

Tonio Schachinger,  
**REALTIMES** (Echtzeitalter)

English sample translation by Ruth Martin



**Winner of the German Book Prize 2023!**

The jury's reasoning: "With subtle irony, Schachinger reflects the political and social conditions of the present. (...) In a narratively outstanding and contemporary way, the text negotiates the question of the social place of literature."

The German Book Prize is one of the most important awards in the German-language literary sector (endowed with 25,000 euros).

**CHAPTER 1**

When you see this place for the first time – the grand mansion house with its Schönbrunn-yellow façade and the crumbling yellowy-grey rear, the grounds with their lawns and playing fields, their wooded hills and grottoes – then the wall surrounding it, which varies in height between two and four metres depending on the gradient of Argentinierstraße and Favoritenstraße, is probably the last thing you notice. And why would you think about the wall on an open day? The children see so many other things, the tennis and beach-volleyball courts, the indoor pool, the wooden-floored gymnasium, the multi-purpose hall, the sala terrena and, when they look down at their own feet, the stone floor whose great flags have been worn smooth over the centuries by thousands of house shoes.

The children are also shown around the football pitches, the two multi-sport courts, the hard court, the Firsty Field, and most importantly the Large Field, which is in all the photos and, together with the running track that encircles it, gives the grounds an official air, a high-school air, even if these children will never play there again after the open day, because the Large Field is the subject of a long-running legal battle to which the notice: *Field closed, enter at your own risk!* bears witness.

As yet, the future Marianists know nothing of all this. They are told about the foreign languages offered, about school trips, exchange programmes, the “extra-curricular activities”, under which banner students can pursue every conceivable passion from chess to skiing or fishkeeping – but they aren’t shown the spot by the conference room where, despite an extra coat of paint, the name of the former director of learning still shows through, along with the words: *kiddy fiddler!*

They are shown the Firsty Field, though without being told what that is – a Firsty – and what it will soon mean for each of them to be treated as a Firsty by the older children, for a whole year, and that despite their best intentions they will fit themselves into this age-based food chain and just one year later will be treating the new Firsties in exactly the same way, not wanting to spare others what they themselves were not spared.

The woodland pitch isn't even part of the tour, this remotest and worst of all football pitches, with no side fences and no goal nets, and a solitary tree in the middle of it, though at the same time it is also the best pitch, because nowhere else on the school grounds can you get further away from everyone and because right behind it – opposite Theater Akzent and in sight of the Nuntiatur, the papal embassy – is the best place for climbing over the wall.

When the children get home and discuss their impressions of the place with their parents, comparing the Marianum with other schools, making lists of pros and cons in order to reach a well-considered decision, not a single one of them mentions the wall. Including Till, a small red-haired boy, who has very much noticed it, looked at it, taken it in, unlike many other children for whom it was nothing more than an old-fashioned theatre backdrop, a transition leading to the horizon in muted shades of grey.

**CHAPTER 2**

But it would be wrong to say that Till's impression was different because he was especially perceptive or observant, or that he was clear-sighted enough to recognise even now something that would only really become apparent to others at the age of 14 or 15, namely that they, unlike other young people at other schools, are locked up in here and that the wall plays a very pragmatic role in this. Nor is it that Till is bored even while the football pitches are being listed, let alone while visiting them, and doesn't want to try a penalty shot, even less so when they urge him, Go on, give it a go! You can do it! just as everyone is always urged into football, as if there was nothing else in the world, until he finally complies because the people waiting behind him are creating a pressure that is familiar to him from diving boards and water slides at the swimming pool, where eventually, turning round and climbing back down in humiliation becomes just as impossible as jumping.

As he takes his run-up, his legs grow so long that he gets vertigo, while the goal keeps shrinking and the goalkeeper's arms keep getting wider, and he finally trips over his own feet without touching the ball.

Till gets up and doesn't think for a second about whether that was embarrassing. It's Saturday, and when his mother fetched him out of his room with a "Right then, we really need to go now!" and walked him the few hundred metres to the school, he had already played three hours of Assassin's Creed, and is therefore still in that state of pleasant detachment from the real world, created by immersion in other worlds. When you are capable of doing something in a computer game, be it smashing down walls and building stairs into the sky with the resulting wood, or overcoming every imaginable obstacle with your parkours

skills, you can sometimes see the same very concrete possibilities in the real world as in the computer game.

