



Philipp Winkler
HOOL

September 2016, 310 pp.

Shortlist German Book Prize 2016
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Adrenalin thrilling up his spine, Heiko Kolbe warms the mouthguard in his hands. He's sitting in a van with the other HOOLS, on his way to meet the boys from Cologne. We're going to make history today, lads – that's what they tell each other. Heiko never doubts that it'll happen someday, but for now he has to accept the reality of his life: he's a high-school dropout from the provinces whose mum took off and whose dad is an alcoholic; he's a gofer at his uncle's gym; and he's the flatmate of a guy who organises dog fights and dreams of owning a tiger.

We've all got two families. The one we're born with and the one we choose for ourselves. HOOL is the story of Heiko Kolbe and his blood brothers, the hooligans. Philipp Winkler's main character is a tough young man with a big heart, a man who fights to protect what's sacred to him: his crew and their legacy. Winkler has a sound that gets under your skin, drawing you into a strange world within our own, a world of coarse language and rough customs. With HOOL, he situates himself within a major literary tradition: giving a voice to those who have none.

Philipp Winkler, born 1986, grew up in a Hanover suburb. Today he lives in Leipzig after having studied Creative Writing at the University of Hildesheim. He spent several months abroad in Japan and the Kosovo. 2008 he received the Joseph-Heinrich-Colbin-Award. Several publications in anthologies and journals. 2015 he was awarded the Retzhof-Prize for Young Literature for excerpts from his debut novel HOOL. At night he works the clubs as DJ Zelection.

Philipp Winkler is, of course, a fan of *Hannover 96*, but foremost of *Werder Bremen* – above all he is a FAN. He grew up in a football loving working class environment. He was never a hooligan, but always a keen observer who knows the ultra-scene well.



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HOOL

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English translation by **Bradley Schmidt**

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I warm my new mouth guard between my palms. Use my fingers to turn it and squeeze it together a little. That's what I do before each fight. The plastic material stays firm, only giving a little. It's a fabulous piece. You can hardly get anything better. Specially made by the dental technician. Not one of those mass-produced cheap-o things that you can chuck after two weeks cause the edges cut into your gums. Or cause you constantly want to gag from the horrible fit and the chemical smell of the plastic. By now, almost all of us have one of those mouth guards, except for Jojo with his paltry janitor salary. Kai, who always has to have the finest shit. Ulf. He has no problem paying for it. Tomek, Töller. And some of our boys who have the right jobs. Uncle Axel of course. He was the one who rustled up the dental technician a couple years ago. Specialized in contact sports and takes care of martial artists all over Germany. Hear the people from Frankfurt go to him and some of the boys from the East. From Dresden and Halle, Zwickau. Probably have to put down their whole month's check from the government, I think and run the tips of my fingers over the ventilation holes.

»Hey, Heiko!« Kai pokes me in the side, »your phone.« The knock-off phone buzzes between us on the seat. I reach for it, my fingers shaking. My uncle watches me in the side mirror. I press the button with the green icon.

»Where are you? We're waiting,« the voice of the guy from Cologne I organized the match with comes through the phone. I roll down the window so I can see better, look for any points of orientation.

»We're on B55 near Olpe. Should be right there.«

»Hit Desert Road. Turn right off the second roundabout. On Bratzkopf straight till you past the city limits. Woods on the left. Can't miss it.«

Before he hangs up I remind him one more time about the agreement. Fifteen men on each side. Then I hang up.

»Well?« Axel asks without turning around. He's still watching me in the side mirror. Despite the sun's reflection, I can recognize his piercing gaze. How he examines me. I pass along the directions and emphasize that I reminded the guy about the agreement.

»I heard,« he says and turns to Hinkel, who is at the wheel, as usual. Axel repeats the directions. As if Hinkel hadn't heard me or Hinkel could only drive that way if the directions come

from him. I noticed how Kai is looking at me from the side. The corners of his mouth spread. Well-intentioned. If I look at him now, he's probably rolling his eyes. Telling me, fucking hell, what a control freak. Something like that. But I don't react, just paying attention to whether Hinkel takes the right turn. He grunts, which probably means that he understood. Hinkel holds onto the wheel, his meatball-like hand at twelve o'clock. Beads of sweat have become trapped in the long hairs on the back of his hand and glitter in the sun. Look like a comb over. He lets the other hand dangle out the window.

