

Long Holidays

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Translated by Stefan Tobler

You don't see the weeds grow. They come overnight. On meadows, strips of wasteland and cattle paths the pioneering creepers stretch out their runners, their yard-long horizontal stems. They take root at the nodes, they establish themselves in every corner which is halfway suitable. Ants carry away their seeds. Through the clearing on the slope and into their nest, into hedges, flowerbeds, freshly laid turf, down into the gap where the sun never shines beside the ramp in front of the garage door, into the gaps between damp stones where the rain chain lies in a tight coil next to the ventilation shaft. The silverweed's roots go hand-deep into the gaps between paving stones. Some people fight the unwelcome growth with poison, many take a gas torch to it. These devices, as thin as an arm, kill off the green in no time, and you don't even have to bend down. It looks pretty – pretty and respectable. But it doesn't work in the long term. Schramm scraped. He forced the pick-axe deep into the gaps, so he could get hold of the strands of the roots and loosen them with repetitive little movements, digging under and levering them up. He could then pluck out whole plants with his fingers, the more securely anchored ones he fetched up with a piece of bent wire. Finally he brushed the cut root hairs out of the cracks.

He had decided to do the whole driveway. It would take him a good three days, perhaps more. He didn't need to look for interruptions. And nor was he that strong any more. Even when he was completely in its thrall, when he didn't want to put down his tools and for a while believed that everything could work, even and especially then he should not let himself get carried away. He had gone overboard once before; it was not to happen again. Such a farce. He had worked for thirty years, not missing a single day. He was just getting going, he had joked, lifting his glass to everyone, when a little celebration was held in the teachers'

lounge on the anniversary: you won't get rid of me that easily, said Schramm. You wouldn't know what to do without the job, someone said.

There had always been people like that. But when the staff used to meet up for a drink at the Greek restaurant before the Christmas holidays and the end of the school year, he had always been there. The last time he had stayed until the early hours. Like everyone around him he had become more and more merry, until he saw double. Don't you ever lose it, asked the trainee teacher, resting her head on her hand to look at him from below. Schramm smacked the edge of his blade down on the paving stones so that sparks flew. And yet he could be happy with himself. He would soon have finished the first row, and the first one was the hardest one. He had almost reached the patch of level ground in front of the bank where the clematis grew whose fake, felty umbels were wilting on their necks, and winding their stalks around the wireframe which Schramm had erected for them.

Controlling a class isn't a dark art, he had said to the trainee teacher, and everything seemed sensible again. You have to keep on top of things, you have to know where you stand and what the next step is. Children have a nose for these things. They know, he commenced, when you aren't sure of what you're doing, when you don't know what comes next. Do you know what they call you, she asked and hid her mouth behind her fist, blinking up at him from under her short clogged eyelashes which crumbled to bits of soot in her tear duct. Do you know what they call you! What's it to you, he had to ask. At least there was never a raised voice in his lessons. And when something happened once, he had sent a clear signal.

It isn't true that when your habitual duties are removed your world collapses immediately and you plunge into a void; that you creep around from one room to the next and don't notice when you start to talk to yourself; that you have a senile, cheerful gratitude when a company calls up with a survey or sales pitch. It needn't come to that. The days need to have a rhythm, a beginning, an end and always the same shape – a shape you can really grasp with both hands. That's not boring, it's just useful when you want to concentrate on a task. And

everything alive has its task to fulfil, which wears it out in the end. When Schramm bought beer, no one needed to draw conclusions; the beer was for the snails. There were too many of them. Their trails glistened along the edge of the grass, swung in threads from the tips of blades of grass and got caught in the pores of the cement. Once in his childhood he had found a whole ball of them in the corner of the garden where he used to like to dawdle when he was young, behind the mound of earth his father had made starting some job or other. Sweating foam, they were feasting on a dead beetle, snuggling up around its shell. Only the ends of its antlers were poking out of the pile. Schramm had fenced them in. He had layered sticks and stones around them in the firm belief that after he had been called inside the animals would stay where they were at least until the next morning. But they hid away by day and ate at night. They searched for and found the youngest plants and damaged them. He scattered lines of chalk as defences and made new traps every day. It had to be fresh – fresh dark beer, that drew them powerfully to it and they drowned in it.

