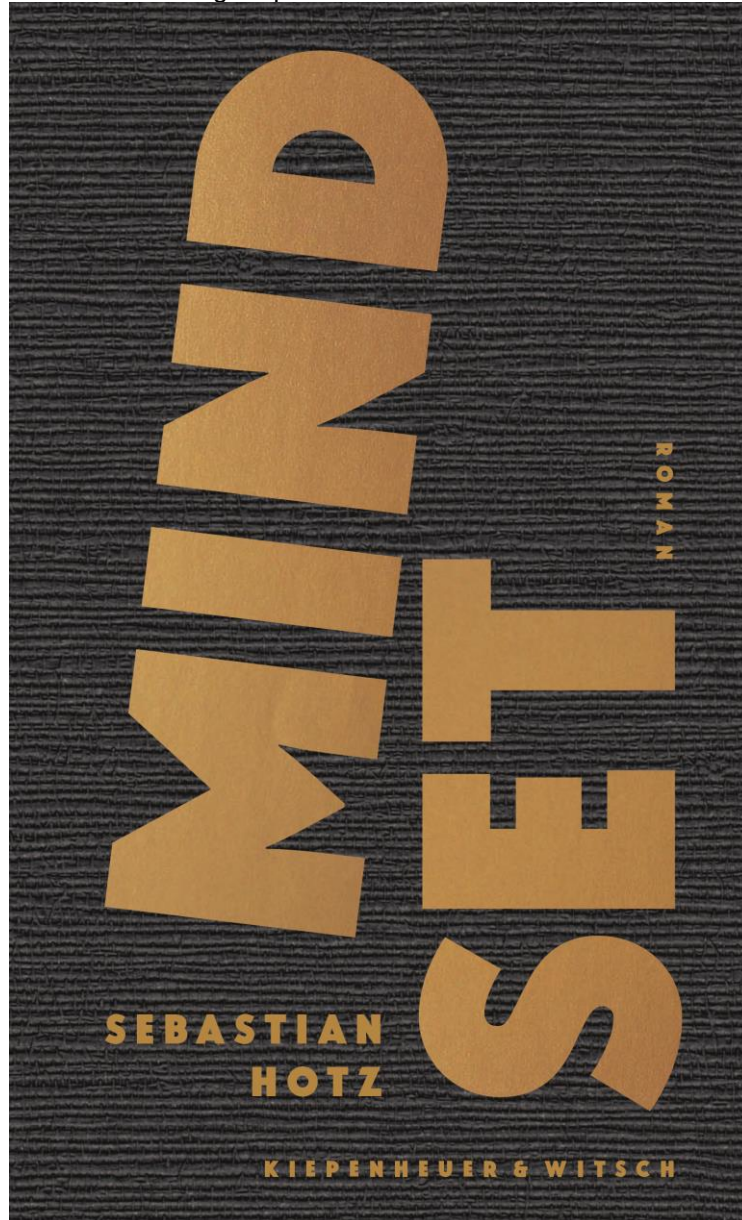


MINDSET

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Chapter 1

Somewhere on the path from the trees to the huts, and on into the massively overpriced single apartments, humanity killed silence. Sometime between the invention of the steam engine and the first download of a meditation app, a background hum arose that will only fall silent once modern civilization becomes a faded memory. Even in the quietest hours of a sleepless night, somewhere you still hear the buzz of an overloaded power strip, cutting up the peace you long for with the razor-sharp edges of its 50-Hertz frequency. And if it's not a strip of plugs it's an adapter. A router. The idling motor of a lift in the block next door, its vibrations transmitting through the walls. Or it's a gurgling water pipe, any pipe, or maybe the heating valve. Or maybe it's just some self-preserving function of the brain that simulates sound to stop the unthinkability of actual silence breaking out.

MEEEBRRRRRR-FA-FA-FA-FA-CCHCHCH-
CHCHCHCHCHCHchchchch "so you on the early shift again?"

The hiss of the coffee vendor and her colleague's way too chirpy voice tears Yasmin from the stream of her thoughts, back into an uncomfortable reality, which for her means sitting at a sticky table in the staffroom of the Holiday Inn Express in Mülheim-on-the-Ruhr, with three minutes to go before the start of her early shift, and now being forced into thirty seconds – still far too long – of small talk with the night-shift guy, which she's

had to get through every morning for the last four weeks before she can take her seat at the reception desk.

"Hey Hannes, early shift – how was the night?"

"Had to scan a new key card for some pissheads last night, but it's been quiet since one-ish, same as usual. You don't have anything to worry about."