Tomek, sitting on Kai's left, scrolls through his phone with an expression of disinterest. It's an East bloc thing. Always the same Slavic mug. Good mood or bad. You can't recognize it. He'd probably have the same expression on his face if he won the lottery. It wouldn't be surprising if he was pissed off. After all, Kai had called shotgun before him. Probably doesn't even know it. Now he has to sit exactly where Jojo bled all over with his destroyed nose. Jojo's schnoz really suffered. And the seat cushion. And besides, that's clearly the spot you really don't want to sit on hot days. Behind Hinkel. Even with the window open.

Kai lifts his ass an inch above the seat and slips his powder tin from the back pocket of his Hollister jeans. He unscrews the lid and shovels a pile of coke onto his thumb, holding it under one nostril, then the other, snorting. The car is jostling quite a bit but he manages not to lose any. He throws his head back. His gelled boxer hairdo scratches over the greasy seat cover. He holds out the tin for me.

»Really? Maybe you won't fill your pants then.« He grins. I grin back and say: »better to have your pants full than your nose, Ms. Winehouse.« He laughs. It's been quite some time since I last took something. He extends his middle finger while screwing the lid back on. My uncle clears his throat loudly. Kai shrugs his shoulders and deposits the tin back in his jeans. He knows exactly that Axel can't stand it when we blow our heads off with something before a match. Even stuff like coke, which clears your head. But that's one of those things that even Uncle Axel can't get out of people. That's why he usually lets it slide, as long as no one gets carried away. Anyways, he's not someone who takes a pass. A lot of people need it for their nerves. Well, that or just cause they're junkies. But Axel doesn't take along people who can't get a grip on themselves. At least not to the important matches. Like today. When it's really about representing Hannover with honor. Kai might be really a heavy hitter when it comes to blow, but he's too good to leave him at home. Against him all those pumped up boys seem as mobile as bulldozers. And thanks to me, he holds back a little before the matches. Besides, my uncle knows exactly that he couldn't constantly count on me if he would leave Kai on the bench. The yellow city limit sign from Olpe flies by the passenger side window of the T5 VW van. I lean forward, my face between Hinkel and my uncle.

»Now go straight –«

»Straight to the first roundabout. Second right,« Axel interrupts me. I fall back on my seat and respond to Kai's rolling his eyes by rolling my own. He hands me a cigarette. I light it and take long drag. The space between the metal supports of the head rest in front of me is completely filled by my uncle's meaty red neck. His shoulders, so angular, as if constructed with a right angle,

protrude to the left and right of the seat. I exhale a plume of smoke towards the red surface between the braces and say: »exactly.«

We turn off onto a dry forest path. The sand crunches under the tires. We are immediately enveloped by the shade of the rustling trees. It's good to be out of the direct sun, and I notice how the slight cooling makes me somewhat calmer. It started when we left Olpe. That feeling that always comes just before it starts. I don't know if it's comparable with stage fright, I never had stage fright, after all. At any rate, it feels like something in my stomach begins to float. As if my belly were filled with helium and was pressing up against the lungs from below.

»There,« Hinkel says and points ahead with his fat, hairy finger. The three of us on the back bench stretch our necks just to see something. A fair distance down the path we see the motorcade from Cologne. The guys stand around in front of their cars. Axel turns around and stares through the back window. I instinctively pull my head to the side so that he can look through better, but then immediately think to myself that I should get a grip on myself. I also look back. Everything ok. The others are behind us, as before. No one got cold feet and turned around. I would have been very surprised.

»Park here,« my uncle orders. Hinkel maneuvers the T5 as best he can on the grass strip between the forest path and the bushes. The others park behind us. We get out. The guys from Cologne park the same way. Just on the other side of the path. When the gig here is over everyone will get back in the car and disappear in the opposite direction.

Axel walks around the hood of the car, positioning himself in the middle of the path, legs spread wide. I take my mouth guard out of the box and don't let my uncle escape my gaze. Tomek takes position next to him. They put their heads together. I bent over towards Kai and ask him for a cig. He tries to fumble the pack out of his tight jeans. I hold out my hand, keep on looking over to Axel, who was inspecting the guys from Cologne, arms akimbo.

