen...* and to the decision to anglicise *Moorsee* as *Moor Lake*. The characters' names are faithful to the original text, with some spelling modifications ('Laya' for *Laja* and 'Layosh' for *Lajosch*) for ease of pronunciation in English. A change of spelling for the nickname *Pu* was essential to evoke the famous Pooh-bear character for English readers.

The author's unusual style in *Die Ferienfamilie* presented opportunities for clarification in the translation that had to be resisted. For example, some of the logic in Nora's conversation while playing chess with Fenek is not very precise; sometimes the author does not attribute spoken text to a particular speaker, and there are several confusing passages using *doch* and *natürlich* as if the author were addressing someone involved in the events, someone who would be aware of certain expectations held by the characters in the story. It is often unclear whether the use of *natürlich* is an interjection by the author or by a character. This word is therefore not translated consistently: 'naturally', 'of course', 'obviously' and 'certainly' are all used, depending on the context.

Some word choices offered humorous, although not readily obvious possibilities for translation. The word *durchstöbern*, used to describe the children's mushroom-hunt in the woods, was translated as 'rummage'. It was tempting to use another word to describe a mushroom-hunt, however the word 'rummage' better describes the disorderly way in which the children most likely went about it and adds humour to the account.

Die Ferienfamilie is not a perfect piece of writing, and its charm is largely due to its shortcomings. It was therefore important in the translation to avoid improving too much on sentence structure, choice of words and flow of ideas. If successful, my efforts in this vein will provide the English-speaking reader with a text as entertaining and engaging as the original.

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A Family Vacation
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Nora had rented a house in the country where she could spend the summer with her son Pooh, a boy more like a little grizzly than a teddy-bear. Word had gotten out quickly enough that the house had more sleeping space than Pooh and Nora could use on their own, even if they slept in separate rooms. For all its tiny outward appearance, the little wooden house could boast an eat-in kitchen, a Nora-room, two lofts and a total of five beds. And after this particular fact became known, it was only a matter of days before father #1, that is to say Pooh's father but also Fenek's, *approached* Nora and put his arm around her in a friendly sort of way, inquiring if son #1, namely Fenek, could also spend the summer with wife #2, namely Nora, so that he, father #1 could go to America with wife #3, namely Sylvie. On a study-trip of course, not for pleasure, since he certainly couldn't afford such a thing. He was thinking of changing careers again, he said, as wife #2, namely Nora, drew a deep sigh, and so he needed to have a little look around the New World for himself. And Fenek's mother (wife #1) hadn't been around for over a year now, since she left to follow husband #3 (a future rancher) to Australia. They were still there, by the way, busy with the hot-dog stand they were running in order to finance the ranch. So it would be a while before she could live up to her

responsibilities where Fenek was concerned, and of course the plane ticket wouldn't exactly come cheap.

Actually, it was Fenek (having been taken with the "Charlie Chan" series on TV) who started this numbering business to make some sense out of all the family relationships. Or did that make it even more confusing? It had scarcely been decided that Fenek would spend the summer with Pooh and Nora, when Nora's sister — from the point of view of Fenek, who had trouble with Pooh's relatives, that would be aunt #2 — showed up one evening all upset. The weather had been dreadful this spring, with sleet right up until June. Her career prospects would take a nosedive if she couldn't take one of those university summer courses to polish up her French, she said as she nervously burnished the table-edge with her finger, because she would *have* to have a certificate if she wanted to go back to her job as a bilingual secretary in the fall. Since the divorce from uncle #2 (that is, husband #1 from her perspective and father #1 from her daughter's) she had no other choice. And the poor child could hardly spend the whole summer in town under only part-time supervision.

"Well, okay," said Nora, and with that it was decided that Aglaya, whose knock-kneed legs made her look like a

little grouse, Laya for short, cousin #1 to Pooh, no relation to Fenek, would spend the summer with Pooh, Nora and Fenek.

When school was over they all set out: Nora, Nora's sister and father #1, each with a kid and a pile of luggage in tow for her, hiking boots, swim-shorts, microscope, remote-control cars, heavy sweaters, sandals, books, cookies and favourite stuffed toys, because it would be a long summer and the weather in the Alps had been unpredictable since the last Ice Age.

The little wooden house quaked as they moved in, especially the top part where the children were to sleep. Of course no one had given any thought as to who should share which loft with whom, and the first suitcase was hardly up over the ladder when the wrangling over the beds started. Fenek insisted that he was already too old to be sharing a room with anybody — except for his mates in boarding school.

"After all, I'm twelve!" he roared, loud enough to make the coffee cups rattle in the kitchen below.

"And I'm a girl!" squawked Laya, "Do you expect me to sleep with a boy?"

"Pooh's still a baby," said Fenek, "It doesn't count." Pooh had either not heard or was indifferent. Besides, he preferred to sleep downstairs with his mother, like they always did when they were on vacation. He was just in the process of moving his fishing rod and his rock collection back downstairs when Nora announced she'd finally like to sleep alone this summer. He was past the age now, and if she knew him at all, he'd be moving back and forth every other day, up-down, down-up, so it would be better to stay up there right from the beginning.

"How come?" cried Pooh, although he knew there'd be no use insisting on his former rights. What was it Fenek had said? "First they kick you out of the bedroom, then they kick you out of the house."

"Would you at least please tell me where I'm supposed to go?"

Nora took the fishing rod and went up the ladder behind Pooh. "Can you guys can't agree among yourselves?" She tossed a coin into the air and caught it in a fist. "Heads

or tails?" They all knew Fenek would guess right. Pooh moved in with Laya, who was eight, and who really did have legs like a grouse. "You only need come up here to sleep." Then Nora showed them all whose things would go where.

The grown-ups sat downstairs and had a sip, as they called it. They were all getting along with each other — which was at least something — as Fenek said, all but the little grouse's parents, who *still* weren't speaking, and Sylvie had probably only stayed home so there would be room in the car for the bike. Nora wanted to put some supper together from the groceries they'd brought, but father #1 said there'd be nothing doing, they'd all go out to eat. Poor Nora would have the kids on her back from now on anyway, so they should at least indulge her on the first day.

"Clean yourselves up," said father #1, forgetting to pay attention if they did or not before they trotted off down the slopes to the village. As they reached the village fountain, father #1 noticed Pooh had sticky hands and something smeared around his mouth, whereupon he gave the boy such a thorough washing, Pooh laughed and gurgled and sputtered until he nearly choked. As they reached the restaurant, Laya's mother suddenly announced she wouldn't

come along after all (she pointed dramatically toward a few gloomy balls of cloud) since she really hated to drive in the rain. Laya's face showed almost no expression, although her mother nearly smothered her with kisses saying good-bye, and everybody could see she was fighting back tears.

Father #1 was in high spirits and said they all could order what they liked. Nora became quite talkative too, after two glasses of wine, yet if Fenek was not to be fooled, and he almost never was, a touch of gallows humour seemed to hang in the air...

Pooh had taken the opportunity, as he usually did in such situations, to stick close to father #1, on whose knees he propped his elbows and over whose leg he laid his own. This irritated Fenek, although he didn't say anything (what would happen if we all stuck to father #1 like that?), so he pinched Pooh now and then when no one was looking. But Pooh, who was seven already, was still at the age where he had to touch and hold onto everything and wasn't shy about being cuddled by his mother in front of other people. He, Fenek, was quite different. Fortunately.

They were really all quite tired, but father #1 and Nora kept smoking one last cigarette together, and by the

time they finally got up to leave, Pooh had already fallen asleep. When they woke him up and set him on his feet he made such a terrible clamour that father #1 hoisted him up on his shoulders and carried him a distance. At the fountain he put the boy down and threatened to wash him awake in it if he didn't start moving on his own.

Father #1 and Nora walked arm in arm, and Pooh allowed Laya to pull him along. Fenek had the feeling that they looked just like any other normal, happy family. "Listen here!" he whispered to Pooh and Laya, "If anybody around here asks, we're all one family. Father, mother and kids. You got that? Dad had to go on a trip and we're here on vacation for the fresh air."

"How come?" Pooh seemed more awake. "Nora is only my mother."

"My mother, my mother," Fenek aped him, "As if anybody cared."

"Well, they do," grumbled Pooh.

"It's nobody's business, you understand? Nobody's. I know what I'm talking about. If you start trying to explain things, you'll have trouble."

"And what if nobody believes us?" whispered Laya.

"They won't ask because they really want to know, they just ask because it's something to do. You can tell them whatever you want. We look like a family and so we are one, that's all there is to it. Just don't start trying to explain anything. Then there'll be no end to the questions and they'll never leave us alone."

When they got in, father #1 pulled off yet another grand performance as the venerable head of the household. With a gesture designed to give Nora a clear view of exactly how large it was, he passed Fenek a large bill and exhorted him to be thrifty with it. Pooh and Laya also got smaller bills, although they had already been looked after. And he said something to Nora about having doubled the alimony payment this time so she wouldn't have to scrimp and save on anything.

"Wash up, now!" he roared, and this time he made sure they did. Fenek was the first in bed. "Bye and good-

night!" he called out one last time before turning out the light, meaning that no further good-byes were necessary. Pooh on the other hand, kept hanging at his father's neck, pestering him until he finally crept up the ladder with him and put him to bed next to Laya, who had burst into tears at last in Nora's arms.

The next day the sky was overcast, and it looked as though it would soon rain. "How nice," said Fenek to his little dormer-window, "Just when you're looking forward to a swim, the good weather goes down the drain." He spotted a pail someone had left under the eaves to catch the expected rain, for watering flowers or washing hair or whatever.

Fenek had to pass through the younger children's loft, where Pooh was still sleeping and where Laya had gone to the bathroom. He found Nora busy trying to get a fire started in the kitchen stove to heat the room. It was a big old-fashioned tiled stove, with a built-in baking oven and cooking plate, which had not failed to impress father #1. Only it wasn't very cooperative. She was trying something with paper, wood chips and logs, but still wasn't able to kindle a flame. After Fenek had watched for a while, she finally pulled herself up from her knees. "I'll have to go

and ask the farmer's wife," she said. "I can still make breakfast on the hot-plate... Oh, right. Breakfast." Nora appeared to be struck by a brilliant idea. "You can ride down quickly to the village on your bike, and fetch us some fresh buns and a newspaper. Then we'll plan out who's going to be responsible for what from now on."

Fenek went, not exactly euphorically, but without any of his usual back-talk. He fetched his bike from the shed and thought about the high-speed ride he would make down the slopes and how he would test the handbrakes. He was a skilled but daredevil rider, and he enjoyed testing the most breakneck riding techniques. What they had seen yesterday was certainly only a part of the place, and as he assumed that he would now be charged with the task of picking up fresh buns and newspapers on a more frequent basis, he wanted to find just the right little shop, where, let's say, you could have a look at the latest Superman comic without having to buy it right away.

A little more than an hour went by before he got back. They were all sitting around the big table chewing on leftover bread rolls that Nora had in her bags. "Listen to me," Nora began, then suddenly it no longer seemed worth the effort and she broke off.

"So what is it, what is it...?" Fenek took a breadbasket from the shelf all by himself, piled the buns into a pyramid, laid it skilfully on the table, and then presented Nora with the newspaper making a sort of bow. But then, as Nora stared expressionlessly into space, then came the big surprise. Fenek pulled a dishtowel out of the shopping bag (nobody knew how it came to be in there) and produced a packet of fresh butter, two cartons of milk, yogurt, eggs, and just what was needed, and with an "Abracadabra, that comes to exactly....!" he laid the receipt on Nora's napkin. They all laughed, and as was to be expected, Pooh made an immediate grab for one of the fresh buns. "People have to get their money's worth," Fenek said, before he too dived hungrily into his breakfast.

Just as the little grouse wanted to get up to go out, Nora began again. "We're going to be here for eight weeks, and I hope you don't expect me to wait on your hand and foot. I suggest that each one should take on certain chores according to your age and abilities."

Fenek sighed. "Since children under twelve are not allowed to ride bicycles on the street, Fenek will partly look after the shopping. Not every day of course, we don't have to have fresh buns every day. Laya, you'll water the

flowers in the window-boxes and will make sure the grass remains visible when the toys are out there on the lawn. And Pooh will clean the shoes. He'll also help me with the dishes from time to time, everybody makes their own bed and in the afternoons I'll need a couple of hours of absolute peace and quiet, since I've brought a ton of work with me. Unfortunately, I can't have two months' vacation like the rest of you. Is that clear?"

Fenek suspected that Nora surprised even herself, the way she churned out that little speech. "Okay," he sighed. Laya nodded and Pooh giggled, which was not to be construed as agreement on his part. Nora stood up. "You can make whatever constructive suggestions you like at the next meeting. Now I'm going over to the farmer's to find out how that thing works," and she pointed to the stove with some mistrust.

"What about us?" asked Pooh reproachfully, "What are we supposed to do?"

"Whatever you want. Since it's too cold for swimming, you'll have to spend your time otherwise. Play. Go for a walk in the woods — but make sure you don't get lost. Draw, paint, put puzzles together, build yourselves a little house

out of bark, go fish in the stream. My God, the world is full of possibilities, and you have no school."

"And what about you? Why won't you play with us?" Pooh had obviously imagined his summer vacation quite differently.

"I'm going over to see the farmer's wife about the stove."

"I'll go with you," said Pooh. Nora rolled her eyes. "It's all the same to me."

"Can I come too?" The little grouse had pulled up one leg and was standing on the other.

"Then we might as well all go. At least then I can introduce you." That was not exactly what she had planned, but it seemed like the most likely excuse. Poor old Nora, thought Fenek. Always trying in vain to cut the umbilical cord on Pooh. She used to always want to have him glued to her, and what had come of it now but Pooh here and Pooh there wherever she went. His mother had seen through it from the beginning, the way she saw through everything. She had seen through father #1, and Nora, and Sylvie, and father

#2 — but Fenek hated to think of him — and hopefully someday she would see through father #3 too, who absolutely had to go to Australia, as if there were no mutton here. And of course she saw through him, although not right through, where it banged and throbbed and twitched and churned whenever he thought about her. But Fenek saw through her too, and he knew that there are some things you just have to do or you simply will burst, that nobody belongs completely to anybody, that such things were not to be expected in this world, and that someday he too would want to be free, as she had put it, and that there was still father #1 after all, whose whole life had consisted in nothing but freedom, and who could maybe start taking care of things for once, even if he wasn't exactly the type.

Pooh took his mother's hand as they set out, and Laya asked, "Do they have children too?"

"I didn't ask," Nora confessed. "Anyway, I didn't see any when I was here to look at the house, or yesterday when I came for the key."

When they arrived at the farmhouse they heard screams, half scolding - half wailing, followed by a car taking off from the house at high speed. "The stupid little brat,"

wailed the farmer's wife, as they stood in the kitchen presently. "How often have I told him? But no, he has to chop wood rather than do as I say and carry in the wood that's already been chopped. And now he's chopped himself, the poor stupid boy, and who knows what the doctor can do for him, maybe he'll have to go to the hospital again. Thank God his father was here and could drive him straight to the doctor, and hopefully the axe didn't go as deep as it looked at first, it bled so much, but that's the way it is when people cut themselves with an axe, and with a bit of luck the doctor will only have to put a stitch in it and the boy can come home with his father."