Hannes, who is really called Johann but insists on being called Hannes in a hopeless attempt to seem a bit more youthful, talks to Yasmin in the mildly inappropriate way that 56-year-old men like to talk to young women: Paternal on the one hand, superficially friendly and thoughtful, but then at decisive moments a bit too personal and weirdly patronising. Every now and then he drifts into mentioning how beautiful she is and if he was her age he'd definitely try his luck and then laughs to cover how seriously he means it.

"Alright then."

"Alright then."

A little too quickly, Yasmin turns the last three sips of her coffee into one, groans quietly as she leans on the table to push herself to her feet, and squeezes her way past Johann – now clutching his own hot drink – towards the door.

"Have a good one, Yasmin!"

"Have a good day!"

The receptionist's job in a chain hotel in a medium-sized city like the Holiday Inn Express in Mülheim-on-the-Ruhr is the very worst mixture of dull and varied. The regular crowd of stressed-out businesspeople, who check in late in the evening

with their wheelie suitcases and spend their time in various appointments in town, is undemanding. Few of them expect anything from the place. But when they do, the gates of hell open. Despite the long idle times, you can forget relaxing; just the chance that at any moment an angry guest could stomp up to the reception desk to complain about the size of the room, the quality of the pillow, or the smell of the soap in the bathroom, is enough of a horror scenario to keep you constantly on edge. A shit job, but not quite shit enough to actually complain about. There's always someone having a shittier time than you.

Yasmin's early shift goes as usual. From six to seven pretty much nothing happens. Anyone checking out now is in a rush, has to get out to catch a train or a plane at Düsseldorf Airport. The short stress-phase starts at seven, when most of the guests get up and groggily raid the meagre breakfast buffet, consisting of not much more than boiled eggs and a large selection of sausage cold cuts, which is maybe why it generally goes down well. With a practised "We're sorry about that, we'd be delighted to offer you a complementary refreshment from the minibar as compensation" she takes the wind out of the sales of the three guys who complain today about the channels missing on the room TV or the too-thin blankets. At about nine, the tide of soulless business travellers slowly ebbs away, disappearing into taxis and company cars, off to offices and conference rooms. They leave behind an empty hotel and Yasmin, who can look at her phone more now and even risk surreptitiously

slipping in her earbuds. 9:12, she'll have got through half the shift soon. She's hardly expecting any actual work from here on out, the lunchtime lull usually starts just after nine.

"HELLO WAKE UP!"

Before Yasmin can react, a hand whips across the reception desk and flicks an earbud out of her ear.

"Does anyone work round here or do you all just play with your phones?"

What kind of person would you have to be to expect a constantly attentive porter service in a Holiday Inn Express in Mülheim-on-the-Ruhr? And what kind of world would such a person have to be living in to think that their status as a guest in such a hotel gives them the right to educate the staff? In a perfect world, she'd stand up at this point, grab the cup of used pens and smash it against this twat's head until he's lost interest in whatever fucking problem he has. In a slightly less perfect but more realistic world, she would berate him in a razor-sharp tone about who the fuck he thinks he is touching her ear? And if he didn't apologise then, she'd refuse to serve him.

Theoretically she even has the right to throw him out of the hotel; work regulations give her that power. Except: At what price? Confrontations, whether physical or verbal, cost energy, much too much of it, energy that Yasmin's job just isn't worth spending on. Worst-case scenario, Yasmin would have to call security and this guy would definitely file a complaint, then she'd have to go see her boss, who would warn her that the "customer is king" or some shit and out of spite for causing

trouble put her on the nightshift, and then Hannes would be pissed off at her because he needs the night bonus to pay for his daughter's art therapy training course. Long story.

Yasmin fiddles the other earbud out, puts on a dutiful service smile and chooses the path of least resistance, coming to terms with the unfortunate fact that she doesn't live in a perfect world.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry. Can I help you?"

—

When the alarm on his iPhone starts to play the set ringtone at 6 a.m., Maximilian is already wide awake. Matchday baby, let's boogie. Maximilian gets up in one fluent motion, the light from the streetlamp through the curtain of his room enough to illuminate him as he makes his bed with military discipline. Edge to edge, corner to corner, with surgical precision the feather duvet is stripped of any semblance of warmth and comfort. The entire process lasts no more than 45 seconds, but it is essential because making a bed is a so-called keystone habit. Minimum effort, maximum long-term effect – an investment in the day but moreover: In your Self. One American study showed that making your bed may even be a precondition for sustained success. Because a made bed is not just a made bed, it's an indicator of diligence, love of order, and self-

discipline, in fact everything that marks out a successful person. And Maximilian is a successful person.

