

He dances to a different tune

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I

Why don't you get up off the floor? I don't say it out loud; it almost comes out of my mouth by itself. Get up now, I can't stand it! I press my lips together tighter. That also helps against the cold wind which bites me on my face. I've almost forgotten about my feet. Get up! Every time I think that, I see this little green something lying there – in the grey-green grassy snow or snowy turf, worn down by tirelessly scraping sledge runners. You might be able stand more firmly on skis, they are longer and wider – but memories of my own experiences make me dismiss the thought straight away. Get up! It hurts me that you are lying there in the cold mud. It hurts me that you keep falling down. It hurts me that you aren't able to control your own legs. Do you have to wear those slippery things underneath? Your face is red with the effort, with the disappointment, with anger – why can everyone else do it? Why do you try it again for the third winter in a row, and fall down again, so that I only see you lying down, and have a feeling that you don't want to get up?

The others think it's very funny. "Look, Mummy, that one!" they say. That's the boy who's lying in the schoolyard and kicking around. He is lying on the ground in a circle of children. He's shouting angrily, spinning on his back in circles and kicking on all sides.

"He's very wicked, isn't he Mummy? You mustn't do that!"

"You have to be careful not to get too close to him: he kicks without looking where it might hit and screams like a banshee."

We stand around him and encourage him: He can't hit, he's stupid, he's funny, he'll stop again, the break will be over soon. And he can't read either.

Back in the snow: I want to pick him up, take him home, comfort him, tell him that the others don't understand anything, but I can't, it would only make it worse. I can't disturb him when he's practising and practising and practising and gets up, falls down, gets up, falls down... Is there no end to this afternoon? I dare not go home. I could stand uneasily by the window. If the strap of his slippery shoe comes loose, who would fasten it? The straps are hard and stiff. Or if a lace on the boot came undone? Who would tie it up again?

II

When he comes back from school on Mondays, he brings most of what he wore in the morning over his arm. Some of it is left in the gym's changing room. The temperature doesn't matter. The anorak zip is an insurmountable obstacle for him and the laces on his shoes are undone. Luckily, it's summer right now. I need a rope, he says when he gets home. I need one now! Skipping ropes? We don't have much in our neighbourhood: a few small shops grouped around a square. They hope to lure the suburbanites off the bus on their way into town. But please: a skipping rope!

"You don't need to pack it!"

He'll take it as it is, straight away. Wait until we are on the grass! Once more, I have to grit my teeth. His hands swing the rope from behind him to his front, where it hits the railings. With one foot he climbs over the rope, the other is left behind.

Once more. The same. "I have to be able to do this!" Again. I stand on the grass. You are allowed to do that in this city, which is made up of suburbs, and has a lot of green spaces. Indeed, it is mostly green spaces. But, it is still a city. You are allowed to stand on the green spaces in it as there are no old men threatening children with knotted sticks. You are allowed to stand here and watch the rope swing, again, again. Disappointment, discouragement is on his face. But it lights up once it has succeeded! The struggle continues. I admire his bravery. So much effort, so much will, such small encouragements. Once more, he has succeeded. "Tomorrow I must be able to do this!" Go on. And he will be able to do it tomorrow.

III

This time he looks as if he should be lying on a stretcher, with his eyes staring open. His temple is dark blue, his eye almost closed, his mouth swollen. I am frightened, but I don't want to show it.

What has happened?

Nothing. Leave me alone. Nothing. You never leave me to be on my own, I can't stand it!

He is screaming, he is crying. I'm scared. Once again, I am on my way to his school. It is close by. Indeed, the school is so close that I can look into the school courtyard below me from our balcony. One warm day I stood there and stared down into that schoolyard. The school break seemed to be over. The bell had just stridently rung out. The caretaker is said to have killed himself. The children were streaming towards the entrance but two of them were running in the opposite direction. A teacher

– a teacher? –was standing there, shouting – and I could still understand from the eighth floor what he was saying: "Come here!"

Two boys now appeared to want to turn around and join the queues in front of the classes.

"Over here!"

Both boys had to make a little detour past the teacher. Could it really be that, up here, I could even hear the sounds of those slaps? Other teachers are different, of course and I am a teacher, too.

I must go down to the school now. I can't find the key to the flat, I fail grabbing the door handle.

"I'll be right back, please wait for me!"

There is the young handsome teacher. He is twenty-seven years old, tall, dark-haired, a truly pleasing sight.

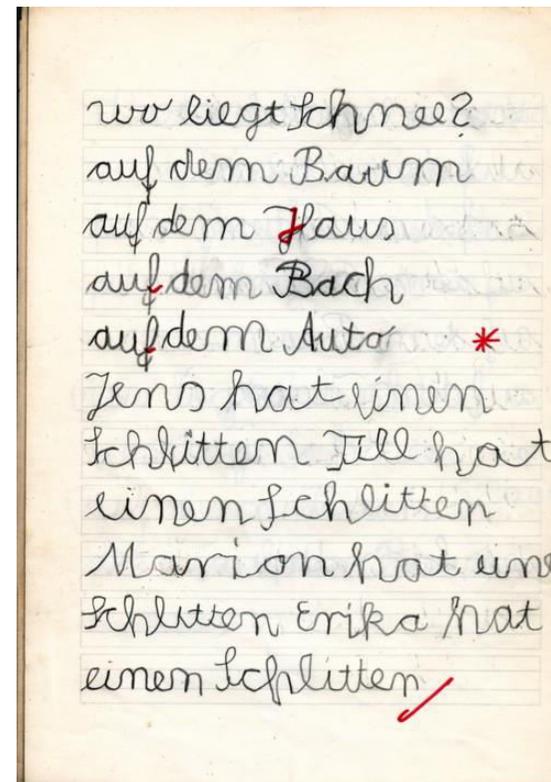
The teacher often has a sore throat and is not able to go to school. I hear he is not going to be taken on as a civil servant, is that why? Or why else?

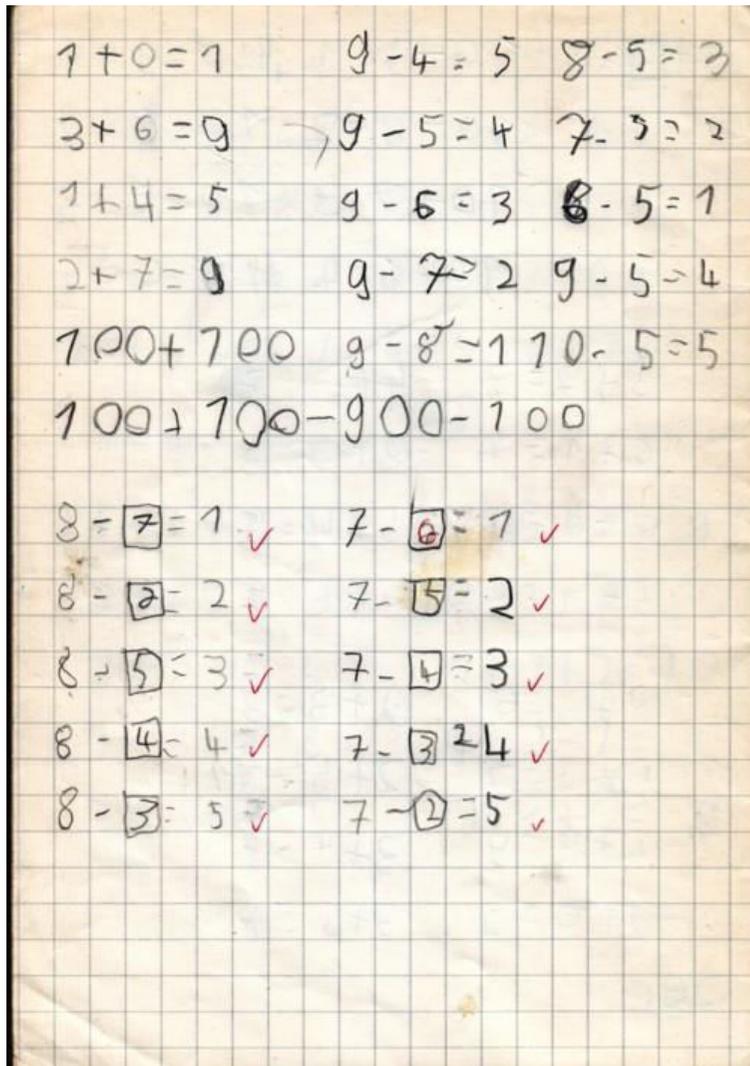
"Yes, well, Mr T., I'm worried. Till looks very bad, as if he was almost beaten to death. How did that happen?"

It turns out that everything was in order. The teacher was in the class when this happened so he wasn't neglecting his supervisory duties at all! No!

Till was lying on the floor, yes, but how had he got there? He's always carrying on with some nonsense! Some boy threw a chair at him. The chairs at school are solid, otherwise they

would break too quickly with all these lively children, wouldn't they? Yes, and sure, the other boy did wrong – his name doesn't matter – and I'm sure Till was annoying him and he hits out too. Sure. The teacher can't be blamed at all. A sore throat, the class is overflowing with third-graders and then, in addition, we have a behaviourally disturbed child in the class.





That's what they agreed on: Till is "behaviourally disturbed". Well, they say, the boy is growing up in an abnormal situation: the mother is divorced, and she also works at the same time. And the upbringing! I have an APO (Außerparlamentarische – Outside Parliament Opposition) child in the class, says the first-year teacher, and she willingly reveals the child's name. After all, it's 1968 and you know what's going on at the universities! "Certain people" know each other so I am informed. I am irritated, because I had thought I had reached some kind of understanding with her, at least that's what I believed.

IV

He is so gifted! she says. Sure, his godfather jokes, university in the afternoon and special school in the morning. There's really no such thing. Yes, of course, I had expected difficulties. There had been difficulties at the kindergarten. His "aunt" remembers that the children used to play by the wooden hut. She does not add that they used to throw stones at each other. She didn't know, because she was sitting by the house, chatting and working on some handicrafts. It was about the ownership of the blockhouse. Some children defended it while others attacked it. The besieged threw back the stones that had not passed over it. It's fun. "There were only two of us in the wooden hut. But they didn't beat us."

In the kindergarten the children are prepared for school. And once in school, the children have to, most importantly, learn to sit still. Young used to, old done. To get accustomed to it, in the kindergarten, it's best to start with the three-year-olds. In the evening Till's dolls must be made to "stand in the corner" in every corner of his bed – so I learn what the children have to do

in the kindergarten. The children have to learn to stand still, not to scream and not to shuffle around. But after a while they are allowed to join in again. "We fold our arms asking who can be the quietest? Shh, shh." At noon, the kindergarten closes for the children who are able to afford mothers who from then on have time for them. The walk home is made up of a series of tantrums. Catching up, I think, and I remember the dolls standing in the corner of his bed in the evening.

The places in the kindergartens have to be booked two years in advance. Once, when the classes are over, I am told to wait. "Wait until the end, please until all the others have gone!" A brown muddy banana is then held up in front of me. They stare at me. "Well, what have you got to say?" I don't understand. "This shouldn't happen again! Imagine, giving a mushy banana for breakfast! " I am ashamed. I didn't recognise the banana at all, it had changed so much. *It is a very efficient kindergarten, educating the parents at the same time!*

V

"He is so talented! If only he wanted to learn!" The teacher is worried about Till. I am happy with that. We've known each other for almost a year and over that time I've managed to convince her that I don't encourage my child to perform extravagance. Oh no, I am really happy when anything is going well! However, in the beginning, there were some communication difficulties between us. For example, the teacher said, "He lies down in the schoolyard and eats his apple." I answered, "He must have been tired." With this sentence I must have said something wrong, so I tried again, "If

someone steps on him, he will surely stand up." This too seemed to have been ill advised.

And then, there is more "abnormal" behaviour. That's not normal, says the teacher, who now wants to help him after all, because apparently the mother is quite a normal person despite everything.

"It's not normal: I tell him to do it this way. Everybody does it like that!"

Till replied: "So what? I just do it the way I do it!"

Is that normal? He is very clumsy. He can't concentrate at all. He eats his apple during the lesson. He gets up from his seat. He confuses the whole class. Now the teacher always stands next to him when they are doing dictation, so he can stay on the task better. She dictates to him in individual syllables. Arithmetic is better, but the three is often written in reverse. "How do you write a We in a hurry?" "He's so talented, if only he wanted to," says the teacher. I disagree: he really wants to! He desperately wants to do it. But it doesn't work. I spell the words for him in the second grade. "How do you write a 'K' again quickly?" Gradually the alphabet "takes root". I'm already dictating syllables to him! At school, a text is written on the board. The children read the text. They copy it down. At home, they have to copy it again. Till tries to copy the scribbled lines from the school booklet into his home booklet.

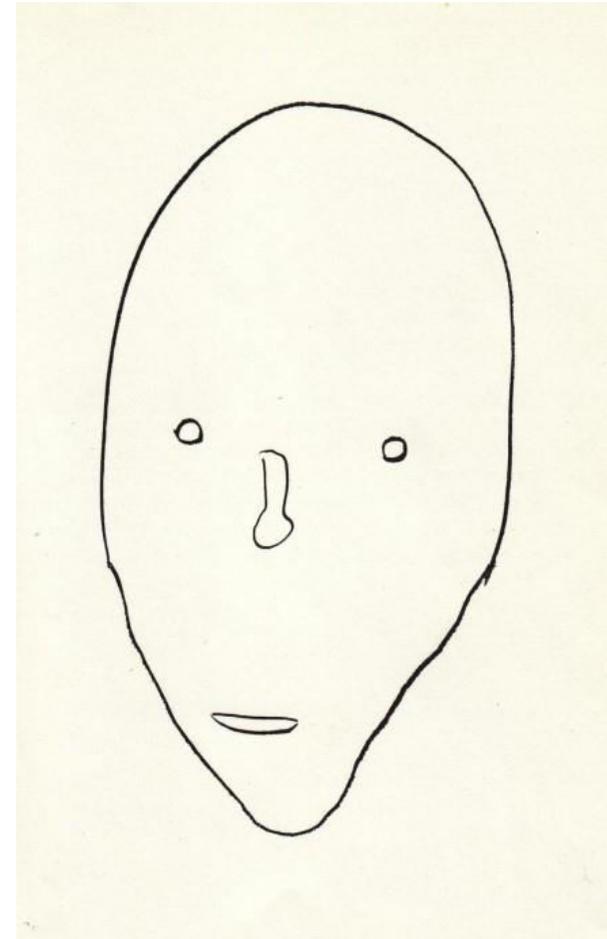
- What does that mean? I ask.
- I don't know!

