

**The Giraffe's Neck**

**by Judith Schalansky**

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English sample translation by Shaun Whiteside

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## **Eco-systems**

‘Sit down,’ said Inge Lohmark, and the class sat down. She said, ‘Open the book at page seven,’ and they opened the book at page seven, and then they started on ecological balances, eco-systems, the interdependencies and interrelations between species, between living creatures and their environment, the effective organisation of community and space. From the food web of mixed woodland they moved to the food chain of the field, from the rivers to the seas and finally to the desert and the tidal flats. ‘You see, no one – no animal, no human being – can live entirely for himself alone. Competition prevails between living creatures. And sometimes, too, something like cooperation. But that is rather rare. The most significant forms of coexistence are competition and the relationship between predator and prey.’

While Inge Lohmark drew arrows on the board, from the mosses, lichens and fungi to the earthworms and stag beetles, hedgehogs and shrews, then to the great tit, to the roe deer and the hawk, and finally one last arrow to the wolf, a pyramid gradually formed, with man at its tip alongside a few beasts of prey.

‘The fact is that there is no animal that eats eagles or lions.’

She took a step back to consider the broad chalk drawing. The arrow diagram linked producers with primary, secondary and tertiary consumers as well as the inevitable decomposing micro-organisms, all connected by respiration, heat loss and increase in biomass. In nature everything had its place, and if perhaps not every creature had a purpose, then at least every species did: eating and being eaten. It was wonderful.

‘Copy that down in your notebook.’

They did as she said.

This was when the year began. The unease of June was long past, the time of sultry heat and bare upper arms. The sun glared through the glass façade, turning the classroom into a greenhouse. The expectation of summer germinated somewhere in the back of empty minds. The mere prospect of wasting their days in utter futility robbed the children of all their concentration. With swimming-pool eyes, greasy skin and a sweaty urge for freedom they slumped on their chairs and dozed their way towards the holidays. Some became erratic and insane. Others, because of the coming report, feigned submissiveness and deposited their biology assessments on the teacher's desk like cats laying dead mice on the sitting-room carpet. Only to ask, at the next class, for their marks, calculators at the ready, eager to work out the improvement in their average to three decimal points.

But Inge Lohmark wasn't one of those teachers who caved in at the end of the school year just because they were about to lose their adversaries. She wasn't worried about slipping into insignificance as she thrown back entirely on her own devices. Some of her colleagues, the closer the summer break approached, were afflicted with almost tender pliancy. Their teaching degenerated into a hollow form of audience participation. A dreamy glance here, a pat on the back there, wistful encouragement, hours of miserable film-watching. An inflation of good marks, a grievous betrayal of the A-grade. And then there was the nuisance of rounding up end-of-year marks to heave a few hopeless cases up into the next class. As if that helped anybody at all. Her colleagues simply didn't understand that they were just damaging their own health by showing any interest in their pupils. After all, they were nothing but bloodsuckers who drained you of all your vital energy. Who fed on the teaching body, on its authority and its fear doing harm to its responsibility. They constantly ambushed one.

With nonsensical questions, meagre suggestions and distasteful familiarities. The purest vampirism.

Inge Lohmark wasn't going to be sucked dry any more. She was well known for her ability to maintain a tight rein and a short leash, without flying into rages or throwing bunches of keys. And she was proud of it. One could still show weakness. The occasional carrot, out of the blue.

The important thing was to set the pupils in the right direction, put blinkers on them in order to sharpen their concentration. And if chaos really did prevail, you just had to scrape your fingernails down the board or tell them about the canine tapeworm. In any case the best thing was to make the pupils constantly aware that they were at her mercy. Rather than allowing them to think they had anything to say. Her pupils had no right to speak and no opportunity to choose. No one had a choice. There was natural selection and that was that.

The year started now. Even though it had begun a long time ago. For her it started today, on the first of September, which fell on a Monday this year. And it was now, in the dried-up tail-end of summer, that Inge Lohmark made her resolutions, not on gaudy New Year's Eve. She was always glad that her school planner carried her safely over the turn of the calendar year. A simple flick of the page, with no countdown or chinking of glasses.

Inge Lohmark looked across the three rows of desks and didn't move her head so much as an inch. She had perfected that in all those years: the omnipotent, motionless gaze. According to statistics, there were always at least two in the class who were really interested in the subject. But those statistics seemed to be in jeopardy. Regardless of the rules of Gaussian distribution. How on earth had they managed to get this far? You could tell they'd been doing nothing but loaf around for

six weeks. None of them had opened a single book. The big holidays. Not quite as big as they used to be. But still far too long! It would take at least a month to get them used to the school's biorhythm again. At least she didn't have to listen to their stories. They could tell those to Mrs Schwanneke, who organised an icebreaking game with each new class. After half an hour all the participants were entangled in skeins from of a red ball of wool, and could each rattle off the names and hobbies of the child sitting next to them.