The woman gradually calmed herself down, and after inviting them to have a seat, she took the bottle with the home-made schnapps and poured some for herself and Nora, "to good neighbourliness", as she called it. She herself had a much more modern stove standing in the kitchen, with all the accessories, and she was very satisfied with it. "Certainly," she said, already grinning again, "you have to have heat. This afternoon I'll show you. The boy might be home again by then."

How old was the boy? Going on thirteen and a real rabble-rouser, she explained proudly. But she had another

youngster too, a small one, she said referring to her six year-old daughter Julie, who was with her grandparents just now, and wouldn't be home before tonight.

"And yours?" She nodded in the direction of Fenek, Laya and Pooh. Nora said their names, and the farmer's wife said they'd meet up with the other children eventually, and her hair was already standing on end just thinking about what those two boys would get up to. Above all, she said, they should be careful in the barn around the cow and were not to touch any scythes, axes or knives, and that the windows were there for looking out through, not for throwing things through. And as they sat there she kept moving about in a way that resembled cooking. The country woman had a way of pulling lunch out of her sleeve — indeed, to Nora's amazement, she had a cooking spoon stuck in the elastic of the sleeve of her dirndl blouse. Even Fenek observed the scene with some interest, but Pooh was anxious to go. He wanted to look in the barn, and he whispered in Nora's ear, asking her to find out if there were any animals in there you could play with.

"There are cats around," said the woman, "but they're outdoors, and there's a calf too. Stay away from the dog, though. He doesn't mind children, but you never know."

They went into the barn on their own, since the countrywoman couldn't leave the kitchen. Only two cows and a calf were in there, and when Pooh went to try and pet the calf, the old cow gave him a dirty look, as he called it, and so they quickly went out again.

The weather was still undecided, feeling like rain, but not cold, and Nora wanted to try the stove again, but she soon gave up and decided to wait for her neighbour. She just wanted to make soup for lunch, and cook a real meal for supper, since the hot plate would do for soup. Besides, she'd still have to do some grocery shopping first, and as expected, the two Little Ones went along while Fenek spread himself out on the corner bench with a book and didn't want to speak to anybody.

In the meantime it had also become evident which things had been forgotten. Laya had neither toothbrush nor comb. Pooh had his pencils but no pad, Nora had forgotten her tweezers, and Fenek had mentioned something about tissues which *somebody* was bound to need eventually. And toilet paper. Naturally there was no toilet paper in the bathroom. And the pantry was of course also empty.

They took all the shopping bags they could find, as well as their plastic raincoats, just in case the clouds should burst. Pooh reached into the arbour for a tin pan smeared with dried glue and a piece of wood stuck in it. It was already late in the morning and they had to get on their way if they wanted to make it before the shops closed for lunch. Nora kept asking Pooh or Laya to memorize something so that she wouldn't forget it, since otherwise she'd have to write it all down and they just didn't have the time.

Fenek was not a *professional* reader, as he put it, brushing Nora off when she happened to ask about his taste in books, he only read when he had nothing else to do or when something interested him in particular. He never carried books around with him, either he picked one up or he didn't. This time he had picked up Pooh's Iliad and Odyssey, which had been lying on Pooh's bed. Odysseus was certainly an impressive guy. The old fox had gotten around, but he always ended up paying for it, and since he didn't care much for Telemach... well, what else could he do? He had already read different versions of the story, just like those in The Jungle Book, and he could read them again and again. He couldn't stand it when his school-mates (especially the ones who were always reading) chattered on

about thousands of books wherever they went. They had only read about or seen on TV the things that he, Fenek, had already experienced. You could certainly say he had a lot of experience. Not as much as Odysseus, but never mind. He tried to calculate the number of families or the number of different people he had lived with, but he couldn't remember them all. His mother was a kind of nomad. "It's in the blood," she had said, and she had dragged him around with her enough times... And when it didn't work out, somebody would *put him up* somewhere. He was easy-going she would say, the type that ate everything — which of course wasn't true — could keep himself busy, knew the TV listings by heart, and — if he got out of hand — could be handled roughly, which hardly ever was necessary, since he had a very successful method for staking out his own space.

He preferred to go off on his own, exploring the new surroundings, and before long he would have all the necessary buddies together. Then the adventures began. The fact that he didn't always keep an eye on the time and often came home later than he should... well, he didn't reproach himself for it. Either it was worth the aggravation or it wasn't. If it was, at least he knew what he was being hauled on the carpet for. How others reacted was a question of temperament. The worst were the ones who were often late

themselves. But Nora had also just about lost it when he came home later than he promised, the first few times she had put *him* up. Of course he was smaller then, he was thinking mostly about the time when she was still with father #1. And Nora had gone on about responsibility and how there was enough trouble going on without him provoking things further. She got used to it in time, and was even ready to accept that he was someone who could look out for himself. His mother had raised him that way, and it was just as well that she did.

Now father #1 had him put up with Nora again for the summer, and sooner or later he'd manage to have him and Pooh put up at Sylvie's. At least by the time Sylvie had a baby. And if it hadn't already occurred to them by that time that he could be misused as a baby-sitter. At least he and Nora had known each other for a while Pooh and Laya were of course no company for him. As soon as the weather cleared up he would be out on his first reconnaissance. He would use the opportunity to get a look at the farmer's son, if he was back. Why roam around off in the distance, he thought, if there was probably someone perfectly acceptable right in the neighbourhood?

Fenek had just finished reading about the mermaids when he noticed it seemed to be getting brighter outside. He got up on his knees, opened the window, and leaned out leisurely over the sill. There was a break in the clouds that had improved the weather, and he thought how they would all go swimming when it turned fine. He knew that he would go along with them every once in a while, just to make these next eight weeks as pleasant for himself as possible. Strictly speaking, the three of them were quite tolerable he thought, as he watched them come up the slope in a sweat, carrying all their things. Nora had a tote in each hand and Pooh had a plastic bag slung over his shoulder, while Laya kept passing her load from one hand to the other. Quite touching, the way the Little Ones made such efforts to drag all that stuff up here. Nora was used to it though, she was always dragging something around. Fenek felt a remarkable sense of satisfaction — with himself, with the house, and with the inhabitants he was now pensively observing. Pooh even waved, and he actually would have waved back, if he could only have found the energy. Nora set the bags down for a moment and rubbed her fingers. My God, thought Fenek, she has stocked up like someone preparing for a natural disaster. They were already quite within hearing distance. "So," Fenek said, "looks like you bought out the whole village." No one answered his well-intended remark. Okay,

so you didn't, thought Fenek, and looked quizzically at Nora as she continued to stare at him.

Just as he looked away he heard his name being called. "Yes?" he smiled obligingly.

"Say, would you be so kind as to at least help us carry these things the last few metres, now that you've gloated over our trouble long enough?" It didn't exactly sound friendly. "Oh, sorry!" Fenek strode toward the door at his usual pace. By then, they were already in, and Nora said simply, "You're unbelievable, you know."

"What do you mean?" Fenek took the bags from Nora and set them on the floor. "You only had to ask." Nora waved her hand as if to say "phooey". Typically Nora. Instead of making something clear at the right time, she would make reproaches after the fact. Fenek stared out the window to watch a cat slinking through the field, while Pooh and Laya clamoured for a glass of juice. Fenek, lost in thought, opened the bottle and took a swallow for himself before filling Pooh's and Laya's glasses. Shortly after that he disappeared. "Fenek!" called Nora, but no answer came. "We're eating in one hour!" "He won't be back that soon," mused Pooh, whose eyes had filled with water from drinking

so much so quickly. He looked like he would overflow. Then Laya said that if she were Nora, she wouldn't put up with any of Fenek's nonsense... not any of it.

After a hasty lunch, for which Fenek had of course not showed up, Nora unpacked her dictionaries and writing utensils, wildly determined to start in on her translation right from day one, not because it was urgent, but because the children should learn to respect her working time right from the start. Just a few yards from the house she had discovered a kind of arbour, more like a gazebo really, which she could use as a retreat. She wanted to clean it up while waiting for the farmer's wife, and then she would sit in a protected place out in the open and bring her city work into the fresh country air.

"Go on," she said to the children, as she heard the countrywoman approaching, "Go and check out the neighbourhood, or go and play somewhere — not too near my office if you don't mind — you have plenty of space here to spend your energy without hanging around me."

The farmer's wife was in a hurry, and in no time there was a fire burning in the stove, a fire which Nora,

relieved, could let go out now that she knew how to start it again. At least she thought she knew. "And the boy, thank God, is home again," said the woman, "with five stitches in the wound, but still, he didn't have to go to the hospital. And in a few days he'll be hopping around again."

Nora liked this kind of weather: the threat of rain that never came, the almost eery stillness, the sharp clarity of the surrounding mountains. This kind of weather was downright inspiring. What she felt was neither depression at the onset of the country rain, nor disappointment at having to miss out on something because of the weather. Instead she felt decidedly well, thought in many tongues, and wrote page after page. Eight weeks like this and she could achieve more than she would in three months under normal conditions. Nora grew more satisfied with herself by the hour, and she was already looking forward to the evening with the children, when they would play a game together, or read, or both, and all get along. After an afternoon like this they wouldn't be able to disturb her frame of mind.

By the time she picked up her things to carry them back inside she had far exceeded her usual daily output. She

even began to sing one of the children's songs softly to herself... "A reaper came wandering from far away Manchuria, he had on a jacket and pants made from apple peels..." and once inside she stretched out on the window-bench to completely relax before starting up the stove again. The children would be back in just a few minutes, at least she was sure of Pooh in this respect, because he certainly would be hungry by now.

She had turned on the radio to hear the evening news, and after several attempts, she really did manage to start something of a fire in the stove... even if it did smoke a bit and she had to open all the windows. Probably it was the humidity or something that caused it. And since she was in such a good mood, she decided to make pancakes for the children, even if she wasn't so crazy about them herself.

My God, she thought, as she considered the news from around the world, the things going on all over. One third of humanity is constantly preoccupied with obliterating another third, while the third third is quite happily producing the weapons for them. A i here we sit in utter peace, in the middle of the mountains, enjoying ourselves.

*Ein Schnitter kam gezogen, weit aus der Mandschurei, er hat aus Apfelschalen Hosen und Rock dabei...(Trans.)

She dropped the mixture into the pan with a ladle, and as usual the first few tries were unsuccessful, since the batter wasn't the right consistency yet. But that couldn't faze her, since by the third time it should work — and there you go, that's exactly what happened — and she could pile them on a plate to be ready for the kids when they came storming in. The evening news ended with announcements about the upcoming programmes and which ones would be particularly interesting, and she tuned the radio to a different station which just played music. Now and then she went to the window to watch for the children, but for far and wide there was no one to be seen.

The edges of the pancakes were starting to droop, and she put a bowl over the whole batch to keep them warm. Where on earth were the children? Could Pooh and Laya have gotten lost in the woods? And where had Fenek gone? The three of them could not just have disappeared right on the very first day. She probably shouldn't have just shooed them away like that. Maybe her tone had been just a bit snappy. And of course things could happen out here in the country too. She had been somewhat inclined to underestimate the dangers of country life. There was less traffic, but the locals tended to drive all the more recklessly. And there were strangers vacationing here too.

Her heart began to beat more quickly, and she went to call their names out the window. Too foolish. She hadn't set any fixed time. That would teach her a lesson. From now on it would be at six or at seven on the dot and not a minute later. This was too much. Supper was ready and soon wouldn't be fit to eat, and not one of them had shown up. As always in these situations, she told herself to stay calm. Should she go look for them? And if so, where? And probably then the fire would go out in the stove. If they were in the neighbourhood, they would certainly be home soon, and if they weren't, where should she start to look? She began to get worked up. So they're out running around without a single thought about me standing here over the stove and going through this trouble for them. It was understood that we'd have a cooked supper, wasn't it? If they just forget everything, then maybe something really could happen to them. I'm not completely foolish. What if something had really happened? She was responsible for them, even if she did say to father #1 and to her sister, "Sure, I'll do my best, but if anything happens, don't look at me...!" That was only talk, after all. The children were with her, and she was responsible for them. Why, she asked herself, why do I always get into these situations? Didn't I have enough on my hands with Pooh? No, I had to take on two more. The more heads there are, the more ideas

get into them. And who knows what's gotten into them this time.

She sat down to read the newspaper that she had forgotten since that morning. But after a quarter of an hour she couldn't stand it any more. Something had to happen. She had to go and look for them. Should she lock the door or leave it open? Who knew how long she'd be gone. Anyone could slip into the house in the meantime. Or the children could come back, find the door locked, and take off in all directions again. Too stupid. She took a jacket and went to the door.

Of course it was still daylight, but by this time they should have been home. It would soon start to get dark, Pooh was only seven, Laya was afraid of the dark, and you never knew what Fenek would be up to. She turned the key in the lock and left it there. The most stupid solution that occurred to her, but still... The children would be able to get in, and she would be able to tell if anyone was inside if she came back and the key was there but not turned. Now where should she go? She went down the slope a distance, until she had a good view of the road, but no one was there. Then she headed in the direction of the farmhouse. As unpleasant as it was for her to bother the farmer's wife

again, she would tactfully ask her where she should start to look. The woman likely knew the children well enough to know in which direction they were most probably headed. They were off to a good start, and she didn't even want to think about all the things that could possibly happen over the next eight weeks. Just in front of the barn, or to put it more precisely, just behind the dung-hill, was where she found them. The children were so engrossed in their talking and gesticulating, that they didn't even notice her until they just about came face to face.

"So," Nora hissed. "Hello, Mommy. Hello, Nora," they came running up to her and Pooch even put his arms around her hips. It was obvious they had no idea why Nora had come. "Did the fire in the stove go out and you have to ask again?" asked Laya. "It's not the fire, it's my patience that's at an end. Supper was ready ages ago. Do you have any idea what time it is?" Fenek frowned. "Guess-omatically seven-thirty!" He hadn't looked at the clock, but had figured out the time by other means. "Yes," he said then, "that's about it, since we left just before the news."

"What have you been up to?" Nora asked the Little Ones. "Were you here on the farm all this time?" They nodded. "And were you playing with the calf or rolling in the hay..."

what were you doing that was so much fun? Or were you helping out with something?" The hem of Pooh's polo shirt was hanging out as usual, showing a stripe of belly with every move he made, and Nora stuffed it back into his pants. The children said nothing for a moment, then they looked at each other, and then Pooh burst out, "That was cool, the way the guys in the space-ship just landed on the football field..."

Nora looked from one to the other. Then suddenly everything was clear.

"We were watching TV," said Pooh, "First we walked around for a while, and then we went into the farmhouse to watch TV."

"Julie came home," said Laya, "but she wanted to watch TV too, so we sat in the living room..."

"Eddy watched TV too," said Fenek, "so he could forget about the pain in his foot."

Nora sighed, more resigned than angry. "Okay, come along. And next time I want you to tell me what you're up to. I've been waiting and waiting..." Fenek ran on ahead.

"I'll turn on the light for you," he called. The sky was so cloudy that it was already beginning to get dark. Pooh and Laya took Nora's hands and tugged her along. Nora kept shaking her head as if she had a nervous tick. "Drive all the way out to the country," she muttered, "visit a farm... to watch TV..."

"And you know what?" Pooh tried to get her attention. "They had a computer that you can use to transfer your thoughts, and so of course the other guys wanted one too..."

"Which other guys?"

"Oh, the earth guys, the humans... who else?"

