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If That Still Works, Things Can't Be That Bad

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kann es nicht so schlimm sein)

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If That Still Works, Things Can't Be That Bad

Friederike, thank you for putting up with all this crap,
and for loving me even when there is almost nothing left of me
except you once again. I know that you don't have to.
And I know that you know that.

»This has been taken straight out of the newspapers.
Nothing has been changed, except the words.«
Bob Dylan

One

We are sitting in a tunnel. We are sitting in a tunnel underneath the river. We are sitting in traffic, backlog. It happens. It happens a lot. Into the tunnel. Down, down, down. Maintain your speed, maintain your speed, maintaining this special kind of speed. The momentum, rolling, almost automatically. A strange kind of floating, as though you were too light, as though something was missing. Or a very gentle falling. Maybe the radio is on, maybe the wipers are moving from side to side on the dry windscreen. And there is the music and the windscreen wipers and this wonderful momentum, this incredible lightness. Rolling and rolling and failing to notice the large red-and-white arrows pointing at the floor. They mark the middle of the tunnel. And now we're starting to go uphill, only slightly at first, then a bit more and then even more still. Gradually, the accelerator becomes necessary, only slight pressure on the pedal at first. Maintaining the speed. And then there is still the momentum and the floating. And then a horn is sounded. And that's when it's already too late. That's when hundreds of people have already had to put their foot on the brake, that's when vehicles that were way too slow have already had to rumble across the solid line with its silver raised pavement markers and into the fast lane. And everything brakes and jams and stops.

Functioning

Two

We are rolling slowly, very slowly, foot on the brake. I'm driving our family car, which right now is my ambulance. It's wide and high, it can comfortably fit four and everything you need. There are two of us. I'm driving, Theo's aunt Hanna sits next to me. I'm driving, because Hanna is glad about every bit of the journey through the city that she doesn't have to drive.

Three

My brain is a sponge, saturated with medications. Do you remember in school, how nice it was to hold the sponge under the tap until it was fully saturated, then throw it against the blackboard with a smack? How the water stained the blackboard dark, the splatter all around? The stains that disappeared into the air of our classroom like ghosts.

Four

Eventually, I spend my nights on the sofa in the living room. The others are sleeping, Friederike upstairs in our bed, in our bedroom, which has become something else to me. Maybe she is alone, probably Wolf is lying next to her. All I would have to do is put my hand on her shoulder. And say what? I can't do this anymore? Help? But ultimately, I had been able to do this every night, until now. And how to ask for help when I don't even believe myself anymore that anyone could help me? Hands off the others, off those who are right.

Most of the time I stare into the dark. Or watch another series, take one last bath from the puddle in the hot water tank. Stuff myself with more of the things that lose their taste somewhere between the fridge and me in the dark. All of it too normal for someone experiencing what I'm experiencing.

In the beginning I did try to sleep in our bed, which is often Friederike's, Wolf's, Theo's and my bed in the last hours of the night. Four bodies, four ways of sprawling out, pressing against one another, claiming space, covering oneself with the duvet, of breathing. Three who dream and one who idles, who ----- a high-pitched hum, the whining of a dentist's drill in an empty head and a paving slab on the chest. This entire, this huge pile of ----? No. Well, what then. --- --. This is not thinking, it's not fear, anger, grief, grief. So, it's just grief then. Grief, for all I care. Can we please call it grief? A turbine -- ----- in my head, all that turning. Everything tears apart, an absolute mess. Everything is mixed up, has been dragged to the wrong place and squashed and spat. I can't think straight, my thoughts are tripping themselves up. And there is no emotion that I can bear anymore. But the emotions are flashing through my body, burn underneath my skin and above the chaos. And there is no more getting up, only the panic and the pile of paving slabs on the chest.

And if I do fall asleep briefly, I start from dreams that I forget right away. I sit up and look into the darkness dully for why not everyone else is awake. Because I did scream, because I did wake myself up with my screams. But no one is awake. The red numbers on the digital display of the clock radio. I hope that two hours have passed, one at least. One, please. Seventeen minutes. And the darkness and the night are huge and everywhere.

Sleeping. I try not to move. If you don't move in the night, you'll fall asleep. I lie stiff so as not to wake Friederike. My muscles are tense, my gaze pokes the darkness as though the horrors were out there. How strange I have become to the world, how strange I am to myself. How I am no one at all anymore. Nothing. Not even ----- . A —

What, actually? I would like to know so badly. I don't know. I'm an experiment and don't know what I'm going to turn into and who is supervising the experiment. I'm afraid. Of myself, of the future. Why? Because I'm no longer me, because there can't be a future for what I used to be, because I can no longer think anything pleasant. Because I'm afraid of myself, of how the world in my head darkens and greys. Because my head has smashed my world to bits. At night, I am alone with myself, with this ugly, crazy night, that is neither ugly nor crazy, only that silent, inanimate world that coldly and jingly ----- ----- ---- -----, a night that I fill up with ugliness and craziness all by myself. And the days are the sister of the night doused by an indifferent sun. I no longer wake up fully during the day. During the day I find myself even creepier than I do at night, during the day I'm even more afraid of myself and I'm afraid of the glances of others. I try to spare the others from the nothingness I have become as much as possible.

