

# Victor Caspak & Yves Lanois: THE MYSTERIOUS ADVENTURES OF THE SHORT ONES

## Die Kurzhosengang

Age: 10+ | 192 pages | 978-3-551-31592-2 | pub date: June 2019



## ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

### RUDOLPHO

The man asks whether we are The Short Ones.

We nod. Yes, we are The Short Ones.

He asks if we feel like parking our bikes somewhere else.

We shake our heads. No, we don't feel like parking our bikes somewhere else.

The man says if we don't play ball, things could get ugly.

The Short Ones smile. Nobody leans on us. Canadians throughout Canada are aware of this. All The Short Ones need to do is flex some muscle and he'll soon see what's what.

The Short Ones flex some muscle.

That's all it takes.

The man turns and goes back to his seat.

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Snickers is the first to get off his bike. He hitches up his trousers and squints as though the sun is in his eyes. I'm next. I nod a few times, because I am the one who field all the questions. Iceland takes the key out of the ignition, folds out the kickstand and parks his bike as though it were a chopper with enormous tyres and a fox's tail dangling from the mirror. Cement is the only one who doesn't stir. Cement needs a little more time than the rest of us. He hasn't arrived in front of the television studio yet. Even though his body is standing right next to us, his head is still en route. Cement only looks up when Snickers says: „Hey, Cement, we're here!“. Then Cement gets off his bike.

Someone like Cement is always surprised at how fast you can get places.

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People often ask what there is to know about The Short Ones. Here are the five most important things:

1) The Short Ones always sit in the seventh row at the cinema, in seats 22, 23, 24 and 25. We only ever go to the cinema on Saturday afternoons. Believe me, it's not that The Short Ones wouldn't prefer to go in the evening and watch films like Bloody Massacre or Dead, Buried and Hit Three Times over the Head with a Shovel. But the thing is, we're only eleven years old, so we don't have much choice.

2) Even though we won't be twelve until next year, the Short Ones know which way the train goes. Once a month Snickers' parents spend a weekend in the country and then we all go and pay Snickers a visit. It's quite an event. As soon as his parents have left the flat, Snickers sprints to the telephone and calls us all up.

„Coast's clear!“

Five minutes later there's a roar out in front of Snickers' building. Iceland brakes, folds out his kickstand and checks his hair in the chrome of the exhaust pipe. At that very moment I screech around the corner and touch the asphalt with one knee.

Cement arrives a minute later, although according to his brain, he hasn't even left home yet.

In the living room the television and the VCR and bags of crisps are waiting for us. The Short Ones really like horror films. Best of all we like films with vampires and lots of blood and screaming. Snickers' sister gets us the films from the video shop. She's nineteen and the most beautiful girl in the whole of Canada. All of us want to marry her at least twice, apart from Snickers, that is, because he's her brother. And Cement, because he hasn't yet figured out who Snickers' sister is. It's all a bit too fast for him. If Snickers' sister comes into the living room and asks us to turn down the sound, we turn down the sound. And she looks so fantastic that our jaws drop. And when Snickers' sister has closed the door, I usually say:

„Wow, she looks fantastic!“

And then Cement usually says:

„Why have you turned the sound down?“

If we really wanted Cement to see Snickers' sister, we'd have to tie her to a chair for half an hour and sit Cement right in front of her. Cement only sees things he already knows. Sometimes we're amazed that he manages to cross the road without getting hurt. There's no way he knows all the cars in town. It's a mystery.

3) These aren't our real names of course. Nobody is born with a name like Snickers or Iceland or Cement. And no mother would call her child Rudolpho. This is what's known as going incognito. If everybody knew who The Short Ones were, all hell would break loose.

4) We live in a small Canadian town where everybody knows everybody. When we go out onto the street, we look different than we do at home. We look and we walk and we talk different. We're as casual as ice cubes on a Tahitian beach. Our parents walk past us and think: There go The Short Ones again. They don't think: There go our children. The Short Ones are not children. We only pretend we are.

5) The Short Ones first became The Short Ones in the middle of winter. It's an important date in world history. A lot of textbooks had to be rewritten because of it and they've still got it all wrong. The thing is, nobody knows precisely what happened that winter day. A lot of people think they do. They say this and they say that, but they don't know anything.

