

Translated excerpt

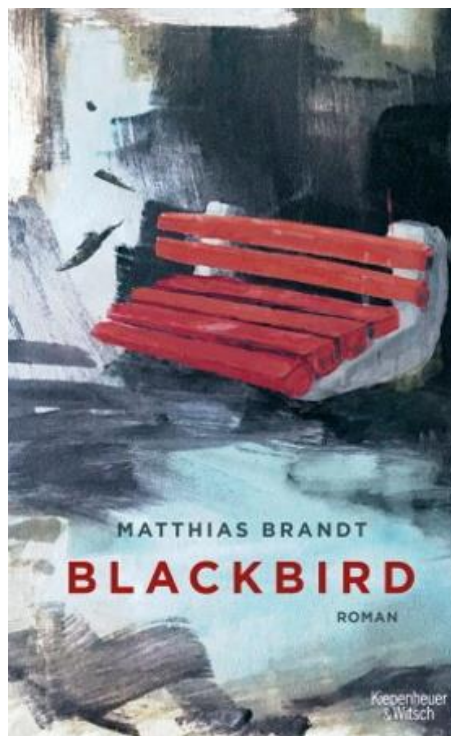
Matthias Brandt
Blackbird

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Translated by Ruth Martin



ONE

–Mid August –

Why wasn't anyone answering the phone?

The bass was pumping up here in my room, but I could still hear the constant ringing from downstairs. A rustling and crackling came from beneath the cracked red patent leather I was lounging on. There was a little hole in the left-hand seam, and whenever I flopped down onto the beanbag, a few of the little Styrofoam balls it was filled with would shoot out. I moistened my finger with spit, collected up a few of the little balls and flicked them. The third one (finally!) stuck to the ceiling.

After the eleventh ring, I jumped up after all: it might be Bogi calling. I ran down the stairs and, although the phone in the hall was closer, went to the one in the living room. Or at least, what had been our living room until recently.

It was now just full of half-packed cardboard boxes. My father and his new girlfriend were moving to some little backwater I wouldn't want to be seen dead in. It wasn't quite the arse-end of nowhere, but you definitely see the arse-end from there. "My partner," he'd said, a little sheepishly, as we stood facing each other in his room, and all I could think was that I wouldn't use that word for someone I was in love with. Not that I had any better suggestions. And why would I? I was

fifteen and not in love with anyone. At least, not the way my father was in love with this Claudia.

My mother and I didn't know where we were going to live yet.

On the way to the phone I passed the half-bald cockatiel. "Poo-face," I hissed at him, hoping that eventually he'd repeat it. Rather than just staring at me and ripping his feathers out.

I picked up the receiver without saying anything.

I never did. After all, the caller had phoned our number, so *he* was the one who needed to explain who he was and what he wanted.

"Er... Schnellstieg."

"What?"

"Schnellstieg. Mr Schumacher?" said the caller.

"Nope, this is Morten."

"Oh, I see. Morten. Hello. This is... Dieter."

"What?"

"Mr Schnellstieg. Dieter Schnellstieg. Manfred's father. Bogi."

"Oh, right, yes. Hello."

"Yes, hello Motte."

"Hello."

It had taken a little while for me to grasp the situation. Him too.

Bogi's father had called me.

I'd never spoken to him on the phone before.

Whenever I phoned Bogi, either he would be waiting for my call and pick up himself, or it was his gormless sister Anette, or his mother. But never his father.

Bogi was my best friend and his real name was Manfred Schnellstieg. But no one except teachers actually called him that. Or maybe his parents, sometimes.

Bogi had been called Bogi ever since that breaktime time a few years ago when Udo Mönch asked us if we'd seen the film last night with Manfred Bogart.

“Eh?”

“You know, that film!” said Udo. “What was it called again? Cassaplanka! With Manfred Bogart!”

We pissed ourselves laughing, and that absolute moron Udo Mönch stormed off in a huff. “Are you taking the mick? What kind of name is that – Hampfree?” he roared at us as he left.

And after that, everyone called Manfred Schnellstieg Bogi. And it wasn't like there was another Manfred in our school. He had his parents to thank for that, for giving him such a great name. Seriously, people. Manfred. Really?

By rights, Udo Mönch should have been given a nickname after that little episode as well. And not a nice one like Bogi; something like dumbbell or space cadet. But the guy was so stupid we couldn't come up with anything for him, not even that.

