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English sample translation

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Wolfgang Herrndorf

Tschick

fiction
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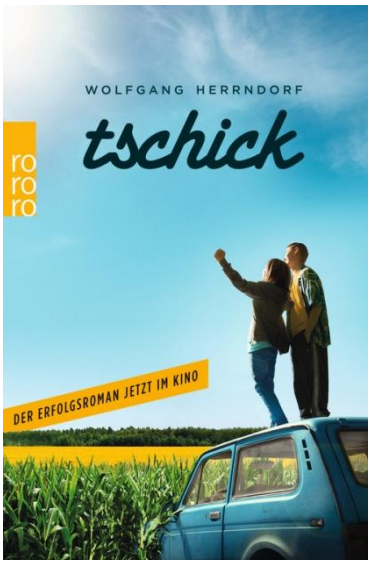
With his mother in rehab and father away on a "business trip" with his pretty assistant, Maik is home alone in his parents' villa. It's the first day of the summer holidays. Together with Tschick, a German-Russian from the tower blocks on the wrong side of the tracks, Maik shows up in a stolen Lada at Tatjana's birthday party, a girl he's head over heels in love with. Soon after, the boys are tearing through the German countryside in the blazing sunshine, heading even further south east, to Walachia, where Tschick's grandfather lives. This is a story of an impossible friendship between two boys - a road novel packed with melancholy and humour.



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Wolfgang Herrndorf: Tschick
English sample translation by Jefferson Chase
(pp. 21-35, 57-61, 67-68, 75-94)

I've never had a nickname. At school, I mean, though I never had one at any other time either. I'm called Maik Klingenberg. Maik. Not Maiki or Klinge or something stupid like that. Just Maik, always Maik. Except for in the sixth grade, when I was briefly known as Psycho. It's no great shakes being called Psycho. But that didn't last long, and afterward it was back to Maik again.

There are two reasons for not having a nickname. Either you're incredibly boring or you don't have any friends. If I had to decide, I think I'd rather not have any friends than be incredibly boring. Cause if you're boring, you're automatically not going to have any friends or only friends who are even more boring than you are.

There's a third alternative, though. You could be incredibly boring *and* have no friends. And I'm afraid that may be my problem. At least since Paul moved away. Paul and I had been friends since kindergarten. We hung out almost every day, until his idiot of a mother decided she wanted to live in the country. It was around the same time that I started junior high, and it didn't make things any easier.

I didn't get to know anyone at all in my first time there. I'm not especially good at getting to know people, although I'd never had much of a problem with that. Until Tatjana Cosic showed up. Or better still: until I noticed her. She'd always been in my class, of course, but I didn't get she was there until the seventh grade. Why, I don't know. But in the seventh grade, she suddenly popped up on my radar screen, and that's when things got really miserable. I guess it's about time I described her. Otherwise no one's going to understand a thing to come.

Tatjana's first name is Tatjana, and her last name is Cosic. She's fourteen years old, around 5'6", and her parents' last name is also Cosic. I don't know what their first names are. They come from Serbia or Croatia, at least their name does, and they live in a rented house that's painted white and has lots of windows – badabim, badabong. One thing's clear: I can go on and on about this, but I don't know what I'm talking about. I don't know Tatjana at all. What I know about her is what everyone who's in our class knows. I know what she looks like and what she's called, and I know she's good at sports and English. And so on and so forth. I know she's 5'6" from the last school inspection. I know where she lives from the telephone book, and that's practically all I know. The logical thing would probably be to describe exactly what she looks like, her voice and hair and stuff like that. But I think it would be a waste of time. Everyone can just picture for themselves what she looks like. She looks great. Her voice is great, too. All in all, she's just great. That's how you can picture her...

I still haven't explained how I came to be called Psycho. Cause, like I said, for a short time, I was known as Psycho. I have no idea why. I mean, I know it was because people thought I had a screw loose. But in my opinion, there were a couple of others who deserved that nickname a lot more. Frank could have been called like that, or Stöbcke with his lighter – they're both way crazier than me. Or the Nazi. But the Nazi was already called the Nazi, so he didn't need another name. And of course, there was a specific reason why I was called Psycho. It was this assignment for Schürmann in the sixth

grade. One of those things where you're given four words – for example, zoo, monkey, animal keeper and cap – and you have to write a story featuring a zoo, a monkey, an animal keeper and a cap. Pretty original, huh? Yeah right. The words Schürmann had thought up were: vacation, water, rescue and God. That was definitely harder than with the zoo and the monkey, and the really tough bit was God. We only had ethics class, not religion, and there were sixteen atheists in our class, me included, and even the kids who were officially Protestants didn't really believe in God. That's what I believe. At least they didn't believe like people believe if they *really* believe in God and wouldn't hurt a fly and are glad when someone dies because it means he's going to heaven. Or the people who fly planes into the World Trade Center. Those guys really believe in God. And that's why the assignment was so tough. Most of the kids just latched on to the word vacation. A family is rowing around the Côte d'Azur, when they get caught in this huge storm and cry out to God for help and get rescued and so on. I could have written something like that, of course. But when I sat down to start, it immediately occurred to me that we hadn't gone on vacation for three years because my father was getting ready to go bankrupt. I didn't really mind. I never liked going on vacation with my parents all that much anyway.