I try to guess. It works. Now I dictate. Tut, tut, a car; t, u, t, new word, t, u, t, new word, a, new word, c, a, r. It might have been

like that if this child wasn't so temperamental. In fact, it sounds like this:

- T
- How many lines are there today? ... Still so many?! No!
- U - write!
- A moment ago you said t, now you say u. What should I write now? T or u?
- First t and then u.
- And then?
- T.
- I already have.
- One more!
- Uh-huh.
- Only one t, not another u!
- Faster, I've already finished.
- The second T is missing.
- One more?
- Yes.
- Why didn't you say so? How many more lines?
- Write and don't count the lines all the time.
- Always the same stuff!

There are a very few rare asterisks marked in the booklet. Once, however, it says "very well done". It was a very unusual task. The children had to think of words and then write them down. What kind of words? I can't remember. It was six years ago now. Till is thrilled, another word and another. How do you write that? Another one! Three pages are scribbled full: "very well done"—for once he was allowed to think of something by himself!



VI

What do you do with a behaviourally disturbed child? I do not accept the diagnosis. My child is not "behaviourally disturbed". He is temperamental, lively, a bit clumsy, and gets angry easily, rages, shouts, then stops after a while and goes back to business as usual – as if nothing had happened. I am a bit nervous, because I expect just such an outburst at any moment. It happens anytime. But since he's been at school, that's not all. He is withdrawn, he looks unhappy, he tells me nothing but goes to school doggedly, but without ever refusing to go. Should I have delayed enrolling him? He was just six at the time. I remember Till sitting at the table and struggling with his cutlery. Scattered around his plate lie the results of his efforts while other pieces of food roll under the table. We've been managing without the tablecloth for a long time and the carpet is yellowish, and not stain proof.

"Watch out" I say angrily this time. I've had enough. "Do you have to spread your food evenly on the table?"

"I don't think it's very even," says Till with his mouth full, "do you"

"I'm worried about the test for your readiness to attend school", I say darkly, "especially since you can't even get dressed by yourself."

"I can!"

A few days later we will have to take the test. Till stands up in front of me, clenches both fists and says: "And I want to, and I can, and I have to go to school!"

During the test, I walk nervously around the school building, between the small tables and chairs. It smells like school always seems to smell. Other mothers also seem to be wrecked. When I had exams myself it never particularly upset me, but this? And it's only the beginning! Even to get into the school kindergarten, a child has to be tested. If the school readiness test is failed, he or she is assigned to the school kindergarten. Till's test is "very good" with a small minus sign. I wonder what they test here? It is by far his best "school mark" to date.

Three months after school started, I'm standing by the school kindergarten teacher. The teacher suggested it. "Socially immature" is what they call it: the child walks around in class, he can't sit still, he is "actually not ready for school". The school kindergarten teacher looks experienced, almost wise. "Yes, take a look at this! Don't you want to come and stay with us for a while first?" And then the next year, first grade again? No way!

"We don't want to force the boy."

VII

The parents meeting is in the evening. At the meeting before that, I sat outside the classroom and nobody knows me. That's fine with me. I don't expect anything good will happen. Unfortunately, someone comes and addresses me by name. "Oh, you're Till's mother!?" Luckily, I can escape into the teacher's classroom. "But that's the one who ..." The parents' evening is followed by a gathering in a small circle. It consists of the teacher, a couple of parents and me. The woman talks. She has been talking and talking since the preliminary meeting at the start of the school term. She is talking for two, because she has twins. She talks ten to the dozen. Nothing can stop her. She

talks about her children and then she said they should do it this way and that she has always been of that opinion. Her husband hums reinforcements. He agrees completely. She is right. And she has twins. She takes the children by the hand, one on each hand – what would she do with triplets? – and takes them off to town. She takes them by the hand and leads them through the streets. The twins are small and well-behaved. They look different. The twins are well-behaved, they do what they are supposed to, their mother says. This is not the first time we have seen each other. Till is in a constant feud with them. They may be small, but they are two – and Till is still not able to stand firmly on his feet at all.

I wonder if this often happens in this city, or have these special parents agreed to do the same thing? I often get visitors in the evening. If it goes well, it's the father with or without his son. I can understand him quite well. I can well comprehend his uneasiness and we agree: unfortunately, children are sometimes like that!

The father tells me at the end of the visit that his son wants to come and play. He is a man. Like all the fathers he works hard in the factory, and in the evening, he is sent to sort out what to do with the hole that has appeared in his son's jacket. It can't be patched as it's imitation leather! Well, his wife thinks it will have to be a new jacket. He believes that even without a new jacket, the trip was worthwhile. I wonder how much does his wife understand him? The fathers of the grandfathers' generation are more able to stick at it. They too are sent out in the evening after work. Why don't the women come themselves? This time it is a pink shirt with dark blue ink

splashes. The new shirt! Till is around, so I can ask him: "how did that happen Till?"

"Yes, the boy held the pen backwards like this and said: I'm about to splash. And I decided to squirt before he did."

A counter argument cannot be presented, because the shirt has come without the boy within. It makes sense to me. Sure, pre-empting a threat. It seems to me that the children would have planned this together? No, because the ink is from Till's pen. Uh-huh. The old man demands a new pink shirt. Or, instead, he wants me to have it cleaned. But, I've got an idea. I'll wash the stains out with cold water. Does he want to take it away wet? It's pink like the day it entered this world.

When the nagging mother of twins is standing in front of our flat door – she does not need to send her husband! – I have a protector at my side. Till's grandmother is visiting. She impresses not only the grandson. What do you want, she says, two new pairs of trousers? Have both children fallen and torn their trousers? Oh, the children only wear the same thing, and that's why, well then, you'll have to try darning them! No, my daughter doesn't have time right now. He fell down from a standing position, oh, so supposedly Till had pushed him and he tore his trousers. Well, these things happen. Unfortunately, I don't have time for you now. Goodbye. I liked that. I'm going to learn what to do from Till's grandmother.

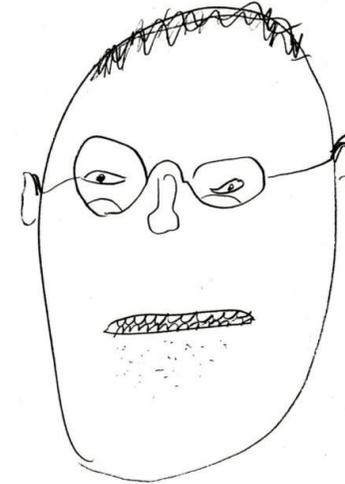
However, I don't like the meeting with a group of four parents. I'm told that I should have taught my child differently. No child in Grade 2 eats their apple in class, without some encouragement from their mother! It's disturbing! I have to realise that. I seem to think children should eat apples in class. I

still try to argue, naively, that in my class what may, and may not be done is my, the teacher's business and not the parents' ...

The torrent of accusations continues to be poured out, the man nods admiringly, and the teacher is uncomfortable with the whole business. But it is not quite so aimless this talk after all: the parents' solution soon emerges from the torrent of words: Till should be chucked out of the class, he has to go, he's so disruptive, the twins are prevented from learning properly. I refuse. I go home. Till is seven and he wasn't at home at half past nine, when I arrived back after the parents' meeting. It's summer. I don't know where he is. I can't reach him at all, he's so unhappy. Only when he's happy will he tell me what is going on. I can't tell that to the never-silent mother of twins. Even today, I turn my head away, as I do not wish to say hello to her, and my stomach sinks.

VIII

Later, the twins are given a chance to be better educated as their mother takes them by the hand, and leads them to the grammar school. The mother says, "we can't really help them much though because at that time there was a war and then the post-war period, so we were not able to go to secondary school." (She is my birth cohort.) But the twins will make it. They have learned that a child has to be good when an adult is looking on. And do what they are told to do. The rest is hard graft. The mother can manage that.



But it will be a while before the twins are able learn without being disturbed. The first two years of school seem to go on forever.

"The child has a behavioural disorder", says a colleague, who had given a substitute lesson to the class to the class teacher. Others said the same. Many said so. Word gets around.

They call at my own school. I have to leave my class. "It's about Till." I feel very hot, and my heart is beating quite fast, as I had to run all the way to the phone. "Till has disappeared from school!" I can still manage that. Where do you think he'll be? Maybe he went to the station in order to pick up his grandmother, who is expected this morning? The teacher snaps

at me, "Is that supposed to be an excuse?" Since 1945, no teacher in Lower Saxony has ever been accused as a result of a "violation of the duty of supervision". She worries anyway, which is actually quite nice of her.

Nevertheless, I am hurt. I am told to call again during the next break to see if he has been found anywhere in the meantime. At the next break, I get hold of a teacher I don't even know by sight. "Till? One hears a lot about him! He's always stepping out of line!" That hits the nail on the head. So, all his misdemeanours are summed up in one explanation; he steps out of line! He simply refuses to be able to read or write. At home, his grandmother is waiting for me. Till had been sitting on the stairs when she came. She sent him back to school when the headmaster called. He calls me at home. Of course, Till's reputation has reached him too. Mr F. spoke to Till and told him that he would have to make up the missed lesson in another class. Till accepted that, and surely, I would agree with that? And then comes a sentence that I have kept in my mind verbatim for seven years. "You can talk quite reasonably to that boy!" Astonishment in his voice. Did you think he was a little wild animal? But at the moment I say nothing at all, or just, yes, sure. He has been greeting me in a compassionate way ever since.

IX

Till had some playmates in the kindergarten. Oliver was an ally who helped him defend the log cabin against superior forces. He is handsome and seems intelligent to me. I like him because he didn't fight for the other side. At five in the afternoon, he then travelled, accompanied by his very young sister, from the

kindergarten to the neighbouring town. It has half-timbered houses and has remained the same small town for a long time. It was already a town when there was just a swamp here, with a few villages and the Renaissance castle of the Schulenburg Counts nearby. Oliver had to change into another bus at the station. It took the children three quarters of an hour to get home. Some years later I meet Oliver again. He had started school a year late. The teachers of the sixth grade are recommending that he should go to the Hauptschule ("main school"; this is the lowest of the three school types in the German school system). That's when his parents intervene and have him examined and I am part of the examining board. The English teacher has chosen a nice piece, "A Visit to the Zoo". First there is an introduction, in English of course. None of the sixteen children have ever been to the zoo in the state capital, some sixty kilometres away. They are all twelve years old. The train has left the station, at least that's how it looks today – perhaps they will get along later in their life.

The mathematics exams are set by a young secondary school teacher. He is gentle, yet firm, quiet and attentive. He takes in all the children's answers and nods at them. The children come first, then the geometry. We could use someone like him at our school and I speak to him about it.

He is pleased that I like his teaching, but he knows what he wants and says "I'll stay at the Hauptschule(main school). That's where I'm really needed." Diamond in the sand. My headmaster also makes him the offer. It would be easier for him at the grammar school. He stays. Besides Oliver, his log cabin companion, there are also children who "don't

understand" Till. For once Till is completely despondent; they don't understand what I mean! "I think you have got smaller" a boy said to Till. Till responded "on the contrary!" The boy laughed at him, "on the contrary, ha, there's no such thing!"

X

The class is not only made up of the twins. There are also some girls. Till makes an agreement with one of the girls, she ties bows on his shoes for him when necessary, and he fetches her anorak from the coat hooks surrounded by the crowd of children. He picks her up for school, even though this makes his journey to school considerably longer. He rings the bell and waits until she is ready. The mother is delighted by the little cavalier. She says that, but unfortunately not loud enough. Others shout louder. A mother claims that "Till pushed her daughter twice in a drawing class and blackmailed her on the way home. He held her down and made her pay him fifty pfennigs to release her". Exactly the same story was shown on a children's programme on the TV recently. He copied his actions from the television, the mother says to the teacher. Finally, however, she has to admit that the story can only have come from her own television set as we don't have one.



There are other girls in his class: two sisters and their fat blonde-haired friend. One of the sisters is repeating first grade. They spend the afternoons alone at home putting on make-up. They buy lipsticks and eyebrow pencils. They always have

money. Till is with them in the afternoons. He doesn't seem happy when he comes home. I want to support these rare contacts, so I decide to make a Saturday afternoon visit to the parents. The mother is cleaning. She says, I should excuse the way she looks. She takes two chairs from the table so we can sit down. Of course, I am better off as a teacher, finished work at noon and then I only had one child! She has four, I can see, cleaning on Saturday afternoon! I don't want to disturb her for long. One evening Till is more forthcoming. He tells me: they don't really do anything and he is bored with the girls. They only put on make-up and he doesn't enjoy that any more. But he still goes there again and again? Yes. They want him to. If he's been there for an hour or two, he gets fifty pfennigs for it. I don't conclude that he doesn't get enough pocket money and so I don't increase it, but I say I don't think two hours of boredom were worth fifty pfennigs. He hasn't looked at it that way yet. He also thinks his time is worth more. So, after that he stays at home, or goes for a walk with me.

XI

It's very warm and I'm wearing a blue dress. It is the summer of daisy patterns. The straps of the dress are very narrow and the skirt bounces up and down. Perhaps my outfit is more suitable for a young girl?

In any case, the man on the sofa seems to like the dress – and me. He has thick lips, speaks as if every sentence was a revelation. He is employed by the city, so we don't have to pay for the play therapy. Till is a difficult case. He builds up the animals in such a way that they have no relationship to each other at all. He prefers to shoot perhaps showing strong

aggression! (Maybe I should have bought him the pop guns after all?) And Till drew a picture which shows a circus dancer in a blue dress, just like me. That suggests a strong Oedipus complex. The child is in love – eyes twinkling – with his – quite attractive indeed! – young mother. I see.

But in order to be offered the play therapy – "which Till needs so much!" – he still has to be seen by a psychiatrist, who luckily lives almost next door.

We don't have to wait at all. I stay outside. Till disappears behind one of the white doors with a pretty and friendly-looking woman in a white coat. On the walls hang children's drawings, large sheets of paper painted with thick pencils. At Till's school, the small children are only allowed to draw on small blocks. They are only as big as their exercise booklets. It's no fun for Till to draw on such a small sheet. They are also supposed to colour everything with crayons. That is boring. He can't concentrate on that either, complains his teacher. But maybe modelling is the right thing for him to do? The basic equipment in his first class includes a box of plasticine. The first piece of work is supposed to be a dwarf. Till's dwarf is the biggest! He made it out of the entire contents of the box. Now, unfortunately, he can no longer take part in the kneading. The gnomes are put on display.