He must have his reasons, they said about Schramm, he knew that, and knew who pointed at him when they passed, while he squatted or kneeled as he worked, but he couldn't worry about how people saw him too. It was easy to work out why people were suspicious when someone proceeded cautiously. Waidschmidt came to mind again. You could say what you liked about Waidschmidt. No one was forced to like him. For all his apparent asceticism, he was a spoilt boy, calculating and incapable of human feeling. But only someone who knew him ought to say that. Most people knew next to nothing about him. However much they mocked and complained about him, and even the teachers complained about his pedantry and his over-the-top industriousness, they were just as vocal when it flipped into refusal almost from one day to the next. What people cannot stand is when someone acts consistently. He was going too far, people said about Waidschmidt; he was going too far, people said about Schramm. He didn't want to think about that now. Waidschmidt had been apprehended when he tried to stop a car; it was just before his final exams. He had obviously been walking for days, without sleep, food, water, just walking. Overall his statements must have been confused and his condition worrying. And

when he was taken to the clinic, apparently he agreed to it, was even enthusiastic.

No matter how much people gossiped and whispered about Schramm, and about his mother and him to his face and behind his back, about Waidschmidt and him, none of it came anywhere near the truth of these relationships determined by purpose and chance. We don't know what another person is thinking. Not a new or complex thought, but true. And by speaking one cannot change that; by speaking two cannot change that, however sure they are of what they agree on. They are just mutually deluding themselves. Waidschmidt had turned these issues over thoroughly enough in his hard skull. Schramm knew that better than anyone else and yet did not know everything – not how serious Waidschmidt was about his half-digested knot of thoughts and not whether he was just trying out these big words or whether he was serious in his intentions.

There'll be stories to tell about you! Schramm had known that right from the start, when the newly arrived boy stood in front of year eight with his satchel. Not a single week, Schramm remembered well, not even that habitual period of grace had gone by before he attracted the others' mockery, scorn and in the end their hatred. His ostentatiously sleepy appearance was enough to get them going; they were finely tuned to notice arrogance. And one should not think that just because Schramm taught the natural sciences that he only knew his calculations, his rain charts, how to construct an experiment and about the interactions of matter and energy, but that he had no sense about interpersonal complications. The opposite was true. He saw what was happening; he knew how they separate master and servant, friend and foe. But it would have been wrong to get involved in the young people's affairs. In Waidschmidt's case not only wrong but completely unnecessary. Larvae, Waidschmidt said. They live a larvae-like existence. They eat what is put in front of them and they want just so much, no more. You need an enemy, he explained, else you don't know where you stand.

He was not older than fourteen when he shared this thought with Schramm, when he waylaid him outside the chart room, as he was not satisfied with a line

of argument Schramm had used. With his toes pointed outward and his satchel held in front of his stomach, there he stood. Whenever Schramm thought of Waid Schmidt, he thought of his satchel of tobacco-coloured fake leather, which was already ugly and worn at the corners. It had no room for the necessary books, for nothing but the thin-leafed notepad, its pages filling with Waid Schmidt's tiny jagged handwriting as he sat in the back row. And although one should not simplify these things, probably the satchel said everything one needed to know about its owner. Schramm was not comfortable with Waid Schmidt waiting for him. Soon he was waiting for him almost every break-time next to the room with the charts for which Schramm was responsible. If only he had shown him clearer limits at the start, thought Schramm and listened from the outset to the small, bad feeling, which although never domineering had always been present. To every answer there was a question. To every statement Waid Schmidt had a riposte, yet that was a natural part of things; as in any conversation which deserves to be called a conversation; in these cases it is not about being right, but about the thing itself – a conversation which can never really be completed, but only interrupted. He had allowed himself to be drawn in by it, and not thought anything of it. He did not think what was driving the boy or whether the boy was expecting some advantage from it.

The long holidays were always a critical time. For as long as his mother had been alive it had not been easier; it had been much more difficult. He would have been able to make the whole thing clear to her without attracting her scorn – and rightly so, thought Schramm. His mother rightly valued brevity and clarity. Rubbish, she would exclaim as soon as she sensed that someone's claims were half-baked. She had a fine nose for these things. Rubbish, and with that she was done with what had been said, had pressed it into the cigarette stub in the ashtray and sorted it into one of the meagre categories in her head. Debtors' and creditors' lists, a simple system. Even when she went into the home and was less clear in her questions, he could never tell what the curve at the corner of her mouth meant, whether she was doubting what he said, disapproving, or perhaps not even realising when he told little white lies to spare her. Or whether it was not she so much as her body that governed and called up this expression, so that

even though it was not a beautiful expression, at least the form was maintained when her cognition could no longer connect to what was said.

