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Opening extract from

# Why We Took the Car

Written by

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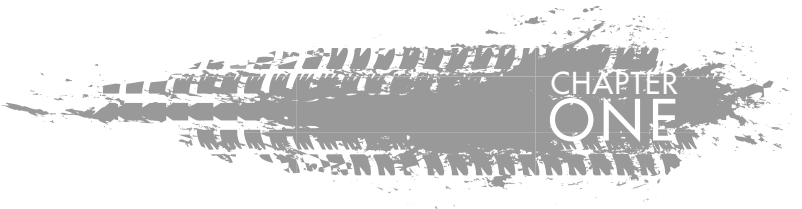
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The first thing is the smell of blood and coffee. The coffee machine is sitting over on the table, and the blood is in my shoes. And if I'm being completely honest, I have to admit it's not just blood. When the old guy said "fourteen," I pissed my pants. I'd been sitting there slumped in the chair, not moving. I was dizzy. I tried to look the way I imagined Tschick would look if someone said "fourteen" to him, and then I got so scared I pissed myself. Mike Klingenberg, hero. I have no idea why I'm freaking out now. It was clear the whole time that it would end this way. And you can be sure Tschick wouldn't piss his pants.

Where is Tschick, anyway? I'd last seen him on the side of the autobahn, hopping into the bushes on one leg. But I figure they must have caught him too. You're not going to get far on one leg. Obviously I can't ask the police where he is. Better not bring it up at all in case they hadn't seen him. Maybe they really hadn't seen him. There's no way they're going to find out about him from me. Even if they torture me. Though I don't think German police are allowed to torture people. They only do that on TV. And in Turkey.

But sitting in your own piss and blood in a highway police station and answering questions about your parents isn't exactly the greatest thing ever. In fact, maybe getting tortured would be preferable — at least then I'd have an excuse for freaking out.

The best thing to do is to keep your mouth shut. That's what Tschick said. And that's exactly how I see it too. Especially now, when it doesn't matter anyway. Nothing matters to me at this point. Well, almost nothing. Tatiana Cosic still matters to me, of course. Despite the fact that I haven't thought about her in quite a while now. But as I'm sitting there in the chair and the autobahn is rushing past outside and the older policeman has spent the last five minutes fumbling around with the coffee machine, filling it with water and emptying it out again, flipping the power switch on and off, and looking at the bottom of the machine, when it's obvious to any moron that the extension cord isn't plugged in, I find myself thinking about Tatiana. Even though she had nothing to do with the whole thing. Is what I'm saying here hard to follow? Yeah, well, sorry. I'll try again later. Tatiana isn't even part of the story. The prettiest girl in the world isn't part of the story. Throughout the entire trip, I'd imagined that she could see us. How we'd gazed out from the high point of that field of grain. How we'd stood on top of that mountain of trash with our bundle of plastic hoses, like the last idiots left on Earth . . . I'd always imagined Tatiana was standing behind us, seeing what we saw, smiling when we smiled. But now I'm happy that I only imagined that.

The policeman pulls a green paper towel out of a dispenser and hands it to me. What am I supposed to do with it? Wipe the floor? He grabs his nose with two fingers and looks at me.

Aha. Blow my nose. I blow my nose and he smiles helpfully. I guess I can forget about the whole torture thing. But where should I put the paper towel now? I scan the room. The entire floor of the station is covered with gray linoleum, exactly the same stuff as in the hallways of our school gymnasium. It smells a bit similar too. Piss, sweat, and linoleum. I picture Mr. Wolkow, our gym teacher, sprinting down the hall in his tracksuit, with seventy years of workouts behind him: "Let's go, people, hop to it!" The sound of his footsteps smacking the floor, distant giggles from the girls' locker room, Wolkow turning to look in that direction. I picture the tall windows, the bleachers, the rings that never get used dangling from the ceiling. I picture Natalie and Lena and Kimberley coming in through the side entrance of the gym. And Tatiana in her green sweats. I picture their blurry reflections on the floor of the gym, the sparkly pants the girls all wear these days, their tops. And how lately half of them show up for gym in thick wool sweaters and another couple have doctor's notes. Hagecius Junior High School, Berlin, eighth grade.

"I thought it was fifteen," I say, and the policeman shakes his head.