How comparatively boring it is, then, to think about whether you really want to learn Latin, French and Russian, whether you want to go to this “semi-boarding school” and only get home at 17:30 every day; whether you feel comfortable amid all the footballers and volleyballers, among children who at ten years old are already dressing the way they will do for the rest of their lives: in green polo shirts and brown deck shoes, pink polo shirts and white jeans. How boring everything seems in comparison to the works of art that hundreds of people have spent years working on so that we will find them as entertaining as possible. Maybe it’s normal for a child whose idea of boarding school comes from the Harry Potter films and the Harry Potter computer games, to see a place where they don’t belong and imagine they could become the right person for it. Or maybe Till simply doesn’t think about it, because during the open day he is imagining himself leaping from the ground to the roof gutter and from there to the upstairs windowsill, climbing up the tall building next door, running across the roofs to the Karlskirche, and then diving off, arms streamlined at his sides. In any case, he feels good that evening when he and his mother put together a list of objectives and work out that the Marianum is the best option for him. And his mother is happy to know that he’ll be taken care of while she’s working full-time.

Notable alumni reveal nothing about the institution that produced them, and in a small city like Vienna they come about naturally over the course of time. Of the academically selective schools, the Wasagasse Gynnasium has Friedrich Torberg, Erich Fried and Stefan Zweig, while the Akademische Gymnasium has Arthur Schnitzler, Lise Meitner and Erwin Schrödinger, and the Schottengymnasium has Johann Nestroy, Johann Strauss and Ernst Jandl. And the Marianum, too, has certain people it can point to, depending on which way the

social wind happens to be blowing. Karl Lueger, for instance, is someone they used to be far prouder of than they are now, and the names Hermann von Trenkwald and Fritz Hamburger aren't mentioned at all, or vanish behind the names of those who had to emigrate because of people like them.

It is unfortunately less easy to gloss over other currently inopportune alumni, because when they include the SA Obersturmführer grandfather, whose performance at the 1936 Olympics did more to disprove than prove the superiority of his race (to general disappointment), and then the father, who was found guilty of Holocaust denial by a criminal court, and finally the son, whose arrogance will inadvertently do a great service to Austrian democracy, there isn't much you can do to distance the school from it.

But German nationalists and the far-right are no more strongly represented at the Marianum than in the rest of Austria, where they make up around 25% of the population, right across the class spectrum – and if you wanted to identify the prevailing mindset here, it would be more one of opportunism. A typical alumnus of this institution is someone who enlarges their family's existing fortune, who becomes a doctor, lawyer or businessman and takes over his father's practice, chambers or company, who finds enough rebellion for a whole lifetime at 17 by tying the jumper draped over his shirt jauntily over one shoulder, rather than symmetrically over both.

Till will never be one of these people.

And it wouldn't be such a terrible thing if Till was out of place here; the school is large enough to let someone slip through, to give them space – more out of neglect than tolerance – and at least leave them in peace, if not actively support them.

Which is to say: it wouldn't be a terrible thing if Till was in 1A or 1C, in 3B or 5D, in any class other than this year's 1B. Because while the school has been working for years to give

its elitism the most human face it can, there is one person whose attitude to all demands of the modern world, all student-centred approaches, is that of an unyielding Gaullish village. And because this person is 1B's form teacher, German and French teacher, tutor and on three afternoons out of five their afternoon supervisor, Till and his classmates have to be Gauls: inhabitants of an exclave of reality.

### **CHAPTER 3**

Vienna draws in oddballs. There are canonised oddballs like Helmut Seethaler, who for decades has been taking legal action against the city's public transport company, to be allowed to Sellotape his poems to the walls of bus shelters; and the beer squire, who is driven by some compulsion to ask women on the metro whether they'd like to go for a beer with him, but responds to the rare Yes by turning away at once and moving on to the next woman. There is the King of Sudan, an older man in a black suit, red tie and red beret who you will find by the Schottentor; he has two doctorates from the University of Alexandria and a megaphone. There is the old lady in the 6<sup>th</sup> district who is waging a hopeless battle against graffiti, and paints over each new tag with a pot of brown paint, no matter what colour the building is. She is regularly taken to court by building owners to whom the brown rectangles seem uglier than the daubings they cover up and, at least in the eyes of the state, she is a vandal to the same degree as the vandals she is combatting.

But the special thing about Vienna is not its original outsiders, not the Little Lark of the Ottakring, the tiny man in the shepherd's-check jacket who seems to always have been old, and who used to imitate birdsong in his falsetto voice on Kärntner Straße; or Waluliso, who has now even had a bridge named after him in the nudist area of the New Danube; or the

homeless people or the drug addicts, the junkies who sell poems in the 7<sup>th</sup> district, written and copied out in childish handwriting, some of the them beautiful and sad, others sad and awful. The special thing about Vienna is the mad people with the middle-class façade, who are more or less functional but could never move away from here, because their anti-social behaviour would never have so few consequences in any other city. People who don't live outside society, but go about their jobs in protected areas with limited responsibility: in municipal authorities, private schools or the police force, even if their lives are psychologically precarious. They could lose control on any given day, because they are used to existing in a small habitat where they can write the rules to suit themselves, and others have to follow them, and it's only when they cause a scene outside their usual environment – when, for example, they start hitting an American student during a Bergman film at the film museum because, in their opinion, she was making too much noise; when they stab someone in the leg with their umbrella on the tram; systematically send lewd poems to young female writers through the post; when they start shouting because someone is drinking from a plastic bottle indoors – it is only then that what those who are at such people's mercy already knew only too well becomes obvious to everyone: namely that this is a mad person, someone who should never be in charge of anyone else.