The paper sheets at the psychiatrists are big, just like the ones we use for Till's paintings at home. He paints very beautifully. And he is not at all clumsy in doing this. He divides the pictures well, everything is big and clear. I have to take Till to the parents' meeting at my own school. He doesn't go to school himself yet, so he finds it interesting to see a school from the

inside. We await the parents' arrival in "my" classroom. The school is new, like everything else in this town, and the furnishings are appropriate. A wide blackboard hangs in front, which can also be opened out. Till has opened it and drawn a ship on it. It stretches from one end of the opened board to the other. The board is about half as wide as the class.

Back to the medical practice. In the meantime, half an hour has passed. The door opens. I have been accustomed to receive a bad write-up. The woman makes a friendly face. With this face, I guess it can't be helped. I get bolder, but I'm not quite serious after all, when I say: I guess he's – somewhat – spontaneous? She smiles more and says enthusiastically: Wonderfully spontaneous! I wonder. In the subsequent meeting, we are now also praised by the doctor. This time Till is waiting outside. The child is, one could say, more "normal" than others, he has fewer inhibitions.

Of course, this does not fit into our schools, where the curriculum is so restricted. It is quite possible that one day he will sit in school and masturbate, why not? I think that's unlikely, because I have the impression that he certainly adapts to the prevailing moral concepts. In kindergarten I once wanted to put a different shirt on him for some forgotten reason but Till was firmly against it. When children see a shirttail, they point their finger and shout "Look at that, a vest!"

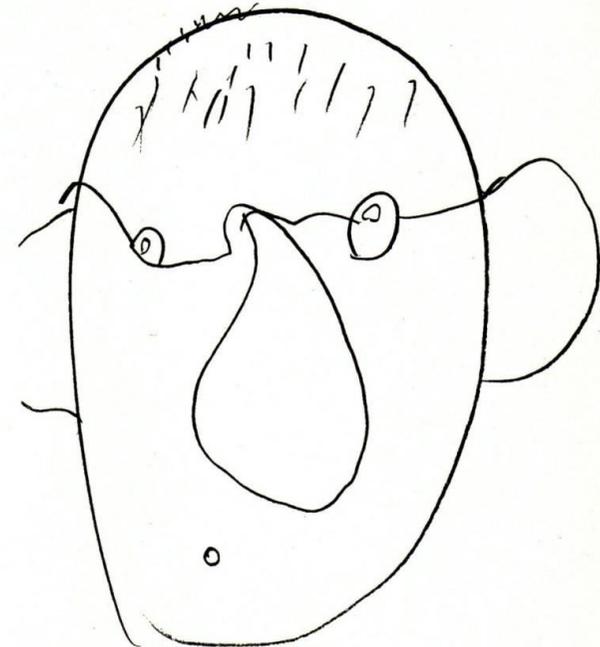
I learn even more useful things. We get a certificate that Till has "constitutional hypermotorism". I am grateful for that too. If it is "constitutional", it is in any case not the result of my education or non-education.

The child is completely normal. I am actually of the same opinion. But then, why doesn't he get along at school? Yes, school! – the word is stretched long. It's just not normal. I see. But how does the normal child put up with the not normal school and vice versa? That becomes clear some time later: not at all. What is to be done? At the insistence of the teachers, and the psychologist appointed by the city, I had enrolled Till in play therapy. When I told the doctor, he says "it doesn't matter. As long as he enjoys it, Till should attend. The child is so normal that even play therapy won't harm him."

XII

For the next few times, Till goes into the town on his own. First, I put him on the bus here, and the secretary of the play therapist does it there, because he has to cross the busy street on the way back. Soon he can do it on his own. He always comes back very happy. They do handicrafts, play games and he had the full attention of an adult, it's like being at home – and then there are all the toys that were available! Till is allowed to spray with the garden hose in the summer. He gets the idea that he could spray from the first floor, and is allowed to do it. The play therapist sees progress. He wants to show me photos. I have to cancel an appointment with him because, unfortunately, my school suddenly needs me to do something. Later I find out that I have been "dismissive" and "disinterested" and of course I find this out through third parties, as seems to be the norm in this town. But it is not only me who is "dismissive". One and a half years later, the therapy is "finished". Things have improved a lot with Till, the therapist

says, but some things have remained very unusual. First of all, the child has not gone through any Oedipus phase at all.



Of course, I'm surprised by this information, because I have an excruciatingly good memory for everything that concerns Till. The other unusual thing was that Till is cautious with him, the therapist. He does not like to come too close to him!

What all the other treated children usually do, Till does not do: he does not identify with his therapist! Till loves the adventure books I read to him. "Taran" is the young radiant hero. "Grischka" is also young, beautiful and strong. The therapist however could be Till's grandfather. And radiant? I look at the corners of his mouth pulled down. I can understand Till.

Meanwhile, nothing has improved at school. But I met the newly employed school psychologist at my school. I know him by sight from my studies. He is a few years younger than me and had started studying when I was almost finished. He is tall and pale and smokes one cigarette after another. His slender white hands tremble slightly.

The official way to have a child examined by the school psychologist is through the teacher's registration. We took the unofficial route: The school psychologist gave me a spelling test for Till and an intelligence test. It turns out, quite unofficially, that Till's spelling performance is far below the norm. He is now at the end of the second grade. He practices obsessively for the dictations. They only write well practised dictations, so he doesn't have any major failures. And that's when the word "dyslexia" appears on our CV for the first time.

XIII

The summer holidays are starting, so I have some time to read books about dyslexia. So, there is after this expert ..., has this

definition now been agreed upon? Or upon anything else? There are about fifteen researchers with fifteen different theories about how it happens and about as many definitions. Each reader picks out what suits them. In one of the thicker books there is something about the so-called "secondary symptomatology". They write about this and that symptom, so is dyslexia a disease? Researchers don't agree on that either. Anyway, "secondary symptoms" are symptoms that teachers, classmates and occasionally parents bring up when they can't come to terms with the fact that their child reads badly and writes incorrectly.

I have a mixture of feelings when I find that Till's behaviour is described in the book. On the one hand, I am relieved: there are other children who have "this"! And on the other hand, I feel reproachful. Is being able to write correctly what makes a schoolchild worthwhile? The book says that quiet children become depressed, while lively children become aggressive. That is all part of the secondary symptomatology. And, I learn plenty of other things from these books ...

Dyslexia is usually socially conditioned. They have many siblings, no place to work of their own and live in a bad neighbourhood. This is what a well-meaning colleague tells me. The school psychologist then adds further to my understanding of dyslexia: thirty per cent of juvenile delinquents are dyslexic!

So, do pay attention – if that helps at all. I am very grateful for all the encouraging words. People I tell about Till's dyslexia often inform me they know children "like that": one is deaf-blind, the another mentally handicapped, yes, parents have to put up with a lot!

Till's new third-grade teacher and his headmaster react quite differently. I speak to the headmaster in one of the corridors: "Not everyone is dyslexic, as you would think! He knows the phenomenon, of course! Till just can't concentrate, that's the explanation." The headmaster provides an additional exercise for Till's class. He always includes a game there, a memory training activity, which of course the children really enjoy. He writes ten words on the board that all start with the same letter. Then he wipes the words away and now the children have to write down all the words by heart in the right order. Well, who can do it best? "But Till can't concentrate at all, he only manages two or three words! There we have the real reason for his difficulties, that's how it is. " "If all the words referred to animals, the exercise would probably be easier for him," I modestly interject. "But why? The others – some of them, anyway, the intelligent ones – can do it too!"

XIV

Right at the beginning of the school year I contact his third-grade teacher. It is the teacher who, about half a year later, is fulfilling his supervisory duty when the boy sitting next to Till throws the chair at him, who is lying on the floor. The teacher seems quite sociable. I tell him about dyslexia and Till's temper, which interact somewhat unhappily. A little depressive child doesn't bother the class, but an aggressive one does. At the end of my long pleading, he promises not to pay any attention to "all the things one hears about Till", but to make up his own mind about him.

Till now has to stay after school more often. He is then allowed to take part in the higher classes' natural history lessons. He

reports enthusiastically on all the things the teacher tells them. Till thinks the teacher is really good there. On other occasions he finds him less good. Again, I go to see the teacher. He seems to be sympathetic. Till's experiences at that time are quite different.

A parent-teacher meeting. I sit near the door to the left. Till's teacher greets us. There is a complex procedure for the election of parent representatives. I've just had to go through that at my school too; you have to keep checking, no one can say it off the top of their head. Till's class teacher is doing well. Only one thing irritates me: he turns his head to the left at almost every sentence.

Is he looking for my approval as a back-up in front of the other parents? After a while I understand: he looks at me and seems to ask silently, and almost fearfully, "am I doing everything all right?" Only almost?

Since the new school year started, Till has been even more unhappy and withdrawn. Now he also has a new maths teacher. The teacher has undergone the short training course introduced a few years ago. In the vernacular, these teachers are disrespectfully called "housewife teachers" because at that time it was mainly housewives – if possible with a high school diploma – who were approached to help out with the misery of the shortage of teachers. The teacher is strict and is generally feared by the children. You still can't do the multiplication tables! You have to be able to do it in your sleep. If someone wakes you up and asks you how much is seven times eight, then the automatic response must be – well? Seven times eight is actually impossible to remember, one has to say it to oneself

a hundred times. One also has to know the multiplication table backwards. It is an excellent memory exercise!

We like numbers, and enjoy brain teasers and discovering relationships. When it came up, Till found out by himself by calculating three-set problems for a long time before school. "That's quite clear, listen, it's like this ..." I draw him the whole multiplication table from one to ten on a sheet of paper in a square and he discovers the relationships between the numbers. Afterwards, he is able to remember some of the multiplication tables better or – if the teacher doesn't notice! – quickly work them out.

But the next disaster is already approaching: there are "text problems" in the class tests. Of course, some people fail because they can't imagine whether the ten sacks of potatoes have to be subtracted, added or even multiplied. Till enjoys it and understands the correct approach very quickly, it's always right, the arithmetic works too, but then comes the real problem: he has to write in whole long sentences and he's not allowed to abbreviate anything. From then on, he is given bad marks in his arithmetic work too. So, yet again, he is now a "loser".

In the same half of the school year, on one occasion, Till was very happy: this was because his estimate was the closest to the actual dimensions of the classroom, and the arithmetic teacher had given Till a soccer coin.

XV

In the meantime, Till gets extra lessons from a special education teacher who deals with dyslexics. He is a friendly soft

man who speaks Silesian. I imagine him sitting on a bench in front of his school in the evening sun, wearing a velvet cap, people walking home tired from the fields, waving their hats: "Good evening, teacher!", he smiles benignly and smokes his pipe. He is sad that Till has to suffer so much at school because his efforts to make writing palatable to Till are undone at school. "Actually, such children should ..." They sit and he erases. Till should not memorise anything incorrectly! And Till writes and moans – and the weather makes the children so restless! You notice it especially in "these" children, he sees it in his special-needs pupils. "Till, don't you want to sit down again? Don't you want to continue? Yes, yes, the weather!"

Maybe this lesson will help a little.

XVI

Sometimes Till talks about his experiences at school. The teacher constantly makes a fool of him. That's very easy. Write "acquaintance" on the blackboard! That is something he could probably only do some years later, because even two consonants next to one another are difficult to hear and then write as one of them usually falls by the wayside. Recently, Till has been asked to do punishment work instead of detention. Punishment work is forbidden, so it is "practice work". You have to practise when you have disturbed the lesson. The latest exercise is to copy out pages from the reading book. I write a letter: Till has an aversion to writing for well-known reasons. We are trying to reduce this aversion, so we don't want to see writing tasks used as punishment. Besides, copying would cost him hours. I ask the teacher to change the punishment to something else if he feels he has to punish.

The answer to my letter comes out of Till's mouth at noon: he should copy the work, and if he brings another written excuse from his mother instead of the copy, he will get the worst possible mark. Shortly, afterwards he is almost beaten to death by the boy sitting next to him.

XVII

The school psychologist says that Till should really enjoy writing. He also needs to have the experience of his achievements being recognised. Till writes stories. He is also an early riser. What does one do in the morning when one still has to be quiet? One makes up stories and writes them down. Even if he can't read them himself, after a while, his mother can, half deciphering, half guessing. The school psychologist suggests having something like that printed in the school print shop? A good idea.

One morning I find a story on the entrance of the living room that delights me:

Once upon a time there was a small man.

He met a big man.

The small man said, "Hey, I am smaller than you!"

The big man said, "Hey, I am bigger than you!"

They went to court.

A small man arrived there who said, "small is better!"

A big man from the court arrived who said, "Big is better!"

Then a wise man arrived who said: "When one is big, big is better; when one is small, small is better."

I copy it out with the typewriter, indent it, make marks. I like it very much. Suddenly I have an idea and I send it to the weekly

newspaper *Die Zeit* for the "Under 20" column. Then I forget about it. The carbon copy is given to the teacher who runs the school print shop. I have the little story printed on cards to send out.

A week later, my headmaster congratulates me on my son's "literary success". I don't understand, but sense an allusion to Till's spelling weakness. I haven't seen *Die Zeit* yet.



Die Zeit. Modernes Leben. Bis 20.

Freitag, den 6. November 1970

We buy all the copies we can find in the two stationery shops. Later, Till is even sent another copy by the newspaper.

For days, this success gives him a period of relative tranquillity in all school matters. The next day he announces: "I got the same mark in both papers we got back today." Since there is dictation involved, I already know –by then the dictations are no longer practised beforehand. He only asks his friends, "Do you actually read *Die Zeit*?" At school he doesn't say a word about his story either.

Days later, the teacher comes to class with the newspaper. "Strange, Till, how did you do this, since you usually write so badly?" I did that all wrong again, the school psychologist tells me. So, why if the school print shop was OK did I send it to the weekly paper '*Die Zeit*'? "Whereas the verbal side of Till is already so overemphasised anyway!" I still don't understand this argument today. I just remained silent, ashamed. I should really understand that children should not be abused to increase the prestige of their parents.