Instead, I spent all last summer in our basement carving boomerangs. This teacher I had in primary school taught me how. He was a total expert in boomerangs. Bretfeld was his name, Wilhelm Bretfeld. He'd even written a book on it. Two books even. But I only learned about it after I'd gone on to junior high.

In any case, I spent my whole summer vacation in the basement carving boomerangs. It was great, way better than going on vacation. My parents were almost never at home. My father drove around from creditor to creditor, and my mother was at the beauty spa. And that's what I wrote about. *My Mother and the Beauty Spa*, a story by Maik Klingenberg.

The day it was due, I had to read it out loud. I didn't want to. Svenja was up first, and she read her crap about the Côte d'Azur, which Schürmann thought was really great, and then Kevin read out pretty much the same thing, only the Côte d'Azur was the North Sea. Then it was my turn. Mother at the spa. The spa wasn't really a spa, although my mother always felt better when she came back from there. The spa is really a clinic. My mother's an alcoholic. For as long as I can remember, she's always drunk alcohol. The only difference is that it used to be more fun. Normally, everyone is more fun when they drink alcohol, but if they cross a certain line, they get tired or angry, and one time when my mother started running around our house with a kitchen knife, I was standing next to my father at the top of the stairs, and he asked: "How about another trip to the beauty spa?" That was the start to my summer vacation in the sixth grade.

I like my mother. I should say that because what's coming next probably doesn't put her in a very good light. But I always liked her and still do. She's not like other mothers. That's what I like best. For example, she can be very funny, which is something you can't say about most mothers. Calling the clinic a beauty spa was just one of her jokes.

She used to play a lot of tennis. My father did, too, but he wasn't as good as she was. My mother was the real pro in our family. She used to win the club championship every year, back when she was in shape. Even with a bottle of vodka in her, she still won, but that's another story. In any case, I always went with her to the club when I was little. My mother would sit on the terrace and drink

cocktails with Mrs. Weber and Mrs. Osterthun and Mr. Schuback and the rest of them. And I'd crouch under their table and play with my toy cars, and the sun would be shining. When I look back on it, the sun was always shining at the tennis club. I'd stare at the red clay on their white socks and look at their underwear beneath their short tennis skirts and collect the bottle tops that fell on the ground and draw lines in the inside of them with a pen. I'd be allowed to eat five ice creams a day and drink ten Cokes, and the waiter would put everything on the tab. Mrs. Weber would say from above: "Seven again next week, Mrs. Klingenberg?"

And my mother would say: "Sure."

Mrs. Weber: "I'll bring the balls next time."

My mother: "Sure."

Etcetera, etcetera. Always the same conversation. The joke was Mrs. Weber never brought the balls cause she was way too cheap.

Sometimes, there was a different conversation. It went like this:

"Seven again next week, Mrs. Klingenberg?"

"I can't. I'm going away."

"But doesn't your husband have a league match?"

"He does. He's not going away. I am."

"Where are you off to?"

"The beauty spa."

It never failed that someone at the table, who didn't know the story, would make the same incredibly clever remark: "I don't see any need for a beauty spa in your case, Mrs. Klingenberg."

And my mother would gulp down her Brandy Alexander and say: "It was a joke, Mr. Schuback. I'm going to a clinic to dry out."

Then we'd walk home, hand in hand, because my mother couldn't drive any more. I'd carry her heavy tennis bag, and she'd say to me: "You can't learn a lot from your mother. But you can learn this. First of all, don't be afraid to talk about anything. And second, never give a shit what people think." That immediately made sense to me. Talk about everything. And never give a shit about people.

Only later did I have my doubts. Not about the basic principle. About whether my mother really did give as little a shit as she said.

Whatever – back to the beauty spa. I don't know exactly what it was like there. We never visited my mother. She didn't want us to. But when she returned, she always talked about crazy stuff. Apparently, her therapy consisted of not drinking and talking. And a water cure and sometimes some gymnastics. But most of the people there couldn't do gymnastics. So most of the time they just talked and tossed around a ball of yarn. I must have asked her five times whether I'd heard right or whether the ball of yarn was a joke. But it was no joke. My mother didn't think it was funny or especially interesting, but I did. Really interesting in fact. You have to imagine: Ten grown-ups sitting around in a circle and tossing a ball of yarn back and forth. In the end, the room was full of yarn, but that wasn't the point, even if you might think it was. The point was to make a *conversational web*. And you can see from that that my mother wasn't the craziest person in the clinic. There must have been people who were a lot crazier.