**CHAPTER 4**

Dolinar, Till's form tutor, whose appearance his students would liken to Lord Voldemort's although, with his sparse strawberry-blond hair and bulbous nose, he looks more like the octopus who is continually infuriated by Spongebob – Dolinar, who always wears black with a loose loden coat in winter that makes him look like a bat, is one of these mad people.

For the past thirty years, his classes have had a special reputation. From the headteacher's point of view they are valued for their above-average grades, the lowest drop-out rate, his students' impeccable behaviour, their inconspicuousness, their reticence. Understandable, then, that the headteacher – who alongside her work as school leader and chair of the Döbling conservative women's group also teaches history and as such has only one class in the lower school – chooses a Dolinar class whenever possible. Nowhere else can she be so sure of tame students. When she enters the room, all the Dolinar children are already in their seats; they stand up within half a second, keep quiet, and only sit back down when they are told to – and the fact that they do this not primarily out of respect for her, but out of fear of their form tutor, is not something that the head, or any other teachers, care about.

Dolinar's colleagues give little thought to precisely what sanctions he imposes for bad behaviour to make his students so much more compliant. For one thing, most of them have no sympathy for children who know by the age of eleven that they will inherit more than their teachers could ever earn, and who show it, too, when they get the chance, who can be unbelievably condescending and cruel – and for another, no one except Dolinar's students knows what really happens in his classes.

What the headteacher might at least know is that in the course of their school career 1B, like all the other Dolinar classes before them, will get extremely poor results in one single area,

namely all the optional subjects and extra-curricular activities, and this is no coincidence.

Dolinar forbids his students from attending optional subjects and extra-curricular activities.

He forbids them from having contact with other classes, forbids their parents from interfering in his method, forbids low grades, in German or French or any other subject, and any kind of indiscipline. Anyone who fails to greet a teacher in the corridor, who stands up too slowly or leaves too quickly, is punished.

Offences are penalised with essays. 300 words on *Playing Football in Enclosed Spaces*, 250 words on *How to Greet People Politely*, 450 words *On the Opening and Closing of Doors*. As the years pass, the wordcount increases, and you will have to stay behind in the classroom writing on at least one or two days, and in extreme cases up to two weeks, while the others are out in the grounds or in one of the recreation rooms. Afterwards, Dolinar marks the essay, returns it, and you spend another day writing three sentences for every serious error, which must then also be marked.

There are days when there is no let up for ten hours straight. First come lessons, then a quick lunch, then the essay, followed by a *study period*, meaning homework and revision, during which Dolinar continues to keep an eye on you. At four o'clock you are allowed down to the buttery for fifteen minutes to get a roll and a chocolate or vanilla milk, and then there is another study period in complete silence until at five thirty, or more often than not quarter to six, and sometimes even six o'clock, Dolinar lets you pack up and go home. Then you are free until eight o'clock the next morning.

But in truth you're not free even then, because if you're out somewhere in Vienna, there is always the possibility of bumping into Dolinar. You might be coming out of the Apollo Cinema at half past nine, and suddenly he'll be there in front of you, and it's just like being at

school, the power imbalance remains, and you can work out what will happen the next day in your German or French lesson, because Dolinar's system of education is based on the motto that you can't dance at two weddings with one backside, and being out in the evening counts as one wedding, as a distraction from school, as a sign that you believe you've learned enough already, as a transgression that cannot be tolerated.

Dolinar needs your full attention, and therefore, he believes, he must restrict his students' lives. That attention is not only required for grammar and orthography, which fall within his subject area, or for all the other topics he teaches because they interest him personally although they're outside the remit of a German and French teacher – Belcanto operas, for instance, European ruling dynasties and the Catholic Church, ballet and architectural history – but above all for an area that is very much part of his subject, but which he interprets quite differently from what the curriculum envisages: literature.

## **CHAPTER 5**

It begins in the very first German lesson, with a poem by Ernst Jandl called "ottos mops", a text that has been reliably making students laugh for decades, at "ottos mops pukes" if not before. (In especially depraved year groups, they start laughing a whole eight verses earlier.)