It was in the middle of the night when Pooh woke Fenek up. "She's bawling," he whispered, and he kept shaking Fenek until he sat up. The light was on in the other loft, and he could hear sobs that someone was trying to stifle, but which only served to shake the entire bed. Pooh had already crawled back over to Laya, and in his helplessness he leaned over her to try to comfort her. He tried to pet whatever piece of her was sticking out from under the covers

and spoke to her as he might speak to a pet guinea-pig that wouldn't eat. "It's okay," he murmured, and "What's wrong?", all in a tone of voice as if he were much older than Laya, but somehow he just couldn't manage it.

Fenek came stumbling in, still drunk with sleep, then all at once he seemed completely awake. He pulled Pooh away from Laya, "You're suffocating her," he said, "Sit down by her feet instead and make sure her blankets stay on. Hey, listen," he said to Laya then, and tried unsuccessfully to turn her face around. He groped for tissues, and, not finding any, he said to Pooh reproachfully, "I told you to buy tissues."

"We did, but the whole package of them is downstairs."

"What a mess. Then go get a cloth hanky from the trunk!" Pooh searched around for a while before coming back with a rather big one, which he handed to Fenek with some hesitation. It had belonged to father #1, a large man's handkerchief softened by many washings, which Pooh so treasured that he never even wiped his own nose with it. He always took it everywhere and had packed it in the suitcase himself. "Well, finally," Fenek eyed the hanky — of course he knew right away where it came from — and held it up to

Laya's nose. She blew her nose in it, dried her tears, and turned her face toward Fenek.

"You'll see," he said, "it's only the first months that are hard. Then they start speaking to each other again, and in time everything settles down somehow." Laya shook her head vehemently.

"You can take it from me," said Fenek, "I know the whole story by heart. And if you don't believe me, you can ask Pooh." Pooh nodded in confirmation, proud that Fenek had called him in as an authority.

Laya was still shaking her head. "That *bitch!*" she blurted out suddenly.

"What *bitch?*" Fenek sat there like a doctor about to take her pulse.

"The one that's responsible for this whole mess."

Fenek sighed. "I don't believe that fairy tale any more."

"Of course it's all that *bitch's* fault," sobbed Laya obstinately.

"Do you know who the *bitch* was in my case?" Fenek leaned over to say it right to Laya's face: "Nora." Laya flinched. "And do you know who was the *bitch* in Pooh's case? Sylvie."

"Nora is not a *bitch*," said Pooh crossly. He had started to refer to his mother as Nora, just like the others.

"That's what I'm saying," hissed Fenek. "I don't believe the story about the *bitch* any more. Or the one about the bastard, when it's the other way around, like with my mother." The hint of pride in his voice was just too much for the other two.

"It's not my father, it's my mother who wanted the divorce," said Laya bitingly, "because she wasn't putting up with that *bitch* anymore!" "My mother was the first one who wanted a divorce too," Pooh decidedly, although he wasn't a hundred percent sure of things, since he was only four when it happened.

"Har, har," said Fenek, "You haven't got a clue. You only repeat what you're told. The fact is, they're all full of shit."

"And why," Pooh asked earnestly, "why are they all full of shit?"

"How should I know? I just know that ours aren't the only parents who are this way."

"But I don't want them to be this way," said Laya between hiccups.

Fenek's face turned to a haughty grin. "What a joke..." he said calmly, "As if anyone's going to ask if you want it or not." Laya looked as though she would start to cry again.

"There's only one thing to do," said Fenek, and it sounded as though he was drawing from a wealth of experience, "Just leave them alone. Flatten back your ears, wait it out, and leave them alone."

"Flatten back your ears?" asked Laya amazed and stared spellbound at Fenek's big fox-like ears. Could she be wrong, or had he really wiggled them?

"Do it again! Please, do it again!" cried Pooh, laughing. And now he remembered what he had been waiting for ever since Fenek arrived. This was it, of course.

"How do you do that?" asked Laya, almost laughing.

"Just like this," said Fenek, and wiggled both ears again.

Laya really did laugh this time. Fenek stood up.

"And now, the fox says good-night to the grouse," and Fenek was gone.

"Do you want me to sleep next to you?" asked Pooh, stroking Laya's feet under the blanket and lost in thought.

Laya shook her head, and Pooh trotted back alone to his cold little bed. After he turned out the light, he resolved to learn to do something as impressive as Fenek's ear-wiggling. He could already flare his nostrils like a

rabbit, but so could a lot of other people. Maybe if he could learn to scratch his left ear with the toes of his right foot — from behind, of course.

"Laya?" he asked softly, "Do you think I can scratch my left ear with my right foot...*from behind, of course?*"

But Laya must have already gone back to sleep, since she didn't answer.

A few days later Laya's father came by for a few hours to visit. The *bitch* stayed in the car, which Laya's father had parked behind a hedge, a distance below the house. None of this had escaped Fenek's notice, and Laya herself felt or guessed as much. She refused to go for an ice-cream with her father. "Why don't we just stay here, seeing as you only have an hour? The cafés in this place are horrible, and their ice-cream tastes like toothpaste..." she said, and drew him to the bench in front of the house. He had brought a doll for her, the kind with the peroxide-blond hair and eyes that close, along with a case of doll-clothes. "Good," Laya said, "I didn't bring any of my dolls with me." The truth was, she didn't care so much for dolls any more. She would have preferred to have a little dog or a cat or a

bird, but apparently that wouldn't do. Her father really couldn't promise any such thing. He hadn't lived with them for some time now, and while he was there she still used to take all her dolls to bed with her, and the only animals she thought about were the kind that were stuffed. So she dressed and undressed the doll and looked in the case to see if little matching panties were there too, and she told her father that the doll was really quite beautiful. It would have been a lie to say that the doll was really *very* beautiful, so she said it was *quite* beautiful so that her father wouldn't think she wasn't happy with it at all.

Fenek and Pooh looked at each other and rolled their eyes, and not only because of the doll; after a time, Pooh couldn't control himself any more. "And so you didn't bring anything for us at all?" he asked brusquely, whereby Laya's father literally turned red, and Fenek had to come to the rescue, saying it was okay and everybody couldn't always be bringing things for each of them. "How do you mean?" her father asked at once, "Does Laya get a lot of visits?" "Naw..." said Fenek. Typical, he thought, now he's interested in whether wife #1 has some new sheik of a boyfriend who comes dancing around with her bringing Laya presents and things for everyone else too.

"I thought," said Laya's father to redeem himself. "I'd rather give you guys some money so you can buy some little thing for yourselves. I don't know you well enough to know what you'd really like."

"That's very nice of you," said Fenek, dragging the rest of the sentence out to be more audible, "but reeaally not necessary." He had noticed that Nora, who was making coffee just then, had suddenly turned an ear to the window. Soon she would say, "Absolutely out of the question," and later there would be an interrogation over it, to find out who had instigated the begging. Pooh, especially Pooh, she would say, staring hard at him, knew very well that she would never stand for it. "Yes, I know," said Laya's father, who now indeed was getting the upper hand, "that it's not necessary, but I'd like you two to have something. You're with Laya all the time, and I'm sure you share with her when you get something."

The old blackmailer. Fenek was becoming furious. What did he think? That he could buy friends for Laya? And for that he was willing to spring for pocket change? Poor Laya. Father #1 was a real truth-fanatic by comparison. At least he wouldn't pretend he was really concerned about how his kids were when he wasn't around. And in such a situation he

would probably say, "If someone gives you something, take it — and if someone takes something from you, yell!"

Nora came with the coffee, and Fenek moved the garden-table in front of the bench. Laya's father tried to kid around with Nora, and she played along with him, since it was obviously the easiest way for her to deal with him. At first Pooh had tried to get Laya's father's attention, the way he did with all the men in father-roles who came along, but since Laya's father was apparently less talented than most of them and didn't express the slightest interest in going down to the stream with him to try out his fishing rod, he soon lost interest and instead made signs to Fenek to take off together. But that was no longer an option, since the way Fenek had Laya's father figured out, he would conveniently forget that he had promised them money, and Fenek was not about to let that happen.

"Alright," said Pooh offended, "then I'll just go by myself." He went for his fishing rod and toddled off, heading for the stream.

"Say goodbye!" Nora called after him, but he purposely didn't hear her any more.

It couldn't last much longer, Fenek was sure of that. Pretty soon the *bitch* would get impatient sitting in the car, and it was clear that Laya's father wouldn't want that. They had probably thought all this out differently: when Laya went with her father for an ice-cream, she would have been forced to make the *bitch's* acquaintance without an uproar, would have had to sit at the same table with her and maybe they would have even had a friendly conversation. Now nothing had come of all their plans and Laya's father would have to explain it, saying that it would certainly work out the next time, and they needn't rush things. And sooner or later things would work out, and pretty sure by next year Laya would no longer refer to her as the *bitch*, would call her by name and either she would like her or she wouldn't, but that was surely not as much of a problem as the new boyfriend her mother would probably have by then, and with whom Laya would surely have to spend a lot more time than with the *bitch*.

"How are you making out with the three of them?" Laya's father asked Nora. "You've sure taken a lot on your shoulders." Nora laughed, and Fenek gulped angrily. They could never talk about them in other terms except as a burden on your shoulders or around your neck and so on.

"Oh, no," said Nora, and Fenek could almost have hugged her for that. "We're getting along great. I even have a chess partner," she pointed to Fenek, "who takes quite some effort to beat."

"And even then you can't," smirked Fenek, while Nora raised her hand in a threat to box his ears.

The weather was disgraceful. A disgrace to weather, that is. They hadn't been able to go swimming once since they had been here, and they even looked happy when it didn't rain constantly. They had been to visit the mine, the local history museum, all of the cafés in the surrounding area, and when Nora wanted to work, she sent them to the indoor pool in the neighbouring town, so that she could at least be undisturbed for a couple of hours. They had gone rummaging through the woods several times already, with and without Nora, but despite the mushroom guide-book, the knives and the baskets — perfect for carrying giant ones — that had been lugged around on each trip, there were still no mushrooms to be found. It had now started to clear up again and it looked as though it would really get fine, so that they all waited patiently for the sky to turn sunny and blue, and if staring at the sky had

anything to do with it, the tiniest cloud wouldn't have stood a chance.

Fenek had managed to convince Pooh and Laya to take the money her father had finally forked over for them and invest it in modelling clay. Modelling clay was a fantastic thing, and while Nora sat wrapped in blankets under the arbour, Fenek, Pooh and Laya had begun to give their creativity full reins. They made ashtrays from hand-rolled sausages and fat little pug-faced creatures whom they named after their teachers. Pooh made a figure holding a bowl, at least that's how he described it, even though it looked more like the bowl was holding the figure, and Laya produced a row of roly-poly clay children, with gaping mouths and little balled fists stuck to a pin-cushion. Of course they hadn't put down a mat, and Fenek of all people, big Fenek as Nora would say when she saw it all, began to smear the clay into the seams of the garden-table until it was completely seamless, and was filled with a feeling of contentment in this activity, even if he thought it was childish at the same time. Still, once he had his fingers in it, he couldn't stop himself. Pooh grew puzzled. "What are you doing there?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing," Fenek hummed, and Pooh began to giggle. Then he got some water and poured it over the modelling clay. He put his finger in it and began to paint. It looked particularly attractive against the wooden walls of the house. "Have you two gone crazy?" shrieked Laya, but she was already laughing and had started to mix sand and dirt into her clay, to change the colour. "Watch," said Laya, smearing thick blobs on the table and bench, then squeezing the blobs into all possible shapes with her fingers. "An elephant's trunk," giggled Pooh, "Or a tail," said Fenek. "Or a branch," cried Laya, "I see a branch." "And I see a wooden leg." Fenek hopped on one leg and painted a spot on Pooh's forehead. "Leave him alone!" Laya cried, and tried to wipe her muddy fingers on Fenek's trousers. "Are you crazy?" Fenek turned around, caught up a glob of the mud mixture, and stuffed it in the neck of Laya's dress. Pooh saw his opportunity and threw a clay ball at Fenek's stomach. That was the starting signal. They all started throwing it at each other. The ash-trays, the roly-poly figures and would-be ornaments were torn apart and made into little missiles. A few flew in through the open windows, others landed on the side of the house or on their faces. They looked like an Australian tribe, ready for the cameras to roll, and didn't at all notice that Nora, hearing their screams, was now angrily striding toward them.

Nor did they hear her over their shrieking as she roared at them to stop, or words to that effect, and although Fenek caught her from the corner of his eye, he really couldn't stop now.

"Hold it!" Nora's indignation must have taken on violent proportions. Pooh even held back a second, but had to take cover from a shot from Laya. And Laya appeared to have completely forgotten everything around her. She laughed and gurgled and threw clay blobs, and it looked as though she was really enjoying herself for the first time since they arrived. Her face was red, and all the tears yet to be cried had evaporated from her eyes.

Nora must have cried stop again at some point, and although Fenek would later recall everything clearly, he was in no way prepared for what would come next. When he saw Nora coming with the bucket from under the eaves trough, it took him only a second to figure out what would happen. By then she had already doused them with such a heavy torrent of water that it caught all three of them and knocked them off balance. Nora was so furious that she didn't even hesitate to empty the bucket in their direction, although they had already run for cover, so that the water streamed over the table and the wall making an even bigger mess.

They had of course all screamed when the cold water poured over them, and Pooh immediately started to grumble, "...if we catch cold, then it's all your fault," but when he felt the second splash he kept quiet, spitting out the mud that the first splash has sent spilling from his face into his mouth.

"So," said Nora, still angry, but with some relief in her voice, and set the pail back under the spout. Laya tried to wring out her dress and Fenek had an unpleasant feeling like the last time he had wet his pants many years ago. "So," Nora said again, and Fenek thought she'd be impossible as a teacher. Especially in boarding school. She wouldn't last three days as a teacher there, the way she got steamed up. And then Nora started to laugh. "You should see yourselves!" she cried, unable to control herself. Fenek, Pooh and Laya, who had up to then just been staring at Nora, now looked at each other for the first time, and then they had to laugh too, in spite of the terrible wet clothes.

"So," said Nora a third time, "Now go get yourselves undressed, and be quick about it."

"Here!" she called, and grabbed Pooh by the arm just as he was about to go inside. "Do you think I need all that mess in the house? Strip down to your underclothes out here." She picked up all the clothes and wondered if it would be better to let the clay dry first and brush it off, or to rinse the whole works out in the stream to avoid clogging up the drain.

By the time the children changed their clothes, Nora discovered that several of the mud missiles had landed inside the kitchen on the counter and on the stove, and was waiting menacingly in front of the house. "Everybody get a scrub-brush or a rag or whatever you can find. Pooh will wipe off the table, Laya will do the bench and Fenek — big Fenek — will kindly clean the side of the house. Have you seen this place? If the farmer's wife happened to drop in and see this, God help us, she'd have us packing our bags in no time."

It really did look grotesque, and the clay stood out even more against the dark brown house and the green furniture as it dried. All the streaks made by the water were more visible too, and Fenek didn't even want to hazard a guess as to how long it would take to clean it all up. Nora stood over them like a slave driver, waiting to be sure

they all had a duster in hand before turning to go back indoors to sweep up the muck, as she called it. "Actually, I'm foolish to be doing it, but I can tell by looking at you that it would take until tomorrow to wait for you to clean it up, which is what I *should* do!"

They heard her muttering to herself for a time, as she pushed the pots and pans to one side to get at the dried clay in between. Obviously she needed that, thought Fenek... and he was generous enough to grant her that. After all, it could have all turned out much worse. Pooh kept grumbling to himself a while, exactly like his mother indoors, threatening to douse Nora himself when she wasn't expecting it, just as soon as there was enough rainwater in the pail again. "Stop it," whispered Laya, "We've had enough rain already. Do you really want it to start pouring down again?"

