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The Uplands

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The door leading out to the big school yard is still unlocked. I push it open for you; you blink in the cold wind, grunt a kind of thank you, and walk through it, still reading. I grit my teeth, look back down the long hallway. The notices tacked up next to the teachers' room flutter in the icy wind that streams all the way to the secretary's office; I take my time as if I intended to let the whole school freeze, but I'm only listening for footsteps, for Sven, who must not follow us.

“Are you coming?”

I let go of the door and follow you. Are you cold? I don't ask. And outside too, there's not a soul anywhere. The usual foot-and-a-half-square concrete paving stones are damp; remnants of grimy snow persist in the angle where the paved yard meets the edging of the plant beds and trees. The wet, brown tree branches tremble. Over there, near the empty bicycle racks, the inevitable rosebushes are putting up with it all, as ever the epitome of public greenery. Your sweater clings to your breasts; your skirt is caught between your legs. You hold the notebook out to me, and I hand you a Gitane, as though to pay for it.

“Hnn?”

“Nicely written. You're not in it. It's funny. On purpose?”

You didn't find it the slightest bit funny; I'm sure I'm interpreting that correctly: *You read those first few pages and said, funny, but you didn't smile.*

“Clearly.”

No way. I close my eyes to make it look as if I'm inhaling appreciatively, but I lower my head. If only I'd justify all this claptrap. Nothing is clear. I walk ahead a bit, taking the lead, you don't care. Typical teenage diaries are full of useless emotional entries such as: *I'm-so-lonely/desperate/furious/hurt/happy*. Cross out anything that doesn't apply so that, if I had some inkling today, I could impress you with the sentence: Lacking any real logbook characteristics, its sentimental value will be zero. The teenager is protected from his own memory by his penchant for experimenting with the biggest words and gestures; indeed, the tear-blurred lack of precision probably prevents worse things. The teenage-diary style, as it happens, the *Please-throw-me-away-in-ten-years blather* on paper, indicates an evolutionary step forward. If there weren't this ineptitude, there wouldn't be any progress at all.

“After all, what am I supposed to write about myself?”

“You might be right, Stringbean.”

“Hmm.”

My *hmm* sounds masterfully neutral, as though I didn't care what you think of me, as if only under certain circumstances would a more detailed explanation interest me. But you don't follow up on it; you hand the book back to me, and put your arms around your sweater. Over there, where the lawn and the bushes begin, the sixth-graders would be romping and running around and looking for a hiding place: Ready or not, here I come.

“Have you ever wondered whether Sven keeps a diary too?”

Confusing me is easy for you; Who knows better than you how tiny our worlds are. And especially those boys who write think that they are the only beings for miles around who take notes on anything.

“Just imagine what he’d write today: *Steff is wonderful, it was terrific; now I am a man.* Look, here’s where the little kids play hop-scotch.”

The chalk lines have been washed away by the melting snow; over the years ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’ have been covered with snow, white on white; frozen over; weathering the change of the seasons under an armor plating of ice; I shuffle into the game. Conveniently, my Gitane is finished; I can flip it into the chalked outline of the game and stomp it out. As I leave the chalk squares I forget that I’m already a big boy and I raise my right foot so as not to touch any of the lines, skipping along in childish steps. You grin.

“What is it you want to show me, Stringbean?”

“It’s there. Back there.”

“Girls know that other girls keep diaries. And what do those other girls write?”

What do you think? Guess.”

I don’t want to hear it. But you keep talking anyway:

“Facts. What the scale says. How many pounds. You little monkeys don’t have a clue. Girls think about their weight. Boys think about how they look; girls about the exact number of pounds, how stupid. Girls believe boys look at them and think: “*Man, she must weigh at least 130 pounds.* That’s what girls think.”

“Concrete – abstract,”

I mumble as I light another smoke and raise my head. Wonderful, cigarettes must have been invented by a man who had problems communicating, and the next step in their

evolution is to make them only half as long so you have to fiddle with them twice as much. Those coffin nails function as a prop, whether it's for small talk, courting, passing the time, or at executions.

“Terrific, Stringbean. Unfortunately, it's not so simple: Girls have precise ideas about their limits; they know exactly who they are, but boys don't even know what a normal dick looks like. That's why you have to play those faggy little games first. You have no idea what that could be, huh? Oh no, not you. Hey, do you intend to walk through *that* muck? Where are we headed anyway?”

We are going to the cemetery. In front of the school entrance there is this noisy intersection, but then on the other side of the building our little town already ends. Next to the primary school yard there's a stubbly wheat field, bordered by a small unkempt hedge, then a wire fence behind which no one would expect to find anything because it continues on, forever green, and few students know about the hole in the fence and the narrow path through the bushes, at the end of which a row of fresh gravestones suddenly appears, as if the Pinneberg Main Cemetery had spread into the plant world with its latest expansion. The matted greenery surrounding the grounds looks rather like bushes hiding a municipal junkyard. Hey, why not write that down?

