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The Karl Mystery

A case for the detective and me

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Karl

Age: Not quite sure. But definitely older than Mrs Vishnevsky.

Hairstyle: none. No hair, I mean. Almost none. Just a few white hairs at the back and above his ears, which always grow too fast. Then Silke comes and cuts the hairs off again. To keep him looking neat and tidy, Karl says.

In summer, Karl wears a straw hat, and then you can't tell that he's got hardly any hair left.

Clothes: Glasses with round lenses, a t-shirt, usually orange, with an advert printed on it. And in winter, one of those ribbed jackets over the top.

Mum says the ribbed material is called corduroy. His trousers are made of corduroy too.

Distinguishing features: Karl owns the little corner shop. He sells coffee, cigarettes, newspapers and beer.

There's ice cream and fizzy drinks, too. And lollies.

Comes from Prague. That's the capital of the Czech Republic.

Chapter 1

In which a severed finger has not yet been found, Mrs Vishnevsky feeds dog biscuits to Paul, and the other Paul is already dead...

It was only when the woman pushed the button to trigger the retracting thing that the dog reluctantly came out of the undergrowth. He was thrashing about and weezing because he was pulling so hard at the lead and...

I stop reading for a second and throw a quick glance at Karl and Mrs Vishnevsky. I'm just getting to the part with the severed finger. Even thinking about it gives me goosepimples. This bit turned out really well. Okay, the finger business wasn't really my idea. I saw it in a film once. In a whodunnit. I watched it in secret one evening when Mum was out and I was supposed to be asleep. And then there was no way I could sleep after that, because I was scared there might be a hand under the bed. Nothing else. Just a hand. And then the chief inspector and his officers spent the whole film searching for the rest of the body that the hand came from. I'm not going to tell you now where they found the guy. I might be able to use it later on in my story. I'd just have to change it a little bit so that my book isn't exactly like the film. Otherwise it would be stealing, and that isn't allowed, of course. Even if it's just a made-up story.

So, in my whodunnit, there isn't a severed hand, just a finger lying in the bushes. And it's found by a dog, not a hunter. The bit where the dog comes back to his owner wagging his tail, with the finger in his mouth, is the best part of the whole book. So far, anyway. A real shocker. Though I don't actually know yet whose finger it is. I still have to figure that out.

I leaf through the pages very slowly, and let my words hang in the air for a while. At the same time, I am trying to sit so that Karl can't look over my shoulder any more and read along with me. I'm not as good at reading aloud when someone's watching me.

"I bet there's a jogger lying in those bushes."

"What?" I'm so startled that I almost drop my notebook. In front of me are two red-and-white striped legs on a skateboard. In fact, what is on the skateboard is a pair of blue trainers with the stripy legs inside them. Now the trainers jump onto the tarmac and one of them taps the board so that it pops up and is caught by a hand.

"Or a bit of a jogger. Like a running shoe or something."

My eyes travel slowly upwards. The girl to whom the stripy legs and the skateboard belong just sits down beside me on the steps.

"Budge up a bit. So? Am I right?" She tries to get a look at my notebook, but I quickly snap it shut. That would really take the biscuit.

"Er, no."

"Sure – you don't want to give anything away." She shrugs. "But it has to be a jogger. It's almost always a jogger," she adds, looking up at Mrs Vishnevsky and Karl. I've been racking my brains all this time, but I'm reasonably sure I've never seen this girl before. She's about my height, with short, bristly blonde hair that sticks up in all directions, and a huge number of freckles.

"I don't know..." Karl begins, putting his head on one side as if he has to think about it first. "But if that's what Finja says..."

Finja, then. I still don't know her, though.

"Nice to see you back," says Karl. "How is Watson? Has he recovered from the shock? Where is he, anyway?"

"Watson's at home. He's not allowed out to do too much walking yet."

Finja. Watson. What funny names.

"You're new here," Finja announces, looking me up and down.

New?! If anyone is new here, it's this Finja, and Watson, who has to recover from some kind of shock. I have no idea why I've never seen this Finja here before, but Karl knows her. And actually, I don't care, either. I want to finally get on with my reading.

"Finja is a real detective, you know," Karl explains. A detective? That does make me a little bit curious, after all. I mean, I *am* writing a whodunnit. Then it occurs to me that Finja is my age at most, and so it's impossible for her to be a detective already. Not a real one, anyway.