The subsequent homework for each new generation consists of writing out what the poem says in your own words.

A week later, they put in an order for the first of more than forty of those famous little paperbacks from Reclam, with their covers that used to be egg-yolk yellow and are now – sadly, in Dolinar's view – an overly modern lemon yellow. His students will have to read those Reclam books for the next eight years. The first is Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince*

*and Other Stories*, a book that eleven-year-olds can grasp, but will still have some difficulty understanding because it uses words like *linen* and *cataract*, which they have to underline while they are reading and copy into their vocab books, the contents of which Dolinar can test them on unannounced at any point.

It is only when the next book arrives, Wilhelm Hauff's *The Cold Heart*, that students realise Ernst Jandl was a red herring, a trick, not to say a deliberate deception, because even more than Oscar Wilde, Hauff tells them that in this class, literature is not to mean to depict the world in which they live or to entertain them; in fact, students have to expand their horizons to what the publisher Reclam defines as worthy literature, and in future *age-appropriate* will mean Frank Wedekind or the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Sorrows of a Boy*, not Ernst Jandl.

Dolinar belongs not only to a minority of German teachers who still spend time on literature and read more than just the short extracts in the textbook and *Faust*; within this minority he belongs to an even smaller group who would rather cut off their own leg than teach anything by Hermann Hesse or Daniel Glattauer. A few contemporary authors may have some value (Handke, Jelinek) but according to Dolinar this is precisely what makes them too complex for students. Some other names – a popular Austrian author like Michael Köhlmeier, for instance – are practically swearwords in Dolinar's universe, especially when such people have the temerity to retell the myths of classical antiquity and make Poseidon say things like, "Oho, so he's been badmouthing me."

No, the myths of classical antiquity should be read in the words of Gustav Schwab, because since Schwab's time (the German classical period), and maybe even since the time of the ancient Greeks, language has been going steadily downhill, and any attempt to modernise an old text, or reinterpret a play, is something that Dolinar resists with every last fibre of his heart.

The three golden rules by which he chooses reading matter for his classes are: nothing from the twentieth century; nothing in translation; and nothing that is not available in a Reclam edition. If he breaks one of these rules, as he does for *Death in Venice*, which you can only get as a Fischer paperback, or for the translations of Jane Austen, Pushkin or Federico García Lorca, we may suspect a particular inclination towards the themes of the text or its author that stems from Dolinar's own biography.

Franz Innerhofer's novel *Beautiful Days* and Felix Mitterer's play *No Room for Idiots* are under the greatest pressure to justify their place in the canon. Both were written after 1945, an exceptional position that they share with only two other books: Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* and Fritz Hochwälder's *The Strong are Lonely*.

Dolinar uses each of these texts to give his students a message, and the more of his rules he is prepared to break, the more important that message is to him. This son of Carinthian farmers uses Innerhofer and Mitterer to show his spoiled Viennese students the brutality to which he himself was subjected in his rural childhood, but also the pride he feels at Austria's deepest and cruellest province having produced its greatest literature. Hochwälder is supposed to teach them that a second, hidden Austria still exists, a canon of the unmodern and conservative, and Bernhard that you must respond to hatred and scorn with hatred and scorn.

Despite their thematic services, these writers are naturally far beneath the truly important ones: Schiller and Lessing, Stifter and Grillparzer. In Dolinar's classroom – unlike everywhere else – the author is greater than his work. Or to put it another way: works are great when they come from great authors. And authors were great before they started wanting to smash up the German language. Before Büchner.

Dolar's idea is that for people whose parents can afford six hundred Euros a month in school fees, it is important to have read Mörike, de La Motte Fouqué and Anzenberger – not to “take something away” from them as people say these days, but so they can say they know them. So they can categorise them. Oh, Anzenberger, sure: social drama, *The Fourth Commandment*.

And that is essentially what he achieves with his students after eight years of extensive class reading, after endless hours of ploughing through Stifter or Thomas Mann, after all the testing and haranguing, they can say yes, I've read *Intrigue and Love*, and intrigue basically means a plot. His aim is to prepare well-heeled young men (and since 2002, well-heeled young women as well) for those salons where capital and culture meet to debate Kleist or E.T.A. Hoffmann – though in truth he himself knows that the wealthy classes only have a very marginal interest in art, and then it will be painting or film or architecture, the kinds of art where money is an advantage – but never literature.

And so the education his students get has a similar function to the experience of the bankers who are sent to Westpoint: it isn't what they practise there that makes them successful later in life; it's that they have learned to endure everything that is expected of them, and to learn everything no matter how unimportant it is.

