

Dagmar Hoßfeld



Conni  
& Co

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and the Exchange Student



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Conni stares, transfixed, at the battered **briefcase**<sup>1</sup> on the teacher's desk in front of her. It belongs to Frau Lindmann, Conni's English teacher, and there can only be one explanation for how fat it is: they will be getting their grammar tests back!

You'd need x-ray vision or, even better, telepathic powers, Conni thinks with a sigh. Then maybe you could have some **influence**<sup>2</sup> on the contents of the folder.

Thinking about the test gives her butterflies in her stomach. English grammar isn't exactly her strong point. She only got a D<sup>3</sup> in her last test. A high D, but a D all the same. If she hasn't done better this time ...

»Conni, are you listening to me?«

Conni **starts**<sup>4</sup>.

»Yes, of course I'm listening to you,« she says quickly.

»Say it in English, please,« says Frau Lindmann. She is standing in front of Conni, drumming her fingers impatiently on the desk.

Conni can feel herself turning red. Janette is giggling quietly behind her. Conni feels like **strangling**<sup>5</sup> her.

»Yes, I am listening to you, Mrs Lindmann.« She emphasises each word. Then she forces a small smile and adds: »Of course I am!«

Frau Lindmann nods, satisfied. »Okay, that's fine,« she says, turning back to her class. »Before we turn our attention to your test results, I've got a surprise for you.«

Conni and Anna exchange looks. A surprise from the Dragon? Well, this will be worth hearing.

»You may know that our school has spent several years forging a friendship with a partner school in Great Britain,«

says Frau Lindmann. »Some of our **Year Tens**<sup>6</sup> went to Brighton in spring. Now St. Christopher's School wants to send some of its pupils here in **exchange**<sup>7</sup>.«

»Great,« murmurs Phillip. »And what's that got to do with us?«

»I was just coming to that,« says Frau Lindmann. She raises an eyebrow and continues: »The **Year Elevens**<sup>8</sup> at our partner school are in the middle of important exams, so they're sending a Year Seven in their place. That means they are so to speak your English parallel class. The pupils are your age. They'll come to our class and **take part**<sup>9</sup> in the lessons.«

Conni, Anna, Billi and Dina stare at one another. Now, that really is a surprise!

»English exchange students,« Billi whispers excitedly to the others. »That's so cool!« Conni agrees. Whispering fills the classroom. Frau Lindmann raises her hand.

»Our guest pupils are to live with **host families**<sup>10</sup> while they're here,« she says. »I've done an information sheet for your parents which explains the main points. It would be nice if some families were prepared to take in an exchange student. There are 18 pupils coming, and I hope we'll be able to find **accommodation**<sup>11</sup> for all of them.«

Paul puts up his hand. He looks unhappy.

»Do they speak any German? Or do we have to speak English to them the whole time?«

»Our guest pupils have been learning German for a year,« Frau Lindmann explains. »It's true that German is optional rather than compulsory in Britain. However, I would assume that you'll be able to communicate quite well with your guests, and that you'll be able to learn a lot from one another. There's no better way to learn a language than talking to **native speakers**<sup>12</sup>.« She gives the class a searching look, one hand on the clasp of her briefcase. »And so that you don't completely **show me up**<sup>13</sup>, let's turn to your grammar tests. Some of you still appear **to be at**

**loggerheads with**<sup>14</sup> modal auxiliary verbs. We have a lot to discuss, *boys and girls*.«

Uh-oh, thinks Conni. Now it's getting serious!

Frau Lindmann pulls a **heap**<sup>15</sup> of blue exercise books from her bag and makes her way slowly up and down the rows, handing them out. She stops when she reaches Conni.