Freshly showered, Maximilian packs his wheelie case, puts his suit in its protective cover, and makes his way to Gütersloh station in a nondescript ensemble of jeans, trainers, black shirt, and black coat. Today's journey is on the RE6 regional train towards Cologne, the rail line that embodies the main artery of North Rhine-Westphalia, the state that embodies the beating heart of Germany. It's only a ninety-minute ride to Mülheim-on-the-Ruhr, but time is money and money is time and you can never have enough of either. That's why, as soon as he's taken his seat Maximilian snaps open the aluminium casing of his MacBook on the little foldout table and starts feverishly practising the lecture he perfected months ago. Pointless work is better than no work. Resting is rusting.

When the train doors open in Mülheim, Maximilian is the first to step onto the platform. Pulling his wheelie case with his left hand, holding his suit up in its protective case in his right, he strides purposefully towards the signs marked "WC".

In the long history of railway station toilets, nobody has ever entered one willingly. Whichever one of the many possible activities you could complete inside, you'd always rather do it somewhere else. Only adverse circumstances can force humanity to throw a euro into a machine to release a turnstile that allows us to take care of whatever business we have away from public view. In Maximilian's case, the business consists of

shedding his everyday shell and slipping into the one that no longer masks his true Self.

Maximilian leaves the Sanifair toilet in Mülheim-on-the-Ruhr station in a suit that is meant to make him look a little sophisticated, but above all rich. Elegant light grey, tight cut, its leg ending above the ankles, which are slotted into the kind of white trainers that you can tell at a glance cost as much as a new iPhone. In any case, Maximilian looks like someone who shouldn't be in Mülheim, but then again no one who still has the spark of a will to live looks like they should be in Mülheim. Maximilian strides on, not deigning to glance at the dismal ambience of the station hall, the usual mixture of McDonald's, overpriced bakeries, pharmacies, and one of those strange bookshops that only seem to stock thrillers and DER SPIEGEL. His eyes lock on the display of his phone, where a blue arrow tells him to exit the station to the left and follow a road called "Tourainer Ring". He should be able to cover the 1.1 km to the Holiday Inn Express in exactly 14 minutes.

The warm air, now almost normal for February, draws a sweat from Maximilian on his walk. He's a little embarrassed by his body's natural reaction to the small exertion of his short journey, because sweat goes in the gym, maybe in bed, but definitely not in a classy suit like this. The glistening beads on his forehead might soon make him look like a boy about to get confirmed in church, or even worse, like one of those meatloaf-roll-munching bank clerks who have to gasp for air at the slightest danger. Whatever he does, he can't afford to even

begin to display the trappings of a low achiever – *they* would never forgive him that. They'd be on him like a pack of wolves. A quick glance at his silver PATEL PHILIPPE NAUTILUS calms him down – 9:08, still enough time to deal with this hitch, cover the slowly developing body odour, straighten out the dark-blond haircut, dry the armpit patches. All not a problem. Improvise. Adapt. Overcome.

As the automatic door of the hotel slides apart in front of him, Maximilian's mild tinge of terror has almost gone. He enters the lobby self-confidently and steers straight towards the reception desk, where he notices that he hasn't been noticed. The only pair of eyes in the otherwise deserted lobby is fixed on a phone screen. An affront, not just against him but against Germany as an investment location for the international hotel sector, which, thanks to this distracted receptionist, is threatening to sink further into a sandstorm in the desert of its own service. Maximilian knows this is just a minor issue, and therefore not really worth his energy. Obviously, he could just clear his throat aloud, and obviously she would then apologise and smile and they could both just get on with their days without wasting energy on such an incidental encounter. Obviously, that would be possible – let the lapse pass this time, turn a blind eye just this once. Maybe twice. Three times wouldn't be all that bad either. But then comes the fourth time, and the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh time, and at some point the path of least resistance has become a well-beaten track, and in no time Maximilian will find himself being pushed around by every

female ticket conductor, barista, bus driver, and every supermarket employee. The better people who don't take every opportunity to remind those around them that they're better aren't being modest, they're just no better after all.

All of which means that Maximilian has no other option but to plant himself in front of the desk, establish his position, give the receptionist one last chance, and then take what he's entitled to: Her undivided attention.

"HELLO WAKE UP!"