Just a few months after their university entrance exams, most of Dolar's students have forgotten pretty much everything about *William Tell* and *The Monastery near Sandomir*, but decades later you can still ask them to tell you about a papal family of the Renaissance and their coat of arms, and they will at least be able to name the Barberini and their bees and, with help from the mnemonic “cacleuth-me-teer-pour”, they can give you at least five of the nine muses, and they will even be slightly proud of this fact.

Another experience common to many in military institutions and to just a few in Austria's best-known private school, with its most ambitious teacher, is their need to romanticise this period of suffering in retrospect, having survived it. It creates a bond between them and the others who made it out alive, which is less about the sixth-form girl who threw herself out of a third-floor window in Till's first year at the school, than all those whose close relationship with death is less obvious.

Many of Dolinar's former students come back to visit him, give him drafts of wedding invitations or death notices to proofread, ask his advice, tell him their problems, and nothing is more repellent to Till and his classmates than these returnees, who knock on their classroom door in the afternoon and let Dolinar treat them like they are still his students. Not even the people in 8D, who know Dolinar as a German and French teacher, but not as afternoon supervisor, tutor and class teacher, and so have gained an approximate idea of his working methods without being entirely at his mercy, and, now that they have almost made it to the end of school, are starting to justify his approach – not even they are as fiercely hated by Till and his classmates as the returning former students. Because they should know. They must have suffered just as much, must have been subjected to the same unwritten rules, and not for just six hours a week like 8D, but at all times. They should know how wrong it is to grow up in a state of permanent fear, to be less free than everyone around you, but incapable of getting anyone else to understand the situation – and yet they come back, sit opposite Dolinar and thus give up the one thing they have, the thing that Till and most others in his class cling to, like many generations of children before them: the dignity of never having to deal with Dolinar again once they have left school.

**CHAPTER 6**

Till is not one to thrust himself into the foreground. On the contrary, Till enjoys the background. When he watches the Harry Potter films, he doesn't imagine himself as Harry or Ron or Hermione, but as one of the students who are never mentioned by name; someone who passes the main characters once on the stairs, and sits in the same dining hall as them, but never has to fight Lord Voldemort or ride dragons. Someone who just goes to school and then eventually finishes.

The art of being unobtrusive is all about letting go of your own individuality and regarding everything you like, everything you find important, as exchangeable. Till is a natural at this.

There is no effort involved in bringing himself to throw away the cap that had been his trademark at primary school, and which, a few weeks into his first term, a seventh-form student publicly mocked him for outside the caretaker's office in front of all the students assembled there. He doesn't think twice about buying the same Timberlands as everyone else, and gives just as little thought to finding a tribe. Because being alone makes you stand out.

Till joins a group of children who aren't interested in football and whose first communal activity is to explore every inch of the school grounds, because some of them think there must be all kinds of interesting secrets to discover there. They produce maps of the secret passageways they find: the one that links the nurse's room to the corridor with the large bell in it; the staircase on the third floor behind the music rooms that they believe leads to the Diplomatic Academy in the next building, although it actually goes to the alumni club's cigar salon.



Even when everything has been explored, they remain a unit. In every PE lesson and on every afternoon when the footballers are playing football, they are the pool from which all the other activities recruit, until new sub-groups form, the basketballers, the gamers, the fantasy fans, and the ones who like to go for walks in the grounds and talk to each other.

Till has joined the gamers; he and Fritzi, the boy who sits next to him and is therefore something like a friend, go to the IT room and play on the clapped-out computers there, or they go outside and play on his phone. He gets satisfactory grades in German and top marks in maths and manages to be neither hated nor loved by Dolinar, which means he is punished neither for being talentless, nor for failing to make enough of his talent.

While the footballers have to write an essay in the very first week, for being late for the German lesson after lunch, it is two months before Till gets his first *exercise*. He is not involved when the footballers shoot one of the sun-bleached Canaletto prints off the wall and hang it back up without its glass, in the hope that Dolinar won't notice. He is in the IT room while they're writing their punishment essays, and it is these afternoons in the IT room, and in particular a long conversation about how artificial intelligence systems make decisions, that bring Till to the attention of the maths teacher, Mr Gruber.

You must picture Gruber, Till's deputy class teacher, as a tall, limping man, a Sancho Panza to Dolinar's Don Quixote, who appeases and compromises and lives in the firm belief he is assisting a genius. Alongside his teaching and his afternoon supervision in Dolinar's class, he is in charge of the school website and the IT room and even so, he leads the life of a wallflower. He tries to uphold the importance of his subjects, but with an ever-present sense of frustration that no one else sees it, and although the senior leadership team trumpet this importance, they never actually support him. When a student like Till can read simple chains

of computer code or finds an alternative way to calculate a prism, it feels to Gruber like an isolated shower of rain falling on the desert of his vocation, and his enthusiasm sprouts more quickly and obviously than anyone would have imagined.

