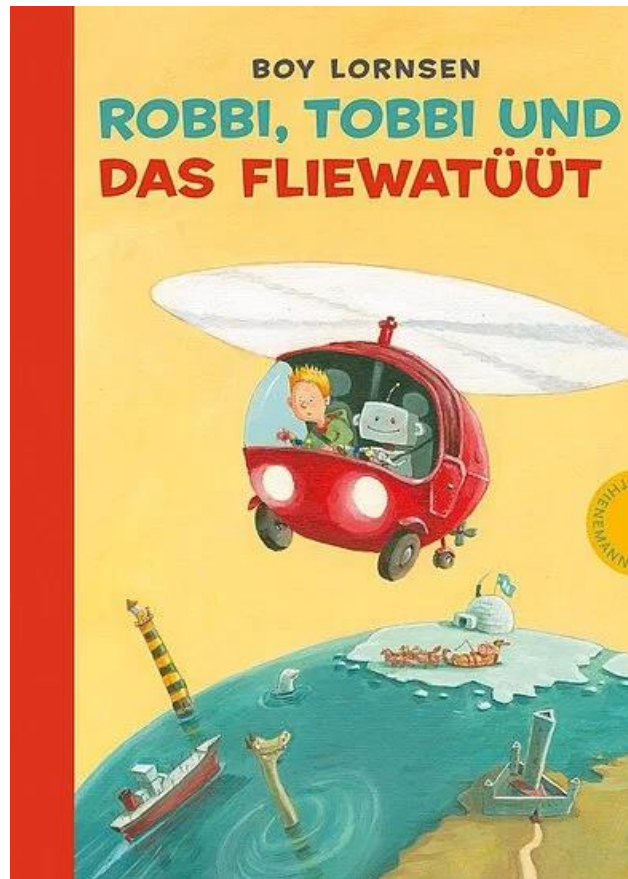


Robbie, Tobbie and the Flywatoot

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Preface to Chapter two (pp. 7 to 26)

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Preface

Things are going to get technical. Sorry, can't be helped. Don't worry, though. If you're good with technology – great! If you're not good with technology – also great! You'll get the hang of it as we go along.

To save time, I'll introduce you to the main characters straight away: first, Tobias Finteisen. He's the co-pilot. I know, normally you introduce the pilot first, but I'm starting with Tobias because he invented the Flywatoot. And you always begin with the inventor. Everyone calls him 'Tobbie', by the way, because it sounds so good. Tobbie's in year four at primary school and he gets good marks in everything. Except playing the recorder, that is. Which doesn't throw him. After all, he's an inventor, and for inventors it's more about the idea than the execution. And Tobbie has loads of good ideas. He's also very polite, which will come in handy later on.

Now let's talk about the pilot. He's called 'Robbie'. Robbie's a robot – a little one though. He's in year four at robot school. Robot school is a bit different to primary school – to move up to year five, you have to pass a really tricky exam. Robbie doesn't have a surname. Robots don't. Instead, he has a surnumber: Rob 344-66/IVa. The Roman 'four' after the slash means Robbie's in year four, and only the really good students are given an 'a'. He can fly like a stunt pilot, work out the most difficult sums before you've counted to three and has loads of amazing robot tricks up his telescopic sleeve.

The third main character is the Flywatoot, although it's not really a character as such. A Flywatoot is a first-class invention. And a first-class invention deserves a special name:

1. The Flywatoot can **fly** like a helicopter.
2. It can swim on **water**, a bit like a duck.
3. And it can drive like a car, only much more slowly. And cars are known for **tooting**.

If you put it all together, you get **fly-wa-toot**. Flywatoot. Easy. Wait! I need to say a few more words about inventors. Only a few, though!

There are big inventors, small inventors, good inventors and bad inventors. Nobody's interested in the bad ones. They need to find a new profession, quickly. Which leaves the good inventors – the big ones and the small ones.

Big inventors are grown-up. They usually only invent big things: big towers, big ocean liners, bridges and rocket ships and lots of other big things, I won't list them all here.

Small inventors aren't grown-up. They still invent things, though: small towers, small ocean liners, bridges and rocket ships and small Flywatoots. Inventors are always inventors, whether they're big or small. The main thing is that their inventions are useful!

And now the story can begin.

