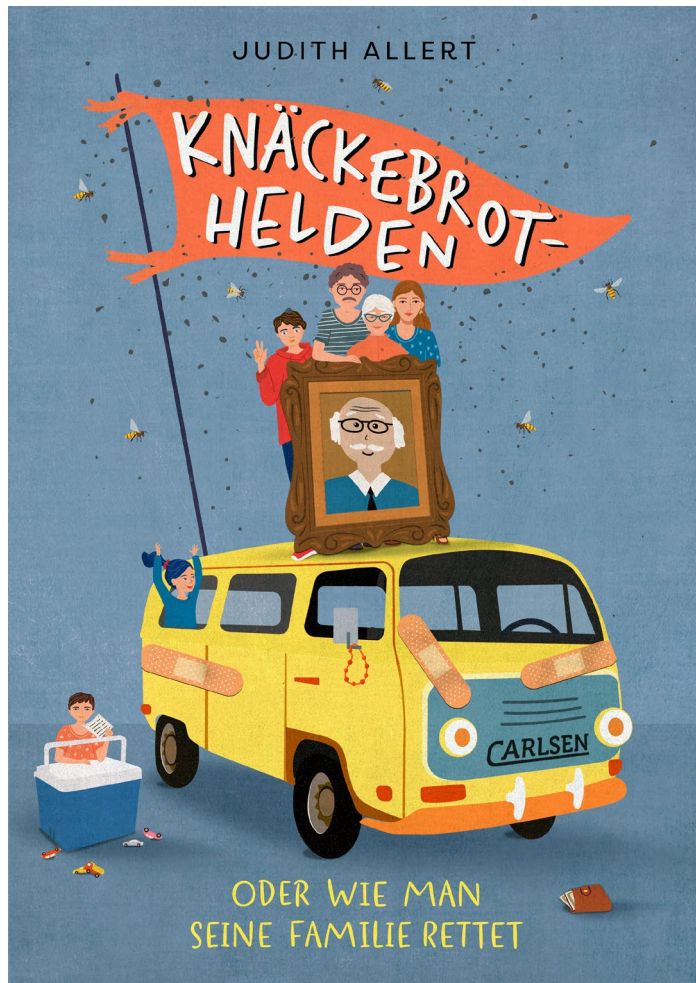


Judith Allert: Crispbread Heroes

Knäckebrothelden

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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**A COUPLE OF DAYS BEFORE:
EVERYTHING'S FINE – SO FAR**

“Saaaammy! What are mortal remains?”

That was Leni. Yet again. I barely managed to keep from spewing my soup all over the table.

Actually, you'd think by now I'd be getting pretty good at answering weird questions. After all, it was only one of around ten thousand that my little sister had peppered me with over the last few days. Leni twisted a lock of her scraggly hair around her finger while she looked at me, waiting for my answer. Dad cleared his throat and smiled at me. I half-expected him to start humming some happy tune. He was always doing that. Humming and buzzing like a bee – and usually dressed in a striped shirt. And in the last two weeks he'd been doing even more of it. Dad had mutated into some sort of super bee.

Mom grabbed her phone and right away started tapping and swiping around on it. Like the real world was in there and everything around it was only spam.

Across from me sat Grandma. Just staring ahead of her, not moving a muscle, as usual. Like a Grandma shell. Nothing in there. The rest of her had ...gotten lost. Or entered another dimension. And me? Well, somebody had to get to get a handle on this crazy situation!

So, I took a stab at it:

“Hmm... Mortal remains... Well ... that's like, hmm ...what remains when a person dies. The rest of them, more or less.”

No wonder I was stuttering around.

I didn't understand it myself.

