

Quick! Save the Mammoth! by Knut Krüger

224 pages

Age 8 and up

Sample translation by Rachel Hildebrandt

pp. 7-10

SATURDAY

WOOF

I just want a dog. I mean, is that really so strange? I’m a ten-year-old boy, and I’d like to have just one of the seven million four-legged, furry creatures that currently live in Germany. Seven million! How do I know that? It says so in the dog book I checked out from my school library. When I look around outside, I sometimes have the feeling that everyone, except me, has a dog. And whenever I ride my bike to school, it seems like a howl, bark or growl comes out of every other house. Even my best friend Finn now has a dog, although he never even wished for one. It was just suddenly there one day.

The only problem is that my parents don’t want to listen to the fact that Germany is large enough to hold dog number seven million and one - in other words, my dog. I refuse to give up hope.

It doesn’t have to be large, though it should have four legs for running, a tail for wagging, and a tongue to lick my hands. I’d be glad to draw a picture, if it would help. But considering how well I draw, it would probably end up looking like a hippo or a llama, and what would I do with a llama that would spit on me all the time?

My parents act as if I’m wishing for something totally bizarre or unbelievably dangerous.

“A DOG?” my mother asked recently, her voice sounding weirdly scratchy. Her face then filled with worry lines, as if I had asked for a pack of wolves, a couple of poisonous snakes, and a crocodile.

“A DOG!” my father said, shaking his head with a smile, as if it were a humorous figment of my small, childish mind. A cute whim from a tiny tot who had no idea what he had just wished for. *Grrr*.

But I know exactly what I want. I went to visit Finn a few days ago, and Pluto hurled himself at me, his ears flying out behind him. I knelt down to tell him hello, but it didn’t occur to Pluto to politely give me his paw. He jumped right up in my face, making me tip over. Of course, the whimpering little fellow jumped right on top of me, snuffling wildly at my neck and licking my ear. All I could do was laugh hysterically - you can’t imagine how great that was! At some point, Finn yelled, “That’s it, Pluto,” before dragging him off of me. He then explained that this is how he is greeted every time he comes home from school. It’s nothing special. I almost think he was a little jealous.

Since Pluto’s snuffle attack, I’ve been unable to think about anything except this one thing, which keeps turning around and around in my mind. There’s no room for any other thoughts, which is somehow both nice and pretty stressful at the same time. A dog... Pluto... cuddle... snuffle... lick... pant... woof - that’s what keeps going through my mind. And then I imagine what it would be like when I come home from school and my own dog totally flips out in excitement. Every single day. Dogs probably have bad memories, but I don’t really care.

[...]

[What is still wrong with the mammoth? The three friends have grown so close to Norbert that they are prepared to do anything to save him. So what do they do? They plan to take him up to the top of the Zugspitze, Germany’s highest mountain - in the hope that the cold and the snow will do him good. To achieve this, they not only need courage, but money for the train fare...]

[...]

pp. 155-166

WEDNESDAY

THE FAMILY TICKET

As we shuffle into the train station lobby, I feel like an asthmatic dwarf. I actually have to gasp for breath, because ten soccer fields could easily fit into this gigantic building, complete with stands, floodlights, and everything else. Although this is supposed to be a train station, I can't see any trains or platforms, at first. On the other hand, there are a whole lot of stores, coffee bars, candy shops, fast food stands, and glowing ads. It's almost as if we've just landed in a strange city.

I look up uneasily at the dirty, gray concrete ceiling and quickly back down, because it seems so incredibly far away. I feel a little dizzy. An announcement clatters through the loudspeaker, but the voice is so distorted that I can't understand a single word. A whooshing sound fills the air and presses against my ears.

I was just as woozy the last time I had to stand up and give a talk in front of my class, the one about the Mongolian Gerbil. Then, too, it had felt like someone had stuffed cotton in my ears. The only thing I could hear was my own squawking voice. By the way, a gerbil is a good comparison for this place, since everyone here is running around more crazily than the gerbils in the Mongolian desert sand. For whatever reason, train travelers seem to be in an incredible hurry. The people are rushing around, pulling their clattering wheelie bags behind them, darting in and out between each other in order to cut ahead. I wonder why they don't get here ten minutes earlier in order to spare themselves all this fuss.

Fortunately, Norbert isn't bothered by the rushing around. In my light blue rain poncho, he plods placidly along beside Zoe, who is leading him on the leash as elegantly as any fine lady with her poodle. Our disguise is working perfectly. Trunk and tusks are hidden under the smooth poncho material, and if the tip of the trunk ever peeps out, I push it back under, quick as a flash.