And so I just say: "All the same, it isn't a jogger," and make a note somewhere in the back of my mind to come up with something else urgently. A jogger really would be too easy; unfortunately, she's right about that. But now, I want to read out the part about the finger at last. And for the finger, it doesn't matter if it belongs to a jogger or an old woman or a lonely walker. The finger is severed, in any case. And that's all that matters for now.

I leaf through my notebook to the page where I stopped reading. Then I start again.

It was only when the woman pushed the button to trigger the retracting thing that the dog reluctantly came out of the undergrowth. He was thrashing about and weezing because...

“You’ve missed the h out of wheezing,” says Finja. Well, that’s just perfect! I snap my notebook closed again quickly. First she rolls up on her skateboard in the middle of my reading, and then she can’t keep her gob shut. Anyway, how you spell wheeze makes no difference to the suspense.

Karl clears his throat. “But I for one would like to know what is lying around in there.” Karl owns the corner shop we are sitting outside. Some people call it an offy or a kiosk. But Mum always says corner shop. When we first moved here, she slid 50 cents over to me and said: “Go down to the corner shop and get yourself a lolly.”

And that’s how I met Karl. And the fourth or fifth time I came into the corner shop to buy a lolly, Karl pushed the 50-cent piece back across the counter and said: “you can hold onto that.”

I got the lolly all the same, and put the 50 cents in my savings tin.

“Can you read something aloud to me, instead?” Karl said then. “I do like to hear stories.”

That was how this whole thing started with Karl and me. Mum doesn’t know anything about it. Sometimes she still gives me 50 cents for a lolly, and I’m always pleased, because then I can put the money in my savings tin. It has already started to rattle nicely when I shake it.

Everything is going to get better; I’ll make sure of that. Not just with the money from Mum, that wouldn’t be any real help. But it’s a start, until I come up with something else. And until then, I’ll keep going down to see Karl in the shop and reading to him every afternoon. As payment for the lolly, you might say. It’s useful for Karl, because he can keep working while he listens, and doesn’t have to read himself. I sit down with the newspaper or a magazine, or sometimes with my German book on the steps outside his shop. Karl leaves the door open and tidies up inside, or makes coffee, or sorts the new cigarettes onto the shelves, and listens to me at the same time.

One day, Karl saw my notebook – which is actually top secret – between my schoolbooks, and asked me what I was writing in there. So I told him about the whodunnit I had started. When Karl heard that I want to be a real writer one day, he was beside himself with delight and told me I absolutely had to read him something from my own book.

And that is why I’m sitting here now on the steps, and because there isn’t much going on today, Karl made his coffee and came to sit on the step above me for a change, looking over my shoulder. Which is annoying, because I can read better when Karl is tidying up his shop and not reading over my shoulder all the time. But at least he doesn’t keep interrupting me with little things like a missing h.

All the same, I don’t want Karl to know in advance what’s going to happen in the story. That’s what you call the arc of suspense. It’s bad enough that this Finja just looked at my notes. The suspense is working pretty well on Mrs Vishnevsky, though.

Mrs Vishnevsky happened to drop in to buy the new TV magazine, and then she just stayed and listened.

“The poor dog,” she whispers now, gasping for breath a little herself. She leans down to Paul and gives him a dog biscuit, which she has just fished out of the pocket of her housecoat. “Don’t be scared, it’s only a story, I’m sure it will all turn out alright in the end,” she whispers, patting his head. Paul is Mrs Vishnevsky’s dachshund, and the way he is licking his lips tells us that he isn’t scared at all; he just wants more of those delicious doggy nibbles.

Karl told me that Paul had actually been the name of Mrs Vishnevsky’s husband. Paul Vishnevsky. She had been married to him since she was a young girl. She cooked for him and cleaned the flat and watched TV in the evening with him when he came home from work tired. But the real Paul Vishnevsky died very suddenly three years ago. At first, I thought maybe I could put his death into my whodunnit. A good whodunnit needs a body, and it would have been practical to use someone who was already dead anyway. But Karl knew that this Paul had just died of heart failure. For no reason at all. He hadn’t even suffered a particular fright or anything, and no one poisoned him, either. He was just sitting in his armchair in front of the TV, watching some boring music programme, when his heart suddenly stopped beating. Perhaps the music had been too boring for it. Or perhaps it was just tired from all the work. I can’t use that in my whodunnit. So Paul Vishnevsky doesn’t appear in it at all. Anyway, it would have been sad if Paul Vishnevsky had been murdered – then I would have had to make Mrs Vishnevsky a suspect. And she’s much too nice for that.