Only a few scattered seats were occupied. It was only clear now how few they were. A sparse audience in her theatre of nature: twelve pupils – five boys, seven girls. The thirteenth had gone back to technical school, even though Mrs Schwanneke had intervened forcefully on his behalf. With repeated private lessons, home visits and psychological reports. Some sort of concentration problem. The things they kept coming up with! These developmental problems they'd read about somewhere or other. First there was dyslexia, then dyscalculia. What would be next? An allergy to biology? Back in the old days there were just pupils who were bad at sport or music. And they had to play and sing along with everyone else anyway. It was just a matter of willpower.

It just wasn't worth it, dragging the weak ones along with you. They were nothing but ballast that held the rest back. Born recidivists. Parasites on the healthy body of the class. Sooner or later the dimmer bulbs would be left behind anyway. It was advisable to confront them with the truth as early as possible, rather than giving them another chance after each failure. With the truth that they simply didn't provide the conditions required to become a fully-fledged member of society. What was the point of being hypocritical? Not everyone could do it. And why should they? There were duds in every year. With some of them, you could be happy if you managed to

instil a few fundamental virtues in them. Politeness, punctuality, cleanliness. It was a shame they'd stopped giving out citizenship grades. Hard work. Cooperation.

Contribution. Proof of the shortcomings of the present educational system.

The later you left getting rid of a failure, the more dangerous he became. He started harassing his fellows, and making unjustified demands: for decent school-end grades, a positive assessment, possibly even a well-paid job and a happy life. The result of many years of intense support, short-sighted benevolence and reckless generosity. Nobody who gulled the hopeless cases into believing they belonged should be surprised if they eventually came marching into school with pipe bombs and small-calibre firearms to avenge themselves for all the things that had been promised them and repeatedly withheld. And then the candle-lit processions.

Lately everyone had started insisting on self-realisation. It was ridiculous. Nothing and no one was fair. Certainly no society. Only nature, perhaps. Not for nothing had the principle of selection made us what we were today: the creature with the most-feared intellect.

But Schwanneke, with her rage for integration, hadn't been able to leave well alone. What could you expect from someone who formed letters out of rows of desks, and semicircles out of chairs: for a long time a big U that embraced her desk. Recently it had even been an angular O, so that she was connected with everybody and there was no longer a beginning or an end, just the circular moment, as she once announced in the staff room. She let the year elevens call her by her first name. We're to call her Karola, Inge Lohmark had heard one girl pupil say. Karola! My goodness – they weren't at the hairdresser's!

Inge Lohmark addressed her pupils formally from year nine onwards. It was a habit dating back to the days when that was the age when children had officially

entered the age of youth. Along with the universe, the earth, humanity and the bunch of socialist carnations. There was no more effective way of reminding them of their own immaturity, and keeping them at arm's length.

The professional relationship didn't involve intimacy or understanding. It was pitiful, if understandable, for pupils to tout for their teachers' favours. Creeping to the powerful. What was unforgivable, though, was the way teachers threw themselves at adolescents. Backsides perched on their desks. Borrowed fashions, borrowed words. Bright scarves around their necks. Dyed blonde strands. Just in order to chum up with the children. Undignified. They relinquished the last scraps of respectability for the brief illusion of fellowship. Leading the way, of course, was Schwanneke with her darlings: cocky little minxes who roped her into break-time conversations, and broken-voiced youths, for whom she performed the cheapest kind of goggle-eyed, lipsticked sign-stimulus display. Probably hadn't looked in the mirror for ages.

Inge Lohmark had no darlings, and never would. Having crushes was an immature, misguided kind of emotional excitement, a hormonally-influenced effusiveness that afflicted adolescents. Having escaped their mothers' apron-strings, but not yet quite a match for the charms of the opposite sex. By way of surrogacy, a helpless member of the same sex or an unattainable adult became the target for half-formed emotions. Blotchy cheeks. Sticky eyes. Inflamed nerves. An embarrassing lapse which, in normal cases, resolved itself once the gonads had attained maturity. But of course: people without professional competence would only be able to offload their educational material by means of of sexual signals. Ingratiating trainees. So-called 'favourite teachers'. Schwanneke. The way she defended her commitment to the year-eight idiots at the teachers' conference. Her brow in wrinkles, shouting into the assembled staff with her red-painted mouth: In the end, we need all our pupils!