XVIII

The hallway is very narrow. The office was probably originally built as a dwelling. Opposite me, the door to the waiting-room is open. The room is bright, the secretary looks at me sympathetically from time to time. She has also tried to get me an appointment quickly. Of course, I still have to wait. I think again about how I want to start. First the dyslexia, then details of the teacher's behaviour towards Till and me. There is no other way. I also feel rather vindictive.

The school counsellor comes towards me from his room. He apologises for keeping me waiting, a phone call. He listens, shaking his head every now and then. What should he do? He doesn't want to tell the teacher from upstairs, he doesn't like to act like a superior. I've already tried talking to him, so it's no use. "Under these circumstances, it is not possible to support the child in this class" and he then "suspends" Till from the school "until further notice." I have to find another school for Till because the school board does not assign him to another school or even to another class. In 1971, the anti-authoritarian wave has reached the provinces. The leave of absence is a help at first, but what to do then?

XIX

There is still one other primary school in our district. It is run by a woman. I make another appointment. I'm not supposed to bring the child, but only his drawings. That is convenient for us. I pick out the most successful ones and go on my way. It is as if I was trying to sell something, like a salesman. I praise my child, but also point out his shortcomings, after all, one doesn't want to upset the customers, otherwise they might complain later about the goods. It's a good story to tell about Till. The headmistress takes her time, encourages me. What kind of child is he?

He is a thoughtful child. He was barely five years old when he suddenly asked me one morning at breakfast: does God also protect the bomb throwers? We lived in Braunschweig then, and for a long time the place was in ruins, left as a result of the war. Till wanted to know what the ruins were all about. My

mother explained it to him and she told him of various experiences she had in both the wars.

Till's question surprised me. First of all, I am a bit slow in the morning and then I heard the question through my theologically educated ear – I studied theology, you know, and I teach RE, yes, and I also teach German. I heard the 'theodicy' question in the child's question (the question: how can a good god permit any evil) and it threw me. Isn't that a bit early at five? I didn't really give Till much in the way of a religious education. We had evening prayers, and I read to him from a children's Bible, which I always changed, when something went theologically against the grain.

I finally had to give up this reading when the Jesus stories were told just like the Abraham stories: as historical facts. "So, you teach religion too", said the headmistress.

So, I pondered for a while after Till asked that question: does the God protect the bomb throwers too? I couldn't think of an answer, rather I thought about the fact that the theodicy question just can't be answered at all. That's how I had learned it, and that's how I thought it was right. After a short wait, Till asked somewhat impatiently, "do you know or don't you know?" It seemed to reassure him that I didn't know either. I didn't want to give him a theological lecture. It would only have become a justification for my not knowing.

Sometime before that, we had had another conversation on this subject. Till had asked how is it that you don't see the God, but he sees everything? I sat by his bed that evening. My gaze fell on the window. Then I had an idea: if I sit behind the curtain, I can see someone passing by on the street, but he

can't see me. That was rather stupid of me, as I had to realise immediately afterwards. Till needed less time to think. "You are seen sometimes, God is never seen!" That made sense to me. But I didn't know any better. My theology studies had not equipped me for such conversations. Suddenly Till had an idea: "Ah, God is made of glass!"

I don't know how he came to terms with the glass God, because he didn't touch on these issues any more. When I asked him a year later if he wanted to come to church with me, he said: actually, I don't believe all that any more. Only when I asked him did he explain: there used to be so many miracles, and since I've been in the world, there are no more miracles at all. I would have liked to tell him something about miracles, but he didn't want to. "I don't want to talk about that now." And that's where it stayed.

These drawings are wonderful, says the headmistress. In general, he would seem to be an interesting child. I nod. "Yes, who can we put him in class with?" There are several very good teachers who run a third class. Several at once! Of course, she can't decide over their heads. She wants to talk to them and lets me know. After that, she seems to have forgotten about us. Or had the news of Till's reputation reached her too? I had hoped he would be allowed to introduce himself. Outside of the class, just talking to a teacher, he would probably have won her over. Now, he won't even get that chance.

XX

But what about trying another school instead? If you teach my child, I'll teach your child, that's our agreement. They recently moved to this town and their son is joining the first-year class

at the grammar school. He only got five out of ten marks in German, so he needs some extra tuition. The husband earns good money, so it's supposed to be a grammar school teacher who tutors his son. In principle, I am not prepared to give private tuition lessons because I am too busy. However, I'm glad to agree to the suggestion that the grammar school mother take Till into her primary school class on the other side of town in exchange for – of course paid – private tuition for her son. So that was a warm-hearted conversation between mothers on the phone. Neither of us really knows what we are getting into.

So, Till now had a long drive through the town to school. At first, he is cheerful, then, once again, he becomes more withdrawn. At the school fête I got to know the teacher: motherly-warm and at the same time cool-blond, round and strict, in any case a stranger to me. In the meantime, I have adopted a new attitude towards Till's teachers: I am an insecure, submissive person, ready to laugh at any joke, resisting saying anything but the most necessary things about Till. I make myself small, I am grateful, and see her as our saviour. She doesn't seem to notice, talks to me almost like a colleague. Well, it seems all right. Often, when Till can no longer concentrate in class, he goes – alone, of course – into the next room. There he can write or do arithmetic in peace. But does he like to do this?

Well, he goes when he's asked to. She doesn't think he has made friends with the children yet but he has only been here for such a short time. He is very lively and has trouble concentrating, I would know that.

At home he is able to concentrate very well. He stays focusing on one activity for a long time and really perseveres. But his "stimulus threshold" is particularly low. He cannot "switch off". He is constantly agitated because he always hears or sees something that distracts him which gets him excited and makes him restless. He is helped in coping with all this by working in the room next to the class, but the gap between him and the other children becomes even deeper as a result.

I go home from the school fête in fairly good spirits. In the days after this, Till tells me that he very much hopes that the class will soon be closed because of an outbreak of scarlet fever. After all, no child likes going to school with such a long journey there. I did not really want to accept, yet again, that I was facing another search for a school. One lunchtime, Till says, "Mrs. F. said I don't have to come back". He is depressed. Two days later, the class is closed because of the scarlet fever. I think, she could have waited for this.

There is another telephone call. The grammar school pupil has been ill, so I didn't get to see him at all in the fortnight that Till was a guest in his mother's class. That made it easier to separate. The teacher finally had to do without Till's presence because he had bitten two children, and the parents were likely to protest. Then the teacher would have been asked how the child from the other side of town got into her class. So she had anticipated their complaint by expelling Till. I wonder if that fortnight had been of any use to Till?

I am looking for a school again.

The thick book about dyslexia is as trilling to me as a novel sometimes is. It is our novel. Till's novel? "In reading music and shorthand, the initial dyslexic difficulties are repeated." Reading music?

My second year of piano lessons. The teacher is known to be very good. I liked her. Her name is Eva and she has a very beautiful face: narrow and bright, dark eyes and freckles on her fine nose. She's not always be patient with me and I realise that very often when I'm practising I lose my temper too. My mother circles me and "holds hand on her heart". The same thing over and over again. I am by then sixteen years old and after two years of piano lessons I am still as if I was just starting. I count out the notes. Then, often there are several notes on top of each other on the page.

Eva thinks I probably can't see very well. It turns out to be a small congenital eye defect, insignificant, but it results in me being fitted out with glasses for when I need them, for example when playing the piano. Otherwise I can see perfectly well. Unfortunately, even the glasses don't help me when reading music. It's not easy for anyone involved to think I'm simply stupid, because I'm in the tenth grade of the grammar school and I'm quite a good pupil – not exactly in foreign languages, but at least in mathematics, and that's considered an indicator of intelligence. Eva looks regretfully at my hands. "You have the best piano hands of all my pupils!" I think quietly to myself, probably because it is what she means, it's a pity that something is lacking in your head. Finally, back pain releases me from my inner compulsion to learn to play the piano at any

cost. Fortunately, I am no longer able to sit and practise for an extra hour in the afternoon!

The mother also breathes a sigh of relief. The daughter seems so very different from her in many ways anyway and she has to come to terms with that.

When I started school, I was treated as if I was a princess who was to be subjected to a compulsory education. It was in a village in Poland, but German by default, where I was the child of the estate manager, and of the "German Reich". The young teacher, also "reichsdeutsche", dismisses the children after class setting them a mental arithmetic problem. Who is the first to answer? I'm usually the first to have a go. The children of the other seven grades – all the pupils are taught in one single room – follow one after the other. I draw the letters on a folding slate. Actually, I should really be in the second class right away, I tell the teacher. She makes me move two benches behind. But I realised that they are already more advanced with their writing. So, I voluntarily move back to my old seat.

After six months in that school, I go back to Berlin. There the schools are closed, because "the Führer wanted women and children to leave Berlin". However, the untroubled life continues as we move to Lower Silesia for three months. We live in the temporarily abandoned flat belonging to some relatives of ours. It was good to have my mother always available for both my cousin and myself. Then we return to Berlin again.

Then after a few nights of bombing, this time we head for Upper Silesia. My mother is "on duty" as a secretary and I am seven years old. There are after-school clubs, families with

adventurous habits, and long distances through the foreign city to pick up my mother from work. In the meantime, I am into the third grade at school. I'm not wanted, because I'm a "Berlin big mouth" and I don't really get along well in the school. But that I am a rather bad pupil is quite "normal" because I've hardly had any lessons. In arithmetic, however, no shortcoming is present but no one notices the difference between my performances in reading and in arithmetic. My mother has to read to me after work in the evening. She likes to help me. Later, when I am "reading", she wonders, "where are you looking?" Actually, I could close the book, but it is quite useful for the occasional cue. One of the stories ends with, "one of the bystanders shouted, with a laugh, 'why not like that?' And people quickly got lost." It was about a fallen horse that is helped back to its feet by putting a blanket beneath it. At school, no one notices that I recite the readings by heart. It didn't take me much effort to learn them; much less than to read them.



Finally, the year is over and once more it's back to Berlin. Again, I don't have to go to school, as there aren't any schools open. Then we move west to a village in Lower Saxony. We often have to sneak home from school, crawling in a ditch, when there is a low flying aeroplane only a few meters above us. Soon the school is closed here too, because the "invasion" has begun. But after that, unfortunately, the school reopens. Here I am not just the "Berlin big mouth", but also soon become one of the "refugee children". The school is torture again, this time because they don't want me there. The "Protestant teacher" is nice, but foolish. We have to do the same thing every day: large multiplications, undertake a "dictation" which is written on the board and then we have to write it in our booklet while the teacher dictates it at a snail's pace. But above all we sing. I feel quite comfortable here. I copy the "dictation" from the blackboard during the break, so that I can then work out what tasks we have been set as homework. It's very different with the "Catholic teacher". Here we "learn something" but I don't remember what exactly. He also tries to teach two classes at the same time. When I look up in the air, because I understood what he explained the first time around, the teacher often secretly makes signs to the children sitting next to me indicating that they should nudge me with their elbows, so that I "wake up". They did this with great commitment and strength.

My journeys to school were also very miserable and I had the impression that I was being persecuted more than the other refugee children. Even today, hearing a Lower Saxon accent gives me the shivers. So, I became "strongly motivated" to get into the grammar school in the town. I gladly accepted many challenges that bothered me now and then in order to escape

those village youngsters: the way to the station, the train journey, and finally the gaps in my knowledge that came to light after my entrance into the grammar school. Soon however I had even read my first book. I was eleven years old by then, and it was a kind of desperate act. I did this by reading *Leatherstocking Tales* in the attic of our Swiss relatives, who had wanted to look after the scrawny German child, and who were very kind, but could do nothing against the homesickness that I suffered in secret.

Since I had been spared almost all of my time at primary school and had an excellent memory, I had never noticed what had almost ruined Till. Certainly, the "letter method", especially the slow approach to learning to read and write, and, according to one of the theories, the use of a slate, played a role in sparing me the particular dyslexic afflictions which were later suffered by Till. Maybe I just didn't notice my dyslexia suffering, as I was, from being isolated and rejected.

At first, learning languages caused me some difficulties at secondary school. My mother created the 'some-people-can-learn-languages-others-mathematics theory' for this. She was the language type, I was the mathematics type. That explained everything.

This time, too, I must have been staring into space, dreaming. No one poked me in the side. "...reading music ..." Some researchers claim that dyslexia is hereditary, others reject this as nonsensical.

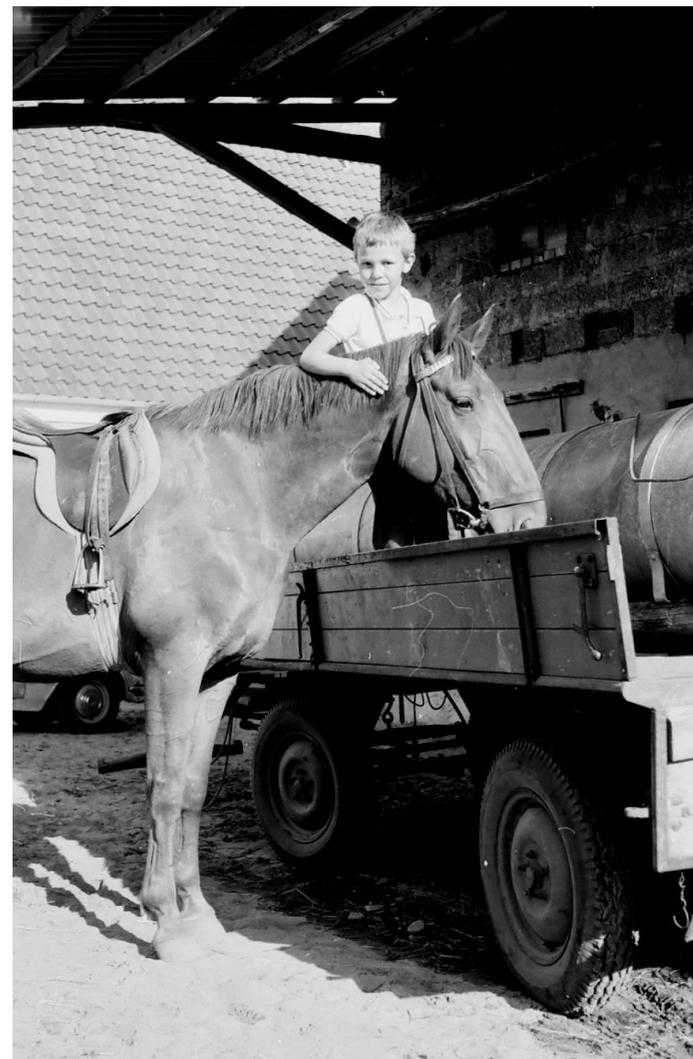
A few days ago, I could not complete writing a word in the bank. Those who saw it must have thought I had been interrupted and then forgot. I had looked at the girls behind the

counter and had concluded that I didn't want to ask any of them whether "Gebühr" [fee in English] was spelt with or without an "h". As a trainee teacher, I once had the ingenious idea of asking the class, at first with some trepidation, with what I pretended was a pedagogical question. "Well, surely you know how to spell it!" For greater certainty, before completing my sentence on the blackboard, I asked the rest of the students as well. My students got used to having to tell me how to spell words from time to time. However, there was laughter when I once wrote "Provessor" on the blackboard, a mistake that was really quite unusual for me to make.

