

Impressum

Klaus Bung:

The Cabbage Tree, and its Eleventh Birthday Present.

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e: klaus.bung@rochdalewriters.org.uk

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

The author wrote this for his 11-year-old granddaughter just before he was officially certified as mad by his relatives. They claimed that such a text was suitable only for adults. The granddaughter has never recovered.

Klaus Bung: The Cabbage Tree, and its Eleventh Birthday Present

A story for children, with undertones for adults

**I DO NOT REMEMBER YOUR BIRTHDAY:
A LETTER
AUGUST 1997**

Dear Thalia,

You know I never remember anybody's birthday, but this year I did.

But perhaps I should rather say, I always remember people's birthday, I remember it a week, or a month or sometimes even a year later.

For, how can you remember anything before it has happened?

One can predict a birthday and therefore send a birthday card a week in advance, but one can remember it only when it is past and when the birthday card or letter cannot possibly arrive on time.

The big question is whether it is better to predict birthdays or to remember them.

The reason why my letters (if any) never arrive on time is because I remember birthdays, Christmas, and so on, and I do not predict them.

There are two types of people, those who remember birthdays and those who predict them. We all have a gene which determines to which group we belong.

People who in reality predict birthdays still say they remember them. But they are prophets and I am not. We can't all be prophets, can we? Some of us have to be prophetesses. Are you a prophetess? I am neither a prophet nor a prophetess.

This year your eleventh birthday was on 6 July (1), and the earliest day on which I could remember it was therefore 7 July. And that's what I did. Then I did not have a birthday present for you, so I decided to make one. And I made a birthday story for you, but it took five days to grow. It is called "The Cabbage Tree, and its Eleventh Birthday Present".

Now you have to do something nice for your brothers and your mother to comfort them because they aren't getting a story, are

they? I am therefore sending you a \$20 note to enable you to buy some sweets (or whatever else \$20 will buy) for Big Brother (Xerxes, King of the Persians, or was it Darius?), for Little Brother (Tristan, The Most Faithful of Lovers), for your Mother (toughest, kindest and most beautiful of all Mothers), and for Thalia (Greek Goddess of comedy, and who should that be but you, my little clown!). That will make them all happy, you can read your story to them, drink a cup of chocolate together and you can celebrate your birthday together, again.

You see, it is really a good idea that I do not predict birthdays but remember them, because that gives you a chance to celebrate them twice - once on the predicted date, and again when somebody remembers them.

If you had 364 friends, you could tell each of them to remember your birthday on a different date, one on 7 July, one on 8 July, one on 9 July, and so on, round the year and the next until your next birthday arrives again. That way you could celebrate your birthday every day of the year, either because it is actually there, or because someone remembers it, and your life would be one big never-ending birthday party. Why don't you go right now and organise your friends so that you will have a happy life.

Lots of love

from your Mad Grandfather



THE STORY

The Cabbage Tree: For Thalia

Late at night before I go to bed, I visit the flowers in my garden. I am a modern mother and give them a lot of liberty. Most of them have chosen for themselves where they want to grow and whose company they like. Once they have decided, they usually stay where they are, but sometimes, I believe, they are naughty, and during the night when they should be sleeping, they go visiting other groups of flowers and hold noisy parties.

Noisy, that is, by flower standards. For us that noise is barely audible. From some of the quieter flowers, such as the daisies, I have heard complaints about what their big rowdy cousins, the sunflowers, get up to. They are a sly lot. Before the sun rises, they usually get back to their old places, so that I can never be sure if they have been away. But I am wary of their tricks. Sometimes I notice in the morning that they are not quite where they were the night before.

When I go down to say Good Night to them and tuck them in, I give them a drink of water, check if they have washed their stinky feet (2) and brushed their teeth and said their evening prayers. Then I leave them, lock the house, drink my nightcap, wash my stinky feet, brush my teeth and say my evening prayers so that God is happy with me. I must set a good example.