Chapter one

We explore the mechanics of the Flywatoot and view the technical drawings. We also find out that Tootermore is not the ideal location for inventors, that Aunt Paula does not quite cut the mustard when it comes to technology and why Tobbie chooses raspberry juice as fuel.

Tootermore was not the ideal location for inventors. That much was clear!

Tobbie didn't live there, though. Five days ago, out of the blue, his parents had left for Canada – to claim an inheritance, or something. And because it was the summer holidays, Aunt Paula had brought Tobbie home to Tootermore without further ado. For one thing, he was her only nephew. And for another, she liked him a lot.

Tobbie actually lived in a big city. That's where his parents' flat was. The city was crammed with technical stuff: trams, cars, the metro, high-tech factories... No wonder a small inventor liked living there.

Still, Tobbie didn't mind being in Tootermore. Not that you could compare Tootermore with a big city. Or even a small town. Tootermore was a village, and a tiny one at that. It was quite close to...

Ah, it's not important exactly where Tootermore was. What is important is that there were lush meadows, lovely orchards and a gold-plated weathercock. There were other things, too, of course: a school with eighteen students, ducks, geese, hens, cows, pigs, dogs and cats, several horses, seven fat and two skinny oxen and three families of mice with children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

In Tootermore, the milk came straight from the cow and not from a supermarket or anything. Every morning, it was covered in a thick layer of cream – a layer as thick as your thumb! The cakes there smelt heavenly, people still knew exactly how to make the perfect baked apples, and, best of all, sometimes students were sent home in the summer so they could enjoy the sun!

The weather in Tootermore behaved very sensibly, too: summer days were filled with sun; in winter everything was covered in snow, and it only ever rained when rain was badly needed. Just as it should be!

Which is why in Tootermore the carrots were twice as long as anywhere else, and the cabbages three times as big! There were almost four times as many sparrows as people, and at least half of them lived in the old ivy growing on Aunt Paula's house.

The only thing Tootermore didn't have was technology. People just got along without it. Odd! And very unusual.

Oh, wait a minute! There were a couple of technical things in Tootermore: solar power and a fire engine. Not even the Tootermorians could do without those. Although only the fire fighters got to see the fire engine. It was kept in their garage, cleaned and greased. And that's where it stayed. Because there just weren't any fires in Tootermore!

You couldn't fault Aunt Paula – well, for the most part, anyway. She was an excellent aunt. Tobbie couldn't have asked for a better one. Her apple cake melted in your mouth, and she was very generous with her fabulous raspberry juice. If you told her a secret, she didn't immediately broadcast it to the entire neighbourhood. In fact, she never spilt the beans – and that's certainly not something you can say about all aunts and uncles.

But Aunt Paula was extremely cautious when it came to colds. Even little sniffles. Which is why Tobbie was in bed. Four days ago, when they were leaving his city home, Aunt Paula said: 'You'll see, my boy, the air in Tootermore is so fresh, you just can't catch cold there.'

She was right about the fresh air, but she was wrong about the cold! She must have made some kind of mistake: the first thing that Tobbie got in Tootermore was – a cold. After exactly four days, which is today!

'Well, doesn't that just take the biscuit! What's this all about?' mumbled Aunt Paula and bundled Tobbie up in bed. And because there was nothing Tobbie could do about it, he did what all inventors do when they're lying in bed with a cold: he busied himself with his invention.

The plans for the Flywatoot were basically ready; they had been for a couple of weeks. They just needed one final check before construction began – after all, that's best practice among good inventors. And so Tobbie fetched the technical plans from his bedside table – he'd brought them with him to Tootermore, of course. He'd decided to review them in bed. So he stuffed a pillow behind his back, drew up his knees and propped the sketch pad against his legs. He put pen, pencil and rubber on the bedside table – just in case he needed to make any changes.

And then Tobbie's invention lines appeared on his brow – you know the ones. Only inventors have them. And only good inventors, at that! They run horizontally, not vertically, and make you look really clever. They're beautifully curved: a bit like a seagull with its wings spread.

Tobbie knuckled down to work.

The hull of the Flywatoot looked a bit like an egg, just pointed at the back. It was very streamlined, and streamlined hulls are particularly good. You could also call it 'aerodynamic'. The Flywatoot had two seats. The two pilots sat at the front behind a curved windscreen. The roof could fold down, like in a convertible – and you could put it up if it rained. The doors were on either side of the seats, and they were watertight, of course, so the Flywatoot could swim. The hull was going to be painted blue, or maybe bright red. The colour wasn't quite fixed yet.

