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The Extraordinary Intergalactic Zoo

With 4c-illustrations by Nikolai Renger

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Sample translation

by Gesche Ipsen



SHARK

My name is Nelly Pail, I’m nine years old and I’m the Special Envoy for the Intergalactic Zoo on Planet Humdinger. It doesn’t matter if you don’t know what that is, because I’ll tell you. And I’ll do that right now, with this story.

It happened on Monday, two weeks ago, and I didn’t know myself yet what a Special Envoy is. I also didn’t know that there was such a thing as space zoos. I was a perfectly normal kid.

At least, I think so.

Okay, so even back then my nose weirdly pointed up into the sky, the way it does now. But I didn’t have a trunk, or feelers, or anything like that. Only a nose like a ski jump.

Oh, and I also had that same weird, scratchy voice. But there’s a simple explanation for that. You see, I talk too much. My mother says that the doctor says that my vocal cords are strained, and that’s why I’m chronically hoarse. I don’t know what “chronically” means, but it sounds like a disgusting disease, so I’ve been trying to talk less. Unfortunately it hasn’t worked. Because I’m so honest.

Or, to be precise: because I try very hard to be honest, and keep noticing mistakes in everything I say. Then I have to add another sentence to correct the previous one, and have to do the same with the sentence after that, and the one after *that*, so I end up with a lot of sentences.

Now I’ve done it again, though all I wanted to say was that, two weeks ago, things were still perfectly normal.

I was in Mrs Redcheek’s form, 4R (correction: I’m still in it), had a close friend (correction: a boy who was my best friend, and two girls who were nearly my best friends), brown hair and glasses (sadly no correction), and knew that I wanted to be an animal-cruelty police officer when I grow up. I think maybe the proper term is just “police officer”, but I mean one who investigates cruelty to animals. Because being cruel to animals is forbidden, and if someone does it anyway they belong in prison. But they can’t catch enough animal-torturers, because there aren’t enough police officers to work on those cases, so I knew for sure: that’s what I’m going to do when I grow up.

The first thing I would do is arrest Mr Fritter.

Mr Fritter is our neighbour, and he has a dog. (Now I have to correct it the other way round: he *used to have* a dog.) The dog’s name was Shark.

Shark was supposed to guard the house, which is why Mr Fritter had sent him off to be specially trained. At a school for guard dogs. Mr Fritter said that the training course cost millions, but I can’t imagine that’s true, because if Mr Fritter had millions of pounds he could have just bought himself a different house, with a wall and a burglar alarm, instead of a ramshackle shack with a wonky wire fence, which anyone can just climb over.

So Shark was supposed to bark whenever someone came near that crooked fence. But Shark isn’t stupid, so he never barked when I came up. Because he liked me, and could sense that I wasn’t interested in setting foot on Mr Fritter’s land to steal his millions, or whatever, but only wanted to stroke Shark. And Shark loved that.

Once, Mr Fritter saw me kneel by the garden gate, sticking my hand through the wire and scratching Shark behind the ears. He immediately shouted, “Heel!”, in a dead horrible voice. It sounded exactly like when you sharpen two knives against each other. My mother does that sometimes when they’ve gone blunt, and I always have to leave the kitchen when she does it, because it hurts my ears so much.

It hurt my ears too, when Mr Fritter shouted “Heel!” Shark did as he was told, but Mr Fritter scolded him anyway: “Why didn’t you bark? You dumb cur. You’re supposed to bark when people come up to the fence!” Then something happened which made my heart hurt more than the sharpening-knives-voice hurt my ears. He picked up a stick and thrashed Shark with it.

Honestly, it’s true.

Ever since then Mr Fritter’s been my enemy. My biggest enemy, in fact, and when I grow up I’m going to arrest him. Even though Shark is already somewhere safe. Because that’s what makes the story I want to tell you so good: Shark’s found a better place to live.

So it was on Monday, two weeks ago – that much you know already – and I was at home, sitting in the kitchen having breakfast and looking out of the kitchen window. I could taste hot chocolate on my tongue and at the same time felt a tingling in my belly. Because there was no silver car parked at the side of the road. Which meant that Mr Fritter was on the early shift, and had already left. I decided that it was going to be a lovely day.

I gulped down my hot chocolate, quickly put on my shoes, slung my rucksack over the shoulder and raced outside. I knelt down by Mr Fritter’s garden fence and waited for Shark to run up, wagging his tail. Because that’s what he always did, on lovely days.

Before I carry on with the story, I should describe him to you. He is an exceedingly pretty dog! His fur is brown with light-brown patches, and his eyes are shiny. They always remind me of crystal balls, because if you try to look really deep down into them you can see some kind of reflected light. His floppy ears hang down like a pair of jolly mittens. Shark can prick them up lightning-fast, and then they don’t look jolly at all, more like sharp spikes. But he always lets them hang when I stroke him, because he really enjoys that.

On this particular morning, I couldn’t see him anywhere. So I called out: “Shark!”

Nothing happened. Which I thought was odd. Because he’s actually quite quick, and his hearing’s good.

“Shark!” I called again, more loudly this time.

Nothing.

“Come on, where are you?”

I stood up again, to be able to see into the garden better. I couldn’t see anything move over by the kennel. I walked along the fence, all the way to Kutnevsky’s garden. Nothing.

I had a really bad feeling about this.

I crossed Kutnevsky’s lawn, to see whether maybe Shark was in the back. But no. All there was behind Mr Fritter’s house was a rusty old car, and everything was completely quiet.

Now I was properly scared. Maybe Mr Fritter had taken him to work on purpose, so that I wouldn’t be able to see him? Maybe he was sick, and lying in his kennel without anybody to take care of him?