"Nope, fourteen. What's with the coffee machine, Horst?"

"It's broken," says Horst.

I want to talk to my lawyer.

That's the sentence I probably need to say. It's the right sentence in the right situation, as everybody knows from watching TV. And it's easy to say: I want to talk to my lawyer. But they'd probably die laughing. Here's the problem: I have no idea what this sentence means. If I say I want to talk to my lawyer and they ask me, "*Who* do you want to talk to? *Your*

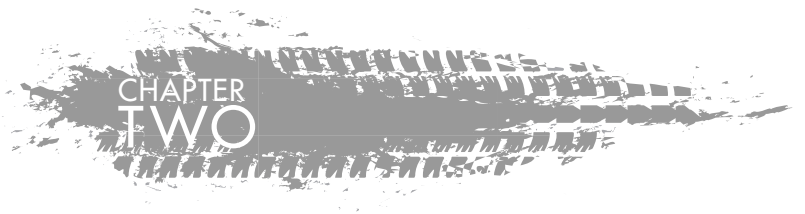
lawyer?" what am I supposed to answer? I've never seen a lawyer in my life, and I don't even know what I need one for. I don't know if there's a difference between a lawyer and an attorney. Or an attorney general. I guess they're like judges except on my side. I guess they know a lot more about the law than I do. But I guess pretty much everyone in the room knows more about the law than I do. First and foremost the policemen. And I could ask them. But I'll bet that if I ask the younger one if I could use some kind of lawyer right about now, he'll just turn to his partner and yell, "Hey, Horst! Horsty! Get a load of this. Our hero here wants to know if he needs a lawyer! Bleeding all over the floor, pissing himself like a champ, and wants to talk to *his lawyer*!" Ha, ha, ha. They'd laugh themselves silly. And I figure I'm bad enough off as it is. No reason to make an even bigger ass of myself. What's done is done. Nothing else is going to happen now. And a lawyer can't change that. Whether or not we caused some bad shit is a question only a lunatic would try to argue. What am I supposed to say? That I spent the entire week lying next to the pool, just ask the cleaning lady? That all those pig parts must have just fallen from the sky like rain? There's really not much more I can do. I could pray in the direction of Mecca, and I could take a crap in my pants, but otherwise there aren't many options left.

The younger officer, who actually looks like a nice guy, shakes his head again and says, "Fifteen? No way. Fourteen. You're criminally accountable at fourteen."

I should probably have feelings of guilt at this point, remorse and all that, but to be honest I don't feel a thing. I'm just unbelievably dizzy. I reach down and scratch my calf,

except that down where my calf used to be, nothing's there. My hand is streaked with violet red slime when I pull it back up. That's not *my* blood, I'd said earlier when they asked. There was enough other slime in the street for them to worry about — and I really didn't think it was my blood. But if it isn't my blood, I ask myself now, where is my calf?

I lift my pant leg and look down. I have exactly one second to think. If I had to watch this in a movie, I think to myself, I would definitely throw up. And sure enough I'm getting sick now, in this oddly calming highway police station. For a split second I see my reflection on the linoleum floor coming toward me, then it smacks into me and I'm out.




The doctor opens and closes his mouth like a carp. It takes a few seconds before words come out. The doctor is yelling. Why is the doctor yelling? He yells at the small woman. Then someone in a uniform steps in, a blue uniform. A policeman, one I don't know yet. The cop shouts at the doctor. How do I even know he's a doctor? He's wearing a white coat. So I guess he could also be a baker. But in the pocket of the coat is a metal flashlight and some kind of listening device. What would a baker need something like that for — to listen for a heartbeat in a bread roll? It's got to be a doctor. And this doctor is pointing at my head now and shouting. I feel around under the sheet where my legs are. They're bare. Don't feel like they're covered in piss or blood anymore. Where am I?

I'm lying on my back. Above me everything is yellow. Glance to the side: big dark window. Other side: white plastic curtain. A hospital, I'd say. The doctor would make sense then too. And, oh yeah, the small woman is also wearing scrubs and carrying a notebook. What hospital — Charité? No, no. I have no idea. I'm not in Berlin. I'll have to ask, I think to myself, but nobody is paying any attention to me. The policeman doesn't

like the way the doctor is shouting at him, and he's shouting back. But the doctor just shouts even louder, and interestingly enough you can see who is calling the shots here. The doctor apparently has the authority, not the policeman. I'm worn out and also somehow happy and tired; it feels as if I'm bursting from within with happiness, and I fall back to sleep without saying a single word. The happiness, I find out later, is called Valium. It's administered with big needles.