Why mortal? Mortal means that you will die. So how, if someone is dead, can there be anything left to die? A person can't get any deader than dead! Or did it have something to do with the soul flying up to heaven? Or that you become an angel? But not everyone believes in that. Lots of people think dead folks are just worm food. Or a heap of ashes in a container. And what do I think? Absolutely no idea! I'd never even thought about it before. Sure, when I was little, I held burial rites for a dead bird that had smacked against the windowpane. And I'd been to

the funerals of distant relatives that I'd seen maybe two or three times in my life. Google or YouTube don't help much in a situation like this either. It's really tricky, this thing with death. How are you supposed to understand – and then try to explain to your little sister – something that's actually not even there? Other than ... as a hole. A giant, invisible hole full of nothing. One that's pretty painful. But sometimes – lots of times, really – it just feels totally weird.

And unreal.

And really dumb.

Dumb with a capital D!

And Leni didn't look like she was very satisfied with my answer. Before she could say anything, a grinning Daddy Bee asked: "Anyone care for a soda?" and started clinking around with a bottle and glasses.

I murmured a thanks and took a big swig.

But my eyes still felt like they were burning and a fat, dopey lump in my throat – big as a grapefruit and for sure three times heavier – started pushing out against my neck.

No. You are not going to start crying again!

Don't think about this thing anymore! Concentrate on something else: slurping up soup! I grabbed my spoon and lowered it into my bowl. If I could just imagine that Grandpa had only gone out for a bit. And wasn't really gone, not really, really gone ... For at least as long as it took to eat a bowl of soup.

So: Spoon it up, into mouth, get it down. Spoon it up, into mouth, get it down.

Repeat. Until Leni dropped her spoon into the soup – splash! – and asked: "How come Finny doesn't have to eat? If he gets to play, I do, too!"

Her twin brother was in his room. Once again, he'd pulled a Finny. Whenever he was determined to get his way, he either started acting really cute and sugar-sweet – or clammed up and just sat there stiff and motionless, like some kind of statue. That was almost more effective than the sweet version. The stiffer Finny became, the softer my parents got. And I hadn't seen the sweet Finny for a couple

of weeks. That's why he'd been allowed to keep playing with his cars. For as long as it took him to sort them all by color and size. Leni jumped up and Mom tried to stop her, but Leni was faster.

Mom took off after her.

Not even a minute had passed before there was a Leni scream.

And I screamed too. Jumped off my chair. Rushed toward the door. Got stopped, though, by the edge of the kitchen counter.

"Ouch! Oh, crap!" Groaning, I doubled over.

"You okay, Sammy?" Dad put his hand on my shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah, everything's fine. Just a scratch," I said aloud. And under my breath, I added:

"Everything's fine ... so far."

And from somewhere outside the room Mom yelled: "Everything's fine here, don't worry!"

Everything's fine.

Don't worry.

Oh, sure.

By the time I was standing up straight again, Dad had already left the room.

Grandma was still sitting at the table. At least her body was. I bit my lip hard, really hard.

"See ya, Grammy ..." She didn't react.

And yet, Grandma was always there for us. Had been, anyway. Didn't matter if it was a plaster, a pancake or ...p ...p. Whatever. Didn't matter what it was. You could always go to Grandma. For any "p" in the world – while Grandpa, with a twinkle, would tell his tall tales, conjure all kinds of things from behind our ears, and somehow still manage to keep a handle on everything. (The whole world, more or less.) Back then. In the past. Once upon a time.

But a plaster big enough to cover the gaping hole that Grandpa had left right in the middle of us – that was nowhere to be found.

My little brother was lying in bed.

Motionless.

Almost.

He was squinting.

"Finny's dead," Leni insisted. "That's why I was crying."

She pointed to her eyes, which didn't look at all like they'd been crying. Dry as the Sahara Desert.

"You screamed. And scared the wits out of your big brother," said Mama.

"Baloney!" I lied, feeling my heart still ready to jump out of my chest and head off to parts unknown.

"How long does dead last?" my little brother asked, struggling to keep his own eyes shut.

Leni snorted.

"Dead people can't talk. And being dead lasts forever!"

Finny sat up. "That means Grampa's always gonna be dead?"

His lower lip was quivering.

