

Das Pony-Café

Schokotörtchen zum Frühstück

THE PONY CAFÉ

CHOCOLATE CAKE FOR BREAKFAST

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Sample translated by Jackie Smith

Chapter 1 A hamster on a lead

If I had written a school essay telling the story, I'm pretty certain Mrs. Bernhard would have scribbled *Too far-fetched!* at the top of the page. And *Stick to reality!* All in thick red pencil. But firstly it is not a story – not a made-up one, I mean – but the truth, and secondly, since the summer holidays Mrs. Bernhard is no longer my teacher. But I'd better start at the beginning.

At the time it all started, I was in a rotten mood. Rotten like rotten tomatoes. Why is it always the parents who get to decide everything? When you have to tidy your bedroom. What's for dinner. What time you have to go to bed. Although those things ranked as teeny-tiny flea farts compared to the misery they were heaping on me this time!

If I could have persuaded Mum and Dad to change their mind, I would have gladly tidied up three times a day. Including dusting on top of my books! And I would have gone to bed after dinner good as gold for a whole week. I would even have willingly eaten Brussels sprouts. For breakfast! And I...

Whatever. The fact is there was not a thing I could do about it now. Our village, and with it my room, my friends and my favourite tree for climbing, were over a hundred miles and at least a thousand red traffic lights behind us.

Oh yes, I'm Alma by the way. Ten years old. Favourite colour: green. Favourite food: strawberry cake and mashed potato (not on the same plate, though). Not that that's very relevant to the story I want to tell. I'd better carry on, to when Dad swung the car door open, jumped out and announced: 'Welcome to our new home!' He performed an elegant bow. At least it was meant to look elegant. But kneading dough is about the only thing Dad can do elegantly. Or spreading chocolate icing over a cake.

As Mum got out of the car, her face lit up like a Christmas tree and she gestured towards the building in front of us. 'Just look, Alma sweetie! See how lovely it is here? A bit like Snow White's tower. We've got the whole of the first floor. And the café on the ground floor – oh it's just delightful!'

'You mean Rapunzel. But I'm pretty sure her tower wasn't so filthy.' I walked up to the building, swiped my index finger over the murky shop window and inspected my blackened fingertip. Other than that, Mum was actually right. The building was as narrow as a toothpick and quite tall. To see the roof, I had to tilt my head so far back that I nearly tipped over backwards. I could see bright red roof tiles. Perched on top was a cooing pigeon. 'So sweet!' The words just popped out of me, despite the fact I had made up my mind not to like a single thing about this place! Then I hurried under cover. I didn't want Renate to plop something on my head.

'Renate?' Mum asked. I must have been thinking out loud again. 'Renate, our resident pigeon,' I explained, while Dad drew a grinning face in the grime of the shop window.

'Tomorrow we'll give everything a good scrub,' he announced in the same delighted tone in which someone else might say:

'Tomorrow we're going on holiday to the South Pacific. Three whole months of nothing but blue sea and coconuts!'

Mum put an arm round me. I caught a waft of her unique peach-shampoo-and-mum smell. It made my nose tickle. 'And we'll look for a pet shop straight away. How about a hamster?'

'Achoo!' I replied (because of the tickly scent of peach), before turning quickly to free myself of her arm. I didn't want to be lulled by her perfume.

'Hmm, I can really see myself taking *that* for a walk on a lead... Or a piece of string more like! No, I want a *proper* pet!' You see, besides strawberry cake and mashed potato, there is something else I like very much. Much, much more in fact! Not on a plate though. But something that does give me a lovely warm tingly feeling in my tummy. I love animals. And I mean all of them! Yes, spiders and snails included. Even the slimy ones.

'But we haven't got space for it here, sweetheart. Big animals belong in the country, not in the city,' said Mum.

'So why are we here then? After all, people are big animals too.'

Mum and Dad sighed in unison. I know, I know, we'd been over the subject a thousand times before. We were here because this café was their once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, their ultimate dream, a dream as big as the ocean and as ancient as the dinosaurs.

But why was their dream more important than mine? All I know is that, at that time, what I wanted mattered to my parents about as much as if a kangaroo had done a somersault in Australia.

Chapter 2

Bertram, the child-hating tomcat

Dad unlocked the front door next to the shop window and I trundled in after him. Mum was in seventh heaven. She stood there with arms outstretched, warbling like an opera diva. 'Just look! These high ceilings. The big windows. And the way the old floorboards creak so wonderfully!' To prove it she performed a pirouette.

