

From Ruins. A Young Man at a Time of Crisis

by Hendrik Bolz

Sample Translation by **Marshall Yarbrough**
[pp. 5 – 39]



Non-Fiction / Memoir, 272 pages

Publication date: October 2026

© 2026, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG

Contact information: <https://www.kiwi-verlag.de/verlag/rights>

For the women who were my teachers, both in and out of school.

This book reports from a world that is hard to talk about without reproducing, in language, the racism, antisemitism, misogyny, homophobia, and violence that were its central organizing principles. No one should be asked to put up with this ambivalence who has not consciously chosen to do so.

It's not possible to write one's own story without appropriating the stories of the people who appear in it. The things that are described in the following pages are things that really happened, but very few happened exactly as they are described. I've changed names and places, actions and events, taken them apart and rearranged them in such a way that the characters appearing in the text only ever bear a partial resemblance to real individuals.

JOHN F. KENNEDY

The toilet looks like somebody poured melted chocolate into the white porcelain bowl then shook up a bottle of Fanta and opened it right over the seat. Great, now I've got to clean this up, otherwise the next guy is going to think this was my doing. So okay, I'll just take the toilet brush and the thin toilet paper and while the hand dryers are roaring outside the stall I'll scrub away till everything's spic and span, and now I can put the lid down, take a seat and pull the little cylindrical bottle out of my pants pocket, the little cylindrical bottle with the twenty tiny helpers.

I don't actually need them anymore, now that I've clawed my way back. It wasn't exactly easy, but I did it. Still, this trip I'm leaving on today is a special case. My first trip to New York, first trip to the US, first long-haul flight, nine hours locked away inside a plane, flying over the so-called pond—I didn't want to take any chances. I open the bottle and tilt it, trying to drop one of the pills into my hand, but of course a whole bunch of them come pouring out and I have to pick them out of my sticky palm one by one.

Of all the people I know in Berlin, I'm one of the only ones who hasn't been to the US before, who hasn't even left Europe before. Vacation after the Wall fell meant taking the ferry from Mecklenburg-Vorpommern to

Scandinavia; it wasn't until a little before I left that we made it down to the Mediterranean. While the people I would later be surrounded by in Berlin were off on some kind of dweeby student exchange program, I sat sedated in a Stralsund drug den, frying my brain, and after high school graduation, when they were backpacking around the world or doing a semester abroad, I was stuck in my Berlin dorm, alone with my wrecked psyche, happy just to make it through to the next day more or less in one piece.

“Whoaah ughh dude, bro, go way down to the end, it's a hazmat zone over here.” Two young men walk past the stall and offer their take on the stench in the bathroom. I'm not trying to hang around here any longer than necessary myself. I've put all the pills back but one, and now with one hand I awkwardly try to open the bottle of water I bought after going through security.

Really it was forever ago, the rock-bottom, wrecked-psyche era, and a whole lot has happened between then and now—finishing college, a rap career, a book, and hundreds of therapy sessions. But somehow while working on said book, *The Aughts*, I managed to slightly retraumatize myself.

I knocked out the first few chapters in no time, excited that I still had such clear memories of my childhood and teenage years and that I had these totally crazy stories to tell. I felt a distance, like everything I was writing about hadn't actually happened to me at all, like I was writing about some bizarre

dream. But as the work continued the moments started to pile up where all of a sudden I'd find myself in a very bad place, where I'd be filled with this massive sense of hopelessness that sucked up all the joy, all the niceness and beauty in the world. At readings I would sit there all alone on these big dark stages in front of hundreds of people and reopen this badly healed wound again and again, and soon it got to the point where it was an actual physical problem. Sometimes my face would start throbbing, sometimes my arms and legs would go numb, soon I was waking up every morning with stomach cramps, couldn't eat anything all day or would just randomly have to throw up. One time, driving home to Berlin, I had such a massive panic attack that I had to pull over and spend the night in a Best Western somewhere in Lower Saxony. Now the wound was completely open, it throbbed and festered, the bed I was lying in kept spinning round and round while old memories and emotions raced around the dark room like restless ghosts. After that everything became difficult, even the simplest things, like standing in the checkout line at the supermarket. And then there was the nice vacation to Crete that I'd booked, which was actually supposed to help bring some relief, but which ended up becoming an insurmountable hurdle, a toxic black spot on my calendar.

