

Sarah Kuttner

Kurt

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“The world doesn’t stop turning for one fucking second. It doesn’t even slow down.”

Lena has bought a house with her boyfriend Kurt. It seems like her biggest challenge will be getting used to the new family arrangement and to rural Brandenburg now being her home. But when little Kurt dies in a fall, he leaves behind three adults whose centre implodes in grief.

Sarah Kuttner tells the story of a perfectly normal complicated family, about what holds them together when the worst happens. She shares this tragedy with her direct and light touch, as only Sarah Kuttner can write. A declaration of love for those who have left us and those who stay behind.

Translated by Katy Derbyshire

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Kurt has tiny eyes. All swollen with sleep and a gorgeous bruise. You're probably not supposed to think a black eye is gorgeous, at least not on small children, but Kurt's black eye suits him – it goes with his mouth full of wobbly milk teeth and his tiny boxer's nose and makes him look much more adventurous than he really is. He gets his boxer's nose from big Kurt. I'm in a bed full of Kurts, little ones and big ones, and they all have boxer's noses and sleepy eyes. While big Kurt breathes alcohol-scented fumes in my direction, little Kurt is lying on top of me. Spread-eagled like a starfish, his body may be a bit too small for his age but it covers my entire torso. His right hand is clutching an orange Matchbox car, although I'm not sure they're still called Matchbox cars these days, but at any rate it has little white rubber wings and is driving up and down the pillow next to my face. Kurt's head is resting on my chest; he has to tip it right back to stare at me out of his puffy eyes. Children in adverts lie on their parents more attractively, and especially more comfortably. This one is lying neither comfortably nor on a parent, so I say: 'Kurti, wouldn't you rather lie on top of your dad?'

'No.'

'But I can hardly breathe, you know.'

Kurt's black eye is a bit smaller even than the non-black eye and, as befits a proper black eye, is also slightly bloodshot.

'Daddy smells though.'

I can't help laughing, giving twenty-kilo Kurt a good shaking on my chest.

'You smell. Both of you!' big Kurt mumbles from the right, and because small children can't get enough of talking about smells and rarely know when they've overdone it on the humour scale, little Kurt answers with a titter but still staring straight at me with his neck in its impressive contortion: 'You smell the most though! Of farts!'

If I was Kurt's mother I'd probably still think that was pretty funny or at least very cute, but I'm not and I might also be a tad strict when it comes to humour, so I let the two Kurts go on giggling and turn on my side so that little Kurt rolls onto big Kurt, which they both find even funnier, giving me an opportunity to get up. Big Kurt tries to reach for my arm but only catches my bare bum, which I become uncomfortably

aware of at that very moment. Not my bum in itself; it's perfectly OK for its age. But I feel I shouldn't be lying naked in bed with two Kurts, only one of whom is mine.

'Stay here, smelly!' crows the Kurt who's not mine, looking at his father through one and a half eyes and clearly craving confirmation.

'Yeah! She should stay here, that smelly lady!' comes his endorsement, and suddenly I feel like I don't belong. Like I'm spoiling the Kurts' party.

'I need the loo,' I mumble, trying to drag the cover to the toilet with me, which only works in American movies because they don't have big fat duvets and they don't have two Kurts either, who they'd drag out of bed along with the duvet. So I cover my bum with my hands like a teenager as I tiptoe out of the master bedroom.

The tiles on the floor are not only ugly; they're also unpleasantly cold. As I stand shivering on the small, damp bathmat like on an island in a sea of 80s tiles, like I'm playing musical chairs with myself, it becomes utterly clear that the idea of retreating to the bathroom was not exactly genius. I don't even need the toilet. I just had to get out of that nest full of warm bodies and evaporating alcohol residue for a moment. But I'm not only naked from behind but also from the front, and how am I supposed to go back to the bedroom without foisting my breasts and pubes on little Kurt as well? I look around the sad little room. It possesses zero charm and comfort, and nor have we helped it to become the best it can be. Toiletries aren't exactly decorative, Kurt's bath toys may be brightly coloured and cute but they're still only toys, and we seem to have forgotten bathroom textiles. It's not like we don't have any – we have a delightful potpourri of mismatched towels from our past – it's just that they're still in a moving box in little Kurt's room. All that's in the bathroom is Kurt's Fireman Sam dressing gown and a single small towel designed for hands rather than a whole body. I'm annoyed by our lack of coordination. For weeks now, we've taken turns to curse when we get out of the shower and only have this tiny rag to dry ourselves off on. For weeks now, we've forgotten to put all its big brothers in the washing machine and release them for use. I'll definitely remember today. I buy myself valuable time by brushing my teeth, shivering in my continued nudity.