If you ask The Short Ones, we'll shake our heads. Because what happened that day is nobody's business. The Short Ones are as silent as four deep graves in a cemetery full of vampires. There's fog everywhere and one of the vampires swishes his cloak and – kazam – he gets a stake through the heart. Where did it come from? A young man steps out of the fog. He's got short hair and is incredibly good-looking. He's in love with his friend's sister. She's much too old for the young man, but that's how life is.

The young man is me.

Me or Rudolpho for short.

And this is what happened the day the world changed and The Short Ones got their names.

You may well ask why I'm telling you this. You and a studio audience and the people watching at home. I'm telling you this because I've had enough of all those books getting it wrong.

So borrow a pen, cross out what's wrong and write in what's right.

That's the way to do it.

\*

We were in a P.E. class. It was snowing outside and a storm raged as we ran through the gym chasing after a basketball. Basketball is about as popular in Canada as high-diving in the Sahara. Canadians love hockey. We wake up in the morning thinking of hockey. We fall asleep in the evening dreaming of pucks. I don't know a single boy who dislikes hockey, but I know a lot of boys who think basketball stinks. A whole gym full of them.

Our sports teacher is called Kneecap. He weighs about two hundred and twenty six kilos. He used to be an amazing hockey player until he broke his kneecaps in a collision and became a sports teacher. Somewhere along the line he started to eat too much and the athlete in him turned into a proper fatso. Even his voice changed. Now it sounds like the voice of somebody who's about to explode and spray everybody around him with blood and entrails. Kneecap is always angry. If there ever comes a time when he isn't angry, then he'll almost certainly be dead. This is how it sounds when Kneecap shouts at somebody:

„GET THAT PRECIOUS LITTLE DERRIÈRE OF YOURS OVER HERE NOW. WHERE DID YOU LEARN HOW TO DROP THE BALL SO WELL? IT'S NOT COVERED IN SUPER GLUE! HOLD ON TO IT, YOU LITTLE SCUMBAG!“

There are around a hundred students at our school and all of them know what Kneecap is like. At least half of these hundred students burst into tears the first time Kneecap shouted at them. Other teachers aren't allowed to behave like that. Kneecap is only allowed to do it because he used to be one of Canada's best hockey players.

„WIPE THAT STUPID LOOK OFF YOUR FACE. THIS ISN'T A HOLIDAY CAMP. CHASE THE BALL, YOU SON OF AN AVOCADO, CHASE IT RIGHT NOW OR I'LL TURN YOUR EARS INSIDE OUT.“

The worst thing about Kneecap is that he hates hockey because of his broken kneecaps. For us this means basketball, volleyball and floor gymnastics. It means football and handball and long distance running. Our school is the saddest school in the world.

That day nobody knew that the saddest school in the world only had a few minutes left before it was wiped off the face of the earth.

\*

Our school stood at the top of a hill with a good view of the sea and our town. The road that led up to the school is about half a kilometre long and takes strange twists and turns. I think it's because there used to be fields there and they had to build the road around the fields.

Every thirty minutes of every day, from morning till afternoon, a bus drove up to the school. Most children were driven to school by their parents. So every day there was traffic. Snickers, Iceland, Cement and I always took the bus. There is nothing more embarrassing than being driven to school by your parents.

Whenever the sun shone, the road looked like a grey snake made of gleaming metal. When there was snow, then none of the parents even considered driving their children to school. Nobody really wanted to drive up the hill when it was icy and slippery. That's what the bus driver was there for. The bus driver knew the road well, he drove the same route all day long and was the total opposite of Kneecap. The bus driver spoke in a calm voice, always nodded politely when you said hello to him and never displayed the slightest hint of anger.

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Once he ran over a fox. Who knows what the fox was thinking when it crossed the road. I always thought foxes were pretty smart, but I must have been wrong. A bus drives by every half an hour and the fox chooses precisely that moment to run across the road. That's not one bit smart.