What did Bogi's father want with me? Were we in trouble? Had he found the Amsfelder that Bogi had hidden in the garden? Our tournament trip was scheduled for that

weekend, and a few days previously we'd bought two bottles of red wine in Kaisers to take with us. They didn't ask for ID in the supermarket, even though they knew us, and knew that we were too young to buy it. Amselfelder, a Yugoslavian wine, was the second cheapest they had. But the even cheaper wine was made of blackberries, and someone had told Bogi it gave you the shits, so we decided to steer clear of that one.

"Wonderfully digestible", the label on the Amselfelder bottle said, "pressed without stalks and stems". If I was honest, I couldn't imagine what was meant by digestible. It sounded like it was for old people. Also: wine made from stalks?! "Digestible" probably just meant that you'd only throw up later, rather than right away.

"That Blackbird-fielder has a real kick to it." Recently Bogi had started translating everything into English, and I'd thought: alright, Bogi, and how come you know that, if we're going to be trying it for the first time on the trip?

While Mr Schnellstiege and I were speaking, I imagined him standing at home, by the old phone in the hallway. Twisting back and forth in his beige corduroy slippers with soles the pinkish colour of gums. I could prove the gum thing because Bogi and I once took one of his father's slippers into the bathroom at their house to compare it with his dead grandmother's false teeth, which were still sitting in there. One minute I had a clear image of Bogi's father in my mind's eye, and then it would grow hazy again. Like when you looked through the frosted glass in the swing doors at the Schnellstiegs' house that separated the porch inside the front

door from the hallway. When you first came into the house, for a moment it was like everyone on the other side of those doors was a ghost, not a real person, or as if they were shrouded in mist. It was only once you had gone in through those doors that they gained a clear shape, and you could tell them apart.

“Is there a problem with the football trip?” I asked.

“No. Now, listen a minute. I’m afraid Manfred – er, Bogi – has had to go into hospital. He won’t be able to go.”

Even the Schnellstiegs called their son Bogi now.

How come he was in hospital? He’d been at school the day before. “See you tomorrow,” we’d said to each other. And now it was Saturday; we were supposed to be going to the football tournament that afternoon. I didn’t understand what was going on.

“Are you still there?” Mr Schnellstieg asked me.

“Yes.”

“Yes. They’ve, er, found something and they need to run some tests. Because, if it... Well, that’s why he’s in the hospital. St Joseph’s.”

“Oh, I see. St Joseph’s,” I repeated, as if I was some kind of expert on hospitals.

“Ahem,” Bogi’s father cleared his throat. “Petra! Can you come here a minute?” he called out. “I’ll pass you over to Manfred’s mother, alright?”

“Hello, Motte?” Now Bogi’s mum was on the line. I let out a sob. Oh, great, this had set the blubbing off again. It kept happening to me recently, though I had no idea why. Just like that, pressed without stalks or stems.

“Oh, listen, Motte, there’s really no need to cry. Manfred was at the doctor’s yesterday afternoon for his vaccination. And they found something that they thought the hospital should take a look at. But it’s probably nothing.”

I sniffed loudly and said nothing. Nor did Mrs Schnellstieg. We both just breathed into the receiver for a while. Bogi’s granddad had once told us that the Nazis wanted people to use good German words and say “long-distance-speaker” rather than telephone. And to call the receiver a handset. They had issues.

Then suddenly Bogi’s mum was crying too, although just five seconds before she had been telling me there was nothing to cry about. She was crying very quietly, but I noticed. When someone doesn’t want other people to know they’re crying, the sniffing is the first thing you hear.

What now? We were both weeping, and I still didn’t really know why. The doctors wanted to take a look at him, she’d said. Aha. Eventually I just hung up.

I went back upstairs to my room. Everything has just changed, I thought to myself. No, I have no idea what I was actually thinking. I might just have wondered whether you could still see the impression of my bum on the beanbag.

Before I closed the door, I paused for a moment; I’d heard something behind me. “Coco!”

The cockatiel. What an idiot. Get knotted, Coco.

TWO

– Mid September –

I took the number seventeen to the station, then changed onto the four, got off at the museum, and from there it was only a five-minute walk to the hospital.