We had decided to stick very close together, and four across, we forge our way through the crowd in search of the ticket counter. We will find out very soon if our trip is already over before it even has a chance to start. We've trusted Finn with all of our money: 38.64 euros. Since his contribution was approximately the amount behind the period, he offered to even things out by taking over the task of actually purchasing the tickets. “Just leave it to me,” were his words. But considering

everything with the money and the master plan, I’m not sure his assurance makes me feel any better.

“Up there!” Finn marches straight up to an open counter, behind which a rail employee in a light blue shirt and a dark blue sweater vest is sitting. He doesn’t look anything like a ticket agent though, since he’s paging through a magazine as he munches away on a sausage in a bun. Finn stands up on his tip toes, right in front of the small glass pane on the counter, in order to attract the man’s attention. The man flips a page as he continues to chew, without casting even a quick glance in Finn’s direction.

“Ahem,” Finn clears his throat.

With a sigh, the man looks up and sets his partially eaten sausage down on the magazine. “How can I help you?” he mumbles with his mouth full.

“We would like to buy three tickets to Garmisch-Partenkirchen,” Finn recites his memorized statement. “With the discount for children and dogs.”

“Children under the age of fourteen may travel for free with their parents,” the sausage-in-a-bun man announces. “Dogs are half price.”

“Half of free?” Finn is confused.

“Half of the normal ticket price, my lad,” the man replies good-naturedly.

“Where is your Fifi?”

“Our what?”

“Your dog. Didn’t you just ask about the dog discount?”

“Here.. here he is,” Zoe answers, taking a step forward with Norbert. “He’s a good dog,” she adds for good measure.

The man gives Norbert an amused look. “Oh, how cute. And where are your parents?”

“They’ve gone on ahead,” Finn quickly cuts in.

“Gone on ahead?” The man suddenly looks unsure of himself. “Without a chaperone, I can only sell you normal tickets. Round trip and seat reservation?”

We nod mutely.

The man taps his keyboard with his greasy fingers and reads off everything as he keys it into the computer: “Three children, round trip to Garmisch, with a dog, second class...” Tap, tap, tap, short pause. “That’ll be 82.40.”

Oh, no, I think in frustration, briefly closing my eyes. We’re done for. Finn’s master plan has failed, and what upsets me the most is that I had known it would all along. How could we have been so naive to think that, with a little allowance money, the four of us could go to the mountains - including streetcar, subway, train, and cable car fares? You’ve got to be joking!

“You don’t have something like a family ticket, do you?” I hear my gerbil-talk voice squeak. I have no idea how I got here, but I’m suddenly standing way up front and staring straight into the sausage-in-a-bun man’s puffy, red face.

“Sure, there is,” he explains with an irritated sigh, “but families aren’t just made up of kids and dogs, but adults too. Or how do you see it?”

I feverishly fumble around for an intelligent response. I rack every nook and cranny of my brain, but all I find there is a gaping emptiness. As if paralyzed, I stare at the half-eaten sausage in which the man’s teeth have left perfect impressions. The man snatches up a pen and drums impatiently on the countertop. *Clackity Clack*. We’ve probably kept him too long from his magazine and sausage. *Clackity Clack*.

“Without an adult chaperone, there’s no family ticket, got it?” he suddenly yells. His piggy eyes turn into mean, narrow slits.

“But we’re siblings, and the dog is our chaperone,” I make one last-ditch attempt.

The man’s face flushes as red as a ripe strawberry. “I can jerk myself around without your help, you snotty-nosed brat!”

Fight, MacFarlane! Think about your Scottish ancestors!

“This is my sister’s service dog,” I fib. “Without his assistance, she’s totally lost.”

“Huh???” The man eyes me, as if I’ve just started speaking Chinese. He then glances over at Zoe, who convincingly twists her eyes and asks in a quavering voice: “Henry, Finn, are you still here?”

“We’re here, sister dear. Everything’s alright!” Finn considerately reaches for her arm. “The poor girl’s been blind as a bat since birth,” he explains to the strawberry man behind the counter. “And her new service dog still needs to finish its training.”

The man’s face shifts from the color of a strawberry to that of a raspberry. He now looks livid, like he really wishes he could give us all a good lashing.

“We would like to buy a family ticket that would include our service dog,” I continue innocently.

