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My Life and other Catastrophes

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Saturday, May 11th

I wanted an iPad for my 13th birthday. All I got was this stupid paper notebook.

Sunday, May 12th

Okay. I don't want to be unfair. Of course, I got more things from my two fathers. An annual pass for Sea Life, for example. And an eraser shaped as a surveillance camera.

Dad claims that people didn't get anything back in his childhood days. On *his* 13th birthday, his mother baked him sugar-free oatmeal cookies to mark the occasion. That's nonsense of course. Dad grew up in the United States. And I know the country. First of all, no one knows how to bake oatmeal cookies over there, unless you put a baking mix and a kidnapped TV chef right in front of them. And secondly, American kids get *everything* they want. A childhood in the US is like someone dropping you off at the IKEA children's play area and saying: "Sweetheart, we'll be back to pick you up in five years! If you are hungry, eat some meat balls from the buffet! And drink cola, as often and as much as you like!"

And in Germany? A childhood in Germany is as if someone lost you in the stationery department of a big store and only came back to pick you up after the store closed.

Monday, May 13th

Dad actually lost me once in the stationery department of a big store. But that was a long time ago. I was standing between the rows of shelves, when the unobtrusive ambient music was interrupted and a high-pitched woman's voice said: "Little Bernadette's Papa is looking for her and she should please come to the main checkout on the ground floor *immediately!*"

I didn't think I was meant by that. Firstly, no one ever calls me Bernadette but Barnie for as long as I can remember. What's more, I wasn't little but already five long years old. And finally, my Dad is my Dad and not my Papa. But the woman at the main checkout simply didn't get that.

Only after the fifth announcement a saleslady talked to me and quite gruffly pulled me down the escalator behind her. Dad was totally beside himself, he thought someone had *stolen* me. That's what he said over and over again: "Oh my God, Darling! I really thought someone has stolen you!" He said those words in German and his German wasn't that good yet back then.

And yet there had been absolutely no reason for him to worry. I had spent the entirety of the half hour at the shelf with the erasers. I had thought about erasers. What they are made of, why there are so many different shapes and if pencils and erasers were invented by two opposing inventors. In my hand, there was an eraser that looked like a seasick hot-dog. When the saleslady had *stolen* me, I hadn't put it back again yet.

"Are you hungry?" Dad had asked me anxiously and got a pitying look from the cashier.

"Would you perhaps like to call the mother?" she suggested quietly to him.

"No. But I have to inform my husband. He's been waiting at the pizza place for 20 minutes," Dad had replied and slowly calmed down again.

The two women had looked at each other confusedly.

It's a fact that my family consists of two fathers and me. Papa, Dad and me. Papa and Dad are a couple in love and they have been for about two thousand years.

"You can keep the eraser!" the cashier had eventually said. I was overjoyed and quickly let the seasick hot-dog disappear in my trouser pocket. I simply didn't get what all the excitement was about. After all, I was still there – and everything was perfect!

That day I discovered philosophy for myself. And started my collection of extraordinary erasers.

Tuesday, May 14th

This afternoon, I tested Dad on German idioms. He loves proverbs but some of them he just can't get into his head. We sat on the balcony and I described different situations to him.

"Someone is totally beautiful but has a terrible personality?"

"Außen hui, innen pfui! All show and no substance!" Dad said solemnly. As a reward, I passed him a red Smartie.

"When you drop something and it breaks to pieces?"

"Scherben bringen Glück! Shards bring good luck!" Dad said happily. He got a green Smartie from me.

"When someone gets all worked up about something and goes totally over the top?"

"Wir wollen die Küche im Dorf lassen! Let's keep the kitchen in the village! Don't get carried away!"

I took the red and the green Smarties away from Dad again and ate them myself. "It's: the church in the village," I corrected him.

"Which church anyway?" Dad complained dejectedly.

"No idea."

"And which village?"

"Hm." I thought about that. Why could Dad not just memorize those sentences without pondering over the details? With this strategy I had successfully made it to seventh grade.

"One last try!" I cut off his protest. "What do you say when Grandma and Grandpa surprisingly come to visit us?"

"Man muss die Feste feiern, wie sie fallen! One must celebrate when one has the chance!" Dad said.