There was a muffled bang and then the bus driver hit the brake and got out. We all ran to the front of the bus and pressed our noses against the windscreen. Cement was the only one who didn't budge an inch and later Iceland had to tell him what had happened. It sounded like this:

„Then he got out and stood in front of the squashed fox and it didn't look good at all it had blood all around its snout and its tongue was hanging out and its eyes were closed it was horrible and Bus Driver took a hanky out of his trousers and pushed one hand under the fox he did it like this as though he was lifting up a piece of cake so that it wouldn't crumble carefully you know and then he went to the side of the road with the fox and put him down on the grass and when somebody asked what we were going to do Bus Driver was completely cool and asked if anybody had a shovel no we said we didn't have a shovel and Bus Driver said it didn't matter and got in the bus and opened up a cupboard under his seat and took out a leather bag and in the leather

bag there was a fold-up shovel and then he folded it out and he asked if anybody wanted to sing a song and then some of the girls got out of course and then we did too and then Bus Driver dug a hole and lifted up the fox like a piece of cake and put it into the hole and covered it up and the girls sang a song and a few of them cried too and then we got back in the bus and drove to school and you didn't notice any of it eh?"

And Cement looked at Iceland and said:

„What kind of cake was it?"

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But on the day The Short Ones acquired their legendary name, even the bus driver had difficulties driving up the icy road that led to the school. The tyres on the bus couldn't get a grip on the road, and the bus driver kept getting out and spreading grit. When we finally arrived at school, the bus driver was completely exhausted and drank two cups of coffee from his Thermos flask.

„See you later, boys," he said.

„See you later, Bus Driver," we said and ran into school.

In the fourth lesson we had P.E.. At that point nobody could have known what was about to happen. If we had known, none of us would have come to school. The bus driver would never have driven us, we would never have got on the bus and our parents would never have woken us up that morning. That I can guarantee you.

\*

Let me tell you something about our school. It's not really a school but an old prison. It was built up on the hill fifty years ago. As our town grew bigger over the years, nobody wanted a prison up on the hill any more. It wasn't a good idea having all those thieves and murderers looking down from its windows at the town, thinking about who they would rob when they were released. So the prison was closed and the prisoners were sent to a new prison two hundred kilometres further north. The town

set to work turning the old prison into a school. They didn't want to fill in the cellar, so they knocked down the walls and made it into a fantastic sports hall under the school. It's not as creepy as it sounds. We got used to it, even if we never knew what time it was or what the weather was like outside. There were no windows, nobody could see us or throw a stink bomb in from outside. It was the best hiding place of all. I hid there a couple of times when my dad was looking for me. My mum has been dead for a long time and my dad is really lonely and that's why he's a lot angrier than he should be. Whenever we argue, I run up the hill and hide down in the sports hall. Then nobody knows where I am. My dad could spend all day looking for me.

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But back to the fourth lesson, P.E., basketball.

Iceland was on the reserve bench. Snickers was on my team and we'd smuggled Cement onto the opposing team so that he'd create chaos. Cement was great at doing that. Whenever he got hold of the ball, it was as if somebody had thrown it into a bottomless pit. It simply disappeared.

Cement wouldn't let go, he looked left and right without moving an inch. Nobody could take the ball away from him. For two whole minutes Cement stood there without moving while the others hopped around him, shouting:

„Hey, pass it over here!“

„No, pass it to me!“

„Pass it, come on!“

And Kneecap roared:

„YOU SLOW-MOED SON OF A SULPHUR SNAIL. DO SOMETHING, DO ANYTHING, JUST PASS THE STUPID BALL!“

After two minutes Cement started to move. He was surprisingly fast. He dribbled like a devil, ran and ran and then he was in the air and the ball was in the net.

Well, the ball would have been in the net if Cement had taken it with him. But after two minutes he had completely forgotten the ball and dropped it on the ground. And



Cement probably only noticed that he had forgotten it when he jumped and tried to throw the ball into the basket.

It was, like, awesome.

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It must have happened right in the middle of it all.

Maybe somebody had just passed the ball to Cement, maybe Iceland had just been substituted in, maybe Snickers' shoelaces had come undone and he was bending over ...

Whatever we were doing, the lights went out just like that and it was pitch black in the hall. Pitch black and eerily quiet. In the quiet we realised that a fierce storm was raging outside. We were several metres under the ground, but we could still hear the storm blowing over the countryside. The roar forced its way through the air vents. It sounded like a dragon pressing its mouth against the walls of the school, hissing loudly.

„I wouldn't want to be outside right now,“ said a boy next to me.

„Me neither,“ I heard another boy say.

Then there was silence again.

A nasty rattling and roaring came from all sides.

„It's only the wind,“ said one boy.

„What's going on up there?“ said another boy.