So, our bed is Friederike's bed now and I, or what looks like me, dwell in the living room at night and move into the bedroom with the drawn curtains during the day, lie down on the bed that is Friederike's bed by night and is my open grave by day. Once, I hear Theo say next door — I think, Daddy's mental illness is that he mixes up day and night.

Five

I take two. One is pink, the other is ruby. Two, that's as many as I took last time. Two, that's the amount that makes everything normal again, except for the fact that you're taking 225 milligrams of something so that you're able to bear yourself. But this time it doesn't help. This time they don't work. How is that possible? How bad does it have to be if that no longer works?

Six

It's Monday and we are sitting in a tunnel. I'm surprised that I'm not sad or desperate but relieved. There was an empty spot on Friday already but I wanted to say goodbye to the children, to bury my nose in Wolf's hair a few more times, inhale his baby smell that is still there even though we're only allowed to call him ›big boy‹ now. Give Theo a big cuddle one more time, explain to him that I have to go to hospital to get healthy again. That I'll try to get healthy as fast as I can. That I'll try to come back home as fast as I can. But that it might take a while. Not super long. But definitely a few weeks. That I'm always glad when he visits. That he can call my any time and that I, if I don't manage to pick up right away, will call him back after one hour at most.

I try to say all of this casually so that Theo won't cry. Theo doesn't cry. He looks serious. Much too serious for a five-year-old. But he doesn't cry. He nods. I cry. At least I manage to keep the tears from rolling down.

Seven

When I take the capsules for the first time, I have to laugh out loud. It's one year and a few months after Theo was born. At that stage, some things are quite funny still. Yes, threatening and shit, but also an interesting experiment somehow. I think it's summer, I'm riding my bike, maybe it's just a very warm spring day. Or rain. I can't remember anymore. No, no rain.

Before Venlafaxine, the doctor tried CipraleX. It takes me quite a while to bring myself to tell him what has happened.

— When it started to work, the first few days were really good, I say.

Then I gather all my courage.

— But then something strange happened. Somehow, I suddenly got the feeling that I didn't deserve the effect.

The way I remember it, I screw up my eyes and wait for the doctor to throw me out, because I'm a fake, because I'm a nobody wasting his time.

— Yes, he says instead, we get that a lot here. We'll try something else then. Do you know Venlafaxine?

Another possible side effect was dryness of the mouth, the doctor adds as he hands me the prescription. OK, got it.

I come out of the pharmacy, swallow a pill and get on my bike. And at some point during the ride, when I'm not even thinking about it anymore, I suddenly feel as if I had bitten into a bag of flour. From one moment to the next. My mouth, the cheeks, the gums, the tongue, dry as dust. Swallowing is hard because something is sticking together at the back of my throat.

Eight

The night before I leave, Theo comes into the living room.

— Dad.

He stands in the dark a few steps away, a slender shadow, five years old, a small human, not someone who should be worried about his father, someone who should get --- ----- -----
--- ----- . But I can no longer do that, and I hate myself for it and I know that this hate doesn't make anything better, only worse, but I can't do anything about that either anymore. I see the shadow and wonder if he still sees his father in me or the creature that I have become. That I can no longer care for the few that I love or think that I love because I don't know if what I'm pulling off here is still love. Theo, Wolf, Friederike are the few people for whom I still feel anything at all. There is only perplexed numbness for everything else, once meaningful gestures, powerless theatre.

— Go on, then, come on in, my lovely bear, I make myself say, because I suspect that that's the right thing to say now, and imitate a loving voice.

It's March, it's going to be an unusually hot summer, but as of now it's still cool. I lift the duvet and Theo crawls in with me. He hesitates briefly as though he was scared of doing something wrong. As if he was thinking, something is missing, there's not enough father. Then he presses against me, so hard that I'm afraid he is going to hurt himself.

— Is it good like this, pet?

— Yes.

He takes my arm and wraps it around himself, presses his head firmly against my chest as though it were hard to hear my heartbeat, as though he had to make sure that there is still something there. His hands and feet are cold. I have tears in my eyes. Not because I think it's so beautiful, so moving that he comes to say goodbye to me. I'm crying because I know that I should feel something now. But there is only that tired, shaky emptiness in me. I'm crying, yes. But I'm crying for myself, for the Benjamin who isn't feeling the right thing in this moment. I'm holding this five-year-old in my arms, who obviously loves me very much, and I can't think of anything but self-pity. This small boy holds me with all his might and I'm wondering why he does that, if what he means with his loves when he hugs me like this is still there. He presses against me and in my head there's only me. But that's nothing. There is no me. Where one should be, there is only strangeness and numbness. And I wish I could claim now, it would be easy to claim, much easier to say, that I'm disgusted by myself. But all I am is empty.

