



Johannes Groschupf

Berlin Preppers

Thriller

Edited by Thomas Wörtche

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Thriller)

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At last: a contemporary thriller of high calibre set in Berlin

ABOUT THE BOOK

As an online-editor for a large daily newspaper, Walter Noack is in charge of eliminating rude remarks and hate speech from various comment sections. He is confronted with the most odious insults a thousand times a day. His nerves become even more frayed after he and subsequently a colleague are beaten seemingly at random by strangers, and his private life is shaken by loss. The police seem powerless. The daily poison of long-term hatred finally begins to seep into Noack's soul as well. He gradually slides into the dark scene of weapon-hoarding preppers and Reich citizens, and finds himself both repelled and fascinated at the same time. During a brutal heat wave in Berlin that leads to fires, unrest, and open anarchy, he begins to realise that he has fallen in with the wrong people. Now it is a matter of life and death.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Johannes Groschupf, born in Braunschweig in 1963, grew up in Lüneburg. After studying German Studies, American Studies and Journalism at the Free University of Berlin, he worked as an independent travel journalist for many years for publications such as *DIE ZEIT*, *FAZ*, and *FR*, among others. In 1994, he experienced a helicopter crash in the Sahara. Based on this experience, 1998 saw the creation of the radio feature *Der Absturz* (The Crash), which was awarded the Robert Geisendörfer Prize the following year. After that, he mainly focused on literary work, above all in the realm of young adult literature, as well as articles for *Tagesspiegel* and *Die Welt*.

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

by Laura Wagner

pp. 9—16; 125—135

1 Before going to work at the newsroom I went for a run every night. Adapt to what the situation requires. Just before midnight I laced up my trainers and left the flat. I didn't see anyone in the stairway, most people in the building had regular jobs and went to bed early. Down on the street I fell into a slow jog, along the house fronts, sometimes on the street, and reached Görlitzer Park.

»Hey there, chief,« one of the figures at the entrance said.

»Hello,« I said and carried on running.

»You alright?« the next man asked.

»I'm good,« I said.

The eight or ten dealers who were always here knew me by now and knew that I wasn't going to buy anything, but still they greeted me with a nod or a wave of their hand. I ran past them eastwards, over the bridge across the Landwehrkanal, listened to my calm heartbeat and gradually picked up my pace, now already on the rail overpass towards Treptow. Here, too, stood young, fit men from Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone in groups, their faces barely visible in the natural cover of dark. They were relaxed, smoking and laughing, the park and its extensions had been their territory for years, especially at night.

They let me pass because I had been coming by almost every night for months. They were listening to a hard-core type of reggae, which I liked because for a few steps it reminded me of those years after I had first met Karli and we had Nick, then the dealers were behind me, and the slow dancehall rhythms and my memories faded away as well. I ran along side streets to Treptower Park, took the gravel paths to the bank of the Spree River. My body slid through the night lithely at a comfortable speed, my feet recognised the ground, keeping their bouncy step even when they came upon tree trunks or bumps in the asphalted paths. Now, as I ran past the Insel der Jugend, Berlin was behind me and I delved into the Plänterwald. I could either take the riverside path along the ruins of the Spree Park or the dead straight forest aisle. On this longer way, I made my body go flat out by doing sprints or running backwards for a while to train my balance and lose the fear of falling.

Now I was fully awake, my senses sharpened. I felt every movement in the forest, every crackling twig, every flutter of an owl or a woodpigeon. I had stashed my swimming gear in an