XXII

The summer holidays, and the reading of books about dyslexia, have long past. Till has already "failed socially" in two of his third-year classes, and, a third school did not want to take him. So, what was I to do?

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I think as I start cautiously, looking at Mr Müller from the side. "Are you taking children again this Easter holiday?" Till had been riding there for three years. I like Mr Müller. He looks like he's not only out in the summer and winter, but also every day and night. He has built everything around him: the house, the barn and the stable. He learned how to handle horses during the war, when he was a horse boy for an East Prussian landed nobility. That's how he knows something about riding. Above all, he seems to be good-natured. He seems to be particularly fond of Till: "The way he sits on the horse!" He sits very straight and seems to think that the height from which he looks down on us is exactly his appropriate position.



He is bossy with the horse, which doesn't let himself be put off by this, but continues to nibble at the long blades of grass that protrude into the riding arena.

That was the sunny side of his life during his school years: that was also where his friend Wedigo came into the picture, but he often had a hard time with Till. Later, the children spent the autumn holidays together on the horse farm, and there were problems for and with Till there, too.

The sunny side of his life? It got darker during the autumn holidays. I got off the bus and looked down the country road. There were children on both sides of the road. There were about eight of them, even older ones. Till was the smallest. He walked alone, a little way ahead of the others, who were marching in a group. Till secretly signalled to me, and when I was close enough to him, he hissed at me: "Don't greet me! We're moving on!" He was obviously afraid that the others would laugh at him if I greeted him with a kiss. The other children were about the same height. They nodded at me. The children didn't seem to be friends. When I ask how Till fitted into the community, the Müllers, husband and wife, answer evasively: "That's the way children are." I got the impression that Till was rejecting all the others and only wanted to be good friends with Wedigo.

However, Wedigo did not want to separate himself from the other children by sticking with the isolated Till and therefore decided to go along to the others. Till was unhappy.

"Till wants to live in the village with the horses so much," so I have to start all over again. I didn't want to book him into the farm for the Easter holidays. But Till really wanted to live with

the animals, as at that time, they were the most important beings for him. In fact, he would have preferred to sleep in the stable with the horses.

Finally, I decided to make a request: couldn't Till stay with you for a while? He would then go to the middle school a few villages away as there is a school bus that goes there. He was already almost nine years old. Till thought this solution would be the fulfilment of all his dreams.

The Müller couple consulted each other. They were already grandparents themselves and they were able to get along well with Till when there were no other children around. Besides, they could use the money. They wanted to give it a try.

The next step was to contact the third-grade teacher at the middle school. I had announced my visit by telephone. The teacher lived in the former schoolhouse in a neighbouring village. I sat on a kind of plush sofa. The hallway had stone tiles. It smelt rural. His own son was almost the same age as Till and he showed Till the former schoolyard. The teacher was quite understanding. I talked far too much, but I didn't have a good feeling when I was about to leave. The teacher is very strange, with his big face, in that spacious, cold house. This time I seem to have pitched for my child more effectively than before. The teacher agreed to have a go at teaching Till— and Till was also happy to move to the Müllers. But that year the weather is peculiar. It should be spring, but instead a polar air mass invaded northern Germany. It felt what it would have been like if we were in Siberia. Till's attic room had no stove. Mrs Müller warmed a stone in a tube set inside the living room stove, and

put this into his bed in the evening. They stuffed straw between a few jumpers pulled over each other. That kept him warm.

For me, the visits to see him were like little trips around the world. I was firmly convinced that I am completely useless at driving and would be recklessly risking my child's life and mine if I had tried. It was too cold to cycle; the buses ran at the times when the workers went home from the factory to the villages and there were no return trips. I could not bother my friends every time and the taxis were too expensive for such a long drive and for so many visits.

So, I gave up two afternoons a week to visit Till, and returned home on foot. He had not yet gone to the school there as the classes did not start until after the Easter holidays.

During the visits, he wanted to talk to me alone. Upstairs, in Till's room, we have to lie down in his bed, because otherwise we would have been frozen. Was Till happy with the animals, as he had expected? He says that he had no one to talk to! I was relieved that he had now realised that he didn't only need animals to be able to live happily.

Mr Müller reported that he really could not answer all of Till's questions, and "there's a lot he does not understand yet ... And there's a lot I don't know as well."

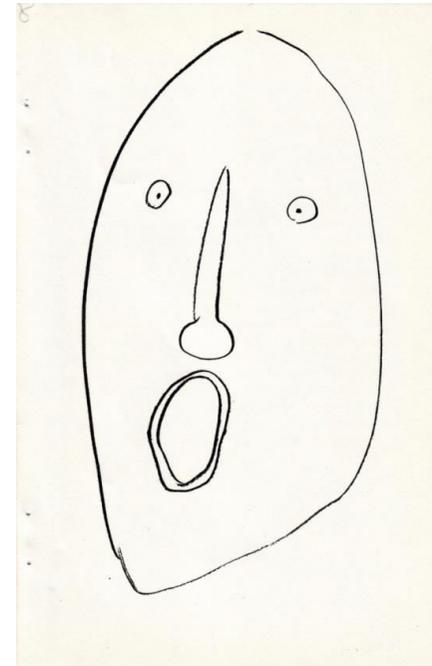
"They don't understand me", says Till. We sat around the dining table in the living room. It is warm there. Till was sitting opposite me. Mr Müller told me about an enormous man on a small pony who once came to see the Müllers. The poor animal!

"It would be better if the pony was riding the man", says Till. I laughed.

"Yes", says Mr Müller, "his legs hung right down to the ground".

Both of the Müllers remained looking serious. I glanced from one to the other, realising that they didn't understand Till's joke. Till raised his shoulders and looks at me.

Quite apart from the cold – it won't last forever – this was probably not the best solution after all. Till looked very unhappy every time I left. What am I expected to do now?



I was supposed to return after two hours to pick Till up. I had managed to take off some of the many jumpers he was wearing, but those that remained would still make him far too hot in that overheated room, in which the school psychologist presided. Till's cheeks are red. He knew that he had to do what he is asked, and to do the best he could, if this interview was to be of any use to him. He would do his best. Then he would drive back to the village where he was staying.

The school psychologist explained the results to me. The results were as clear as daylight: he had dyslexia but was highly intelligent. He explained the details to me: surprisingly, Till got most of his points from the "word part" of the test. Speaking seemed to play a subordinate role, because someone who had been saying "Madelalde", instead of "Marmalade", "er gang" instead of "er ging" for years, and despite being corrected each time, (and even at an age of 12 still says "ihr fängt an" instead of "ihr fangt an") is perhaps not linguistically proficient in every way after all? Dyslexics are supposed to have a smaller vocabulary than that of other children. Till had an overabundance of practice in speaking and listening, because he had been constantly with me, because of his lack of friends, and, anyway, I enjoyed talking to him very much. When Till told me something about the way he saw things, I noticed things quite differently than before, as if it was for the first time that I had seen them. I had never noticed that he had difficulty learning new words. When I read to him ...

I had been reading to him for a long time. Even when he was a toddler, the little fellow sat glued to the floor when I told a

story or read to him. When I retold the same fairy tales, Till never gave me the famous admonition of children: "you have to tell it to me exactly the same way as you did the last time you told it! "

When reading aloud, I have just remembered, Till would often ask as we came to the last section of the book, when a name was mentioned that had frequently come up before: "who was that again?" I got into the habit of not showing my astonishment at any question like that, but simply answering calmly over and over again. As a teacher, if you want students to ask questions, you have the opportunity to practise this way of responding. I was often criticised by well-meaning people because of all the times I used to read aloud. That's why the boy doesn't read himself! For both of us, reading was a shared experience that would have been sorely missed. Reading aloud in the evenings replaced watching the children's TV programme – on a by the way not existing television set – which said good night to children.

I was often asked, "something had to change with Till's schooling now" or "what do you think should happen now?". I think perhaps we should have tried the school in the village: I had already contacted the teacher but that might not have worked out. The school psychologist knew of a boarding school for "children with behavioural problems" in Schleswig-Holstein. The children could stay there for about half a year until they were "cured". Of course, I would have to move to Schleswig-Holstein so that we were able to see each other during that time. I was amazed that a school for "behaviourally disturbed" children could be suitable for treating dyslexia. What actually

was I thinking? Wasn't Till behaving in a disturbed manner at school? As a psychologist, you have to tell the truth to unreasonable parents, and sometimes that may sound harsh.

And I got another piece of advice: Till should have his brain waves measured by a neurologist in Braunschweig. This advice seemed reasonable to me. Just the previous year, the same advice had been given, by the same psychologist, to the parents of one of the children in my class, and it caused this doctor and his wife sheer horror, and resulted in a flood of disparaging remarks about the psychologist. I, on the other hand, could understand the point he was making.

XXIV

Till struggled to get dressed. My hands were twitching, but I didn't want to show the neurologist how emotionally I usually act when Till gets into scuffles with objects that drive him to despair. That was still the case then, even though he would soon be nine. Tying the laces on his shoe would have to wait until the waiting room. The neurologist talked to Till about his school. Till said he would like to go to another school, somewhere – but still be able live at home. He is told to wait outside. A child doesn't usually talk like that, the neurologist tells me. That is not childlike at all. His reflexes are normal and the child is able adapt to new situations, but his EEG, is not normal. It shows an "organic brain change". He tells me about one of his sons who also had "that". In the time when he was a child, "that" could not be detected, but now medical science is much more advanced. By now he was quite all right. He almost got kicked out of the grammar school a couple of times, despite doing well. "Yes, schools! It is terrible what they do to

children!" The children with "organic-brain disorders" often cannot control themselves, they suffer from sudden changes of emotion and are handicapped in their movements. In general, it was "not a pedagogical but a medical task" to deal with them. The damage was "perinatal", i.e. it occurred around birth. The EEG must be checked regularly. If it is only measured once, it is not possible to decide whether the cause is just a retardation in growth or a permanent disorder. The dyslexia was probably related to this.

According to what I have on record about Till's illnesses, the "damage" would probably have occurred as a result of an unrecognised occurrence of meningitis during a period of diarrhoea and vomiting which happened when he was one year old. He nearly died then. I had previously thought his tantrums were just part of his temperament. An angry temperament.

The danger with this disorder, says the neurologist, is that psychological damage is added as a result of interactions with the environment. He is sure that a large number of young people in "public education", and also in the juvenile prisons, were originally suffering from an "organic-brain disorders" who were driven to despair by the environment that they could not comprehend.

What Till needed, said the neurologist, is a gentle environment, not a "normal" school. He knew a psychologist who had a connection ...

I had actually had enough of psychologists for the time being, so I decided first to look around myself.



Agricultural building of the castle of Wehrden, Weser

XXV

There was an advertisement in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* and for the second time, this newspaper played a role in Till's life. I wrote in detail about the difficulties Till had with his environment and with himself, and the difficulties his environment had with him. The advertisement promised a "school for dyslexics" in a beautiful rural area. They also took children from the third year in school. Even while reading the ad, I had the feeling that we might now be saved. My letter to the school had to describe all the difficulties my son was having, so that there would be no danger of him being admitted but then having to be soon afterwards sent home. That would have been too much for both of us.

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The headmaster called me the following evening. They had "lots of kids like that"! This great number of children was a result of the lack of understanding that dyslexics experienced in the "normal" schools. They wanted us to come and see the school the following weekend. The school was in another of the German *Länder* (states). A "dyslexic decree" already existed which gave dyslexics grants to attend certain facilities: this was for those children who had been "recognised by the school psychologist".

We sat in green-brown leather armchairs that were long past their middle age. Above and beside us, antlers protruded into the room. A wild boar skin lay on the floor. The man of the house obviously loved to hunt. He was tall and slightly stooped, perhaps ten years older than me. He wore leather knee breeches and smoked a lot. We were excited about the surroundings. The place is out of the way. It was built around the castle, which now houses the school. A manor farm was part of it, which was still being farmed. Hills and a river completed the picture. Till was sitting with us. He is almost nine years old and had completed two and a half years of school. The headmaster addressed him, he answered, the headmaster nods and invited him to look around outside. Till gladly follows the invitation. The headmaster nods again. Till will be fine. They only took intelligent children with "IQ of 110 and above". After all, they were not a school for children with special needs. They were still struggling for state recognition: the headmaster had to make trips to the government in Bonn in support of his application. He thinks the recognition would not be long in coming. They wanted to be recognised as an experimental school for "dyslexics and school failures from good

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backgrounds", for the "neglected of the wealthy" – these were the children who are neglected because their parents are too busy amusing themselves with everything their wealth offered them. He did not stress very much to me the importance of the second group." For the time being", the entire costs would have to be borne by the parents. There was a knock at the door. A young man stuck his head in. He was looking for some kind of key. In a friendly manner, he was told where the key was. The director must always be there for his students. He shrugged: that's how it is here. They were on duty around the clock.

The school is similar to the "Landschulheim" or the Hermann Lietz schools. The children were given their own flower beds, and they were allowed to keep animals if they wanted, and they all took care of the flowers around the castle. Time was also allowed so as to give the pupils access to culture. They went on trips, travelled to concerts and the theatre, and music was also listened to in the school. In the so-called "evening sessions" the children were encouraged to read aloud from the classics.