I thought of lots of gruesome things that could have happened to Shark, and was already wondering whether to scramble over the fence, although Mum had absolutely forbidden it. Just then, I heard a voice from the end of the street: “Nelly!!! Come on!”

THE ROCKET OVER THE SCHOOLYARD

The voice belonged to Julius. Julius is my best friend. He has a big, bright face and is always grinning. Actually, he doesn't grin at all: it's just how his face is made, with the corners of his mouth always turned up. I like that. Whenever I look at him, I think that all's well with the world.

“Hi!” Julius called out.

He likes saying “Hi”, which is shorter than saying “Hello” or “Good Morning”. He doesn't really like talking. As you can tell, he's quite different from me.

Julius was waiting for me at the corner, as he does every morning. He lives in the house on the corner plot. Not the one with the brilliant climbing-sliding-swinging-bouncing structure in the garden – the one opposite.

One day, we waited outside that other one for a whole afternoon, to meet the kids who lived there. But when they arrived, they just stuck out their tongues at us. Then they sat on the swing seat for five minutes, and went back into the house. They didn't even bounce on the trampoline! And they didn't do any climbing, either, or go on the slide. I called after them: “Can we play here sometimes, when you're not in?” The older girl just turned around and blew us a raspberry.

I've since found out that she's called Eileen Clatterbrook, and the other kid was her brother Alexander. But I don't really care about that now.

On this particular morning, I cared even less. I ran past their garden to where Julius was.

“Shark's gone!” I yelled. Actually, I wanted to ask Julius whether we should sneak into Mr Fritter's garden to save Shark, in case he was lying in his kennel, dangerously ill. That's the brilliant thing about Julius: he's always up for a secret adventure. He doesn't tell on you and nothing scares him and he always does his bit. But the best thing about him is this Julius Thing.

I don't know how to explain it.

But Julius can make it so that the world suddenly looks completely different. As if it isn't anything like as horrible as I imagine it. With just a few words.

“Holiday, maybe,” he mumbled now.

“Holiday?”

“Well, Fritter. Maybe he's gone off on holiday with Shark.”

“You think?” I asked, stunned. That’s what I mean: Julius always comes up with things which I wouldn’t ever have thought of myself! I’d like to know whether it’s because of his everything’s-fine grin that the reassuring ideas always float into his head, while only the horrible ones float into mine.

“Or sold him. Because Shark doesn’t bark.”

“Of course! That’s it!” I cried, and immediately cheered up. Because it sounded so logical: after all, Mr Fritter yelled at poor Shark all day long, so it made sense for him to sell him. And Shark would be chuffed.

“Or animal rescue.”

“Animal rescue?”

“Abducted, to a shelter for abused animals. Happens. Seen it on the telly.”

That sounded brilliant. “Exactly,” I said, and hopped three steps. “He’ll definitely have a much bigger kennel there, and delicious food, and someone to stroke him every day.” It was a wonderful place. We went off, happy as Larry.

Not off to Fritter’s garden, but off to school. By the time we got there, I no longer had a care in the world.

Which was just as well. Since I wasn’t worried about anything, I was able to focus in class, and on that particular day it was worth it, because our teacher Mrs Redcheeks said: “Listen, children, we have to talk about the school outing.”

She actually said “*have to*”, even though a school outing is something you *want* to do!

“Where would you like to go? Does anyone have any ideas?”

“To the zoo!” I called out, and right away the others joined in: “Yes! Let’s go to the zoo!” Adriana even jumped up and squealed: “I want to see the elephants!”

Mrs Redcheeks scowled. She often does that, unfortunately. Even though there’s quite a merry face hiding underneath her jowly scowl. I know it. Sometimes her face lights up, and then her lessons are loads of fun.

But not now.

“No,” she grumbled, “it’s much too expensive.”

“But why? You don’t have to pay for it. You can collect the money from us!”

“Exactly,” said Mrs Redcheeks. “It’s very difficult for some parents, if we constantly do things that cost money.”

Because nobody had any other ideas, Mrs Redcheeks decided that we’d take a trip to the woodland playground, and to show that the subject was closed she went over to the piano.

Which meant that we’d do some singing now. I love singing!

Especially the “Laughing Song” which Mrs Redcheeks taught us recently, because you’re allowed to shout “Hahaha!” really loudly between verses.

“One, two, three,” Mrs Redcheeks counted, placed her fingers on the keys and struck the first chord. But then—

VROOMPHHHWHOOSHOOSHBOOMKADUNNNK!!!!

At first we all giggled, because it really seemed as if that awful, booming, whooshing noise came from Mrs Redcheeks playing all the wrong keys.

Timo was the first to realise that those strange sounds were coming from outside. He ran over to the window.

“It’s a space ship!” he cried. Nobody believed him, of course. Firstly, because in those days we still thought that aliens didn’t exist, and secondly, because Timo always says weird stuff.

We ran over to the window anyway.

Brace yourselves: it was true.

Honestly! There really was one. A real-life space rocket. It was pointy and silvery at the front, and flames were coming out of the back. It couldn’t be anything else but a rocket. And this one was flying in circles above our schoolyard. And at that very moment, as we were standing open-mouthed and speechless at the window, a hatch opened in the side of the rocket and a creature in a space suit looked out, and threw a heap of paper into our schoolyard. Flyers in glittering colours!

We instantly turned and ran to the door.

“Stay!” Mrs Redcheeks shouted.

She was the only one who’d remained where she was, sitting at the piano, and of course she didn’t believe a word we said. She told us off until we’d all sat back down in our chairs.

And then she started up the laughing song, but nobody joined in when we got to the great “Hahaha!” bit, because we were far too busy wondering what those flyers were all about.