You probably think there's no way to top the ball of yarn, but you don't know about the cardboard box. Every patient in the clinic had a cardboard box in his room. It was hung up just under the ceiling and was open at the top, and you had to toss note cards into it like you were playing basketball. The note cards contained desires, wishes, resolutions, prayers or whatever. Whenever my mother felt some sort of wish or made a resolution or blamed herself for something, she'd write it on a note card and fold it up and basically do a Dirk Nowitzki dunk. The bizarre thing was *no one* ever read the cards. That wasn't the point. The point was for you to write them so that they were there and you could see your wishes and desires and all the rest of the crap were there in the cardboard box up under the ceiling. And since the boxes were so important, you had to give them a name. You'd write it in magic marker on the side of the box, so just about every drunk in the clinic had a box in his room with the word "God" written on it and his desires inside. Cause most of them named their box God. The therapists suggested it, although you were allowed to name your box whatever you wanted. One older lady called hers "Osiris," and someone else chose "Big Spirit."

My mother's box was called "Karl-Heinz," and one day a therapist came and gave her the third degree. At first, he wanted to know whether it was her father. "What?" my mother asked, and the therapist pointed at the box. My mother shook her head. So the therapist asked who Karl-Heinz was, and my mother said, "The box." And then the therapist asked what the name of my mother's father was. "Gottlieb," answered my mother, and the therapist went "A-ha." The way he said it, sounded like he had figured out something really big and important. My mother had no idea what he had figured out, and the therapist didn't tell her either. That's the way it always was. Everyone was also going around like they'd figured out something really important, but they never shared it with anyone else. When my father heard about the box, he nearly fell off his chair laughing. "My God, is that sad," he said, but he laughed, and I had to laugh the entire time. Too. My mother found it funny as well, at least after the fact.

I put all of this in my story. To take care of the word "rescue," I included the bit with the kitchen knife, and since I'd gotten into what I was doing, I also wrote about how she'd come downstairs one morning and mistaken me for my father. It was the longest assignment I'd ever written, at least eight pages, and I could have probably written part two and three and four, if I'd wanted to. But as it turned out, part one was enough.

My class loved it as I read it out loud. Schürmann told everyone to settle down and said: "Very well. How long is the rest? That long? I'd say that's enough for now." So I didn't have to read the rest. During break, Schürmann kept me behind so he could read the rest on his own. Standing next to him, I was totally proud. It was a really big success that Schürmann personally wanted to read the story to the end. Maik Klingenberg, the author. Then Schürmann shut my notebook and looked at me and shook his head. I thought it was one of those admiring shakes of the head, as if to say: "How can a fifth grader write such a totally, totally cool story?" But what he in fact said was: "What are you grinning for? Do you think this is funny?" And slowly I realized that my story hadn't been that big a success, at least not with Schürmann.

He got up from his desk and went to the window and stared out at the schoolyard, "Maik," he said, turning around again to face me, "she's your own *mother*. Did you ever think about that?"

Apparently, I'd made some huge mistake. I didn't know what it was, but you only had to look at Schürmann to see that I'd botched it up really badly with my story. It was obvious he thought I'd written the most embarrassingly awful story in world history. But I didn't know why that was, and he didn't tell me, and to be honest, to this very day I still don't know why. He just kept repeating that she was my *mother*, to which I replied that I knew my mother was my mother. And then he got loud and said that this story was the most disgusting and repulsive and shameless thing he'd seen in fifteen years of teaching, etcetera, etcetera, and I should rip the pages out of my notebook. I was completely floored and, like an idiot, I picked up the notebook to rip out the pages, but Schürmann grabbed my hand screamed: "I don't mean *literally* rip them out. Don't you understand anything. You should *think*. Think!" I thought for a minute, but in all honesty, I didn't understand. I never have to this very day. I mean, it wasn't as if I made anything up…

After that, I was Psycho. For the better part of the year, everyone called me that, even in classes. Even when the teachers were there. "Come on, Psycho, pass the ball! You can do it, Psycho! Keep the ball on the ground!" They only stopped when André joined out class. André Langin. Handsome André.

André had been forced to repeat a grade, and he had a girlfriend from day one, and every week after that he had a different one. At the moment, he's going out with a Turkish girl from the class parallel to ours, who looks like Salma Hayek...

One time, when André was still new in our class, we all went hiking. Somewhere south of Berlin. The usual sort of trek through the woods. At some point we stopped in front of a three-hundred-year old white beech that was planted by Frederick the Great, and the teacher asked if anyone knew what kind of tree it was. No one did except me, of course, but I wasn't crazy enough to admit in front of all the others that I knew what a white beech was. I could just as well have stood up and said: Hi, my name is Psycho and I have a problem. Still, we were all standing around this tree and no one knew what it was, and that was depressing. Now let me get to the point of this. Frederick the Great had put a couple of benches under his white beech so that people could sit down and have a picnic, which is exactly what we did. And as chance would have it, I was sitting at the same table as Tatjana Cosic. Diagonally across from me was André, handsome André, with his arms spread out over Laura and Marie's shoulders. As if they were best of friends, even though they weren't friends at all. He'd only been in our class for a week tops. But the girls didn't seem to mind. On the contrary, they seemed paralyzed with happiness and didn't move a millimeter. It was like they were afraid that if they moved, they'd scare off Andrés arms like timid birds. André didn't say a word. He just looked around sleepily. All of a sudden he looked at me and, after a moment's thought, he spoke. To no one in particular, and definitely not to me. "How come he's called Psycho? He's totally boring." Laura and Marie laughed themselves silly, and seeing that his joke was a total hit, André repeated it: "Seriously, how can such a deadhead be called Psycho?" Ever since, I've been known as Maik again. And that's even worse than before...