"Oh, Finny ..." Mom raised her hands helplessly. "We've already talked about that."

"Only about a zillion times," I muttered.

"And now me!" shouted Leni, and squeezed into bed beside Finny. She pressed her arms tightly to her sides and stiffened her whole body. Finny followed suit.

"Hee-hee, we're in a twin coffin! That's funny, isn't it?" Leni asked, giggling.

My brother didn't look very amused. He nodded earnestly: "We're dead tins."

Of course he knew how the word was pronounced. After all, he'd been a twin for almost six years now. But suddenly he was pulling out old baby words again.

Well, okay. Not suddenly. It'd started exactly two weeks ago. On the day of days.

And not once did Mom correct him. Although otherwise it was always super-important to her that he speak properly. Her favorite words, after all, are "clean"

and “proper.” And “disinfectant spray and wet wipes” could be her middle name. She’s even got a subscription with one of those online providers. Every three months she gets a package – no joke. And if they said the world was ending tomorrow, I guarantee the first thing she’d do is make a note of it in her daily planner app. But anyway, this latest antic did have its good side – for a few minutes the little twerps weren’t asking any gruesome questions. Instead, the two of them were squeezing their eyes shut and pressing their lips tightly together.

“I have to ... make another phone call,” said Mom, and disappeared from Finny’s room.

Dad’s eyes followed her briefly. Then he grinned and clapped his hands: “Hey, you pint-size goofballs. How’d you like to eat a few cookies?”

Which led to a very quick resurrection.

On the way to the kitchen Finny tugged my sleeve. I bent down to him.

And then he whispered very softly (and kinda warm and damp – Finny always splutters when he gets overexcited) in my ear: “We have to do something! Grampa can’t stay dead forever!”

And once again I bit my lip. Hard. For about the thousandth time. The thousandth time since Grandpa died.

THE LAST STORY

Cancer. Stupid, idiotic, lousy cancer. It had stalked Grandpa for years, and it wasn’t the first time that he hadn’t been feeling well. Six months ago there’d been a really bad stretch. That is – for Grandpa, nothing was ever really bad. Where the rest of the world saw half-empty glasses, for him they were all half-full. What were deadly diseases for others, were just scratches for him. My Grandpa wasn’t afraid of anything and could handle everything. That was one of his favorite

sayings: "We'll handle it!" And by "we" he meant himself. Didn't matter if the neighbor's lawnmower wouldn't start; an old man (okay, a really old man) from the nursing home desperately needed a driver; or if Grandpa needed to get rid of a malignant tumor. And to do it he didn't even have to fight like a ... wild hippopotamus or anything. (One time I saw this video. Hippopotamus versus lion – because the lion wanted to kill the baby hippo. Did not go well for the lion!) Nope. Grandpa never made a big deal out of any of it. Because unlike the hippopotamus, he wasn't scared. Ever. Of anything. He didn't overthink things, he just got them done. Everything that needed to be done. He let those chemo infusions flow into him like they were lemonade. Let himself be shoved into all those tubes like they were cozy little mini-hotels. With sauna, massage, and all-you-can-eat.

Well, of course that stupid cancer had never seen the likes of Grandpa before. Its cancer pride had been wounded, and it took its lousy claws off him. The doctors were astonished. But not us! Because we hadn't believed for even a second that Grandpa, our hero, wouldn't handle this, too. Because we didn't think for even half a second that there could be a world without Grandpa. Just as Grandpa had never, for one second, been ready to leave us and the world.

Okay, Grandpa wasn't in as good a shape as he'd been before – "I feel as strong as an ox," he used to say – but suddenly it was more like a wobbly calf. Now he was always a little hunched over when he walked, and his feet shuffled slowly over the floor. He looked kind of like a turtle. An old, easy-going, and very nice grandpa turtle. But the main thing was that he was still around! Here with us! He could sip a beer in the evenings. He watched soccer with me (I think soccer's really boring – but it felt good just to sit next to him); he listened to classical music and whistled along with the melodies; and he never failed to praise Grandma's cooking, after asking for seconds or thirds of everything at every meal.