And this is how Till gets classified. From then on, he belongs to the tribe of number people, who live in the dark, wear glasses and stare at screens, the people without whom there probably would have been no bridges and no printed books, though a culture person like Dolinar still feels nothing but pity for them, because to him the value of their work, even in total, doesn't come close to that of any single Rembrandt painting you care to name.

In Dolinar's mind there are no shades of grey, just saturated white and light-swallowing black, men and women, art and mathematics, past and future, things that are valuable and things that are inconsequential. His world is made up of contrasts, and for him the contrast between culture and science is no less acute than that between good and evil or between yes and no.

And so once every few years, when Gruber finds a student with a talent for mathematics or IT who has nevertheless ended up at this school, where everyone has to take three modern languages and Latin, Dolinar mentally writes that student off.

For his first two years at the school Till is largely left in peace. If you were to add up the days that other members of his class have spent writing punishment essays, the minutes that Dolinar has spent castigating them during lessons, you would find that Till is among those who have got off most lightly.

It is only in his third year that Till's easy life in the background comes to an end.

**CHAPTER 7**

It begins with French being added to the timetable. This is the first calamity, because unlike English, German and Latin, where according to Till's grades his performance is *satisfactory*, and even *good* in Latin, in French Dolinar describes him as "a zero" and – without anything else having changed in his behaviour – after the first in-class test in October Till has to face the consequences.

The second calamity has its roots in something nice: Till has found a friend. Georg is in the other class in Till's year. He, too, spends his afternoons in the IT room; he cuts the sleeves off all his t-shirts like his great hero Rafael Nadal; and he has a lot of time. When Dolinar's class has its second study period, between 16:15 and 17:30, Georg and his classmates have a second free period. They can play football in the school grounds or go to the IT room, as they wish. They seem to be able to do everything the Dolinar children can only dream of.

At two o'clock one Tuesday, while Till is still in class because Dolinar won't let them go even though the lesson was supposed to end 25 minutes ago, and is still testing them on the operas of Rossini and Bellini, Georg is secretly installing Age of Empires 2 on the computers in the furthest corner of the IT room.

While Till is writing a short punishment essay, because to him the names Rossini and Bellini look like mirror images of one another, and so he can't recall which of the two has a steak named after him, Georg is waiting for him in the IT room. And when they have played against each other for half an hour and Till has to go back and carry on with his homework, reading Raimund's *The Spendthrift* or some other book that he either doesn't understand or just has no interest in, though he can't say which, Georg is researching new mods for them to

try out and sending them to Till, who replies covertly, his phone hidden behind the Reclam he is pretending to read, and an additional strategically placed stack of books on the edge of the desk, always ready to react in a millisecond if Dolinar should suddenly stand up.

His friendship with Georg is special because it excludes everything it should really contain: naturally turning to one another when a task requires them to get into pairs; walking side by side when Dolinar's class files into lunch behind their teacher; helping each other in lessons and moaning about Dolinar. And although Georg and Till are only together for half an hour a day, and the only lesson they share is PE, and the unbridgeable difference in their experience stands between them, because Georg's teachers are largely normal people – they still manage, as far as this is possible, to become friends.

They have two places that are theirs: the IT room, where Gruber the maths teacher allows them to play Age of Empires 2 although it is forbidden to install programmes on the computers, and to play games that require certain keys to be pressed repeatedly; and the PE lessons with Professor Betsch, in which they pick daisies.

Betsch the PE teacher looks like he should be in an Elisabeth T. Spira documentary from the nineties, with leathery tanned skin like he spends the whole summer cycling naked around the Donauinsel, and he is old-school in other ways, too. He doesn't have them doing any athletics, no long jump, no relay, he has no curriculum. He makes his classes either run and do press-ups, or – and this happens much more often – he takes two footballs and a basketball, throws them to the students, sits down on a bench from where he has a good overview of everything and, now he is no longer allowed to smoke there, chews nicotine gum.

Before Betsch came to the Marianum, he had been a PE teacher at another private Catholic school, the Kollegium Kalksburg, and there in the late eighties he taught a student who told him, incredibly politely but also incredibly directly, that neither of these options, football and basketball, were any good to him, and he would have to do something else with his time.

“You know, Professor Betsch, with the greatest respect,” the student reportedly said – at least, this is how Betsch told the story – “there is one dilemma that a truly general education cannot escape, and that is the impossibility of uniting its aims with the tendencies and talents of the students. In other words: if our roles were reversed and I was teaching a subject that didn’t suit you, and which you also knew would play no role in your later life, then I would try to create some flexibility for you. I would say, for instance, that if you can’t sit still, then you can go into the corridor and do press-ups. I’m sure you understand what I’m getting at: I need a third option besides football and basketball that will allow me to pursue the things that will be important to me in life, and at this point I can rule out the possibility that these will include ball sports.”