[…]

I'm going to tell you now about Tatjana's birthday. It was in the middle of summer vacation, and she had announced well in advance that she was going to throw a gigantic party. At first it was set to take place in the town of Werder just outside Berlin, and everyone would be invited to spend the

night. She had asked all her best friends whether they were sure they were going to be able to come, and since Natalie was going away with her parents on the third day of vacation, the party was moved ahead to the second day. That was why everybody knew about it so early.

The house in Werder belonged to Tatjana's uncle, and it was located directly on the local lake. The uncle was the only adult there so Tatjana practically had the place to herself. The party would go on throughout the night, and everyone was supposed to bring a sleeping bag.

Weeks in advance, her party was all anyone in our class could talk about, and I started thinking a lot about Tatjana's uncle. I don't know why I was so fascinated by him, but for some reason I thought he must be a totally interesting guy since he was basically handing over his house to Tatjana, and he was related to her to boot. I was really excited to meet him. I saw myself sitting with him by the fireplace in his living room and making sophisticated conversation – even though I had no idea whether his house even had a fireplace. But I wasn't the only one getting a bit hyperactive. Julia and Natalie spent weeks passing notes back and forth in class about what to get Tatjana for a present. I read them because I sat in the middle on the direct line of communication, and of course I, too, was electrified by the idea, and all I could think about was what I was going to give Tatjana for her birthday. Julia and Natalie, that much was clear, were going for the new Beyoncé CD. Everyone knew Tatjana loved Beyoncé. I found that a bit problematic because I thought Beyoncé was crap – well, at least, Beyoncé's music was crap. She looked fantastic and even looked a bit like Tatjana, so at some point I stopped thinking Beyoncé was crap. On the contrary, I started liking Beyoncé. Suddenly I even liked her music. No, that's not right. I *loved* her music. I bought her latest two CDs and put them on endless repeat, while I thought about Tatjana and what I was going to give her at the party. There was no way I could give her anything by Beyoncé. In addition to Julia and Natalie, thirty other people must have had that idea, and I wanted to come up with something original.

I went to the Karstadt department store, brought a really expensive fashion magazine with Beyoncé's face on the cover and began drawing it. Using a ruler, I made vertical and horizontal lines over her face until it was covered with tiny squares. Then, I took a larger piece of paper and drew squares that were five times bigger on it. I learned this method from a book called *Old Masters* or something like that. It's a way to make a small image into a bigger one. I could have just put the magazine on a photocopier, of course, but I wanted the picture to be hand-drawn. Probably because I wanted people to see how much effort I had put in it. If you could see the effort, I thought, the rest would take care of itself. I worked on the portrait for weeks, worked really hard. I only used a pencil, and the more I drew the more excited I got, thinking about Tatjana and her birthday and the great guy who was her uncle and with whom I was going to have long, sophisticated fireplace conversations.

I'm not good at much, but I can draw. It's like with the high jump. If drawing Beyoncé and doing the high jump were the two most important disciplines in life, I'd be golden. I'm serious. Unfortunately, no one gives a damn about high-jumping, and I was beginning to have my doubts while I was completing my drawing. After four weeks, Beyoncé looked almost exactly like she did on the photo. It was a giant pencilled Beyoncé with Tatjana's eyes, and I would have been the happiest guy on the planet if I'd gotten an invitation to Tatjana's party. But the invitation didn't come.

It was the last day of school, and I was pretty wound up. The electricity of the upcoming party hung in the air, everyone was talking non-stop about Werder, but there had been no invitations – at

least not any I had seen. No one even knew where precisely the party was, and Werder isn't that small of a place. I had long since memorized the map of the town, thinking that Tatjana would reveal the location on the last day of school. That, though, didn't happen.

During math, I peaked two rows ahead of me and saw a small green note card in Arndt's small school bag. I watched Arndt showing it to Kallenbach and Kallenbach furrowing his brows. I could see a tiny map. And it dawned on me that everyone had one of these green cards. Almost everyone. Kallenbach didn't have one, to judge from the stupid look on his face, although he always had a stupid look on his face. That's because he was, in fact, stupid – which was probably why he hadn't been invited. Kallenbach bent down to take a closer look at the card – he was short-sighted, but for some reason never wore his glasses – and then Arndt snatched it back and put it away in his bag. As it turned out later, Kallenbach and I weren't the only ones who hadn't been invited. The Nazi hadn't been, nor had Tschichatschow and one or two others. It was all too logical. The total bores and biggest weirdoes hadn't been invited -- the Russians, the Nazis and the idiots. I didn't have to think very hard to figure out which category I belonged to in Tatjana's eyes. I wasn't a Russian, and I wasn't a Nazi.

Otherwise, almost everyone in the class had been invited, as well as half of the parallel class in our year and probably a hundred other random people. But not me.