inconspicuous hollow between four birch trees at the end of the forest, just before the station of the Water Police East. I got changed quickly and dove into the Spree without making a sound. I didn't feel the coldness of the water, my body was protected by the wetsuit and sufficiently heated up from the run just before. I took pleasure in the first few minutes, life is simple when you're floating with the current. I swam towards the city with idle strokes, past the ferry dock at the Wilhelmstrand and the broadcasting centre in Nalepastraße, past the small island of Bullenbruch, across from it lay the cement works and the combined heat and power station, both of which seemed deserted at night. The water was carrying me, on some nights, the sky above me was clear, on others it was clouded over or murky, occasionally I would swim through moonlight. I had a rest after the demanding run and prepared myself for the exertion that was yet to come. Before I got to Kratzbruch Island, I turned toward the Insel der Jugend, following the current of the Spree, floating on my back as I swam underneath the Elsen Bridge. At this time of night there were no more tourist boats and only a few party floats carrying brawling drunk people, I could already see the two towers of Oberbaum Bridge in front of me. No matter the time of year, the party crowd flocked from Warschauer Bridge to Kreuzberg or to ›Berghain‹ behind the Ostbahnhof, on many nights I could hear buskers play on the bridge, bottles smashing, electronic basses pounding incessantly behind the windows of ›Watergate‹. A U-Bahn train was crossing the bridge. Nobody noticed me as I raised my clenched fist from the water for a brief moment.

Then I turned around and the actual struggle began. The Spree's current was calm but strong, I had to work against it steadily. It had taken me years to manage the entire distance back to the water police station in one go, in the beginning I often had to recover on the riverbank or the rusty wreck behind the arena, I swallowed a lot of river water, the muscles in my arms and legs hopelessly sore, and I had cursed myself because I had imposed this training on myself. For what? When I did the crawl past the Badeschiff, stroke after stroke, metre by metre, I saw the hipsters sitting there, the young men with their full beards and the nerdy beginnings of a paunch, next to them long-haired girls posing for their selfies, and I gained strength and courage. I didn't want to end up like that, of this I was certain. When the time came, I would be prepared and able to react. But I was sure that these people would go down. They swam in their artificial pool with purified, nicely heated water and had no clue that only a few metres next to them a man was doing the crawl through the cold, dirty water of the Spree.

The way back started to annoy me. I kept concentrating on the next ten strokes, then the next then, never rest or the current would carry me back down the river. Further, further. I worked my way up to Elsen Bridge, swam past Zenner Inn and the Insel der Jugend, then the

deserted Spree Park appeared on my right, some nights I could see the passenger cars of the Ferris wheel above the treetops. I counted my strokes, in my head my father's voice pushed me forwards so that I carried on out of sheer bitterness, beyond any exhaustion. By now I was able to manage the distance every night.

My trainers were waiting for me. I got changed, put the plastic bag with the wetsuit back in the hollow between the birch trees and ran back on the path along the Spree. Sometimes I passed elderly men sitting at the riverbank fishing in the middle of the night, or the homeless people who had built a tent camp under Elsen Bridge. In Schlesischer Busch and Görlitzer Park the African dealers were getting a lot of business, particularly on weekends, they had stashed their product everywhere underneath the bushes and shrubs, just like I had established small stocks of emergency provisions in parks and fallow plots all over the city. But I wasn't selling anything, and nobody knew about it.

When the time came, I would be prepared. A prepper. They were laughing at people like me, but I knew: He who laughs last laughs best. Not even one per cent of the population is adequately prepared for the event of a disaster. Probably even less in Berlin. They trust that nothing is going to happen. Trust in the state. In Berlin's administration. But in the hour of need nobody's going to be there and then they'll be sorry. I didn't trust anyone anymore. I kept in shape to be ready in case of an emergency. I wasn't waiting for the catastrophe, but I knew that it would inevitably come. Fine by me. I was in good physical shape, had supplies for a few months in the city and also the necessary tools to survive for another couple of weeks in the wild.

When I got the offer for the job in the newsroom, I was forty-four years old and since my marriage had failed, I had been surviving on various jobs. I had trained teenagers in karate, had a small shop for second-hand dime novels on Sonnenallee, I had also worked at a give-away ad newspaper for a while. I only went to the interview in the newsroom of a newspaper group because a training partner at table tennis had told me about it. Guido with the quick backhand. There'd never be an offer like this again, he told me in the locker room. »They're looking for a content moderator. That's easy money. They need reliable people, the students are late or don't show up at all, young people don't like to read. They're looking for a silver surfer like you. Go check it out.«

I didn't know what a content moderator does, but I needed a regular income to buy an old Jeep and convert it bit by bit to make it fit for driving in the wilderness. When push came to shove, I didn't want to be forced to stay in the city but have other options. Not long ago, I had found a military utility vehicle, a *Sachsenring P3*, from the former GDR's National People's

Army that was for sale for twelve thousand Euros in Suhl: hadn't been moved in a while but not too decrepit, it would be a start.