'The hull's sorted. I don't need to change anything,' Tobbie mumbled to himself. He was just starting on the interior – when Aunt Paula appeared at the door. With a tray, which had a mug of camomile tea on it. Still steaming.

'How about a mug of camomile tea?' enquired Aunt Paula, adding: 'It'll be good for your cold.'

'No thanks,' answered Tobbie. He didn't like camomile tea.

'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely! I really don't like camomile tea,' Tobbie said truthfully. He only fibbed in absolute emergencies, and this was not an absolute emergency. Besides, he knew that you could count people who actually like camomile tea on one hand.

'I could have guessed – I don't like it either!' admitted Aunt Paula frankly. 'But could you do me a favour, and drink just this one mug?' she asked. 'In future we'll try hot raspberry juice instead. I reckon it'll be just as good.'

Tobbie did her the favour and drank his camomile tea without any fuss. It was a real effort.

'What are you drawing?' Aunt Paula peered at Tobbie's sketch pad.

'I'm not drawing – I'm inventing!' Tobbie corrected her right away. It's important not to confuse these things.

'And what are you inventing? Not that I want to be nosy...'

'A Flywatoot.'

'A Flywa – what?' Aunt Paula was flummoxed. This was the first time she'd heard anything about Tobbie's invention.

'A fly – wa – toot!' Tobbie sounded out slowly.

Aunt Paula rubbed her big nose thoughtfully and made a face, as if Tobbie had just told her that the baker's old, lame cat had taken up rollerblading.

'A Flywatoot...' she muttered. 'Well, doesn't that just take the cake!' That's what people in Tootermore say when they're astonished. And Aunt Paula was really quite astonished!

'Does such a thing exist?' she wanted to know.

'It doesn't! That's why I had to invent it!' explained Tobbie.

'Oh... huh...' said Aunt Paula. She still couldn't quite imagine what a Flywatoot might be.

Tobbie realised that he would have to explain in more detail.

'Right – listen carefully, Aunt Paula,' he said. 'The thing about the Flywatoot is that it can fly like a helicopter, swim like a duck and... are you with me, I mean, do you understand, Aunt Paula? It is, of course, very technical.'

'No! No – I'm not quite with you. You see, when it comes to technology, I don't quite cut the mustard these days!' admitted Aunt Paula frankly.

'Oh well! Not everyone can be an inventor,' Tobbie comforted her.

'Exactly!' said Aunt Paula. 'I'd rather stick with fried potatoes, berry compote and meatballs. I know where I am with them. I'll be off, then!'

And so Aunt Paula went to her kitchen and Tobbie returned to his technical plans.

The inside of the Flywatoot was cleverly designed – Tobbie had spent a long time on it. There were two seats and two sets of controls in the cockpit, so you could take over the steering without changing places. Behind that was a space for equipment. Then came the engine, right at the back, in the tip of the tail. And that was all that fitted into the Flywatoot.

The engine was very, very small. After all, why would a little Flywatoot need a big engine? That would have been much too heavy. If you want an aeroplane to fly, you have to make it light. The engine could either power the four rotor blades, the tiny propeller or the two front wheels, so you could switch between flying, swimming and driving very easily. The rotor blades were on top, just like on a helicopter, and the shaft was inside a sturdy pipe that had to be well-oiled. The propeller angled down behind the tailwheel. The Flywatoot had three wheels: two at the front, more or less beneath the doors, and a slightly smaller one at the back – the tailwheel.

The control panel had three levers. And just to make sure you didn't confuse them, they each had a different colour button: one was red, one blue and one yellow. The one with the red button was the accelerator. You needed that one most, which is why it was blazing red. The blue lever controlled the engine modes. You could switch between air, water and land. And the lever with the yellow button had a very special function: it folded the four rotor blades backwards into a V, or unfolded them again. Tobbi had thought this up specially because on the country roads it would be all too easy to catch the rotor blades on trees.

Everything was just as it should be. Tobbie had checked every detail very carefully and not found anything that needed to be changed.

He took a look at the equipment list:

1. A wooden box (for provisions and tools).
2. A life ring (painted yellow).
3. An anchor (preferably made of iron).
4. Ropes and lines (clothes lines and things).
5. A bike pump (a big one).
6. A repair kit (travel size).
7. Tools.
8. Bits and bobs.