I tried to keep my hopes up through the last hour, as our report cards were handed out. I prayed that it was all a big mistake, that Tatjana would come up to me after the final bell and say: "Man, Psycho, I forgot all about you! Here's your invitation. I hope you have the time. I'd be totally unhappy, if you, of all people, couldn't make it. Hopefully, you've thought of my present. Of course, you have, you're totally reliable. So, see you then. I'm really glad you're coming. And to think I almost forgot!" The bell rang, and everyone went home. I took a long time getting my things together so that Tatjana would have one more chance to notice her mistake...

[…]

Back at home, I didn't know what to do. I tried repairing the light on my bicycle, which had been broken for a while, but I didn't have any spare parts. I put on *Survivor* and started rearranging the furniture in my room. I pushed my bed forward and my desk back. Then I went back downstairs and tried to fix the light again, but it was hopeless, so I tossed my tools in the flowerbed and went back up and threw myself on my bed and screamed my lungs out. It was the first day of vacation, and I was already practically going insane. At some point, I got out my Beyoncé portrait. I looked at it for a while, then held it in both hands away from body and slowly started ripping it in two. When the tear reached Beyoncé's forehead, I stopped and burst into tears. I don't know exactly what happened next. All I know is that I ran out of the house, into the woods and up the hill and then started jogging. I wasn't really jogging since I didn't have sports clothes on, but I still overtook around 20 real joggers every minute. I simply ran through the woods, screaming. I was really annoyed with all the other people who were running through the woods because they could *hear* me, and when a guy approached me with those Alpine walking poles, I wasn't that far away from kicking the poles up his ass.

At home, I spent hours in the shower. Afterwards I felt a tiny bit better, like someone who's been shipwrecked and spent weeks floating around in the Atlantic, only to have a cruise ship come along and toss him a can of Red Bull. Or something like that...

[…]

I gathered my tools, which were scattered all over the place, and stood in the warm evening air, catching my breath. Across the way, the Dyckerhoffs were having a barbecue. Their oldest son waved at me with his grill tongs and I quickly looked away because he was a huge asshole like all of our neighbors. A bicycle rolled down the street, tires squealing. Although rolled is an exaggeration, as is bicycle. It was the frame of an old ladies' bike with different tires on the front and the back and a beat-up leather saddle in the middle. Its only other part was a rattling handbrake that hung down from a cable like an upside down antenna. The back tire was flat, and on top of it all sat Tschichatschow. After my father, he was probably the last person I needed to see now. Although, with the lone exception of Tatjana, every person was the last person I needed to see right now. But the expression on Tschichatschow's Mongolian face made it clear that he did not feel the same way.

"Ka-vock!" said Tschick and steered his way grinning up on the sidewalk. "What do you know. I'm riding on the back, and it makes ka-vock. You live here? Hey, is that a repair kit? How cool is that. Give it here."

I had no desire for any discussions. I handed over all my tools and told him he could leave them there when he was done. I said I had no time and had to go. I went inside and listened for a while behind the closed door, wondering what was happening outside and whether he might simply disappear with my tools. Then I went back to my room and tried to think about something else. But it wasn't easy. Down on the street, there were constant sounds of tools, a lawn being mowed and someone singing in Russian. Singing badly in Russian. But I was even more unnerved when everything went quiet around our house. I looked out the window and saw someone walking through our backyard. Tschick went once around our swimming pool, stopped at the aluminum ladder, shaking his head, and scratched his back with a screwdriver.

"Cool pool!" Tschick shouted up to me with a smile.

"Yeah, cool pool. Cool jacket, cool pool. So what."

He kept standing there. So I went out, and we talked for a bit. Tschick was really enthusiastic about our pool and wanted to know what my father did for his money, so I told him....We talked for a while, and then, inevitably we ended up in front of the PlayStation and played GTA. Tschick didn't know the game, and we didn't have much luck, but I thought, whatever. It was better than huddling in the corner screaming.

"You didn't get left back?" he asked at one point. "I mean, did you look? I don't understand. You've got vacation, man. You're probably going on holiday, and you can go to this party, and you've got a cool..."

"What party?"

"Aren't you going to Tatjana's party?"

"Naw, don't wanna."

"Seriously?"

"I've got something else to do tomorrow," I said, fiddling around manically with the game console. "Plus, I'm not invited."

"You're not invited. That's a bummer. I thought I was the only one."

"It'll be boring anyway," I said and ran a couple of people over with my gasoline tanker.

"For fags maybe. But for guys like me, who need girls, this party is a *must*. Simla is going to be there. And Natalie. And Laura and Corrina and Sarah. Not to mention Tatjana. And Mia. And Fadile and Cathy and Kimberley. And super-hot Jennifer. And the blonde from 8A. And her sister. And Melanie.

"Yeah," I said and stared at the TV screen, depressed. Tschick, too, stared at the TV screen, depressed.

"Let me have the helicopter," he said. I gave him the console and we stopped talking about the party.

It was almost midnight by the time Tschick finally went home. I heard his bike go squealing off toward Weidengasse, and I remained standing for a while, alone, in front of our house. Above me were the stars. That was the best thing about that day. It was finally over.

