

Translated excerpt

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Das Verschwinden des Philip S.

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The disappearance of Philip S.

Translated by Martin Chalmers



..... The photographers are there before the ambulance. The first newspaper pictures show a policeman, fallen to the ground beside a wire fence. He's lying on his back between two cars. On the uniform a large dark stain at chest-level. His body on the cobblestones already framed by the chalk line, which separates him from the living. A good-looking young man with shadows under his eyes. His gun must have slipped out of his hand as he fell. Even in death a movement starts from his bent index finger and leads to Philip S. who has collapsed a few yards away next to a stretch of barbed wire. His foot is caught in the wire. One leg of his black trousers is ripped open. He's wearing shoes that are good for running, with rubber soles. Lighter than those he used to wear, with horsehide toecaps, double sewn. Shoulder and arm cover his face. The black leather jacket has been pushed up a little. Under it his belt. He had it made from the strap on which the cows on the mountain meadows carry their bells. A cattle halter. Perhaps the only thing from his earlier life that he still owned.

A policeman's torch is shining on him. It's a public dying. Philip S. is lying in hard, low shrubbery. In a last moment of flight. As if leaping.

1

Philip S. arrives in Berlin in the late summer of 1967. He's wearing a suit that doesn't go with his age, and has a first name that's not on his identity card. With his thin beard, which lends his rural face an old-fashioned air of severity, he resembles Bonifacius Amerbach of Basel, as Hans Holbein the Younger painted him five hundred years ago. He's twenty, and it is as if he had already traversed his years with long strides. But he doesn't rush along, coat tails flying; instead his movements are rather deliberate, stretching out the seconds, as if he had to exhaust their every potential. Everything he does, he does slowly. And yet he is driven on by a hidden urgency, which his long body only hesitantly wants to follow.

When I see him for the first time, he's leaning against a wall and waiting. He's waiting for me to finish my conversation on the old black telephone in the corridor of the Berlin Film Academy. I'm twenty-seven, have a child by a man who has left me, and live in the district of Kreuzberg in a flat that was once a baker's shop. I still go to the Film Academy when I don't have any small change for the phone box. I am drawn to the place, although I know I could meet the father of my child there. I look into the open editing rooms, where reels of film run back and forward with a quiet hum. It sometimes happens that on the screen on the editing table, something from my flat turns up, a lamp, which students have borrowed for a scene, a table at which an actor is sitting, or my old-fashioned fur coat, which some woman or other is now wearing as she steps out of a car. Or at another cutting table I see pictures of a rag and bone man, who pulls his cart through the streets of Kreuzberg. He also passes the bakery in which I live. In one place he loads something onto the cart, somewhere else he unloads it again: a used pram with chrome mudguards or an old bicycle. Coughing, he drags his cart in the evening to the hostel for the homeless at Silesian Gate. In the corridors I walk past photo boards on which the father of my child, who is no longer my husband, can also be seen. I have a coffee with the secretary, who remembers the first time I came here, with a baby on my arm.

The father of my child was one of the first students at the Academy. During our brief married life in the former bakery he made a single film: the last minutes in the life of Socrates, played by a beggar with long white hair, who collects cigarette ends on Potsdamer Strasse and speaks Plato's text in a Berlin accent. An East Prussian labourer who at night sleeps next to the coal stove in a Berlin corner pub plays Kriton, his pupil. The Death of Socrates takes place in a cemetery between thuja trees, gravestones and fallen leaves.

At the beginning of 1967, when it's become so cold in the baker's shop, that the frost patterns on the windows of the child's room no longer thaw, I pack a kit bag and get on the train to Rome. My son crawls around on the floor of the compartment and is stuffed with sweets by Italians returning home. We go to my friend C. who lives in a flat in Trastevere with her daughter born the previous spring and earns a living by translating ecclesiastical texts from Italian into German in a Vatican Library. Now and again she passes work on to me, which I translate from English. At the weekends when she can't sit in the library, we take the back seat out of the old Volkswagen, put the two prams in it and go for outings to Lake Nemi; sometimes we lie down in the early sun by the Appian Way or drive north to the Monsters' Grove of the park at Bomarzo with its crooked house and its figures cut from volcanic stone. On working days she quickly orders an espresso and a cornetto con panna in the bar in Trastevere before hurrying to her work. I look after her tiny daughter until midday. When she comes back I set out with my son through the churches, across the cemeteries, the markets, through gardens and museums. I cross the squares as if they were never-ending rooms, one more beautifully furnished than the next. During the day our life is light and full of movement. In the evenings, however, when our children are asleep, we sit in the half-empty apartment and from time to time the conversation comes to a stop, when it occurs to us that once again no post has come. Then each of us tries to suppress a rising suspicion that

our husbands, who are shooting their first films at the Academy in Berlin, could be with other women. When the tenancy agreement runs out we pack everything up and clear the flat. Red and white painted trestles and boards we carry back to the building sites from which we had got them. American artists had lent us mattresses and children's beds, which they would take back as soon as we had started for home after our last night.