„Maybe we should ...“

„NOBODY MOVES FROM THE SPOT UNTIL THE LIGHTS GO BACK ON!“  
roared Kneecap.

His roar sounded much louder in the dark. We didn't move from the spot and waited.

Then a surprised voice said:

„Ooops, the lights have gone out.“

And then the first girl started to scream.

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The girls did P.E. too, of course. The reason I didn't tell you straight away is that I don't really like talking about girls. Or at least not about the girls at our school. I could talk about Snickers' sister all day long. But nobody wants to listen to that. When the first girl started screaming, panic broke out. Kneecap roared again, then we heard his stampeding footsteps and there was a crash and then we didn't hear anything more from him.

The lady P.E. teacher said nobody was allowed to move and finally a light flickered. „Everything's cool,“ said Snickers and held up a lighter. Who knows where he got it from. Snickers always carries a lot of stuff around with him. He collects marbles and chewing gum and anything small and useful in his trouser pockets. But he'd never stashed anything in his P.E. shorts before.

The boys and girls gathered around Snickers. He looked like the Statue of Liberty with a gap in his teeth and his hair slicked back. When everybody had gathered around, ten boys, twelve girls and one P.E. teacher set out to look for Kneecap. We found him next to the sports hall exit. Kneecap must have tried to leave the hall. In his panic he had missed the door by a yard and collided with the wall. Now he lay on the ground, groaning quietly.

„Is he dead?“ asked one of the girls.

„No,“ said Snickers, „Kneecap can't die.“

„Then why is he groaning so quietly?“ asked another girl.

It was really strange. You'd expect Kneecap to groan like a toilet flushing, not with a whimper like that.

„Maybe he is dead,“ said Iceland and the girls told him he shouldn't say things like that.

„Hey, what are we going to do now?“ asked Snickers, whose thumb was slowly getting hot.

„Yeah. What now?“ asked one of the boys.

„We're not moving from the spot until the lights go on,“ said the lady teacher, trying to sound like Kneecap.

I shook my head and said:

„We should find out what’s going on up there.“

Snickers took his thumb off the lighter, the flame went out and when it went on again, I was the one holding it.

„Whoever wants to stay here, can stay here,“ I said and set off.

Ten boys, twelve girls and one lady teacher marched out of the hall and up the stairs towards the changing rooms that were located next to the caretaker’s office. The caretaker would be able to tell us why there was no electricity.

I opened the door at the top of the stairs and was about to go down the corridor towards the caretaker’s office when I noticed that I was standing outside. Snickers, Iceland and Cement were standing next to me. Within seconds we were all covered in a fine layer of snow. The P.E. teacher got her fair share too, then she shooed the girls and boys back down into the sports hall.

Somebody started to cry, somebody shouted out that the end of the world had arrived and after that we didn’t hear anything else from our class.

„Where’s the school?“ said Snickers.

„Where’s my bike?“ said Iceland.

„Where are we?“ said Cement.

If you looked carefully, you could see where the school had once stood. There were a couple of bricks lying around and lines in the ground indicated where the walls had been. The only thing still standing in the wind was the stairway and the door frame that led down to the sports hall.

„The school’s gone,“ I said and then all four of us screamed and we ran down to join the others in the hall.

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Later we found out that there had been a hurricane warning and that the whole school had been evacuated. While we were doing our warm up exercises down below, a rescue team had trotted up the hill. All the pupils and teachers had been rescued before the school was ripped to pieces by the hurricane. I would have liked to have seen it, it must have been really exciting. And the whole time we were playing

basketball in the sports hall. Somebody could have warned us. But no, they forgot we were even there.

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So there we were crouching in the sports hall, taking turns to hold the lighter. I had a great big blister on my thumb already and I was beginning to wonder how long the lighter fluid would last.

„They’ll come and rescue us all right,“ the P.E. teacher said for the eighteenth time.

„Oh my God, we’re going to freeze,“ said one of the girls.

„Yeah, we’re going to freeze,“ said another girl and then they all started talking at once. Boy, what a stupid bunch. They could only think about freezing, but I was more worried about the lighter. When the fluid was gone, there would be no light and then there’d be worse things than freezing – like the dark. I’m afraid of the dark. Now I’ve said it. I’m really afraid of the dark. If you locked me in a dark room and left me alone for five minutes, I’d hammer a hole in the wall and get myself out of there. The dark is worse than spiders on toast or a cat that pees on your face every morning.