Well, three years ago, my flowers complained to me that they were getting bored and that they were getting hungry. They were fed up with eating nothing but cow dung and dog shit for breakfast, lunch and dinner (3) , and wanted something better. They asked cheekily whether they could not have cow shit and dog dung instead. They said that dog dung was more poetical, but I think cow shit is rude and unfair on cows, so I simply ignored their sarcastic remarks. But I decided to solve two birds with one stone. I gave them a buttercupful of mixed vegetable seeds, allowed them to scatter these where they liked and to make friends with the vegetables which they would grow in their midst.

These flowers are not racist, they are good mixers and don't mind flowers with colours different from theirs. So now I have a beautifully mixed Brazilian garden, with flowers, herbs and vegetables all living happily together. They even marry one another.

I have a big laburnum tree in my garden, and a cabbage plant grew up in its shadow. I love this laburnum tree because lots of golden sovereigns (4) grow on it, and in summer the laburnum sheds so many that it feels as if it was raining gold. That's why in Germany the laburnum is called Goldregen (Golden Shower). Germans are such a romantic nation!

Once I slept in the garden, and so many gold coins fell on me during the night, that my body and my face were bruised all over. "What has the wife done to you?" asked my friends when I met them in the street, but they don't know how lucky I am.

That's how I get my money, from my Golden-Shower Tree, because nobody wants to pay me anything for my silly stories.

Well, the cabbage plant also loves money because it helps him to buy presents for his girlfriends, the flowers. So he fell in love with the laburnum because he always wanted a wife with lots of money. The laburnum fell in love with the cabbage because she always wanted an intelligent husband, something that is hard to come by. That was a fair exchange.

The two came from respectable, God-fearing families, they weren't wicked tear-aways like so many youngsters these days. Therefore they said: "Before we get any closer together, we want to get married and what God has joined together (5) no gardener shall cut asunder." I always like and support respectable people. So I got the marriage licence for them from the town hall and brought the priest to hold the ceremony.

Eight months later they had a daughter. They were overjoyed, because daughters are so much cleverer than boys, give less trouble, and shall inherit the garden and dwell therein forever (6) . But would she be a plant, like her father, or a tree, like her mother? that was the big question. A tree or not a tree!

To start with, the baby cabbage took after her father and looked more like a cabbage than a tree. But with time she grew tall and gawky and was tossed around by the violent storms which are common on my hill. That stretched her neck even more. But her deep roots clung to the soil. For a while she was lying flat on the ground, and I had to take a bamboo stick to tie her and make her stand upright like a man. She kept growing higher and higher and I had to tie her to her stick again and again.

Summer and autumn passed and still she had not developed a cabbage head. Was this going to be a brainless cabbage? Then she would be the first such in the world. Usually cabbages consist almost entirely of head, with just a short leg to stand on, whereas we human beings consist only of legs and stomach so that we can eat, play football and make love. Our head and brains are tiny by comparison. That's why we are so monstrously stupid.

But cabbages have a reputation for being clever.

If two cabbages get into a fight, the stronger one tries to cut off his opponent's leg. The loser then takes him to court for assault. Then the stronger one says to the judge: "My opponent doesn't have a leg to stand on." How could he, poor soul, if it has been cut off! But that is justice.

If the victim sues because someone has cut off his leg, he cannot possibly win: he must stand on his leg to prove his case. Otherwise the court will not believe that it has been cut off. But if he still has his leg, he cannot complain that it has been cut off. That is the dilemma of the cabbages.

Therefore you must never go to court, especially if you do not have a leg to stand on. That is the main reason why you are lucky to be a little girl (never mind being stupid like all humans), and not a smart cabbage. You start off with two legs. Even if you lose one, you still have the other one to stand on. What good is your head to you in court if you do not have a leg to stand on!

When we see a really brainy person, we say "He is a cabbage", which means, "He is all head and brains. He'll never run in the Olympics." If children want to become clever, they must eat lots of cabbages, to say nothing of apples, oranges and bananas.

Apples are born without a leg to stand on. That's why they must hang upside down from apple trees and Christmas trees. Apples feel dizzy most of the time, because they are not yogis or politicians, who can stand on their head for thousands of years.

