



How to Get Rid of Goutweed

By Felix Oldenburg

Translated from German by Max Landwehrjohann

When his father dies on June 11, 2020, the garden is in immaculate condition. Jasper leans on the garden fence. Wood splinters drill through the thin fabric of his long-sleeve cotton shirt into his forearms. He smells the freshly mown lawn, feels the heat of the stones by the herb bed. He doesn't dare enter the garden. It's too much of a risk, for the garden should never look any other way: groomed, cut and kept in shape by his father, every morning between 6 and 7:15.

Seventeen scars, says the pathologist when they come to the DIAKO hospital for the autopsy results. Seventeen scars, and by the way he repeats the words and strokes the stubble on his chin, they can tell that he is impressed. Seventeen scars they found on the backside of his left ventricle. Seventeen scars meaning seventeen heart attacks, presumably accumulated in the past five to seven years. I'm sorry, says the pathologist, but your father's heart was more punctured than an old sailcloth.

They contact a funeral home, choose a grave on Mill Cemetery, clear out the apartment in Mommenstraße where their father had his practice as a psychoanalyst, hold their ID cards into webcams at a slanted angle to prove that they really are Jasper and Johan Machat, sons and sole heirs of Dr. Helmuth Machat, put the money from the life insurance into a long-term fund at GLS Bank, post an obituary in the *Flensburger Tageblatt*, sell his CHI accreditation to the daughter of one of his college friends, cancel his subscription to the SZ psychology journal, and donate his collection of original editions from the Portuguese Saudosismo to the university library.

His brother brings up the estate several times, but Jasper shrugs. Who would buy a manor house with a plot of five thousand square meters between Flensburg-Waldeshöh and Rüllschau? He doesn't want to tell his brother, who returned to Hamburg long ago, that in a few weeks the garden will run to seed due to neglect. As if their father wasn't dead, but was coming back tomorrow, the day after at the latest, from his vacation in Southern Portugal, and would kneel down between lemon balm and marsh gentian and later call up one of his sons to ask about their week and, at the end of the conversation, in passing, mention his back pain, which they now know was the only sign of his seventeen heart attacks. He doesn't want to tell Johan that as long as the garden awaits the return of their father, he just can't give it up.

So, Jasper comes back, day in and day out. He leans his bicycle against the tree stump next to the garden gate. He rests his arms on the fence and feels the familiar sting of the splinters. He gazes at the garden and the pond, beside which he lay after school, until the tree frogs were no longer scared and leapt into his palms. Their bodies pulsate, even though they're much too small to have a heart, and through expressionless eyes they stare into other dimensions. He presses his forearms into the fence and imagines being a frog. His eyes turn expressionless, in search for the dimension beyond the garden.

But all he sees is the magnolia his father plants on Jasper's first day of school. He sees the goutweed that his father plucks out from between the herbs. His father tosses it in the compost trash, saying that if it grows back, it will prove Frankl's principle of paradoxical intention. He sees the red deckchair, in which his father sits in the morning after garden work, flat cap turned back, sweat beads on his forehead. He caresses the leaves of the shadbush with the back of his index finger like he caresses Jasper's temple when he tells him he wants to be an inventor when he grows up.

He sees his brother stand next to the magnolia. He squints, his forehead wrinkled, his thigh strained, his left foot raised, ready to kick. He scrapes against a bump on the tree, again and again and again. He groans and his upper body tightens up as if his soul was itching but he can't get it. Jasper wants to make fun of him, because he doesn't know what OCD is yet, but his father runs past him. Never has his father run before, one hand on his beige corduroy pants that always slip, the other on his cap. He releases Johan's hand from the magnolia, kneels down beside him and wraps him up in his body. Jasper's chest contracts, then his father waves him over.

He drills the splinters deep into his skin. He wants to see his father smile one more time. That rare flicker in the corner of his eyes that Jasper misses the most. His father comes out of the house and stands with his back to the pile of leaves that Jasper and his brother took hours to rake up. He spreads his arms. *OYE* shouts Johan and their father falls over, the leaves fly up, get caught and carried away by the wind. *OYE*, Johan shouts again, but their father lifts his head and his eyes beam.

Later, they sit on the patio. An eagle owl announces nightfall. His father places his hand on Jasper's head and they look at the silver plate he brought from Serra de Caldeirão whose inscription they can barely read: "A vida é um sonho da qual a morte nos desperta." Life is a dream from which death wakes us up.

Jasper's forearms bleed. He hears the eagle owl call, feels his father's touch and weeps.

In the spring of 2021, the goutweed comes out. It penetrates the soil in the herb bed, surrounds the pond, spreads across the lawn. First, Jasper is angry. He looks up "How to get rid of goutweed" on Google. He's told to mow it to death, suffocate it with cardboard or take the light away from it with potato plants. There's a lawn mower in the tool shed. He wants to climb the fence.

His father points at the plucked-out goutweed in the compost trash. It'll grow back for sure, he says.

In June 2021, the goutweed celebrates its anniversary. White blossoms spring up across the garden. Jasper breathes in their parsley scent. The blossoms sway in the wind, still sparkling from the night's humidity like the spindrift of a wave that buries the garden beneath it. This space no longer belongs to him. It's time to move on.