"I couldn't care less," Pooh slapped his duster over the tabletop to break up the muck. Laya took the cloth from his hand. "Do it like this," she said, "If you do it like this we might just finish up before this day is over."

Pooh and Laya were already asleep and Fenek was playing chess with Nora.

"If I ever have children," said Fenek, "things will be pretty different, believe you me."

Nora didn't look up. "What do you mean, different?"

"I'll always be there for them, and there'll be no such thing as boarding-school."

"And you'll give very serious thought to it, and make a decision that you will stick to for the rest of your life, and take the responsibility, and stick to your word, even when it's very hard for you."

"Don't laugh," said Fenek, "you know exactly what I mean, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. That's the way we all imagined it at one time or another."

"I know, I know," Fenek captured one of Nora's pawns, "Just don't say 'when I was your age'..."

"Don't get me wrong," Nora still wasn't looking at Fenek. "We all thought just as seriously about it, especially where children are concerned. But somehow, it just didn't work out. And now everybody says : back then, yes, back then things were different, people couldn't afford all this splitting up, this many people wouldn't have survived... the family unit was an economic necessity. And so I ask you, if that's true, then isn't it logical that nowadays, when the family unit is no longer an absolute and economic necessity, so many families are breaking up?"

"How come? If you really love somebody, then don't you want to stay with them. And you should only have children if you really love each other," said Fenek defiantly.

"Is there anybody that you really love?" This time Nora looked at Fenek, although she knew it wasn't a fair question.

Fenek leaned his head back and didn't answer. He would never reveal what was going through his mind at that moment. It was no wonder he was such a good chess player. He could pretty much predict what Nora would answer, if he should betray himself even with a single sentence. And Australia was a long ways away.

"When I'm grown up, I'll make sure I first get a good look at the woman before I marry her."

"And what if you fall in love with one who is completely different than the one you imagine would be the right one for you?"

Fenek was silent. He knew they would never resolve anything this way.

"In all the books years ago, they used to say that families should stay together through thick and thin. And that's the way it should be."

"Depends who you're talking about." said Nora more sharply than she meant to. "Do you know what some women had to go through if they had a bit of bad luck or couldn't make it work? And do you really believe that it was always better for the children? Certainly not for the girls, who must have had the feeling the same things would happen to them someday. And it was no bed of roses for the boys either. Do you think they got away with half the things that you do? They had to tow the line or they got the strap."

"It's not so bad to be punished by somebody if you really respect and admire him..." Fenek murmured.

Nora was speechless for a moment. "You mean if somebody deliberately hit you, you'd just take it?"

Fenek laughed maliciously. "Do you think father #1 never gave me a knock or two? And what do you call *one*? It was more like left-right, right-left."

"He really hit you?" Nora's eyes grew wide. "And for what reason?"

"All kinds of reasons," Fenek tried to smile. "It didn't bother me all that much : spare the rod, spoil the child. What really bothered me was that he's the very one who can't discipline himself. Besides, he always shows up hours late."

"And are you sure he just didn't lash out with his hand? I mean," she cleared her throat, "it can happen to me too."

"Obviously he was out of control, but he looked where he was hitting."

Nora shook her head. "You must have provoked him terribly. He's just not like that otherwise."

"That's why I'm not really so angry with him." Fenek moved his knight. "By the way, you're going to lose your queen."

"Uh-oh!" said Nora.

"I just wish he could be bigger about things somehow. I don't mean that he's petty, because he's certainly not that. But he has no perspective. He doesn't look around. Sometimes I have the feeling he doesn't really accept me, like I'm just someone that he's legally responsible for, especially now, with wife #1 in Australia." He avoided saying the word mother. "More than anything, he's afraid something might happen with me that he'd have to answer for. Otherwise I think he doesn't even know I'm there, except when he takes a smack at me, then at least he feels me."

Nora stared grimly at her endangered queen and looked for something soothing or comforting to say, and the more urgently she looked for something, the less likely it seemed that anything would occur to her that she could say without turning red for shame. She moved her queen one space

further, and Fenek said, "Now you've stepped right into the trap."

"You know," Nora looked up, "That's what we all want from each other: to be bigger. We wish for someone to be bigger than us... bigger than us and therefore responsible for us, and on it goes, right up to God Himself. Responsible not only for us, but for the whole world, for the weather, the wars, and the earth's orbit. And that's why we always look for responsible people... just so that the really guilty ones aren't always held responsible. Not that I want to excuse your father or myself for everything, but it's just that so much has gotten jumbled up in the last decades that it's not so easy to divide up the guilt any more. Everything is changing. Generations had to fight for particular freedoms, such as being able to choose your own spouse, and to be able to go back on your choice if it turns out to be the wrong one, and now that we have so much freedom, we're inclined to overestimate ourselves and our possibilities. We're continually trying to undo what's been done whenever we have the feeling it's not working out the way we wanted."

"Father #1 would undo me if he could," Fenek tried to laugh. "Unfortunately it doesn't work that way."

"No, it doesn't work that way," said Nora, "Thank God it doesn't. He just keeps trying to start over, and every time that it still doesn't work out, he thinks it's because he has too many ties. But nobody can just cross off the experiences and events in their life, and the things you've done come back to you. It's just terribly hard to realize that of the hundred possibilities open to you, about ninety-eight of them just look possible. So you keep trying and trying..."

"Until it turns out that there was nothing there after all, and you have to get a whole new team together again..." Fenek finally captured Nora's queen.

"I admit," said Nora, "that you can look at it that way, as sorry as I am to say so. But try to see it from another angle. Years ago people had so many children because it was the only way to be looked after in your old age. Children were like property. And even longer ago fathers could decide the life or death of their children according to the number of mouths they were able to feed. I know it sounds cruel. But love between parents and children was bound up in a string of necessities; it was all a question of survival. I don't mean to say that there's no need for love today... just the opposite... but for most of

us it just looks as though we've been left behind on our own. Love is really a living thing that can grow stronger or weaker, and can either focus on one person or be shared among many. If I know you're not going to get gobbled up by wild animals the minute I take my eyes off you, then I can allow myself to lose sight of you every now and then."

"You're going on," said Fenek as he lined up all the pieces he had captured from Nora, "as if there were no such thing any more as a normal family where things work out just fine, with a father and mother and children who can all depend on each other."

"Sure there is," Nora stared thoughtfully into space. "Of course there is..."

"I don't mean the kind that just act as if they're a family, when they really can't stand each other. I mean families where everybody looks forward to the weekend so they can all do something together. Families where children have something to laugh about..."

"Oh, Fenek, I wished for the same thing too. And I laughed a lot with your father, but suddenly it just didn't work any more, and we kept moving further apart just to

avoid tearing a piece out of each other until it ended up with each of us off in our own corner wishing we could start all over again."

"Why did you marry him in the first place?" Fenek set up the pieces for a new game and turned the board around.

"Why?" Nora was still staring. "Yes, why did I?"

"What even gave you the idea? Certainly you must have loved him." He said the word like a movie actor, yet it sounded as though he just wanted to get it out of the way and forget about it. "You certainly knew him long enough and knew what he was like. Why did you go ahead and marry him anyway?"

"Why?" Nora's face was still blank. "I thought it was what I wanted at the time."

"And were you completely sure?"

"Pretty sure."

"But why him exactly?"

"There are people," said Nora, "that just draw you to them because they make you laugh, and because they talk to you in a way that makes you feel incredibly happy to be with them. Your father is just such a person. Not always. But when things are going his way, it's just a wonderful experience to be with him. There are so many people that bore you. Your father doesn't let that happen — either he plays all his trump cards or he's insufferable, but I was never bored with him."

"But marriage, why did you marry him?" On Fenek's face was a look of total suspense. "You were already together."

Nora rubbed her fingers. "Because of Pooh. I wanted Pooh to be born under *normal* circumstances. Back then I still thought it was important for a child to be born into a marriage. I thought the child should have a father, a mother and a name, and not always have to be explaining things."

"Do you still think so?"

Nora shook her head slowly. "I think above all a child needs to have people to turn to, no matter who they are. And he should develop a sense for who those people might be,

and how to draw them in. You know, the way I see it, children are quite capable of singling people out. I'm afraid you're going to have to get used to the idea of giving all the confused and overwrought mothers and fathers another chance. You'll just have to pitch in and bring us all back to our senses. It will depend on you, and on Pooh and Laya too, which way the pendulum swings, since right now it's just going around and around. Someday you'll be fathers and mothers too, and even if you don't want to be like us, we'll probably all have to put our heads together and figure something out."

"Nothing could be easier," said Fenek, "I'll get married, have children and put my family above everything else."

"Nothing could be more difficult, Fenek. I'm only hearing you say *I'll* get married, *I'll* have children, *I'll* take care of *my* family. If it only depended on you, I might say your chances are good. But it doesn't only depend on you. All the struggles and confusion we had, had to be for something. It's never too early to get used to the idea that things do indeed depend on you, but they depend just as much on the other people you'll be living with. The little bit more justice we all wanted was hard enough to come by

that we shouldn't lose sight of it just when things get easier."

"I just can't understand," said Fenek, knocking on the tabletop with his rook, "why some people have so much trouble, why they can't last long with anybody."

"People are different, Fenek. And they're not all equally dependent on others like they used to be. And less dependent people are also less tolerant. On the other hand, we all like others to like us. It shows us that we're lovable. And the more people like us, the greater the temptation to start over with someone new. You can get too used to affection, and when you're used to it, it gets dull, and something new looks more attractive."

"I still find it all pretty unfair," said Fenek.

"It is, but like and dislike have nothing to do with fairness. We just have to try to not let ourselves be deluded so often and to not let our delusions run away with all our other feelings. We haven't learned how to handle our new-found freedom too well yet, but we'll figure it out. The fact that we're all here together for the summer, that's something in itself."

"And don't laugh," said Fenek — and it was obvious he wanted to end the conversation — "but I'm glad to be here. How did I put it..." he asked, "...like a kindred spirit? Do you want to play another game with me?"

Nora had to yawn. "Oh, no. You'll have to wait a while now, after that pillage."

"Coward!" cried Fenek, and began to put away the chess pieces. To be truthful, he was also quite sleepy, and if he didn't go straight to bed and through that little hole of sleep, he would surely be lying awake for hours thinking about all the things that Nora had said.

All at once there it was, the radiant summer weather, uncompromising, without any suspicious-looking clouds on the horizon and without any of the treacherous damp air hanging so heavily on the mountains that one could trip over it. Pooh was the first to notice it, and decided to lose no time in spreading the good news. He pulled Laya's blanket off, but she lay there sound asleep with her nightie pulled up and her bare bottom showing. Pooh just couldn't resist, and he pinched her on the left cheek.

"Pooh!" she screamed, in so many octaves that her voice cracked. And the scuffle that followed — Laya of course wanted her blanket back — woke Fenek and Nora anyway.

"Fenek, help me!" Laya screamed, as she saw him creeping through their room toward the toilet. But he was in no mood for wrestling. "Nice weather today," he said appeasingly, "Everyone out of the hollows and on with the swim-fins." With that, Pooh at last let go of the blanket, and practical as he was in some things, he pulled on his swim trunks right away so as to save himself a lot of unnecessary movements. Just as he wanted to slip out of the bedroom, Laya's pillow hit him with such a force that he bumped himself on the door frame. He was angry enough to pounce on Laya when he heard Nora call out, "Keep it quiet up there, the ceiling's already coming apart again!" The ceiling was made of wood, and the heat from the stove had already caused a number of cracks in the boards to open up, allowing dust and sand and other filler to trickle out and cover the stove, which then smelled terribly when heated. "Just wait," threatened Pooh, "I'll dunk you right down to the bottom today, even if it makes you drown!"

"Haw, haw," teased the grouse, "See who'll do it first!"

Pooh blundered downstairs. "So, Pooh-bear, how about a bite to eat?" Nora seemed to be in the best of moods. She even gave him a kiss on his bump without saying serves you right or that's what you get.

Fenek had already pedalled off for milk and fresh rolls, and Pooh was awkwardly brushing his teeth when Laya came clomping downstairs. Naturally she kept her wooden clogs on going up and down the stairs. She had just started to set the garden table for breakfast, when Fenek arrived back already. "Do you guys have a pump for the air-mattresses, or should I take the bicycle pump?" he asked Nora as he made his usual pyramid of bread rolls.

"Pump here," said Nora, sailor-like.

"Pump broken," mumbled Pooh, head down.

"What do you mean?" they all charged at once.

"Can't a person have an accident?" cried Pooh, outraged.

"So what happened to it?" Nora seemed to be still in a good mood.

"There was a spider in my bed, this big..."

He placed his two index fingers at least five centimetres apart. Laya rolled her eyes contemptuously. "And since I didn't want to pick it up, I took the pump to blow it away. And when it didn't work I pulled the valve a little bit and it just broke."

"And that's how the pump got broken?" Nora couldn't believe it.

"And then," said Pooh, "I thought that since it was no good any more I could use the tubing for fishing."

"For fishing?" Even Fenek was amazed.

"Well, yeah. I thought it almost looks like a worm, except it's a lot bigger, and since it's so big, maybe a big fish will bite it."

Nora laughed, Fenek howled, and the grouse cackled. Pooh mumbled unhappily to himself and offered to go and get the bicycle pump.

"Oh, no you don't," cried Fenek. "The tube has a pattern on it like a garter snake, and you'd only take it out to catch storks with!"

Their arms ached with the load... air-mattresses, bath-towels, swim-fins and food supplies. They lugged and groaned and swore. Only Fenek had it good; he had told them he would ride on ahead with his bike to save them standing in line for admission, but he really meant to prevent them from piling so much stuff on his bike that he'd end up having to push it. Pooh's large baseball cap that he had been given at the bank where Nora went to withdraw money every week came in handy. Laya had also been offered one, but had declined, saying that the big peak wouldn't suit her face. Now she was envious of Pooh, and she toyed secretly with the thought of how she might just take it from him, but the opportunity wasn't yet favourable and Nora was still too close by.

When they finally arrived, Fenek was standing alone and bored in front of the entrance, waving the admission tickets. He made no mention of any waiting line.

There was that unmistakable smell of chlorinated water, of sun-warmed wooden chairs and various oils and

creams that met their noses all at once, and they drew it all in, tasting it like something yearned-for, but no longer really expected.

Males and females had to separate at the turnstiles, and after arguing a while over where they would meet up, Pooh and Fenek marched off in one direction, Laya and Nora in the other.

They picked out a nice spot for themselves on the lawn, half in the shade, half in the blazing sun, and set up their fortress of air-mattresses and inflated rubber toys. Fortunately they could all swim, which reassured Nora, and the pool wasn't all that big that they could really get lost.

Nora didn't want to get in the water straight away. With her whole being, she felt the enjoyment of lying stretched out in the sun. She would have loved to be able to turn herself inside out, so that the sun could shine on every part of her. Then later on, later she would step slowly into the water and swim up and down the pool a few times until she was completely cooled off, and then she would stretch out in the sun again. She opened her eyes just a crack under her sunglasses and looked through the

tree branches at that flawless, untouched sky, so unquestionably blue as to banish any thought of it being covered over in any way.