Even next year, my cabbage would not grow a head as I expected. She was obviously going to be a tree, like her mother. During the nightly parties of the flower children she must have run around like a headless chicken. The flowers wanted to kiss her and had nothing to kiss her on.

Meanwhile she grew taller and taller. She grew blossoms and many succulent leaves. She looked like a small tree, and already reached up to my elbows. Her stem was now an inch and a half in diameter.

The flowers, who wanted to become as intelligent as I, started eating her leaves, and the little cabbage tree happily let them do so. She did not need so many leaves. "I can always make new ones", she said, "just watch me do it!"

Then a butterfly called Parú Paró flew five thousand miles across the wide wild Sargasso sea (7) , instantly fell in love with my garden and started kissing the cabbage tree. The cabbage tree liked that because it tickled its leaves. Wherever Parú Paró had kissed, beautiful little caterpillars grew up, almost as pretty, but not quite, as their cousins, the earth-movers, which we use to build our roads, to level football pitches and destroy the foundations of society.

The little caterpillars also asked for leaves to eat and got them. It was an incredibly loving and generous cabbage tree. Just like Parú Paró.

I asked the cabbage tree if I would live long and stay healthy if I also eat her leaves. "Of course, you will," she said. "If you

eat cabbage leaves, you will live twice as long as normal people".

"And what is normal?" I asked.

"Man's life lasts 70 years", she said, "and if she is lucky, it will be 80, but the extra ten will be nothing but toil and trouble. (8) But if you eat cabbage leaves all your life and always love your monster and your Parú Paró, you will live to 140 years, and enjoy them to the very end."

So I also started eating cabbage leaves and always loved my monster and Parú Paró. Because I will live and work till I am 140, just watch me do it!

"Who is your monster?" you ask. He is an extraordinarily loveable creature who has the miraculous ability to be in two places at the same time. He lives in the kennel in my garden and in my heart. God alone knows how he does it.

The cabbage tree had become so big, that the bamboo stick was too weak to hold her up. So I bought a metal pole to support her. It cost me £5, just imagine! Next year she continued growing, and during midsummer night (9) that year I had a strange dream.

I dreamt of St John eating grasshoppers and wild honey (10) in the desert, at the banks of the river Jordan. First I saw the grasshoppers hopping away and St John hopping after them to catch them. But they were professional hoppers, whereas St John was a professional baptist. Baptists (anabaptists and paedobaptists (11) alike) are only amateur hoppers (12) . Therefore hopping after them was such hard work for St John that he became quite emaciated. It was not a case of anorexia nervosa but, like his old friend Cassius Clay, he had that lean and hungry look that characterises the true philosopher. "Would he were fatter", said Julius Caesar compassionately when on 13 March 44 B.C. he was flown to Jordan for an emergency baptism (13) two days before his premature death. Suddenly I understood why St John (as you can see when you visit him in the Chiesa dei Frari (14)) is so much leaner than his Pope and his Bishop. If they also did some aerobics, they could be as fit as St John and your Mum.

I also want to shed some weight, and I have decided to join the St John's Aerobics Club across the road. They use clay grasshoppers there for hopping after because most of its members are vegetarians. Now you know why St John is the patron saint of aerobics.

Suddenly my dream changed. I couldn't figure out what grasshoppers were doing in the desert since, in the desert, there is no grass on which they can hop. Moreover how can St John live on wild honey, when there are only three flowers left in the desert - not enough to feed an army of bees on, especially wild ones, who are as greedy as ten-year-old children.

So I went to Paris and asked St Merry and his new neighbour Madame Pompadour (15) for an explanation. They told me that every night three ravens (16) come to visit St John and bring him a tin of grasshoppers from Egypt, a jar of wild honey from South Africa, and a videotape from Denmark so that he doesn't get bored in his desert and can test his self-control.

St John has grown so old on eating grasshoppers and wild honey (he'll soon be 2000) that he has only one tooth left in his mouth - upper right one. It is in front, behind his upper lip, is long, strong, uncommonly sharp, and winks at you triumphantly when St John laughs, which is not very often. The other hermits and hippies there in the desert call him John The Tin Opener. They love to see his tooth wink, therefore they hatch plots to make him laugh. "Anything for a good laugh!" they say, "for our God is a merry God".