»*Very good*,« Frau Lindmann says pleasantly, putting the book on the desk. »You got a **straight**<sup>16</sup> **B**.«

»A B?« Conni's eyes open wide. »Are you sure?«

She stares first at her book and then at her teacher, before quickly correcting herself. »*Oh, I'm sorry. I meant to say: Are you sure?*«

»*Yes, I am*,« Frau Lindmann nods. »As you know, I am not often wrong.«

»Amazing!« Conni leafs through her exercise book. And it is true. There it is, red on white: a B!

»Wow, that's fantastic!« Anna exclaims in delight. »All that **revision**<sup>17</sup> paid off!«

Conni nods happily. She and Anna had revised together every afternoon until they could almost do the grammar and vocab in their sleep.

»What did you get?« she asks Anna.

Anna grins. »A B as well!«

Conni leans forward. »What about you two?« she whispers to Billi and Dina.

»A straight A,« Billi whispers back. »No mistakes, *best test!*«

Dina makes a >C< shape with her fingers. »I got a C-plus,« she says with a smile.

Satisfied, Conni leans back. Fantastic, she thinks. Today seems to be our lucky day.

As she turns round, Paul and Phillip both give her a thumbs-up. It appears that the boys have good marks too. Only Janette, who sits diagonally behind Conni, screws up her mouth as if she's been sucking a lemon.

As she catches Conni's eye, she quickly looks away and **busies herself with**<sup>18</sup> examining her glittery pink finger nails. Conni can't hold back a little grin of schadenfreude.

After Frau Lindmann has discussed the worst grammatical errors with the class and has written the corrections on the board, she hands out the information sheets about the school exchange.

»Read it through **at your leisure**<sup>19</sup>,« she says, »and then pass the paperwork on to your parents, please. There's a **form**<sup>20</sup> attached, which your parents should fill in if they would like to take in an exchange student. Completed forms need to be returned by the end of next week at the latest, please. Any more questions?«

»So when are the cute English girls coming?« Phillip pipes up. He grins. »I can hardly wait.«

Frau Lindmann frowns. »I'm quite sure that the group won't just consist of girls, Phillip,« she replies. »We haven't got a definite date yet, but it looks as if you'll just have to be patient until the start of next month.«

»And how long are they staying?« asks Dina.

»Ten days,« replies Frau Lindmann. »The English school system isn't divided into two half-years, like ours, but consists of three **terms**<sup>21</sup>. Then there are holidays in between. So we have to bear this in mind when we're making our plans, as we don't want their trip to be in the holidays.« When the bell rings for the break and a couple of people hurriedly jump up, Frau Lindmann calls them back. »*One moment please!* Homework for tomorrow is correcting your tests. And you need to read Lesson 9 in your English workbooks for the day after tomorrow. That will tell you everything about the English school system. You're also very welcome to do some additional **research**<sup>22</sup> in the library or on the internet and note down the main points.« She picks up her bag. »*Goodbye, boys and girls. Have a nice day.*« With her head held high, the teacher leaves the classroom.

»*Goodbye, Mrs Lindmann,*« choruses the class.



Conni grabs her breaktime snack and together with Anna, Billi and Dina pushes her way through the **crowds**<sup>23</sup> and outside into the playground. The English test has become just a minor matter; far more important is the school exchange.

»I hope we'll be able to have an exchange student staying with us,« Conni says excitedly. »That would be totally brilliant.«

Anna **nods**<sup>24</sup>. »Me too. I just wonder how I'm going to convince my parents.«

»The best way is to tell them that a visitor from England would be good for your English marks,« grins Billi. »You heard what the Dragon says.« She puts her nose in the air, raises her index finger, and **disguises**<sup>25</sup> her voice: »There's no better way to learn a language than talking to native speakers!« Conni and Anna giggle. Only Dina remains silent. »It's true,« she says thoughtfully. »It's a good argument. All the same, I don't think my parents will agree to it.«

»Why not?« asks Anna.

Dina um-s and ah-s before answering.