Had 'her hand slipped' and slapped him, that would have been the end of the matter for her, although not an appropriate description. It did not help anyone if the events or the affair – as the headmistress called it in her last call – were brought up again and again. You can spend a long time looking for the mistake in a chain of calculations if you have made assumptions at the start about wrong amounts. He would never do that again. People disturbed you soon enough. They came from outside and they came without any encouragement. At the latest at around half past nine came the announcements from the open air pool in the wood higher up the slope and the calls and yells of the children chasing each other down the scarcely used residential streets. The lines of their chalk drawings reached right up to the ramp of his drive. He could hear them whispering behind his hedges. From his bushes and flower beds he regularly collected the toys which they had thrown over the hedge in their high spirits. And once he had even tried to deal with them, in a good way, calling out: Look over here! Standing in the middle of the traffic-free street he had held the box with his finds in his outstretched hands. But none of them took anything. They just looked at him, as if it were so difficult to understand what he wanted of them.

It was not right, Schramm had known that immediately. He had certainly known it when a little later Waidschmidt had come back, and then back again. But those first times he had considered it a one-off each time, and so had not wanted to send him away. Later he no longer could, as a habit had been formed. But when Waidschmidt started turning up at every break, and soon spent the afternoon periods there too, that was not what Schramm wanted; it was Waidschmidt who instigated it. He was not to be driven away. Not even with the warning that tongues would wag. He just laughed about that. As he laughed when Schramm had to deny him the best mark because of apparently minor mistakes; as he laughed when he did not want to work out a formula for him,

because it was at that moment too difficult. You're the teacher, he said. You have to explain things and not make a secret of them.

That is how he talked, how he had to talk. Even at the end, when Schramm ordered him to see him, because he could make neither head nor tale of his behaviour. Ordered him to the chart room which Schramm, incidentally, in spite of the fact that it was set pleasantly apart, did not like. I just can't wait, can't wait to get out of here, said Waid Schmidt. You're getting ahead of yourself, my boy, said Schramm, holding his last exam paper in front of his nose, showing him the mistakes, none of them serious but which, when added up, were considerable. Leaning against the wall, Waid Schmidt looked down at the paper, standing comfortably there as if it were no longer of importance, thought Schramm. You won't get to America like this, he said. And he heard their cheers. Even through the closed windows the sounds echoed up from the schoolyard of their shouts and yelling, and of the hollow rattling when a ball smacked into the mesh behind the goal posts. And from Waid Schmidt's mouth for the first time the word *we*.

It was just before the exams and not different to any other year, when the eighteen-year-olds sat out drinking on the meadows until it grew light, the short nights around a campfire passing with vodka and vows. Even the ones who had barely looked at each other until then swore they were brothers for life, just before they all separated forever. Just before the last exams Waid Schmidt was seen near certain groups. Let him. It was nothing special, not the first time; Schramm knew that and yet did not know any more about it.

A practical joke, said Schramm, thinking about the mag. It had slid out of a rolled up chart of the ocean currents one lesson and fallen to the floor. The girl in the front row hooked the chart onto its catch. Everyone else peered, even those in the back row peered at the magazine lying at Schramm's feet, at its picture which showed too much at once: two pairs of arms growing out of one backside in a convoluted mass, one body which covered another one and just let it be glimpsed that one body was hanging over the other like a dog. One could not see anything completely in this picture; everything could be guessed; and that was

what made it all so much more invasive and unpleasant. The way they squatted in their rows, almost adults, squatted and waited to see what would happen next. And the girl, who had grown so much, stood beside the now unrolled and still trembling chart with its circling arrows on a blue background and did not move. Blotches appeared at her worn-thin neckline and blossomed up over the curve of her cheeks and up to the bay of her dirty parting. Schramm poked at the magazine with his foot, kicked it so that it flapped open and stopped a step away. So, are we going to wait until tomorrow, he asked, and he felt himself calming down inside as he waited for her to bend down stiffly and carry it, folded up again, to her seat, before he put the topic for the lesson on the board.