Their pranks are so many that, if I should write them all down, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. (17) Therefore I must leave them for another letter.

After St John has said grace, he opens his tin of grasshoppers with his one tooth and immediately the grasshoppers come goose-stepping out and hop straight into his mouth. This is not only a very good service but also a miracle.

I always thought St John should become a vegetarian like me and start eating grass and cabbage leaves. Suddenly I understood why there is no grass in the desert. St John used to be a vegetarian and has eaten it all.

Mark Antony Tyson had the same problem. He is a vegetarian, a pacifist and a deserter. When he couldn't find any more grass in the desert, he went without food until he saw some grass growing out of Evander Holyfield's ear and started grazing there.

**"Evander Holyhead, lend me your ears,
I come to whack your hollies, not to graze them, (18) "**

he whispered, perhaps to show off his erudition, but graze he did. He was near starvation, and in his excitement he followed St Peter's example (19) and bit off Holyfield's ear (20) . An obvious act of clumsiness by someone used to grazing in the desert and not in other people's ears. Evander Holyfield has now changed his name to Evander Holydesert and will never again box with a vegetarian.

When the grasshoppers no longer had any grass to hop on, they became simply hoppers. It was so boring to hop in the desert with nothing to hop on that they decided to make a quantum leap, which is the tiniest leap you can possibly imagine, and hopped straight into a tin factory in Cairo (21) , which is a big city in Egypt, where the Gyptians and the Gypsies come from. The manager was a romantic German, Werner Heisenberg (22) . He ruled his tiny tin

empire with a rod of iron, a reign that has become affectionately known as Verner's Law (23) . When the hoppers arrived in his yard, he taught them goose-stepping while from the jukebox came strains of "Honour your German Masters" (24) and they taught him quantum leaps: as a result, their love and friendship grew in bounds (25) .

They asked him for food and shelter. He had no food for them but, out of gratitude for teaching him to make quantum leaps, he gave them tins to live in and made them draft-proof and water-proof. That's how the grasshoppers became plain hoppers and how the hoppers managed to get into tins, even though the tins were draft-proof, water-proof, and hopper-proof. When the hoppers come out of the tins, they hop straight at St John's head trying to get into his mouth. This is how they became hopper heads. Sometimes you can still see them clinging to English drain pipes.

Then I dreamt that my cabbage tree had trebled in size. On its branches lots of cabbages were growing. These were intelligent cabbages with real heads. They were dangling from the branches like apples, gently swinging and singing. It became winter, the cabbages froze and as they touched each other in the breeze, they started ringing like green silver bells, and there was heavenly music all day long. But in reality it was silent night.

Suddenly a raven came to peck at one of the cabbages, croaked Nevermore! (26) , the cabbage dropped on my head and I awoke.

That was a mad dream. But who knows, perhaps it was true!

I rushed into my garden and there I saw the cabbage tree exactly as it had been in my dream. It had been transformed overnight, in this night of love and miracles.

There were exactly eleven cabbages on it. I asked: "Why eleven?"

The cabbage tree said:

"They are for your American granddaughter Thalia, because it is her 11th birthday today. That is the most important of all birthdays, because it comes around only once every eleven years, and she has been waiting for it all her life!

On her birthday she will be allowed to stuff herself with cabbages. What nicer birthday treat could there be!

But do not worry, you won't go short. When she has finished, I will grow more cabbages for you, and for my darling flowers.

I will also cater for the wriggly little caterpillars so that they can grow up and become strong pillars of society.

Caterpillars are called caterpillars because when they are little I have to cater for them, and when they are big, they are pillars of society (27) , watch Ibsen (28) in the theatre and clap loudly when they have been exposed, didn't you know, stupid?"

That surprised me since I had been told that caterpillars are called caterpillars because they look like cats with pile or hair, in other words, like pily cats or hairy cats. But that story with the pillars of society makes much more sense to a simple mind like mine. Have you ever seen a naked cat!