»Come on,« I say, »any day now.«

»Take it easy,« Kai mumbles. I sway, rocking from one leg to the other. I go over to Axel and Tomek, when I finally have a cigarette between my fingers.

»What?« He bellows when he notices that someone is approaching. Then he sees that it's me. His jaw relaxes somewhat and he briefly rests his paw on my shoulder and pulls me closer.

»I just counted them,« Tomek says with his Polack accent. It sounds like »cownted«. »Fifteen men plus camera.«

»Does everyone have their red t-shirt on?« Axel asks. Could turn around and look himself, I think, but bite my tongue, of course. I passed out the t-shirts before we left. Precisely so that we didn't have to wait around now.

»Everyone does,« I say.

I want to add what I've thought out regarding formation. That we should try to put the massive guys in front. Like a breakwater, more or less. That way we could catch a little of the first impact, even if it's at the cost of speed. But Axel raises his hand to signal that I should be quiet. But I haven't even said half a sentence. One of the guys from Cologne comes toward us. I'm guessing that he's the guy I was in touch with.

»Ok,« Axel says.

I don't know to whom exactly.

»Heiko. You make sure the others are ready.«

He holds his hand out in front of me, as if wanting to block my path, which isn't necessary, and goes towards the other guy, who has stopped in the mid-distance and was waiting for one of us. I feel completely taken for a ride. After all, the agreement between Axel and me was that I would handle all the logistics this time. I try to swallow it. Tomek pats me on the arm. There is a faded tattoo of some woman on his hand. I look at him briefly, then at the ground, saying: »fuck it,« and grind out my cigarette.

Kai stands in front of the T5 with a cig in his mouth and examines himself in the tinted windows. He plucks at his short spiky hair. Everyone else is wearing the red t-shirts that I had passed out. He has a red Fred Perry polo on. At least he left the collar down for once. I step next to him, look at him first, then myself.

»You actually know how batty you are?«

He doesn't react, keeps on rocking from side to side, and rolls his cigarette between his lips while humming. My face next to it in the dark brown tinted windows. Expressionless. Corners of my mouth pointed toward the ground. Brow furrowed. Dead serious. At least my hair is shaved back down to a millimeter. A huge shadow pushes across the reflection of car window.

»Hey, ya losers. It's been a while,« says Ulf, »ready?«

»I was born fucking ready,« Kai says and slams his right elbow into his left palm, making a slapping sound.

I blow out air through closed lips. »You're a retard,« I say. I turn around and look at Ulf, who's at least a head taller than me: »Way too long.«

»Tell that to Jojo's crooked nose.«

We laugh. Ulf gazes down the path. He asks why my uncle's down there shooting the shit again. If it wasn't my turn this time. I nod, but simultaneously lift my shoulders, say: »what do I know.«

»You know Axel,« Kai weighs in, »little uncle doesn't like to hand over the reins.«

»Fuck it. He should do what he wants,« I say. Ulf raises his shoulders too. The XXL shirt stretches tight around his chest and biceps. His collar looks as if it would burst any second.

»You organized this here, after all.«

I nod again, say that I actually don't give a fuck as long as there's finally another rumble. We haven't had a single match since the new season started. Hinkel and a couple of the other old war horses come back from taking a piss, breaking through the bushes. All of them form a semi-circle around Axel. Skulls roll from shoulder to shoulder. Arms are stretched. Hands are shaken loose.

»Straighten up now! Let's go!« Axel calls.

I swallow my mouth guard. Bite down on it. The nervousness is only a just an aftertaste. We form three rows across the width of the path. The adrenalin courses through my body. My body becomes light.

The squad stomps off. Axel and Tomek are a step ahead of us. Ulf and Kai next to me. Fucking hell, he's grinning and it gets me started. Then I look straight ahead. At the wall of shaved heads and white shirts pushing towards us. They become faster, bellowing: »Hanoi Whores!« Several raise their fists.

Now we accelerate. Be careful about footing. You need firm ground to fall on. Otherwise you've already lost. They're running. We are too. Don't stumble now! Don't step on Axel's heel! Soon. I feel hands on my back, pushing me forward. As if that were needed. Any moment!