For a few days already you could tell it was starting to get dark earlier again. It was a week until my sixteenth birthday, and three months until Christmas.

I'd arranged the visit with Bogi's mum. The others were going to come later, to say hello to Bogi. Others meaning Walki – Detlef Walkenhorst – and Jan Borowka. But we couldn't stay too long, Mrs Schnellstieg had said, because the treatment meant that Bogi got tired very quickly.

It was weird. Bogi, with whom I'd spent almost every day for years, had disappeared from one minute to the next. I couldn't actually remember how we'd become friends. One day he was just there, in my life, and I was there in his, and from then on neither one of us ever questioned it. And now all of a sudden I couldn't talk to him, and all I got were these weird messages from his mother. That he was very pleased to hear I had sent my regards, that kind of thing. So bizarre.

The last time we'd spoken, before he went to hospital, it had been about... okay, fine, we were talking about farting.

About lighting farts, to be precise. Bogi knew a fair bit about the subject, in all seriousness.

For instance, he knew that methane farts burned well, but carbon dioxide farts, the kind you get from drinking too much Coke, didn't.

Things like that. We didn't know it would be our last proper conversation for a long time. If we had, then obviously we'd have chosen a different topic. Pythagoras' theorem. The hypotenuse, the catheti. God knows. But we didn't. In any case, Bogi had just read somewhere that you should never light your farts, because there might be a backdraft, and then you'd explode or something. He'd done it a few times – the lighting, not the exploding – and now he'd retrospectively scared himself. On the other hand, he was in hospital now anyway, I thought. A stupid thought, but you can't help the things that go through your mind.

Anyway, it was one of Bogi's hobbies. I'm not making this up. He liked talking about it, and he did it often. Farting, I mean, not talking. Well, talking too, but not as much as he liked farting.

Okay, that's enough of that now.

I had to cross Kaiserallee, which wasn't an easy matter, because I didn't want to traipse all the way up to the pedestrian lights. Everyone drove like the clappers down here. The speed made people crazy. They bombed through the city at 100km an hour and thought that made them the greatest.

And they thought that even if – I don't know – they were the caretaker at the Brahms school, for instance, like Mr Schaff.

And he definitely wasn't the greatest, I could prove that. Mr Schaff had recently bought a leather belt with a wide buckle that said "*Chef!*" on it. Now, think about that: you actually have to go into the shop, see the belt and think, wow, great belt, and then go to the sales girl and say: this is the exact belt I want, this one with the insane buckle. This is the buckle I like best out of the, I don't know, hundred and seven others in the shop. Much better than the ones that say *War* or *Peace* or whatever else. But – and listen to this – Schaff then went straight down to his basement workshop and took his soldering iron or his welder, or whatever it is you use for these things, and made a big S to go in front of the Chef, and then turned the exclamation mark into a second f, which was only partly successful. So that now, if you tried hard enough, you could read it as "SCheff". Not even "Schaff". The whole thing was kind of depressing. It just meant people stared at his groin, trying to figure out what was written there.

But – important question – why on earth did *I* find this embarrassing? Could anyone explain that to me? Schaff himself obviously wasn't embarrassed by it; he strode proudly along the corridors at Brahm's, hips first.

The answer is that idiots have never found anything embarrassing. Schlager singers don't, either, while we're on the subject. You could only become a Schlager singer if you weren't embarrassed by anything. There's no way you could do it otherwise. Like the dorks who went on that cheesy Dieter Thomas Heck show, singing folk-pop nonsense in front of all those people. Although, on the other hand, it was also funny.

Or, I thought, Dietmar Rosin from the top year, for instance, who got a tattoo on a school trip to London, but had got drunk with the tattooist beforehand. And now he had “Led Zelepin” on his right bicep. It was no surprise that he was still trying to pass his final year at the age of 21. Walki said, incidentally, that Rosin was already starting to go bald. And he was still at school! Seriously.

Anyway, the school caretaker Karl-Heinz Schaff might be bombing along here right now in his mouldy Ford Taunus, while I was trying to get to the other side of Kaiserallee.

And another thing: just before the holidays, when Schaff and his new belt were the hot topic for us, our biology teacher Mrs Strobel had shown us a film about cattle farming in one of her lessons.

“The belted Galloway has unusually coarse hair and can weigh over 1000kg,” the film’s narrator said. As the projector rattled, Mrs Strobel was concentrating on her macramé or whatever that stuff is called. She’d seen the film about a hundred and thirty-four times already.