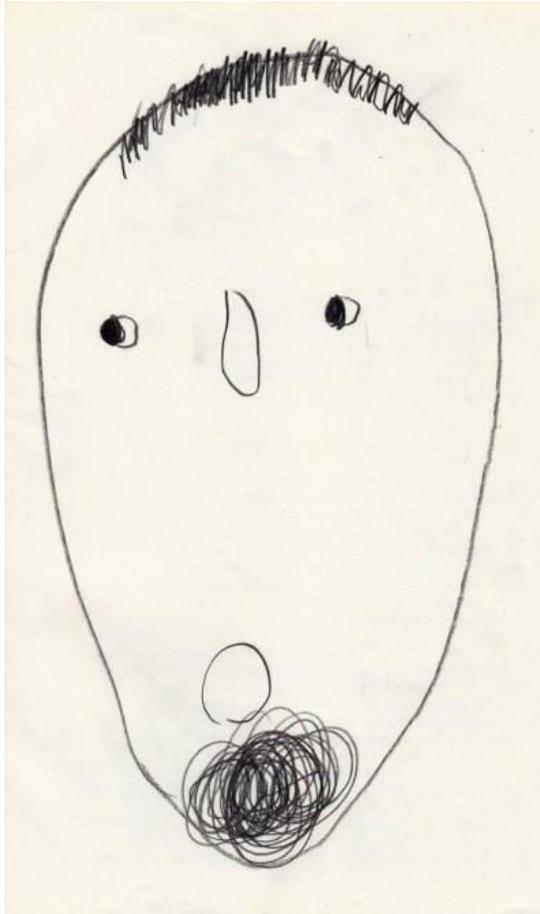
Our conversation was followed by a tour of the castle: Wide well-trodden wooden stairs lead to the upper floor. One wing was occupied by the "little ones". They lived six or eight to a room where they slept in bunks, with a sleeping place and a locker for everyone. There was a table with chairs in the middle of the room. I was happy about the apparent disorder: there was obviously no strict drill here which would have made life difficult for the children. I thought that the strict demands for keeping everything in order would have been particularly

difficult for Till. Outside, we were allowed to look around on our own. Between the castle and the river lay a bright grove of trees. Next to it, a pony grazed on a fenced-off piece of meadow. On the other side, next to a dilapidated tower, there was an aviary with chickens and pheasants and behind them rabbits. Till had wanted a rabbit for a long time, and he would get one when he joined the school.

Till accompanied me, along with our friend who drove us there, on our walk through the castle grounds. Till already knew about everything and showed it all to us. He had obviously already made his choice and it looked as if we won't have much of a decision to make. The educational principles here don't seem to deviate much from my own ideas about education: you let the children decide as much as possible and insist on a few clear rules necessary for happily living together. It is not Summerhill, but it is no "normal" state school either.

We returned to the "office" to inform them of our decision and took care of the formalities. I didn't like to be called "madam". The question whether the "well-known writer" was a relative, and the affirmative smile that was given to my reply, also upset me somewhat. There is often talk of "such" children, who are obviously "better" and more valuable, who in any case cannot be treated "like everyone else". Maybe, I thought, all children should be treated better. I didn't like the elitism. I fear that Till, like all those who were disadvantaged in some way, would be very receptive to this type of 'upgrading' and might possibly adopt such attitudes in future. However, these concerns only worried me a little in view of the obvious advantages of the people involved, the house and its surroundings. We also met

the headmaster's wife. She was refreshing and cordial, young and lively, and motherly in an unthreatening way that inspired confidence.



May be portrait of Till's father, Wanja

I stood on the platform and waved at the train. I felt like crying. Till was leaving yet again and he seemed to me to be particularly small. We were both very sad when he had to leave, but we tried to hide it from each other. "You'll be back soon!" Every four to five weeks there was a "homecoming weekend". The village where the school was lucky to be on a main railway line. Till travelled along with other pupils as far as Braunschweig. That's where I picked him up and that's where I had just taken him. We both knew that the separation was necessary. On my last visit to the school, the head told me he felt our "bond was too strong" and Till's educator added: "when Till comes back, he is always happy. One can be sure that he has had a good weekend. He knows that he can rely on his mother". However, the head teacher points out that maybe Till relied too much on his mother – being so closely connected with her.

Yes, what was my relationship with Till actually like? Just at that time, I made a note of it in another context: "I am pleased that he seems to like me, but I don't really expect it. However, I accept him in everything, even if I prefer to ignore his lapses. He is 'quite after my own heart' in his basic traits: his intellect, his capacity for detachment, his compassion, his ability to relate to the other, his cheerfulness, his resourcefulness – in short, he hasn't been home for a fortnight!"

I wondered if the child had really "needed a father", like psychologists and other experts kept telling me. Unfortunately, there was no way to compare the same child "with a father" with the child "without a father"! So, these well-meaning

people still needed to prove this to me. Till showed no special interest in men of his father's or grandfather's age, but is more focused on young men, who were achievable role models and who had no desire to exercise any authority. Till's relationship to authority was however relaxed. He sometimes acknowledged authority in a person, and sometimes not. What he liked to see in a person was their genuineness, cleverness and strength. He was not usually an obedient child, and as a teacher wrote in the annual report, he is "very critical of everything".

XXVII

The first year was over. Till was now ten years old. The neurologist reassured me that the "organic brain change" had evolved a bit. It had become "qualitatively the same, but quantitatively less". So, it had turned out to be just a slowing down of Till's brain growth that would, one day, be made up for. His mental equilibrium had also been restored. His tantrums had become less frequent, and his self-confidence was again just a little ahead of the abilities, as it was before he went to school. Once, when this had become particularly clear to me, I had said to Till: "Well, your self-assessment will certainly become more appropriate with time." To which I got the answer, "No, I'm getting better!"

A sentence in the "Annual Report for the School Year" made me think very carefully: "As the Right Honourable Till von Heiseler, you must set a good example to the others." "When I was next in the castle, I had said that "I do not understand what you are asking for here. I do not think that the name 'von Heiseler' can

justify demanding any special duties from Till, or indeed providing any privileges to him."

At the end of his second school year at the boarding school, the children went on a class trip. They visited all the castles and fortresses in the countryside. Coal mines and factories, which make an essential part of the life of the area, were only looked at from afar. Such things disturbed the beautiful image of the glorious countryside about them and, in general, they do not fit into the school's view of the world: its culture excluded sweat and dirt. This way of looking at the world was quite different from the one envisioned in conversations between Till and myself. So, there were the first beginnings of our disagreements with the social studies lessons given by the headmaster. As well as that, he didn't like Till talking about politics with any of the other pupils.

At the end of the sixth grade, the "annual report" no longer sounded humorous: "If Till does not improve his behaviour, we will have to exclude him." Until then, every report had emphasised his intelligence: "you are so intelligent, so you must... " Not only nobility, but also intelligence obliges people to do well! He had been reprimanded for his disordered behaviour and for his "stubbornness". At first, all these difficulties were seen to be remnants from the days of suffering being legasthenic (i.e. being dyslexic and not being able to read and write properly) when he was a student at the "normal" school. One and a half years after he entered the boarding school, I'm told that Till is "still one of the pupils who gives us terrible problems". "Still", despite the school having strived to cope with him for so long! The teachers and the other

educators are disappointed that their efforts have not had more of an impact.

I completely disagreed: Till had made all round progress and what he has "not yet" learned, is certainly not the fault of the school! That statement made no impression on the disappointed staff. So, I asked the neurologist to send his report of the situation to the school. The disappointment over the supposed failure of one's educational efforts are easily blamed on the "pupil", as I know from myself.

The report was meant to calm the mind: it is not the teachers who have failed, but Till's resistance to education is due to the nature of his brain. The report ends: "his brain is not able to adapt to the various demands of the environment and such resistance must be expected."

XXVIII

Since the start of the new school year, I had been preoccupied with the thought of daring to bring Till back home. Besides, with the threat of expulsion hanging over Till, I also had the impression that the demands made in class and the learning opportunities provided are increasingly different from those of the "normal" school. The school is still not recognised by the state. Students who have been there have to take an external middle school examination after 10 years in the school. I heard that only a few students succeeded in this exam. Gradually, thoughts about Till's future in the school come more to the fore. Till wanted to become an "animal researcher" and asked how he might achieve this goal. As well as that, for a long time, he had been asking me to allow him to come home.

First, I asked at the comprehensive school. There are several dyslexics there who are supported by a law enacted in the meantime which provides support for dyslexic children, and which is now also valid in our federal state. However, the comprehensive school only accepted children from its specified catchment area. I considered moving there, but first we would try the secondary school in our 'school centre' which included four types of school. One was the grammar school where I was teaching. There the pupils had to learn two foreign languages, that is why I asked the "middle school" to take Till. There they only have to learn English, and French is optional. Till's difficulties were at that time limited to learning foreign languages. Again, the pronunciation was a problem, as was learning new words. The grammar was easy to learn as long as it was logical. The headmaster was attentive and accommodating: Till would be able to start in December, in the seventh class, which was equivalent to his class level in the boarding school.

When I met Till's teachers in the entrance hall which two kinds of school used in common, I got hot and cold, and I smiled foolishly and stammered. They must have thought I was mentally deranged. Yet all I heard from them was a recognition of Till's problems and affection for us. I still couldn't believe it.

Before the transfer happened, I was, and I couldn't understand why, feeling rather tense and I kept saying to myself: why should Till not be allowed to repeat a grade? In English, the marks he achieved was "close fail" and it seemed to be even flattered. It would still be sufficient to move on to the next grade. With French, which Till desperately wants to continue

learning, it all seemed hopeless: he didn't understand anything. The French language lessons depressed him. I explained to the teacher, who thought he should give up French, which in this school – differently to the grammar school – was an optional subject, that it is not me, but Till who doesn't want to give it up. It is only after the summer holidays that I realise why I was so upset by my uncertainty of him being transferred to the next grade: I was unsure whether my decision to bring him back from the boarding school at this point was the right one. But my wishes had been achieved: Till was able to get on well in the "normal" school!

When Till was nine years old and failed in the third year of his school career, a very close friend asked, with sympathy and despondency, "what is he supposed to do after that?" To which I replied coolly, and with conviction, "Well, A-levels, I suppose."

Till took his A-level exams in 1981 – with the other pupils in his year.



Foto: Heinrich Heidersberger 1977

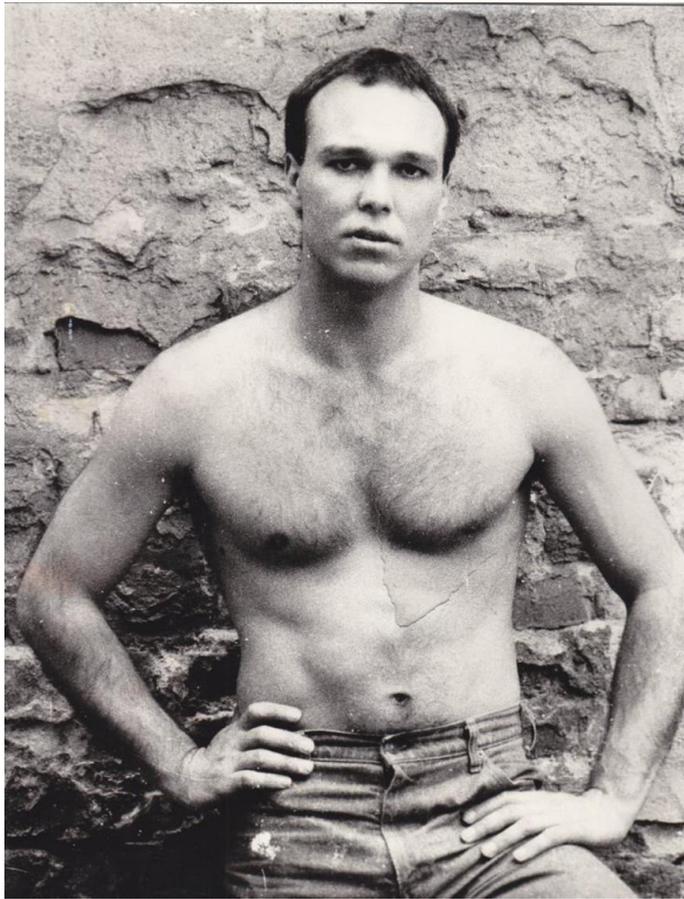


Foto: Iris Brosch, probably 1986

Till 1974: Autumn Holidays in Barwedel

I liked riding, so I often rode my bike over to the Müllers. I went there nearly every week. The Müllers have horses, pigs, poultry and fields. They don't have a tractor, so they do everything using the horses.

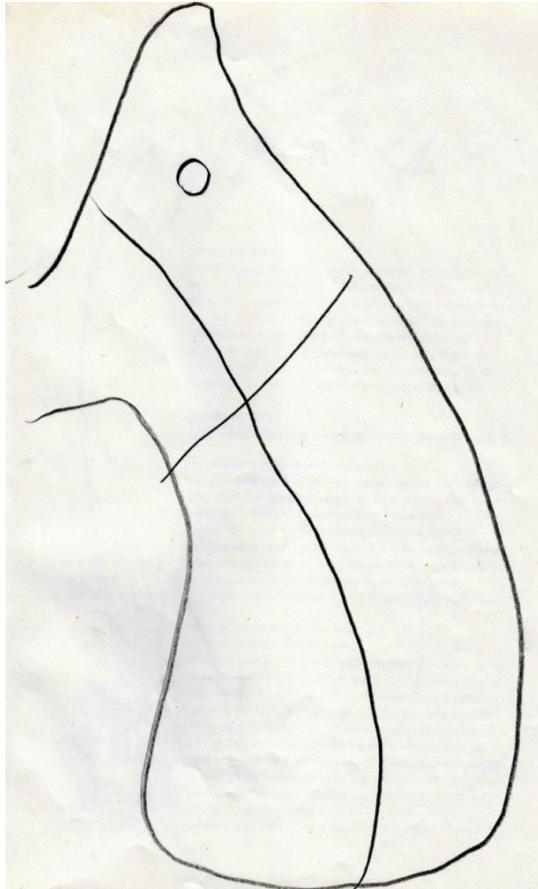
When I was eight years old, in 1970, my friend Wedigo and I decided to spend the autumn holidays at the Müllers in Barwedel. When we drove into the yard, Rex barked. Rex was happy to see us; indeed, he was happy to see anyone. He jumped around on his chain so much that his neck became sore all over. We said hello to Rex. Because he had been barking, Mrs. Müller had thought that somebody must be there. Mr Müller then came out of the house and greeted us as well.

