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A Lazy God

Novel

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One

IT WOULD BE BETTER if the grains in the wallpaper moved. If they shifted to the edge, the wallpaper could split open in the middle and the ceiling behind it could follow suit. The roof would collapse. The truss would bore a hole into the house. The shingles would fall into the garden and smash the bushes. You would be able to see the sky.

The machine would start up. It would send signals from the bellybutton to the surface via light wires. The relay boards underneath the skin would click. The reduced pressure in the brain's radio transmitters would make them vibrate. Central Command would take over.

He would fly, leave the broken house behind, the destroyed garden, the residential estate, the forest. The meadows and the pathways. The main road. The world.

Ben is ill without really being ill. The space behind his nose has grown bigger from the crying and is pushing against his eyes from the inside. He should really get up. But he doesn't dare to. Yesterday, his brother died. From now on, Ben is an only child and Mummy is alone. His brother's name was Jonas. He was eight and in third grade and Ben used to call him Jumping Jack. Ben doesn't know what his brother is called now. Souls have Latin names.

Somewhere in the house a door closes. Then another. Mummy's alive. She was his and Jonas's mother in equal parts. What will happen to Jonas's part is still unclear. Maybe Ben will get it. Maybe not.

Mummy had already returned from the hospital when Ben came home from school yesterday. He wanted to tell her about Mark Spitz, his third gold medal and the world record in 200-metre

freestyle in one minute fifty-two and eighty-seven milliseconds and about the fact that Mark Spitz was planning on becoming a dentist after the Olympic Games.

Trembling, Mummy had whispered in his ear that she had to tell him something very sad. That today, she had found out in the hospital that Jonas had succumbed to his illness this morning, and that this meant that he had died. That apparently it had happened quickly and hadn't hurt, promise. That she believed that God had been looking for help and had decided on Jonas. But that they were still allowed to be sad about it and that Jonas was now a soul.

God is a sort of Mister Behrends of the sky, who grips the souls by their arms until the pain throbs in them and then he banishes them to the outmost corners of the sky in order to work. There, they have to tidy up and clean and lug God's things around, naked and with filthy faces. God himself is lazy in his almightiness and it brings him joy to steal siblings from people and children from parents. He's insatiable. There are more dead people in heaven than there are living ones on earth. Taking Mr Behrends, his PE teacher, as a starting point, Ben began to imagine this, because Mummy was crying and had no air left to speak. He had seen Jonas, how he was slaving away for God. He also cried and had not been able to stop.

Afterwards, Mummy stared at the kitchen door for ages. It seemed as if her eyes were conflating, as if her face was made of wood and the eyes were the knotholes and her hair was fuzz on the roots and her skin the bark, furrowed and creased and no leaves and no woodpecker's cavity. With a gush of wind that bends the wood, Mummy got up and took Jonas's timetable off the refrigerator door. She caressed it with her hand as if she could wipe away Jonas's lessons and said that she had to call the school.

For dinner, they had pasta bake. Mummy didn't eat anything and Ben ate the pasta with a lot of snot. He was allowed to eat his dessert sitting on Mummy's lap. He was still crying and got the collar of Mummy's blouse wet with tears and dessert. Mummy didn't mind. He closed his eyes and made himself heavy, so as to account for Jonas's weight as well. Then he fell asleep on Mummy's shoulder.

This morning he's feeling ashamed. He doesn't think that he is sad enough. He had liked the way things were while Jonas had been in hospital. He had imagined being Mummy's husband. He had cleaned the electric pins in the toaster and straightened out the napkin rings. He had sorted all the nails that were kept in old baby food jars in the boiler room into the shelf according to their size, had shaken a pretty pattern into the kaleidoscope and taken a sip from the cognac. When Mummy had lain down on the sofa after being exhausted from the hospital visit, he had sat down in the armchair across from her and had a chat with her. Jonas was supposed to come home on Tuesday at the latest.