“A gentleman, my dear, would take off his jacket and place it on the ground so his lady can walk dry-shod through the mud. But never mind, I have to wash my skirt anyway. So what's next?”

The gaping hole cut into the fence is as tall as a man. The muddy path leads right through it; today at least there are no stinging nettles; I push the straggly steel mesh aside; the edge of the opening in the fence is bent toward the outside, and it's strange, but it never

occurred to me before that some undead person in a hurry had fought his way through here to the sun, to freedom, or that someone badly buried had lumbered with superhuman strength into the open. After all, I also believe that zombies aren't squeamish idiots but fantastically strong.

“Good lord, is this it?”

You catch sight of the first gravestones. Why do I write today: *Don't you have a mother?*

“A cemetery? Am I getting myself all dirty just for this?”

Oh, because you're going to have to wash your skirt yourself, that's why. Clear-cut conclusion, I think. Shivering in your sweater, you toss your curls, but you do look at a couple of the gravestones, and so I can allow myself another Gitane to hide my disappointment. I should have known how hard it is to impress you. Now you turn around. I try to grin and attempt to talk up my playground a little:

“This place...no one ever comes here.”

Yes, so what? Anyway, once you're here it's hard to leave again. You press your lips together and decide to make things a little easier for me; that's nice of you.

“And who is it you want to introduce to me?”

Nobody in particular. I blow out some smoke and gesture all around me with my cigarette as if it were obvious what miracle was constantly occurring at this gray, small, sodden spot. In those days I was fascinated by the freshness, no, to be more exact, the naked untouched nature of precisely this section. This field was cleared and made part of the cemetery only a few years before. It is young ground, used for the first time for burials and obviously intended for those of modest means: hardly any care, few decorations, the laconic nature of the information on the gravestones: a name plus two dates, the same

informative content as on the metal dog tags of faceless soldiers, even the size and writing on the blocks of stone corresponds to the lowest price range. What I want to say, what I could say is: Look, isn't that wonderful? Over there: Frank Möllmann, 1967-1981, nothing else, he got to be fourteen like me, no wreath, no verse couplet, he got it over and done with without any frills. Right next to him, Friede Mertens, got to be eighty-three, the same setup, a nothing of a grave. Here people suddenly don't care how they lie and whom they're lying next to, elsewhere they always do. They're my buddies. I could recite the names in the first few rows in my sleep, they're so similar it's easy to get them mixed up: Want to bet I can resurrect an entire section of the Pinneberg Main Cemetery, just the way it's laid out here? You don't even need an explanation:

“Aha. Have you ever seen a dead body?”

With my right sneaker I shuffle in the yellow grass as though I wanted to caress one of the all-but nameless buried corpses beneath the ground, or dig it up.

“They're your best friends, are they? And now you're going to tell me how often you've thought of suicide, blah, blah, blah. And do you keep a skull next to your alarm clock? Are you one of those cowards who sleeps in a coffin at night? Hey kid, you never get to see your own skull. And you never see yourself lying dead in your coffin. You and your little mental games.”

You come very close, you smile, your intentions are good, you extend a hand, pluck the cigarette from my lips, toss it over your shoulder, it lands in front of the grave of Wilhelm Otto, an average Joe. The news-ticker stone reveals he lived from 1/12/10 to 8/16/81; the dawdler stuck to a normal age. You look me directly in the eyes; I have to look back without diverting my gaze.

“Okay, I wouldn’t want to hurt your feelings. But don’t tell me you’re really interested in suicide and cemeteries. You look pretty crappy, but that’s not enough, my dear. Listen to me.”

Not necessary, because I stash away every one of your words, I don’t need anything to help me remember; I could publish your collected works, and to prove it to myself, I memorize my log. I’m all ears.

“You think you’re much too important, even though you’re nothing. You just don’t get it: first, you have to stop caring about yourself. Why do you tell me that you’re going to hang yourself from the balcony? Huh? As long as you keep on looking love-struck at yourself in the mirror you have a huge job ahead of you before you’ll be allowed to lie here.”

“Hmm.”

“You know what ‘cool’ means? The Indians have a test: An Indian boy gets to take a mouthful of water; then they send him out into the hot desert. And when he comes back, he has to spit out that same mouthful of water. – Shit, the cum is running down my leg.”

You turn around so that I can be by myself, put your hands under your arms, and in disgust shake a drop of Sven off your leg. You walk down the most recent row of graves as if you wanted to find out whether you knew anybody. I swallow a couple of times.