A last yell. The forest falls silent. Then bodies slam into each other. Fists and legs are swung. I still see Axel as he is basically sucked into the Cologne throng. A guy in front of me. A fist comes toward me. I take the swing. Duck under the blow. Throw myself against him. He doesn't fall. Too stable, the fucker. He's huffing and puffing. They fly past me all around. Entangled. Cross-threaded. In a headlock. The baldy in front of me is ripped. Who cares. Raise your blocking hands. Fake a move to the left. He had the same idea. Is surprised. His punch is hasty. Slides past. Land a jab against his jaw. He groans. Stumbles. Not a clean hit. He comes hunched over, hands raised. I want to juke him again, then someone slams into me from behind. No chance. His fist slams directly onto my collarbone. Probably aimed for my face. Lucked out again. But my collarbone yowled. Seemed to vibrate. Fuck it, I tell myself. I jump forward. Fake right. Juked him out. The fucker wasn't expecting that. He whips his hands up. Kidney shot. He bent over, but is able to stay up. His hands instinctively go toward his kidneys. Tough luck! I slam a haymaker straight into his ugly mug. Folds like a pocket knife, bends over and groans. Spits his mouth guard in the sand. Teeth covered in blood. Stay down, damn it! Stay down! I look around. Not too long! He stays down. Begs off, eyes clenched in pain. My vision is narrow as a bottleneck. I peer through and see Kai. In a clinch. Fucker from Cologne is tugging at his polo shirt. Kai tries to pull free. He pivots, his opponent comes along, and raises dust. Another white shirt behind him. No fucking way, you bastard! The guy lifts his leg as I charge. Catches my groin. I'm a fucking idiot! Lose my footing, but catch myself with my hands. He's already on top of me. Get a knee to my side. Air knocked out of me. Try to catch myself. My hand slips and bends in an unnatural direction. Pain shoots from my wrist up into my shoulder. A taste like Styrofoam in the back of my mouth. No time. He comes. I push off him. Create some space. The goon falls for it. Gives me time to get up. My hand is numb. Not my elbow. My left straight-arm connects with his blocking arm and pulls it to the side. Then I slam my elbow onto his kisser. He goes down. Coughs. Gags and holds his face. I

wait. Keep moving. He removes his hand, looks at it. A wide, shining cut over his left eye gushes. He stays down. I'm winded myself. There's just isolated, exhausted skirmishes that slowly disentangle. I put my hands on my hips. The air jags through my lungs like shards of glass. Fucking cigs! Now light one up. Some hoi polloi behind me. Töller stands in the bushes, a good two yards away. Swaths of his t-shirt hangs from his upper body, in tatters. I go over to him, see that he's standing over a guy bleeding with a split lip. The guy helplessly holds his hand in front of his face but Töller gets in two more shots and is screaming at him. I grab Töller's arm. My other hand around his waist and pull him away.

»Are you crazy, Töller? He's had enough!«

He pushed against me halfheartedly. »The piece of shit hit me in the balls!«

I pull him back out of the bushes. Several people come over, want to see what's going on here, but I raise my hands. Everything's fine. Everything sorted out. I use both hands to shove Töller, who wants to get past me.

»Take it easy, man! It had to be an accident. Even if it wasn't, just fuck it.« Then I raise my finger. Hold it up close to my face, point at him.

»If I catch you punching someone on the ground one more time...«

»What then, Kolbe?«

He turns away before I can answer, waving me off.

»Hey!« Axel's voice booms through the trees. His shirt almost looks freshly washed. He spreads his arms in question, opening his hands. I show him that everything's ok. Ulf comes over. His collar is torn. The skin underneath is scratched and red. He congratulates me. I ask him why, but then I notice myself. Most of the people on the ground are wearing white t-shirts. The reds are standing. They're chanting: »Han-o-ver! Han-o-ver!« My shoulders feel lighter than they have for a long time. My stomach is like filled with lead and crashes to the bottom of my torso. I crouch down next to Ulf's massive legs, rest my forearms on my knees and try to breath. My ribcage feels constricted. The collarbone flickers with numbness. My left arm is heavy. I spit my mouth guard into my hand. It covers my palm with blood. My face pulses with hot pain. I look up at Ulf: »Hope there's a second round.«