So there she was, alone with three children whom she had more or less volunteered to take on, with no man and none of the friends who otherwise made her feel she wasn't at all as alone as she sometimes felt.

She had gotten a lot of work done, in spite of the rain, and in spite of the children not always respecting her wishes as to her stated working hours. Or perhaps because of the rain and the children, who prevented her from thinking too much about her life alone. It would have been a lie to say she felt no lack of anything, but on the other hand, the children were better company than she had expected. And as long as she was in a good mood, the children were easy to get along with too. It still amazed her, how suddenly a mood could change, how quickly the children reacted to her or to each other, especially if someone was angry. When her temper gave out, she could always be sure there'd be quarrelling amongst the children soon after, even if they didn't really hold it against her. She knew she was only human after all, and when all her ranting and raving was over with, the children knew it too.

All in all, this vacation could have turned out much worse, and it wasn't always so good for Pooh to be alone with her.

This day had put her in a conciliatory mood, so that she was even up to thinking about the next summer with the same cast of characters, when just then she started to choke. Those two monsters Pooh and Laya, the two inseparable enemies, had filled her bathing-cap with water and dumped it out over her belly. "Just wait!", she snorted like a fire-breathing dragon, ready to throw them off the five-metre diving board with her own hands. But the two of them had already run for cover, that is to say, as close to other people as they could get, and were doubled over with laughter. So she would get in the water now after all. She made one last threatening gesture in their direction, picked up her bathing cap, put it down — what use was it, if it was wet — picked it up again — you weren't allowed in the pool without a bathing-cap — went back again to lay down her sunglasses, and was grabbed from behind by two icy wet arms belonging to Fenek. "Aaagh," said Fenek to her back, but Nora only waved him off more tiredly. They wouldn't even grant her the little bit of sun. Kids, mischievous as monkeys, and she thought she could get along with them. When she was finally in the water, she forgot all about it, and when Pooh came hopping after her she cuddled him like

she used to when he was a baby and let him climb up onto her shoulders to jump into the water. And even Laya, thin delicate Laya with the knock-kneed grouse legs, cuddled in her arms and wouldn't let Pooh come near. She held the two of them for a while, and then Fenek came from behind to put an arm around her neck to keep the other two from coming cackling after him like rabid ducks.

Water soothes. It felt good there, and after they broke away from her to play water-polo with other children, she kept swimming up and down the pool until her tired arms could almost move no more. How simple it could be sometimes, to be happy. She imagined father #1 travelling around America with Sylvie. How they moved about in a rented car over endless highways from city to city, the sun beating through the windshield, and she shook herself. She was careful not to think about any of the many swimming-pools in America; such thoughts were simply not allowed. Or her sister, who was now at summer-school, in class all day long and most likely hanging around bars all night, ending up with a hangover the next day. Brrrr.

She really never would have recognized him, at least not right away. Nora was sitting in front of the canteen, a

broad-brimmed straw hat on her head and a towel over her slightly reddened shoulders, drinking a large coffee. From time to time she would look out over the pool and wave at the children, when she could tell them apart from all the other brightly-coloured bathing-cap heads, and otherwise enjoyed letting the sun shine on her stomach and legs with her head and shoulders in the shade. These were the famous days to look back on whenever they would mention *vacation*. And although there were usually never more than a few such days in a summer that fit such an immaculate recollection, these were the days that would stand behind that word, and give it that wonderful sunshiny sound.

At first he only saw her side on, but then he moved to sit across from her, and when his stare started to bother her, he became convinced enough to begin to smile. As he opened his mouth, something dawned on her, and after she heard him say her name, it all came back. That must be Layosh Molnar, who had gone to school with her. His parents had left Hungary in 1956, and on his first day at school he could barely speak a word of German. Now he spoke without the slightest accent and said that he had practically forgotten his Hungarian, which certainly couldn't be true, but then Layosh had always been one for over- or understatements.

"My God," said Nora, "I never expected to see you again!"

"Why not?" he asked, and insisted that he had recognized her immediately, when she was in the pool. She hadn't changed a bit, and was even looking younger and slimmer than himself. Nora laughed, and Layosh showed her his fat belly, which was nothing more than a little fold of bacon over the waistband of his bathing suit when he bent forward, and showed her his grey hairs, which he really did have, but which didn't make his face look any older.

So naturally they began to tell each other about what they'd been doing and how they had been living over the years. Layosh had become a precision-instrument maker and was working in a firm for optical equipment, making microscopes. "I would have liked to have studied," he went on, "but you remember how my parents had to start all over again, and then when my mother got sick I had to get out and earn some money."

"But you're not unhappy with your job, are you?" asked Nora, concerned.

"Not at all," Layosh lit himself a cigarette. "You might say I'm *in demand*, and my mind is taken up with my hobbies."

"Hobbies?" Nora looked at him suspiciously. You never knew with Layosh, if he wasn't laying some harmless-looking trap for you, setting off a peal of laughter when you fell into it.

"Are you hunting for unicorns? Or are you assembling a complete set of pictures of mail coaches that went from Vienna to St. Petersburg in the seventeenth century?"

Layosh shook his head in playful earnest. "Guess again."

"Are you spinning gold out of straw? Fighting battles with tin soldiers? Or do you spend your weekends watching the armwrestling matches at the local pub?"

Layosh laughed. "You'll never guess. Nothing so grand at all. In the winter I go skiing, in the summer I go swimming; if I have to, I read a few books, and otherwise I collect old clocks, fusees, and friendly faces."

"No wonder you live alone," said Nora, "with that expense."

"You have to enjoy life before your hair turns white," Layosh pointed to his greying head, "and for as long as you're *in demand*. For the rest, I see myself as a kind of semi-nomad, happy to share my tent with passers-by."

"So that's what you are." Nora laughed heartily and with the good graces of someone not directly affected.

Suddenly they were all around her, all three of them, and for a moment Nora thought they reminded her of a posse sent out to investigate some new situation. Pooh laid his hand on her knee before beginning to speak, and Laya sized up Layosh quite openly, and not in the most friendly way either. Fenek leaned over to Pooh and whispered loud enough for all to hear, "Ask Mommy if we can have an ice-cream." Nora took a second before she understood what was meant by his "Mommy". Of course he would never address her himself as Mommy, but why he cleverly referred to her as the overall mother perplexed her, especially when she thought what that might mean.

"Are they all yours?" asked Layosh, his jovial laughter not quite concealing his surprise.

"You could say that," Nora laughed tiredly and saw Fenek nudge Pooh, who was about to cry in protest.

"Mommy," said Laya unashamedly and as a matter of fact, "We're so warm, can we have an ice-cream?"

Sounds like a conspiracy, thought Nora; they seemed to fear the worst. Simply ridiculous. She had only been sitting there with Layosh for half an hour, and here was a raid already.

"Well, of course," said Layosh, and before Nora could intervene, he had the money out of his pocket. Nora didn't bother to speak up; that's how worried she was about how the children would react. Startled, Fenek and Laya looked at each other and hesitated, but Pooh reached out for the money and said, "Thanks, that's very nice of you!" And then he beamed at Layosh with one of his "gift" looks that everybody always found so touching, while at the same time thinking how he would divide 20 shillings among the three of them without raising a racket. She had him figured out, because just then he turned to her and said, as if thinking aloud,

"So how much is three into twenty?" Then, just to make it look better, he raised his finger with the solution. "Three sixes are eighteen," he said, "and two left over. And since I'm having a 'Cremissimo', that leaves at least enough for Fenek and Laya to have a 'Paiper'."

Nora reached into her purse and gave Poch another four shillings. "That should make the arithmetic easier for you."

And before they ran off, she added, "By the way, this is Layosh Molnar, who went to school with me years and years ago."

"Oh," said Laya, relieved. "We thought some stranger was chatting you up." Fenek cleared his throat but said nothing, as if he had no delusions about it making any difference whether you knew somebody from before or not. The main thing was how much time they would cost you.

She gazed after the children, watching how they trotted over to the ice-cream stand, distracted by the money in their hands yet still concerned that somehow the relationships they had finally established could change again. The fact that they could even be engaged in such

considerations made Nora stop to wonder what could be going on in their heads. She thought she could guess when it came to Pooh, but as for Laya and Fenek?

"Well, I guess your time's accounted for," said Layosh, "Three like those are not exactly *child's play*. Are they really all yours?"

"For now, at least," answered Nora. "I only gave birth to the little guy, but the others are part of the family."

"So you've sacrificed yourself for a certain time? That's just like you."

How strange that sounds, thought Nora, *sacrificed yourself*. All these phrases were starting to drive her to despair. No wonder the children were so sensitive, if they kept hearing about themselves in terms of *sacrifice* all the time. She looked up. What could this Layosh possibly know about it. "Not really," she said, "It's certainly a lot less troublesome than looking after a picky man."

Layosh laughed. "Come on, you make it sound like a man would have nothing to offer you."

There was another word, *offer* somebody something. She was afraid that if she didn't soon stop struggling with so many such phrases and words, she'd never see an end to it.

"*Offer?*" she said to Layosh. "He wouldn't need to *offer* me anything, just help me have a little fun!" That was far from a complete description of the situation, but at least it was a different angle on it.

Layosh bowed. "I shall do my best."

Nora stood up. "I'm going to take another dip; are you coming? Our blankets are over there, and I just need to go get my bathing cap."

"I'm not letting you out of my sight." Layosh made a telescope with his hands. "Now that I've found you after so many years, I'm not going to let you give me the slip all over again."

Later they lay under the tree, with half their bodies in the sun. Layosh had brought his blanket over and was talking to the children. He was only here for the weekend, since he had to work during the week. Fathers got priority for time off this time of year, because of the school

vacation. But he didn't really mind taking his vacation in June or September since the weather was more predictable then anyway and there weren't so many people everywhere.

"Do you know," said Layosh, after the children had toddled off again, "I thought about you often over all these years."

Nora avoided looking at him. "Don't exaggerate. And how did you happen to think so often about me of all people?"

"I had a thing for you back then." He rubbed her arm lightly with his hand, which wasn't at all unpleasant.

"Ha, ha," said Nora sarcastically, "and when I stepped on your toes in that dance class you gave such a loud yell, I got teased by the whole class."

"You still remember that?" Layosh laughed unbelievably. "That was my way of showing my feelings for you."

"Well, I certainly didn't notice."

"Because I was such a coward. You always seemed so unapproachable to me. Unapproachable, but somehow nice all the same. And do you still remember that time doing seat-work in German class, how you fixed my spelling mistakes? We just switched notebooks and pens and you tried to imitate my handwriting."

Nora couldn't remember. "And..." she said, "did anybody ever catch on?"

Layosh shook his head. "Fortunately, you overlooked some of my mistakes, maybe on purpose, so that my sudden familiarity with the German language wouldn't look too suspicious. That way, Mrs. Hudinetz was able to believe my occasional moments of inspiration. 'Read, read, Molnar', she used to say, 'that's your only hope.' And 'the fruits of reading will always do you good, even when you still make a few incorrect statements, because in the end you'll always remember how the word looked, and then you get it right.' That's how she thought I'd improve."

"Old Hudinetz," Nora looked past Layosh and saw their common school past. "Actually, I liked her. She always talked so enthusiastically to us about books she had just read, and she was always so disappointed when we didn't read

them in spite of her most glowing recommendations. She even allowed us to borrow her books, and I think she must have lost a good part of her collection that way."

Layosh lay on his back, sunning himself. He had a blade of grass between his fingers and tickled Nora with it, and she seemed to find nothing objectionable. She saw Fenek running around after a ball with some other boys his age, and saw how he simply jumped over the other sunbathers in the pursuit. They certainly wouldn't put up with that for long, but he would have to deal with that himself. Pooh and Laya were still in the water, and sooner or later she would have to drag them out with all her strength before they just dissolved in there, but there was no rush. She felt good there, in the sun next to Layosh, and everything else would take care of itself.

It was Layosh that made Pooh so happy that evening when he drove them home. First, he liked being in a car and second, he was very, very tired. They invited Layosh in for a small supper, and Pooh sat next to him trying to talk him into a game of Othello, but nothing came of it in the end and Pooh fell asleep on the window-bench, managing yet again to save himself from bathing and brushing his teeth. Fenek

came home much later, since he had to hang around with his new friends for a while. And Laya sighed with relief when Layosh said it was time for him to go, as he was staying in the neighbouring village, and had promised to look in on an old friend there. They would see each other at the pool again tomorrow, and he'd be there next weekend again too, barring any unexpected snowstorm.

"A snowstorm?" asked Laya, perplexed. "You must be crazy."

"Laya," Nora put her arm around her as they stood on the doorstep. Layosh laughed and said, "Of course I'm crazy. That's the way I am."

"Laya," said Nora again, "Can't you tell when somebody's joking?"

"Oh, I see," said Laya. "Sure." But as Layosh got in the car, she thought, "I don't find it so funny at all, but you probably like everything that he does."

Only after they were all in bed did Nora allow the pleasant feeling to come over her again. To have found

somebody again after so many years, without being disappointed in how he had changed.

Layosh was already back in the city, and the weather too had deviated considerably from the imaginary ideal. In the mornings they would keep running to the window or up to the door to try to read from the cloud formations whether they should pack their swim things or go for a walk in the woods instead. First it would look like rain, then the sun would shine again as if the earth were a burning-glass. Pooh ran around in his swim shorts the whole time anyway, as if that would conjure up the weather to accommodate him. Fenek was the least affected of all of them. He was only concerned about meeting up with his friends, who would always come up with something to do whether they were in the pool or in the woods. Pooh and Laya certainly had their fights with him, but they didn't at all like it when he simply took off.

"You're the one that said we look like a family and so we are a family," Laya charged him.

"Yeah, so?" said Fenek. "That's why you're allowed to have your own friends. You guys could invite Julie over here."

"Oh, her. She's still too small," said Laya scornfully.

"Well, she's not that much smaller than the two of you," called Fenek, jumping on his bike to go call for Eddy, whose foot was already almost better.

There were times when Pooh and Laya played very devotedly with one another, playing assumed roles for hours. When Nora unintentionally or intentionally listened in on them, she was touched and moved by their conversations and wondered where they could have picked up such things.

"You know what?," said Pooh to Laya just when Nora needed to come in for more paper. "Let's play like I had an accident and am in the hospital." He let his arm hang from the bench and began to moan. "And you're my wife and come to visit me. And I tell you, you can go ahead and get another husband since I'm way too sick." With that he started moaning and groaning pitifully.

"And where would I find a new one?" asked Laya reproachfully.

"Well, okay," Pooh dangled his *multi-fractured* arm. "Then you have to stay at the hospital all the time and take care of me."

Laya packed up her things, and explained to the imaginary hospital doorman that she would have to nurse her husband herself, as she didn't know where she would find another one.

"You have to cook really special good things for me, or else I'll never get better. So, ask me what I want to eat."

"If you're going to boss me around, you can cook your own food," grumbled Laya, and for a minute it looked like she might step out of her role. "I'm not really bossing you," Pooh gave in. "We're only pretending that I'm really sick. And if you want me to get better, then you have to ask me what I want to eat, like this: Oh my dear husband, what are you hungry for?"

"Oh my dear husband, what are you hungry for?", tooted Laya in a sweet voice.

"Nothing," groaned Pooh. "A pancake."

"A pancake, my darling? Would you like a plain pancake, a potato pancake, or a sweet pancake?"

"A sweet..." murmured Pooh with a dying voice.

"With raisins or without?"