You curse softly because of the cold and your skirt, not because of the graves; they remain silent, a row of modern corpses. You stand there with your back to me in front of the unusually large tombstone of Fridolin Maassen, a blank granite surface, as if the man with the clown’s name really had wanted a long inscription on his tombstone, perhaps:

My remains rot six feet under, but in the end there's nothing on it but his name and the bracketing dates. I wipe away a little tear. You're right, but I have to defend myself, here among my beloved resting places, and I blow clouds of condensation into the air, make an effort to raise the stakes. Did I stutter while asking the question?

“D-d-do you b-b-believe,”

oh yes, that's not so easy to get out; I swallow again, blush, you don't move an inch, probably already have an idea of what I want to ask; I close my eyes; the words have to get out; in a terrible way they have to be spoken out loud; given my circumstances, they have to be bellowed. Unfortunately, I really expect you to answer:

“Do you believe in life after death?!”

“Do I believe in what?!”

You turn around. An echo effect would be nice, but cemeteries aren't laid out for indiscrete shouting.

“A life?! Oh, Stringbean.”

I pretend not to give up.

“But life without a Beyond would be a total waste! What I mean is: Does it somehow go on? At some point I'll be looking down at myself from up there.

Otherwise everything would have been a lot of hogwash!”

And I have only a few seconds left before you'll completely spoil this spot for me. I'll never be able to figure out whether you had those devastating words ready or whether they only occurred to you at Fridolin's gravesite.

“Why do you like it here so much, huh? I'll tell you. Because it's the safest place there is. The safest. Nobody kicks the bucket in a cemetery.”

That's right, it's the opposite of a battlefield. Anyway, I agree and hang my head. You come over, a bit blue from the cold, grin, wanting to leave.

“Hasn't anyone told you that before? Let's go; it's getting dark.”

You keep smiling as I raise my head, you were only waiting for that, and now you tap your finger against my diary.

“Look here, don't write: ‘Steff is afraid of the cemetery.’ A lady wants to know what puddle she has to step into. Do you have a Rolodex with the names of your best friends, a party guest list? Without one you'll forget them all.”

Not that dead people would interest you. You look past me, through the hedge to where the path begins.

“I know it by heart.”

“In a couple of months you won't care a bit, believe me. You teenagers never know what you want. And once you turn seventy, you'll miss those memories.”

“Seventy? I'll never get to be seventy!”

Sounds like: *Stuffy, I'll never get to be stuffy*. It just happens I'm right, I'm so sure of that, it gives me a real feeling of triumph: You're wrong, my love.

“Well, so I'm wrong, Stringbean. How do we get out of here? Anyway, make a list. In twenty years these graves will be occupied by others. You won't find any of them again.”

“In twenty years I'll be long dead!”

It's true, and now I have to laugh. Laugh! With a loud ha-ha and my arms spread wide; man, that's rare, that belongs in my log; after all I don't have to write *I*, it's enough to

say: *after weeks Behse bursts into liberated laughter once more*, or something similar.

I'm never sufficiently interested in facts.

“I didn't want to hurt your feelings. I just think that as soon as you have three people in a room they'll automatically develop a religion. Can we leave now, or are you waiting for a hand to come out of the ground and wave to you?”

“I'm not like that!”

But then, what kind of guy am I? I pass myself off as a perfect representative, a prime example of the couldn't-care-less generation.

“And...and as for my soul – I don't care about my soul!”

“Don't be silly. Of course you do.”

Watch out, on that subject I have very precise views, certain basic ideas that – having trained myself through months of soliloquizing – I can splutter forth. Oh, God, I turn in the right direction and am probably going to tell her what I'll scribble in my notebook that evening.

“You know, all the bodies here are completely dead of course, those down there are just heaps of dirt. I mean, I'm not afraid of zombies or things like that, but their ghosts, they exist. Do you believe in ghosts?”

“Slow down a little; my skirt is caught on something.”

You curse, and my sneakers slide forward on the barely discernible trail. We've come to the end of the secret path. I spread apart the rip in the fence:

“Their ghosts, they visit them; they're here someplace. That's what I think.”

“So there is a party list?”

“It’s drier here, see? And, and, and I think – this is really my idea – I think the ghosts visit their bodies because of their life stories; you know, the story begins as soon as you have your own ‘I’, and the story ends with a corpse.”

“You read the last page in a novel to see who survives, don’t you?”

“No, what I mean is, the ghosts only float around up there, somewhere up there, you know, and they look down, look down at their old lives.”

“Now? Am I supposed to look up and say: *Hello, Behse Two?* Shit.”

Your sweater catches on some branches. I continue leading the way as though you hadn’t said anything and I hadn’t heard anything. I even leave the cigarettes in my pocket.

