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Opening Extract from...

The Weekend

Written by Bernhard Schlink

Translated from the German by Shaun Whiteside

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

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THE WEEKEND

Bernhard Schlink

Translated from the German by
Shaun Whiteside

Weidenfeld & Nicolson
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One

She got there just before seven. She'd expected to make more headway and arrive sooner by traveling in the early morning. When she hit more road construction, and yet more, she grew nervous. Would he walk through the gate, look out for her in vain, his first reaction one of disappointment, of discouragement? The sun rose in the rearview mirror—she would rather have been driving toward it than away from it, even if it had dazzled her.

She parked where she had always parked and walked the short path to the gate as slowly as she had always walked. Everything to do with her own life she cleared from her mind, to make room for him. He always had a firm place in her mind; not an hour passed without her wondering what he was doing right now, how he was getting on. But each time she met him, he alone existed for her. Now that his life was no longer in suspended animation, now that it was starting to move once more, he needed her full attention.

The old sandstone building stood in the sun. As so often before, she was strangely moved that a building should serve such an ugly purpose and at the same time be so beautiful: the walls covered with Virginia creeper, field and forest green in spring and summer, yellow and red in autumn, the small towers on the corners and the

large one in the middle, its windows like those of a church, the heavy gate, forbidding, as if it wished not to shut the inhabitants in but to shut their enemies out. She looked at the clock. The people in there liked to keep you waiting. She had often applied in vain for a two-hour visit, and after the hour granted, was simply not collected but went on sitting with him for another half hour, three quarters of an hour, without really being with him any longer.

But when the bells of the nearby church began to strike seven, the gate opened and he stepped out and blinked into the sun. She crossed the street and embraced him. She embraced him before he could set down his two big bags, and he stood in her embrace without returning it. "At last," she said, "at last."

"Let me drive," he said as they stood by the car, "I've dreamed of it so many times."

"Are you sure? Cars have got faster, the traffic's heavier."

He insisted, and kept driving even when the sweat stood out on his brow. She sat tensely next to him and said nothing when he made mistakes turning in the city and overtaking on the autobahn. Until they passed a sign for a service station and she said, "I need some breakfast, I've been up for five hours."

She had visited him in prison every two weeks. But when he walked along the counter with her, filled his tray, stood at the till, came back from the toilet and sat down facing her, she felt as if she were seeing him for the first time in ages. She saw how old he had become, older than she had noticed or admitted during her visits.

At first glance he was still a handsome man, tall, square face, bright green eyes, thick salt-and-pepper hair. But his poor posture emphasized his little paunch, which didn't match his thin arms and legs, his gait was slow, his face gray, and the wrinkles that crisscrossed his forehead, and were steep and long in his cheeks, indicated not concentration so much as a vague sense of strain. And when he spoke—she was startled by the awkwardness and hesitancy with which he responded to what she said, and the random, jittery hand movements with which he emphasized his words. How could she have failed to notice that on her visits? What else was happening, in him and to him, that she had also failed to notice?

"Are we going to your place?"

"We're going to the country for the weekend. Margarete and I have bought a house in Brandenburg, rundown, no heating, no electricity, and the only water comes from the pump outside, but it's got a big, old park. It's gorgeous now, in the summer."

"How do you cook?"

She laughed. "Are you interested in that? With great fat red gas canisters. I've ordered an extra two for the weekend; I've invited our old friends."

She'd hoped he'd be pleased. But he showed no pleasure. He only asked: "Who?"

She had thought long and hard. Which old friends would do him good, which would only make him embarrassed or reserved? He needs to be among people, she thought. And more than that, he needs help. Who will he get that from, if not his old friends? Finally she

decided that the ones who were pleased she had called, the ones who wanted to come, were also the right ones. In some of those who made excuses she sensed honest regret; they would have liked to be there if they'd known about it earlier, if they hadn't already made other plans. But what was she to do? His release had come as a surprise.

"Henner, Ilse, Ulrich with his second wife and their daughter, Karin with her husband, Andreas, of course. With you, Margarete and me that's eleven."

"Marko Hahn?"

"Who?"

"You know the one—for a long time he just wrote to me. He visited me for the first time four years ago and he's been a regular visitor ever since. Apart from you he's . . ."

"You mean that lunatic who nearly cost you your reprieve?"

"He only did as I asked. I wrote the welcoming speech, I knew who the addressees were, what the occasion was. You have nothing to reproach him for."

"You couldn't have known what you were doing. He did know, and he didn't try to stop you, he just rode on into it. He uses you." She was as furious now as she had been that morning, reading in the paper that he had written the welcoming address for an obscure left-wing conference on the theme of violence. His actions, the paper said, had revealed his incapacity for insight and remorse—such a person didn't deserve to be reprieved.

"I'll give him a call and invite him." He got up, looked for and found some coins in his trouser pocket

and walked to the phone. She got up too, was about to run after him and stop him, then sat back down again. When she saw he didn't know where to take the conversation, she got back up, walked over to him, took the receiver and described the route to her house. He put his arm around her, and it felt so good that she was reconciled.

When they drove on, she was at the wheel. After a while he asked, "Why didn't you invite my son?"

"I called him and he just put the phone down. Then I wrote him a letter." She shrugged. "I knew you'd want him to be there. I also knew he wouldn't come. He decided against you a long time ago."

"That wasn't him. That was them."

"What difference does it make? He's become the person they brought up."

Two

Henner didn't know what to make of the weekend they were about to spend together, and what he should expect from it: from meeting Jörg again, along with Christiane and his other old friends. When Christiane's call had come, he had said yes right away. Because he had heard a plea in her voice? Because a friendship formed in youth can claim a lifelong loyalty? Out of curiosity?