And at the exact moment the narrator said those words, Schaff actually appeared in person outside the window, raking up big piles of leaves that Walki, Jan and I, and the others, would kick over once he’d gone, spreading the leaves back out to where Schaff had raked them up from.

That was long before he got his mental leaf-blower. Anyway, we fell about laughing in this stupid biology lesson, and Mrs Strobel couldn’t understand what was so funny about the film.

Why this crap came into my head just then, when I was trying to cross the road, is a mystery. It was a mess in there. I was probably just a bit worked up because I was about to see Bogi for the first time since he'd been admitted to hospital, and I was trying to distract myself.

In the end, I did somehow manage to get across Kaiserallee. There was a long red-brick wall separating the hospital grounds from the road. After a while, there was a gate on the right.

I looked at the man in the gatehouse and waited in case he was going to ask me anything. To see my ID or something, I had no idea how it all worked.

But the man just nodded and said nothing.

His illuminated box looked like an aquarium. Mr Gallenkamp, our physics teacher, had one that he was always telling us about, with ornamental guppies in it.

He said: "gubbies".

We always asked him about them, because as long as he was talking about his fish, he wasn't teaching us.

I got a B in physics for class participation – although, God's honest truth, I didn't understand any of that shit. It was purely because I kept asking after Mr Gallenkamp's gubbies.

I walked up to the hospital's main entrance. The building was large and old, made of the same weather-beaten brick as the boundary wall.

The lights were already on in many of the windows, although it was still only four o'clock in the afternoon. They

probably left the neon tubes on day and night, so that no one would forget they were ill for a single second.

There was an ambulance parked outside the entrance, and someone was being taken out of it on a stretcher.

I didn't look too closely, not wanting to see blood. Four metal legs with little wheels at the bottom unfolded from the stretcher with a loud clank. I couldn't imagine it was a great experience for the person lying on it.

One of the paramedics was wearing a hairnet; he had to be a conscientious objector on national service – a slacker, as Kragler, our PE teacher, would have said.

First and second lessons on a Wednesday were always double PE. With *Oberstudienrat* Horst Kragler. "Right then, my friends: physical jerks!" he would roar, and then we'd have to line up and do all this military shit. Jump over obstacles, crawl underneath other ones. Climb ropes, the whole works.

"Hup, hup, hup, men, don't tell me you're tired!" Then we had to throw the little leather balls as if they were hand grenades. Kragler didn't say that, but that's how we understood it.

If he thought you were too slow, Kragler got out his little red notebook and scribbled something in it.

"Schumacher: unfit for close combat," or whatever. And I didn't care, either, to be honest.

Michael Habel once just about made it to the top of the rope. He was – without beating about the bush – quite fat. And it wasn't a good idea to make him climb up there, although he did his best, of course. Anyway, when he got to the top he had

no strength left, and slid down from a height of four or five metres, ripping all the skin off his hands in the process. He lay at the bottom screaming like a stuck pig, you could see the raw flesh on both his palms, the floor was covered in blood, and they had to call an ambulance. Michael Habel had also broken his leg; the pathetic crash-mat had been no use at all. The bone was sticking out of his shin, all yellow, no word of a lie. Even the paramedics' eyes popped out when they saw Habel lying on the floor like that. Kragler stood there acting as if he couldn't explain how it had happened.

A few weeks later Michael Habel was back in lessons, though still with bandaged hands and his leg in plaster, looking even more of a dork than he had before. If he ever said anything, it was only to tell you how many plates and pins he now had in his leg. But we had no desire to know the details. Someone always had to go with him to the toilets and take his trousers down. Seriously. I'd rather have jumped out the window.

For once, Kragler had probably got into trouble over it, and was quite restrained for a while afterwards, though he started muttering inaudible things to himself even more than he used to.

We had him for geography as well, incidentally. I made sure I was on map duty with Bogi as often as possible, so that we at least missed a few minutes at the start of the lesson.

He always greeted us with: "A good soldier is always five minutes early, Schumacher."