[...]

“Ow.” Finja has just elbowed me in the ribs.

“Go on, keep reading,” she hisses, “hurry up!”

But it isn’t that simple. After all, this is my first public reading from my crime novel. I mean, the novel is still a long way from being finished, so it’s my first public reading from my unfinished novel, and because I’ve written the whole story in pencil in my notebook, I have to concentrate really hard while I’m reading, because sometimes I can’t really read my own handwriting. That’s because quite often, the only time I can write is secretly under the bed covers when I’m supposed to be asleep – or in school, under the desk, when horrible Bertram isn’t looking too hard in my direction.

[...] Annoyingly, Mum and I had to move house because Mum lost her job and in her new one, she didn’t earn enough to pay for our flat. And because Dad wasn’t there any more and couldn’t help her to pay for it. All sounds a bit complicated, and someday I’m going to write the whole story down, so that it’s easier to understand, but that will be quite a sad book, and sad books don’t earn you as much money. That’s why I decided to write a whodunnit first. Because they can make you pretty rich. Or science fiction. But I don’t know that much about aliens and all that type of thing. Karl said that with science fiction, you have to invent whole new worlds from

scratch. With all the countries and rivers, all the places and plants and extra-terrestrials and space technology and all that malarky. I imagine that's quite stressful. And I'm already finding it stressful that we've moved to a different part of town, which meant I had to change schools. That's enough of a new world for me. My old class had a farewell party for me, and then Mrs Sonntag gave me a brilliant notebook, because so many new things are happening in my life. "So that you can write everything down," she said. "One day, I'm sure you're going to become a real author."

[...]

"Hey, Karl, are you there?" the sound of a bell rings out from the shop and Karl shrugs regretfully. "Customer," he says, getting to his feet. "Got to go." Mrs Vishnevsky gets up from the steps as well, with some effort. "It's the old lady from number 13," she whispers to me. "Might take a while." I sigh and shut my notebook. I guess that's the end of the reading for today, then.

"Come on, Paulikins, dinner is calling." Mrs Vishnevsky bends down and scoops Paul up into her arms.

If he gets carried around everywhere, that pooch is going to die of a fatty heart, Karl always says. But he only says that when Mrs Vishnevsky and her dachshund can't hear him. I wonder whether the real Paul died of a fatty heart as well, but Mrs Vishnevsky can't possibly have carried him around.

"Well then, you can let me in on it now!" Finja leaps to her feet and drops her skateboard loudly onto the tarmac.

"What?" I look up at her in confusion.

"You know, the jogger thing."