It was a friend, who had been lying in my bed. From a neighbour I learn that during my absence she had also been wearing my clothes. During those spring days I go to other parts of the city, visit the people I know there, and don't show my feelings. If I'm not visiting anyone I go walking along the bank of the Landwehr Canal with my child, until I come to the Wall, where the city ends, and turn round again. I push the pram past cellar apartments: the circle of light of naked bulbs swings back and forward across floral wax tablecloths. An old man sits at the table, a woman. Or a couple, saying nothing. In the evening, when my child is asleep, I sit down at the big drawing table in what was once the front shop. The production stills from the shooting of the Socrates film are still lying among the materials for my doctoral thesis on an Expressionist writer. I stare at books and papers, unable to think clearly. Through the opaque foil on the shop windowpanes I see the shadows of people who briefly sit down on the windowsill and then walk away.

In the early light of second June I'm woken by shouting. I see outlines of policemen forming a knot, a blurred tangle. Arms with sticks and legs with heavy boots detach themselves from the knot. They strike and kick someone lying on the ground. I stand behind the window as if paralysed. This is the world, I think, in which my child, sleeping in the back room, will grow up. In the afternoon I go to the demonstration against the Shah of Persia. But I remain at the edge with my pram, don't join the crowd. In the evening the rumour goes around that a demonstrator has been killed. The photo of the shot student is one of the indelible images for my generation. Nothing remained as it had been.

In late summer I stop thinking about the return of my husband and look for a new flat. I find it in the autumn, in Charlottenburg, in a street by the railway tracks. Every three minutes an S-Bahn goes by between Friedrichstrasse Station and Wannsee Station. I have packed up most of the things in the baker's shop; I leave behind two leather settees, the seats of which are worn out. I organise my move on the black phone in the corridor of the Film Academy. Philip S. is leaning against the wall and listening to me. He's wearing a pin-stripe suit and a shirt with a monogram that becomes visible when he puts his hand in his trouser pocket. I'm wearing an old-fashioned dress of artificial silk and boots. He says: "I would like to help you." From these few words I hear that he's Swiss.

The next day he turns up in a long black coat, carries boxes and furniture up the stairs and stays. He gives up his room in the basement of a villa through the barred half-height windows of which, he saw the tyres of the trucks rolling along the wide main road from the Staaken border-crossing point into the city and out of the city again to West Germany. He comes to my flat with a lime green Hermes portable typewriter, a lime green suitcase and his photographic equipment for which he has fitted compartments into an old doctor's bag with a bar closure: a reflex camera, three lenses, twenty four, fifty and one hundred and five millimetres, the matching lens hoods, a magnifying glass, cable release, light meter, cleaning brushes, leather cloth. The camera had been bought in Zurich just before his eighteenth birthday. The invoice, made out in his father's name and with a considerable discount, is still in a suspension file, which he started for both of us. The camera was not a present. It was an investment, which his parents hoped would pay off with this son who didn't fit in the family.

In the Volpi Brothers' shop he had decided against Minolta, Leica and Pentax and for a Nikon because of the sound of the shutter release.

Nevertheless, he doesn't choose the model with which David Hemmings in Antonioni's film *Blow-Up* follows Vanessa Redgrave through a London park. He chooses the simplest Nikon without any automatic function, because he is a slow, a static photographer, concerned with careful preparation; nothing is left to chance. In the photographic shop he compares on a list the indicated shutter speeds of the camera with his own measurements. Perhaps it was because of this meticulousness that the salesman who had initialled the invoice in 1965 recognised his earlier customer on a house wall in Zurich ten years later. After his death on 9th May 1975 former friends had put up a poster in memory of Philip S. The salesman takes a photo and publishes the picture in a magazine. Wind and rain have not yet entirely worn away the face. The laughter in the eyes can be made out in the photo, the broad forehead, the number twenty eight, the date of his death and three or four words which once made up a sentence – "goes on", "meaning" and "life".

2

He is buried in a small cemetery on the edge of Zurich where the countryside spreads out, towards Forch or Rüti. The route to his grave leads past the hospital in which he came into the world in 1947, born under the sign of Aries, the Ram, of whom it is said that he knows no past. For many years he is the only one to lie under the heavy gravestone, embellished with a coat of arms. On the grave a young fir. Scattered fir needles on the snow. Now his grandmother rests by his side. She had sometimes slipped him something after he had left home, and he had added her surname to his. She was followed by Klari, the maid and nanny, whom he loved. His grandmother and Klari survived him by almost twenty years, his parents by more than thirty. Business people who had become wealthy through the manufacture of traffic lights. The parental home – a villa on Lake Zurich.

