

Josefine Sonneson: How To Shrink Fear Down To Size

Wie man einen Bammel auf Hosentaschengröße schrumpft

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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How to swear on all the ghosts (Chapter 1)

With most things, we are stuck right in the middle.

Wednesdays we are stuck right in the middle of the week and right in the middle of school. And we are stuck right in the middle of ourselves. Me in myself, Elli, just before 11, Elli with the fast legs and the strong arms, Elli with the *go-for-it* and in wellies. And Jaro in himself. Jaro, just after 11, Jaro with the eagle eyes and the carefulness, Jaro with the looking things up and with the mobile phone, Jaro with the good ideas. Apart from that, we're stuck right in the middle of our friendship, in fact, ever since we can think. Jaro and me. Me and Jaro. Accomplices.

Agents. And the best of friends.

"Wait a sec", says Jaro. I'm just about to cross the road and take the little detour from the bus stop to home, the one we always take. But Jaro has stopped and won't go any further.

"I don't want to do it anymore", says Jaro and suddenly looks very serious. Jaro hasn't said a word for the whole bus journey, maybe because something has been brewing inside him. I didn't think anything of it at first, because I normally talk more than Jaro.

"Ey?", I say.

“I don’t want to be a scaredy-cat”, says Jaro, and looks down the street we usually never go down. Because that’s where the barking dog lives.

“But you’re not a scaredy-cat!”, I say, and step towards Jaro. Best friends sometimes have to remind each other of things.

“Yes... but”, says Jaro, “I don’t want to have the jitters anymore. I don’t want to be a wimp. I don’t want to be afraid! I don’t want to always change to the other side of the road and take the long way round. I just want to go the way I want to go. Without the jitters getting in the way.”

Jaro is being serious. Jaro has already pondered this. And now he has decided something.

“Okay”, I say. “Then that is our new mission!”

Now Jaro’s grinning again. We need to make a plan. And for that we decide to meet in our secret place later.

Jaro and I live in the same house. Since basically forever. When we were five, he moved into the third floor flat with his dad. We live directly above on the fourth floor, that’s Mama, Mamia and me. That’s already pretty high up. Seventy-nine steps to be exact. My Mama is currently pregnant, and that’s why she’s slower on the steps. But Mamia isn’t pregnant. She can get up the steps quicker.

Sometimes we race each other. Together I call the two of them my M&M. It's shorter and sounds like chocolate sweets. We all like those. Mamia's favourites are the ones with peanuts, Mama only likes the ones with chocolate, and I prefer those with the crispy crunchy filling.

To get to the attic is another floor up. When we get home, we push open the dark green door. It's so heavy that I have to press myself against it. It creaks beautifully when it opens. If we don't pull it shut behind us it always stays open just a crack. On the floor of the attic there's all this dusty stuff. Two boxes of books with yellowed pages, a deflated dinghy hanging over the washing line, Mama's old bicycle with very flat tyres, a half-collapsed pile of red roof tiles, and a shelf with empty plant pots. The other people in our house rarely go up to their dusty stuff, and so we have the place to ourselves. Behind the shelf, in the corner under the skylight, is our secret hiding place. We've put a fold-up mattress and cushions on the floor, there's an upturned box as a table, a torch and an emergency stash of biscuits. The tin is mostly empty, because you also need biscuits in non-emergency situations. This is also where we keep our secret notebook for the mission notes.

This secret hide-out is my favourite place, even when it isn't a *tutto completo* secret. My Mama and Jaro's dad know that it exists, but they stay quiet about it and that's why it belongs only to Jaro and me.

We meet in the secret place to hatch plans. You have to hatch plans, or dream them up. Especially the plans for shrinking medium-sized jitters.

"So", I say, and put our notebook across my legs, find the next free page and write *Jaro's fear of dogs*.

Then I let myself fall backwards onto the cushions.

"What are you afraid of?" asks Jaro.

I look at my thoughts coming up, one by one.

I'd like to say, I'm not afraid of anything. Nothing, nothing at all. But that is a fib. Wouldn't it be great, if you could say something like that?

"You're scared of doing sums in your head!", Jaro says then. I sit back up.

"No!", I say. Jaro shrugs his shoulders.

"But you always end up stuck in the corners when we're doing angles." That's true. I think about the maths lesson today with Jaro and get a funny feeling in my tummy just remembering it.

"But I'm not scared of it, I just can't stand it", I say.

"Okay", says Jaro, "then something else".

I can't think of anything at first.

Then I can think of loads of things.

And then in the end I think of something, which I should have thought of straight away.