Before she can react, Maximilian flicks the cableless earbud from her ear. That was clearly a step too far, definitely too much, but what's done is done and a winner only looks forwards, and maybe, while she's looking for her earbud, she can think about how all this might have been avoided.

"Does anyone work round here or do you all just play with your phones?"

In a fraction of a second the receptionist's expression moves through the three phases that people go through when they're confronted with something that shatters long-internalised social conventions. Astonishment, anger, then a return to the prescribed social protocols. The mouth, opened in disbelief, closes again, the lips become a single enraged line, before then curling upwards into a cold smile. Typical sheep, typical sleeper, anyone who's ever caught a glimpse behind the scenes of this world would've given him a piece of their mind, but what can you expect from a receptionist?

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry. Can I help you?"

Can she ever. Maximilian leaves no doubt as to the utmost urgency of his business.

"Krach Consulting. I reserved Conference Room 1 for 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. today. No lunch, no conference package. Just the room."

Two clicks on the reception computer and an opened drawer later, and Maximilian has the key to "Conference Room 1" in his hand. Down the hall, ladies' toilets, men's toilets, third door on the left, key in the lock. As the large metal key tag with a 1 engraved on it clonks against the door, Maximilian wonders briefly why Conference Room 1 is called "Conference Room 1", as there is clearly only one conference room here. The conference room looks exactly like the sight of the lobby would lead you to expect. Floor-length windows face the inner courtyard, with frosted glass apparently designed more to protect conference guests from the view outside than the interior from curious onlookers. Maximilian gets to work straight away, breaking up the classroom-style order of the furniture. He pushes the tables against the back wall and starts to move the chairs into a theatre arrangement. Maximilian's seminars aren't lessons, they're performances. Krach Consulting is not a company. Krach Consulting is a movement.

He produces four small Bluetooth speakers from the depths of his wheelie suitcase and positions them in the corners of the room. Using a small adapter, Maximilian connects his MacBook with the projector's HDMI cable hanging from the ceiling, before diligently checking all the systems. Routine is

deadly. The silver minute hand on the blue face of his PATEK is still just before the ten, which is good news, because that gives Maximilian enough time to put his haircut, facial hair, and body odour into their optimal states, before his audience finally occupy the still-empty chairs and he can conquer their minds all over again. Maximilian slips the projector's remote control into his inside jacket pocket, draws the curtains of the seminar room shut and heads next door.

The men's toilet next door to Conference Room 1 manages to add several dozen grey tones to the grey palette of a February day in Mülheim-on-the-Ruhr. There are grey tiles on the walls and floor, grey walls dividing the cubicles, grey urinals, grey paper-towel dispensers, which are filled with grey paper, while a greying condom machine promises the "Joys of Sex" you can experience if you spend five grey one-euro coins on a "Travel pussy". Maximilian stands in the grey light filtering from the strip-lights on the ceiling and the windows obscured with a sticky-plastic film and inspects the damage that the journey has inflicted on him. The tight grey suit has a few forgivable creases, the painfully accurate three-day stubble leaves no room for doubt, despite the train journey, that it's intentional and not the result of accidental dishevelment, and the light sweat of the walk has long since dried. Only the cement-hard parting of his dark-blond hair needs correcting, with a single swipe of the hand. All not too bad, all as it should be, as it has to be. And, seriously, he doesn't look all that bad. Of course, no man in a suit ever looks really bad, but a suit like this would mercilessly

expose every small flaw in his body, every hint of a belly, if it had one. An alert mind in a healthy body. Healthy but definitely not over-trained – no one should get the impression he has too much free time. True hard work is reflected in your bank balance, not your body fat percentage.

Completely absorbed in the fully embodied monument to his own aspirations to perfection, Maximilian strikes a series of poses.

Hand to the tie, critical gaze into the distance? Man of the world.

Hand to the chin, knowing smile? Shrewd savant.

Index finger to the temple, street-smart grin? A tamer in the circus ring that others call reality.

Arms across the chest, chin up? Tell us what we need to do. Maximilian decides he's ready.

When he notices that the minute hand of his PATEK has gone past the 11 and is mercilessly bearing down on the full hour, his pulse begins to quicken. Within seconds, it climbs above the level appropriate to stage-fright and reaches heights normally only associated with elite sports, the reaction to a werewolf bite, and stairs. Sweat shoots out of Maximilian's pores and begins to soak the shirt that just dried. All the minute planning, the rigidly rehearsed procedures, the perfect choreography, usually lifebelts in the wave-pool of his eight-hour seminar days, suddenly now constrict around him, squeezing the air from his lungs. His thoughts, just seconds ago a high-speed train on the rails of his plannability, have jumped

the track, and swathes of smoke made of what-ifs are rising from the burning wreckage of his consciousness.