Weeks before the flight, my palms would start sweating. I was convinced that I'd get up in the air and just keel over and die. The doors close,

the flight attendants do their creepy safety dance, the plane rolls around on the tarmac, and now I know I'm screwed. But then even at this point, if worse comes to worst I could still get out of there, I'd just have to really get the waterworks going, make a racket, freak the fuck out. But once the pilot steps on the gas, when out the window the paved surfaces and parched yellow fields start flying by, when the nose of the airplane suddenly lifts and we're soaring diagonally through the air, first level with the treetops, then with the roofs, then over them all, the paved surfaces and parched yellow fields growing smaller and smaller and the sky around us ever larger, THAT'S WHEN I KNOW I'M COMPLETELY FUCKED.

Now I'm trapped, now there's no turning back, now I'm all alone up here, with no traction, nothing to hold onto, and if my body starts playing tricks on me again, if I get dizzy, if my throat constricts, if I can't swallow or can't breathe or who knows what other torture it'll come up with, then nothing can save me here in this tin can, there's no escape, no chance, then I'll just die, howling and sobbing and wetting my pants down there on the dirty carpet in the aisle, eyed with disgust by my fellow passengers, the saddest schlub in all of Germany, should have stayed on the ground, stayed in his lane, the higher you fly the harder you fall.

Before the flight to Crete, on the advice of my therapist, I got a prescription for Tavor, this little blue pill that is now sitting on my sweaty palm, this little fucker that's supposedly going to prevent the emergence of my horrible delusions. There it sits, smugly staring back at me, feeling very fine and superior.

Haven't I come a long way since then? Do I really still need this? Whatever, swallow it and wash it down.

"If you were in a plane crash, who would you rather be stranded on a desert island with, Kida Ramadan or Hans-Georg Maaßen?" Ronja glances up from her TikTok feed as I drop down on the seat next to her at the gate, then wrinkles her nose and gestures toward my armpits. Only now do I notice that my underarms are soaking wet, that in my nervousness I've sweated through the T-shirt and cashmere sweater I'm wearing under my Barbour jacket. My flying outfits are a regular source of amusement for my friends. While they travel in comfortable clothes, like they're at home just lounging on the couch, I dress as if I were about to moderate a panel discussion at the theater. But the sad fact is that wearing sweatpants makes me look like a stressed-out prole from a concrete apartment block and I know that people are nicer to me when I dress decently, and also maybe when we get up there I might end up on the dirty

carpet in the aisle after all, and in that case I'll need all the sympathy I can get. Besides that I'm as nervous as hell and this clothing gives me strength, it's like armor, as soon as I put it on my whole attitude is different.

"So what do you think? Kida or Maaßen?" Ronja meanwhile is a picture of calm, but then she grew up near Kassel, not far from a former U.S. base, and has been to the U.S. a bunch of times, starting when she was a little kid visiting her relatives, who we will also be seeing in the coming weeks.

"I'd have to think about it, you?"

"Kida might flip out at some point and punch you in the face, but Hans-Georg Maaßen's got that stubborn middle-class propriety, he'd probably force himself to leave you alone." Her eyes are shining, she loves thought experiments like this. Last night after a reading we went out for drinks with friends at a Berlin restaurant frequented by A-listers—gentlemen in suits, women in dresses with thick gold rings and designer handbags, plates filled with veal cutlets, oysters, crème brûlée, beef tartare, bouillabaisse. Up until a little while ago this would have been one of the many places and situations that made me about as insecure as a long-haul flight, situations where I would have felt like the lowest antisocial peasant from the Pomeranian sticks—which in some ways of course I am—someone who looks wrong, talks wrong, eats wrong, dresses wrong, even moves wrong. Like walking on eggshells, this

feeling. In any case, Ramadan, the actor, came walking through the door, followed shortly thereafter by the ex-chief of the domestic intelligence service, and normally I'd have a response to the desert island question, but at the moment I'm just too nervous for it. According to the screen at the gate there's still another hour till takeoff, and now it's just starting creep up within me a little, this cold, anxious feeling, dampened by the tablet I took in the bathroom, and being in this bleak waiting area with all these strangers doesn't exactly bolster my sense of well-being.

Outside the big window, an endless loop of airplanes taking off and landing—so I'm about to be sitting inside one of these things.

Breathe in, hold, breathe out. Accept the fear, let it subside.

Breathe in, hold, breathe out. Accept the fear, let it subside.

Most of my fellow travelers speak English and are more or less the same age as me. There are a few couples, some stressed-out families who seem to be on their way home from vacation in Europe, plus a few aloof older women and men in fancy business attire. They've got laptops in front of them and look like they might take this flight every few days. That's got to be a crazy life, regularly commuting between Berlin and New York.