»Well, I mean,« she says. »You know we've got a pretty small **flat**<sup>26</sup>. And on top of that, my mum's a nurse and works shifts. She needs her peace and quiet.«

Conni frowns. »Hmm, that's a pain. But you know what?« She nudges her friend. »If Anna, Billi and I get English students, we'll share them with you! We always do everything together anyway.«

Billi and Anna immediately nod.

»Half of my English student belongs to you,« Billi **declares**<sup>27</sup> solemnly. »Promise.«

Conni scrumples up her snack wrapper and throws it in the waste paper bin. Then she and the others slowly make their way back indoors.

»Shall we meet in the library this afternoon?« Anna suggests. »We could surf the net a bit and look for information about the English school system.«



»Yes, great idea,« says Conni. »But I can't come until later, around four. I've got to make my mum a birthday present before that. I promised Jakob.«

»Four's fine,« says Anna.

Billi and Dina agree too.

Dina looks **curious**<sup>28</sup>. »What are you going to make?«

»A photo calendar,« Conni reveals. »I've made twelve photos of Jakob and me. We're sticking them onto cardboard and decorating them a bit.«

»Fantastic,« says Dina. »Your mum will love it.«

»Well, I certainly hope so!« grins Conni. »But before we get started, I'll certainly try to get my mum to say yes to us having an exchange student. If she agrees, then my dad won't **object**<sup>29</sup> either.«

»I'll **keep my fingers crossed**<sup>30</sup>,« says Anna.

»I'll ask too,« says Dina. »Maybe my parents will agree after all.«

»Yes, you do it,« Billi says encouragingly. »It can't hurt to ask!«

Conni sighs as she **slides**<sup>31</sup> into her place. »What a pain that we've still got a German lesson.«

Herr Albers enters the classroom. »I hope you don't mean that personally?« he **chuckles**<sup>32</sup>.

Conni goes red. »No, of course not.«

»That's a relief.« The German teacher smiles. »Open your books please. Where did we leave off yesterday, Conni?«

»Page 64,« Conni says quickly. She opens her book: Robert Louis Stevenson's ›Treasure Island‹.

»Thank you.« Herr Albers sits himself casually on the corner of his desk. »Paul, you read please.«

As Paul reads the next **chapter**<sup>33</sup> aloud, Conni lowers her head and reads along in silence.

This is fantastic, she thinks as she turns the pages. An exciting book makes the most boring lesson pass in no time at all!

She is soon so **immersed**<sup>34</sup> in the pirate adventure that she stops thinking about anything else. Only when the bell goes and Herr Albers writes their homework on the board does she raise her head. She closes the book and puts it into her rucksack. As she does so, she notices Frau Lindmann's information sheets, and her heart beats slightly faster. A class of children from England – that's almost more exciting than a ship full of pirates!

She quickly stuffs her book and pencil case into her rucksack and throws it over her shoulder. She can hardly wait to get home and tell Mum the great news.



On the way home, Conni and Paul discuss how they can make the school exchange most **appealing**<sup>35</sup> to their parents. Paul's sole **suggestion**<sup>36</sup> is: »The best idea is just to ask them.«

Conni just looks at him. As if it were that easy!

They say goodbye and Conni is just about to wheel her bike into the garage when the neighbour's door is flung open. Jakob and Marie, Paul's little sister, come storming out.

»Where've you been, for goodness' sake?« Jakob cries.  
»I've been waiting for you since forever!«

Conni goes over to her brother and ruffles his hair. »You can't have been,« she laughs. »You were at school too until just now. But why are you at the Hausers'? Isn't Mum back yet?«

Frau Hauser looks round the corner. »Your mum's going to be back a bit later. She's just rung.«

»We need to put the water on for the pasta,« Jakob declares. He lowers his voice. »When are we going to make the present?«

»Later,« Conni whispers. She waves to Paul and thanks Frau Hauser. Then she rummages in her rucksack for her key.