"With..." groaned Pooh. Suddenly he sat up. "And with loads of plum jam," he said in a normal voice. "And don't forget, you old goat!"

"Lie down!" screamed Laya. "What do you think? I'm not making you any pancakes. I'll make a pretend pancake."

"Yes, please," Pooh groaned again. "I'm so sick, I can't even move..." Then he sat up again. "You know what? Let's pretend now that you're sick and I'm the doctor."

Nora had come in for her paper, and the children stopped their game for as long as she was in the house.

Nora opened the dictionary and looked for meanings that just wouldn't come to her. Pooh and Laya were only to be heard when they screamed loudly, which did happen from time to time. Sometimes they chased each other outside around the house, only daring to come to her in cases of greatest necessity. She had been able to make them understand that these few hours of work in the afternoon were a matter of survival. Only if she held regularly to these working hours could she get away with not showing up at the office. They all understood that office meant city, and a maximum of two weeks for going anywhere else. Of course Pooh was the one who tried most often to break these iron rules. As Nora's son #1 and only child he felt sure enough of himself to rebel against absolute necessities from time to time by interrupting Nora for something out of the blue, either to take them somewhere, or to explain some other request. Sometimes Laya or Fenek would try to stop him.

"Stop it," they would say. "You know what will happen if you keep it up." Pooh was not easily dissuaded, but they usually managed to bring him to reason.

Nora tried to continue working at the same pace as before, but it just wasn't going as well. Thoughts of Layosh kept getting in the way. She was already imagining

him coming on outings or playing parcheesi with all of them. And even if he only came on the weekends, it would still be very nice to have him around. And she was sure the children would also soon be glad to see him coming, even if it didn't work out that way the first time. She didn't want to waste any time thinking that Layosh might not be so thrilled about the children. My God, she wasn't asking for very much, a little company for her to enjoy, a kind of a change, a little excitement, and to spend some time together. Everything else would work itself out, or maybe it wouldn't either, but she didn't want to think about it.

Nora was just about to take her usual half-time break to make herself a cup of coffee. It was quiet in the house and she assumed that the children had gone off to the farm next door, at least she had seen Pooh go that way. He and Laya were getting on well with Julie these days, especially when there was something interesting on television.

At first she thought the noise was coming from outside, but when the sobbing began in again, she knew it was coming from the loft. She covered the full coffee cup with the saucer to stop any dust from falling into it when she climbed the ladder and walked about upstairs.

It was Laya, lying on her bed and crying so bitterly it nearly broke Nora's heart to hear her. She sat carefully on the side of the bed, since Laya had probably not heard her come in. "Laya-child," she said softly, and began to stroke her gently. Laya sat up and, before Nora knew it, plopped her head in Nora's lap. "What ever is the matter?" asked Nora. "What's wrong enough to make you cry so much?" Laya only shook her head for a while and then reached for a handkerchief. After she had blown her nose and gulped a few times, she said, "Fenek got a letter from his mother in Australia today. Just imagine, she sends a letter all the way from Australia, and what about my mother? My mother sits in Vienna and doesn't write me at all, even though it's much closer and doesn't cost nearly as much."

"Laya-child," said Nora again, and almost had to laugh. "Distance doesn't have anything to do with it, and if it did it would be just the opposite. It's precisely because your mother's not far away and we can call her every week that she doesn't write."

"But what's the real reason why she doesn't write to me? Because she forgot about me."

"But you speak to each other on the phone."

"Yes, whenever we call her from the post office, she can't help but think about me, because I'm speaking to her. But what about her?"

Nora cuddled Laya like a baby in her arms. "Laya, Laya," she said. "Always the same old story. And you know it, too. I know your mother well enough to have an idea of how much she's thinking about you. But you know, she's alone and that's not good for her. So she has to find her own friends, and she must certainly be kept busy at the university."

"But she has me. What does she need other friends for, when she has me?"

"And where are you? You're here with us and you have us for company. And I can't imagine you would have very much fun sitting in the city waiting for your mother all day until her classes are finished."

Laya sobbed. "But she's my mother, she belongs to me and I want her to write me a letter."

"How old are you now?" asked Nora in feigned uncertainty.

"Almost eight already. I'll be eight on the fifth of September."

"Just think ahead ten years. I know you can hardly manage that, but just try."

"Why shouldn't I manage it? When I'm eighteen I'll be able to do whatever I want."

"You see!"

"What should I see?"

"Now just imagine, you're eighteen and your mother says: what does Laya want with other friends when she has me? I gave up all my friends when she was small, and she should keep me company now. She's my child, and I want her to think about me all the time. How would you like that?"

Laya sobbed softly and said nothing.

"I know," Nora continued stroking her, "that you can't always look ahead ten years, but perhaps you can try to be glad that your mother has a little bit of entertainment in her life. And you know," Nora whispered, "the secret is,

that grown-ups are often much nicer with their children when they can have a little fun for themselves. And from what I've seen and heard in the last while, it could only do your mother good to cheer up a bit."

Laya pulled her mouth into an unsuccessful grin. "But she could still write to me," she said.

Nora thought a while. "Maybe she just never thought about it. You know what, why don't you write to her? Then she'll surely answer you, and then you'll receive letters too. Sometimes you just have to help things along." Nora cleared her throat. "My little sister is not always so quick to understand things."

Laya made herself comfortable on Nora's arm. "Do you think..." She hesitated. But as Nora's gaze encouraged her, she began again. "Do you think my mother's found a new sheik?"

Nora's arms dropped and Laya had to hold on about her neck.

"Where did you get such an idea?" Nora sounded slightly aghast.

"Fenek says that's what always happens, and I'm afraid I won't like him and then they'll gang up on me."

Nora thought a moment. "Well, I haven't heard anything about one yet. And even if she did, there's no reason for you to panic. Wait it out. Don't start worrying about it for no reason. Your mother is not going to leave you high and dry. And besides..." — Nora didn't want to get sentimental — "besides, you always have us. There's no reason why you can't let her have a new boyfriend, he won't be some kind of monster or anything. And sooner or later you'll have your own boyfriend. In one way Fenek is right, that it always turns out that way. And if you ask me, I think that's just fine. It's wonderful to have old friends, but it's just as marvellous to make a new friend."

Laya looked thoughtfully into Nora's eyes. "Are you saying that because of Layosh?"

Nora started. "What do you mean, because of Layosh?"

"So that we won't think everything is going to change on his account, for us I mean?"

Nora blew a little strand of hair from Laya's forehead. "Because I spent one evening with Layosh? On Sunday night before he left? Laya, that's ridiculous. You were all so tired, that you all just fell into bed, even Fenek. And didn't Layosh play water-polo with you and tell you stories? And didn't we all have a really lovely day?"

Laya nodded through her sobs. "Yes, but what if you two start to fight, what then?"

Nora hadn't thought of that of course, and so much had she not thought of it that for a second she didn't know what to say.

"That's how it always starts, Fenek says. And even Pooh can remember how angry you and his father were. And if I told you what my mother and my father did... They didn't fight, they just didn't speak to each other for days, which is a lot worse, believe me."

"You fight with each other and don't speak to each other, you and Pooh and Fenek I mean. And everything is far from over amongst you," objected Nora, still somewhat bewildered.

"But that's different. Besides, we're children and not married to each other," Laya sneered slightly, "not like a couple."

"I quite like Layosh," said Nora. "And besides, I'm a grown-up now. Grown-ups need other grown-ups just like you children need other children, and it doesn't mean I'm abandoning you."

"But say Layosh wanted you to go somewhere with him alone? And if you didn't you would fight?"

Nora smiled. "You can always warn me whenever you get the feeling that we're going to have a fight. And then I'll say: Let's wait and see. Okay?"

"You know," Laya had sat up and was looking at Nora straight on, "Pooh would be very sad if you went away somewhere alone with Layosh. And then when you came back he would even feel worse than he does now."

"Did Pooh tell you that?"

"No. But I know that's how it is. First you feel sad, then you feel angry, and then you have to let it out somehow."

"So it really is a kind of blackmail, is it?" Nora attempted to laugh, then she continued: "I think you all can trust me. I mean, in general. It's not against the law for me to want a day's rest here and there. But on the whole you can trust me, don't you think? You might laugh at this, but I enjoy being with all of you. Even when you behave like little toads, and I'd like to throw you all out the window. And other times I find you all so sweet I could kiss your faces off," and indeed she did kiss Laya on both cheeks. "I think we've managed to become friends, and I hope that we'll be friends in the future too, I mean when I'm not taking care of you any more. Laya's coming over today, I'll say, and pin up my grey hair. I wonder what kind of a boyfriend she's got with her today? Hopefully he'll be patient with me, and will let me chat with her as much as I like. Maybe he'll be terribly selfish and want Laya all to himself. But after all, Laya and I are friends and have all kinds of things to tell each other. Or wait, I can see it coming, you'll call me up all excited and say: Nora? Guess what? I've got tickets for the concert tonight. We really want to go but I don't know what to do

with the baby. I can't leave her alone. No, you can't, I'll say, but you're in luck, because I don't have any tickets for the concert, and if you'd like, I'll come and baby-sit. That is, if your mother's too busy. That's just it, you'll say, she's gone to a conference and doesn't know what time she'll be free."

"And what if I don't have a baby?" asked Laya, slyly.

"Then here's what will happen," and Nora held up her hand as if she were speaking on the telephone, and pretended she was Laya. "Nora? You know what? I'm completely burnt out. I've just had two exams, one right after the other, and how do you think I feel? And Paul, that stupid guy, picked this very time to go off to England to study. I'm completely floored. I feel miserable and bored, and if something doesn't happen soon, I'm going to throw myself out the window... And I'll say: Well I don't think that would be too good for your bones, but I just finished translating a book, a terrible cheap novel, and I feel exactly the same way. Why don't we be bored together? What do you say to a fancy restaurant, and if you like, we can go to a movie afterwards..."

Laya grinned. "Don't you want to tell me more about who this Paul is supposed to be?"

"No. And maybe his name won't be Paul, maybe it will be Robert or Carl or What's-his-name. I'm no clairvoyant."

Just then they heard Pooh call 'Mama', and they knew it must be something important if he forgot to call her Nora.

Nora sighed. "You guys wear me out. Just when you've stopped bawling I have to get ready for the next one."

They both looked out through the attic window and observed Pooh trudging up to the house with something in his arms. This something was making its own noises, and Nora felt as if she had seen this coming for a long time. Of course she had. Only why hadn't she said something to rule out any possibility right from the start? Nora headed downstairs with slow, deliberate steps, gathering the strength she would need. Laya followed.

Pooh was just coming in through the door, and there could be no more doubts. The thing in his arms meowed. "Mama!" he cried. "Look at her! Somebody gave her to me. She's mine, all mine. Look how cute she is! I have a name

for her already. I saved her and so the farmer gave her to me."

And now who's going to save us from the cat, thought Nora, imagining all the possibilities. First among them was exactly what happened next, namely that Laya would rush toward the kitten and insist on holding it, whereas Pooh wasn't about to let go of it, causing the kitten, plucked and pulled at, to spread its claws and cling on about Pooh's neck while he kicked and punched at Laya to stay away. "She's my Zizu," he screamed. "You can pet her later, but now you leave her alone, you hear, you leave her alone since you'll frighten her!" Laya, overwhelmed by the idea of having a kitten at home with her at last, was ready to do anything, and had already managed to grab hold of the little cat's lower body. Just one more little yank, she thought, trying to pull the kitten to herself, not expecting it to meow so loudly. "You're squishing her!" she screamed at him, hoping that this would make Pooh loosen his grip, which of course he didn't, and Nora had to move in and save the poor animal from being torn in two once and for all.

"That's enough," she said and took the kitten from Pooh herself, whereupon he threw himself howling on the floor and Laya clamoured after her to let her hold it.

"You two almost killed her," said Nora, sizing up the tiny tiger-striped creature now sitting in her hand with its fur standing on end and having no idea what was to become of it. Nora didn't know either.

Pooh cried bitterly over all the injustice done to him, and now that Nora had the kitten Laya suddenly went to his side. "I only wanted to pet her," she said, "Now get up." And while Pooh went on sobbing, she added, "I've been wishing for a kitten a lot longer than you have."

"But he gave her to me, because I saved her, and now she's taking her away from me. You're mean!" he shouted at his mother, "So mean..."

Nora did not seem to be much affected. "And now what's going to happen to her really?" she asked. "Surely you don't intend to keep her?"

"He gave her to me," cried Pooh, "Me, and only me. And he said I could keep her."

"And so you want to take her home?"

"There's enough space in my room."

"And you had no intention of asking me first?"

The kitten had begun licking Nora's finger, which obviously tasted of something that it liked.

"When we were on vacation last year and I wanted a cat, you said I could have one someday if one came along."

Nora had a vague memory of another cat-story, with just as many tears and temper tantrums. It had been a question of a much bigger cat, that Pooh had picked up somewhere and brought home with him. It had let itself be stroked and fed, but someone came looking for it an hour later and Pooh had been inconsolable for the rest of the day.

"This cat didn't come along. You brought her here, so it doesn't count," she said, "It's not the same."

"But she was given to me," Pooh said excitedly, "and that counts even more, don't you see? That's more than if she just came along. She's much too small to wander around, so she can really get used to me. And then she won't mind at all when we take her with us."

"Can't you see how miserable she'll be in our apartment in the city? She'll have to stay indoors all the time and will never meet any other cats to play with." It was a last attempt, and Nora knew it would be pointless.

"But she has me," said Pooh forcefully. "I'll play with her. And don't you think she would be sad anyway if we all went and left her here alone?"

Laya had seated herself on the corner bench and was thinking about something. It was easy to see how one argument weighed against another until a conclusion was reached, which only had to be acted upon.

"Are there any more kittens at that place where you got her?" she asked Pooh, in a voice that left no doubt as to her intentions.

"I don't know," said Pooh, and Nora suddenly skipped a breath. "You can go and see. It's not our farmer but the other one down where the bridge is."

"Laya," Nora tried to hold her back. "You don't really mean to...?" Laya's face glowed with the firmness of her decision. "Well, alright then," said Nora, "Go and get

yourself a kitten, but I'm telling the two of you, if they do their dirt in here..." She said nothing else, convinced of the absolute pointlessness of any explanations or threats. Laya's cat would be her sister's problem, and they would see if she could talk her out of it. And what about Pooh's cat? She could already smell the horrible smell of dirty kitty-litter, and when she closed her eyes she could see the cat sharpening its claws on all the furniture. She could hear a terrible cat-music, and in her imagination she was already brushing cat hairs off all her winter clothes.

"Meow," said the kitten on the palm of her hand, looking at her.

"She's hungry." Pooh tore open the fridge door and began rummaging around in it, something Nora would have to put a stop to before things got out of hand. Laya had already left in the meantime. "Do we have any milk here?"

"Wait," said Nora and placed the cat in his arms. "I'll get it." And so it was decided. "Poor, cute little Zizu," murmured Pooh transfixed, and rubbed his face against the soft little piece of fur.

Nora secretly put her hopes in the usual kinds of small catastrophes. The kitten could run away or get lost in the woods or any number of other places. And if she was really mean about it, she could imagine a wolf coming out of the woods... She thought of Fenek. What if he... No, no, that wouldn't work. Besides, Fenek was in boarding school. And he was old enough to know you can't bring cats to boarding school. Who knows, maybe he couldn't care less about cats? She couldn't say, right off the bat like that.