When I slunk off at the rest stop just after putting the Ruhr valley to spread the individual parts of the burner phone on the adjacent field, Kai and Töller got into it with a group of Polish truck drivers over some ridiculous shit. But Tomek was able to difuse the situation and shortly after that I'd just come back, they were standing around together and passing around an unlabeled bottle of booze. Axel was just about to rip Kai and Töller, who were nodding in unison, a new one, what that shit was, starting something after a match, and who'd shit in their skull. But Axel didn't really sound that energetic – after all, we all still had the fresh taste of victory on our lips.

So we arrived back in Hanover just before midnight. Everyone climbed back into his car. Even Ulf had to go, otherwise Saskia would bitch him out at home.

Kai and me drive back to the main train station together. I just want to get to bed. He still wants to head to Raschplatz and party, in other words: go somewhere and find someone to bone.

We guzzle a quick pilsner at our local. Then I take the last regional train, out to Wunstorf. Kai still tried to convince me to come along, but I had no interest in shitty tunes and Beck's for the price of a used car. Even though he don't like being dissed downtown either, when you're looking for someone easy to screw, you're best chances are there. But you should demand to see the ID of the person you drag off, to be on the safe side.

It actually happened to Kai once. He went along with just a sweet little thing. Cause the parents were on vacation. And then there was a class schedule hanging in the kitchen, tenth grade, on the fridge. He claims he'd never gotten his pants back on quicker. I think he went to a brothel the same night. Got himself a professional that was that much older. As an ethical correction, more or less.

As far as I'm concerned, there's only two possibilities to drag me into the dives on Raschplatz: it's Kai's birthday or I'm so sloshed that I don't understand a thing.

*

Arnim's farm is just over a half-mile away from the train station in Wunstorf, where I'd parked by the VW from the 80s. When you're heading on the county road towards the autobahn onramp in Luthe there's a field lane you have to follow till you hit a small patch of woods surrounding the house. I need almost a half an hour at night cause Armin had immediately hammered it into me after I'd moved in with him that you have to turn off the lights as soon as you get off the county road. If there's something he can't stand, that's unbidden guests. Especially law enforcement.

I turn off the long, tree-lined field lane into the driveway. In the pale, indirect light I can make up Jojo's Volvo next to Arnim's old pick-up.

I climb up the crumbling steps to the veranda and mumble to myself: »please don't have him blown away. Please don't have him blown away.« All the while I imagine Arnim standing over Jojo's corpse with his gun in hand, one leg on the pierced belly, like Captain Morgan, and looking at me and asking: »What? Unlawful entry, my boy.«

Standing outside the front door, which is actually made up of two doors, the normal one and the screen door, I listen into the darkness for a moment. When I hear Jojo's voice, my prayer of thanks goes up in smoke, which I didn't believe in anyway. I open the screen door. It hits the doorbell mounted above it. Arnim's "alarm system". The familiar yapping starts up behind the house. A rectangular beam of light falls in my direction through the kitchen door. Then Arnim's heavy-set silhouette pushes through.

»Who's there?« He calls. I see that he already has the gun in his hand.

»It's just me, you crazy dog, « I answer and chuck my athletic bag into the darkness of the living room. It hits the cushions of the old sofa with a thump. I hear how Jojo calls out my name. The dogs are still yapping away excitedly. You can hear the clatter of the pen when they jump against it.

»Shut up!« Arnim's bellowing flows into a phlegm-tinged cough. He grabs the rifle by the barrel, sits back down at the table, and bangs several times at the window pane with the butt of the gun. I expect it to break any second. But nothing happens except for the frame thundering.

Jojo jumps up. His short, tight curls bounce. We give each other a five and pat each other on the shoulders. I immediately feel my collarbone, which seems to stretch over the length of my shoulder. Jojo's nose is still completely swollen and glowing like a grow light. I grab a can of Elephant beer from the cooler and sit down at the kitchen table with the two of them.