What if the projector breaks down?

What if the sound from the speakers sticks?

What if he stutters, what if he forgets his lines?

What if the spark doesn't catch this time, what if Krach Consulting isn't a movement after all, what if he trips, falls over, his trousers split? What if someone notices that the little winder wheels on his watch stick significantly further out of the casing than on a real PATEK, what if someone saw him on the train today? WHAT IF WHAT IF WHAT IF?

The number of possible disasters doubles at the excessive speed of his heartbeat, everything starts to slip, Maximilian's knees soften. As his stomach announces that it's about to evacuate the rest of last night's dinner and the acid with it, Maximilian dives for one of the cubicles, frantically locks the door and vomits, tears streaming from his eyes, into the bowl and onto major parts of the toilet seat. Disgusted at his own weakness, the smell of his stomach contents, and the biting citrusy smell of the toilet cleaner, slightly too generously applied, Maximilian turns away and sits, leaning against the cubicle wall, and wipes the bile from his lips, only to be seized by another wave of what-ifs. What if they can smell his weakness? What if no one comes? What if they've all heard everything he's got to say before and have only come to secretly make fun of him?

Maximilian doesn't know whether seconds, minutes, or hours pass before the panic begins to ebb. Just as clear thoughts slowly return to Maximilian's brain and he almost feels ready to sit up against the cubicle wall, his phone vibrates. A call. With some effort, he works it out of the pocket of his tight-cut trousers. The blackness of the lock-screen on his iPhone is pierced only by the white numbers of the time display, the notification of an incoming call from the area of Mülheim, North Rhine-Westphalia, and a single word, written in golden letters on the background. SUCCESS.

"Krach Consulting, hello?"

—

The prospect of drifting contentedly to the shift change after 9:30 was just too good to be true. She must've forgotten something. The unpleasant encounter with the consulting guy was basically the universe punishing her for feeling ok for a second. Not that she feels bad about it. Why would she? A job is a job, her life doesn't depend on it. It just depends on the money that gets transferred to her at the end of the month, and a pissed-off suit who doesn't like her work ethic won't cut her wages by a cent. Apart from where the earbud that was flicked away has gone, Yasmin has just one problem on her mind:

People who reserve a conference room expect guests, and seeing as that scene with the host was enough to make the term "young businessman" forever an insult, the chances are that in the next few minutes the hotel lobby is going to be filled by a parade of the most unpleasant people who ever wandered into Mülheim-on-the-Ruhr.

And the entourage doesn't take long to show up. Ten minutes before the seminar, the first participants start to trickle in. Tight suits, conspicuous watches, bare ankles over white trainers, neatly clipped haircuts. Their interactions with Yasmin are confined to necessities, their glances are disapproving, as if she wasn't worth their attention, which is probably exactly what they think. Could be racism, could be misogyny, could be pure disdain for people who have to sustain their living with actual work. One after another, she points to the third door on the left, behind which they disappear, hopefully only to reappear once she's long since got off work. Just after ten, the stream of guests ebbs, never more than a dribble anyway. See ya, ya dickheads, have fun in your stupid seminar.

Just as Yasmin is about to leave her post at her own peril to adjust the caffeine levels in her blood with yet another cup of coffee, one of the men reappears at her desk.

"Mr. Krach, well ... I'm from GENESIS EGO, that Krach Consulting seminar here, and he's not here yet, Mr. Krach I mean, do you know if he's already checked in, I mean is he here already?"

Just as her rage at the suits had turned white hot, this stammerer, barely more than a boy shoved into an H&M suit, raises so many doubts that she almost feels sorry for him. This fearful little lamb needs his shepherd. No wonder none of them dared talk to her. It's almost cute, but also deeply obnoxious, a paradox she's just going to have to deal with.

"Mr. Krach checked in nearly an hour ago and went into Conference Room 1. I'm afraid I don't know any more than that. Can't you just phone him?"

Suit-boy flinches at the word "phone", as if Yasmin had asked him to bite into the wood of the reception desk to muffle his squeals while she thrashes his little arse.

"No one phones the boss, I mean the boss really doesn't like being phoned, he, the boss I mean, always says phone calls are wasted time and Elon Musk, he never phones either, I mean Elon Musk ..."