So I went to the interview. »The job is no walk in the park,« the head of the department, who had introduced himself as Harry, said. He addressed me with the informal »du« immediately. »Nobody's going to thank you here. Nobody's going to say hello.«

»I can do without that,« I said. »I'm not looking for a job to make friends.«

»There are no friends in the newsroom,« said Harry. »As content moderator you only have one job: read and delete hate posts for eight hours a day. The voice of the people, foaming at the mouth, 'round the clock. Abuse, lies, misrepresentation, rants, violent phantasies, death threats. All of that needs to go.«

»I'll get rid of it for you,« I said. »I'll be the janitor, if I understand correctly. Not a problem.«

Harry was being serious. »If all that hate gets onto the site unfiltered, we'll have a problem. If you make more than three mistakes in any given month, you're gone. You'll be standing in a cesspool with both legs and you'll be smelling accordingly to others. Think about it. You can start immediately. Thirteen Euros an hour.«

His smile was inviting which made me suspicious. But I thought the job sounded interesting.

»Since when have people been writing these posts?«

»Since when, good question. We've been doing this for nine years, back then there was no refugee crisis, back then they hated the Euro. But believe me, for the readers the world was ending even back then.«

Harry sighed. He looked exhausted, his cheeks were sunken in, he had dark circles around the eyes. But maybe he was just smoking too much pot. »Times have changed, the language has become rougher,« he said.

»I get that,« I said.

»I hope so,« Harry said. »It's in your best interest. In ours as well. We need tough employees. Resilient people. Believe me, I'm so fed up with those students who quit after two weeks because they can't stand the hate.«

»I won't quit,« I said. »I swim from Oberbaum Bridge to the station of the Water Police East every night.«

He looked at me without saying a word. His facial expression didn't change.

»I hate that stretch,« I said. »But I tough it out. Every night. You don't have to tell me about hate.«

I didn't say anything else about the swimming. Nor about my military utility vehicle that I wanted to convert and upgrade. Nothing about my provisions, the emergency plans. Most people didn't understand, they just frowned at you.

Harry didn't ask any follow-up questions, he laughed. »You got the job.«

We shook hands.

»Welcome to the land of digital public anger,« said Harry.

[...]

13 »The usual, big guy? Two cheese rolls, an apple,« Ahmad said. It was half past five, we were the only people in his bakery. I had ten minutes before I had to catch the 29 bus.

»You said once, if I needed anything, I should come and see you,« I said as I was paying.

»I did say that,« Ahmad said. »What can I do for you?«

»If I told you that I was looking for a guy who's working security in one of the container villages, could you help me out?«

»How should I be able to help you with that?«

»The guy's Turkish,« I said.

»You don't say,« said Ahmad. »You think just 'cause I'm Turkish, I know all the Turks working security?«

»His name's Volkan,« I said.

»Why didn't you say so? His name's Volkan. Volkan the Turk who works security in a refugee camp,« Ahmad shook his head and wiped his hands on a cloth. »I think we'd better stick to the cheese rolls, big guy.«

»I just thought...,« I said.

»Nah, I get it,« Ahmad said. »You think that all the Turks in Berlin know each other. 'Cause of the family clans and incest and that. Two hundred thousand Turks who're all related by blood or marriage, they all know each other. Ever been to a Turkish wedding? I go to Turkish weddings sometimes, because I'm invited. 'Cause they know me. And now have a guess how many of the guests I know there.«

»Forget it,« I said. »My bus'll be here any minute anyway.«

»My cousins, all of them, big guy. Ali Abdul, Attila, Adem, Adnan, Akif. There's a lot of us. And our numbers are growing.«

»Alright, alright,« I said.