»Well? And?« Jojo wants to know. I tell him about the successful trip to Cologne, and how Axel once again didn't want to hand over the reins, despite our agreement. Jojo greedily took in every little bit. Every now and again he groans and says how he fucking wished he'd have been there, etc. Arnim gazes emptily into the darkness, which lurks outside behind the yellow shaded windows. His lungs wheeze strenuously and does everything so that he doesn't suffocate here and now. I look at him amused. He usually doesn't get anything anyways. Don't even want to know what kind of crazy things are shooting through his head again. Jojo squeezes his beer can, producing a rhythmic clacking.

»Have some good news.«

»Spit it out,« I say, and have difficulty releasing from the hypnotic up and down of Arnim's paunch.

»I got the position!« Jojo's voice did loops from the happiness.

I ask him what position he means: »What?«

»Well, not a position. I mean, because it's not a paid job. It's volunteer position.«

I stare at him, without comprehension.

»He's now a coach with the football here, « Arnim says, takes a sip, and looks away again. Maybe he understands more that I gave the old dude credit for, after all.

»How? What?«

»Yeah. No. So. The coach of the B-team had to quit. Stroke. And Gerti's filling in. Yes, and I have his position now. Coach of the C-youth team.«

»Fuck yeah, man,« I say and hold my can out for Jojo to clink, »Cheers.« We knock cans and drain the elephant piss.

Jojo had started a couple years ago. It was back when he was going through a really rough time. After the thing with Joel, which was hell for all of us. But that Jojo's father would really fuck things up a couple months later, truly no one could have seen that coming. We were already afraid that we wouldn't ever be able to get Jojo out of that deep hole. No one wanted to leave him alone

and we divided up shifts. Then, on some random day, Jojo got up, finally took a shower, and went to the practice field in Luthé. Not a word to anyone. And would you look at that, co-trainer of the U15. That had gotten him back on track at the time. Even so far that he went back to his old job at the retirement home and apologized for drinking on the job. And once again, look at that, Jojo had his janitor job back.

»I thought to myself, I'll change a couple things. Regarding the practice program. Do things different than Gerti had,« circling the top of his beer can with his finger tip, »maybe integrate a couple things that we'd practiced with Joel, back when. I was meaning to ask you. Maybe you have the sketches we made back then. You remember? With the drills on them and such.«

I nod to myself and sigh. My gaze repeatedly drifts down to the surface of the table.

»It's been an eternity. Don't reckon I still have them flying around.«

»Yeah, not here, but maybe back at your dad's place.«

»Jojo, hey, seriously...« My mouth tasted like Styrofoam again.

»... yeah, just check the next time you're there.«

He thanks me and drinks. A stream of beer misses his mouth and flows through his stubble and over his chin. He wipes at it with the sleeve of Joel's old Hanover 96 warm-up jacket. Only then does he realize what he'd just done.

»Well, shit,« he mumbled and tried to rub the tiny beer spot dry with his bare hand. I kill my can and slam it on the table.

»Well, I'm so fucking tired. Think I'm gonna hit the hay now.«

Jojo down what was left and ground out his burned down cigarette, which he'd forgotten in the ashtray.

»I'll head off then,« he said.

We hugged, patting each other on the back. We don't actually do hugs, but for some odd reason we're in sync in the exact same moment, making it an honest hug and no embarrassed spreading of arms and leaning back and forth where in the end you just shake hands.

We go to the door. I want to turn the light on the veranda on, but nothing happened. I yell over to the kitchen that the damn light outside it already broke again and hold the door open for Jojo. The bell rings and makes the dogs riled up again. In the kitchen Arnim yells that I should shut my trap.

»And congrats again,« I say and hold open the veranda door, cause it'd fall shut otherwise.

»Come over to practice sometime or something. I haven't told Ulf and Kai yet. And,« he balls up his fist, »awesome how you guys smashed Cologne.«

Jojo climbed into the Volvo, turned around, and chugged down the drive. I raise my hand in parting. Then the car disappears behind the birches and willows bending over the driveway.

I get another beer from the kitchen. Arnim's chin is resting a couple inches above his paunch and is trembling from the snoring. I take the rifle with me, placing it on the sofa on my way upstairs and grab my athletic bag. The stairs creak like the bones of an old man.