Breathe in, hold, breathe out. Accept the fear, let it subside.

Actually most of the people here look likable enough. Okay, now I'm alright, now it's gone. Me, I'm not afraid at all, I'm just nervous.

WAIT WHAT, I'M ABOUT TO FLY TO NEW YORK?

An expensive trip that lots of people spend a long time saving up for, a trip to this city at the absolute center of the world, the city of 50 Cent, Biggie, French Montana, Nas, Jay-Z, A\$AP Rocky, Jennifer Lopez, Nickie Minaj, Cardi B, the Ramones, Martin Scorsese, Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro, Lana del Rey, Lady Gaga, Donald Trump, *The King of Queens*, *Home Alone 2*, *The Godfather*, *Donnie Brasco*, *American Gangster*, *Goodfellas*, *Kids*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, *American Psycho*, *The Big Short*, and so on and so forth, you could fill a few pages of a book with such a list. Rap, the style of music that for many years I made my living performing, was invented in New York; America was the place where it all came from, the cartoons, the bands, the books, the movies, the brands, the whole cool vibe that flooded the country all around me after the end of the GDR and infected everybody with the great capitalist promise that hard work would lead to upward mobility and prosperity. Cartoons, bands, books, movies, brands that gave color to my melancholy gray apartment block, that showed me another world, flashy and thrilling. Ever since I can remember, it was American pop culture that captivated and excited me like few other things could; Mickey Mouse and Nike and McDonald's were the shimmering,

promising alternative to the Trabant, to the yellowed Volk und Wissen textbooks, to village festivals and Neo-Nazi pop songs.

And now, in my late thirties, it's finally time, now I'm really flying there, and I had to *work* for this, I really had to struggle for it! It's crazy that I'm actually trusting myself to make this trip, that I'm paying for it with money that I earn by writing books, that everything has played out the way it has. Crazy, especially when I think back on how I started my life as an adult after high school, stranded with my bombed-out psyche, lost and alone in a cramped, musty room, rudderless and adrift on murky waves, no shore in sight, nothing below me but the endless, churning deep.

"And?"

"And what?"

"Kida or Maaßen?"

"I think in a situation like that I could get along with either of them."

". . ."

"Yes, what?"

"You're not on a talk show, this is supposed to be fun!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

"I think if you manage to beat Kida in a fight then he'll get real gentle, and after that you could have a nice relaxed time on the island with him." Ronja

dives back into her phone and starts watching TikToks, it's almost unfair how relaxed she is. Now I pull my phone out too and scroll through the news for a second.

Germany's going down the tubes, there's deadlock over key reforms, new debt, weak economy, war in Iran, war in Ukraine, the new authoritarianism, crisis of the rules-based international order, everybody acting tough, schoolyard logic, struggle and deterrence, survival of the fittest, zones of influence, preemptive strikes, peace through strength, historical turning point. What are you looking at, pussy? What are you laughing at, what are you, gay? A sharp pain in my face, thick red blood running down onto my t-shirt, salty air whistling through a bent nose, my own fists slamming into others' faces, the dismal roar of the surf, a world turning gray.

Turn the phone off, put it away.

What version of the U.S. am I about to fly to? If I'm to believe a few German media outlets and my Insta feed, then it's a completely ruined country full of total morons . . . but then I'm more than familiar with the kind of distorted images that result from nonstop, scandal-focused reporting from my own experience with the subject of *East Germany*.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’re currently pre-boarding for Delta Flight 93 to John F. Kennedy Airport. Would the following passengers please come to the gate: Arno von Weber, Catherine Hohenstein . . .”

Again they call out this long list of names that sound like characters from the Bibi and Tina universe. When is it ever going to be our time to board, it’s crazy how much waiting you have to do on a trip like this. Should I read something? Since *The Aughts* came out I keep getting recommendations of books from France, apparently the topics I bring up have been a big thing there for a while now, class, social milieux, I come from here, I went there, autofiction with a sociological perspective, authors like Didier Eribon, Annie Ernaux, and Édouard Louis. For this trip I went to Dussmann and bought a few similar books from the US, Ocean Vuong, Julia Fox, Tara Westover, memoirs, stories about class, about struggle and upward mobility, American culture is full of them.