»Sorry, I didn't even get to Volkan yet,« he said.

My bus arrived.

»His left hand is bandaged,« I said.

»Are you kidding me?« Ahmad asked. »Don't come back here. Take your damned bus and go to hell. Don't come back.«

So, that was that with my cheese rolls in the morning. From now on, I'd get my apples from the supermarket.

It had gotten cold again. Peppa was back at work, she was wearing a long coat with a rabbit-fur collar accompanied by heavy boots. The sleeves of the coat were way too long for her arms, her hands seemed like tiny bird's claws in them. During breaks she talked a lot to Guido, who was flattered by the attention.

»What do you want with him?« I asked.

She looked at me bleakly. »I won't let them get me again. Next time, I'll be quicker. Next time, I'll have a gun. Then the other one will go down, not me.«

»And you think Guido is the right guy for that? His brain is muddled by all that glue he uses to fix his paddles.«

»Why would you say that about Guido? He's the one who got you this job. Also, he knows Willy. Willy has a shooting range in Tempelhof, you told me that. Willy knows how to get a gun.«

»Says Guido.«

She nodded. »Let's go there. It won't take long. Let's just have a look.«

On our next day off we went there. We walked through the Hasenheide, then along Columbiadamm and the red police barracks. At Platz der Luftbrücke you could immediately tell that the whole area was crawling with police. This was their territory, they seemed to be everywhere. Not only did they work in the offices in the headquarters, they also met up in the pubs in the side streets, relaxed in their cars with the motors running, smoking cigarettes in front of the U-Bahn. You could recognize them by their sensible functional wear, the mobile phones at their belts, the trained muscles. They seemed alert, nimble and confident.

Three blocks down we found the park where the bunker was supposed to be. Two teenagers were playing ping pong on a concrete table while their girlfriends sat on a bench next to them and scrolled on their phones.

On the other side of the park was a metal door covered in black tags. It opened and a man came out. We asked him about the shooting range.

He pointed at the door. »When you open that, you'll see a bell, ring that, then they'll open the second door for you. Then it's just down the stairs.«

We rang the bell. A buzzer went off. Peppa pushed the door open, behind it was a lattice gate. In front of us plain concrete steps led downstairs.

»A bunker,« Peppa said. »Great. I love bunkers.«

We heard the sharp cracking of a gun from below. The door fell shut behind us. We were standing in cool neon light that led the way down the stairs.

Another crack, then a third.

Peppa started to walk down the stairs. The steps were steep, there was no handrail. It smelt of cigarette smoke, concrete and carpet.

A pale-faced woman was waiting for us at the foot of the stairs. She was wearing a sweater sporting the sequined outline of a cat.

»What do you want?« Her voice was seasoned by countless cigarettes.

»We're looking for the shooting range,« Peppa said.

»There's no shooting range here,« the woman said.

Two shots rang out behind her.

»Sounds like a shooting range, though,« Peppa said.

»But it's not,« the woman with the pale face said. »At least not for you. We don't offer trial courses.«

»Guido told us that we could find Willy here,« I said.

»And what do you want with Willy?« she asked.

»We'd like to tell him that ourselves,« said Peppa.

»Could we take a quick look?« I asked.

She didn't move an inch. »Don't know what there is to see.«

A shot ran out, its echo was bouncing off the concrete walls. Peppa pushed past the woman resolutely and stepped into the dark hallway.

»You're going to regret that, missy,« the woman said.

»I apologize,« I said. »She's been having a rough time lately, she's not quite recovered yet.«

»Yeah, I can tell,« the woman said. »Come through with me, five minutes, but then you gotta go. We're not a zoo!«

We got to a square room illuminated by two naked bulbs and a colourful string of lights. There was a small counter on one side, beer crates behind it, a coffee machine was going. Two ale-benches stood in front of it.

A man with a crew cut and a massive belly was sitting on them, legs spread apart. He was rolling an empty Schultheiß bottle between his hands. Behind him a window looked onto

the shooting range where a short, wiry man was standing slightly crouched holding a gun out in front of himself with both hands. He pulled the trigger twice in short succession. The double crack hurt my ears.