As I walk through the dark hallway, I head the beating of wings behind the first door on the left. It sounds dry. Like sandpaper being rubbed together. The pungent smell of bird crap had spread all around. I unlock my room. The hard piece of rubber stapled to the bottom of my door scrapes over the old wood flooring. I have to use my knee, just under the lock, to push the door closed. Then I turn on the light. Athletic back in the corner. Open beer. Still a pack of cigs on the table. I remain standing in the middle of the room for a moment. I alternate between drinking and taking a drag. Feel my body. Feels like it's been wrung out. Has been, actually. I smile to myself, contented, then the pain shoots through my jaw again, which I dim with more beer. Already half-empty again. Only now do I notice that I haven't eaten anything since this morning. Was too nervous. While standing, I take off my shoes with some effort. Then I undress completely. My clothes form a small pile among many in the room. Need to go to the laundry mat again. Fuck it, turning it inside-out works, too. My real phone is still on the power cord attached to the outlet next to the door. I pull it out. It sparks, but it doesn't catch me. Three messages, five missed calls. All five over the course of the day. All of them from Manuela. Then a MMS from Kai, which makes me laugh. He took a selfie, shirtless and thumbs up. Behind him there's some bimbo, legs together and bent over on the bedspread, pointing her naked ass towards him. Her head can't be seen. Behind that I recognize Kai's bedroom.

»That was fast,« I write, »new record?«

A text from Uncle Axel: »Good job. See you at work.« I don't write back. The third message is from Manuela. Sent a couple hours ago: »Heiko, where are you at?? Please call me back, but not so late. We go to bed around 10. It's about dad. Finally were able to get a spot in rehab. Hugs and kisses, your big sister. PS. Greetings from Andreas.«

Of course her retard fuckwit husband sends his regards. I read the text again and press my thumb to the power button until the screen goes black.

I stand in the bathroom and examine myself in the mirror. My face is distorted by the cracks in the glass and I have to concentrate to put the pieces like a puzzle in my head. Otherwise I look like a mutant or something. Although I'm not too far from that, either. The left side of my face is a little swollen on the cheek and glimmers red to purple. On my mouth there are two globs of congealed blood, which I leave where they are. Got off okay this time.

Even the collarbone appears to be okay. Even though it may hurt like hell not, it'll be gone within two or three days at the max. I rest the beer on the lip of the sink. Next to it, damp dust rolls up into something that looks like delicate, gray maggot. I hold my hands up in the air, turning them and examining them directly and in the reflection. Blood has collected under the skin on all joints and who knows where else. There's even a remnant of blood that I must have missed at the sink in the rest stop toilette. Not my blood. Here and there scratches, with dirt in the furrows. I

look at myself again. Not the mutant reflection, but rather the composite, true puzzle-me. As I'm standing here in the flickering light, surrounded by tiles that don't even look white any more by day.

»Good job,« I repeat, and try to look myself in the eye, as if there was a real person standing behind the mirror, someone who should be praised.

I climb into the shower. A family of silverfish scurry into the cracks between the tiles.

Damp footprints follow me into my room. I lock the door, slip into some boxers, which immediately absorb the shower water I hadn't dried off, and lie down on the mattress. The water covers my stubbly hair like a blanket of mist and cools my scalp. I cross my arms behind my head. Close my eyes. I think about Yvonne. About her pretty face and her eyebrows, which are as free as a cloudless sky.

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The meal was over. I had just accompanied Yvonne back to her car. She had to go to her night shift. »Nice that it finally worked out for us to meet,« was what Manuela had said in parting, and gave me sideways glance, »I was afraid that we'd never get to know you. Heiko is such a tough nut to crack. Never opens up.«

Yvonne had smiled, unsure if she should take it as a joke or not. She apologized again that she had come in her work clothes: »We can't change in the hospital because the nurse's locker room is being remodeled at the moment.«

Manuela had put on a generous smile and shook her head. Her long, dangling earrings made her seem at least ten years older.

»Don't worry about it. I hope you have a quiet shift. I bet it's hard work at the hospital.« She went back to the patio to help Andreas and his parents clean up the picnic table. Damian was kicking my birthday present through the garden, draped in evening light. I had even gone to the trouble to get him the official ball from the World Cup '98 in France on eBay. Best ball ever.