“Sorry, Mr Kragler, there was just so much mess in the map room,” I said before we clipped “The German Reich: Borders as of 1938” to the stands and unrolled them. Kragler was desperate to go back to Silesia, if I understood it correctly. Or he wanted Silesia to come to him. Or to us, I don’t know. Kragler wanted to get Silesia back, with our help. Because Silesia was probably a great thing. Honestly, I didn’t even know where it was.

For Kragler, Silesia was what the ornamental gubbies were to Mr Gallenkamp. Did Kragler imagine that all our daydreaming in class was because we missed Silesia so much? No matter, I certainly had no desire to go there. And the likelihood of Silesia coming to me was also pretty slim. And even if Silesia were to arrive here at some point, I’d be long gone; I wanted to disappear off to Berlin as soon as I could. Because of bloody military service and everything.

They held your balls during the army medical exam. Honestly. Ludger, Detlef Walkenhorst’s older brother, had told us that. The doctor had told him to pull his pants down – “Lift up your member for a moment,” – then he took hold of his sack and ordered him to cough. Which Ludger did, cough, cough.

And the doctor went: “One, two, all there.”

Unbelievable.

Walki and I fell over laughing when Ludger told us that.

On the other hand, maybe it wasn’t all that surprising when you looked at these army types. You wouldn’t put anything past them. Udo Mönch’s father was in the army, for instance; he was an officer or something. Udo was always

telling people he was going to sign up for twelve years when he finished school. Twelve years! Twelve! He and a few other morons had started a club. And now they were advertising it everywhere: "Brahms Gymnasium Army Fanclub!" How dim did you have to be? And Udo Mönch was shitting himself that the army wouldn't take him because he had Scheuermann's.

Anyway, I was still standing around outside the hospital, and the national service people were taking someone out of the ambulance and pushing them into the building on a trolley. Was that how Bogi arrived here, too?

"Wilhelm Verderblich Medical Vehicles," I read on a small plate on the back of the ambulance as I passed it. Great name.

Once I was inside and standing there, looking around, a nurse asked me where I was going, and I said to see Bo... Manfred Schnellstieg. She checked a list and told me there was no one of that name here. But then it turned out I was in the emergency department and had to go across to the main entrance next door.

Okay, another security guard behind glass. I bent down to the flap made of perforated, yellowing plastic and said I was here to see Bo... Manfred Schnellstieg. The guard checked in a book. It looked like a class register.

"Mpfmmpfmmpfmomommpf?" I heard from inside the cabin.

"Excuse me?"

My mother claimed that you got further by saying "excuse me?" than "Huh?"

“Mompfmommpfmpf.”

Well, it looked like that wasn't always true.

So I stopped being pointlessly polite and went “Huh?”

“MOMPFMMMPFPFPFMMOMP!”

It was hopeless. I shrugged.

Then the guard wrote me a note: *3rd floor, right, ward 3b*, and finally opened the speaking hole to pass it to me. “There you go. Third floor, right hand side, 3b.”

Yes, that was what he'd written down, but he could have just opened the stupid flap and... never mind.

I could now hear exactly what the guard was saying, but I didn't want to go over the whole thing again. It wouldn't get me anywhere.

“Thanks,” I said, and left.

A wide staircase led to the upper floors. To the right of it were a set of lifts, which ordinarily I would have used; I wasn't crazy about the idea of traipsing up three floors if there was a lift. (I was fundamentally quite lazy). But suddenly I was afraid of getting stuck in a lift with someone who was injured and would cause a bloodbath in there like Michael Habel did that time in the school gym.

I took the stairs two at a time, eyes fixed straight ahead. There was no way I wanted to be one of the people in here, I was thinking the whole time. And because all the people who belonged here were so slow, I moved as fast as I could.

Then I was standing at the door to the ward, out of breath and trying to calm myself down.

I always got a bit worked up about these situations. And actually it was ridiculous to be making such a fuss over it. After all, Bogi was the one stuck in here, not me.

The glass door was covered in comic-book pictures: children's ward.

Bogi was a year younger than me and, when he'd still been properly clever, he'd skipped the sixth year. From then on, we were in the same class. Then, a little over a year ago, when he was thirteen, Bogi lost his brain and came back to school after the summer holidays without it. Fact. It probably disappeared in the waters of the Mediterranean off Formentera, just like that. Anyway, his age had landed Bogi here, rather than on the adult ward.

The bell was just above Donald Duck's beak. A nurse came and opened the door. She was quite pretty.