»What do you want here?« he asked.

»Guido said that you might be able to help us,« Peppa said.

»Well, let's start with a hello,« the big man said. »Moni, do you have some coffee left for these two?«

The landlady, leaning against the counter with crossed arms, shook her head slowly. »We don't do trial courses, Willy, you know that. We don't want any visitors here.«

»We aren't visitors,« I said. »We're members of the Pack tribe.«

Willy laughed and revealed a row of rake front teeth. For a moment he looked like a cheerful schoolboy. Peppa sat down opposite him.

»Are you a policeman?«

He didn't say anything but was visibly flattered by the question.

»What does a young woman such as yourself want at a shooting range?« he asked.

Peppa briefly told him about the assault at the bus stop.

»The police is at a loss,« she said. »They're investigating. At least that's what they say. Nobody saw anything. There's no profile of the offender. Maybe a mix-up, a misunderstanding. Can't do anything about it, they say.«

The man listened with narrowed eyes.

»The same happened to him,« Peppa said and pointed at me. »Hit on the head with a bat from behind, kicked in the ribs, lost a tooth. You could still see the gap now, if he smiled for a change.«

»You're just not safe out there anymore,« I said.

As though to prove my point, we heard shots that rang through the long hallway of the bunker.

»That's a thing of the past,« the man said. »Personally, I only leave the house with a weapon. Even though here in Tempelhof it's calm in comparison. Hardly any foreigners that cause trouble. In Karow and Hellersdorf they're patrolling in vigilance committees to ensure peace and order and that's a good thing. 'Cause the state no longer wants to protect us. They don't give a shit about us, to put it plainly. They have their new favourite pets, the darlings from North Africa. We're supposed to re-negotiate our coexistence with them, they tell us. I say: Alright, that's okay with me. But I'm gonna need a weapon for that.«

»Unfortunately, the police don't really like the vigilance committees,« I said. »They're quite fussy about that. People like us shouldn't be allowed to defend ourselves. Can't even speak our minds anymore—if you do, they'll put you in the right-wing corner straight away. That's where they're listening closely. If you want to protect yourself, you're a Nazi.«

Willy nodded. »Yeah, that's kind of the way I see it, too. It's a touchy subject. There's enough idiots out there running around with guns. They know exactly how to get weapons.«

»And the police can't do anything about it,« I said.

He shrugged his heavy shoulders. »I was with the police for long enough to know what's going on there. They don't have any men on the streets any more. There's no one. The old officers are burnt-out, they already quit mentally. If they didn't get cancer from the asbestos at the shooting ranges already. They dropped like flies. Just died a horrible death, no one cared. And the new ones? There're no reliable recruits, no quality. All they get are losers from the schools, they're suckers, can't even put one foot in front of the other some of them. Or Arab boys who flock there to serve their clan. But the simple citizen in Hellersdorf or Tempelhof doesn't count for anything. He's gotta figure out himself how he's going to protect his wife and daughters when the Muslims grope them.«

»Exactly,« said Peppa. »How are we supposed to go out? You won't get very far with pepper spray. A friend of mine almost got herself with that.«

»That's what I've been saying for years,« said Willy. »You won't have a good time of it with pepper spray. Only knives are worse.«

»Do we look like Arabs?« I said. »I'm not against knives. A decent knife is essential out in the bush, but not if you're fighting man to man.«

»Correct,« Willy said. »In the end it'll be you with the knife between your ribs. I wholeheartedly advise against knives. There'll be some ugly injuries, but your opponent is going to keep fighting for quite a while. You need a reliable solution.«

»All I can say to that is: Dominik Brunner,« I said. »All the guy wanted to do was help. He wanted to mediate. All he wanted was to take the S-Bahn in peace. And in return they kicked him to death.«

»That wouldn't have happened if he had had a proper weapon,« Willy said. »That's for sure.«