He did not know what Waidschmidt's part in it had been. Just as he did not know, would never know, if he had blamed him or said nothing, had suggested something or denied everything. Blamed him and then lost his nerve because the half of it was a lie. Schramm would never know, nor even work out for himself which of all the possibilities he disliked the most. And nor could he put his finger on the point when things had started to change and he had become concerned. It was not when Waidschmidt had started to make little mistakes. In the last exams they had not been major mistakes, but they had been mistakes, the kind one makes out of carelessness. No doubt it was a highly intentional carelessness, as can be seen in people who suddenly want to show that they don't care about something. That is why in his stubborn way he had looked for friends and then a girlfriend. A girl like any other, Schramm thought. Every morning she sat in her place with her glucose tablets, her sharpened pencils and her damp hair tied up tight against her skull, so that you could watch it bleach as it dried at the back of her neck. When he bent down beside her, to check her calculations, he could see them – the little tousled tufts springing beyond her haircut and the blurred transition to the pale as sand, downy hairs which grew down her neck below her collar. She rarely allowed a mistake to slip through, but did that make her anything special? What did someone like Waidschmidt have to talk about with a girl like this, what had brought Waidschmidt to leave behind his life apart, which he had chosen and led consistently for years? Why does it matter, asked Waidschmidt, if I may ask?

An attempt – it could not have been anything else for Waidschmidt; an attempt – that is what he himself had called it in the end, thought Schramm. Her scrubbed clean legs, her black eyebrows, which still knotted in doubt even as she trained on her own in her free periods and after school, hurling the ball against the outside wall of the gym again and again. How like the others he had become, how little time it had taken him to join them, or rather: to throw himself at them, thought Schramm, pressing himself on them in a shameless way.

He had not been comfortable with the extent to which the boy had sought out his company, but when he suddenly stopped coming Schramm felt just as uncomfortable. And Waidschmidt did not answer any of his questions; he brushed them aside with empty phrases and evasive counter questions. We talk about this and that, you know, nothing much. And with the magazine, what was all that about? What are you getting at; you have to speak more clearly, he challenged him, if I'm to know what you're talking about. You're the teacher; you have to explain things, and not leave them vague. He was one to speak! An evasive tactic, thought Schramm, one big evasive tactic instead of a single useful answer, so that the one time he called for him, he wanted to send him away immediately, because he could not get a hold of him in any way. Yet with his hand on the door, already half gone, Waidschmidt turned round one more time.

How can you bear it, asked Waidschmidt. In your shoes I'd have gone mad long ago. And he ran his hand quickly through his hair, which he had started to wear longer recently. He stood there and listened with pleasure to the sound of his words as the little bulb above the door started to flash to indicate the end of break-time and shouts and footsteps entered the halls outside the room. You're heading for trouble, warned Schramm. You've got another think coming to you. Careful, he warned, the way he warned when someone was making more mistakes than usual because they were not paying attention: you're not the first. That is how he talked, but he could see that Waidschmidt was somewhere else. As if he was working out what would come next, Schramm thought. As if he knew all the possible phrases already, and he, Schramm, knew them too: If you want

too much, you don't want anything, you know in your heart of hearts that you'll never get it; dreams end more quickly than a thought. Think about it first. Waidschmidt stretched the nape of his neck, resting his chin on his chest. Gone mad long ago or killed, he said, or both, one after the other.

And no one's hand had 'slipped'. Nothing, as Schramm realised again now, had happened by chance. Waidschmidt had drawn everything to that point with a plan and a purpose. Everything he said was a move conscious of what the response to a counter move would be, and to the following one. And even the so-called breakdown, thought Schramm, was intended and planned as the necessary consequence of what had come before. All along until the end, thought Schramm, he was ahead of you, ahead and above you, and still was when Waidschmidt and he both looked at his hand, at Schramm's hand raised to strike him but frozen in hesitation. Now you've raised your hand. Waidschmidt smiled.

And maybe he was finally to get what he deserved, and not only did he deserve it, thought Schramm, he actually needed it desperately: for once to be struck dumb, to be shaken. To feel the shock, which makes everyone feel naked and stupid, when he loses his clever phrases, when someone lays a hand on him and throttles him as hard as can be done. His hand was raised, so hit him, thought Schramm, that was what he had wanted with his hints, his comments, that was what they had all wanted in truth, and hoped for, that one thing would lead to the next and that it would not be without consequences. The boy looked at him without blinking, just the right eyelid, the one which hung a little lower, trembled with eagerness, fear and excitement that something was finally going to happen.

Nothing to look at here, said Schramm and grasped the handle of his pickaxe in both hands. Maybe one day he would threaten them when they played too long by his gate, pressing their foreheads to the bars and peering down at him in his front garden, showing them the pickaxe, showing them a stone, as you would expect of someone who had become ever more strange, living there without a wife, child or even a dog. But it was still too soon for that.