I recognize many of my own experiences in books like these, but does my story really fit in the same category as theirs? It’s true that violence was a defining element of my youth, alongside right-wing extremism, drugs, and decline; as a dock worker my father had a hard time after the Wall fell, he lost his job, wound up on unemployment for a while, then had to take temporary work and was always away on a job, coming home on Friday evening and

having to leave again on Sunday afternoon. My mother was still in college when the GDR ended, she had to repeat part of her training and then for several years had trouble finding the right job until finally she went into business for herself. Living in the apartment block we had to rely on rental assistance for a long time and I wore hand-me-down clothes from the neighbor kids, but I never went hungry or cold and was always bathed, and when I was about fifteen we moved out of the block and into a house of our own. Of course by this point I was so closely attached to the neighborhood that I kept spending my days there at the homes of my friends, continuing my career of drugs and violence, but still: many of the people I knew back then, whose stories and personalities wound up informing the characters in my book, had to deal with far greater challenges than mine: poverty, a broken home, long-term unemployment, alcoholism—really almost all of them struggled with these problems.

When I visited my publisher in Cologne to celebrate the completion of the manuscript and the publisher offered words of praise, saying that many authors tried to engage with the topic of the underclass, but few managed to pull it off as well as I had, I was fully taken aback, since I didn't think of my story as an underclass narrative at all. Really I had just wanted to tell about my upbringing, about what I considered to be normal circumstances in East Germany. Even at this point in time I didn't fully understand how great the

differences were between the various social milieux emerging even just in the post-reunification East—people my age who grew up in Stralsund’s Old City, for example, had a totally different experience than us kids from the block. Even at this point in time, in lovely, cheerful Cologne, I didn’t fully understand what vastly different degrees of wealth and security existed in Germany, didn’t realize the extent to which the place I grew up in and the people I grew up with were caught in the midst of a decline, didn’t see what depths my friends on long-term unemployment had sunk into and become stuck within. Today I’m regularly astonished at how blind I was to the significance of such class differences—the egalitarian East German mindset, the decades-long endeavor to abolish these very differences, had sure left its mark on me.

It was an irony of fate that after finishing high school I should stumble into one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Berlin. By chance I ended up in the former American sector, in Berlin-Zehlendorf. I studied at the Free University of Berlin, founded here after World War II with the Americans’ help as an answer to the Soviet influence at Humboldt University, and lived in the “student village” in Schlachtensee, built by the U.S. to provide a home for the future elite of a de-Nazified, non-totalitarian Germany.

Just making it there had been a struggle. I had pulled myself out of my morass of violence and drugs, and my clothes were still covered in muck,

everywhere I went I left a sad trail of slime, in lecture halls, at house parties, in Berlin clubs and in the tidily-swept streets of my new neighborhood. I still didn't know down from up, and the misery that I had bogged myself down in right up to the day I left home continued to grow and grow in these new surroundings, an endless feedback loop of maladjustment, continuing on into the year 2009. The year of Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, Mando Diao, the year Obama took office, the year of "Yes We Can," of the financial crisis and the bank bailout, of *Jung, brutal, gutaussehend*, of *Sexismus gegen Rechts*, of *Carlo Cokxxx Nutten 2*, of Sarrazin's first "headscarf girl" interview, my first summer in Berlin, my last summer without a smartphone, the year when I

t o t a l l y

w e n t

t o

p i e c e s.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we're now about to start boarding for Delta Flight 93 to John F. Kennedy Airport, please have your boarding pass and ID ready."

I can't help but grin for a moment because with the second mention of JFK airport I'm reminded of the "Telekom Sweden" skit by Studio Braun, but then I start to get a little queasy again. It's almost go time for real now, the first

people are starting to stand up, a few of them are getting really pushy, but it's not like we don't all have assigned seats.

We're on our way to New York, on our way to the US, leaving Europe behind. I had to wait till I was almost forty to experience this, but that's just how it is, and when I look back at how my adult life began, what things were like back then, then I have to admit that all of this here is nothing short of a miracle.

POOR BUT SEXY

A thick black column of smoke rises into the light pink sky, the birds are chirping for the very first time this year, it smells of spring, of new leaves and blossoms and molten plastic, someone tugs impatiently at my bomber jacket and I feel like the biggest hero in all of Germany.

Good morning, dear birds, good morning, good morning!

The fire cozily crackles and roars. I can't tear my eyes away, they're stuck on the scene like Velcro, like a suction cup on tile, this is the wildest, most beautiful thing I've ever seen. What a night, what a brilliant move I pulled off earlier, and now to top it all off, this here, the first burning car of my life, not a movie, not a music video, no, no, no, it's right here in front of me, I could walk right up and touch it, HOW BADASS IS THAT?