Tobbie wasn't quite sure what to put under 'bits and bobs' yet, but he knew some things always pop into your mind at the last minute.

But he still had to sort out the fuel: that was terribly important! He'd been puzzling it over for a long time. You might well be able to buy petrol and diesel, but you needed money for that. Which was a problem: Tobbie's piggy bank was almost empty. And he wasn't allowed to open it by himself anyway. So he decided to use raspberry juice. He could get that for free, if he had to. Aunt Paula was sure to be reasonable! Her entire cellar was full of raspberry juice, and she was a first-class aunt – even if she didn't know anything about technology.

Tobbie put the sketch pad to one side and stretched his legs. They were starting to fall asleep. He was very pleased with himself, and inventors do like to feel pleased with themselves.

‘Soooo, how’s the Flywatoot?’ Aunt Paula asked. She was balancing a full tray on her hand as she opened the door. This time, she brought supper and a glass of raspberry juice. Hot! She hadn’t forgotten her promise. She never did. ‘Brilliant! It’s almost ready!’ replied Tobbi, and tucked into his sandwich. He was hungry. The matter of the raspberry juice fuel could wait until after supper.

Aunt Paula sat on the edge of the bed; she was glad Tobbi was enjoying the food.

Tobbie washed down the last bite with the last sip of raspberry juice and then said, ‘Erm, Aunt Paula, I have to ask you something very important – it’s about the raspberry juice...’

‘Would you like another glass?’

‘No, thank you. You’ve got the wrong end of the stick. It’s about the fuel. Well... I was going to say the Flywatoot – it has to run on raspberry juice. The engine, I mean!’

There! He’d said it!

‘Raspberry juice...?’ said Aunt Paula, poker-faced. ‘Isn’t that a little unusual?’

‘Yes, it is. But there’s no other way.’

Tobbie now explained exactly why, of all things, it had to be raspberry juice. And then, at the very end, he came out with his important question: ‘Aunt Paula! You will give me the raspberry juice, won’t you? Please, please! It’s terribly important. I don’t need it right away. But soon, once I’ve finished building the Flywatoot. Please!’

‘Hmmm. It’s important, I see. All right! You can have your raspberry juice. But on one condition...’ Aunt Paula paused and looked meaningfully at Tobbi.

‘What condition?’ Tobbi asked eagerly.

‘That I don’t have to fly with you! Not that I’m afraid! Well, maybe just a little, but I think – I’m not fit to fly anymore. I’m getting old, you know – it happens to us all.’

‘Don’t worry about that! You can’t come anyway.’ Tobbi chuckled. ‘You wouldn’t fit through the watertight doors! They’re too small.’

‘Is that so...? Well, that’s a relief!’ murmured Aunt Paula. She took the tray, gave Tobbie a quick kiss on the cheek and drew the curtains.

‘Good night! And sleep well!’

‘Good night, Aunt Paula!’

Tobbie settled down to sleep. He’d done everything he wanted. Just before he dropped off, one last thing popped into his mind: Who should he take with him in the Flywatoot? And who would teach him to fly? Who could?

But he was getting ahead of himself there...

Chapter two

Odd things happen at or shortly after midnight: a grandfather clock plays up. Tobbie has a visitor that he would not necessarily want even Aunt Paula to find out about. It's not every day that you hear about a 'robot school', and it's even more unusual to come across tricky robot examination questions...

Midnight in Tootermore!

The grandfather clock in Aunt Paula's living room said 'ding!' eleven times. Then it took a deep breath and shouted 'dong!' very loudly. And then it was exactly midnight! You could rely on it telling the time. But it sounded utterly absurd.

Oh, Aunt Paula's old grandfather clock often played up, but only when it was quite sure that no one was listening.

Nowhere else in Tootermore was really haunted, otherwise. Not even at midnight. Yes, Granny Clovecorn's most beautiful silver teaspoon might well have disappeared under mysterious circumstances. But that had nothing to do with ghosts. Carla, the black and white magpie, stole it and hid it under a compost heap. She loved glittery things, and collected them when she could. And that wasn't even at midnight, it was in the middle of the afternoon, while Granny Clovecorn was having a nap.


Still!

But now something pretty unbelievable was happening in Tootermore. In Aunt Paula's sleepy, thatched-roof cottage, of all places!

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