But instead his soul left his body. It had wafted right out of him, looked down on him and wondered about why they had folded his body's hands because it was looking as though he was praying and as though he was a good person. But Jonas never prayed. He considered praying too boring and eight-year-olds can't be good people. A lock of his hair has gone astray and is jabbing into his left eye. It would continue to grow for a little while after his death, Ben had once read in a How and Why Wonder Book on humans. Jonas would have blown the lock of hair away, but being a soul he lacks the strength to do so. After a little while, Jonas's soul is blown out through an open window. Ben estimates its speed to be that of a bird. On the way to heaven it could collide with an airplane, a Lufthansa or a Condor Boeing. The airplane wouldn't be affected by the collision, but the soul could be ripped apart and disintegrate, because it's made mainly out of air. The soul's pieces would then have to find each

other again. If they failed, they wouldn't be allowed into heaven. Jonas was a good cyclist and quite a good swimmer. Why shouldn't he also be able to fly well? Away from Mummy and from him, past airplanes and into heaven. Ben is crying. He's sad enough after all. There's a knock on the door.

»May I come in?,« Mummy asks.

»Yes,« Ben says and wipes his tears into the bed sheets.

»I made you cocoa.«

»Thanks.«

»Are you hungry?«

»No. Still full of pasta bake.«

»You really ought to eat something later.«

The cocoa has developed a skin. It's gross, but Ben drinks it without making a face.

»Can I come under the covers with you?«

»Yes,« Ben says.

Mummy crawls into bed, fully clothed. Her skirt and the blouse with the dessert stains from yesterday. She only takes off her slippers. She puts her arm on her face and Ben can hear her breathing.

»Would you like to talk about Jonas with me?«

Ben doesn't know what to say. He practices parking a Ford Capri traffic police car on the edge of the pillow.

»Jonas drew a picture of a rocket for you in hospital. I took it with me and put it on the kitchen table for you. There's a vase in the rocket's window and a dog guards its entrance. The person in the bed next to Jonas was complaining about the colour of the fire coming out of the rocket. That kind of fire wasn't green, he said. But I think the green fire is pretty.«

»Did you know that Jonas didn't know that astronauts eat their food from a tube? I told him that. That the tomato sauce is already in there with the pasta and that schnitzels are a bit runnier so that they'll fit through the hole. So Jonas wanted to become an astronaut and take Gerald, his furry cocker spaniel, with him. I told him that dogs are only allowed on Russian rockets.«

Mummy is crying underneath her arm. »Come here,« she says.

They spend the afternoon under the covers like they're in a cave and talk about Jonas and the children he met in hospital, about the girl without any hair, whose gender you could only tell because she was carrying around an album of pony stickers with her, about the tall boy, who was missing one of his legs up to the knee, and who was crying all the time because of that, and about the Asian twins, only one of whom was sick, but the other didn't want to leave and had threatened to scream if they forced him to. They remember that Jonas hadn't wanted to go sledging last winter, because he had felt sorry for the snow, because of the rusty blades, and that he had kept stumbling over the tunicle made from the bathroom rug when he had dressed up as the pope. They talked about Rex Gildo and his great song »Tanze Samba mit mir« and about the remarkable fact that the Kurt Edelhagen Orchestra had played at exactly 114 beats per minute during the Parade of Nations at the Olympic Games, because that's when humans walk with most ease and that this was due to their size and the effects of gravity. They also talked about the colour of Jonas's skin, which had been looking a little yellow in the last days.

»Was Jonas sleeping when he died?,« Ben asks.

»Yes, certainly,« Mummy says. »I'm sure of it.«

»I thought so,« Ben says. He starts crying and hits his fist onto the bed.

In the evening they light a candle for Jonas. It's like a mini-Christmas. The flame wavers on the wick and the shadow of the objects in the room flicker across the walls. Ben remembers that because of his name, Jonas sometimes believed he was living inside a whale. He tells Mummy about this.

»I didn't know that,« she says.

»Yes,« says Ben. »He thought that he was living in the stomach of a whale. And that the walls of the stomach could move and that you'd have to be careful not to fall down and land in the mucus because it tastes of fish puke. That's why Jumping Jack built additional walls out of Lego, and they supported the whale's stomach so that it can't contract or sag in the middle.«

»I didn't know that,« Mummy says.

»Yes,« says Ben.

Later they sing *Abendsti-hi-le ü-hü-berall*. Ben decides that this will be his favourite song from now on. Up until now, only Jonas had had a favourite song. C, O, F, F, E, E, don't drink so mu-hu-ch co-ho-ffee. Mummy sang it to him a lot. Now she'll be able to sing *Abendsti-hi-le* to Ben when she wants to sing. Mummy gets up and spreads out the blanket over Ben.