Melted plastic drips onto the pavement, probably the dashboard or a child's car seat, I've never seen anything like this before, I wonder who the car belongs to? Rich corporate asshole, court officer, arms dealer, nurse, Turkish family man? There's no way of knowing what make or model it was, all that's left is an automotive carcass, sitting there engulfed in flame, lazily pouring thick black clouds of smoke up into the sky, right here in the middle of the

street, among the garbage cans, street signs, and apartment buildings, and nobody seems to be bothered by it.

More tugging on my bomber jacket, this time more aggressive.

OKAY, OKAY, ALRIGHT ALREADY.

POP.

There goes the suction cup.

Sofia snorts with satisfaction and runs off, I try to keep up with her, once again I have absolutely no idea where we are, somewhere in east Berlin, I think. Cobblestones, overflowing garbage cans, colorful graffiti on crumbling walls, posters of Silbermond, Bob Dylan, Peter Fox, everything rushes past, I glide through the unfamiliar surroundings like I'm on rails, all the while following Sofia's blond hair and perfume, realizing again just how loaded I am.

Wow, how thick the buds are on the trees already, already some of the branches are showing a faint green gleam, on the damp street the last dirty patches of snow are disappearing, revealing stiff frozen piles of dog shit, revealing bright orange and purple crocuses, I still can't even really believe it, it's finally spring! I did it again, I made it through another awful, shitty, fucked-up winter, the third winter since I stopped smoking weed, now it's all uphill from here!

“Watch out, hot and greasy, coming through!” A dad and his kids coming toward me, well-rested and in fantastic spirits, with steaming, rich-smelling coffee cups and fresh rolls, I try to get out of the way and SMACK, stick my foot right in a puddle. Gross brown slime on my Nike Shox, but no time to clean them, Sofia is already ten meters ahead of me, I hurry to catch up, sock squelching, run past a kebab stand, past the smell of meat, zonked out partygoers standing in line with pale, swollen faces, wrapped in coats and winter jackets, greasy hair, slumped shoulders, is that what I look like?

“YOUR SOUL IS LOOKING FOR A WAY OUT!” Man, why’s there gotta be such creepy headshrinker shit on the walls all over Berlin? Ah, I know this train station, it’s Ostkreuz. Up the metal stairs under the corrugated iron ceiling, then back down and across. Construction fences, piles of muck, exposed cables, the whole station is one big construction site. A yellow-and-red S-Bahn pulls in and Sofia’s blond hair vanishes in the crush of bodies hurrying past, then reappears on the stairs leading up to the Ring line.

“Hey watch where you’re going!” Yeah, yeah, shut your mouth, grandpa, I’ve gotta catch up, gotta catch up, I take the stairs three at a time, now I’m up top and warm rays of sunlight fall on my face, fall on clubgoers and early risers, on an old water tower, red brick buildings, a 1UP graffiti tag, off in the distance the TV Tower vanishes in a cloud of haze.

Man, I'm actually here, in the sickest city in Germany, "poor, but sexy," population 3.4 million and me right here in the middle of it, the hero in the RPG who when the prologue's over leaves his village and sets off on his adventures, I'm here experiencing the sickest shit nonstop, just look at the major exploit I pulled off today, a thousand experience points and level up, BRO BRO BRO, wait'll I tell everybody back home!!!

"Are you really that dumb? You're actually stoked about this?"

"Yeah, it served him right, didn't it!? He was asking for it!"

"Dude, something serious could've happened!"

"It's not my fault he just hit the deck like that!"

"Things don't work like that here, it's not like where you come from, people don't just go around bashing each other's heads in like a bunch of village idiots!"

"Yeah whatever, there's enough losers here."

"But you aren't a loser."

"What do you know."

"I don't want to hang out with somebody who beats other people up."

"Huh? Bro, I was just defending you, I did that for you, don't you get it!?"

“Ohhh, well thank you very much, my knight in shining armor, where would I be without you!? Hey look, here’s your carriage!”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, *huh* is right, now come on, in you get, go go go! SEE YA!”

Determined hands pushing me onto the train, a few people on the platform here and there, muttering and shaking their heads, in a minute they’ll start applauding, the dumbasses. Enjoy the show, losers, you want a photo, too?

WHAM I drop down onto the turquoise seat, two benches facing each other, there’s a woman with a headscarf and a retiree in hiking gear, a thin puddle of beer from the seat behind him seeps in between his feet, or maybe it’s vomit or piss, what do I care.

I DON’T GET ANY OF THIS

dooodOOOdoood, red light over the doorway, the doors close, the train starts moving.

Sofia isn’t even looking this way, what’s her problem, I thought she’d be glad!?