„They’ll come and rescue us all right,“ the P.E. teacher said for the nineteenth time.

I squinted at the lighter and the flame shrank in front of my eyes.

„Oh my God, we’re going to freeze,“ said one of the girls.

„I’m leaving now,“ I said. „I’ve had enough.“

Everybody looked at me.

„I’m leaving too,“ said Snickers and came and stood next to me. So did Iceland. My friends knew how frightened I was of the dark.

„Hey, Cement,“ said Snickers.

„What?“

„Come over here.“

Cement moved over.

„We’re going up,“ said Snickers.

„Is it break-time already?“ asked Cement.

„But you’ll freeze,“ said the P.E. teacher, trying to stop us.

Snickers waved her away and said:

„If just one of us makes it, it’ll be worth the effort. That’s all that matters.“

Four of the girls fainted.

The Short Ones were about to be born.

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Our main problem was that we were only wearing shorts and T-shirts. Our proper clothes were in the changing rooms and they had disappeared into the blue along with the rest of the school. My shorts were bright red and had two blue stripes down the side. I remember them precisely because now all our shorts are on display in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. If you ask Snickers and Iceland, they’ll be able to tell you exactly what their shorts looked like. You’re better off not asking Cement. He’s still trying to figure out what happened to his.

So we crept, half-naked, along the corridor and up the stairs. We’d left Snickers’ lighter behind, of course, because we couldn’t be mean to the girls. Nothing but darkness surrounded us. I sweated half a litre a minute and had to bite my lower lip to stop myself from howling with fear.

„As soon as we get up there, we’ll run down the hill and straight to the first house,“ said Snickers.

„Okay,“ I said.

„Okay,“ said Iceland.

Cement didn’t say a word.

„Cement?“ we all said at the same time, groping into emptiness. Side by side, we cautiously crept back down to the sports hall to fetch Cement, who was standing stock still in the dark.

„Where were you?“ he asked.

We took him by the hand and went up the stairs to the door.

But the door was shut.

„Push.“

We pushed like crazy. The door must have been snowed shut. With a lot of effort we succeeded in pushing it open a crack and snow began to blow in. We pushed for about ten minutes before we were able to squeeze ourselves out.

Outside the wind was whipping around and the hill looked like an iceberg about to cut loose. At the bottom of the hill the town lights had completely disappeared under the snow. We felt as though we were in the Antarctic. Four boys in shorts in the middle of the Antarctic. It was so cold you could see through our kneecaps.

„Run!“ shouted Snickers, and we all ran down the hill.

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I don't know how we survived, but we did. When we reached town, so much snow had stuck to the soles of our shoes that our feet had all grown to size 20. Each of us had an ice beard that hung down to our bellybuttons, and in order to comb our hair, you'd have to have used a Bunsen burner. But we were alive and we ran, frozen through, to the first building. The bar.

We wanted to burst in and call for help. We wanted to point up to the hill and explain that the school had disappeared. But we bounced off the door and landed in the snow. The door was closed.

We banged and hammered against it, but nobody opened. There were candles behind the windows and faces appeared next to them. We called and waved but the wind stole the words from our lips. Nobody could hear us. The faces looked out in shock and then the curtains were drawn.

„Are they blind or what?!“ cried Snickers angrily.

We ran to the next house. Old Laroux who never came out during the day lived there. She did her shopping after midnight at the petrol station and always wore sunglasses. When we were in kindergarten, we thought she was a vampire. Whenever we saw her, it gave us a creepy feeling that went right down into our bones. But that didn't matter now. Even if old Laroux was a 300 year old vampire, she'd have to help us. We rang and rang the bell. Nothing happened. We tap-danced on the spot and rang and rang. Finally old Laroux emerged at the window with a candle. She was wearing

sunglasses and her face was the color of wax. The wind died down for a minute and it was completely quiet all around us. Old Laroux looked at us and her mouth moved.

„Ghosts!“ old Laroux hissed so loud that we could hear it. „Ghosts! Ghosts!“

We shook our heads. We weren't ghosts yet.

„Ghosts!“ hissed old Laroux, and then Snickers said:

„Look at that.“

Old Laroux smiled. The two teeth at the corners of her mouth were as sharp as thorns.

„She'll never let us in,“ I said, shaking.