The icing on the cake would have been if she of all people, childless Schwanneke, who had recently been dumped by her husband, had started saying children are our future. Future indeed. These children here weren't the future. Strictly speaking they were the past: year nine was sitting in front of her. They were the last one there would be at Charles Darwin Gymnasium, who would be doing their school-leaving exam in four years. And Inge Lohmark was to act as their head of year. Just Class Nine. They no longer needed the letters they used to have, from A to G. The years were falling like a unit in wartime – in terms of numbers at least. They'd only just managed to scrape a class together. Almost a miracle, given that it was the year with the lowest birth-rate in the region. There hadn't been enough of them for the classes below. Not even when word started going around that this meant the end for the Darwin, and the teachers at the three regional schools had got together to make generous recommendations for the senior classes at the Gymnasium. The consequence was that any half-way literate child was elevated to Gymnasium status.

There had always been parents who convinced that their child belonged to the Gymnasium in spite of all advice to the contrary. But by now there weren't even enough parents in the town.

No, these children really didn't strike her as jewels in evolution's crown. Development was something quite different from growth. This was an impressively shocking demonstration of the fact that qualitative and quantitative change occurred quite independently. Nature wasn't exactly lovely to gaze upon, at this undecided threshold between childhood and adolescence. A developmental phase. Adolescent tetrapods. School an enclosure. Now came the bad time, the airing of the classrooms against the smell of this age group, musk and liberated pheromones, confinement, bodies on their way to their final shape, sweat behind the knees, suety skin, dull eyes,

unstoppable, burgeoning growth. It was much easier to teach them things before they were sexually mature. And a real challenge to explain what was going on behind their blank façades: whether they were unreachably far in front, or hobbling along behind because serious refurbishment was currently under way.

They lacked any awareness of their condition, let alone the discipline to overcome it. They stared straight ahead. Apathetic, overtaxed, preoccupied exclusively with themselves. They yielded unresistingly to their own inertia. The power of gravity seemed to act upon them with threefold force. Everything was a massive effort. Every spark of energy at the disposal of these bodies was used up by an excruciating metamorphosis no less extreme the elaborate transformation of a caterpillar in the chrysalis. Only in the rarest of cases did a butterfly emerge. Becoming an adult just required these misshapen transitional forms, on which secondary sexual characteristics flourished like tumours. Here, the laborious process of becoming human was played out before you in slow motion. It wasn't only ontogenesis that recapitulated phylogenesis, puberty did, too. They grew. Day in, day out. In spurts and over the summer, so that you had your work cut out even to recognise them again. Compliant girls turned into hysterical beasts, and eager boys into phlegmatic proles. And then there was the awkward rehearsal of partner selection. No, nature wasn't original. But it was fair. It was a condition like an illness. You just had to wait for it to pass. The bigger and older an animal became, the longer its youth dragged on. A human being required a third of its whole lifetime to reach maturity. On average it was eighteen years before a young human being was able to fend for itself. Wolfgang even had to go on paying for the children from his first marriage until they were twenty-seven.

So there they sat, life's absolute beginners. Sharpening pencils and copying down the pyramid on the board, raising and lowering their heads at five-second intervals. Not yet fully formed, but boldly self-evident with a claim to absoluteness that was both shameless and presumptuous. They were no longer children who always had to follow, and who disregarded personal space on the most threadbare of pretexts, who extorted physical contact and stared at you brazenly like hooligans on the cross-country bus. They were young adults, already capable of procreation, but still immature, like prematurely harvested fruit. To them, Inge Lohmark was certainly ageless. It was more likely, in fact, that she just struck them as old. A state that would never change as far as her pupils were concerned. Everyone young grew older. Old stayed old. She was long past the half-way mark. Luckily. At least that meant she would be spared the indignity of changing noticeably in front of their eyes. And that knowledge made her powerful. They were still all interchangeable, a swarm in pursuit of the minimum standard. But within a very short time they would become perfidiously autonomous, they would pick up the scent and start finding accomplices. And she herself would start ignoring the lame old nags and secretly back one of the thoroughbreds. Once or twice she had been on the right track. There had been a pilot, a marine biologist. Not a bad haul for a small provincial town.

Right at the front crouched a terrified vicar's child who had grown up with wooden angels, wax stains and recorder lessons. In the back row sat two dolled-up minxes. One was chewing gum, the other was obsessed with her coarse black hair, which she constantly smoothed and examined, strand by strand. Next to her, a tow-headed, primary-school-sized squirt. A tragedy, the way nature was presenting the uneven development of the sexes here. To the right by the big windows, a small primate rocked back and forth, open-mouthed, waiting only to mark his territory with

some vulgar remark. It was just short of drumming on its chest. It needed to be kept busy. In front of her was the sheet of paper on which the pupils had written their names, scribbles on the way to a legally valid signature. *Kevin*. Of course. Who else.