The next morning I felt a bit better. I woke up just as early as when I have to go to school -- there was no way to adjust that quickly. But the silence around me made it clear that I was alone, summer vacation had started, the house was mine, and I could do whatever I wanted. […] Then it occurred to me that the lawn needed watering. My father had forgotten to tell me to do this so, officially, I didn't have to, but I did it anyway. Normally it would have really bugged me, but now, seeing that I was practically the owner of this property, and the lawn was *my* lawn, I didn't mind. I stood barefooted on the steps in front of our house and sprayed the grass with a yellow hose. […] A rattletrap car came driving down the street. It headed slowly toward our house and turned into our driveway. A minute later, and the light-blue Lada Niva was sitting, motor running, in front of our garage. Then the motor went off, and Tschick got out. He braced himself with his elbows on the roof and watched as I watered the lawn.

"A-ha," he said and then fell silent for a little while. "Having fun?"...

I was waiting for his father or brother or someone to get out of the car, but no one did. That was because there was no one else in the car, although it was difficult to see that through the vehicle's dirty windows.

"You look like a fag whose yard got shit on last night. You want me to drive you somewhere, or are you just going to stand there spraying water around?" He flashed me his broadest Russian grin. "Get in, man."

Of course, I didn't get in. I wasn't totally crazy. I just went up and half-sat down in the passenger seat so I wouldn't have to stand around like an idiot in the driveway.

The Lada's interior was even more beat-up than the outside. Wires hung out from under the steering wheel, and a screwdriver was jammed into the dashboard.

"Have you lost your friggin' mind?"

"It's only borrowed, not stolen," Tschick said. "I'll put it back later. We do this a lot."

"Who's we?"

"My brother. He's the one who found the car. It's just standing around on the street. It's practically junk. Perfect for borrowing. The owner doesn't even notice."

"And what's with that?" I pointed to the tangle of wires.

"You can stuff them back in."

"You must be crazy. And the fingerprints?"

"What fingerprints? Is that why you're sitting so strange?" He gabbed my arms, which I had held crossed to my chest, and shook them.

"Don't be such a chicken. Fingerprints are just TV bullshit. Here, touch this. You can touch everything. Now let's go and take a drive."

"Not me." I stared him in the face and said nothing. He truly had lost his friggin' mind.

"Weren't you saying yesterday you wanted some excitement?"

"I wasn't talking about prison."

"Prison. You're a minor."

"Do whatever you want. But not with me." To tell the truth, I wasn't exactly sure what it meant to be a minor. I mean I knew approximately. But not exactly.

"If you're a minor, nothing can happen to you. If I were still in your shoes, my brother says, I'd rob a bank. As long as you're under fifteen. My brother is thirty. In Russia, they'd beat seven sorts of shit out of you, but not in Germany. Plus, no one -- not even the owner -- cares about this car any more."

"No way."

"Once around the block."

"No."

Tschick released the handbrake, and in truth I have no idea why I didn't just get out. Usually I'm a pretty big chicken. But maybe for precisely that reason, I didn't want to be a chicken this time. He pressed down the left-most pedal with his left foot, and the Lada began silently rolling backward down our inclined driveway. Tschick stepped on the middle pedal, and the Lada came to a stop. One twist of the tangle of wires, and the engine started. I closed my eyes. When I re-opened them, we were gliding down Ketschendorfer Weg and turning right into Rotraudstrasse.

"You forgot to signal," I said in a weak voice, my arms still folded in front of my chest. I was so nervous I felt like I could die. I searched around for the safety belt.

"No need to be afraid. I drive like a champ."

"Then signal like a champ."

"I never signal."

"Huh?"

"What for? People can see where I'm going. And no one's around anyway."

That was true. The street was completely empty. And it continued to be true for a couple of minutes. Then Tschick took two turns, and suddenly we were on Allee der Kosmonauten. That's a four-lane road. I was starting to panic.

"Okay, okay. Let's head back now. Please."

"I drive like Mika Häkkinen."

"You said that already."

"So am I right?"

"No."

"Seriously, I drive pretty great, don't I?" Tschick asked.

"*Really* great," I said, and paying tribute to the standard answer my mother always gave when my father asked questions like that, I added: "Really great, darling."

"Settle down."

The truth was: Tschick didn't drive like a world champ nor was he a complete catastrophe. He wasn't any better or worse than my father. And at least he was driving back toward my neighborhood.

"Can't you follow at least one of the traffic rules? That's a solid line."

"Are you gay?"

"What?"

"I said: 'Are you gay?'"

"Is there something wrong with you?"

"You called me *darling*."

"I said...what? It's called irony."

"So are you gay?"

"Because I was being ironic?"

"Because you're not interested in girls." He looked me straight in the eye.

"Look at the road." I admit I was getting hysterical. He was driving without even looking at the road. My father did that, too, sometimes, but he was my father and he had a driver's license.

"Everyone in our class is way into Tatjana. *Way* into her."

"Who?"

"Tatjana. There's a girl in our class called Tatjana. That ever occur to you? Tatjana Superstar. You're the only one who's never scoped her out. But you never scope anyone out, do you? So, are you gay? It's just a question."

I felt like dying.

