

Class Trip

Emmanuel Carrère



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2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Vintage
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Vintage is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
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Penguin
Random House
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First published in France with the title
La Classe de Neige by Gallimard in 1995
This edition published by Vintage in 2020

penguin.co.uk/vintage

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

ISBN 9781784876159

Typeset in 10.57/15pt Stempel Garamond by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograft S.p.A.

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For a long time afterward – even now – Nicolas tried to remember the last words his father spoke to him. His father had said good-bye at the front door of the chalet, telling him once again to be careful, but Nicolas had been so embarrassed by his presence, so eager for him to leave, that he hadn't listened. Convinced that everyone was laughing at them, he had hung his head resentfully, avoiding his father's parting kiss. At home he would have been scolded for such behavior, but he knew that here, in public, his father wouldn't dare.

Surely they had talked earlier, in the car. Sitting in the back, Nicolas had found it hard to make himself heard above the noise of the defroster going full blast to keep the windows clear. He had been anxious to find out if there would be any Shell stations along the way. Nothing on earth would have made him let his father buy gas anywhere else that winter, because Shell was giving out coupons you could trade in for a Visible Man, a plastic model whose whole front lifted up like the cover of a box, revealing a skeleton and internal organs

you could remove and put back again, thus learning about human anatomy. The previous summer, Fina stations had offered air mattresses and inflatable boats; elsewhere the premiums had been comic books, of which Nicolas had a complete collection. He felt lucky, at least in this respect, since his father drove a great deal on his job and had to fill the tank every few days. Whenever his father went on the road, Nicolas asked to be shown the route on a map so that he could calculate the number of miles and convert it into coupons, which he stashed in a safe the size of a cigar box, with a combination known only to him. It was a Christmas present from his parents ('For your little secrets,' his father had said), and he had insisted on bringing it along in his bag. He would have really liked to count up his coupons during the trip and figure out how many he still needed, but his bag was in the trunk and his father had refused to pull over, saying that they'd get it when they stopped for gas somewhere. In the end, there had been no Shell stations or any other reason to stop before they reached the chalet. Seeing how disappointed Nicolas was, his father had promised to drive enough between then and the end of ski school to win the plastic model. If Nicolas would entrust him with all his coupons, it would be waiting for him when he came home.

The last stretch of the trip had taken them along minor roads that had too little snow to warrant putting chains on the tires – another letdown for Nicolas. Before

that, they'd been driving on the highway. At one point, the traffic had slowed, then come to a standstill for a few minutes. Nicolas's father had drummed his fingers on the steering wheel in frustration, grumbling that this wasn't normal for a weekday in February. From the backseat, Nicolas could see only a hint of a profile above the thick neck tightly encircled by the overcoat collar. The profile and the neck betrayed anxiety, and a bitter, thwarted rage. At last the cars began to move again. Nicolas's father sighed, relaxing a little bit. Probably just an accident, he said. Nicolas was shocked by the relief in his voice: as if an accident – since it would create a traffic jam only until help arrived – could be considered something desirable. He was shocked but also intrigued. Glued to the side window, he hoped to see crumpled metal, bloodied bodies carried away on stretchers in the glare of flashing lights, but he saw nothing, and his father, surprised, remarked that no, it must have been something else after all. The bottleneck gone, its mystery remained.

The class had left for ski school the day before, by bus. Ten days earlier, however, there had been a tragic accident, pictures of which had been shown on the news: a large truck had crashed into a school bus, and several children had died horribly in the flames. A meeting was held the next day at school to prepare for the class trip. Parents were to receive final instructions concerning their children's belongings: what clothes were to be marked; the stamped envelopes to be provided for letters home; the phone calls, on the other hand, that were best avoided (except in an emergency), to help the boys feel truly off on their own, not tied by a thread to their families. Several mothers were distressed by this last instruction: the children were so young . . . Patiently the teacher repeated that it was in their interest. The main purpose of such a trip was to teach them how to stand on their own two feet.