Crrrrrk! the wooden boards beneath her feet replied.

'Just think. There's so much we can do with this! We'll turn it into the most fabulous café in town.' Dad nudged me on the upper arm. I said nothing and tried to look as grumpy as possible. But I didn't stand much of a chance as I had my father standing next to me with such a broad grin on his face that he could have fitted a whole banana in his mouth. *Crossways*, mind you!

'And now let's go and have a look at the apartment!' said Mum, clapping her hands. One of the doors led directly to the stairwell, and from there it was only a matter of a few stairs to our new home.

The door of the apartment was bright red, the paint was peeling slightly in places, and in the middle of the door was an old-fashioned spyhole.

Dad had just managed – after some fumbling around – to extract the right key from among the thousand others, when a lady appeared coming down from upstairs. She was wearing a polo-neck jumper, even though it was warm outside.

'Hello. We're the Peas. The new people. The Pea family! I'm Franzi, this is my husband Christoph and this is our daughter Alma.'

Mum went up to the lady and held out her hand. Her voice was silky soft as always and she had a faint smile on her lips. Normally the smile was catching, like a cold. A *good* cold. And failing that,

people would always start grinning the moment they noticed Mum's clothes. Mum had sewn, knitted and crocheted them all herself, and you could see at a glance that they weren't the kind of thing you could buy in the shops.

The lady grasped Mum's outstretched hand. But in a way that reminded me of a cold, twitching fish.

'My name's Stock. Would you mind not stamping up the stairs like that. It echoes and Bertram needs his sleep so he can get well again.'

Stamping? Even Mum and Dad had a bit of a funny look on their faces.

All the same, Mum kept up her friendly manner. 'Oh no, your husband's ill? Please wish him a speedy recovery from us!'

Yet Mrs. Stock pressed her lips together even harder and a look came over her as if Mum had seriously insulted her.

Someone else came down the stairs.

"Hi, Mrs. Stock! Hi, new people! Big rush, sorry!" A girl with brightly coloured strands in her hair dashed past us. Before I could get a proper look, the front door had swung shut behind her with a *boom!*

Mrs. Stock, meanwhile, was making a face as if she had swallowed a fly. 'My cat is ill. He needs peace and quiet!'

'A cat? How lovely! Our Alma loves animals!'

Mum winked at me and I smiled bravely. In the same way you might smile at the dentist before he gets out his drill.

'Bertram can't tolerate any commotion,...' – the lady tugged at her polo-neck and gave me a sidelong look – 'and especially not children. They're always much too noisy.'

Bertram the child-hating tomcat, that was a good start.

'See you around, then, Mrs. Stock,' said Mum.

We were already darting through the door. In a big hurry. And all three of us at once. All it needed now was for us all to get stuck in the doorway together. Then the fire brigade would have had to

come and cut away the door frame. And no doubt that would have been too noisy for our neighbour too.

Mum had this idea that, where we used to live, they used to fold away the pavements at night. But why? To sweep underneath? To give the spiders and woodlice a blast of fresh air?

Things were definitely different here. *Very* different. There were always masses of people scurrying past below our new-old kitchen window, even in the evening. Tall and short people. Old and young. Grey-haired and multicoloured-haired. My room, on the other hand, overlooked the backyard, which looked as if nobody had set foot there for a hundred years. A Rapunzel tower with a Sleeping Beauty garden. At the far end stood an old shed. It looked so rickety that, if a passing earthworm just happened to sneeze, the shed might well collapse on the spot. In the middle were individual garden plots separated by weather-beaten fences choked with weeds. Teeny patches barely any bigger than a postage stamp. And all completely overgrown and full of stinging nettles and thistles.

Only one of the garden plots actually looked nice. It had lots of brightly coloured flowers, and was the only splash of colour far and wide. For beyond the end of the yard and to the left and right of it were more buildings, with not even the tiniest free space between them.

Riiiiiiiiing! The doorbell jolted me from my thoughts. Mum and Dad immediately rushed to see who was there. I trailed slowly behind in the direction of the hall, but Mum was already at the door, peeping through the spyhole.

'Yoo-hoo, my dears. It's us, Martha and Elli Mazotti from the third floor,' a sing-song voice announced.

'Oh how lovely!' Mum opened the door, and there stood the girl who had dashed past me earlier, now holding a red and white striped box in her hands, and accompanied by her giant-earring-wearing mum.