"Not that there's anything wrong with it," said Tschick. "I've got this uncle in Moscow who runs around the whole day in lederhosen with no ass. Otherwise, he's totally all right, my uncle. Works for the government. He can't help it if he's gay. No big deal to me."

Unbelievable. I mean, it's no *big deal* to me either if someone's gay, although guys running around in assless lederhosen wasn't exactly my usual idea of Russia. But the fact that I ignored Tatjana Cosic…that was a joke, right? Of course, I ignored her. What else was I supposed to do. For an absolute nothing, a total loser like me, it was the only way of not making myself a complete laughingstock.

"You're an idiot," I said.

"I'm fine with that. The main thing is you leave my bunghole in peace."

"Quit it. That's disgusting."

"My uncle..."

"I don't give a shit about your uncle! I'm not gay, man. Has it never once occurred to you that all this time I've been in a bad mood."

"Cause I'm not signaling"

"No! Because I'm not gay, you moron!"

It was clear from Tschick's look that he didn't understand a word. I said nothing. I didn't want to explain myself. I didn't want to say anything – it had simply popped out. I'd never talked with anyone about stuff like this, and I wasn't about to start now.

"I don't understand," Tschick said. "You're not gay because you're in a bad mood? What's that about?"

I looked out the window, insulted. The only positive thing was that I didn't care anymore that we stopped at a red light and two retirees were staring at us through the windshield and the police would be coming soon to take us in. I almost wanted the cops to come. At least it would be a bit of action.

"So you're in a bad mood. Why?"

"Because today's the *day*, man."

"What day?"

"The day of the party, you moron. Tatjana's party."

"Just because you're sexually confused doesn't mean you have to talk shit. Yesterday, you didn't even want to go."

"Of course, I wanted to go.

"It's no big deal to me," Tschick said, putting his hand on my knee. "Your sexual problems don't matter, and I swear I won't tell anyone else."

"I can prove it," I said. "Do you want me to prove it?"

"Prove you're not gay? Well, la-di-da." He waved his hands as if to shoo away imaginary flies.

This time, Tschick didn't park directly in front of my house, but in a adjacent alleyway, a small dead-end street, where no one could see us getting out of the car. When we were back upstairs, Tschick kept looking at me as if he had discovered something, God only knows what. I said: "I'm not responsible for what you're about to see. And don't laugh. If you laugh…"

"I won't laugh."

"You know Tatjana is completely bonkers for Beyoncé?"

"Sure. I would have stolen her a CD, if she'd invited me."

"Yeah. Anyway…that thing there."

I got the portrait out of a drawer, Tschick took it, held it out at arms length and studied it. But at first, he was less interested in my drawing than in the reverse side, where I had neatly secured the tear with Scotch tape so that you could hardly see it from the front. He stared at the tear and then at the drawing, and then he said: "So you do have feelings."

He meant it seriously, no bullshit, and I thought that was weird. It was the first time that I thought: he's not so stupid after all. Tschick had immediately understood what the tear meant. I don't think many people would have gotten that. Tschick looked at me very seriously , and I liked him for that. He was a pretty funny guy a lot of the time, but when things came to a head, he was serious, not funny.

"How long did this take you? Three months? It looks just like a photo. What are you going to do with it now?"

"Nothing."

"You have to do something with it."

"What am I supposed to do? Go to Tatjana and say: 'Congratulations, here's a little something for your birthday – and no problem that you didn't invite me but any of the other spastics, really, it's no big deal. I just happened to be passing by and I'll be going again. Hope you like the drawing. I worked my ass off on it for three months.'"

Tschick scratched his neck. He put the drawing down on my desk and scrutinized it with a shake of his head, and then he looked back at me and said: "That's exactly what I would do."

"Seriously. You have to do something. If you don't, you'll go crazy. Let's just drive on out there. Who cares if you think it's embarrassing? When you're sitting in a stolen Lada, nothing is embarrassing. Put on that cool jacket of yours, take your drawing and get your ass in the car."

"No way."

"We'll wait until it starts getting dark. Then you can get your ass in the car."

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"I'm not invited."

"You're not invited. So what? I'm not invited either. And you know why? Of course, the Russian idiot isn't invited. But do you know why you're not invited? You see. You don't. But I do."

"Then, spit it out, o wise man. Because I'm boring and look like shit?"

Tschick shook his head. "You don't look like shit. Then again, maybe you do. But that's not the problem. The reason is: There's absolutely no reason to invite you. You don't attract attention. You've got to attract attention, man."

"What do you mean: attract attention? Am I supposed to show up drunk every day at school?"

"No. God no. But if I were you and looked like you and lived here and had clothes like these, I would have gotten a hundred invitations."

"You need some clothes?"

"Don't try to change the subject. As soon as it starts getting dark, we're driving to Werder."

"Not on your life."

"We won't go to the party. We'll just drive by."

What an absolutely moronic idea. To be exact, there were three ideas, all of which were equally moronic. To show up uninvited, to drive the Lada all the way across Berlin and, most moronically, to take the drawing along with us. One thing was certain. Tatjana, too, was sure to notice what my drawing meant. No way was I driving out to Werder.