»Can I have Dreamy?,« he asks. Dreamy is his doll. It's bald, one too many visits to the hairdresser's.

»Where is it?«

»With Jonas. In his room.«

Mummy gives Ben a kiss. »I'm sorry, Ben. I can't. Not today.«

»Yes,« Ben says and nods his head.

»Good night,« Mummy says. She hesitates, then she says: »Good night, Jonas.«

»Good night, Jonas,« Ben says.

When Mummy has left, Ben screws up his face, because of the skin on the cocoa from earlier.

BEN IS FED UP WITH BEING ILL-WITHOUT-REALLY-BEING-ILL. He gets dressed and goes downstairs. He doesn't have to go to school today or tomorrow. »It can wait,« Mummy had said, »you'll go when you want to again.« He's allowed to decide for himself when he wants to go to school and finds that it can wait for a good, long while. Mummy is in the living room. She has put the chairs on the sofa, taken down the curtains and carried the plants out onto the terrace. She has taken the books off the shelves and has placed them in piles against the wall. She's standing on tip toes on a chair, sprays the top shelves with cleaning agent and wipes them. After each wipe, she examines the dirt on the cloth. Then she shakes her head and wipes again.

»Hello,« Ben says.

Without turning around, Mummy says: »You can't come in here right now. I'm cleaning. Go to the kitchen. I put out some breakfast for you.«

When Ben is about to leave, she says: »Just hand me the Poliboy, would you?«

Ben doesn't know what she means by Poliboy and hands her a sponge.

»The Poliboy, Benjamin, the bottle on the windowsill, you can read, can't you. And take the curtains with you, you can throw them down the cellar steps.«

Ben has to go twice, the curtains are heavy.

»You can hold the ladder for me later, when I clean the windows.«

Ben toasts a slice of bread and butters it. The butter is soft, it melts and drips through the bread, he lifts it and sees little lakes of butter on the cutting board. He stirs the cherry jam with a knife and pushes the fruit aside. He only likes the runny part. When he tries to slide it onto the bread some cherries fall on the table. Ben's hands are sticky, the butter on the board smells strange and the crayon fire on the rocket picture is really quite green.

»Good grief, Benjamin, what kind of mess is this? Go to the living room. I'll clean this up.«

Ben goes into the living room and sits down on the part of the sofa that is not covered by chairs. He holds his smudgy hands in front of his face so that they won't stain anything.

Mummy yells from the kitchen: »Be careful not to stain anything.«

Ben counts half of the corduroy ribs on the part of the sofa he is sitting on and doubles them.
56 ribs.

»Bring me the cleaning cloth.«

Ben clenches the cloth between his elbows and carries it to the kitchen.

»Seriously, are you kidding me?«

»My fingers were sticky.«

He lets the cloth fall to the floor and washes his fingers in the sink. He wants to go back to the living room, but Mummy says: »No, I'm going to vacuum there now.«

Ben asks whether she knows how many ribs the sofa has. No, she didn't know and she also didn't want to. »Now sit down here and wait until you can hold the ladder for me.«

While Mummy is vacuuming the living room, Ben gets hungry. The breakfast has been cleared away by now, he opens the fridge and finds a packet of spaghetti. He drips ketchup onto three spaghetti and nibbles at them. He uses a fourth spaghetti to play conductor. Mummy comes into the kitchen.
»And what is this now?«

Ben doesn't know where to put down the spaghetti.

»Throw that away. And now come with me, you can hold the ladder now.«

After Ben held the ladder, he is also done with being fine. He goes upstairs. He holds onto the handrail while walking up the stairs. He has never done that before. He puts on his pyjamas, lies down on the bed and builds a garage for the Ford Capri traffic police car and a staffroom for the policemen, where they can talk into their radios, out of a piece of duvet.

Later, Mummy comes into the room. She sits down at the edge of the bed and stops moving. Motionless, she transforms into a tree again, only today the tree smells of Poliboy. Ben imagines that there would be creaking if Mummy's branch-arms or her wooden neck moved. At some point, Mummy takes off her rubber gloves and there's no creaking after all. She strokes Ben's hair and apologises to him.