'Welcome to you all!' As she said this, Martha took the box from her daughter and handed it to us. The box was full of... er... shampoo? For fine hair, dry hair, curly hair...

Hello?! Just because we had come from the country didn't mean to say we went around stinking of cow dung!

'Mum has a hairdresser's,' explained Elli, and blew a bubble with her gum. It was then I noticed that Elli had her hair done differently, with even more colourful strands this time.

I must have been staring rather obviously, as Martha laid an arm around her daughter's shoulders and said: 'Elli here is my model.' *Model?* I glanced down at my jogging bottoms, which had stains of various colours all over them, and, as subtly as possible, picked off a dried-on bit of dinner.

'Well, we won't hold you up,' said Martha.

There was the sound of a horn.

'The removals lorry!' Mum squeaked like a guinea pig.

'Let us know if you need a hand,' said Martha.

'Great! Thanks!' Dad replied. He nodded again to our new neighbours – and a moment later we were charging down the stairs.

Chapter 3

A professor on four hooves

We slaved away well into the night, and by late Sunday morning most of the pieces of furniture were in their right places.

The most important boxes were unpacked – and I had even painted one wall of my bedroom: raspberry red, with doggy paw prints stamped all over it in poison-green. I'd say it was a *hooooooooowling* success!

The only annoying thing was that now, every time I looked at the wall, it reminded me that no one would ever leave *real* paw prints here.

I had to force myself not to keep on pestering Mum and Dad with my dog-or-cat-or-anything-significantly-bigger-than-a-hamster request. It was a completely hopeless case anyway, and what's more the two of them were now scrubbing the café from top to bottom, and the last thing I wanted was for them to press a cleaning cloth into my hand.

I quickly helped myself to one of Dad's chocolate cupcakes as a late breakfast, went down the stairs – on tiptoes, as I didn't want to encounter that Mrs. Stock – and then through the back door into the yard.

I plonked myself down cross-legged in one of the micro-sized patches of garden. I could hear the tram jangling in the distance. And I could make out the sound of a fire engine even further away. There was a constant tooting of horns from somewhere or other. And it was hot! The warm summer air seemed to be trapped in this yard like in an oven.

What's more, I had a stupid thistle pricking my bottom.

'Ouch! That hurt!' I put the cake down and jumped up. But there wasn't a single spot that was free of stinging nettles and thistles. Except in the flower garden. But I didn't dare go in there for fear there might be an alarm.

I was still grumbling to myself when I heard a very peculiar sound.

A 'pffffrrrts'. Like a sneeze gone wrong.

I looked around. But there was no one there!

Or was Mrs. Stock lurking in the bushes somewhere, waiting for the right moment to jump out and have a go at me – because I'd given the prickly thistles a nasty look? Or for some other crime?

Then I heard it again! This time it was more of a 'shrrrrrrrrrts.'

I walked slowly and quietly in the direction the sounds were coming from, as far as the tumbledown shed, and peered through the window. But from what I could make out through the metre-thick dust, there was nothing there. Well in that case, I thought, I would go and finish eating my yummy chocolate cake in peace instead.

But hey! Where had my cake gone?

So there really was someone here.

A really, really mean cake thief!

I walked all the way round the backyard one more time, keeping my eyes fixed on the ground to make sure I wouldn't miss a single clue – not even the tiniest one – left by the cake thief.

There! The grass was trodden flat in a few places. I followed the trail, which led me back to the shed. Where, only a moment ago, there had been masses of stinging nettles, now everything was flattened. It meant I was able to follow the trail around the shed without getting stung at all.

At one point I glanced up for a second and at that moment my foot landed in something soft. Something soft... and warm.

'No way!' I crouched down and stared at the stinking pile at my feet. I couldn't believe it! It was still fresh! Bottom-fresh! And that could only mean...

'Ooh!'

Something was snorting at me from behind. And then I felt something warm and tickly on my neck. An unusual smell reached my nose. Faintly musty, but somehow nice at the same time. It smelt of hay. And of fur. And slightly of chocolate cake.

I spun around.

'Pffffffrrrrr,' puffed the little creature in front of me.

He wasn't as small as a hamster, that's for sure. But he was still pretty small. For a horse, at any rate. And a horse he definitely was! Or a pony, to be precise. A miniature Shetland pony barely as tall as a table. He was dark brown, almost like chocolate, and had a long shaggy mane that dangled down into his dark eyes.