„She's more afraid of us than we are of her,“ said Snickers, even though that was a lie.

We ran to the next house.

They wouldn't let us in.

And to the next.

No luck there either.

How were we supposed to know that not only old Laroux, but every resident of the town thought that we were ghosts?

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When the rescue team rescued everybody from the school and a few people were missing, they explained to our parents that they were very sorry but the storm had carried us off. There was a lot of crying and wailing, and then the parents of the missing children put candles in their windows. That's what they do around here so that dead souls can see that everybody is thinking about them. People are quick to believe in ghosts around here. And when people have died, they're supposed to stay away from their old homes.

When I knocked on my own door and saw my dad at the window, I realised what was going on. Dad rolled his eyes and fainted. The same thing happened at Iceland's. At Cement's place the whole family stood at the window without moving, asking

themselves why they were standing at the window without moving. Cement made a snowball and threw it at the glass.

„Are they blind or what?“ Snickers said again when we finally got to his parents' house. His beautiful sister covered her eyes in fear while his mother leaned on his father's shoulder and wept.

I could understand them. What else could four boys standing outside in the ice and the wind wearing shorts and T-shirts be apart from the ghosts of four dead boys? I wouldn't have let us in either.

„They think we're dead,“ said Snickers and almost started to cry.

„I'm not going to cry,“ said Iceland, swallowing back tears.

„Me neither,“ I said and sniffed.

Cement didn't say anything and threw a second snowball, then we ran on to the fire station. There was nobody there of course. The firemen had probably shut themselves up at home with cups of hot cocoa, happy that they didn't have to go outside.

„I give up,“ said Snickers and collapsed into the snow in front of the entrance to the fire station.

„You'll freeze,“ I said, pulling him up again.

We stood in the fire station doorway because it protected us from the wind. Our teeth chattered so loudly that we didn't know if one of us was trying to say something or if he was just freezing cold. Finally Cement banged his head against the fire station door and his teeth immediately stopped chattering. We tried it too. Now we all had big bruises and slight headaches, but our teeth weren't chattering any more.

„Great idea,“ said Iceland, rubbing his head.

„What?“ asked Cement.

„We need to do something quickly, otherwise we're going to freeze,“ said Snickers, looking at his blue fingers. And as he did so, we looked at our blue fingers too and asked ourselves what would happen next. Would our eyes grow stiff and lifeless and roll out of our heads? Would we notice, or would we thaw out a thousand years from now, visitors from a bygone age?

„I'm going inside the garage,“ said Cement and went over to the fire station garage. He opened the big door and went inside.



„The garage is open!“ I cried.

„I don’t believe it!“ cried Iceland.

We ran after Cement. Finally there was peace – no storm and no wind. It was warm too. But we couldn’t see Cement.

„Cement?“

A horn sounded. Cement waved at us from one of the three fire engines that all shone like polished coins.

„The fire engine won’t help us,“ said Snickers and looked for the telephone. He found it on the wall, lifted the receiver and listened.

„Dead,“ he said and hung up again.

„Maybe the fire engine can help us,“ I said and climbed into the driver’s cabin alongside Cement.

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Now you might be thinking that I had already driven a car sitting on my dad’s lap somewhere out in the countryside. Wrong. My dad doesn’t even own a car. But we did take part in a soap box derby once and so I thought to myself, how different can it be?

It was very different.

I couldn’t even reach the pedals.

„I’ll do it,“ said Cement, and crawled down.

We drove out of the garage in slow motion and were thoroughly shaken by the wind.

The windscreen wipers were much too weak for the snow. Snickers stuck his head out of the passenger window and shouted out directions. Without Snickers I would have driven into a house straight away. Iceland sat next to the gear stick and moved it to and fro randomly while I steered with my eyes closed. I was so afraid of driving in the wrong direction that I preferred to keep my eyes shut.

„NOW TO THE LEFT!“ cried Snickers.

I steered to the left.

„NOW SPEED UP!“ cried Snickers.

Cement didn't speed up straight away of course, so I kicked him in the backside and Cement cried „OW!“ and stepped on the accelerator.

„PRESS DOWN ON THE CLUTCH!“

Cement pressed down on the clutch and Iceland thrust the gear stick in every possible direction until it almost snapped off. The fire engine shuddered like a wild horse. Sometimes I felt as though we were driving in a circle, sometimes I was certain that we weren't driving at all, but sliding along like a sled that would soon arrive at the American border.