Fenek had been getting around a lot in the last few days. He had sealed a friendship with Eddy, who introduced him to his group of friends in the village. And when he came home it often happened that he and Eddy would lean on their bikes by the corner of the house and stay talking. She never would have thought that this Eddy would turn out to be so talkative, and Fenek had her quite stunned. It was a world from which she and Pooh and Laya were completely shut out, although she thought she understood Fenek in other respects. She hadn't the slightest clue what it was that made these two boys suddenly burst into laughter. Obviously their different language backgrounds were no barrier to understanding each other, whereas Nora had trouble even distinguishing among the sounds that Fenek and Eddy hollered out to each other.

Naturally there were still those arguments when Fenek didn't show up for hours and hours. Either that, or he came home with Eddy and went to walk him home, and sometimes stayed so long that Eddy ended up walking him back. Could they be talking about girls? Nora didn't really think so. More likely it was quite different and far more dangerous daydreams that were being exchanged, discussed and turned over between the two.

Once she and the Little Ones were just about scared to death. They had gone for a walk in the woods when Fenek, Eddy and his friends came flying down a slope on their bicycles. Cross-country cycle racing they called it, and Nora could only entertain the worst thoughts about such a pastime. She would have much preferred they all jumped from the five-metre diving board. Or went off quietly fishing somewhere. Or went to sit in some café and behaved like they were all infinitely adult.

The days passed, filled according to the weather, and when it was really fine enough for swimming they took advantage of every minute, with Nora even passing up her work time. Fortunately, Laya hadn't been able to get a kitten — Pooh's had been the last one to be given away — and

Pooh had become somewhat more used to his possession, so that he now let Laya play with it too. Naturally the kitten had made its mess in the loft several times. Fenek claimed that since then he slept like someone under anesthetic. But after a few days it had begun to recognize the little box filled with saw-dust that Pooh and Laya had gotten from a carpenter, and Nora had broad-mindedly decided not to mention it any more. As she had said, she wanted everything to work itself out on its own. Maybe the kitten would decide for itself not to come with them, and would grow quite independent by the time they left. But as each day went by she grew less and less convinced of the likelihood of any such solution.

Layosh came to see them on the weekends, and sometimes they all did something together. In the evening he and Nora would go out somewhere, or else they sat in the kitchen until late at night while the children slept. Sometimes you could see that he was making an effort, although he didn't make any special fuss over the children. Pooh was certainly the most demanding, as he was always trying to distract Layosh from Nora and draw attention to himself. Laya and Fenek paid much less attention to Layosh, although they quite enjoyed playing games with him whenever they could. It was all rather tiring for Layosh, who was unused to it,

but he had no intention of giving up so quickly and sometimes he even liked the children quite a lot.

Nora herself wasn't exactly sure how much she really liked Layosh. Anyway, she was always glad to see him when he came, and since she had no one else with whom to have an adult conversation in this place, she talked to Layosh when he was there.

"I don't quite understand you," said Layosh as they sat together in one of the hotel restaurants one evening. They had ordered a bottle of wine and it was warm enough to sit outdoors on the terrace. "Why don't you start a baby-sitting service or something? Not that I have anything against any one of the kids. I just wonder how you ended up with them." He took Nora's hand and looked at her with a gaze mixed with concern and lack of understanding.

"How I ended up with them?" Nora's tone was friendly, but rang with a hidden trace of aggression. "How did I end up being born? And how did I end up being raised? And how did I end up surviving at all? How did I end up getting at least as much love as I needed to survive? How did I end up having anyone talk to me, so that I could learn to talk? And how did I end up with so many wonderful childhood

memories, and bad ones too for sure, but I can still remember the good ones perfectly well." Layosh looked somewhat amazed. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Why shouldn't I give back what I received?"

"Of course you're grateful to your parents for a lot of things," said Layosh, "and I'm grateful to mine too, but you have your own child to make demands on you."

"I didn't grow up with my parents," said Nora, "but nobody knew anything about it at school. My sister and I were passed around among our relatives, and I could differentiate very well between people who were concerned about us and those who were just doing some kind of duty. And the fact that we got through it at all, we owe to those who didn't spare their affection. The ones who didn't seem to care whether we were their own kids or not, who just knew that we were children, who were there and needed to be cared for, body and soul. We had one aunt who was neither very motherly nor very domestic and who always groaned whenever we were left with her. 'Here come the little tormentors again,' she would complain, and next thing we'd have to laugh since she would nearly crush us with hugs. And what made her especially lovable was that we had the impression

that she really enjoyed us. That she enjoyed having us there, even though she was quite hot-tempered and you could never tell how she would react to our little pranks. She couldn't say anything without exaggerating, and she was always assuring us that we were an enormous trouble to her, but we soon learned how to speak to her in her own mixed-up language, and whenever she would start to carry on in one of her dramatic wails, we'd just say 'It's your own fault, you're the one who can't get enough of us.' Or 'Being here with you, we're doing penance for all our venial sins and yours too. Your moods are harder to take than rusty shoe-nails, what ever did we do to be punished like this?' But when they came to take us away from her, the three of us couldn't even look each other in the eyes without crying. 'Slave driver,' we'd say to her for as long as we were in her house, since she always made sure we had our fair share of chores to do, but whenever anybody asked us where we preferred to go, there was never any question as far as we were concerned."

"I see," said Layosh. "Sounds like you might be trying to emulate your aunt."

"Not at all," said Nora, "She was unique in every way. But I know that certain things are necessary and that life consists of give and take."

"I can understand all that, but it's extremely tiring to work and care for children and the devil knows what else."

"It's just a matter of how you distribute your time," Nora laughed. "You can help me, and then it won't be quite so tiring any more."

"I knew you were a demanding woman," Layosh teased. "I thought I'd get taken for a fur coat or a big gold necklace. But what you want is for me to do work, real work. I don't know if I can handle it," he groaned.

"I'll soon show you the advantages of it, so you don't back off too quickly."

"And just what might they be?" asked Layosh sceptically.

"You find out very quickly, who and what you are as a person."

"What do you mean?" Layosh looked somewhat less than intelligent.

"Children play so much more of yourself back to you than any psychiatrist ever could, the way they imitate you, make fun of you or fight back with you."

"And what else," asked Layosh, "if I grant you that first point?"

"Secondly, you feel so much more of an interest in life; I would say, your life becomes more meaningful. You become less sure of your opinions and more sure of your feelings. Like for example when Pooh says, 'If everything is in God's hands, how come nobody ever bites his finger?' You can never give the right answer, but you know exactly how he feels."

"Is there a third reason?" asked Layosh, sounding more indulgent than approving.

"Thirdly," said Nora, "thirdly," and she couldn't think what to say next. Fortunately, the waiter came just at that moment with a fresh carafe of wine and she had another minute to think about her answer.

"Thirdly, you can get it out of your head that we, I mean our generation, in any way discovered the world. Which is an unhealthy idea in the long run anyway, since every generation seems to tend to think so. And fourthly and fifthly, all your feelings will be turned upside-down, you'll go from anger to joy, from hope to despair... You can't ever afford to be depressed for any length of time, since the demands are too immediate and your nerves are too high-strung to remain in any such state for long."

"Anyone listening to you would think you were some kind of missionary," said Layosh, deflated. "But tell the truth, it all must get on your nerves now and again."

"Of course it all gets on my nerves now and again. But I wonder is there anything that doesn't get on our nerves now and again? Do you think it's any different with my translations? And don't you feel like throwing your microscopes up against the wall now and then? And your regular pub won't always be as much fun to you. I would even hazard a guess," said Nora looking at him probingly, "that I even get on your nerves sometimes too."

Layosh began to laugh loudly. "And how! Especially the way you tell me off right to my face. You tread all

over my nerves as if they were wire ropes, jump up and down and do your pirouettes: to put it bluntly — you show off, without the slightest thought that they might snap."

"And you," said Nora, "you carry on like it doesn't affect you, like you could be watching from the sidelines or maybe get drawn in just a little bit. No... hugged in, — taken pity on."

And somehow she was right, since Layosh had placed his arm around her and had kept it there the longest while.

The next day it was Pooh who was the first to come downstairs and into Nora's room. "It's the middle of the night," she said, half asleep. Pooh protested and opened the window so wide, it dragged the curtains up and let in the full light of day. And then he noticed Layosh.

Pooh was outraged. "Mama!" he cried, "What's Layosh doing in your bed?"

Nora blinked, and Layosh didn't move. "Come here," said Nora, and Pooh crept in under her blanket.

"Why?" asked Pooh again, "Why is he allowed and not me?"

"Because you have to learn to sleep alone in your own bed. You have to be able to do both."

"But why is he allowed?" asked Pooh.

"Because it's also a form of love. I nursed you and bathed you, and I tell you stories, I look after you and make sure you have food and clothes, I help you with your homework, I talk to you about your teacher, I spend my vacation with you, I cuddle you, and I let you have a cat even though you brought it home without asking."

With that, Layosh opened his eyes as if he had been sleeping the whole time, and said, "And when she's out with me she does nothing else but talk to me about you, so you really have no reason to complain."

"But so far you've never slept over," said Pooh sharply, "So why now?"

Layosh thought a moment. "Yes, why? I think because your mother converted me."

"Converted?"

"To the idea that it might be a lot of fun to take you on in a pillow-fight."

Nora got up. "I'm not staying around for that."

She took her things into the adjoining bathroom. She took a long shower and then looked at herself in the mirror a while. She wanted to see if anything about her had changed overnight.

When Nora returned to her room she found a real battle under way which included Laya, but found that Fenek had begun to set the table for breakfast. Nora could hardly believe it, that Fenek had taken it all on himself. "I'm touched," she said, as she put the kettle on. But Fenek only nodded slightly in the direction of the bedroom: "That's how it always is in the beginning."

Nora started. "And then?"

"Why ask me, you know very well," said Fenek meaningfully. "Then it's: Quiet until we're finished

sleeping. We got in very late last night, and Sunday is the only day, and so on and so forth..."

Nora had to smile. "You see things blacker than I do. But perhaps we could come to an agreement that holds for everyone: quiet until nine o'clock and then an all-out racket."

"We could." Fenek shrugged his shoulders. "But you know how it is, the drummer sets the beat."

"Quiet!" Nora bellowed then. The door was threatening to break from the force of the bangs. "Everybody out of bed, breakfast is nearly ready."

Everything was quiet for a minute, then they heard a three-voiced laughter. It seemed Layosh had said something, but neither Fenek nor Nora understood. Shortly after that, a human pyramid came walking into the kitchen. Laya had wrapped herself around Layosh's waist and Pooh was sitting on his shoulders. "As ordered," said Layosh, "Unit reporting for food pick-up."

Nora and Fenek had breakfast just about ready when they all finally came to the table washed and combed and noses blown.

Their mood was good and the weather was in-betweenish. If it got even more in-betweenish they could always drive to Moor Lake and swim there for a change, since Layosh had his car. But for the first little while they did nothing more than sit around. Pooh and Laya were telling jokes that all had one thing in common, that is to say that they told the punch line first, and buckled over with laughter while the others tried in vain to make any sense of it. Zizu was there too and kept trying to climb up on the table to get a closer look at the breakfast. Nora stood by her rule though, and would in no way tolerate it.

While Nora made the beds, Layosh played a game of chess with Fenek, Laya watered the flowers in the window-boxes, and Pooh disappeared out the door with the shoe brushes, as he had gotten it into his head to soften up the mud on Nora's walking shoes before cleaning them, in such a way that the mud not only got spread all over the shoes, but also all over his undershirt. Nora took the brushes and the undershirt and explained to him where to put away the forks and knives that she had just washed.

When they were finally all in the car, they discovered Laya had forgotten her swimsuit and Nora had forgotten the towels. This provided the opportunity for Fenek to make a couple of derogatory remarks about *the women*. Layosh joined in with a malicious sneer, pleased that Fenek was now obviously on his side. Nora and Laya's disgusted expressions showed just what they thought of these kinds of sneers and remarks. They were obviously not going to stoop so low as to respond in any way. They simply got out of the car without a word and fetched their things. Then they were off, and after some time, that is to say right at the very last incline in the road, the car just came to a stop because Layosh had forgotten to go for gas. Now it was Nora's and Laya's turn to sneer. They pushed the car to the shoulder of the road and Layosh got out an empty canister for the gas he would buy at the service station at the top of the hill. Pooh complained about the unplanned hike, although he was usually a good walker. "But I'm not prepared for it," he grumbled, "and when I'm not prepared to walk, then I don't feel like it, and when I don't feel like it, then I can't do it either," and he sat himself on a bench by the side of the road in a spot overlooking a lovely view.

The weather had changed to the point where it was now quite sultry, and they dragged themselves and their things sweating and grumbling to the lake. Pooh had stayed behind, but as no one paid any attention to his antics he came along behind and cried out for them to wait up, which no one did.

Their mood went along with the weather, even Layosh and Nora seemed stranger to each other than before. Only when they reached Moor Lake at last and found themselves a little camp site did the pressure leave them somewhat, and while the children ran straight for the water, Layosh kissed Nora quickly. And when they had seen to it that all their things were together he began to tease her, pretending to be hiding something behind his back.

It was not the first Sunday they had spent together, but somehow this time everything was just a little different. There were slight feelings of embarrassment whenever anything showed from under the swimsuits, and the children didn't like it very much when their former playmate Layosh placed himself between them and Nora. Layosh was also more unsure of himself than usual, especially when it came to making any spontaneous decision like whether he wanted Coca-Cola or a salami sandwich.

Pooh and Fenek whiled away the time catching frogs, and as soon as they had one each in their hands they stood side by side and let them loose. The one whose frog jumped the furthest was the winner. But then Pooh started to cheat by leaning ahead more and more. Fenek got angry, and when Pooh said, "I always catch the best ones because I have an eye for it," Fenek made a swipe at him, behind a willow-bush though, so nobody would notice. Pooh was so furious that he bit Fenek on the arm. Just at that moment they discovered a grass snake gliding into the water next to them, and they forgot their hostilities in the pursuit of it.

Laya on the other hand was insistent in that Layosh should let her ride piggy-back, letting her hook her feet together to make a ring around his stomach, then she tried to do a hand-stand, succeeding only after countless tries, and after that Layosh was so exhausted that he had to ask to be left alone for the rest of the afternoon. So from then on Laya stood in the water on one leg, *à la* grouse, as Pooh and Fenek remarked pejoratively, trying to catch fish.

And Nora slept. To everyone's dismay. Because if there was one thing none of them liked, it was a sleeping Nora, showing that she was tired and needed to be given a little consideration. This way she couldn't be spoken to,

since that would wake her. And when this happened, the children finally realized how often they had to ask her something.

The water in Moor Lake was warm, so they didn't notice that clouds had gathered and were then dispersed, thank God, by a warm wind. Fenek was convinced it was going to rain sooner or later, and he even had planned to push for an early end to their little outing so that he would be home in time to go over to see Eddy for a while. But he couldn't do any of that with a sleeping Nora, so he went looking for an appropriately-forked branch to hunt for snakes with, as he explained to Pooh. Pooh then of course wanted one too, and they talked about how they would set up their own snake-pit. In such moments they got along almost excellently. Pooh was so enthusiastic, that he listened devotedly to everything Fenek said and did everything he asked, even leaving the actual catching to him. They didn't fight again at all until it turned out that Pooh felt he could handle a branch just as well as Fenek.