When I next wake up, it's all bright. The sun is shining in the big window. Something is scratching at the soles of my feet. Aha, a doctor, a different one, and he has another nurse with him. No police. The only unpleasant thing is the doctor scratching at my feet. Why is he doing that?

"He's awake," says the nurse. Not exactly a genius.

"Ah, aha," says the doctor looking at me. "And how do you feel?"

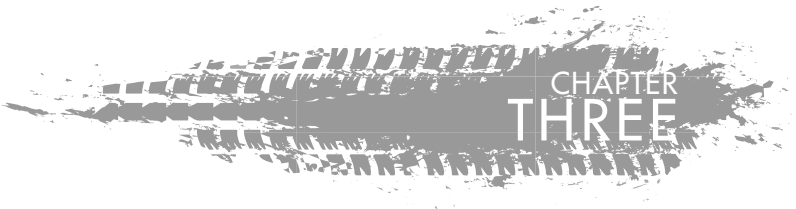
I want to say something, but the only thing that comes out of my mouth is, "Pfff."

"How do you feel? Do you know your name?"

"Pfff-fay?"

What the hell kind of question is that? Do they think I'm crazy or something? I look at the doctor and he looks at me; then he leans over me and shines a flashlight in my eyes. Is this an interrogation? Am I supposed to confess my name? Is this the torture hospital? And if it is, could he just stop lifting up my eyelids for a second and at least pretend he's interested in my answer? Of course, I don't answer anyway. Because, while I'm deciding whether I should say Mike Klingenberg or just Mike or Klinge or Attila the Hun — that's what my father

says whenever he's stressed, when he's gotten nothing but bad news all day; he drinks two shots of Jägermeister and answers the phone as Attila the Hun — I mean, as I'm deciding whether to say anything at all or to skip it altogether given the situation, the doctor starts saying something about "four of these" and "three of these" and I pass out again.




There's a lot of things you can say about hospitals, but you can't say they're not nice. I always love being in the hospital. You do nothing all day long, and then the nurses come in. They're all super young and super friendly. And they wear those thin white outfits that I love because you can always see what kind of underwear they have on underneath. Just why I think that's so cool, I'm not sure. Because if they wore those outfits on the street, I'd think it was stupid. But inside a hospital it's great. I think so, anyway. It's a little like those mafia movies, when there's a long silence before one gangster answers another, and they just stare at each other. "Hey!" A minute of silence. "Look me in the eyes!" Five minutes of silence. In regular life that would be stupid. But when you're in the mafia, it's not.

My favorite nurse is from Lebanon and is named Hanna. Hanna has short dark hair and wears normal underwear. And that's cool: *normal underwear.* Other kinds of underwear always look a bit sad. On most people. If you don't have Megan Fox's body, it can look a little desperate. I don't know. Maybe I'm weird, but I like normal underwear.

Hanna is actually still studying to be a nurse. This is her residency or whatever. Before she comes into my room she

always pokes her head around the corner and then taps on the door frame with two fingers. Which I think is very thoughtful. And she comes up with a new name for me every day. First I was Mike, then Mikey, then Mikeypikey — which I thought sounded like some old Finnish name. But that wasn't the end. I was Michael Schumacher and Attila the Hun, then pig killer, and finally *the sick bunny*. For that alone I'd love to stay here in the hospital for a year.

Hanna changes my bandages every day. It hurts pretty bad, and I can see from the look on her face that it hurts her to cause me pain too.

"The most important thing is for you to be comfortable," she always says when she's finished. And then I always say I'm going to marry her one day or whatever. Unfortunately she already has a boyfriend. Sometimes she just comes by and sits on the side of my bed because I don't really get any other visitors, and we have great conversations. Real adult conversations. It's so much easier to talk with women like Hanna than with girls my age. If anyone can tell me why that is, I'd love to hear it, because I sure can't figure it out.