„NOW STRAIGHT AHEAD!“ cried Snickers.

I gripped the steering wheel, closed my eyes tightly and tried to keep the fire engine moving straight ahead.

„I SAID STRAIGHT AHEAD!“ cried Snickers.

We sped ahead, coughing loudly. We were as hot as if we were sitting directly under the midday sun. And then when Snickers cried „STOP!“, I kicked Cement in the bum and Cement cried „OW!“ and pressed down on the brake, and I took my hands off the steering wheel and held them up in the air as though somebody was threatening me with a pistol.

„Why STOP?“ Cement asked from below.

„Yeah, why STOP?“ Iceland asked too, hanging on to the gear stick.

„Yeah, why?“ I asked.

„Because we're there,“ said Snickers and jumped out of the passenger window right into the snowstorm.

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The rest happened quickly.

We raced into the sports hall and piled everybody into the fire engine. It turned out to be more difficult than we had thought. We even had to stash people in the driver's cabin. The lady P.E. teacher definitely didn't want to drive the fire engine back because she didn't have a driving licence for fire engines. We thought that was a lame excuse. Then she burst into tears and we squashed her into the fire engine along

with Kneecap, who was still unconscious and groaning, and the six boys and twelve girls. A few arms and legs hung out of the windows, but otherwise everybody was inside.

„It'll be easier going down,“ said Snickers and stuck his head out of the passenger window again. Cement sat down by the pedals once more and Iceland put his arms around the gear stick.

„I'm scared,“ said one of the girls.

„Me too,“ said another girl.

„No fear,“ I said. „We've got everything under control.“

And then I closed my eyes and turned and turned the steering wheel until Snickers shouted „THAT'S ENOUGH!“. Cement got a kick in the bum and pressed down on the accelerator, the boys and girls started to scream, I listened to Snickers' directions and Iceland thrust the gear stick around as though he was a racing driver by profession.

\*

Don't ask how we managed to drive back to the fire station. But suddenly we were standing under the roof of the garage, the engine doors opened and everybody fell out of the driver's cabin and danced for joy. Nobody cared that we had rammed four verandas and a dog kennel on the way back. At least that way people realised we were more than just ghosts.

As soon as we were on dry land again, the girls and boys stared at us as though we were one of the wonders of the world.

„I want a hot chocolate,“ said Cement.

„I just want a hot bath and then some sleep,“ said Snickers.

„Why are they looking at us like that?“ said Iceland.

The boys and girls looked at us like that for quite a while, then the whole town turned up with a reporter and a cameraman too. They'd probably all been hiding out in the bar just waiting for this moment.

„You saved a lot of people, and in such bad weather!“ the reporter called out and everybody clapped.

„You wrestled with the hurricane and you even saved your two teachers from freezing to death!“ cried the reporter and everybody clapped.

„You’re heroes!“

„Heroes!“ they all cried.

Cement shook his head. Everybody immediately fell silent.

„We’re not heroes,“ said Cement and shut up.

Everybody waited for him to say something else. Snickers, Iceland and I were the only ones who knew that Cement wouldn’t say anything else. But then he did say something else, and we were so surprised that we could only nod.

„We’re The Short Ones,“ said Cement, „and we’re tired.“

\*

There you go. That’s the story of The Short Ones. It all happened three weeks ago in the middle of winter and cost us our school. Now you can think what you like, but I’m certainly not apologising for driving with my eyes closed. That’s the way real professionals do it. They know which way the cookie crumbles.

„Which way?“ Snickers asks.

A red carpet lies at our feet. It leads straight to the television studio. At the other end of the carpet photographers and women with champagne glasses and men with gold teeth are waiting and they are all smiling at us. They’re making a programme today about The Short Ones and their adventures. So they had to invite us of course. Now they’re waiting for us to go over there and shake hands. Who knows if I’ll tell our story again in front of the television cameras. Who knows if I’ll feel like it.

„I think we’re supposed to follow the carpet,“ says Iceland.

„I think we’re heroes,“ I say.

„No,“ says Cement and shakes his head.

We know there’s something else on the way and so we wait. Cement looks at each of us in turn. For two whole minutes.

„What are you waiting for?“ he asks and walks down the red carpet without looking back.

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