Yasmin smiles at him as she clicks on Maximilian Krach's online booking and taps the phone number he left into the reception landline. Suit-boy turns ashen-pale as he hears the quiet beep of the ringtone in the receiver and even ashen-paler when it stops. Krach actually picked up.

"Hello Mr. Krach, this is Yasmin Kara, Holiday Inn Express Mülheim. I'm sorry to disturb you, but I have a young man here wondering where you are and whether everything's alright with you ... ok, I'll tell him. Thank you!"

Smiling, Yasmin hangs up again, adopting an almost motherly tone as she explains to the visibly upset seminar

attendee that Mr. Krach has had a "professional emergency", but one which has been resolved, and that Mr. Krach is on his way now. Suit-boy looks relieved and quickly disappears off towards Conference Room 1, before Yasmin can ask him whether that's his confirmation suit he's wearing. She's left alone with the stubborn cloud of heavy aftershave he leaves behind in the lobby, and the even more stubborn impression that something isn't right. "Professional emergency" – Sure, there's bound to be some act of spite that needs this Mr. Krach's urgent attention, but where the hell did he get to in that dead end of a conference room and the toilets? And why didn't he tell his guests? And why was suit-boy whimpering like that, why did Krach's voice sound so broken, why was he breathing so hard? And what the fuck is Krach Consulting meant to be anyway? Questions upon questions, all of which ...

MEEEBRRUUURRRRR-FA-FA-FA-FA- CCHCHCH
CHCHCHCHCHCHchchchch

... lose their interest as the automatic coffee machine in the staff room of the Holiday Inn Express Mülheim-on-the-Ruhr starts to spit out its cappuccino, which will taste just as bad today as it does every other day.

—

HALF AN HOUR.

Maximilian has spent half an hour sitting on the slip-proof tiles of a toilet cubicle getting his head together again. HALF AN HOUR! Maximilian can't even be sure that no one has been in the toilet in that time. What a disgrace. What a complete and utter disgrace. Next door a room full of highly motivated people are waiting, people who are ready to give everything to optimise themselves and the world around them using his techniques, while he's got nothing better to do than sit listlessly on the floor feeling sorry for himself. A complete embarrassment. How infinitely, utterly humiliating. "What if, what if, what if." What if he finally got his pussy-arse up off the floor and gave the people what they've travelled here hours for? Maximilian is ashamed of himself. In the condition he's in, he's hardly better than that receptionist listening to her music whose call rescued him from this state. Refusing work is refusing work, and subjugating yourself to your psyche means coming second on the path to success.

Maximilian isn't sure whether the receptionist heard his voice break or whether she believed the "professional emergency" thing, but it doesn't really matter. Because however extraordinary Maximilian is, he's just a random guest to her, maybe even one of the inferior ones. After all, he didn't even book a room, just that shabby conference room. Every thought she wastes on him is one too many, and he won't be a part of her reality again until he hands back the key in the early

evening. Lies are most effective when no one's interested in the truth.

It's all about damage limitation for Maximilian now. After winning the struggle for control over his body, it's time to grab back the levers of action. He leaves the toilet cubicle to check his appearance in the mirror a second time under the merciless light of the fluorescent tubes. His standards are significantly lower this time, but he doesn't meet the new ones either – the craters that the panic have left in his face are too deep. Mussed hair, pressed flat against the back of his head by the cubicle wall, his face reddened, his suit creased. The blend of citrusy toilet cleaner, old sweat, vomit, and ACQUA DI PARMA has left him smelling like a bad village disco, but it'll have to do for today.

One last deep breath, then Maximilian takes a determined stride out of the toilet back into the corridor and makes his way to the conference room, whose door is shut, thankfully. He's in his tunnel now. His field of vision focusses tighter, he deliberately speeds up his breathing, meant to heighten the oxygen levels in the blood, to sharpen his senses. Total concentration. All that matters is that he knows what his seminar participants want from him, and that he knows he's going to give them exactly that – even on a day like today. They want Krach, Maximilian Krach, the CEO of Krach Consulting. But mainly they want to hear how they can take back control of their lives. Free themselves of their constraints. They want to hear how they can create their brand-new Self with the

programme he has personally developed: GENESIS EGO. And he's going to show them. Maximilian stops at the door. He fumbles his phone from his tight trousers one more time and waits a few tortuously long seconds for it to connect to the Bluetooth speakers placed inside the conference room. Then he selects the file "Intro_new.wav", hits play, and waits at the door for his cue. 00:00, 00:01, 00:02, 00:03. The little dot on his play bar wanders steadily to the right. When it reaches 00:07, Maximilian can hear the rich, foreboding, rising bass from outside the conference room door. Now.