Shortly afterwards, she is standing in the kitchen with Jakob, filling the big pasta pan with water. Before she puts it on the **stove-top**<sup>37</sup>, she adds a pinch of salt.

»When Mum goes for her **nap**<sup>38</sup> after lunch, we'll have some peace and quiet,« she says to Jakob. »Then we can get making things, okay?«

Jakob wrinkles his nose. »Okay,« he grumbles. »But you'll have to make sure she doesn't see anything! It'll be your

fault if she does!«

»Yes, I know,« laughs Conni. »Big sisters are always to blame. Come on, then, and help me chop the tomatoes.«

When Conni's mother arrives home from the local health centre where she works as a **paediatrician**<sup>39</sup>, a pan of delicious tomato sauce is simmering on the hob. The pasta is already steaming in the sieve. She sniffs the air and says, astonished: »My goodness! You two have got everything ready!«

Jakob stretches proudly. »Of course we did – did you think we wouldn't? I chopped the tomatoes!«

»Thanks very much, sweethearts. I'm sorry I'm late, but it was **bedlam**<sup>40</sup> at the **surgery**<sup>41</sup>.« Mum gives first Jakob then Conni a kiss. »But I'm free tomorrow to make up for it!«

»Well, they couldn't have you working on your birthday, that's for sure!« Conni gives Jakob a **conspiratorial wink**<sup>42</sup>. He winks back.

The pasta is great. Conni piles a second helping onto her plate. She's put the information about the school exchange by her mum's place. She can't possibly miss it there.

Frau Klawitter, however, just gives it a brief glance. »What's that?« she asks.

»You read it,« Conni mumbles, her mouth full of pasta.

»Can't it wait until after lunch?« Mum asks. »This pasta is incredibly delicious!«

»Do you want some more?« Jakob jumps up, but Mum waves him away. »No, thanks.« She picks up the letter. »You're getting exchange students from England?«

Conni nods excitedly. »Yes, isn't it brilliant?«

»Why?« Jakob twists his spaghetti onto his fork and shovels it noisily into his mouth. »What do they want to come here for?«

Conni frowns. How would Jakob even know what exchange students are? He is only in Year One.

»They're taking part in our lessons,« she explains. »And all the other stuff.«

»That's stupid!« Jakob shakes his head.

»It's not in the slightest bit stupid,« Mum interjects.

»**Quite the reverse**<sup>43</sup>.« She pushes her plate to one side and **flicks through**<sup>44</sup> the papers with interest.

Conni puts down her fork and crosses her fingers so tightly that her knuckles stand out.

»So?« she finally asks. »What do you think?«

»It's fantastic,« Mum replies. »I spent six months in France when I was at school. Then the French girl I lived with came to stay with me in Germany **in return**<sup>45</sup>. We still write to one another. Claire became a really good friend. I think this kind of school exchange is great!«

Conni opens her eyes wide. Yes, of course! Mum is always talking about her French friend! And there have been all those letters from France! But she hadn't realised that the two of them had known one another since they were at school and had done a school exchange ...

»So you'll agree?« she asks excitedly. »We're going to have an exchange student?«

»Hang on a minute,« says Mum. »Slow down a bit.«

»If Conni gets one, I want one too,« crows Jakob.

Conni gives him an amused look. »You're far too young for that!«

»No I'm not!«

»Yes you are!«

Mum **clutches her forehead**<sup>46</sup>.

»Let's clear the table and have a little rest.« She turns to Conni. »We'll talk about it later, okay? In peace and quiet and, most importantly, when Dad's here.«

»Yes, fine,« sighs Conni. At least Mum hasn't immediately said no. That is something. And anyway, she remembers, she and Jakob still have to sort out the birthday present.

Mum gets up and is about to gather up the **crockery**<sup>47</sup>.

Jakob **beats her to it**<sup>48</sup>.