Laya swam across the lake several times and discovered a little girl on the other side who was the same age and who had a magnifying glass she used to look at the beetles on the bank. She let Laya look through it, and Laya was quite

impressed by all the patterns and wing shapes, antennae and legs. For the time being she overlooked the horse-flies that were stinging her back. "You must have sweet blood," everybody would say to her, instead of buying her some repellent to make them go away or giving her vitamin B, which horse-flies were known not to like. Laya thought about the coming night with horror, about how all the stings would suddenly all start to itch at once and she would have to clench her fists to stop from scratching. She felt this was the height of injustice, that these beasts always came looking for her while Pooh and Fenek never got anything and not even Nora was affected. "There!" cried the little stranger as she squashed a horse-fly on Laya's back, smacking it so hard and unexpectedly that Laya almost wanted to hit back.

It was already late in the afternoon when the weather turned threatening again and they decided to retreat. Pooh was the only one who remembered they would have to go to the self-service station again for gas — he was the one who had taken the canister along to play with — and now he wasn't exactly sure where he had left it. Fortunately Fenek found it quickly, that is to say, before Layosh completely lost his temper, and so they all toddled off, single file, along the path to the car.

Of course the clouds were all gone by the time they finally arrived home, but Layosh would have to drive back soon anyway. The sun was setting in a clear patch, as if the fickleness of the day's weather were some sort of misunderstanding. Layosh and Nora were sitting in front of the house, holding hands and talking, while Pooh and Laya cleaned the kitty-litter. Fenek had taken his bike to go call on Eddy, but came back alone shortly afterwards (Eddy obviously wasn't home), and in his boredom was riding up the road next to the house. Suddenly there he came, flying more than riding in the direction of the house, just as Pooh was heading for the garbage bin with the little box. Fenek caught Pooh on the heels so that Pooh fell, but Fenek was going so fast that the collision sent him straight into the air and catapulted him with full force against the milestone at the entrance to the driveway. They had all screamed, Fenek when he saw Pooh, Pooh as he fell, Nora when she saw Pooh and Fenek crash, and Layosh who just then had been looking deeply into Nora's eyes and saw the enormous fear in them. Now they were all quiet, only Pooh soon started to cry. Nora picked him up and helped him to his feet, and when he was able to stand, she ran straight to where Layosh was kneeling next to Fenek.

"What happened?" shouted Laya through the window, but no one answered.

"Fenek!" screamed Nora and tried to put her arms around him, but Layosh stopped her. Fenek lay there as if lifeless, bleeding from somewhere on his head.

"He has to lie in a sloping position," said Layosh, who had learned it in a first-aid course, and turned him around carefully.

If only he doesn't die, was all Nora could think in her great despair. She felt strangely empty, as if she had always guessed this would happen, and one day her greatest fears would come true. Misfortune lurks everywhere, and you can't escape it forever.

"What should we do?" asked Nora softly.

Layosh seemed quite calm again. "We have to take him to the hospital immediately. I'll go and bring the car, and we'll lay him in the back seat. Very carefully."

Nora stayed with Fenek and held his hand. She was crying. Pooh came over to her howling and wanting to be

hugged. He couldn't understand why no one was paying any attention to him, since he was hurt too and was even limping. But when he saw Fenek lying there that way, he said nothing and only sobbed to himself as he snuggled up to Nora.

Layosh had brought the car and opened the back doors. "Come on," he said to Nora, "We have to try." Very cautiously they lifted Fenek, still unconscious, into the car. They placed a small cushion under his head, and lay him on his side so that he wouldn't choke in case he threw up.

Tears were still streaming from Nora's eyes. "Go in the house, Pooh," she said. "There's no room in the car. You and Laya have to stay here. If you feel afraid, then go over to the farmer's wife."

Pooh sobbed more heavily and clung to Nora a moment longer. Then he suddenly seemed to understand and went back into the house without a word. Laya was still standing at the window; her face was white.

They drove off. Nora tried to sit so that she could watch Fenek. She propped him up on his side with one hand.

So many thoughts went through her mind. What if Fenek was marked for life by this? Or what if he died? He couldn't die, no, he just couldn't. And what would his mother and father say? How could such a thing have happened? Nora couldn't think of any answers.

He still had not regained consciousness when they arrived at the hospital. He was taken for examination immediately, while Nora had to go to Admissions to explain the details of who he was and how the accident happened.

"Are you the mother?" asked the nurse abruptly.

"Yes," murmured Nora, then she corrected herself, "No. No, I'm not the mother."

The nurse looked at her quizzically. "And where is the mother?"

"In Australia."

"And where in Australia?"

Then it occurred to Nora that she didn't know the address of Fenek's mother. And why should she, she had had

nothing to do with her for so long. And who could have imagined a situation where she would happen to need the address of Fenek's mother? But maybe it was on the envelope of the letter Fenek had gotten from her. Now, just where was the letter? She would have to go through Fenek's things, and what if he only kept the letter and had thrown away the envelope?

"I don't know the address by heart," said Nora, "I'll bring it with me next time."

"And you," the nurse asked Layosh, who came in just at that moment, "Are you the father?"

"The father?" Layosh shook his head.

"Where is the father?"

"In America." Nora lowered her gaze, knowing what would come next.

"And where in America?" The nurse was pointing the pen toward Nora. Nora shrugged her shoulders. "Somewhere. He's taking a trip across the whole continent, and sends

postcards from different places. Right now he's probably in California, but where exactly, I couldn't tell you."

"And who is responsible for the child?" That was the terrible question that Nora had seen coming for so long.

"I am." Nora straightened herself.

"And what is your relationship to the child? Are you a relative? Do you have any power of attorney or documents for insurance purposes for him?"

Fortunately she still knew where father #1 was insured; naturally she didn't have any documents, but she knew where to get them. And for a few seconds rage built up inside her, rage over the thoughtlessness of father #1 who never thought of such things. She had remembered to ask him for Fenek's health card, after all the boy could come down with angina or bronchitis or something. And father #1 had said, "Sure, sure. I'll tell Sylvie to send a copy to you before we leave." And of course Sylvie never sent anything, since father #1 had surely forgotten the whole business immediately. Now there was the nurse, behaving like a judge while she, Nora, sat before her like the accused.

"I am his father's second ex-wife," said Nora.

"And how does the child come to be with you?" asked the nurse curiously.

"You become related through children," said Nora. "I am the mother of his half-brother, and I took both boys with me for the summer so that they could spend some time together."

"And you have no difficulty with that?" asked the nurse in a private tone all of a sudden. And when Nora didn't answer right away, she continued, "The father, where did you say the father is?"

"The father is with his third wife in America," answered Nora, resigned. The nurse seemed to take it as a personal affront.

"Insurance?" she asked.

Nora fished around in her purse. She had written the insurance information in her notebook, since Pooh was also insured with his father. She gave the nurse the name of the insurance company. "Only I don't have any documents."

"Then you will have to make a deposit," said the nurse.

Suddenly the barrier that had been holding back Nora's fears just gave way. "Listen to me!" she cried, "First I want to know what has happened to Fenek." She was almost choking. "Can't you understand, that none of this means anything to me right now? I want to know what has happened to the child and what his chances are." And Nora began to cry again in spite of herself.

"He is being examined," said the nurse, "It will take a little while." And then she said, "That's all for now. Just don't think this is something I invented. I have to maintain the rules here, and they state that when there is uncertainty surrounding the insurance coverage of incoming patients, a deposit must be made."

Nora couldn't calm herself down so readily. Layosh was sitting next to her and trying to comfort her.

"Why are you so upset, if it's not your own child?" asked the nurse.

Nora was speechless. She wanted to say something, but Layosh stopped her, saying, "Don't say anything, not now; it's better not to."

"How much is the deposit?" Layosh asked.

The nurse, still shaking her head over Nora's reaction, named the sum — quite a large amount.

Layosh took his cheque book out of his jacket pocket.

"Leave it," said Nora, "I'll get it." They agreed to each make out a cheque for half the amount. Nora would never forget the way Layosh had so spontaneously stepped in. The nurse locked up the cheques in a metal box and told them where to sit to wait for the doctor. When he finally appeared, Nora was calm enough again to speak to him without sobbing.

"It's a fractured skull," said the doctor, "Fortunately with no internal injuries or bleeding. We've placed him in intensive care. He requires complete rest. Call again in the morning."

"Do you think," Nora asked with a trembling voice, "Do you think he's going to be alright? That he'll be like before?"

"We'll be able to tell in a few days," said the doctor, "But he's young and strong, and if there are no other complications, his chances are good."

They went to drink a cup of coffee before leaving the hospital. Layosh spoke to Nora encouragingly. "Should I stay," he asked her, "and wait with you a few days?"

"That's sweet of you," Nora whispered, "But we can't do anything now anyway. Maybe we'll need you more after a few days instead, when Fenek comes home from the hospital."

Pooh and Laya sat in the living room and waited. They didn't go to the neighbours', since they preferred to be home when Nora came back. They had comforted and encouraged each other, Laya had even made tea, something she had never done before, and Pooh had buttered some bread, since they were still hungry despite all the excitement.

Nora told them what the doctor had said and Pooh asked, quite intimidated, "Do you think it's all my fault?" Nora

looked at him with surprise. "Well, since I'm the one he bumped into."

"These things happen," said Nora. "Fenek shouldn't have come flying in the driveway so fast," she said, "and you should have looked more carefully where you were going."

"But nobody drives through our driveway. Even Layosh leaves his car outside."

Nora shrugged her shoulders. "It seems accidents will happen no matter how careful you are. Fenek usually always watched out, and then all of a sudden something happened anyway. Let's just hope everything is going to work out alright."

That night, when Layosh had driven away and the children were long asleep, Nora felt guilty feelings arise again.

What would Fenek's parents say, really? And shouldn't she have sent for them right away? But how? Should she have started a massive search for them? She would look for the letter from Fenek's mother first thing in the morning. But she absolutely had to know what the doctor would have to

say before sending any telegrams. At such a distance, any account of the accident would hit her like a gun-shot. And father #1? He had assured Nora nothing would happen, when she had said she couldn't take on the responsibility. "We won't make any reproaches," he had proclaimed confidently. And now? How would he react to this? And for a while she felt very humble. That should be a lesson to me, she said to herself. Why did I have to take on so much? She tried to imagine how Fenek and Laya might have spent the summer somewhere else. It wouldn't have been ideal for them of course, and accidents could happen anywhere. But now it had happened under her care, and she would be held responsible. And then she thought about Fenek, about everything she knew about him and the things he had told her, and she just wished everything would turn out alright, that he would wake up and start talking just like before. "That was a pretty big joke, eh...? Hmm, did I sprout wings or something?" or words to that effect. As time passed, all other considerations seemed to disappear.

The next day she went straight to the post office to call the hospital. The doctor was rather optimistic, and she would be allowed to see Fenek for a few minutes that afternoon. Then she tried to put together a telegram,

having found the letter along with the envelope. In speaking with the postmistress, she discovered she could also ask to arrange a long-distance call from there. She asked to have it arranged for the time after her visit to the hospital and made alternate arrangements for the following morning in case Fenek's mother couldn't be reached at that time.

Pooh and Laya were rather depressed throughout the day and almost didn't bicker at all. They were sad not to be able to see Fenek, and went over to the farmhouse while Nora drove off to the hospital. Fenek was already conscious again, but didn't seem to really understand what was going on. He couldn't remember his accident at all, and could just vaguely remember what went before. The doctors said he was coming along, and Nora drove back to the post office with a heavy heart, yet slightly relieved. Fenek's mother didn't call; obviously the telegram explaining the details of the arranged phone call had not yet reached her.

Pooh hadn't come away unscathed, as it turned out. He had an enormous bruise on his heel, and whenever he thought about it, he had to limp pitifully.

"My brother is always doing things like that," said Julie, who had brought her baby-doll over for a visit. "If you only knew how many times he's been in the hospital. But after a few days he's out again and is just as wild as ever." Laya tried to dress the kitten in one of Julie's baby-doll clothes, but after putting up with it for a few minutes, the cat decided it didn't like it at all. When he saw what was happening Pooh lunged at Laya with his little garden shovel, and only held back from hitting her with it right at the last minute. He took Zizu from her and swore never to lend her to Laya again if she was going to come up with such stupid ideas.

At last Nora succeeded in getting in touch with Fenek's mother. She tried to explain everything as carefully as possible, and she knew now that Fenek was doing better even though his memory was a bit lost. Fenek's mother was so shaken in the beginning that she couldn't even speak and Nora had to wonder if the line had been cut off. Then she said, "I have to go to him. At a time like this, I have to go to him. I don't know yet how I'll do it, but I'll be there. In a day or two I should be able to get there, even though it's a long trip." She sighed. Nora could sense

what kind of thoughts must be going through Fenek's mother's head.

Pooh and Laya got quite excited when she told them about it. They hadn't really believed in the existence of Fenek's mother, not even Pooh, although he had seen her often enough years ago.

"Fenek's mother," said Laya to herself, "I thought she was dead and he was only pretending that she was in Australia."

"But she wrote Fenek a letter, remember?" said Nora.

"Anybody with similar handwriting could have done the same thing."

And Pooh asked, "Is our father going to come too?"

Nora shrugged her shoulders. "I've tried to contact the consulate in Los Angeles through Laya's mother, but I don't know if he'll have been there."

"And what about calling the police?" asked Pooh.

Nora laughed as she imagined what Pooh must be thinking. A policeman with a huge megaphone, calling out for Pooh's and Fenek's father across the whole continent.

"He's going to be back soon anyway. The summer holidays are nearly over, and if I know father #1, he'll soon be out of money if he's not out of it and on the plane with Sylvie already."

This time Fenek had his wits about him, and after Nora had been sitting there a while, he asked meekly, "Can I spend the summer with you again next year? Or don't you need me any more?"

Nora petted him and said, "Don't worry yourself about it."

"See, I know you have a lot on your plate right now..."

Nora was touched. "You have to get better, that's all that matters now."

"But maybe next year you won't want to..."

"Won't want what?"

"All of us to come stay with you... and screw everything up on you." Fenek made a lopsided smile.

So as not to get too sentimental, Nora answered, "Well, somebody has to be there. And don't think I'm going to be able to get rid of you so easily, with all the travelling in the family. All I need is for Sylvie to have a baby. I'm absolutely beyond the baby stage now."

Fenek was now smiling openly. "But when they come to you and lay one on the table in front of you, you still won't be able to say no."

"You wait and see," said Nora with a deep voice, "You don't know me very well."

Of course there was something else Fenek wanted to know, but didn't dare ask, for fear of being disappointed. Nora had not wanted to mention it at first, so as not to excite him, but when she saw how much he longed to know, she changed her mind. She had thought of asking the doctor first, but the way Fenek kept reaching for her hand and looking at her, she couldn't help but say to him, "She'll be

here. I spoke with her on the telephone, and in a day or two she'll be here."

At first Fenek couldn't believe it, then his face began to beam, and then he lay back on the pillow and said nothing else except *thank you*.

Back at the house Nora found a postcard waiting from father #1 and on it he said that Sylvie was doing very well in spite of the pregnancy, but now it was starting to get tiring for her and so they would soon be on their way back. They would look in on them as soon as they were home. "No!" cried Nora, "No, I don't believe it!" And Pooch and Laya, who of course had already seen the postcard, made faces as if to say they knew it all along. "No!" said Nora again, and then all three had to have a good laugh at it, for how, please tell me, how indeed could they be expected to react to all these muddled-up goings-on in this muddled-up world?



