

Men and Boys

THE RIVER BATHS were closed, the entrance padlocked. There was a chill rain falling. The lifeguard was nowhere to be seen, perhaps he had gone home or was in the village somewhere. When Lucas clambered over the wire fence, he thought of the drunk who had got in here at night a few years ago and fallen into the pool. They had found him dead the following morning.

He went to the changing rooms, which were in a low whitewashed brick building. Next to the entrance was a sign, MEN AND BOYS. There was no light except what came through the gap between the walls and ceiling, and it was always a bit damp in the cabins, even when it was really hot outside. Lucas browsed along the row of lockers, to

see if someone had forgotten a coin, but there wasn't one. About halfway he stopped looking. He went down to the river. The water was high and pale brown. It flowed so fast that there were little eddies marking its surface. Twigs drifted past, they seemed to be going faster than the current. They must have opened the weir downstream, following the storm, Lucas could hear a distant roar of falling water. The rain eased, then stopped altogether. He went back to the cabins and changed.

He remembered summer afternoons when it was hot and all the kids seemed to go swimming. There were various groups dotted about the lawn. Lucas's fellows ran around on the edge of the pool jumping or pushing each other into the water until the lifeguard intervened. Lucas swam back and forth, counting laps. After he'd done a mile, he climbed out, feeling cold and staggering slightly as if he'd forgotten how to walk. His friends lay on big bath towels on the grass. They talked about the summer holidays and where they would go. He lay down next to them on the grass.

Whenever he was with the others, Lucas felt as though his pores were closing, he felt small and painfully self-conscious of his body. He was shut up inside it, he couldn't be human without it. On his own, he could forget about it, then his edges were those of his consciousness, the damp

meadow he was walking over, the passing clouds, the blue strip on the horizon, the seam of forest on the river's far bank. Then Lucas could have been just anyone, or even no one.

He lay down on the rough concrete slabs beside the pool. There were leaves floating on the water that the storm had blown off the trees, and a wasp was wriggling about. Lucas put out his hand to rescue the creature, but he was afraid he might get stung. His hand hovered protectively over it. Slowly it drifted farther and farther from the edge of the pool.

Lucas remembered Franziska, who was in the same class as him. They sometimes walked home together from school as far as the railroad crossing, where their paths divided. Often they would stand in front of the crossing sign for a long time, talking. Franziska had so much to say, she never seemed to get to the end of it. But at the class party she didn't want to dance with him, she made some snotty remark and got herself something to drink. And later she was seen dancing with Leo.

Lucas picked three stones from the rosebed that surrounded the pool, washed the clay off them, and dropped them into the water one after the other. Once the ripples had stopped, he could see them lying on the bottom. He lowered himself slowly into the water. It was so cold it took

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his breath away. For a long time he stood on the lowest step of the ladder, up to his belly, and then he slipped in. As soon as he started to move, the cold abated. He dived for the stones. The first time he only managed two, he didn't see the last one until he was on the surface again. He released them from his hand. When they dropped, they made a little clucking sound in the water, and then they sank waveringly to the floor. The second time, Lucas found all three. He wasn't an especially good swimmer, but he was a good diver. He took a few deep breaths, pushed off the side, and dived down on a diagonal slant. He saw the blurry white tramlines and the bottom of the pool quickly move beneath him. Now he was swimming just over the floor. After the third line, he felt an ache in his throat and chest. He had to rise to the surface, he couldn't make it all the way across. But he carried on, and the aching diminished. He now had the feeling he could dive forever. Over the last few yards he expelled the air he still had in his lungs, and then his head broke the surface just in front of the edge. He took deep breaths and turned and swam slowly. He wished Franziska could have been there and seen him. One time, as she was getting out of the water, her bikini top slipped and for a second Lucas caught a glimpse of her small bare breast, and the nipple dark and erect.

When he left the water he was cold, and he ran to the diving board and back. The surface of the water was smooth once more. Lucas dived the length of the pool, fifty meters, and surged out of the water at the far end with a shout of triumph. Franziska was standing there smiling at him. She bent down, put out her hand, and helped him out. He wanted to hug her, but he wasn't sure how to do it. They just looked at each other and walked to the lawn side by side. In her bathing suit, Franziska walked somehow differently, more confidently, her whole body moving, the hips, the shoulders, the slender arms. She sat down—it looked as though she just let herself drop. Then she sat there on the grass, cross-legged, leaning forward. She talked and talked.

Lucas wandered about, crossed the large lawn, and walked along the fence under the trees, where in some places the bare earth had a shiny gleam, as if someone had polished it. There was a smell of grass and earth, and something sweet like flowers or something rotting. The sun had come out from under the clouds, and its level rays were falling on the ground. Little droplets of water glistened on the leaves and in the grass, and suddenly everything looked very bright.

Lucas wandered across the lawn, hoping to find something, a purse or a watch or a penknife, something.

Down by the river he lay down in the short-cut grass and watched the dirty brown water flowing past. The grass was wet and cold. Everything was clear and shallow. It was a mixture of happiness and unhappiness. It was happiness that felt like unhappiness.

Franziska and her girlfriends were going to the baths. They sat in a circle, they had bought sweets and were talking and laughing. Lucas couldn't imagine what they were talking about, he couldn't remember what Franziska used to talk about with him. Sometimes she wouldn't know what to say anymore. Perhaps that was the moment when people kissed. You had to be quiet before you kissed.

Lucas lay in the grass. He cupped his hands on his chest and made two shallow breasts. A couple of drops of water from somewhere landed on his stomach. A light wind had started up. Lucas shivered with cold.

He stood in front of the changing rooms: WOMEN AND GIRLS. He went inside. Here there were single stalls, there was no general changing room, like for men, who didn't mind changing together. Lucas wondered if women felt more shame, and if they had secrets from one another, and what they were.

Franziska walked in, with a plastic bag with her things under her arm. She locked herself in one of the stalls and

pulled off her jeans and T-shirt. Before undressing further, she pulled her bathing suit out of the bag and shook it out and hung it on a hook. She hurried. She was thinking of the others who were already there, lying in a ring on the grass and waiting for her to arrive.

Lucas had taken off his trunks and hung them. He wedged his cock between his legs, and looked down his body, stroked his hands over his hips. He could be someone or no one. He had a sensation of warmth, his skin seemed to glow, but inside his body was still cold.

He opened the stall door, and immediately felt much more exposed. When he stepped out into the open, someone could see him naked. He didn't dare go on, and stopped at the entrance. The women walked past him, the girls in light summer dresses and young mothers and older women. They vanished into the changing rooms, and immediately re-emerged in various brightly colored bathing suits.

Lucas ran over to the men's changing rooms. He hadn't put his clothes away in a locker, there was a little heap of them lying on the long wooden bench. He pulled on the chilly garments. Then he checked the lockers again, to see if someone had forgotten their deposit, starting with the first lockers and going on until halfway, when he gave up and left the building.

The toilets were locked. Lucas tried both doors, the men's and women's. At the back of the little hut was a door that was open a crack. A low monotonous drone was audible. Lucas peered into the unlit room. The noise came from a big pump. On the floor were blue-and-white plastic chemical containers. It smelled of chlorine.

He went inside—it was far warmer there than it was outside—and pulled the door shut behind him. For a while he stood in the darkness. Suddenly he panicked: the lifeguard might return and catch him.

When he climbed back out over the fence, he remembered he had left his trunks in the ladies' cabins. He imagined Franziska picking them up and taking them between the tips of her fingers to the lifeguard, who tossed them in a box where all sorts of lost and forgotten things were kept until someone came for them.