I have a fear that all animals are eventually going to be extinct. I have a fear of stepping on a slug with bare feet.

I have a fear that the doors of the tram will shut too quickly and trap my foot. I have a fear of the flush in train toilets. Because they sound like they would suck you down in a loud rush if you stand too close. I have a medium fear of scary films. And deep, dark water really gives me the creeps, that something will wrap itself around my legs while I'm swimming.

"I am frightened of deep lakes and the sea, you know that", I mumble. And my heart thumps a little quicker and louder. Some fears give you the jitters just saying them out loud.

Jaro looks at me, says: "True", and nods, because he knows what that's like. Jaro pulls the book towards him and writes.

Now, first of all, it isn't actually that bad, when you have a kind of fear. I don't have to watch scary films, if I don't want to. But when you can't do something that you actually want to do, just because you have the jitters, then that's stupid. Then you have to make plans to change it.

Jaro doesn't want to keep crossing the street, if some dog comes running along or is barking. And I want to go on the school trip when we will go swimming, and not have to stand around on the side. "I can stay on the side with you", Jaro had said, and that was good, because it's always better together. But I don't actually want to stand at the side, I want to take part.

We're going to the seaside you see, for our school trip. To an island in the North Sea. So that's right in the middle of the sea. We are going to go crabbing, have sandcastle competitions, play hide and seek in the sand dunes, drink funny local juice, go to the maritime museum, ride our bikes along the dyke. And: we will swim in the sea. We've already discussed it all. Everyone in my class can swim.

Me too. But only in the calm chlorinated water of the leisure centre. And only in clear water, when you can see all the way to the bottom, where the tiles go blurry. And only, if no one dunks me under. And only without diving too long. And only without waves and without algae and without fish and without mud and without spray and without swirling water and without tides. And when there's too many *Only Without's* then there's not much left at the end. Also, I'd rather be on land and not in the water and that's that.

Jaro says he doesn't like climbing up buildings when the floor is only made of metal grates you can see through. We both find the landlord on the ground floor creepy. A little bit anyway. Especially when he's shouting. Because you can hear that all over the hallway. It's the reason Jaro and I believe that there's a ghost on the ground floor. An argument-ghost who has cursed the whole floor and the landlord. A shouting curse. We don't really believe in ghosts and curses, because ghosts don't exist. But the landlord exists and his arguing too. And that's why we always go extra quickly past his front door.

I can't stand it when people argue. I get this kind of tingling under my skin. Even when it has nothing to do with me. With the landlord it for sure has nothing to do with me, he doesn't even know me.

When the biscuits are all gone, there are two fears on our list.

"Okay", says Jaro.

"Okay", I say.

"But we're really going to do this", says Jaro.

"Totally honestly", I say.

"And both of us", says Jaro.

"Of course, both of us", I say.

We need to begin the fight against the jitters as soon as possible. Definitely before the school trip. And that's why we swear on it.

We swear on it, so that we totally honestly do it, and because it's cool to swear on it and because you sometimes have to do things like that in hiding places, to make it real.

We don't swear on it with blood and not with spit either, because we find both of those options disgusting and not making sense. We sit down opposite each other on the floor, in the middle of our hiding place, and look at each other eye to eye. Without blinking and without looking away or giggling. And then we swear with our eyes locked and with our words. We swear.

We swear by our secret attic hiding place. We swear by the loose tile, where the rain drips in. We swear by all the good ghosts, and also by the argument ghosts, because they will be offended if you leave them out. And we swear by all the stars you can see through the skylight, we swear by all the secrets in the world and by the best ice cream in the city and then we can't think of anything else. And then we do have to giggle a little bit.

To seal the oath, we scratch our initials first into the roofbeam and then onto our hands. With Mama's good ballpoint, which I borrowed from her desk drawer,

because she would never give it to me if I asked. A little E on Jaro's hand, a little J on mine. That's enough.

Our half-started list of jitters is on page 13 in our secret notebook, directly after the list of our Missions and the notes of our last espionage.

The list on page 13 reads:

Plans to get rid of the jitters

1. To stay on the same side of the street as a strange dog, stroking a dog or even befriending it.
2. Jumping into the waves or deep, murky water and swimming to the middle of the sea.

Jaro and I never argue, we sometimes squabble a little bit. Over the bigger portion of pudding. The last biscuit. For a bet. Or about who has to do something first. A bravery test, for example. And so we throw a dice to decide. If it's 1-3-5 I'll have to start, with 2-4-6 it will be Jaro. The dice lands on the edge of the empty biscuit packet, tipped exactly between the 3 and the 2.