The raspberry man growls like an attack dog about to charge. Then he whacks a couple of keys - thwap, thwap, thwap - prints out four tickets, and tosses them down on the counter. “That’s twenty euros!” he barks at us. “And now get out of here, you brats, before I change my mind!”

Dropping Zoe’s arm, Finn rummages around in his pocket and shoves a crumpled twenty across to the man, while I grab the four tickets.

“Thank you so very much! Our parents will be very grateful,” I blubber. But before I can babble any further nonsense, my siblings drag me and the service dog away from the counter and toward our train to Garmisch.

I gaze absentmindedly out of the window. The sunlit fields, desolate farms, and bare trees sweep past me, as the wheels on the tracks hum a soft tune: *Gadagunk, gadagunk, gadagunk.*

Everything seems unreal to me, as if we were sitting in a movie theater on wheels and watching a nature film. White cloud formations float across the swimming-pool blue sky, as airy and light as cotton candy.

It would be such a nice trip, I think, if only we weren’t worried about Norbert, who is playing his role as service dog perfectly. The only thing he should have been doing from time to time was barking, but perhaps that is too much to expect from a sleeping mammoth. In any case, Norbert has stretched out on the floor such that nobody else can fit in our compartment. The fabric from my poncho covers him like a big, blue tent.

Finn has unbuttoned his fur coat, and Zoe has wiggled her feet under Norbert’s stomach. None of us are in a mood to talk, but there is nothing unpleasant about this silence. I read somewhere that good friends can just be silent around each other. And considering how little we’re saying right now, we must be darn good

friends. Sometimes we catch each other’s gaze for a few seconds, but that only lasts until one of us starts to giggle. It is like a game we didn’t plan to play.

After a while, the game comes to an end all on its own, and each of us is once again lost in our own thoughts. The same questions are probably going through our minds: How sick is Norbert really? And even if we manage to reach the snowy mountaintop, will he recover right away?

I have a sneaky suspicion that we’re totally off base with our ice-and-snow theory. It is true that mammoths come from frosty times and regions, and that my room might be way too warm for Norbert. But if it is really so warm, then why is his body not getting warmer, but colder all the time? Why is he having such terrible seizures, when he turns as cold and rigid as a piece of wood? Isn’t that a total contradiction?

More than ever before, I’m now certain that he is suffering from some mysterious illness that is making him increasingly tired and sluggish. This would explain why he seems to lose more and more of his energy with each passing hour. He spent almost all day yesterday sleeping, and today on the train, it didn’t take even a minute before he sprawled out on the floor and closed his eyes.

I casually lower my hand and run my fingers underneath the edge of the poncho. His fur feels crackly, and his body is already dangerously stiff again. I try to tickle him lightly, but Norbert doesn’t respond to my touch.

Under their thin lids, his eyes are twitching back and forth, as if they are searching for something. Do mammoths dream? Perhaps Norbert is dreaming about ice and snow. About his parents and siblings, who went on long treks with him through the endless tundra. Perhaps he is also dreaming about Zoe, Finn and me. About tasty math exercise books, the best hiding place in my room, and a frothy bubble bath.

“Henry!”

“Uh, what?”

Zoe tensely points at the door, but before I fully grasp what is going on, it is jerked open.

“Tickets, please!”

The conductor gets no further than the threshold, because slumbering Norbert has made it impossible for her to set even one foot in our compartment.

I reach into the inner pocket of my jacket and awkwardly pull out our four crumpled tickets. Fortunately, the conductor stretches her arm way out, so I don't have to stand up to hand them to her.

As her forehead wrinkles in confusion, her gazes wanders from me to Zoe, from Zoe to Finn, and from Finn to Norbert, where he remains plastered to the floor. She then looks through the tickets one more time and sinks into thought for a moment. “Where did you get these tickets?” she asks, her tone both curious and not exactly unfriendly.

“Um, they gave them to us at the station,” Finn replies in a rush.

“We bought them there,” Zoe quickly adds.

The conductor lightly shakes her dark curls, pulls out her punch, and marks them - knips, knips, knips, knips - one for each of the tickets in the pile. “Well, I hope you have a nice trip,” she says with a grin, before handing the tickets back to me and pulling the door shut behind her.

We lean over the punched tickets with interest, seeing for the first time what is actually printed on them.

“Employee ticket,” Zoe reads. “With staff discount.”

“Look at what it says here,” I continue, pointing at the tiny letters on the lower edge. “Only valid for employees of German Rail.”

For a few seconds, we look at each other, puzzled.

“I had no idea they hired mammoths,” Finn quips dryly.

All we can do is laugh.