I repeated over and over, as Tschick chauffeured me, that I didn't want to go there. At first, I told him to turn around. I'd changed my mind. Then I claimed we didn't know the address. And then I swore that nothing was going to make me get out of the car when we got there.

I kept my hands clamped under my armpits the whole ride. This time, though, it wasn't because I was afraid of leaving fingerprints, but because otherwise my hands would have started shaking. Beyoncé lay atop the dashboard in front of me. She was shaking, too.

Despite how stirred up I was, I did notice that Tschick was driving more cautiously than in the morning. He avoided two-lane roads and took his foot off the gas way before lights that were turning red so that we wouldn't have to stand at intersections where pedestrians could see us. At one point we

pulled over into the breakdown lane because it had started to rain and the Lada's windshield wipers didn't work. But by that point we had almost gotten out of Berlin. It poured. It was just a squall that was over in five minutes, and afterwards, the air smelled amazing.

I stared out of the wet windshield, and for the first time it occurred to me how strange it was to be sitting in a car that didn't belong to me and to be cruising through the evening streets of Berlin, across the tree-lined avenues of the western part of the city and past the isolated gas stations and the road signs directing drivers to Werder. The weather turned hot and humid again. I didn't say a thing, and neither did Tschick, and I was glad he was steering so decisively toward the party to which I allegedly didn't want to go. For three months, I'd thought of nothing else. And now it was happening, and I was going to make myself look completely ridiculous in front of Tatjana.

Her uncle's house wasn't hard to find. We probably would have located it by just driving along the roads lining the Havel River, but shortly after we entered the town properly, two mountain bikes loaded with sleeping bags appeared before us. André and some other idiot. Tschick drove a safe distance behind them, and then we saw the house. Red bricks, a front yard full of bicycles, and a huge amount of noise coming from the lake. Only one hundred meters away. I slid down from my seat to the floor of the car, while Tschick rolled down the window, coolly stuck out one elbow and drove past the party, doing eight-and-a-half kilometers an hour. Around a dozen people were standing in the front yard and the open doorway to the house, people with glasses and bottles and cell phones and cigarettes in their hands. There were far more out back. Familiar and unfamiliar faces, girls heavily made up from the parallel class in our year. And in the middle of them all, shining like the sun, was Tatjana. She may not have had invited the biggest idiots and the Russians in her class, but she'd invited everything else who is breathing. The house disappeared to our rear. No one had seen us, and it occurred to me that I had no plan whatsoever about how to give Tatjana my drawing. For a moment, I considered tossing it out the window. Surely someone would find it and bring it to her. Before I could do anything stupid, Tschick stopped the car and got out. I looked on, horrified. I don't know whether being in love is always so embarrassing, but in any case, it seems I'm no good at it. As I debated whether to sink all the way to the car floor and cover my head with my jacket or sit up straight and put a bored look on my face, a rocket shot skyward from behind the red-brick house and exploded in a shower of red and yellow. Everyone ran out into the yard to watch the fireworks. The only people left on the sidewalk were André with his mountain bike and Tatjana, who had come out to greet him.

And Tschick.

Tschick was standing almost directly in front of them. They stared at him, as if he wasn't someone they recognized, and probably they didn't recognize him. Tschick was wearing my sunglasses, as well as a pair of my jeans and a grey jacket of mine. We emptied my closet that day, and I'd given him three pairs of pants and a couple of shirts and sweaters and some other stuff so that he no longer like looked some Russian hillbilly, but rather like something from an early evening soap opera. I don't mean that as an insult. But he didn't look like himself any more. He even had a fistful of gel in his hair. I could see him approach Tatjana and her answer. It was obvious she was confused. Behind his back, Tschick made a wink-wink gesture in my direction. As though hypnotized, I got out of the car and… don't ask me what happened next. I have no idea. Suddenly I was standing next to Tatjana with

my drawing, and I think she probably looked at me the same way she had at Tschick. But I didn't see it with my own eyes.

I said: "Here."

I said: "Beyoncé."

I said: "A drawing."

I said: "For you."

Tatajana stared at my drawing, and before she could look up again, I heard Tschick saying to André: "No, no time. We've got something to do." He pushed me and turned back toward the car, and I followed. He started the motor and we were gone. I pounded the dashboard with my fists, as Tschick put the car in second gear and sped down the dead-end street.

"Should I show them?" he asked.

I didn't answer. I couldn't.

"Should I show them?" Tschick asked again.

"Do whatever you want," I screamed. I was so relieved.

Tschick sped toward the end of the street, jerked the steering wheel briefly to the right and the left, pulled the emergency brake and did a 180, right in the middle of the road. I almost went flying out the window.

"Doesn't always work," said Tschick, full of pride. "Doesn't always work."

He sped up as we passed the red-brick house, and from the corner of my eye, I saw them still standing on the sidewalk. Time seemed to have stopped. Tatjana standing with my drawing in her hand, André with his mountain bike, and Natalie just coming from the back yard.

The Lada was going sixty when we hit the next curve, and I was still pounding the dashboard with my fists.

"Step on it!" I yelled.

"That's what I'm doing."

"Then step on it harder!" I cried and looked at my fists pounding away. Relief wasn't the word for what I felt.