He goofed around with the kids, chatted with the neighbors, and still shuffled off to his volunteer jobs once in a while. In the library (he was something like the master storyteller there), in the nursing home (not even 75 yet, Grandpa wasn't old – please!), at the soccer club. And the whole time, his illness didn't even rate a mention. Grandpa had way better stuff to talk about. Another one of his thousand wild, heroic exploits – stories about how he managed everything back when he was young. In Grandpa fashion. Thank goodness. Because Grandpa without his stories, that would have been like Christmas without a tree and summer without mosquito bites. In short, actually, Grandpa was almost like always: always in a good mood, always there for others. Which is why we thought we'd have him forever.

Wrong.

I dropped my spoon in the soup.

Not because it had become cold. I blinked and blinked and blinked. Don't cry.

Please don't. Because then Finny would start crying again. And Dad would – who knows – probably stuff chocolate in my mouth while turning pirouettes. Mom would once again quickly have to leave the room for a mega-important phone call. Leni would start acting up even more. And Grandma ... Well, she'd just still be sitting there. Like some sort of ghost.

"I ... I have to ... I can ... Well, I can't ..." I muttered and stood up.

Finny looked at me with wide eyes: "Are you gonna be sad forever, Sammy?"

"No ... That's ridiculous ... Everything's fine. I just have to ..." I muttered something to myself and then rushed out of the kitchen.

I saw Grandma out of the corner of my eye. She still hadn't said anything. Not even a peep. Finny climbed up on her lap and pressed himself into her. A thin trickle ran down Grandma's cheek and I asked myself, just as my little brother had, how this here and now was ever going to become any different.

Different from sad.

In a flash, curled up in bed with a book. Actually, reading always works for me.

Dream. Escape. Be someone else. At least in stories. Normally.

But this time a different story popped into my head.

Grandpa's last one.

And it had all – I mean this damned dying – started so innocently. At first it was only a fever. Then all at once, Grandpa was super weak. He could hardly even walk anymore.

Man. It happened so damn fast!

Hospital again.

This time he didn't have it in him to charm those half-empty glasses into full ones. He didn't really realize what was happening. He didn't even recognize us anymore.

But almost to the end, he believed that everything would be okay.

The last time I talked to him, at home, he laughed. He didn't have the energy for a long story anymore, but for a couple of anecdotes, yes. That's why I keep telling myself: It was better for him like this.

He wasn't afraid of death. Or of saying goodbye.

He died a hero.

Unfortunately that doesn't change what we have to go through now.

The without him.

Who's going to tell us now that life is a piece of cake, and we'll be able to handle everything?

Exactly: no one! Because the hero's place in our family is vacant, effective immediately.

(I've got about as much in common with a hero as a slug with a samba dancer.)

"Crap!"

I threw the book in a corner and shut my eyes. Or rather – I squeezed my eyelids so tightly together that not one nano-drop of salty fluid was able to escape to the outside.

Unfortunately, I am one big scaredy-cat.

My middle name, you might say.

Here's a short list of what I'm afraid of. (No claims as to completeness. You never know what could happen next!)

- Fear of dogs (was given a very vicious look by one when I was a child)
- Fear of wasps (allergy – serious danger of deadly reaction)
- Okay, okay, fear of just about all animals (no matter whether they have fur, feelers, or fuzzy noses)
- Fear of heights (no need to explain – everyone understands that!)
- Fear of thunderstorms (see above)
- Fear of sticky, disgusting things (chewing gum stuck under desks – you put your fingers in it and never get the stickiness off)
- Fear that something terrible could happen to Finny
- Fear that something terrible could happen to Leni
- Fear that (shortening things up here) something terrible could happen to anyone in the family! Yes, and currently – not to forget:
- Fear of life without Grandpa – and everything that goes along with that (among other things, that Grandma will always remain a spooky shell. Forever and ever and always)