From Tiefenbrunn Station the shore rises steeply up to Resedastrasse. It's the first time I'm in the city again since our paths separated. A light rain is falling. After more than thirty years I'm sitting on a low front garden wall opposite the house and looking at dark red open shutters. Only once did I walk up the steps with him to the art nouveau villa. The visit ended in the entrance hall. Now architects have moved in and they display the restored rooms on the Internet. On a virtual tour, I am able to see how beautiful the house is inside, the round entrance hall bigger and more spacious than I remember it. Several doors, arranged in a semi-circle are open, allowing me to look into rooms I never entered. I know nothing of his childhood. I have to imagine how he lived here. A curving staircase leads to the upper stories and to his room. From there he had a view of his daily route to school: along the shore almost to the centre of the city, turning left at Bellevueplatz across the Quai Bridge to the other side of the lake. He always walked the whole way, he had once said. Even in winter no ticket for the tram, no bicycle, he was not to be spoiled, no exception made from the puritanical rules that had created the family wealth. He also said once that in his parents' home no books were read, no pictures

looked at, no music heard. There had been fairness, but there had been no place for wishes, children's wishes. Instead purchases had been made when they were necessary and brought a return.

He unenthusiastically attends the commercial school stream of the grammar school in the Enge district of Zurich. He had submitted to the will of his father, who wanted to bring up his second son at least as his successor in the family business, even if the first had already broken away to be a racing driver. But commodity management, balance sheets, economic geography and commercial correspondence are of little interest to Philip S. One year before taking his university entrance certificate he leaves school with an average grade. Only in German did he obtain the top mark. He immerses in a world of words and pictures. He moves to Waffenplatz in the city. From there, on clear days, he can look across the lake to his parents' house. But it is no longer his home, no more than a look back. From his room on the top floor he has brought nothing with him except his camera.

He is nineteen. He works as a freelance photographer for a fashion magazine, at the same time takes a half day job there as a graphic designer and is acknowledged as having professional skills. With the first money he earns he buys himself clothes. For him clothes are not just something to wear; he uses them to express his difference, an image of himself devised with care but in haste: his form of rebellion against his parents. He has clothes made which are not practical, which he doesn't need and which he actually can't afford – three shirts with a monogram, a suit, shoes of horsehide and the long black coat of good cloth. That is how he is fixed in the memory of those who knew him. Sometimes the coat is said to have had a fur collar like that of Oscar Wilde, then again it is said to have been of velvet or to have been silk-lined and made by the best tailor in Zurich for a month's wages.

He shoots his first film. He had written the script with a friend during his last school holidays. In winter 1967 the film is shown at the Solothurn Festival. It explores the open and empty condition of his generation between accommodation and opposition writes the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Later he left the film lying somewhere, in an attic, a cellar, no one knows where. In the spring he turns twenty and has decided on a life as an artist. He now describes himself as a free film-maker; on his letterhead, he puts the words "film" and "experiment" under the magnifying glass, they are repeated, considerably enlarged in a circular section.

He shares a studio in Zollikon with a painter who likewise wore a long black coat. Philip S. had been his best friend then, and had reinforced him in his desire to live as a free artist. He had been self-sacrificing; with what he earned at the fashion magazine he had kept them both afloat and paid the rent for the studio. His parents had not given him anything. He would not have wanted anything either. Everything in him had rebelled against his parental home, an ice-cold fortress. He had been a sensitive person and a good photographer. Philip S., says the painter, had designed a photograph for the poster of his, the painter's, first show. He had spent three days in the darkroom until he was satisfied with it. The figures he had admired, he very quickly left behind. Then he went to Berlin, and they drifted apart. But he had been very fond of him, said the painter years later to a Zurich magazine.

Philip S. applies to the Berlin Film Academy, which had been established one year earlier. He is classified as a cineaste with high standards. In his application portfolio there are, in addition to posters, eight screen prints, mounted on aluminium, by his friend, the painter. The pictures, a pop-art comic about a girl-character, are the visual outline of a film he's planning. He rejects it, however, after he comes to Berlin, the atmosphere of the still dilapidated city prompts him to make a different film. He places his friend's works, each one carefully wrapped in tissue paper, in a cardboard box.

In spring 1967 he comes to Berlin for a week for the entrance examination. He writes an analysis, several pages long, of a brief feature film sequence. Meticulously, take by take, he reconstructs the hand movements of two escapees, knocking a hole in a wall. Asked about a writer or composer he admires, he names in the same breath Georg Büchner, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Beethoven, Stravinsky and the Rolling Stones. He mentions neither Schubert nor Brahms whose music he will use in a film shortly afterwards. Among the visual artists he is impressed, above all, by Andy Warhol and by the director Jean-Luc Godard, whose film *Pierrot le Fou* is a milestone. Godard, he writes, tells of the truth, of life and of death. "Pour être sur de vivre, il faut être sur de mourir."

In September, at the beginning of the semester, he brings his few possessions to Berlin in a little red Citroën. He arrives like someone without a hinterland. He, the man of images, has no pictures of his past, not one that shows him as a child or adolescent. His family, his parents' home, his history – he has parted from it all, even from the name his parents gave him. He also leaves his friends behind. None of it plays any part any more in the eight years he still has to live. Even his language remains there, where he was born. Soon he will speak only standard German with a slight accent. Only rarely do those unusual emphases on first syllables slip out, which reveal where he comes from. In the years that follow if he nevertheless turns up in his hometown now and again, he appears like a stranger or someone passing through who hasn't been there for a long time.