Maximilian opens the door and enters the darkened room. No one has dared open the curtains, of course they haven't. The bass has swelled to an epic drone that rattles the Bluetooth speakers. He presses the remote control in his jacket pocket, the projector awakens from standby mode and shines on Maximilian like a spotlight, projecting golden writing onto the wall behind him.

GENESIS EGO. Create your SELF.

Maximilian knows what an impressive effect his entrance creates, and he soaks up the tense silence that follows. His eyes are powerless to penetrate the blazing light of the projector, he can only feel his audience's presence. 00:11, 00:12, the bass has now reached a volume at which the speakers give up, the raw power of the noise now lost thanks to the technical limitations of his equipment. At 00:13, the sound finally ebbs away, and the silence that replaces it is almost more oppressive than the noise that came before. Unbearably

long fractions of seconds ensue, until Maximilian finally deigns to fill the room and his audience's ears with the sound of his voice.

"What separates the sheep from the wolves? The sheep isn't slower than the wolf – both can run up to fifty kilometres per hour. The sheep isn't weaker than the wolf – both have a bite that has the power of a small car. Both are mammals, both live in similar habitats, both raise their young in a community. So what separates the sheep from the wolves? It's a question that biology can't answer."

No one in Conference Room 1 has the slightest intention of answering Maximilian's rhetorical questions, let alone interrupt his performance. Not even the traffic noise of inner-city Mülheim coming through the windows can break the concentration of the seminar attendees, so enraptured by Maximilian's words they don't even notice that he just claimed that wolves and sheep were the same animal.

"Only psychology can explain the difference between the wolf and the sheep. The wolf is the hunter, and the sheep is the prey, because that's what their mindset dictates to them. There is no biological reason why sheep don't turn around and start hunting wolves. The only thing that stops them doing that is their brains. But sheep can't change themselves. Sheep are condemned to stay sheep. Sheep can never understand that they're more than just grass-eaters and protein sources. The only animal that has the power to turn from a sheep to a wolf is the human."

Animal metaphors are the bread and butter of the public speaker. From Jesus to Joseph Goebbels, every serious speechmaker in history has used them. Not that Maximilian has to reach too deep into his box of rhetorical tricks to win over his attendees. Wolves, sheep, the imagery is well-honed, everyone in the room knows perfectly well where the speech is going from here. But Maximilian knows that no one has come here to expand their horizons. Conference Room 1 at the Holiday Inn Express in Mülheim-on-the-Ruhr is full of people who want to have their worldview confirmed. And their worldview is the worldview of Krach Consulting. It is the worldview of Maximilian Krach. Sometimes it hurts Maximilian that the group he speaks to is always on the small side, never more than a dozen, never fewer than eight. Maybe he can't fill any stadiums, he has to admit, but the nine men sitting in front of him today aren't an audience, they're fanatical believers who know that they themselves are the only gods worth worshipping. Their number might be small, but their commitment is all the greater. They have come here from all corners of the German-speaking world and know each other from the countless seminars they've been to before today. That's dedication. "Krach Consulting" isn't just some company whose events they like coming to, it's what their lives are about, yes, it's the crystallization-point of their lives. As different as their jobs, their family status, or their backgrounds might be, in this seminar room they melt into a single organism that, guided by Maximilian, follows just one principle: Maximum personal success.

"Humans cannot be distinguished biologically either. Sure, some are a little stronger, others a little cleverer, but none of that explains why some of us beg for money and other earn billions. So what are the differences?"

Maximilian leaves the ensuing pause a little too long. He can almost feel the eager tension leave the room, like parents from a school concert after their children have played. His nine guests even find the courage to shift a little in their seats, the low creaking of their cloth-covered chairs mingles with the traffic noise from outside, giving the moment an uncomfortable mundanity. Someone coughs, but just before Maximilian totally loses control over the room, he continues.

"The differences between winners and losers, between sheep and wolves, are all here."

Mirror pose number three: Index finger to the temple, street-smart grin. Now, whatever you do, don't let go. There's still a danger that the room's attention might slip from his hands.

"Humans are not sheep. Humans can turn round and transform from prey to hunter. Humans can do that up here," Maximilian strikes mirror pose number four, "Humans can change their mindset. To do that, they need stamina, conviction, unconditional self-belief ... there are no shortcuts to success, but we at Krach Consulting have a damn good satnav to get you there!"

Ecstatic applause in the room, but Maximilian immediately cuts it off.