»You go and lie on the sofa and have a look at the paper,« he says generously. »Conni and I'll put everything in the dishwasher, then we'll go upstairs and play a board game!«

»Hey, are you two up to something?« asks Mum. »Or have I got the date wrong, and it's already my birthday?«

»Wrong both times,« laughs Conni. »But you can put your feet up all the same.«

»Yes, go on! Do it,« Jakob pesters, pushing Mum towards the door. Conni rolls her eyes. Now Jakob really is **exaggerating**<sup>49</sup> a bit. If he carries on, Mum will get suspicious. She surreptitiously treads on her brother's foot.

»Ow!« he immediately squawks. Conni raises her eyebrows menacingly, but Mum has already grabbed the paper and isn't paying any more attention to the two of them.

Conni loads the dishwasher at top speed. »Done!« she cries, signalling to Jakob to go on ahead of her.

Jakob grins and runs upstairs. Conni follows him soon after, but only once she's made sure that Mum is lying on the living room sofa.

One short hour later, they are **surveying**<sup>50</sup> their teamwork with satisfaction. Twelve lovely photos mounted on coloured card, one for each month of the year, carefully labelled, and decorated with Jakob's colourful illustrations.

»Do you think she'll like it?« A fleck of sky-blue stands out proudly on Jakob's forehead.

»Of course she will.« Conni nods. »A home-made calendar is a brilliant present and, what's more, it's unique. You can't buy anything like this ready-made!«

The calendar really is perfect, she thinks. Brilliant!

»We just have to wrap it up now.«

She looks around her bedroom. It looks pretty chaotic after their **craft**<sup>51</sup> session, but the pretty **gift-wrap**<sup>52</sup> that

she's bought for this purpose has to be somewhere in the mess.

Jakob pulls out a floral roll from under the desk. »Might this be what you're looking for?« he grins.

Conni grins back. »Absolutely, wise guy. So do you happen to know where the **Sellotape**<sup>53</sup> is?«

As Conni kneels on the floor cutting the wrapping paper to the right size, Jakob rummages through the desk.

»Got it!« he finally announces.

Shortly afterwards, the calendar is nicely wrapped. Conni makes a couple of bows out of gift ribbon and sticks them on.

»Great,« she says. »All that's missing is the flowers. But we'll pick them tomorrow morning so that they're nice and fresh. I'll wake you up quarter of an hour before Mum gets up, okay? Then we'll have enough time.«

»Okay.« Jakob chuckles to himself. »Wow, this is so cool. Mum won't believe it.«

Conni gets up and ushers her brother out of the room.

»Yes, I think so too,« she says, casting a glance at the clock. »But I've got to go now. I'm meeting Anna and the others.«





»For goodness' sake, Conni! Where on earth have you been?« Anna looks **reproachfully**<sup>54</sup> at Conni. »If you had a **mobile**<sup>55</sup> like every normal person nowadays, I'd have phoned you at least ten times!«

»In that case it's a good job I've not got one,« counters Conni. »It has its advantages!« She locks her bike up and grins. Since getting her own mobile for her birthday, Anna has been full of hot air. It makes everyone else feel like the last of the Neanderthals for not having one.

»Oh, don't make such a big drama about a few minutes,« she says to Anna. »I said I'd be a bit late. Where are Billi and Dina?«

»They're already upstairs, **bagging**<sup>56</sup> a computer.« Anna pulls Conni into the library. The public computer terminals are on the first floor. They run up the wide staircase and round a couple of high bookshelves.

Even from a distance, Conni can hear Billi laughing.

»Is the English school system that funny?« she says, surprised.

»I don't think so.« Anna giggles. »I think Billi's good **mood**<sup>57</sup> might have more to do with the people at the next computer. They're pretty special!«

Conni frowns. Special people at the next-door computer? What can Anna mean?

As they go round the corner that separates the internet terminals from the rest of the library, she sees what Anna means: two blond boys are sitting at one of the computers. They are staring at the flickering monitor, shaking with laughter as they greet Conni in passing.