"Oh, great", I say.

"Do it again", says Jaro.

Agents on a mission don't have to be completely fear-free, but they have to have the guts to face it fully frontal. To stand directly in front of their fear, and then to jump

over it, or to walk directly through it until the jitters have gone.

The problem with that kind of fear is that you would rather run away. Because you don't want to be stuck in the middle of it. That means not stuck on the middle of a slug for example, and not in the middle of the dark, or in a scary film or between barking dogs.

So, is it a case of closing your eyes and just getting through it? Nope. Eyes closed and through it we don't want to do. With your eyes closed you fall flat on your face. And in the worst case, you fall directly onto a dog's face. We want to keep our eyes open and keep looking and we don't want to run away.

We throw the dice again. It rolls and stops just before the edge of the table and lands directly in front of Jaro. Jaro looks from the dice to me. "Four", he says. I nod. "Sorted, Jaro."

We begin with the barking dog. Straight away, tomorrow, in fact.

How to sneak up (Chapter 2)

Round the corner, one street away, is where the barking dog lives behind a tall fence. This is on our way home from the bus stop, and mostly we go the long way round

because of that. But not today. We don't know what the barking dog's problem is, but he's definitely got one. Because it basically barks all the time. Well, every time we go past. Even when we walk on the other side of the street you can hear his mouth drooling as he barks. The fence is so high that you can't look over the top of it. Not when you're short like us. I could put Jaro on my shoulders. Then we'd be wobbly, but taller than the fence. If we pressed ourselves flat against the fence with our noses against it and stretched our arms up high, then we'd be able to get our fingertips over the top of the fence. But we don't do that. Because there's a barking dog behind the fence. And maybe he would be able to get to our fingertips, even if he didn't stand on someone's shoulders.

In the middle of the fence there's a *Beware of the dog* sign. We've never seen the barking dog. But we can hear him. He warns you of himself. A lot, and loudly, and always when you walk past the fence trying to be as quiet as a mouse. Most people are rarely quiet as mice. But me and Jaro are able to creep up silently.

That's why we want to sneak up to the fence, as close as possible, in order to stand directly in front of it. Directly in front of the fear, so to say. That is, directly in front of the

fence and practically directly in front of the barking dog.

That's the plan.

Right now, we are standing on the other side of the street, looking at the fence from a distance. That's enough for both of us for now.

Jaro's dad had said: "Dogs that bark don't bite." But he couldn't explain why it would be that way. And that's suspicious. And when something is suspicious, you should probably think it through again. Or, like proper people on a mission, test it out and get a better idea of the suspicious thing.

"It's just a saying" Jaro's dad had said. But there's a lot of things you just say. For example, that you always know better afterwards. But that isn't true when it comes to mental arithmetic, for example. With that, I always know less afterwards and don't remember any of the things I knew before, because I spent too long standing around. Maybe dogs that bark don't bite because they have to open their mouths to bark, and to bite they have to close their mouths. Barking and biting can't happen at the same time. Nevertheless, we can't rely on the fact that the barker won't bite.

Now we are standing on the other side of the street and look at the fence.

I take Jaro's hand. We cross the road. Quiet as mice. Walk directly towards the fence. The dog doesn't hear us, because we can creep up so quietly, and that's why he will stay still. And then we stand directly in front of the fence. And if there's a gap, we will carefully look through it. Because that's what this is about. Jaro can't be near dogs. Because when you're near a dog it could perhaps bite a chunk off you.

"Hey! You! What are you doing by my fence?" Someone barks loudly from behind us. Of course, the dog immediately starts barking too. Jaro stumbles two steps backwards. I grab his arm so he doesn't fall over. We turn around. A man is heaving himself out of his car. And he looks exactly how I imagine the dog looks, except as a human. Tall and broad, with short stubbly hair, dark circles under his eyes and bared teeth. He comes towards us and barks just like his dog behind the fence.

"What do you think you're doing? Can't you read the sign? Be-ware-of-the-dog!"

Jaro squeezes my hand. "Come on, let's go", he says.

"Yes, in a minute", I say.

The barking guy is standing directly in front of us.

"Go on, get out of here! What are you sniffing around here for?" The barker behind the fence has become even louder. Jaro is pinching my hand now.

“We haven’t even...”, I say.

“Shut up now!”, the man hisses across the fence, and shakes his head. The barking stops briefly, then starts up again.

When I get shouted at, then I have to shout back. It’s just one of those things. So I do it too.

“You’re just as horrible as your dog! You dimwit! No wonder he’s always barking!”

And then we run.