“I mean, there are always those three days after people die. You know. Always those three days in which you, as a ghost, look back at your old life. During those days you float around almost as if you were visiting a monument.”

“Write that down. And in less than twenty years you’ll look at the end of your story, terrific. You should die in Venice; that would be worthwhile. Besides, if no one ever dies in cemeteries, why should there be ghosts bustling around here, huh? *That party’s cancelled.*”

I write it down, exactly like that. I can already see it quite clearly, a couple of years later: You dragged me along, without asking whether I wanted to go anywhere in particular. And you were right, because where should I have wanted to go. We reach the safety of the paved schoolyard; it is getting so dark, you can hardly see the mud stains.

“I don’t think I’ll ever go back to that cemetery.”

Is that what I think? Nonsense. Because of you it’s going to become even more of a playground for me.

“Ooh, did you already see yourself lying there, Stringbean? Jens Behse 1967 to...
How old did you want to get? Have you thought up a little verse?”

“Oh yes.”

“Damn, it’s cold.”

“You know, I’m going to croak of cancer, that’s guaranteed. My life is just too shitty. Some kind of cancer’s going to get me. Liver, stomach, testicles, whatever, maybe larynx. Have you read *Mars*? It’s a novel about a guy who has cancer of the larynx. And he’s Swiss too.”

“I don’t read books.”

“I don’t either. Only the dust jacket and the ending. My father got it as a present. Then there’s chemo in the hospital.”

“And if your life weren’t so shitty, does that mean you wouldn’t get cancer? My dear, you’ll always manage to find a cause; that’s the least of your problems. One of my old guys, the one with the camera, he deals with cancer all the time, and he says: The cause gets you before the disease does.”

“Hnn?”

“In plain English: You always live a pretty shitty life. Get it?”

Of course I understand that. Who if not me. *You always live a pretty shitty life*. I can write that sentence, I write it down that very evening; it will have a place of honor in my log, I’ll fall asleep next to that sentence and dream sweet dreams because I know: I’ll never live a good life.

My father tries, obsessively, his buddies do too, and they all envy Peter, his best friend, because he eats only the healthiest foods and is going to stop smoking this year; he jogs,

meditates, attends yoga and psycho workshops, has harmonious relationships with his partners, and drops syllables like Ti-be-tan everywhere he goes. In short, my father's friends consider this life of his absolutely exemplary. Cancer would hit Peter in a completely different way because it would mean that all this extreme effort, the years of struggling for self-improvement, the typical mix of asceticism, correct attitude, and serenity would have failed – but if afterward anyone were to discover the loophole through which the enemy gained entrance, then surely it will be Peter, who always finds a cause. Peter needs to have a story ready behind everything, otherwise it doesn't make sense. The game *Luck in fighting cancer* opens a world of unlimited possibilities.

“Hey, this is great; the gate's already locked. We have to go around the other way.

And on your gravestone, what should it say?”

“Hmm, I've thought that over carefully. *Keep going*. Two words: *Keep going*, you know, with a double meaning.”

“You mean: People like you shouldn't stop and stand at your own gravesite.”

“Oh shit, I didn't think of that...”

“Am I spoiling everything for you today, Stringbean? Don't let it get you down; you teenagers can't think anything through consistently. It's biological. It's a job for older guys.”

The wind hits us just as we turn the corner into the lane that runs between the front of the school, the bicycle racks and the janitor's bungalow; I stare straight ahead, wide-eyed, not even feeling the cold; you in your sweater, on the other hand, are freezing and press your arms against your stomach.

“Look at yourselves, what a bunch of pathetic guys! What are we girls supposed to do with you? Huh? You can’t even manage to put on a better act, that’d be the least you could do.”

You’re being unfair. It’s hard to avoid showing our immature surprise or shock; it takes enormous energy. We just don’t matter – in all respects; that won’t happen for a few more years. Alpha animals like Sven manage to do it, but the rest of us are trying desperately to get rid of our mental baby teeth. We can only cover up our jerky, awkward gestures and thoughts and our attempts to wriggle free with one standardized mask: that of the dimwit. Looking uninvolved is cool. The agonizing process of concealment serves to keep people from reading every childish emotion in our faces. It’s probably our fundamental attempt to achieve growth. How horrible that simple word ‘kid’ can be.

“You and Svennieboy, you ought to become friends. Especially him. You may not think so, but you’d be a perfect match.”

“Sven and me, friends?”

I fumble for a cigarette to rescue me. You grin.

“He’ll think so too. You tell him you accidentally overheard us talking on the other side of the door. Just say to Svennie: Six inches. At first, it’ll be the end of the world for him, then he’ll hate you, and then you’ll be buddies. That’s how things go with you monkeys. You’d have a friend at last.”