I poured the remaining Smarties into my mouth. "No. Ein Unglück kommt selten allein. Misfortunes never come singly." I corrected him, eating noisily.

Dad's favourite proverb is: "Alte Liebe rostet nicht. An old flame never dies."

My favourite proverb is: "Hätte, wenn und aber, alles nur Gelaber. Ifs, whens and buts – that's all just talk, no action."

Speaking of *ifs*: If I had gotten an iPad for my birthday, I wouldn't be giving my Dad extra lessons right now but would learn something useful myself on the internet. Chinese or Japanese, for example. Or I would teach myself how to play the piano and playfully perform Mozart's *Kleine Nachtmusik*. My fathers don't get it at all that they have ultimately stunted my development into a child prodigy with their ill-considered choice of their birthday present.

"Do you have a sugar rush?" Dad asked concerned because I didn't say anything anymore but stared into space with a chocolaty facial expression.

I shook my head. "No. I'm wondering what I should do with your silly paper notebook. Do you want it for your proverbs?"

Dad shook his head. "Barnie, your Papa and me actually thought about this quite a lot. You could keep a diary, for example! After all, you are a girl who lives with a special family. In one hundred years students will possibly read in class about your everyday life. Your everyday life with two fathers."

"Really exciting." I yawned quietly.

We heard the key turn in the lock. Papa came home from work. He strongly disapproved of sweets before dinner. Quickly, Dad thrust the empty Smarties roll into the Geranium tub. The stubs of his secretly smoked cigarettes are buried there, too. And the list with all the boys who I had had a crush on in the course of the last year. I made that on a rainy Sunday on the computer. And sorted the names alphabetically.

Dad got up and gave Papa a welcoming kiss. His wedding ring sparkled in the evening sun. My parents' rings are made of real gold. To be on the safe side, I looked it up on eBay: After selling the rings I would be able to afford no less than *four* iPads!

Wednesday, May 15th

There is absolutely no way this ugly notebook will become a diary! I refuse to acknowledge this measly present. Nevertheless, there is something I have to write down: Today at school, Ms. Zelenki had a baby with her. Not a real one but one made of plastic.

"What's that?" Tore asked. "A baby," Ms. Zelenki said.

"*Your* baby?" Tore asked and the class laughed.

Ms. Zelenki simply chose not to hear that. "I hope all of you do still remember the topic we have been talking about for the last two weeks in biology class?" she asked.

We were silent. Naturally, we did *all* remember that. But we didn't want to. It was bad enough that every single one of us suddenly had primary and secondary sexual characteristics. As of late, the appropriate Latin names for them were ready for use as well.

"Our school participates in the child protective services' project 'Baby – Think it through'," Ms. Zelenki explained. "As I gather from this leaflet, they want to sensitise you young people to what it means to become pregnant and have a baby when you're still very young. In order for you to always properly think of the consequences of your actions and not to end up at the beach of your life that's covered with shards."

We were still silent.

Ms. Zelenki shifted her weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. She was tall and broad and wore grey flowing clothes. She looked like a particularly friendly walrus.

I really liked Ms. Zelenki very much. Even when she was strict with us sometimes.

"What does sensitise mean?" Tore eventually asked into the sweaty silence. We had had physical education in the lesson before and had jointly decided not to shower.

"If I get pregnant at 13, I'll be grounded!" Aysun said before Ms. Zelenki could answer.

"Me too," Laura murmured. "Sure as rain!"

"I've never been to a beach," I heard Tore mutter longingly.

"Couldn't we rather voluntarily clean the gym?" My best friend Finja asked.

Marie put her hand up. She is highly gifted and only by accident in our class. "I think no one here wants to become pregnant at 13," she stated like a know-it-all. "We could talk about spore-producing plants instead!"

Ms. Zelenki took the bald baby doll in her hands and sighed. "Headmaster Emmerich has registered us for this exciting and meaningful project. For the duration of two weeks, you will experience what it means to have a child. You will see, it will broaden your horizon enormously."

She kept on talking for quite a while. Explained how the baby thing should work and handed it around in class. It felt cold and like hard plastic. If I manufactured baby dolls, I would make them out of soft rubber like erasers.

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