This student, who said *exactly* these words according to Betsch, was Daniel Kehlmann, twelve years old at the time, and because Betsch has been telling this story for decades and further embellishing it each time, he has actually forgotten what the kernel of truth in it once was and what a distant relationship this kernel bears to his version. All the same, Till and Georg are grateful to Daniel Kehlmann for giving them a third option alongside the two ball sports, and that they can go and *pick daisies*, which essentially means that they can do what they want, as long as they stay on the playing fields and don’t look at their phones too conspicuously.

At the end of October, before it is cold enough to move into the gym, but when it is already too cold to be sitting around in shorts and t-shirts, so that Till and Georg have to actually move about during their daisy-picking sessions if they don't want to freeze, they decide to put into action a plan they have been discussing for some time. They take a long walk around the grounds and try to work on speeches they have been rehearsing, but they keep drifting off into fantasies of how great it would be if their wish came true.

Meanwhile, Professor Betsch is sitting on a bench with his phone out, watching a video of the football coach Toni Polster calling for greater tolerance, in which he says everyone should be what they want to be, whether that's gay or *llesbian* or, like him, one hundred and twenty per cent hetero.

When Georg and Till catch up with Betsch in the smoking corner after the lesson, and explain to him that their classes both have an uneven number of students and so on the ski course there will be a twin room which one student from the A class and one from the B class will have to share, he just smiles. Betsch's first sexual experience just happens to have been on a ski course, with three other lads, and when Till and Georg suggest that they could share a room, he immediately assumes the pair have something similar in mind.

Unlike his own group masturbation session all those years ago, which he dismisses as harmless because everyone involved was heterosexual, Betsch assumes Till and Georg are gay, just as he always thought Daniel Kehlmann was, and all the others he allows to pick daisies and do press-ups with their legs crossed, and as a one hundred and twenty per cent heterosexual man he feels very progressive for showing such empathy towards his gay students.

This new feeling – for which he thanks Toni Polster, who has given voice to something Betsch has long thought without being able to formulate it so trenchantly – inspires him for

several days afterwards. In the next PE lesson, when they are all doing press-ups together, he gives linguistic expression to his new progressive attitude by calling what Till and Georg and the other unsporty children are doing *lady press-ups* and not *gay press-ups* like he used to.

Georg and Till travel to the ski course with huge suitcases, huge anticipation, and a medium-sized sense of trepidation. The suitcases contain laptops and mice, ethernet cables, headphones, and two wooden trays from Ikea that belong to Georg's mother and are actually intended for breakfast in bed but should make it possible to play AOE2 lying down.

They play between skiing and dinner, between dinner and lights-out, and deep into the night, completely undisturbed by the patrolling PE teachers, who tiptoe along the corridors from ten o'clock onwards and are so busy with other students' misdemeanours – the rucksack full of Campari and soda they confiscate, the little bottle of poppers they find in the room of two Bulgarian girls, along with three Marianum boys – that they take no interest in the thin blue light, the wheezing of hot laptops and the muffled whispers coming from Till and Georg's room.

They play against each other via the ethernet cable. Till chooses the Mayans and Georg the Aztecs, then Till switches to the Vikings and Georg to the Franks, and then they both let fate decide which peoples they play. Some matches last 45 minutes, but it seems to them like the blink of an eye; others end in the Dark Ages because they are both taking an aggressive, yolo approach. They play 2v2 against other people over the occasionally spotty youth-hostel WIFI, and then they play each other again via the ethernet cable. They play through the night, almost fall asleep while skiing and actually do fall asleep on the chair lift, and spend all day looking forward to playing again in the evening; they play until their laptops smoulder, play

so much that for the first time, Till feels like he can watch himself getting better, as things that he has been failing to do for months suddenly become second nature.

In the first French lesson after the course, Dolinar enters the classroom earlier than usual, a full ten minutes before the bell, takes his seat and says nothing for what feels like forever. He looks from Till to his classmate Johannes Steiner and back, narrows his eyes and says: “I’ve just had a very interesting conversation with Professor Betsch...”

## **CHAPTER 8**

There is a limit to how many times you can say a word out loud before it loses its meaning and simply becomes a series of abstract sounds. Till is asked to read out a paragraph, but he never gets beyond the first word, and spends an entire lesson on this word while 24 other children listen to him.

“L’Oiseau,” says Dolinar.

“Lö Oiseau,” Till replies.

“Oa,” says Dolinar. “Oasoa!”

“Aseau,” Till replies.

“Oaseau,” Dolinar roars.