"Gentlemen, by coming to today's GENESIS EGO seminar you've already made your first step from sheep to wolf."

The applause is as rapturous as, well, as the applause of nine people in a seminar room can be. For a brief moment, Maximilian enjoys bathing in their zeal, thinking about how good he looks in the light of the projector, with his perfectly cut suit, his well-kempt three-day stubble, and the still more-or-less-sharp side-parting. What he likes most is the idea that no one could have the faintest idea that the man who just produced that stirring speech was a weeping wreck in the gents next door less than half an hour ago. A phoenix from the ashes, from dishwasher to millionaire. Who could do that, if not him?

Maximilian drops the hero pose, takes the remote control from his trouser pocket, and clicks to the prepared presentation on the next slide. Now the background isn't black anymore, but white, and instead of the words GENESIS EGO it shows the agenda for the rest of the day, which, apart from more lectures by "Maximilian Krach, CEO of Krach Consulting," includes role-playing games, a contemplation session, and an opportunity for audience contributions. With a nod, Maximilian motions for someone in the first row to open the curtains, transforming Conference Room 1 from a theatre back to a bog-standard conference room. The daylight gives Maximilian the first sight of his audience, who he could only make out vaguely until now.

With a lot of goodwill, the seminar room could be described as half full, though realistically "half empty" would be the right description. According to the hotel's website, Conference Room 1 provides a capacity of twenty-five people with tightly set-out seats, which Maximilian, with wise forethought, reduced to twenty by loosening the arrangement. Maximilian is disappointed every time anew by the low attendance figures. What hurts even more is that he recognizes every single face here. Apparently Mülheim couldn't deliver a single new recruit for GENESIS EGO, a programme whose didactic quality, Maximilian is convinced, could fundamentally change the lives of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of people. Great minds, Maximilian reflects, are often ahead of their time, condemned to wait for the rest of humanity to catch up. He swallows the bitter taste of frustration, returns to his spot in front of the audience, who have filled the front rows, and continues with point two on the agenda: "Maximilian Krach. The brains behind GENESIS EGO."

As Maximilian is about to go on, one seminar participant takes the opportunity to say something. "I'm sorry, Mr. Krach, I know you'll be disappointed."

Maximilian turns his head sharply and tries to drill a hole through the speaker with a look.

"Why should I be disappointed?"

The participant's courage seems to immediately abandon him. Instead of finding some clear words, all he can manage is a stuttered response.

"Well, cos there's not that many of us again ..."

"NOT THAT MANY?" Maximilian sees a chance to reinforce his authority. "Instead of complaining about a lack of growth, what I see here are nine men prepared to take another step on the path from sheep to wolf, and eight men prepared to give it all to win it all. But above all I see one doubter who is scared of the life of the wolf, who is scared of the strength that GENESIS EGO could unleash in him. I see a herd animal who is hiding, shrinking away, because the next step could be too uncomfortable. Instead of clearly focussing on the goal in front of you, you're looking left and right and worrying that the path you're carving out might be too lonely. What do we call people who act like that?"

"SHEEP!"

The voices of the eight unblemished participants almost crack in their eagerness to feel superior to one of their number. One disruptor dared to raise a doubt, and even if it wasn't really much of a doubt, everyone is glad for the opportunity to display their unconditional loyalty to Maximilian Krach. They're wolves, they don't follow the herd. Or would a sheep travel hundreds of kilometres to follow Maximilian's call? No way. That's wolf behaviour. Alpha behaviour.

Maximilian plants himself in front of the visibly intimidated disruptor and smiles at him, one eyebrow raised. "It is normal to have doubts, but only sheep give in to them. Wolves overcome them. If you stay here, one day maybe you could be one too."

"I didn't mean to doubt anything, boss, I just said that..."

"... of course, you're free to go any time." Maximilian has turned his back to the audience. "I'm sure you'll find the way to the door," Maximilian points behind him, "without my help."

The audience whoops, the battle is won, his authority is reinforced, he's still a wolf. Maximilian condescends to offer the sheep, who has stayed in his seat, one last look. "Wise decision, my friend."

As Maximilian prepares to give the settling mob his life story one more time, the door handle of Conference Room 1 quietly presses down. Ten pairs of eyes look at it, mesmerised as the door opens slowly and a new face appears in the widening gap.

"Am I in the right place for GENESIS EGO?"

Maximilian and the seminar participants all put on the same broad grin.

"You've never been more right. I'm Maximilian Krach, CEO of Krach Consulting. Take a seat – if you're ready to change your life."

[END OF SAMPLE]