I kissed Yvonne on her pale forehead and watched her climb into her Ford Ka and drive away. Once again, she hadn't eaten hardly a thing all evening.

I wanted to light a cig on the patio again.

»Heiko,« Manuela jumped in, »can you please not smoke around Damian?«

I snapped the pack closed.

»But he's playing on the grass way back there,« I snapped at her and pointed at my nephew, who was at least five yards away.

»But it blows over to him.«

Which wasn't true. With the trees beyond the property I saw that the wind was blowing in exactly the opposite direction. And even if it wasn't, we're outside, damn it, I thought to myself.

»Besides, I don't want you to be a bad example for him. If he sees that his uncle smokes, then he might want to, too.«

»He's six!«

»Heiko, please,« Andreas butted in.

So I went around the corner, where Damian could not see me, and crouched down, leaning against the wall, smoking in silence. At least the evening was almost over now. It was cooling down.

For me it had felt like the meal had lasted forever. The most exciting thing was Damian's torrent of words. It just bubbled out of him, talking about the first grade and who his best friends were, and so on and so forth. The business chit-chat between Andreas and his father, who had sat across from each other in their checkered shirts, appearing increasingly more like clones and less like father and son, made the time go by even more slowly. Manuela wasn't much help either, not leaving out any chance to praise Andreas' many salad variations. She wouldn't be able to produce something edible if you put a gun to her head. I'll admit it. The food was actually good. Electric grill. But you don't really need to eat outside if you're not going to use charcoal.

Hans' place at the table, opposite Yvonne, had remained empty the whole time, and so Mie sat there alone and silently smiled at the circle. My father had made her load up a plate for him and carry it to him in the living room because he wanted to watch TV. I had watched him from the patio, through the window, the blueish reflection of the tube flickering on his face and then disappearing again.

I heard voices from inside. Only then did I realize I was sitting directly next to the kitchen window. Andreas and Manuela were talking. It sounded like they were loading the dishwasher. Andreas' parents joined them.

»We'd better leave. I have to leave the house early tomorrow morning,« Andreas' father said.

Manuela and Andreas thanked them emphatically for coming and for the generous presents for Damian, and I just thought, good lord, how long do people need to say goodbye. At some point Andreas led his parents to the door. Shortly thereafter, the kitchen fell silent. Manuela had stopped loading the dishwasher. And then I heard her suddenly start to sob. She sucked up the snot. Then another moment of silence. Then it started again. She appeared to be holding her hand in front of her mouth. I tried not to move so that she wouldn't know that I was listening in by accident.

Andreas returned.

»Dear, do you...« He halted. Must have noticed that she was crying. Then nothing. I needed a moment to get that he had simply turned on his heel and left my sister in the kitchen. No clue where it came from, but I stood up, next to the kitchen window, but without showing myself, and whispered: »what's going on?«

Manuela didn't appear at all surprised that my voice was suddenly coming in from outside. If she was, I wasn't able to tell.

»It's just... Heiko. I just can't stand it sometimes...«

I wanted to press her about what she meant exactly, but she added: »Seeing Andreas' parents. And us in contrast. How Papa doesn't even come to the table. And Mama...«My molars ground together so hard that my jaw hurt. »Heiko. I hate Mama for it. I hate her for just running away. I hate her for not caring about us at all.« I wanted to tell her that I felt the same way. That it wasn't a family. And it never had been. At least not as long as I could remember. I wanted to tell Manuela that she was my sister. I mean: of course she is. But by saying that, I actually wanted to say something else. But instead of saying all that and more, what I could have said, I said nothing at all. Cause once again I couldn't open my trap. Then it was too late, because Mie came into the kitchen with the rest of the dirty plates. We haven't spoken about it since then.

I went back around the corner of the house. My knees were soft as sponges. Damian called to me from the patch of lawn, asking if I could play another round of football before he went to sleep. I said I'd come right away.

Andreas sat at the picnic table. There were splotches of red on his cheeks, which didn't fit with his otherwise put-together appearance. He just looked at me. Took a swig of his non-alcoholic beer and looked at me again from beneath his eyebrows. I walked by him without saying a word.

Praise for Philipp Winkler

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