“Osoa,” Till repeats, amid laughter.

“Plural,” says Dolinar.

“Lö soaseaus,” says Till.

“Leh,” Dolinar corrects him. “Les oiseaux.”

“Lösoaseaus,” says Till.



“And you think you get to take liberties, do you?” Dolinar asks as the bell rings for the next lesson. “You? You can’t utter a single sentence in French, but you think you can stay up all night with some student from the A class? Well that’s enough of your monkey business, Kokorda. You can see your friend in the evenings, but not in school hours and certainly not on the ski trip!”

There is of course no list to tell you who has the most difficult time in Dolinar’s class, but you could draw one up. You could begin with the psychological punishments, with Amir Khakpour, who sits right at the back on a single desk, more than two metres behind the row in front. You could get each student to draw up their own list and then amalgamate them all into a master list. There would be discrepancies, because most children would rank themselves higher than their classmates (one’s own suffering being more keenly felt than other people’s). Even so, everyone would put the same names right at the top: Khakpour at number 1 and then, in differing orders, Palffy, Steiner, Ertl, Blindstein and Ghisetti. Each of them has aspects of Harry, Ron and Hermione; they are clever and rebellious or stupid and loyal or they get top marks but spend their time with children Dolinar regards as bad company.

Up until his third year, Till would have been somewhere near the bottom of all these imaginary lists; perhaps he would even have been forgotten, or at least been one of those whose names you only recall once everyone thinks the list is complete, but when you tot up the numbers, you realise someone is missing.

French lessons brought Till from places 22–25 up to 12–17.

And for a moment after the ski course, he learns what it is to be right at the top.

**CHAPTER 9**

A divorce is like a box of chocolates, except that with chocolates you can generally judge pretty well which ones you are going to like and which you aren't, but with divorces there is always the chance you'll be unlucky. For example, on the day before the divorce papers are due to be signed, Till's mother is unlucky enough to be seen on Praterstraße holding hands with a colleague a few years younger than her, and Till's father then refuses her an amicable divorce, which leads to many further complications, because a divorce that is battled out in court is like sitting together around a box of chocolates and watching as lawyers slice every last one in half and allocate it to one side or the other – arguing about how you weigh up marzipan against caramel, responsibilities against holiday weeks, money against time.

From Till's perspective, though, his mother's new lover is still a stroke of luck, because instead of spending her evenings watching culture shows on Arte and asking Till how his day was, his mother now goes out to the cinema or dancing. She comes home late or sometimes not at all, gently shoos Till into bed when she finds him still sitting in front of his PC at two in the morning, and otherwise treats him increasingly like an independent housemate rather than a child. Till's mother is finding new activities to occupy her time, and Till's father does what fathers like to do when they've neglected their children for a while, which is to interfere in their lives quite suddenly and heavy-handedly, and tell them all the things that need to change. In Till's case it's about how much time he spends in front of screens, what he eats, who his friends are, how little interest he has in sport, how little sport he does, and how reluctantly he reads.

His father uses tax dodges to pay less than the originally agreed level of alimony, and as a result Till's mother decides not to let Till go skiing with him in the February school holidays.

It's a Tuesday evening when she informs her ex-husband of this. Till stays at his father's house on Tuesday nights so he doesn't hear what she says, just what his father yells down the phone in response, namely that this decision represents the greatest crime ever committed against Till, the final proof that as a mother, she has no interest in Till's wellbeing, that in fact all she thinks about is her own sexual fulfilment, which has always been self-centred – even though *this child*, as he calls Till, desperately needs a week with no computer games, no mother, and plenty of exercise.

Till had the most freedom in life between the ages of eight and ten, on those golden afternoons when his mother had just started working full-time again, and Till got home from primary school before she returned from work. He would unlock the door himself, heat up his food on the stove, play X-Box, eat, watch TV, and have so much vanilla pudding for dessert, spooned straight from the dish, that he felt a bit sick. He would watch two episodes of *Malcolm in the Middle* and two episodes of *The Simpsons* on ORF1 and then finally, just before six, sit down to do his homework. When his mother got home and saw him sitting there, she would smile, stroke his hair and think how often her husband and numerous other people had told her that you can't just leave a child on their own like that all afternoon.

The fact that you only become aware of freedom when you don't have it is not a new revelation. It is new only to those who suddenly realise – be it at the age of 12 or 21 or even later – that their life is increasingly governed by tasks they take no pleasure in performing, and who only then consider how free they used to be. For Till, the week of freedom he does not spend with his father, while his mother goes out to work and is usually busy in the evenings, this week in which he doesn't open his schoolbag once, harks back to the golden

afternoons of his primary school days, although those afternoons were about fully losing himself, while the February holiday sharpens his focus.