Nicolas's father remarked, rather brusquely, that the main purpose of school was not, in his opinion, to cut children off from their families and that he wouldn't

hesitate to call if he felt like it. The teacher opened her mouth to reply, but he pressed on. He had come to raise a much more serious question: the safety of the bus. How could they be sure there wouldn't be a catastrophe like the one they'd all seen recently on the news? Yes, how could they be sure, chimed in other parents, who'd doubtless been wondering the same thing without daring to raise the issue. The teacher admitted that, unfortunately, there was no way to be sure. She could only say that they were taking every precaution with regard to safety, that the bus driver was extremely reliable, and that reasonable risks were a part of life. If parents wanted to be absolutely certain that their children wouldn't be hit by cars, they'd have to prevent them from ever leaving home – and that wouldn't keep them from having accidents with household appliances or from simply getting sick. Some parents conceded the soundness of this argument, but many were shocked by the teacher's fatalistic attitude. She was even smiling as she spoke.

'It's easy to see they're not your children!' exclaimed Nicolas's father. No longer smiling, the teacher replied that she had a child, too, and that he'd taken the bus to ski school the year before. Then Nicolas's father announced that he preferred to drive his son to the chalet himself: at least that way he'd know who was behind the wheel.

The teacher pointed out that the chalet was almost three hundred miles away.

So what? He was determined to make the trip.

But it wouldn't be good for Nicolas, she insisted. Wouldn't help him fit into the group.

'He'll fit in just fine,' said his father, and he laughed sarcastically. 'Don't try to make me believe arriving in a car with his dad will make him an outcast!'

The teacher asked him to think it over carefully, suggested that he speak with the school psychologist (who would confirm her opinion), but admitted that the final decision was up to him.

In school the next day, the teacher attempted to talk to Nicolas about this, to find out whose idea it was. Treading carefully, as she always did with him, she asked what he would prefer. The question made Nicolas uneasy. Deep down, he knew perfectly well he'd rather travel on the bus like everyone else. But his father had made up his mind, he wouldn't change it, and Nicolas didn't want the teacher and the other boys to think he was being forced to go along with his father's wishes. He shrugged, said he didn't care one way or the other – it was okay the way it was. The teacher left it at that. She had done what she could, and since she clearly couldn't change anything, it was better not to make a fuss.

Nicolas and his father reached the chalet shortly before nightfall. The other boys, who'd arrived the previous day, had taken their first skiing lesson that morning and were now in the main room, on the ground floor, watching a film on alpine flora and fauna. This was interrupted by the arrival of the newcomers. While the teacher greeted Nicolas's father out in the hall and introduced him to the two instructors, the children in the room began to make a commotion. Nicolas watched from the doorway without daring to join them. He heard his father ask how the skiing was going and an instructor reply laughingly that there wasn't much snow, the kids were learning mostly how to ski on grass, but it was a start. Then his father wanted to know if they'd receive a certificate at the end of the course. An intermediate's star? The instructor chuckled again and said, 'A beginner's snowflake, perhaps.' Nicolas stood shifting from one foot to the other, his face impassive. When his father finally was ready to leave, Nicolas grudgingly allowed himself to be kissed but did not go outside to see his

father off. From the hall, he listened with relief to the motor rumbling out on the driveway, then moving off into the distance.

The teacher sent the instructors to restore order and start the film rolling again while she helped Nicolas settle in. She asked him where his bag was, intending to carry it upstairs. Nicolas looked around; there was no bag to be seen. He didn't understand.

'I thought it was here,' he mumbled.

'You're sure you brought it with you?' asked the teacher.

Yes, Nicolas definitely remembered that they'd put it in the trunk, between the tire chains and his father's sample cases.

'And when you arrived, you took it out of the trunk?'

Biting his lips, Nicolas shook his head. He wasn't sure about that. Or rather, yes: now he was certain that they'd forgotten to remove it. They'd stepped out of the car, later his father had gotten back in, and they hadn't ever opened the trunk.