I fish my MP3 player out of my jeans, headphone cord’s all tangled up, so annoying, man, is everybody trying to fuck with me now or what? I fumble and futz with it. TREPTOWER PARK. Finally get the knots undone, stick the earbuds in my ears, the cord’s got a loose connection, I’ve gotta twist it around

to just the right angle, now I crank the volume to full blast, the old hiker changes seats.

Das ist Alqaida auf Deutsch

Halb Hooligan, halb Taliban

This is Al Qaida in German

Half hooligan, half Taliban

Stretch your legs out and for now just try to deal. Beyond the scratched-up window pane the awakening city flies past, dirty facades, apartments, office buildings, industrial buildings. I pull out my old Nokia cellphone, a gift from Kramer, who probably pinched it from somebody, some old geezer or another, but it does what it's supposed to. It was so funny, that guy me and Susanne saw in Stralsund a few months ago, showing off his weird eye phone that he said had all these songs on it and a good camera and all that, WHAT DO YOU NEED ALL THAT SHIT FOR YOU FUCKWAD?

Text to Sofia: “???”

Text to Kramer: “all losers h3re.”

Man, how cool would it be if they were all here, Kramer, Pavel, Schubert, the whole legendary crew, we'd have such a sick time, we'd get some real action going and get to know all the really badass people, but NO NO NO, none of them wants to move here, they won't even hear of it, laugh in my face when I bring it up. Kramer says he'd never move to Berlin unless he had a badass gang there already, without that you're just a total chump. A few years ago he was here visiting relatives and passed by a building and BAM just like that he gets punched in the face by these two badass Arabs in the doorway, just because. There's even a photo from the trip on his OKF profile, Kramer with a tanning salon tan, Picaldi jeans and a Cordon jacket, standing in front of some old building, with the caption: "me in schöneberg."

SONNENALLEE, NEUKÖLLN, HERMANNSTRASSE.

It's one legendary place after the other here, I see the names and immediately my head is filled with visions of a mob of SLASHERS pumped to the gills with tilidine, ready to BUST ONTO the train and ROLL EVERYBODY they see, STICK a knife in somebody's stomach or STOMP ON their head on the platform. Mystical places that I know from rap lyrics, places I've been hearing about ever since I was a pimply little pissant and one of the older kids gave me a burned CD with "UNDERGROUND BERLIN RAP" written on it. Places where the COOLEST, MOST BADASS, HARDEST guys

you can imagine liked to hang out, places that were the backdrop for the wild, exciting life that I would dream of when I sat, drunk and high out of my mind, on some ratty couch in my retirement home of a town, where everything was always depressing, everybody always in a bad mood, and as a young person you felt like you were being suffocated. SICK, BRO, that sign over there actually says HERMANNSTRASSE, I could get off the train right now and TOUCH IT, this is my hometown now, I've done it, I'm really here, right in the middle of all these badass places, Nollendorfplatz from the "Bei Nacht" video, the MTV building where Fler got ambushed, the Märkische Viertel where Sido's block is, the Q-Dorf on Ku'damm where Shokmuzik and the Aggro crew threw down.

And now this shitty, fucked-up winter is over, now I'm looking at my first spring and summer in Berlin, now my life can begin! Now I just have to finally get to know the cool people!!!

**Zieh am Joint, mein Freund, mach das Fass auf
Ich zeig dir die Stadt, yo Roman, dreh den Bass auf!**

Hit the joint, my friend, tap the keg,

I'll show you the city, yo Roman, turn the bass up!

The feet of the woman in front of me are tapping to the beat of my music, outside we've been passing a giant, fenced-in vacant lot, the decommissioned Tempelhof airport. Up until just a few weeks ago planes were still taking off and landing here. Someone put up a flyer recently on the endlessly long community board outside the cafeteria at the university that called for opening the site to everybody, and to make this happen we're supposed to occupy it once summer comes. You look a meter farther down and there's a flyer saying we're supposed to demonstrate against weapons research, and a meter on from that we're demonstrating against the newly introduced Bachelor's and Master's degree tracks, and so on and so forth. Exploitation, imperialism, warmongering, reading it all you really start to feel like the world is ending, shit like this can really make you depressed, it's like watching the *Zeitgeist* doc on YouTube, makes you glad for every Obama "Hope" poster you can get.

BRO I JUST DECKED A GUY, THE DUMBASS JUST FELL STRAIGHT BACK, FUCKING BIG MOUTH DID A GODDAMN BACKFLIP. YOU GOT A PROBLEM? STILL GOT A PROBLEM? *HALLO WERNER!* MAN ISN'T THIS SICK, I JUST GOTTA SMILE, I'VE GOT GOOSEBUMPS.