»I also want to take the S-Bahn,« Peppa said. »Get home from work without any hassle. Walk through the pedestrian zones at night. Celebrate New Year's in front of the train station without people grabbing at all my holes.«

»Now, don't be crude,« said the pale women from behind the counter. »You shouldn't talk like that.«

»I'm sorry,« Peppa said. »But it's true, isn't it? I'm a young woman and that's how they react to me. It's their hormones. Do I have to stay at home now and never go out or what?«

»She's absolutely right,« Willy said. »Our young women especially have to be protected. Women are our future, they carry our children.«

»Thanks, Willy,« Peppa said. »It's nice to hear someone say that out loud for once. Medicine for my soul.«

Willy's facial expression didn't change, but he had come to a conclusion. »I'd say, you guys need a gun.«

»Exactly,« I said. »You got the idea. I was thinking about something like an Erma EP 652.«

I sat down next to him. He didn't move an inch. His body exuded an intense heat and smelt of onions.

A cough was getting closer. The wiry figure of the shooter who had been training at the range during our visit appeared in the door. He sat down on the bench with us, the pale woman brought him a bottle of Schultheiß. He didn't say a word.

»Let's see what I can do for you,« Willy said. »I can't promise you anything. And this meeting never happened. But maybe we'll find a solution. I'll let you know.«

»See,« said Peppa as we were walking back through Hasenheide. Here too, dealers were standing at the spots where the paths crossed but unlike in Görlitzer Park it was mainly Arabs here. »You *can* talk to right-wingers. You just have to use their language. Then they'll understand.«

»You and your train station at New Year's,« I said. »That almost made me lose it.«

»It's not funny,« Peppa said. »That really moved him. He does have these protective instincts. He'd accompany me to my front door every night to save me from being assaulted by horny Muslims. I only wish Nick was that gallant.«

I didn't inquire further about whether there was something going on between Nick and her, it was none of my business. We hadn't actually achieved anything, but nevertheless we walked back to our neighbourhood cheerfully and said goodbye on Reichenberger Street.

The kick in the gut came that same night, completely unexpected. Without any notice. Afterwards you tell yourself: You failed. Should have kept watch. It shouldn't have happened. Not to you. But you can't anticipate it.

Inspector Romeike called me. I had gone to bed just after midnight, because I had the six a.m. shift in the newsroom.

»We have to come and pick you up,« she said. »Get dressed. We'll be there in ten minutes.«

She came with a young colleague who kept rearranging her ponytail. The inspector was trying hard to show no emotion.

»I have no idea what it is now,« I said as I got into the car with them. I had waited by my front door for five minutes and thought about this. Had someone else been attacked? Guido? He didn't do late shifts. Another colleague? Maybe Kottwitz? No, he used the basement car park and drove a Jeep that would withstand any bat. Who else could it be? I didn't know and I didn't want to know. I wanted to sleep. I had to leave for work in four hours.

»I'm sorry,« Romeike said when they arrived.

Her colleague was driving.

We stopped at Heinrich Square. The square, Oranienstrasse and Mariannenstrasse were ablaze with the emergency lights and the headlights of the ambulances.

He was lying behind the stall in which Kemal sells his veggie burgers during the day. I could see the outline of his body underneath the sheet. At first, I wanted to run away, shove the inspector aside, run through Oranienstrasse, run to the end of the world so I wouldn't have to see this.

His legs were bent. I could see his right hand. The head was hidden underneath the sheet.

»You don't have to look at this,« the inspector said next to me.

I saw his shoes. His sneakers, which were always worn out. How many times had I bought him new ones? One was lying about five meters away. A chalk circle around it. Officers wearing protective clothing were securing evidence.

A plain-clothed officer came towards us. »The father?«

The inspector nodded.

He held out his hand towards me. I didn't take it.

The body underneath the sheet wasn't moving. The sneaker was still lying there. Two of the police cars turned off their blue lights and drove off.

The clock keeps on ticking. The minute passes. So does the next. My heart kept beating. Cars, vans, trucks were driving on Skalitzerstrasse, the U-Bahn was arriving on the tracks above the street.