Then we went to see the horses, first visiting Eisfee. She was quite a wild horse and was in foal. It had been estimated that the foal should be born during the autumn holidays. She was nine years old. Mr Müller had bought her from the slaughterhouse. She had become a very good horse and she can jump up to one metre sixty high.

We then went on to the other stable where Goldmark, my favourite horse, usually stood. She had a foal, so she was out in the pasture. Goldmark was the biggest, most good-natured and most comfortable horse. She only obeyed you if you were good at riding. She was eight years old. She had been provided with a horse trough but that didn't suit her at all, because she much preferred to drink the better water from the spring.

Next to her was Jack of Hearts. He was four years old. He had already been broken in, but had not yet been taught to

jump over hurdles. He had a blaze on his forehead, right down to the tip of his nose. It was quite crooked stripe.



Then we went into the other wing of the stable. It used to be a cow shed, so there was a pipe at head height where the cows used to be tied up. I bumped my head on it quite often. That's where Schnucki and Ali were located. Schnucki was fourteen. She "sticks", that is, she always ran after other horses and was ticklish. If her stirrups hung down loosely, it tickled her and she then rose up on her hind legs. Otherwise, she is a well-behaved horse, and she runs quite fast.

Ali has been racing and hunting a lot and Mr. Müller had many photos and trophies won by her. Her father was called Ala, her mother was called Grete. It was not known exactly how old Ali was, but they estimated she was sixteen or seventeen.

When we came out of the stable, we saw the black cat. The black and white one had to be somewhere, too.

Henning, Wedigo's father, who had brought us, then drove away again. We ran into the stable, sat down in the hay and talked until Mr Müller called out, "Come here! Bring the horses from the meadow!!!" We were happy, because when we fetched the horses we used to be allowed to ride them. Wedigo asked, "which horses?" and Mr Müller answered: "Goldmark and her foal. But be careful with the foal on the road!"

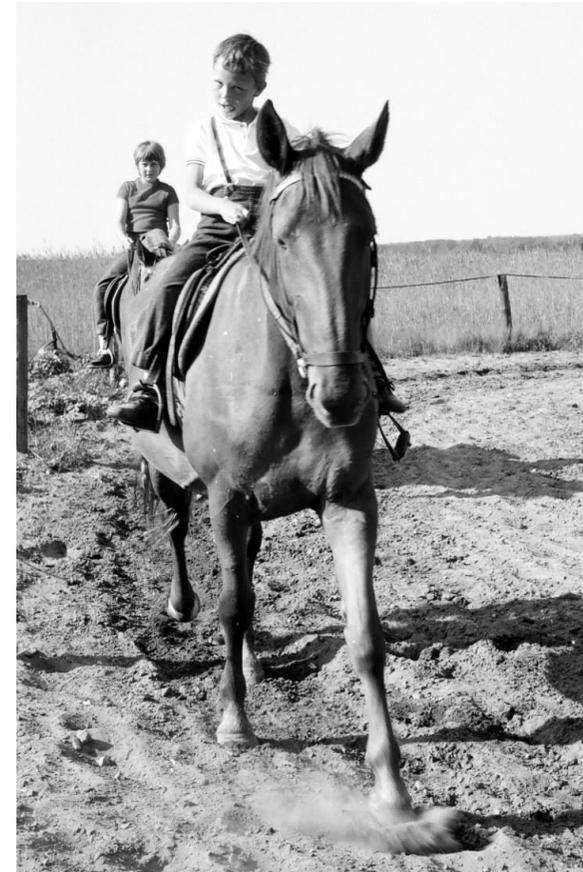
As we walked out of the yard, Rex howled and barked and yanked on the chain because he thought we were leaving. Then we went across the road, down an embankment and then came to a pasture where there were some young cattle. We climbed over the fence and went across the pasture. On the other side of it, we climbed over the fence again and we then stood on a path.

To the right and left there were many fields full of grazing cattle. Goldmark was in the third field. We climbed over the

fence. Goldmark was difficult to catch so we drove her to the corner of the field. There we could climb up on the fence and then mount Goldmark. Wedigo jumped down from the horse to open the gate and then closed it again behind us. The only problem was this: how was Wedigo supposed to get back on Goldmark? She didn't have a saddle on, and even with a saddle Wedigo wouldn't be able to make it. But then we saw a high-voltage power line. Wedigo climbed onto the lowest two steps of an electricity pylon. He carefully put one foot on Goldmark's back. It was difficult because there was quite a lot of space between Goldmark and the pylon.



Suddenly, we heard some loud hoof beats behind us. It was the foal running wild. Wedigo was still standing between the pylon and Goldmark.



The foal galloped in between the mast and Goldmark, rearing up and knocking Wedigo down. Wedigo fell onto the dirt road, but it was no big deal. He preferred to walk from then on. Wedigo led the foal by the mane along the road. That was very difficult. When we came into the yard, Rex barked. The foal was frightened and raced across the yard. When we led Goldmark into the stable, the foal immediately ran after her. When we went into the house, we were very tired and went straight to bed. We talked a little bit more and then went straight to sleep.



Wedigo and Till

Till, 1990: "Evening sessions"

There were either funny or serious 'evening sessions.' The serious evening sessions were on Fridays and the funny ones were on Wednesdays. In the first funny evening session some slides were shown, pictures intended to make us laugh. They were prefaced by the comment, "this is what happens to you when you misbehave." The first picture shows a boy standing in the corner.

"This is what happens when you're even worse behaved." The second picture shows a child being beaten.

"And that's when you have been very, very badly behaved!" The third picture shows a boy being "wanked". Wanking is the name given to the following treatment: a child is strapped naked to the table with belts, and also braided "straw ropes" which are excellent for this purpose. In this way the boy is immobilised and can be covered with shoe cream at leisure. The boy is "wanked". This is how he should recognise what it looks like in his soul: black. There he lay. A general merriment ensues. At first, I'm a little taken aback, but then I laugh. We hear that the boy who was "wanked" was no longer at school and that he had used a wall fire extinguisher to incapacitate other children who had tried to attack him. The teachers are not involved in the "jerking off" although they might take a photo, but they never had a hand in it. On the other hand, you have to get permission from the teachers to "jerk off". I remember that the "boss" – as the headmaster of the boarding school was generally called – explained in an after-lunch speech, which they insisted we listen to, the advantage of this

method over "keelhauling", which was unhygienic and 'really bad'.

"Keelhauling" consisted of the person to be punished being tied together at the feet. The arms are tied behind the body and so he is dragged through the "piss trough". The school where this was carried out, also has other disadvantages, for example, pupils ate from paper plates. However, the boss had to admit, they used "real" cutlery. I was still a bit lost in my thoughts on this. Whom would I like to "keelhaul"? I thought, we don't have any pissing troughs but only individual pissing basins– well...

So how does this "wanking" happen?

Tuesday was swimming day. We kids stood in rows behind the starting blocks. The boss whistled and we all dived in. We swam across the pool and lined up again!

"Dive! This is how far you have to dive. If you don't make it, you have to be helped: you just have to dive."

A tall pupil was responsible for this and if someone came to the surface too early they were quickly pushed under the water again. I didn't come up too soon, but I dived too shallowly and my back was almost at the surface. I come up and lifted my head. I then felt a hand on it. I shouted so that the student refrained from "diving", for which he gets a reprimand from the boss. I would have bitten his finger off without much further ado.

On the way back in the bus, which had been hired along with the driver, German pop songs and yodelling music were played, At least when the boss didn't "forbid" it. Sometimes when he

was not there, the children also sang hits, such as, *The day Conny Kramer died*.

During one such swimming trip, a pupil had a plan which, as it turned out later, was not a very good idea. He claimed that someone had stolen a ten-mark note from his trouser pocket in the changing room. The thief, however, in exchange, had put a five-mark piece in his pocket. He showed this five-mark piece as proof. His name was Stephan. He probably hoped that the boss would give him the money back.

The boss was known for helping out when someone came to harm, but, of course, only when it was through no fault of their own. Whether he would do it this time too, I didn't know. In any case, that was not the end of it. A theft has been committed! It must be solved! He decided that the children wouldn't get any supper until the thief came forward. But this process also required a ceremony. We had to line up in rows of two by two, as the "little ones" usually do. We are "invited in". Lined up in the square. "Jesus Christ be our guest and bless what you have given us. Amen." We sit down, food is "served". But instead of eating, we hear a speech. It ends with the sentence, "and you know who to thank for that!" The next morning, the same thing, but without the speech. Only the question: will the thief come forward? Silence. At noon, too, we prayed and then watched as the blessed food gets cold. Again, Jesus was only invited to speak this time. Things then took a different turn. No longer was there talk of moral duty, a man must turn himself in etc., but the threat that a detective would be employed. That makes a big impression on us. In the evening we have dinner again. Stephan admitted he had lied.

He then "voluntarily" turned himself in for a wank. We "little ones" were not allowed to join in, but I heard there is a photo "with a rose in his ass". In the shower, which we take every Saturday evening, I saw the scabs on his back.

Some had "thanked" him– with wire brushes. That was not allowed. Stephan put the towel over his shoulder so that the boss, who was standing in the changing room, "in order that there might not be any nonsense", doesn't see the scabs.

And then there were the serious evening sessions which were not so much fun. We sat for hours listening to classical music. A slap with the strap from the boss – that hurt more, but it passed more quickly.

Back to the evening session. I sat in the front row so I could see how long it was going to last. Usually two long-playing records were played. I stared at the tone arm and made an interesting discovery: although the record is smaller on the inside than on the outside, it took the same amount of time. The tone arm always moved at the same speed.

Sometimes I received twice as many strokes of the cane because the boss argued that as I am 'aristocratic' so I had to be brought up twice as well. I was glad that I didn't have to listen to twice as much classical music because of that.

Sometimes the boss didn't have to punish us because God himself had already done it. Once, three of us ran away, Brutali, Porki and me. However, Brutali was punished by God. This spared him from standing, hands behind the back, in the office for hours waiting for the punishment. Our heads had to be lowered with the arms folded behind the back Nevertheless,

one was supposed to look at the boss. But then one's gaze was more likely to wander to the boar's skin on the ground. The punishment: beatings with "the strap on the naked..." and two weeks of only dry bread in the morning, dry potatoes at noon, dry bread in the evening. However, at lunchtime, this carefully thought-out punishment failed because the kitchen was just too busy. For example, we were allowed to have lentil stew, much to our regret. Moreover, the two weeks were shortened to ten days by the approaching weekend at home. I remember discussing with the boss whether Brutali, whom God had punished and who had therefore escaped the beating, should not be exempted from the dry bread, etc. punishment. The boss disagreed. Well, how had God punished Brutali? He had torn open his lower leg with a nail. God had reacted quickly. We had only run away for three hours and Brutali had already been struck.



Till in Wehrden, Weser

Brutali had not said a word. But his white corduroy trousers were turning red. He could no longer walk on his own as he lost so much blood that we had to support him. That's quick punishment for a ten-year-old. So that was how God had punished him. He didn't need to be punished any more. On the other hand, one must not minimise God's punishment: the wound was stitched up without any anaesthetic. That had to be done. When he returned to the room in the evening, he just muttered "seven stitches". He said it with a grimace. I'm sure he didn't even flinch. These punishments, God's punishments, were not shown in any of our evening sessions. Neither in the serious ones nor, in the funny ones.



The author: Ingrid von Heiseler, was born in 1936. During the war she lived in Berlin and the occupied territories in the East. At the end of '44 she moved to a village in Lower Saxony. She attended the girls' grammar school in Wolfenbüttel. She studied German and theology in Tübingen, Hamburg and Göttingen. Her son was born in '62. Her first position was at a boarding school in Hildesheim. Since '68 she has lived in Wolfsburg. She also studied education and was trained as a talk therapist.

Photo: Lars Landmann, Press photographer, 1990.

About the book: The story is about a single mother. While in kindergarten her son is already showing "conspicuous behaviour". When he finally starts school, the elementary school teachers are confronted with unsolvable problems. This headstrong child cannot "sit still", nor does he want to comply with the teachers' instructions. School psychologists, play therapists, neurologists, analysts make their diagnoses. They range from "wonderful spontaneity" (which the "normal" school is not able to cope with) to a "too strong Oedipus

complex" to a "behavioural disorder". An odyssey from school to school, from therapist to therapist begins. With her "narrative report", the author provides both an impressive example of a provincial interpretation of education and psychology in the 1960s, and a cheerful and melancholy portrait of a mother-son relationship in which they manage to keep going despite all adversity. (1990)

Epilogue 2021

Some people would probably deal differently if they suspected that they were dealing with a potential satirist writer or even just a reporter. The people of Wolfsburg who were involved in the story, though not named in it, were easily recognizable from the account. They never mentioned the book to me, though they were probably aware of it, especially since both of the Wolfsburg local newspapers published reviews of the book.

The result of an enforced inability to adapt – be it from being a stranger (me) or the one who cannot read (Till)– results perhaps in a kind of independence on how one might live one's life. Both of us had learnt early in life to value ourselves more than what others might think of us.

When I started writing this account I remember making this statement: "Till made good progress in the seventh grade, in the normal school, namely the *Realschule*, based in the *Kreuzheide* school centre in Wolfsburg." From that point, I looked back at many of the events that had made Till's eventual progress in that normal school most unlikely. These events deeply impressed me, so that I had the impression while

writing that I was quoting verbatim what I heard "back then". I added the last sentence, "Till took his A-level exams in 1981 – with the other pupils in his year" when the long-term goal of graduating from high school had finally been achieved.

Two years later, the magazine *,betrifft: erziehung'* printed the almost unabridged text of *Einer tanzt aus der Reihe* in its September 1983 issue. I had sent it to this magazine which was published by the Beltz publishing house and they agreed to publish it. They wrote to me that it was not usual to print such a long text – from page 22 to 34 – and even more so in two columns. In this version, Till was still called Jan. I don't remember whether this was due to my discretion, or Till's objection.

Till then offered to publish the book in his newly founded publishing house. At that time, this meant that he had to copy the text himself, because I had only been able to supply him with a typescript. This inspired him to write an epilogue in which he recalls the peculiarities – or oddities – of his life at his boarding school. (Needless to say, he had never told me anything about it.) Of course, I was delighted to add this to the book!

I asked a student of mine, who has become an artist, to create a drawing for the cover. I told her how I imagined it might be, but that unfortunately I was not able to draw it myself. She also allowed me to use her drawing for the eBook edition, and of course I acknowledged her in the appropriate places.