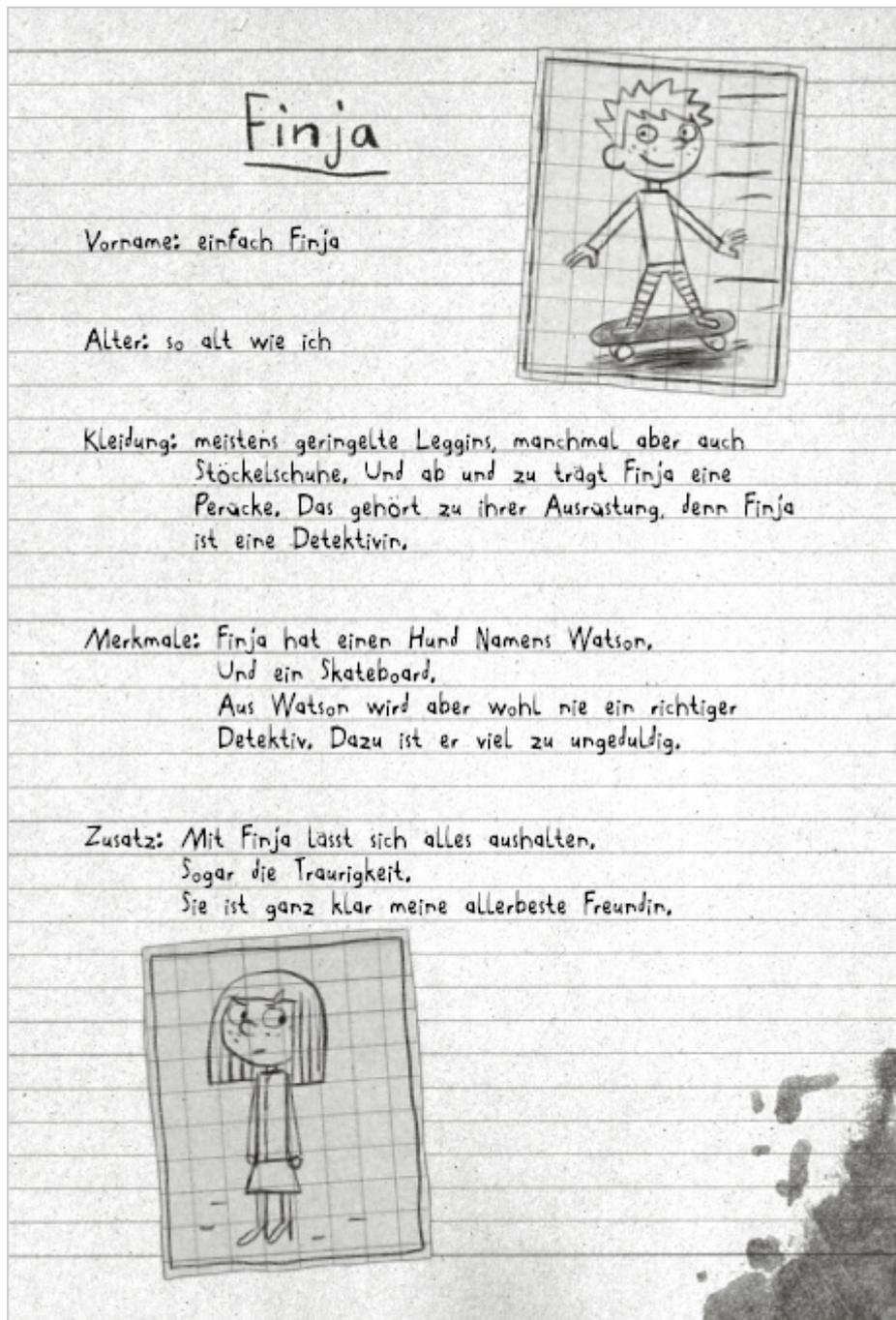
I don't give her an answer. Instead, I close the notebook for good this time and stuff it back into my schoolbag with the other things. Finja keeps staring down at me for a while, which makes me kind of nervous. I look aloof and rummage around in my bag as if I'm searching for something. From the corner of my eye, I see the red-and-white-striped legs still standing in front of me. I gradually forget what I was looking for in my bag; I must have picked up every textbook and exercise book at least three times.

"Okay," says Finja. "I have to go home now."

"Me too," I mutter, without looking up. I don't want her to see how relieved I am. I quickly flip the flap down and shut the clip. And I try to cover as much of my rucksack as possible with my arms in the process. It's embarrassing that the flap is covered in little glittery planets and rockets. When I started school five years ago, I thought the pattern was totally cool, and I still remember Dad putting my new schoolbag on my back on the first day of school. Then he jammed his motorbike helmet onto my head and started taking photos of me.

"Like a real astronaut," he said, and kept leaping around me with his camera. The photos of me with the huge helmet on my head and the space-themed rucksack on my back are up in our hallway now, and Mum always says they're the coolest first-day-of-school photos ever.

All the same, I'd like a different schoolbag. Rockets and planets are no good for a writer. At most, only for one who writes science fiction. Star Wars and that kind of thing. But I can't say anything about the bag to Mum, because these things are ridiculously expensive and it would only make her sad again. And Mum has been sad far too often recently.



Finja

First name: just Finja

Age: the same as me

Clothes: mostly stripy leggings, but sometimes high-heeled shoes. And now and then Finja wears a wig, as well. It's part of her equipment, because Finja is a detective.

Distinishing features: Finja has a dog called Watson.

And a skateboard.

But Watson probably won't ever become a real detective. He's much too impatient.

Note: With Finja, you can get through anything.

Even sadness.

She is quite obviously my best friend.