Oh man, right there in that red clinker-brick building is the next legendary spot! “I’m at McFit gym, just kickin’ it in Templehof / Yo come on down I’ll knock you flat before the gloves come off!” I’ve seen the rapper Godsilla working out a few times now, it’s so sick, years ago I would listen to his music on the sly in class, I’ve been to his concerts, back home I’ve got merch that he’s signed, and now there he is lifting weights just a few feet away from me. And when I drive back to campus I turn on the car radio and what do I hear? Not some no-name on Ostseewelle but the rapper She-Raw, who DJ’s the afternoon slot on KissFM. Man, people in Berlin have no idea how lucky they are.

SCHÖNEBERG.

Up off the bench, out onto the cold platform, now I take a minute to get my bearings, there’s the sign for the S1, down the stairs, next train in eight minutes, I drop down onto a bench. A bright, sunny morning, kids laughing loudly, pigeons standing around in their own shit, I pull my phone out, no answer from Sofia . . .

Should I call? Ask her what the deal is? I check the messages, zero, zero, zero. Never dealt with anything like this before.

The guy threw every insult there was at her, slut, whore, hooker, he got right up in our business while we were messing around, HE WAS ASKING FOR IT, RIGHT!?

Then I defend her, and what kind of thanks do I get???

You're fucked up, you're weird, I'm not into you.

I'm not calling her, she can call me . . .

I stick my phone back in my jeans, the ones with the big white patches on the front, cross my arms in front of the Alpha logo on my chest, in the brown track bed a few mice are running around. These pants are my pride and joy, they fit perfectly, I got them here, just a few stops away in Steglitz, on my first day alone in Berlin. I came down from Stralsund specially to attend some dumb university orientation event where all they did was go over the same stuff that was on the website. Then all these show-offs saw their opening and started asking the professors *in detail*, in front of the whole packed auditorium full of hundreds of students, about which format they would have to hand their bachelor's thesis in *three years from now*. I took off before it was over and headed to the Picaldi shop on Schlossstraße, I'd looked up the bus and train connections on Google Maps and printed them off at home before I left, and they were even having a sale, so I went ahead and bought a sweater and two

pairs a pants. I felt like a king driving back to Stralsund with the big shopping bag, so in the end the trip was worth it after all.

Hold on, is there a strange dark shadow standing over at the end of the platform, staring me straight in the eye?

I blink and it's gone.

“Mhhhhmhhhhmhhmmmm.” Before I can give it a second thought, a guy who'd wandered over from the opposite end of the track holds a beat-up coffee cup with a few coins in it under my nose, with my headphones in I can't understand what he's saying. Grey beard, dull gaze, yellow teeth, but actually his features are quite delicate, in another life he could have been a handsome man, now though the poor guy stinks like the moldy kitchen in our dorm. I act like the other people on the platform and just ignore him. That's how you do it in Berlin, something I had to learn, since where I come from there aren't any beggars. The first time I saw all the dudes on Ku'damm, the burnout and the guy with the dislocated knee, I actually felt dizzy, I just can't deal with that kind of thing, it's really shitty, all of it, really bad.

My grandma from Leipzig once told me a story about the time after the Wall fell when she went to visit my grandpa at his new job in Frankfurt. About how on the Zeil, the big long shopping street there, she saw a beggar for the first time in her life, then went into a department store and was suddenly

surrounded by all these people who were lumbering around with their big, expensive shopping bags, while a man wearing a tailcoat and a bowtie sat at a piano and calmly tinkled away on the keys. “So this is the world we live in now,” she thought to herself, and then, the way she tells it, she proceeded to faint right there in the middle of the lobby, right in front of the piano.

“WAIT A SECOND!” Everybody startles, classic idiot move, screaming with headphones on, I stand up, run after the guy, pull two euros out of my wallet and drop them in the cup. He bows and says something, I give him a boozy, bleary-eyed smile and in that same moment my train pulls in.

Doors open, step inside, WHAM I drop into another four-seater, both benches empty this time, red light over the doors, doooDOOOdooo, doors close, pull my phone out—no message—fucking Sofia.

None of this would’ve happened if she wasn’t always trying to go out partying without spending any dough and always went looking for whichever idiots were stupid enough to foot the bill, it’s no surprise they’d be hoping for something in return.

OH SICK DID SHE SAY SOMETHING SERIOUS COULD’VE
HAPPENED?