"Nurse Merle" said a badge on her tunic.

"Is, er, Manfred Schnellstiegl there?" I knew that must be the silliest question I could ask.

"Bogi? He's in giraffe."

So they were already calling him Bogi here, too.

"Er, sorry?"

"The giraffe room. There are animal symbols on the doors. You'll find it."

And then she was gone, on her squeaking sandals.

I walked down the corridor and found the characters on the doors: tortoise, mouse, and at the far end on the left there was finally a giraffe.

The door to Bogi's room was closed. I knocked tentatively, put my ear to the cold wood and at first heard nothing from inside – then, when I knocked again, a soft “yes?”

He was sitting cross-legged on the bed.

How long it was since I'd last seen him.

Bogi looked completely changed. He hadn't suddenly lost all his hair, or whatever other shit the treatment might do to you. My mother had told me all kinds of things. It was nothing about his appearance. But... How can I put it? It was as if, even though he hadn't been here that long, he already belonged here and not in our world – my world – any more. Of course, I couldn't think like that, it was the opposite of what had been drummed into me by Bogi's mother and mine. They'd said that now was the time when Bogi desperately needed to feel like he was one of us, etc. It was an important part of the healing process, they said.

But how was that supposed to work, being one of us, when he was lying around in terrycloth pyjamas all day in this stupid giraffe room, while we were busy rearranging our world outside? Of course, no one explains that to you.

The next problem was that all this shit had been making me feel quite aggressive. And unhelpfully, it was coming out now, when I finally saw Bogi again. But it had been bubbling away inside me ever since I went and sat back down on my beanbag after the initial shock, when I cried on the phone, and turned the music up even louder so that I could think about what Bogi's parents had just told me. I was waiting to start feeling sad, because I thought that's what people expected of

me, but if I was honest, I was only sad maybe ten per cent of the time, and angry for the rest. Even at Bogi himself. Which was idiotic, I knew that. But he needed to stop this shit, do something about it. Get better. This was no state to be in, with this disease that sounded like it wasn't a disease at all. At least, not a bad one. Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma: sounds like not a disease, right? It definitely would've been better if it was called Hodgkin's non-lymphoma. Especially for Bogi.

But actually, I was angry at him because I wanted my old life back, including Bogi. I simply thought I had enough crap to deal with as it was. And I wasn't *trying* to think all this just at that moment. But thoughts don't knock and ask for permission before they come in. They just appear.

Bogi's mother had explained the illness to me in detail – it was something to do with his lymph nodes – and I'd listened to most of what she was saying. Which was not all that easy, to be honest. But the fact that it was cancer and you could die of that shit – in fact, dying was actually quite likely – was something she only came out with once I'd asked her four times.

“Alright?” I said, grinning at Bogi.

I had the feeling it took him a minute to recognise me.

Then, when we looked each other in the eye, a shudder went through me, though I didn't know why. I was really glad to see him, and at the same time all I wanted to do was run away. I glanced at the mangy teddy bear on Bogi's bed.

There are probably no words for the really important things you feel. At least, not the right words. You just always act

as if there are. Because you have to talk everything into shape, so that the world doesn't stand still and you can somehow carry on.

Up until a little while ago, everything had been easier for me to understand. When I'd been really angry about something, for instance, I was completely, one hundred per cent angry, until the next feeling turned up.

And usually, that feeling had been the complete opposite of anger. The next minute I'd be pleased or in a silly mood, no problem. Sometimes the change was quick, and sometimes it took a bit longer, but it had always been a sequence. And one day, without my noticing, the sequence had gone and all the emotions started happening at once. Feelings were bouncing around inside me and I couldn't keep them apart any longer. All of a sudden I was happy and sad at the same time. I laughed myself stupid even though I was sickened by everything. I'd fallen in love with... well, that's no one's business but mine, and I hated her at the same time. And I didn't even know why. Well, probably for the fact that I was in love with her. It was actually really stressful, and I couldn't bear it, but I'd stopped trying to fend it off and waiting for it to pass, because I guessed that it was pointless; I was going to feel this way forever.

And so now I was standing here in Bogi's room.

I went over to him and we hugged. But not properly; a bit awkwardly. We put our arms around each other without the rest of our bodies joining in. I think I was just afraid of hurting him, and Bogi realised that.

"Motte. Alright?" said Bogi.