

Introducing Torless

"Frau Hofrat Torless-- this was the lady, perhaps forty years of age--wore a thick veil concealing her sad eyes, which were a little reddened from weeping. This was a leave-taking. And she found it hard, yet once again, having to leave her only child among strangers for so long a period, without any chance to watch protectively over her darling.

"For the little town lay far away from the capital, in the eastern territories of the empire, in thinly populated, dry arable country.

"The reason why Frau Torless had to leave her boy in this remote and inhospitable outlandish district was that in this town there was a celebrated boarding-school, which in the previous century had developed out of a religious foundation and had since remained where it was, doubtless in order to safeguard the young generation, in its years of awakening, from the corrupting influences of a large city.

"It was here that the sons of the best families in the country received their education, going on then to the university, or into the army or the service of the State; in all such careers, as well as for general social reasons, it was a particular advantage to have been educated at W.

"Four years previously this consideration had caused Hofrat and Frau Torless to yield to their son's ambitious plea and arrange for him to enter this school.

"This decision afterwards cost many tears. For almost from the first moment when the doors of the school closed behind him with irrevocable finality, little Torless suffered from frightful, agonising homesickness. Neither lessons, nor games on the wide luxuriant grasslands of the park, nor the other distractions that the school offered its inmates, could hold his attention; he took almost no interest in these things. He saw everything only as through a veil and even during the day often had trouble in gulping down an obstinately rising sob; at night he always cried himself to sleep.

"He wrote letters home almost daily, and he lived only in these letters; everything else he did seemed to him only a shadowy, unmeaning string of events, indifferent stations on his way, like the marking of the hours on a clock-face. But when he wrote he felt within himself something that made him distinct, that set him apart; something in him rose, like an island of miraculous suns and flashing colours, out of the ocean of grey sensations that lapped around him, cold and indifferent, day after day. And when by day, at games or in class, he remembered that he would write his letter

in the evening, it was as though he were wearing, hidden on his person, fastened to an invisible chain, a golden key with which, as soon as no one was looking he would open the gate leading into marvellous gardens.

"The remarkable thing about it was that this sudden consuming fondness for his parents was for himself something new and disconcerting. He had never imagined such a thing before, he had gone to boarding-school gladly and of his own free will, indeed he had laughed when at their first leave-taking his mother had been unable to check her tears; and only later, when he had been on his own for some days and been getting on comparatively well, did it gush up in him suddenly and with elemental force ..."

- from "Young Torless" by Robert Musil