Shit, I should have said the same thing to her!!!

When am I finally finally finaalllly gonna meet the cool people.

**Wir sind Hustler, Nutte, mach jetzt Platz da
Godzilla, Frank White schlagen, bis du schreist**

We're hustlers, bitch, go on make some room

Godzilla, Frank White gonna beat you till you scream

As if somebody had heard my wish, two guys come swaggering through the train car. Broad shoulders, wide jeans, striped knit sweaters, Alpha jackets, silver chains—they're dressed like me.

Look each of them in the eye, just for a second, but mean it, show them you're not afraid but you're not dissing them either. In the car with us there's just a single other passenger, a man in a brown jacket holding a coffee cup, all the other seats are empty, but still they sit down on the bench across from me.

Hmmmmm . . .

Right away the tingling sets in at the back of my neck and in my fingers.

Time for some psychological warfare: act unimpressed, it's all chill, it's all normal, nothing to me, I'm badass enough, I'm no chump! I make a show of casually looking at my phone, stay calm, radiate calm, y'all can't do a thing to me, boys, you'd better keep looking.

Text from Kramer: “grilling tomorrow come up”

Text to Kramer: “just decked a guy”

Look out the window, at slick, renovated apartment buildings, at black Mega Combi freight cars, at abandoned railyard buildings with chrome-and-black graffiti, even some tags by TMR and Fler. Man, they actually stood out there and painted those . . . Meanwhile, study the two guys’ reflection in the glass. One of them is bigger and broader, the other has the prouder face, the more alert eyes—he calls the shots, I’ll go after him, he’s the one I’ve gotta neutralize, Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.

RATHAUS STEGLITZ. The man in the brown jacket gets off, the people on the platform see us three characters sitting across from each other in the four-seater and keep going down to the next car.

KIND OF A BADASS FEELING ACTUALLY.

Now for the next few hundred meters it’s just us on the train.

doooDOOOdooo

The big guy gets up and sits down next to me.

Hmmmmmmm . . .

Now everything’s clear, now it’s about to go down, but good, okay, so that’s how it is, so there’s gonna be some more action today, I’m not gonna give

'em a thing, I'm not about to start my time here like that, it's like being in prison, the first fight you're in you have to go berserk, act totally insane, or else you're in for a real rough time.

I reach into my pants pocket. On account of the bouncers at the club all I've got with me is a lighter, I wrap my hand around it, makes your fist bigger and keeps you from breaking a finger, I've busted my hand enough times to learn that lesson.

The guy across from me, the leader, also reaches into his pants pocket. His mouth starts moving. I'm going to fight for my life here on this train and if I get a knife in me then that's just the way it is, it'll put an end to all my problems at least, better dead than a coward.

He keeps rummaging around in his pocket, his mouth keeps moving, he taps me on the knee, then points to his ear, I take the earbuds out.

"You wanna trade your phone?"

With a line like that, hundred percent chance he's trying to make trouble, I should know, I've done it enough times myself. Hey can I bum a cig? Hey you got a light? Do you know what time it is? Hey could I see your phone for a second? Actually it'd be funny if the phone that Kramer took off some loser in Stralsund were to wind up in the hands of these two Berlin gangsters. They're bound to have knives on them, maybe I'm about to be lying in a red

puddle on the bumpy floor of this S-Bahn train, but I'll get a punch in before I go, I'll break a bone or two for him, he won't forget me for the rest of his life—fought like a lion, they'll all say, went out like a hero! We'll see what Sofia has to say for herself now, meanwhile I'll be kickin' it nice and chill down in the ground with a big smile on my dead lips.

“How 'bout it?” The guy nods again toward my phone, then finally pulls something silver out of his pocket, but it's not a knife, it's some kind of Sony Ericsson. It's gotta be a trick, they just want my phone, but I'm not gonna give it to them, no way!

“Nah guys, thanks though.” I put my Nokia away and try to make my voice sound as clear and firm and deep as possible, while my heart pounds in my temples, my fist feels warm and heavy, and I can already taste the metallic taste in the back of my throat, every cell in my body primed for the final struggle.

The two of them trade looks.

And then the leader shakes his head, almost imperceptibly, first right and then left.

“All good.”

He also puts his phone away, they stand up and move on down the train car, and then the rapid pounding of my heart starts to slow, the blood flows

from my head back down to the rest of my body, and all of a sudden it's freezing and I'm all alone again and on my way back to my stupid dorm, and for a second I consider running after the two of them and asking if they want to go do something together.

[END OF SAMPLE]