Betrifft: Erziehung, September 1983, S. 22 -34

I was very pleased when Till turned my text into a book in 1990. Then, by chance, when I was on a flight the following year, I spoke, with my neighbour on the plane. He turned out to be a professor of education in Hanover. I told him about the background of the book and it interested him. He wanted to check the book for its suitability for reading and discussion in an educational seminar. In fact, he subsequently requested a set of the books for his students, and invited me to a seminar session at the end of the reading and discussion of the book in class. I sat in front of the students and answered questions. I expected critical comments, but not a single one came. For the end of the seminar session, I brought the videocassette of the television movie *Too Young to Die*, in which Till plays the main role. The viewers were impressed by what "had become of the child". And yet at least one of them remarked: "Oh, he's quite normal!" Then I had doubts about what she had understood.

There had already been a remarkable reaction to the article in 'betrifft: erziehung'. A teacher got each of her third graders to write a letter to the protagonist, that is to Till. She was happy about such a "natural writing occasion" which involved writing a letter to a real person. I got countless individual responses, including a comment from a colleague in another school: "it gives you courage to stand by your own child." A shoe saleswoman in my building bought several copies to give away. Another friend warned any potential reader they should "not start reading in the evening or you will read half the night and not get enough sleep!" Indeed, this was what my dentist's receptionist complained about. My principal tells me, during the intermission in the theatre, that he "had a hard time tearing himself away to get in time to the performance." But, of

course, there were also some critical comments: the "normal school" is completely unsuitable as a benchmark, and that I sent my child to do the work I should have done myself. These were the only negative statements that have lingered in my otherwise rather positively oriented mind.

Reviews of the book in the two of Wolfsburg daily newspapers.

***Wolfsburger Allgemeine* on Tuesday, May 15, 1990**

Einer tanzt aus der Reihe (He dances out of line) by Ingrid von Heiseler.

Ingrid von Heiseler describes a mother-son relationship in her book *Einer tanzt aus der Reihe*

WOLFSBURG The relationship between mother and son has always been an intense one and also fierce and stormy. There were battles that had to be fought between them and with the outside world.

Ingrid von Heiseler (born in 1936), is a teacher of German and religion at the Kreuzheide Gymnasium (Grammar School), and has published a sort of biography about her son Till and herself. The title of the book, *Einer tanzt aus der Reihe* (He dances out of line), points to what the author is heading for and which is already made clear on the book cover: in the midst of a flock of black sheep romps a white sheep. Swimming against the current, so to speak. Yes, that is Till von Heiseler, now 28 years old. After graduating from high school in Wolfsburg and

studying German in Göttingen, he lives in Berlin as a writer, actor and director. He is also a publisher. He published his mother's (diary) book in his own publishing house.

Till – that was the boy who could not be controlled and generally fit in. He was an outsider, who even as a small child, did not shy away from any challenge. He did try to do things and he always wanted to succeed. For example, trying to tie the laces on his shoes himself. He wanted to be successful in school, even if reading and writing did not come naturally to him. "A restless student," the teachers moaned, "one who can't sit still." Yes, just one who constantly steps out of line. The simple verdict was that he was "behaviourally disturbed".

Ingrid von Heiseler deals with her colleagues. She asks, fears, hopes. Argues and gives in, juggles and tricks. She is angry. She keeps looking for new schools for Till and has him diagnosed by psychologists, neurologists and therapists. She hears diagnoses ranging from "highly gifted" to confirmation that he has "wonderful spontaneity" and "too strong an Oedipus complex". She sees herself pilloried: "the mother is divorced, plus she works. And the upbringing! "I have an APO (Außerparlamentarische – Outside Parliament - Opposition) child in the class, says the first-year teacher, and she willingly reveals the child's name."

Ingrid von Heiseler gives a fresh and lively, intelligent and sensitive account of what happened to her and her son. Without looking back in anger. "I have written for people who suffer with difficult children. And, of course, for me. It's my way of processing what I've experienced." No, she's not trying to be a life coach. She doesn't like that term at all. "I want my book

to entertain and be a smooth read." Certainly, the subject of "dyslexia" is tremendously important to her. "It's a real problem for children who don't have high intelligence, and who are not able to be helped by their parents." Ingrid fought for and argued for Till, from school to school, "this boy has so much power in him." Indeed, both mother and son have power. Their interaction at the today is based on friendship. Ingrid reads Till's plays and poems, and does the proofreading. They are committed on a professional basis, trust each other's judgment, and are aware of each other's honesty.

If you want to understand this mother and son relationship with all its complications, this volume is for you. The book (112 pages) is illustrated with drawings by Till as a child, and is available in local bookstores and cost twelve marks.

The author of the article is *km*.

***Wolfsburger Nachrichten*, 29.05.1990**

Einer tanzt aus der Reihe (He dances out of line) by Ingrid von Heiseler.

With love and patience, against frustration

"Behaviourally disturbed!" – "Constitutional hypermotorism!" – Or in plain German: "he's always dancing out of line!". These were the statements a mother in Wolfsburg heard when her son was between six and ten years old. But even as a single parent she did not despair.

This mother showed a lot of love and patience. And she managed, against all odds. She describes how she did it in this short book that has just been published in the Berlin series

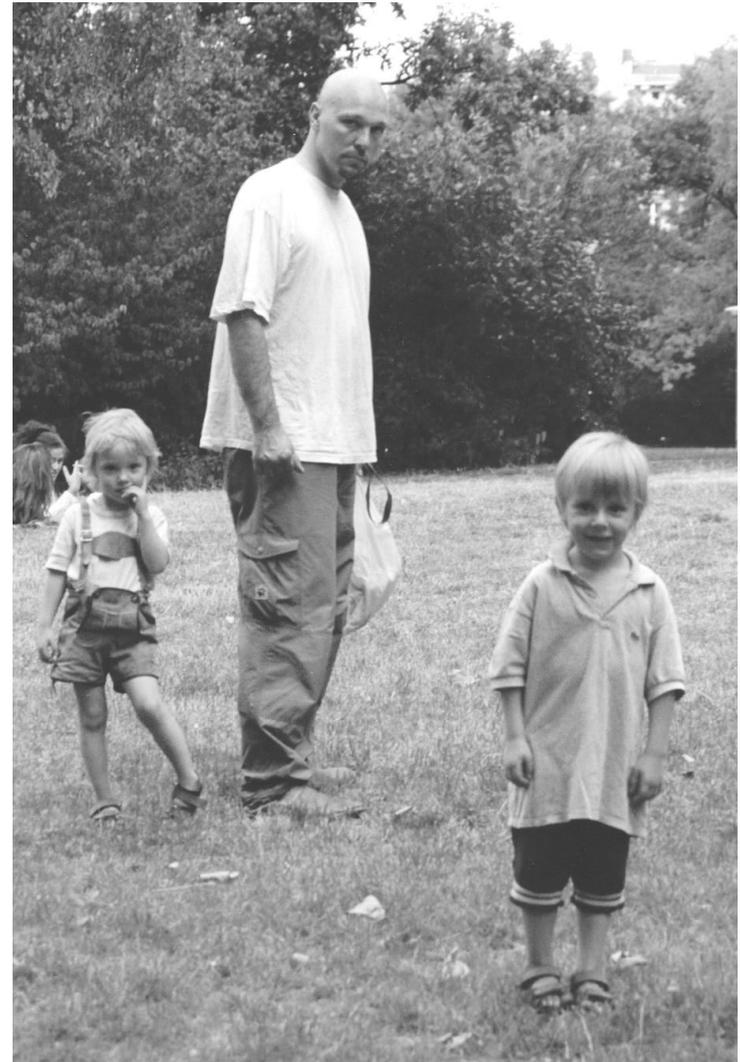
"edition sisyphos": "Einer tanzt aus der Reihe". Ingrid von Heiseler, is a teacher at a Wolfsburg grammar school and reveals herself in 28 small chapters as a sensitive author who is able to describe her environment critically and humorously at the same time.

The cover illustration by JuditRozsas picks up on this humour when a white sheep appears in a herd of black sheep. That's how it can go. Ingrid's son, Till von Heiseler is now twenty-eight years old. He was labelled as a dyslexic at school, but has already proven himself a wordsmith of distinction with his poetry collection *Black Roses (Schwarze Rosen)*. As an actor, as a director and as an author of plays, the supposed black (white) sheep has come to the fore in recent years. The book can be an encouragement to some mothers and fathers. Ingrid von Heiseler describes so vividly in her book how this boy grows up experiencing more frustration than pleasure at school, but flourishes when he is allowed to be creative.

The relaxed conversational tone that Ingrid von Heiseler adopts does not conceal the despair that this mother often felt. She does not tell the story in strict chronological order, but in skilful leaps back and forth. The result is a picture of a mother and son relationship that is as tense as it is lovingly shaped.

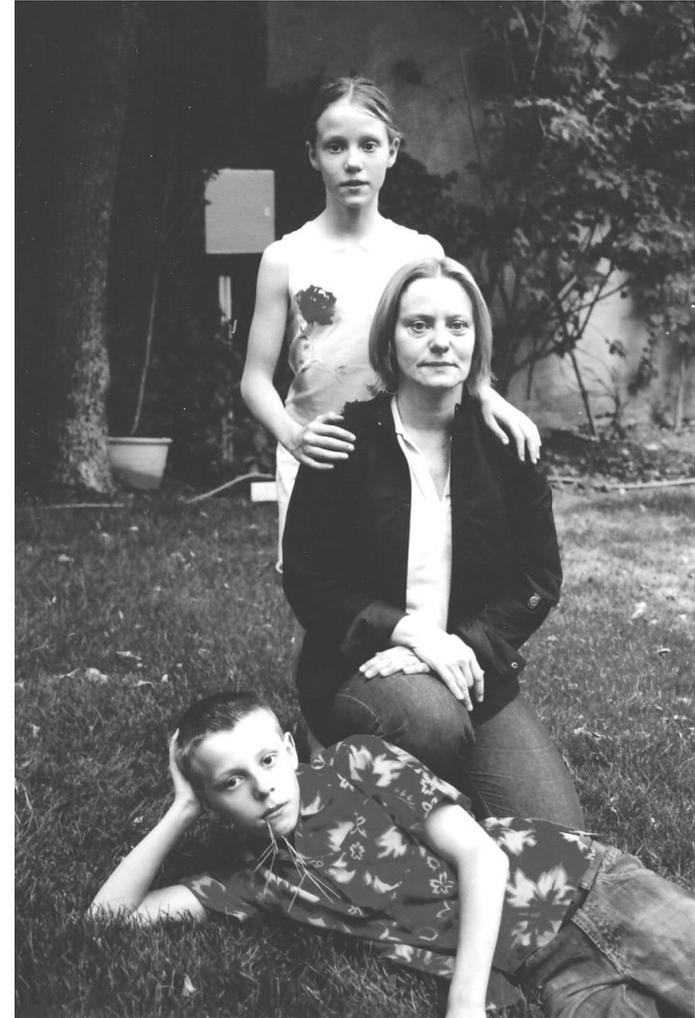
The end of the book is revealing, where Till von Heiseler, in a text of his own, reveals the almost sadistic methods of upbringing in a boarding school. Here we look behind the façade that was described by the mother shortly in a previous section. The whole thing is a revealing and a comforting book.

The author of the article is *Lie*.

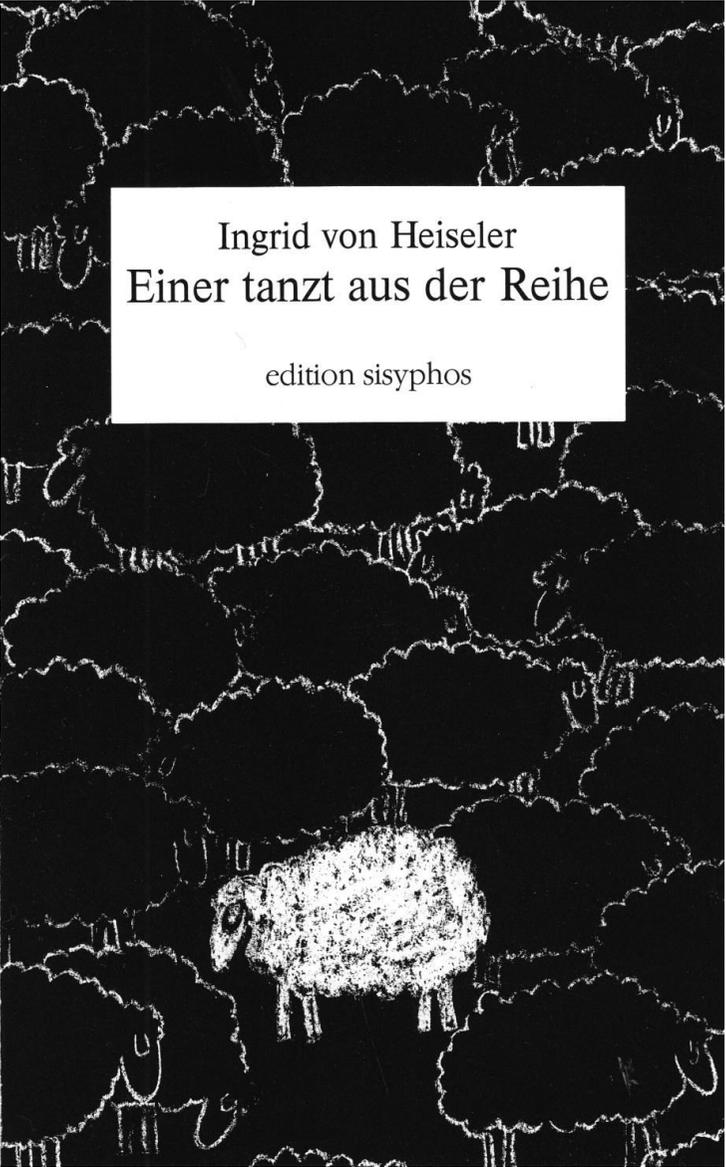




Anton, Till, Emilia 1998



Emilia, Michaela und Anton 2006

The book cover features a black and white illustration of a flock of sheep. The sheep are depicted with white, textured wool and dark outlines, standing in a field. The background is filled with dark, stylized trees or bushes, creating a dense, textured effect. The overall style is reminiscent of a woodcut or a high-contrast drawing.

Ingrid von Heiseler
Einer tanzt aus der Reihe

edition sisyphe