He nudged me again with his muzzle as soft as cotton wool clouds. I imagine he wanted second helpings of cake. But he wouldn't get it from me! Sweet stuff like that was much too unhealthy for this little guy.

'Er... nibble me instead!' I said on the spur of the moment, though I didn't really mean it, as a teeny pony like that doesn't necessarily have teeny teeth to match.

So where had he appeared from all of a sudden? A real pony! He certainly felt real enough when I stroked his fluffy ears. And he sounded real enough when he grunted contentedly and snorted again.

I looked around, almost expecting Mum or Dad to jump out from behind the shed shouting 'Surpriiiiiise! You're not getting a dog – you're getting a poooooony instead!' But that didn't happen, and in any case this pocket-sized horse was much too dirty to be a moving-in present. His mane was tangled and his coat caked with dirt.

And the little fellow didn't have a bow tied around his neck either.

'Have you escaped from somewhere?'

'Pffffr!' the pony snuffled again, shaking his head and his shaggy mane with it.

I let him lick me gently on the hand. It tickled. 'No, you came looking for me and found me, didn't you? Why else would you turn up in this scruffy backyard?' I started to feel all warm and tingly in my tummy. I stroked the pony's nose. But then I thought: wait a minute! A pony? In the middle of the city? Where I wasn't even

allowed to have a dog! Even though there were dogs by the thousand here. And I had never even heard of a city pony before. The tingling in my tummy was already gone. In its place came a horrible gnawing feeling.

'I can't keep you. Mum and Dad will never let me!' I whispered. But the pony gave me a look of dismay.

I cleared my throat. 'Nonsense! I just need to think it over in peace. I'm sure then an idea will come to me!'

At that moment the little creature looked at me and nodded in the direction of the shed.

'You think I should hide you in there until an idea occurs to me?' I stared at my new friend. 'D'you know what? I think you might just be the cleverest pony in the world!'

In answer, the pony pulled up his lips and grinned.

'A proper Professor Einstein – in the form of a pony!' I laughed.

The pony snorted and tilted his head to one side.

'Okay, okay. You don't know Einstein. He's a super-smart scientist. There's a picture of him sticking his tongue out – so you see he's just as cheeky as you!'

I managed, with a great deal of scraping and squeaking, to wiggle the bolt back, and swung the old wooden door open. I was hit by a faceful of stale, dusty air.

'There's not much space. But you may just fit between the old lawnmower and the wheelbarrow there. I'm going to quickly run back to the apartment and bring you something to eat. And don't make a sound. Whatever happens, Mum, Dad and that weird Mrs. Stock mustn't see you!'

The pony peered past me into the shed. He gave one more puff. This time it sounded like a deep sigh. But then he trotted through the door without further ado.

'I'll be as quick as I can. See you soon!'

It wasn't that easy to slide the rusty bolt back again. Especially as the door was threatening to come right off its hinges. And as I was

still huffing and puffing and jiggling it with both hands, I suddenly heard footsteps behind me.

'Hi, Alma! What are you doing here?'

I spun around.

Elli. With – would you believe it – yet another new hairdo! A mega-high ponytail. It looked as if she had a palm tree on her head.

'I... er ... just... get some fresh air!'

'In the old shed?' Ellie frowned.

My ears turned as hot as cabbage soup. 'Er... no, I wanted to use the toilet. I mean, I thought there might have been an outdoor loo in there, but...' I chewed my lips. Could someone please stop me, I thought, before I say anything else embarrassing...? Not surprisingly, Elli was eyeing me with a look of disbelief.

At the same moment a 'Pffrrrrrts' could be heard from behind the closed door. It was the pony, of course. But if you didn't know that there was a pony standing in the shed merrily puffing away to itself, and since I had just been saying something about a toilet, you could easily mistake the sound for something else. Elli scratched her forehead. 'Well, I think I'll get going,' she spluttered, and turned to go.

I stared after her as she walked back indoors. I felt mortified. I tried to chase away the feeling with a shake of the head. Let her think what she liked.

The only thing that mattered was the unbelievably cute pony that was waiting for me inside the shed.

'I'll be right back, Professor Einstein! Be good!' I whispered through the gaps between the panels.

As I was about to run off towards the apartment, something in one of the second-floor windows caught my eye. In the window sat a cat. It was looking daggers at me as if it was accusing me personally of regularly stealing the food out of its bowl.

'Bertram, the child-hating tomcat,' I murmured.

And although I do love all animals, I did find that particular one just a little bit creepy.