At some point, he lets go of me. He lets go of me and turns away and falls asleep immediately.

Nine

----- -head--, -----, -----, -----
-----, -----, -----.
-----, -----, -----, -----.
-----, -----, -----, -----
----- ----- . And I love you very much.
-----, -----, -----,
-----, -----.

Ten

We are sitting in the car and talk about something, I forgot about what. We're making progress slowly. Sometimes Hanna says that it's the right thing, that there is no other way and sometimes I say that it's the right thing, that there is no other way. And I do know that there is no other way, but what it doesn't feel like is right. We talk about anything, and sometimes it's nice for a bit, and in the boot is the big, black trolley case, and sometimes we say that it's the right thing and I think that it's the wrong thing and that it would be more right to pull up at the side of the road and die. Just like that, collapse behind the wheel with one last, deep exhale and be gone. Taken from the world by a merciful coincidence.

I mustn't think. That's the real trick for an acceptable drive to the psychiatric hospital. If I think, I'll only notice how strange and distanced I have become to myself. How I am watching myself from afar and hardly recognise myself. And I think that it's also a little bit funny, a little bit crazy and absurd to be driving yourself to hospital and chat away all the while. Like the surprising first scene in an uplifting comedy set in a psychiatric hospital starring Til Schweiger, Florian David Fitz and Matthias Schweighöfer, where they all escape from the mental hospital in the end and drive to the seaside to see a sunrise that makes the suicidal one realise that life is actually quite worth living after all, and the congenially crazy bipolar one decides to take his meds and marries the cute nurse while sky diving, and the kind-of-cute autistic nerd with the panic attacks lands a fantastic deal for his conservative-narrow-minded manager dad with his super unusual perspective on everything, which is why junior is allowed to take over the small but thriving family business and apropos of nothing the three show their surroundings that being normal isn't the measure of all things after all.

Later, Friederike says that she had also been sitting in the car.

We find a parking spot right in front of the clinic, I heave the big, black trolley case out of the car.

—Do you want me to come with?, asks Hanna.

—Nah, we'll be alright. Thank you. It's going to get boring now anyway.

I give Hanna a hug, give her the car keys, thank her for her help, wheel myself off. Shouldn't I be feeling something now? What am I supposed to feel now? Grief? Or fear? Because the insurance card is going to be read in a little while and then you're officially logged into the psychiatric hospital? But I don't feel anything. No, I do. Shame. Because I'm rocking up with this massive black suitcase. Shouldn't you get to the clinic in a hurry, with a carelessly stuffed

bag and clothes that haven't been washed in weeks, no shower and sticky with tears? Should you commit yourself for your life?

[...]

Fifty-three

There is a painting on the wall of the TV room. A stale print. I don't know the artist. The frame is crooked, the subject a cliché. A path that leads to a villa. The path winds gently and is lined by tall trees, and I wonder who is responsible for choosing the art prints in hospitals.

I keep having to look at the painting. When I read here during the day or watch *Alarm für Cobra 11* with the others in the evening. The light of a sunrise or sunset colours everything with its deep, dark, strangely glaring orange. The beams of sunlight cling to everything, fat and lazy and somehow pointless, saturate a pale white into a doughy yellow, make green crust into warm shades of brown. The clouds in the sky, nothing but snot, the villa groans under the weight of the colours, branches bend, the path, a gooey river of sunmud, sticky and warm, bubbles and swashes. And this stuff that squelches around and suffocates everything makes heaven and earth equal. Trees and houses forlorn and familiar at once, undecided between above and below, below and above.

One afternoon, I'm sitting in the TV room, I put the book aside and notice for the first time that someone has hung the picture upside down. I only realise this because I notice a strange mark in the top left corner, the illegible signature of the painter. I walk over to the picture, turn it around, sit back down on the black leather sofa. I look at it for a bit, get back up and turn it over again.

Fifty-four

Okay. Stop. That was a lie. My apologies. That is a lie. I hung the picture upside down myself. I lie so often, I'm sorry. I'm a liar, made up only of lies. Please accept my apologies.

Fifty-three

On another afternoon, I look at it for a long time and am pleased by the fact that it is hanging upside down. This way, I think, it's much better. A far superior artwork. And it takes forever until I realise that someone has hung it the right way up again.

Angry Birds Match, Level 98

Fifty-five

Every good picture is a lie. Every good sentence is a hiding spot. My apologies.

There could be a picture here.

There could be a ----- here.

There koud be - picture here.