'How silly,' said the teacher, not at all pleased. The car had left barely five minutes before, but it was already too late to catch up with it. Nicolas felt like crying. He stammered that it wasn't his fault. 'You could have at least thought of it,' sighed the teacher. Relenting when she saw how miserable he looked, she shrugged and said it was a silly mistake but not a serious one. They'd figure something out. Anyway, his father would quickly

realize what had happened. Yes, agreed Nicolas: when he opened the trunk to get his sample cases. Hearing this, the teacher was confident he'd soon return with the bag. Yes, yes, said Nicolas, torn between his desire to have his things back and his fear of his father's return.

'Do you know where he's planning to stop for the night?' asked the teacher.

Nicolas didn't know.

Darkness had fallen, making it unlikely that Nicolas's father would show up with the bag before morning. It was therefore necessary to make some arrangement for that night. The teacher and Nicolas returned to the main room, where the film was over and everyone was getting ready to set the table for dinner. Following the teacher through the door, Nicolas felt painfully like the new kid who doesn't know what's going on, the kid everyone makes fun of. He sensed that the teacher was doing what she could to protect him from any teasing or hostility. After clapping for silence, she announced in a joking tone that Nicolas – off in the clouds, as usual – had forgotten his bag. Who would lend him some pajamas?

Since each student's list had specified three pairs, anyone could have lent him some, but nobody spoke up. Not daring to look at the children gathered around them, Nicolas stayed close to the teacher, who repeated her appeal with a touch of irritation. He heard giggles, and then a voice he couldn't identify said something

that made the others burst out laughing: ‘He’ll pee in them!’

It was pure meanness, a random shot, but it hit home. Nicolas did still occasionally wet his bed, not very often, but even so he dreaded sleeping anywhere except in his own room at home. From the very start, this had been one of his greatest anxieties about ski school. At first he’d said he didn’t want to go. His mother had requested a meeting with the teacher, who had reassured her that he probably wouldn’t be the only one, and besides, that kind of problem often disappeared in a group setting. Just in case, it would be a good idea for him to take along one more set of pajamas and a draw-sheet to protect the mattress. Despite these comforting words, Nicolas had watched nervously as his bag was packed: since they were going to sleep in dormitories, how could he place the drawsheet over the mattress without anyone noticing? This worrisome thought and a few others like it had tortured him before he left, but even in his worst nightmare he’d never have imagined what was actually happening to him: finding himself without his bag, the drawsheet, pajamas, reduced to begging in vain for a pair, mocked and stripped naked as soon as he arrived, as though his shame were written all over his face.

Finally, someone said he’d lend him some pajamas. It was Hodkann. That sparked fresh merriment, because he was the tallest boy in the class, while Nicolas was one

of the smallest, so the offer almost seemed intended to poke more fun at him. But Hodkann put a stop to the jeers by saying that whoever bothered Nicolas would have to deal with him, and everyone knew he meant it. Nicolas gave him a flustered, grateful look. The teacher seemed relieved but perplexed, as though she suspected a trap. Hodkann had great authority over the other boys, which he exercised in a capricious fashion. In all games, for example, they took their cues from him, without knowing whether he would behave like a referee or a gang leader, dispensing justice or flouting it cynically. Within the space of a few seconds, he could be extraordinarily kind and extraordinarily brutal. He protected and rewarded his vassals but banished them without cause as well, replacing them with others whom he'd previously disdained or mistreated. With Hodkann, you never knew where you stood. He was feared and admired; even adults seemed afraid of him. He was about as tall as an adult, moreover, with a nearly grown-up voice and none of the clumsiness of boys who shoot up too quickly. He moved and spoke with an ease that was almost disconcerting. Although he could be vulgar, at times he expressed himself extremely well, with a richness and precision of vocabulary surprising for his age. He received very good grades or very bad ones, without seeming to care either way. On the form everyone filled out at the beginning of the school year, he'd written, 'Father: deceased,' and everyone knew he lived