»What for?«

Mummy doesn't crawl under the duvet with him tonight, but she does tell Ben a fairy tale. A prince is meant to marry an ugly princess with a scaly wart on her nose, even though he is in love with the blacksmith's beautiful daughter and has secretly taken her dancing a couple of times already. The

wheel fiddle player on the dance floor has a solution, his second job is being a wizard and he conjures up an impressive family tree with baronesses and barons as relatives for the girl. The fairy tale has a happy ending. The king is so impressed by the girl's magic heritage that he not only agrees to the marriage with his son, he also demands all sorts of pomp and circumstance for the wedding. The warty princess is chased from the country. She is going to have to look for someone to marry in Denmark. Mummy leaves out the part about the living happily ever after. She smooths out the wrinkles in Ben's pyjama, so that he won't sleep on a crease, and waits for him to fall asleep.

[...]

INSTEAD OF TAKING THE USUAL ROUTE, Ruth drives to the hospital on a narrow, unpaved path off the main road and along the moor. Rain is pattering on the windowpanes, branches bash against the car doors, the car body is dragging through murky puddles across the gravel. The radio is playing a hit mix.

While trying to remove dried up chewing gum from the driver's cab of a toy truck with a knife, Ruth has broken off its passenger door. Instead of repairing the truck, she has scratched the windscreen, slashed the seats and cut a few holes into the rear tyres. Then she threw the truck into the garbage. Before she was able to get a replacement, Jonas had died.

Now she has bought an expensive dump truck that drives on jagged lug tread tyres and whose scoop is fashioned from painted zinc.

Ruth parks the car on the pavement and turns off the radio. She gets out of the car, hurries through the rain and ducks underneath the sombre portal of the hospital that was built to serve as a stronghold for the 1st battalion of the SS-*Verfügungstruppe* Germania in 1937. Bruchrau sandstone. Unwavering confidence in victory.

A few moments later, she is standing in the hallway of the children's ward in front of room number 14 without being able to remember how she got there. She wipes the rain off her forehead, orders a smile on her face, knocks on the door and enters unprompted.

Jonas's bed underneath the window has been stripped, a nightstand lies across the mattress and only poorly covers a spot on it. A girl is lying in the bed next to it. She is sleeping. Her braids are woven so tightly that they stick out like shaggy desert plants.

Ruth runs into the senior nurse at the nurses' station.

»Oh,« says the nurse. A letter has fallen off the colourful name tag made from fired Plasticine pinned to her coat. Gu_run.

»My name is Schrader,« Ruth says.

»I know, Mrs. Schrader.« The nurse puts down a tray and grips Ruth's arm, a gesture that is probably meant to be friendly, but which seems rather overbearing to Ruth.

»Regrettably, I had no opportunity to express my sympathies. Your son didn't die during my shift. I'm truly sorry, Mrs. Schrader. What can I do for you today?«

»I have an extra toy. I bought it. To replace a broken toy. It's a dump truck. Also, I bought streamers for a bike. Two weeks ago.« Ruth is annoyed at her stammering. »I would like to give a present to little Michael, who shares Jonas's room. But I couldn't find him there.«

»He left a long time ago, Mrs. Schrader. He has recovered well and is now in physical therapy.«

»He doesn't need the tubes anymore?«

»No. Everything works flawlessly now.«

»Oh,« Ruth says. And after a short while: »A victory, achieved by confidence.«

The senior nurse looks at her blankly.

Ruth wanders through the familiar hallways slowly, like a shadow, towards the exit. She should have expected this. Little Michael's recovery was to be expected. Where children die, other children survive. Someone's loss is another's victory. In the end, the sum of the conflicting forces will always be zero, Hans had once explained to her. She throws the truck into a bin filled with bandages that is standing on wheels in a corner.

In the foyer, she runs into the doctor who had treated Jonas. He leans against a wall, smokes and flicks the ash of his cigarette into a potted plant. He wishes Ruth strength on the arduous journey that lies ahead of her now. The glasses in front of his pinpoint eyes resemble the ones worn by the president of the IOC, whom she had seen on the news a few days ago.

With a thin-lipped smile, she says: »The games must go on. And eventually, they do.« Then she loses control over her face. She leaves the doctor standing there and exits the hospital through the portal. The rain has ceased.