There ----- -- a picture here.

----- could be an picture here.

There ----- -- - -----.

There -----, -----.

picture picture picture

picture picture

picture

Fifty-eight

After two weeks or so, I know the names of most of my fellow patients. I smile at the nursing staff and crack a joke when I pick up my pills morning, noon and evening.

You shouldn't have smiled, you shouldn't have cracked jokes, depressed people don't smile, depressed people don't crack jokes. They'll tell the doctor tomorrow and then you'll get kicked out.

Out —

At some point someone says that most people do better in the beginning, because the pressure of the daily routine is gone. Daily routine. In the end, I didn't even have a daily routine at home anymore. Only my family. My family. I'm doing better, because I got rid of my family. I mean, fuck.

Fortunately, it's only a few more days, then everything is going to get better. That's when I'll be having breakdowns. Breakdowns are sufficiently severe to stay in a psychiatric hospital. So severe that I think I won't ever get out of here again.

Fifty-nine

After the first time, I thought that the thing with the depression was over and done with, that I had experienced, understood and overcome it all once.

Hospital, medications, therapy.

Check, check, check.

In the spring of two thousand and seventeen I finish my weekly sessions with the doctor. Check. Two months later I start phasing out my medications. Check. The side effects are hell, the side effects feel like I was back in the midst of the deepest depression. Check. And I probably am too. Check. Or I'm not but because I think it, I am after all. Check. I stick it out. Check. Don't make such a fuss, it'll soon be over. Check. I'm proud when I finally stop taking the pills. Check. I take my leftover pills to the pharmacy, to dispose of them responsibly, and throw my pillbox with one compartment for each day in the rubbish. Check.

Now I'm in the hospital for the second time. Check. And this time the depression is no longer an interesting episode, no ›Oh, wow, been there, done that now,‹ but a part of my life. Check. And eventually I'm discharged and have a pillbox with two compartments for each day. Check.

[...]

One hundred and fourteen

I don't see the breakdowns coming. The crying again, cramping again, self-hatred again, Tavor again. A weird look from a stranger, an ambiguous text message, a thoughtless aside. I don't even notice it, something feels strange somewhere and – it starts.

One hundred and fifteen

And somewhere —

One hundred and sixteen

And somewhere in my head or my body it starts. I don't even notice it. Did I do something wrong? I must have done something wrong. I don't even notice it. I don't even think it. It thinks itself. Did I do something wrong? I must have done something wrong, of course I did something wrong. They are probably talking about me right now, they're probably talking about what I did wrong, what a horrible person I am, which, of course, is because I am a horrible person, I'm so colossally bad, barely human, not lovable, not worthy to live, monstrous, I have to die, I'm so bad that I have to die, I know I mustn't kill myself because that would make me a bad patient too, I'm a bad patient, I'm such a bad patient that I must be punished for it, no one but me knows that I'm so horrible, I have to punish myself, I could manage at least that, manage a little bit at least, help a little bit, be a little helpful in this fucking mess I'm putting everyone through, because I'm so incredibly bad, no one knows how abysmally bad I am, that's why I have to punish myself so harshly, which no one is going to be able to believe later, no one is going to understand why I punish myself so harshly, they're going to think that it's a mistake, and if they think that it's a mistake, then it is a mistake, because I'm so wrong that everyone else in the world is nothing but right, I have to punish myself, for being so incredibly bad and for the fact that punishing myself is a mistake. I have to kill myself.

One hundred and seventeen

There is a photo of Theo and me. He's not even Theo yet, not really, he's still a baby, still only the idea of a person, just a few weeks old. A bundle of needs. That's long before I go to the hospital for the first time. I'm healthy. I'm sitting on a chair in the kitchen and press this baby to me so tightly, press his small fist to my lips and stare into nothingness.

The guy on the photo simply doesn't look like he was holding his son. He looks like he was holding on to him. He looks as though the baby was his grip on life or on happiness. As though he was using the baby as a grip. Abuse it. He looks as though he had already seen the emptiness, which is now in me, coming. Why didn't I hold on to Theo? Why wasn't I able to hold on to him? I should have held on to him.

One hundred and eighteen

And somewhere —

One hundred and nineteen

— Do you have kids?

— Yes.

— So? Any contact?

One hundred and twenty

Sometimes I can feel my hands becoming fists and wanting to hit my head until I taste blood. It's such a good feeling, so decisive. The dull vibration in my skull, along with the clear sound and the alertness, the being-here-fully and the brightness immediately afterwards, as it peters out in all directions, becoming a slight burn, a satisfied dullness.

One hundred and twenty-one

Everything I write down turns into stories and punchlines on the paper. Language isn't made to show up demons. We call the light that tears through the sky some nights lightning and the roaring that follows it thunder. Two words, two sounds like closing the drawers of a filing cabinet.