He turned up early. He had seen on the map that Christiane's house bordered a nature reserve, and before he saw her again he wanted to take a walk. To walk, get some air in his lungs, switch off. Just that Wednesday he had returned from a conference in New York to the tyranny of his crowded desk and his crowded schedule.

He was surprised to see how grand the estate was: stone wall, iron gate, tall oak tree in front of the house and expanse of parkland behind it, the house itself a baronial mansion several centuries old. Everything was dilapidated. The roof was covered with rusty corrugated iron, the plaster on the exterior was flaky and mildewed and the meadow overlooked by the terrace at the back was overgrown with weeds and scrub. But the windows were new, there was fresh gravel out in front, wooden beer-garden furniture on the terrace, a table and four chairs already up, more tables and chairs still

folded and the paths leading to the park had been cleared of weeds.

Henner took one of the paths and was plunged into a quiet, green forest world; above him he saw not sky, but sunlit foliage, and on either side of the grassy path the thicket of branches and bushes seemed impenetrable. For a while a bird had hopped or flown ahead of him. Henner understood that the many twists and turns in the path were there because the architect had wanted to make the park seem enormous. Even so, he felt as if he were in an enchanted wood, as if he had been cursed never to find his way back out. Just when he was starting to think he really wouldn't find his way back out, the forest world came to an end and he was standing by a wide stream; there were fields on the opposite bank and in the distance a village with a church tower and grain silos. Everything was still very quiet.

Then he saw a woman sitting on a bench downstream. She had been writing, had lowered her notebook and pencil to her lap and was looking at him. He walked over to her. A little gray mouse, he thought, nondescript, gauche, insecure. She looked back at him. "So you don't recognize me?"

"Ilse!" So often he found himself facing a familiar person and just couldn't think of his or her name—he was pleased that he had immediately put a name to a face that he had almost failed to recognize. When he had last seen Ilse sometime in the seventies, she had been a pretty young woman, her nose and chin slightly pointed, her mouth slightly severe, her back always slightly bent so that her big breasts didn't draw attention, but she

glowed, a pale-skinned, blue-eyed blonde. Now Henner could no longer see that glow, although she was reacting with a friendly smile to their meeting, to his recognition of her. He felt uncomfortable, as if the fact that she had not become what she had promised to be and remain were somehow embarrassing. "How are you?"

"I've taken some time off. Three English classes—my friend stepped in for me, and I'm sure she'll do a good job, but I'd feel better if she called me or if I had some way of contacting her." She looked at him as if he might be able to help her. "I've never done that before: just take time off."

"Where do you teach?"

"I stayed. When the rest of you left, I finished my teaching diploma, got my first job and then my second, at my old school. I still have it: German, English, art." As if she wanted to get it out of the way, she went on: "I have no children. I never married. I have two cats and an apartment of my own on the mountain with a view of the plain. I like teaching. Sometimes I think thirty years is enough, but everybody thinks that about their job. And there isn't much longer to go."

Henner waited for a question in return: And how are you? When it didn't come, he asked another question: "Did you stay in contact with Jörg and Christiane?"

She shook her head. "I bumped into Christiane a few years ago at the Frankfurt station—the railway timetable was in chaos because of the snow, and we were waiting for our connecting trains. Since then we've talked on the phone from time to time. She said I should write to Jörg, but for a long time I didn't dare to.

I did when he made his application. 'I'm not asking for mercy. I fought against this state, and it has fought against me, and we owe each other nothing. We owe loyalty only to a single cause.' You remember? The announcement that he'd applied for a reprieve was so filled with pride—all of a sudden Jörg was once again the boy I'd known. The boy I'd fallen in love with." She smiled. "He didn't notice at the time, and neither did the rest of you. You were all . . . I was always afraid of you. Because you knew so precisely what was right and what was wrong and what needed to be done, because you were so resolute, unconditional, unbending, fearless. Everything was easy for you, and I was ashamed that it was hard for me and I didn't know a thing about capital and the state and the ruling class, and when you talked about pigs . . ." She shook her head again, lost in her past shame and fear. "And I had to graduate quickly and start earning money, and you had all the money and all the time in the world, and your fathers—Jörg and Christiane's was a professor, yours was a lawyer, Ulrich's was a dentist with a big practice and Karin's was a vicar. My father had lost his little farm in Silesia, which had hardly fed him but which had belonged to him, and was working in a dairy. 'Our milkmaid,' you sometimes called me, and I think it was meant nicely, but I didn't fit in with the rest of you, and it was more that you sort of put up with me, and if I'd disappeared . . ."

Henner tried to find memories that matched Ilse's. Had he presented himself as someone who knew everything quite precisely and had all the time in the world? Had he talked about policemen, judges or politicians as

pigs? Had he called Ilse "our milkmaid"? It was all far away. He remembered the atmosphere on those nights when they had talked till dawn over too many cigarettes and too much cheap red wine, the constant feeling of searching for something, of needing to find the correct analysis, the correct action, the excitement of shared plans and preparations, and the sheer intensity of it, the intense enjoyment of their own strength, when the lecture hall belonged to them, or the street did. But there was nothing in his memories of what they had talked about and what they had actually been searching for and why lecture halls and streets needed to be conquered, and certainly nothing of how it had been for Ilse. Had she fetched them their cigarettes and made coffee for them? She was an art teacher—had she made posters for them? "I'm glad you took care of Jörg. I visited him when he was convicted, and couldn't get a sensible sentence out of him. That was it—until I got that call from Christiane a week ago. Has he changed a lot?"

"Oh, I didn't visit him—I just wrote to him. He never invited me." She looked at him quizzically. He didn't know whether it was his lack of interest in Jörg over all those years that she didn't understand, or his present interest in how Jörg might have changed. "We'll soon see, won't we?"