Unfortunately, little Thalia, you do not live in England but in America. But I have picked the eleven cabbages for you and sent them to the greengrocer near where you live. He will keep them for you. Your Mum only has to go and collect them. I hope you will enjoy them and become strong, clever and good. And don't let your brothers Tristan and Iseult boss you around. Eat plenty of cabbages and if the boys get bolshy, do like Halima and Yamina here and punch them on the nose or on their cabbage head. I wish you a happy eleventh birthday.

Good night.

6 July 1997

FOOTNOTES

1. On what date was your eleventh birthday last year?
2. Indignant parents have since told me that children do not have stinky feet (to say nothing of plants or adults) and that dogs do not shit and that children should be made aware of these linguistic facts early in life. Since it is too late to change the text of this story (quod scripsi scripsi), I herewith retract what I have said. The only people who had stinky feet (and this has transpired in John 13:2-5) were Philoctetes and the other disciples of Jesus. But they had it bad, and it drove Jesus to his premature death! He patiently suffered the stench during his last supper with them, but then he could not stand it any longer. He got up in person, put on a gas mask, an apron and rubber gloves, and got down on his hands and knees to wash their feet, one by one, with Persil or St Peter's herb, since this is parsley (in French), and Petersil (in German). It is so called because St Peter, who loved his smell of rotten fish, affected an allergy to it. St Peter therefore, like a naughty child, struggled violently to stop Jesus from washing his feet. "Never, never, never, never, never, Never (sic!) will I allow you to wash my stinky feet!" (John Lear 13:8 and 5.3:307). Peter gave in when Jesus threatened to dispatch him to the Greek island of Lemnos, the ancestral home of all people with stinky feet.
3. Plants, curiously enough, eat with their feet and, considering their daily diet, it is not surprising that they had stinky feet, as mentioned above. Civilised human beings, regardless of their diet, should not even eat with their hands, but with knife and fork.
4. English coins
5. Matthew 19:6
6. Psalm 37:29
7. Jean Rhys
8. Psalm 90:10
9. 24 June, the summer solstice and the Feast Day of St John the Baptist. During the night preceding it Freud, Shakespeare and Wagner (in alphabetical order of importance) had notorious dreams.
10. Mark 1:6
11. Paedobaptists are members of Christian sects (e.g. Roman Catholics and Anglicans) which baptise infants. They are

-
- considered perverts by Anabaptists, who baptise only adults who have reached the age of, and given their, consent.
12. Go to any Baptist garden fête and the chances are you will always win.
 13. Shakespeare: Julius Caesar, 1.2:194-198
 14. Church in Venice, c/o Donatelli, St John's European residence.
 15. The church of St Merry and the Centre Pompidou are side by side. The Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Lustiger, goes there when he wants to relax and have a good laugh. He was born Bruder Lustig but after these visits
a lustiger and wiser man
he wakes the morrow morn.
 16. 1 Kings 17:6
 17. John 21:25
 18. Shakespeare: Julius Caesar, 3.2:75-76
 19. Matthew 26:51
 20. ca. 1 July 1997
 21. Hopping is a traditional pastime in Egypt:
"I saw her once
Hop forty paces through the public street."
(Shakespeare: Antony and Cleopatra 2.3:32-33)
 22. The physicist Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) developed quantum theory and the uncertainty principle. Many children suffer from it at examination time.
 23. Note the Sound Shift from W to V; see Encyclopaedia Britannica under "Germanic Languages".
 24. "Ehrt eure deutschen Meister" from Wagner's opera The Mastersingers of Heidelberg, celebrating the invention of computer generated poetry on St John's Day.
 25. Some historians argue that it grew also in leaps.
 26. Edgar Allen Poe: The Raven
 27. hence also known as "religious caterpillars" (Marlowe: The Jew of Malta, Act 4) and weakly worshipped by Mr Eliot during his morning service.

28. The Norwegian playwright Ibsen wrote the play "Pillars of Society" in 1877. It is a shortened version of his Ph.D. Thesis "The Survival of the Fittest Caterpillars in Rural Norwegian Society".

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