When I was seven, another child once called me a 'naked pig' – with an exclamation mark. I was lounging on the banks of my childhood lake, playing cards with my little sister Laura. Up to that day, I'd never wasted a single thought on nudity. We were just naked, it seemed to make sense if we were constantly popping in and out of the water to push other kids off the lilo or rub ourselves from top to bottom with black mud. Swimsuits would only have got in the way. My parents were often naked too; not by the lake that day because they were grown-ups and there seemed to be different rules

for grown-ups even back then. But in the moral safety zone of Nanna Inge's garden, we often all went nude, at least at the height of summer. My father would read in a remote corner of the garden, my mother would play rummy with my aunt in the shade on the patio, Nanna Inge would be either in the kitchen or weeding the flower beds. All semi-naked or naked. It wasn't particularly exciting for me, although it was sometimes funny. Like when my father turned on one side to read and his penis flopped down like a lazy snake. My sister and I laughed, my mother joined in, and sometimes my father would tuck his penis between his legs so he looked like a woman, and he'd laugh too. There are various blurry photos from my childhood, all of us happy and flesh-coloured, lounging around in Nanna Inge's garden in the Schorfheide in rural East Germany. As far as I remember, that 'naked pig' with an exclamation mark only embarrassed me briefly. I didn't start wearing a swimsuit at the beach until my breasts made their first hesitant appearance, one of them with some delay, which looked rather unfortunate and was my main reason for covering them up.

So nudity isn't a problem. Not really. My faffing about like this is to do with Kurt. Little Kurt, not big Kurt. Big Kurt and I work together particularly well when we're naked. Little Kurt, however, isn't familiar with my undressed body. He didn't get pushed past my pubes into the cold delivery room and my breasts didn't nourish him for months on end. I don't know the rules on nudity between adults and children who aren't theirs.

Kurt's Fireman Sam dressing gown comes precisely down to the top of my bum crack, making the fact that I'm wearing it even more ridiculous, but I appear to have left any semblance of relaxed coolness in bed, so I tiptoe as quickly as a person can tiptoe along the short hallway to little Kurt's room to fetch an unwashed but large towel.

'I can see your bum-bum! Daddy, I can see Lena's bum!' Kurt squeals, hopping from one foot to the other, a choreography of excitement and probably a full bladder, out of our bedroom.

'What does it look like? Pretty good, huh?' big Kurt asks in a lazy, muffled voice. His hungover head is presumably under the duvet, breathing whiskey fumes.

'It's huuuuuge!' his son giggles and skips off to the loo. He'd like to stay and make some more silly comments, but his small body can't ignore his bladder's urgency any longer, which finally gives me an opportunity to cover my body up sensibly. I head back to our bedroom and tug yesterday's jeans on over my bare bum.

'Are you wearing Kurt's dressing gown?' Kurt asks from under the covers. I ignore him and look for my shirt. It's on the floor under the bed.

'Lena. You're wearing a tiny bathrobe!' I roll my eyes out loud, getting tangled in the openings of my T-shirt.

'Don't get dressed! Come back to bed,' Kurt complains, pulling me backwards by a belt-loop onto the pillows. I lose my balance and our heads bang together.

'Ow! Jesus, Kurt!'

Kurt holds his head, titters and imitates his son: 'I can see Lena's bum-bum! It's huuuuge!'

'How old are you, five?' I ask, flouncing out of the bed. 'I'm going to make breakfast. Get up, the plants guys are coming any minute now,' I say, because it's true but also because I want to change the subject from my bum.

'Plants guys, schmants guys,' mutters Kurt, pulling the cover back up over his head. While I go down the pinewood stairs to the kitchen, I hear him shouting: 'Kurt! Have you fallen in the toilet? Get dressed, Lena says the schmants schmuys are coming!'

'SCHMANTS SCHMUYS!' I hear a distant echo from little Kurt, and suddenly I'm glad the two of them will probably take a good while before they make it to the kitchen, leaving me a bit of time to shake off my morning sulk. Before I throw on Kurt's navy-blue jumper, draped over the back of a chair, I take off my inside-out T-shirt and put it on the right way round. Then I turn on the radio and stare out of the window at the grey garden for a bit. It's stupid that the plants are being delivered today – it's probably too cold to plant them. When I ordered them online three weeks ago, the internet told me late March was a good time. Now, though, there are still stubborn remains of hard snow in the corners of our garden. I should have just gone to the garden centre in Hohen Neuendorf. Or to some local nursery. But the range was larger and cheaper online, and there weren't any people pushing gigantic shopping trolleys full of decorative ponds, and – anyway. Now the plants are coming today, and we'll all have to get on with it.

I love Brandenburg. I spent all my childhood summers here, and even now I regularly exchange the city – at least for country walks or romantic outings – for lovely stuffy old Uckermark, Oberhavelland, Spreewald or Schorfheide. I've never wanted to go to the seaside, the mountains, abroad. I've always liked the fields and forests north of Berlin the best. I've grown to love it all. The giant wind turbines that the locals put up a fight against because of the noise. The stink of the chemical works that always reminds me to turn off the A10 onto the A114 for Berlin at the Pankow junction. The dismal and often bleakly straight roads through Basdorf, Liebenwalde, Summt or

Zerpenschleuse. The dilapidated grey village houses, made only even more melancholy by radical and often stridently painted new facades in the early 2000s. The neon-orange cardboard signs nailed to trees, promising local mushrooms, asparagus, strawberries or pumpkins, depending on the season. The weathered wooden crosses marking where teenagers have died in collisions with trees on the shaded roads. The clumsy graffiti hearts asking Mandy to marry Mike. It's all so touching. I love it all with a seething passion.

Suddenly living here, though, is a different matter.